TITLE: RIDING THE TIGER: THE LATVIAN AGRARIAN UNION AND AGRARIAN REFORM BETWEEN THE TWO WORLD WARS

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THE NATIONAL COUNCIL
FOR SOVIET AND EAST EUROPEAN RESEARCH

TITLE VIII PROGRAM

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Washington, D.C. 20036
PROJECT INFORMATION

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COUNCIL CONTRACT NUMBER: 810-23

DATE: December 31, 1996

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The work leading to this report was supported in part by contract funds provided by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, made available by the U. S. Department of State under Title VIII (the Soviet-Eastern European Research and Training Act of 1983, as amended). The analysis and interpretations contained in the report are those of the author(s).
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Summary

After 1918 the Latvian farmers of the Russian Baltic provinces found themselves constituting about three-quarters of the population of a new state called the Republic of Latvia. They also found that among the political groupings that since 1918 had been working to create viable state structures in the new republic there was a party called the Latvian Agrarian Union (founded in 1917) that purported to represent the interests of all Latvian farmers. Among the planks of its platform, the Union called for wide-scale agrarian reform in the new state, specifically, the nationalization of landed properties above a certain size and the redistribution of this land to the landless and the smallholders. This was an attractive idea, because the Baltic agrarian reforms of the nineteenth century had left the area in the early twentieth century with an immense population of landless and nearly landless persons. Accordingly, about a quarter of the rural vote in Latvia for the Constitutional Convention of 1919 went to the Union. But during the 1920s, the rural vote fragmented, as the Union was charged with becoming too much a "national" (some said "bourgeois") party seeking too hard to reconcile the general interests of the new state with those of its farming population. Moreover, the great Agrarian Reform of 1920 turned out not to be a final solution of Latvian farmers' problems. The amount of land nationalized was insufficient to satisfy demand, and smallholders were becoming increasingly reliant on government subsidies. In 1934, a parliamentary crisis led to a coup d'etat by Karlis Ulmanis, one of the founders of the Latvian state and the leader of the Agrarian Union. The Constitution of 1922 was suspended, the parliament dismissed, and all political parties, including the Union, were dissolved. The guiding ideology of the Ulmanis regime proclaimed Latvia to be a farmer-state, and the farmer was portrayed as the backbone of the country's national culture. The farming population, however, paid for this preferred status by being included in what was eventually meant to be a guided (if not planned) economy. The evolution of Ulmanis' statist regime was cut short, however, by the Soviet occupation of Latvia in 1940 and its inclusion into the USSR.

This paper describes the history of the Latvian Agrarian Union between the two World Wars, and argues that the Union party should be seen as yet another manifestation of the Latvian population's somewhat reluctant adaptation to life in a continent where large, industrially advanced states were increasingly dominant. The Union's primary constituency - the Latvian rural population - found that in 1918 a new state structure was being erected around them, but the grievances they had were old ones, having been created in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Union could address some of them because of its standing as the second most important Latvian political

1Compiled by NCSEER staff.
party, but it never entirely resolved any permanently. The Union's political eminence in the 1920s created a springboard for an authoritarian government (1934-1940) which was still coping with the same grievances when it came to an abrupt end in 1940 with the Soviet occupation of the country. For the next half-century, the rural economy of Latvia was shaped largely by exogenous planners, as the rural population gradually diminished as a proportion of the whole. But after 1991, the 1920s political configuration returned, and it contained the Latvian Agrarian Union. During the Soviet period the Union had remained alive in the Latvian émigré communities in the West, and when in 1991 independence was regained and parliamentary politics revived, the Union stood ready to reclaim its legacy. Bowing to that legacy, the Latvian parliament elected the Unionist Guntis Ulmanis (grandnephew of Karlis Ulmanis) as president in 1993, and reelected him for a second term in 1996.
There was a young lady of Riga,
Who went for a ride on a tiger;
They returned from the ride
With the lady inside,
And a smile on the face of the tiger.

Introduction

The Victorian-era limerick from England may have erred in rhyming "Riga" with "tiger," but it did create a useful metaphor for capturing the essence of the history of agrarian relationships in Latvia. The Tiger -- a dissatisfied rural population -- had been prowling the Latvian countryside throughout the nineteenth century and had not been assuaged by new laws fixing the labor requirements on landed estates (1804), emancipating serfs (1816-1819 and 1861), and enabling peasants to buy land outright (1849-1861). In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Tiger was still hungry. The total amount of land the nineteenth-century purchase laws transferred from landed estates to individual peasants was insufficient to reduce the absolute number of landless peasants or even to slow the rate of their increase. One estimate placed their number at the turn of the century at four times that of peasants who owned holdings. About one-eighth of the Latvian-speaking population in the Russian Empire lived outside the Baltic provinces -- their ancestral home -- having left in part because of land shortages.3

As the turmoil of the First World War ended and the government of the new republic of Latvia began its work, the Tiger was still fearsome, the proportion of the rural population in Latvia in 1920 being 77%.4 The Young Lady - the new political party system, including the Latvian Agrarian Union - began her ride on the Tiger with the Agrarian Reform Law of 1920. Fourteen years later, by mid-1934, the Young Lady was gone, the leader of the Agrarian Union, Karlis Ulmanis, having carried out a coup that replaced the parliamentary system with his personal rule. For the following six years, until the occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union on June 13-14, 1940, the Tiger -- the farmers -- did indeed have a smile on its face, because Ulmanis' statist regime portrayed them as the backbone of the Latvian state and treated them accordingly. The early period of the Ride itself (1920-1934), however, had not been an easy one, because even before its formal demise the Agrarian Union had not been capable of calming the volatility of rural political attitudes. The last parliament, elected in 1931, contained six other political parties claiming to represent the interests of rural people, and the
number of Union deputies (in a 100-deputy parliament) had fallen to fourteen. For those who enjoy extending metaphors in historical time, it might be added that during the Soviet period in Latvia (1945-1991) the Tiger behaved, in part because the Young Lady then on its back -- the Communist Party -- held the reins tightly. But after 1991, the 1920s political configuration returned, and, remarkably enough, it contained the Latvian Agrarian Union. During the Soviet period the Union had remained alive in the Latvian émigré communities in the West, and when in 1991 independence was regained and parliamentary politics revived, the Union stood ready to reclaim its legacy. Bowing to that legacy, the Latvian parliament elected the Unionist Guntis Ulmanis (grandnephew of Kārlis Ulmanis) as president in 1993, and reelected him for a second term in 1996. But the Tiger -- now smaller, since the 1994 rural population in Latvia stood at 30.8% — and quite disoriented, has continued to growl.

In the period between the two World Wars, the rural populations of almost all of the new states of the European east stood at upwards of 60 percent of the total, and all the political systems included elected legislatures with proportional representation. Electoral politics here tended to discourage broadly-based coalitions, with the result that each state developed at least one political party that portrayed itself as the champion of "rural" interests. Generically referred to as "agrarian," "agrarianist," "peasant," or "peasantist" parties, these entities were extremely varied with respect to conditions of formation, leadership, membership, and ideology. It would be misleading, however, to view them all simply as variations of the better-known fire-breathing representatives of the type, such as Alexander Stamboliski's Bulgarian Agrarian National Union and Ante Radic's Croatian Peasant Party in Yugoslavia. All of them did espouse with various degrees of intensity the view that the nation's cultural and economic health required the preservation of a large rural population: urbanization was a suspect process and a nation was likely to lose its "soul" if its policies diminished the influence of traditional "peasant values" and "peasant ways." But beyond that, the roles each played and their position on the political spectrum differed. Some of the tenets of "peasantist" ideology resembled general interwar right-wing political thought: for example, it usually employed a quasi-biological definition of nationality and stressed the need for economic self-sufficiency (as opposed to specialization and interdependence). Other tenets resembled the ideologies of the left: for example, peasant parties usually championed agrarian reform in the form of confiscation and redistribution of the property of large landowners, and frequently pictured parliamentary politics as an unnecessary obstacle to the implementation of "the will of the working people." Thus all "peasant" parties resembled an ideal type, but the history of each was unique. Indeed, they were ultimately so dissimilar that the effort to unite them into an international movement (the so-called "Green International") foundered after a few meetings.

The present paper describes the history of the Latvian Agrarian Union between the two World Wars, and argues that the Union party should be seen as yet another manifestation of the Latvian
population's somewhat reluctant adaptation to life in a continent where large, industrially advanced states were increasingly dominant. The Union's primary constituency - the Latvian rural population - found that in 1918 a new state structure was being erected around them, but the grievances they had were old ones, having been created in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Union could address some of them because of its standing as the second most important Latvian political party, but it never entirely resolved any permanently. The Union's political eminence in the 1920s created a springboard for an authoritarian government (1934-1940) which was still coping with the same grievances when it came to an abrupt end in 1940 with the Soviet occupation of the country. For the next half-century, the rural economy of Latvia was shaped largely by exogenous planners, as the rural population gradually diminished as a proportion of the whole.

Latvian Politics Before and During World War I

Although there was no Latvian state before 1918, the Latvian population of the Russian "Baltic provinces" (southern Livonia and Courland) had contained politically active individuals and groups since the "national awakening" period of the 1860s. Unrepresented in any local or regional governmental body and therefore unable to wield direct political influences, Latvians gave financial support to a host of nationalistic undertakings: cultural organizations, a Latvian-language press, song festivals, self-help groups -- all of which had to have a non-political outward appearance because of the distrust in the Imperial government and the Baltic Germans -- the latter being the political elite of the Baltic provinces -- of political organizations as such. All such groups nonetheless had a political meaning because they acquainted both urban and rural Latvians with the idea of organizing for common effort. Initially this Latvian activism sought to diminish the social, economic, and political control of the provinces by the Baltic Germans; then, from the mid-1880s onward, it had to address as well the cultural ramifications of Alexander III's and Nicholas II's russification policy, which sought to integrate the Empire's western borderlands with the rest of the country.

In print, especially in works published outside the Russian Empire, the Latvian nationalists did not need to be as careful. They severely criticized the agricultural conditions of the Baltic provinces, especially the control by the Baltic German Ritterschaften (corporations of the nobility) of all agricultural properties. But on agricultural questions, the Latvian critics did not speak with a single voice. Already in the 1870s, a fissure was evident in Latvian political thinking between those who championed smallholders and the landless, and those who were more sympathetic to the new Latvian landowners who had benefitted by the land purchase reforms of the 1850s and 1860s. There was also disillusionment with "modernization": some writers in the 1880s believed that urban and industrial expansion carried Latvians away from the traditional farmstead, which in this view was central to Latvian national identity as a rural people.
In the 1890s, the so-called "new current" brought to the fore of Latvian political ideas Marxist and other socialist notions, and revealed that Latvian political thought could be simultaneously "national" and divided on fundamental questions. Radicalism of the left found institutional expression in the 1904 founding of the Latvian Social Democratic Workers Party, and the severity of the Revolution of 1905 in the Baltic provinces revealed the deep resentment against both the entrenched Baltic German landowning elites as well as against Czarist autocracy. A succession of Duma elections after the Revolution of 1905 provided incentives for Latvian non-radical political groups to form, but the ones that did tended to be short-lived and fired by local, largely evanescent, issues. The Latvian Social Democrats - most of whom in the post-1905 years were in exile in the US, England, and Switzerland - were able to retain a sharp ideological edge in their writings, but those Latvian activists who remained in the Baltic area had to make their public pronouncements circumspectly because of the increasing illiberality of the Tsarist government.

By 1914 political thinking among Latvians had expanded beyond the pre-1900 ideas of cultural autonomy, but public expressions of the desire for political independence remained rare. The increasing weakness of the central government during the war years created many opportunities for further organization, as well as for the formation in 1917 of the Latvian National Council. The Council had represented in it a handful of previously separate Latvian organizations, all, with the exception of the Social Democrats, of very recent origin -- the Agrarian Union, the Radical Democrats, the National Democrats, the Republicans, the Independents, and the Social Revolutionaries. On November 18, 1918, seizing the opportunities presented by the turmoil in Russia, the Council met in Riga (which at that moment was under German control) and proclaimed the founding of the Republic of Latvia. To many participants in this ceremony, the proclamation seemed but a natural, if not inevitable, outcome of the "national awakening" of the nineteenth century; to those for whom historical inevitability was meaningless, the proclamation was at best an expression of an aspiration. Nonetheless, formation of a national army and governmental institutions continued to transform the ideal into the real, and, by 1919 when a call for the election to a Constitutional Convention was issued, party-founding revealed itself to have become irrepressible. Twenty-four different political parties proposed slates to the Convention, and the Convention itself, with its 152 members, had represented in it sixteen different political parties.

**The Founding of the Latvian Agrarian Union**

The genesis of each "party" represented in the National Council and in the Constitutional Convention is a story in itself, but some of these formations were more likely to succeed because they represented broader interests and incorporated more organizational talent. The Social Democrats was one of these, and the Agrarian Union was another. Yet in May, 1917, when the Union was founded -- about eighteen months before the official declaration of Latvian independence -
probability of its survival was poor, to say the least. As a Latvian organization, in had no Latvian state or political system to operate in, and as an organization in the Russian state it had virtually no standing and was, in any case, one of thousands of similar groupings that emerged after the March, 1917, Revolution. About a half of the Latvian-speaking area of the Baltic provinces (the entire province of Courland) was occupied by the German army, which also served as a protective umbrella for the Baltic German leadership and its agenda to retain power in the Baltic region. Czar Nicholas II had abdicated and Russia was governed by Alexander Kerensky's provisional government, which mostly turned a deaf ear to all pleas for the devolution of power. The Kerensky government, in turn, disappeared in October, 1917, as a result of the Bolshevik coup. The political loyalties of the borderland populations, including those of the Baltic area, were rapidly losing a reference point, and, moreover, substantial proportions of the Baltic population were concerned primarily with survival. Some 570,000 persons had fled Courland before the German advance, finding temporary refuge in Livonia and in the interior of Russia. The Latvian Rifle regiments, formed in the Czarist army in 1916, had polarized between the supporters and opponents of the Bolshevik cause, which seemed to the supporters to offer the only alternative to impending chaos. The opponents, still coherent as military units but wary of Bolshevik slogans, were searching for reasons not to disband. In short, there was no single political position that had the support of all Latvians and no political framework to lend credence to such seemingly stateless entities as the Union.

The support the Union did have at its founding was based in the practical-minded, non-political, and demonstrably effective Latvian agricultural organizations that had continued to function even during the difficult wartime years. Many of these had come into being in the pre-war decades, and among them agricultural cooperatives had emerged as economic enterprises of considerable size and staying power. Some had expanded to become umbrella organizations, and one of the largest of these, called Konsums, had as members 77 local agricultural societies, 17 consumer cooperatives, 18 savings and loan associations, and 13 cooperative dairies. It was the politically-minded leaders of Konsums and of several of its affiliates who in March of 1917 convinced their members of the desirability of founding a new political party to represent agricultural interests. The congress at which the Union was formally established consisted of 216 delegates from Konsums' constituent groups, although only from the agricultural organizations of Livonia (Courland being under German occupation). Latgale, the easternmost Latvian-speaking region that after 1918 was to become part of the Latvian state, in 1917 was not administratively part of the Baltic provinces and in any case was virtually bereft of economic organization of any kind because its predominantly rural population consisted of smallholders and agricultural wage-workers on large estates. The Union's founding congress, therefore, was not representative, strictly speaking, of all of the rural areas of the Latvian-speaking region. Nonetheless, in their discussions about the purposes and political positions of the
new party, congressional delegates spoke of representing the "Latvian peasant," and of peasanthood itself as the taproot of the "Latvian nation." The congress elected a three-man council, with Karlis Ulmanis at its head, and adopted provisional statutes spelling out the new party's organizational principles. Its origins obviously made the Union particularly sensitive to agricultural questions, but the timing of its founding meant that it could not be concerned with economic matters alone. In light of the fragmentation of Latvian political life and the emigration of thousands to the interior of Russia in search of safety, and in view of growing popularity of left-of-center political ideologies, a "national" ideology was necessary both to reduce political bewilderment and to create a recognizable alternative to the left. The combination of seeming practical-mindedness and "national" concerns attracted many: by its second congress in July, 1917, the Union already had 137 local chapters and could boast a membership of 17,186 persons. 18

At its first congress the Union formulated a platform that was subsequently changed only as its original demands were realized. 19 Heading all other planks, and reflecting the political situation in 1917, was the call for the creation of a Latvian state, to consist of the Latvian-language areas of southern Livonia, Courland, and the Latvian districts of Vitebsk province. All foreign armies were to be evacuated from Latvian territory and, as soon as possible thereafter, all Latvians (including women) were to elect representatives to a constitutional convention. Latvian "colonies" in Russia -- enclaves of Latvian-speakers who had emigrated from the Baltic area in the nineteenth century -- were to be represented at the constitutional convention by their own delegates. With respect to agrarian reform, the Union called for the progressively heavier taxation of all landed estates until their owners turned them over to landless Latvian peasants. There should also be a unified public school system that emphasized vocational education and had at its apex a University, a Conservatory, and an Academy of Arts; and the new state should follow a strict policy of church-state separation.

In the area of social legislation the Union's platform called for the introduction of the eight-hour work day in industrial enterprises; workers' insurance for illness and accidents; protection of women and children in the labor force; and a social security system for the old and disabled, based on contributions by the state and the employees. State revenues were to come from a tax system that had at its core a progressive income tax and an inheritance tax. There should also be import duties to protect Latvian industry, a common Latvian currency, and a central national bank to issue it. In order to handle local affairs democratically, there should be local (pagasts) and district (aprin%k%is) governments. Finally, the state should take an active role in the rationalization and development of Latvian agriculture.

The Union's program was revised and passed by the pre-independence congresses and endorsed in a final form by the first General Congress following the independence proclamation of November, 1918. Thereafter it remained unchanged except for the removal of provisions that were incorporated into the new constitution of the country and realized in some form by the successive governments in
the 1920s. The scope of the program made it clear from the beginning, however, that the Union did not intend to be a purely "peasant" party. The statehood plank, for example, was aimed at all Latvians, and the planks dealing with the conditions of industrial labor sought to appeal to the natural constituency of the Social Democrats. Moreover, the planks calling for various kinds of agrarian reform were relatively moderate, because in refusing to talk the language of outright confiscation of landed estates (and their redistribution to the landless) the Union was underlining the importance of the idea of private property and seeking to distinguishing itself, at this stage, from the more radical Social Democrats and, above all, from the increasingly more popular Latvian Bolsheviks.

The Union in the 1920s

In retrospect, the two post-1918 years appear as a transition, but their experienced reality was one of unpredictability and near-chaos. The new Latvian government had neither full internal legitimacy nor external recognition. Much of the territory over which it proclaimed authority continued to be occupied by the German army, which also provided cover for elements of the Baltic German Ritterschaften to ply their own agendas. A rival Latvian government, headed by the writer Andrievs Niedra, in 1919 sought accommodation with the Baltic Germans but received little support in the general population. Also in 1919, for a period of five months, a Latvian Bolshevik government, headed by Peteris Stucka and supported by Lenin, proclaimed its authority over the Latvian-language areas of southern Livonia. The number of refugees remained high, and continued warfare added to their insecurity. No single institution possessed ultimate sovereignty, and all laws, including those pertaining to property and life, had become uprooted and were losing force.

By the end of 1919, however, stability and predictability appeared to be returning, as the Latvian national government not only had assembled a successful army but had also established institutions that could implement the sovereignty it claimed for itself. An elected Constitutional Convention was convened on May 1, 1920, and began its work, even though the territory of the new state was not yet cleared of rival armies (contingents of the Bolshevik armed forces remained in Latgale until summer of 1920). Recognizing the need to secure the loyalty of the population over which it now claimed authority, the Convention not only began drafting a basic document but also began a series of reforms, including agrarian reform. As the danger of warfare receded and the German army withdrew, refugees began to return to the farms they had abandoned, and those without farmland, having fought in the national army as well as in the Bolshevik contingents, now awaited action -- in the form of rewards -- from the new "national" government. The new constitution, adopted by the Convention in 1922, required election of a 100-person parliament (Saeima) every three years. Accordingly, Saeima elections were held in 1922, 1925, 1928, and 1931 and it is these four dates that structure the political history of the so-called "parliamentary period" in...
the interwar phase of Latvian political history. Even before the first election in 1992, however, the
Great Agrarian Reform (as it is known in Latvian history) had started to transfer property rights to
rural land to thousands who had never had them before.

Though generally in agreement on the need for an agrarian reform, the political parties of the
1920s divided on many other issues, and, indeed, political debate increasingly centered around
relatively narrow concerns. The observation by Dr. Paul Schiemann, a Saeima deputy from the
German Party, that, by comparison with the parliaments of the Western democracies, the Latvian
Saeima was characterized by divisions based not as much on world-views as on exceedingly practical
and even personal matters, was largely correct. The fragmentation of the political domain was
evident even in the first (1922) Saeima election, when voters had to choose from among 88 candidate
lists; and in the 1925 election the choice was even greater since 141 lists were presented. A
tightening of the law of party formation had an effect, but still in the third Saeima (1928) election
voters chose from among 120 lists and in 1931 from among 103. The number of parties represented
in the Saeimas themselves was, of course, smaller: 20 in the first, 24 in the second, 26 in the third,
and 27 in the fourth. All of this forming, dissolving, and re-forming of political groupings took place
in a population which voted in impressively high numbers (75 to 80% of all voters), but in which the
total number of voters ranged from 963,000 in 1922 to 1.2 million in 1931. The splintering of the
political domain reflected one overriding fact about Latvian political attitudes in the 1920s. The
consensus that had earlier formed on the "large" issues - whether there should be a Latvian state,
what its government should be, what should take priority in post-war reconstruction - was virtually
impossible to transfer to "smaller" ones.

In this atmosphere, the Agrarian Union found itself in a bind. The important role its leaders --
especially Karlis Ulmanis (who headed the National Council) and Zigfrīds Meierovics (who worked
hard to obtain diplomatic recognition for the new state) -- had played in the founding of the Latvian
state had indeed elevated the party to a "national" level, yet its basic constituency remained the
farming population, which now looked to the Union to safeguard its "interests." The Union's main
rival in terms of size and influence -- the Social Democrats -- were in the same bind, but its
connection to its basic constituency -- the "working class" -- was tighter because it was ideologically
defined. Its ideology allowed the Social Democrats to maintain the position of a permanent
opposition in the Saeima, whereas the Union worked hard to piece together and head twelve of the
eighteen cabinets of the parliamentary period. Though the Union continued to represent itself during
the 1920s and early 1930s as an "agrarian" party, its frequent assumption of the role of "the
government" and the similarly equally frequent appearance of its leaders as cabinet ministers in the
governments formed by other parties meant a gradual loss of distinctiveness as an "agrarian" entity.
On too many occasions its leaders had to act on behalf of the "nation" rather than it rural
constituency. The challenges of creating a viable national economy in the 1920s called for the

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proposal by the Union of measures that addressed the problems not only of farmers but also of the expanding industrial sector. Union loyalists in the foreign ministry and the diplomatic corps realized that representations to the outside world had to be made in terms of the whole Latvian "nation" rather than any of its parts. What in fact took place was the transformation of the Union -- to use the language of the times -- into a "bourgeois" party, willing, as many saw it, to make deals of all sorts with the splinter parties in the Saeima in an unseemly desire to stay in power.22

The Fragmentation of Rural Political Opinion

This "nationalization" of the Union can explain the erosion of its agrarian base only partially, however. The rural population of Latvia, still some 75% of the total in the early 1920s, continued to have a core of Union supporters as long as the party existed. Yet as the decade of the 1920s unfolded and rural interests themselves became more diverse and outspoken, the Union's hold over its natural constituency began to diminish. With each Saeima election, new "peasantist" parties put forward candidates who argued that the Union had ceased to be the "true" champion of the rural population. There is no doubt that the very liberal Latvian electoral law continued to encourage this splintering. Any dissatisfied fragment of the politically active population could establish a bona fide "party" if it could obtain 100 signatures on a petition. There was little pressure on disgruntled activists to compromise; moreover, in the Union itself -- as in all of the Latvian political parties -- there was from the beginning an insistence on doctrinal assent as a sign of party loyalty, and expulsions became more frequent. The statistics of representation reveal the weakening of the Union's support: 26 representatives in the Constitutional Convention, seventeen in the first Saeima (1922), sixteen in the second (1925), sixteen in the third (1928), and fourteen in the fourth (1931). The results of the fourth Saeima election in 1931 tell the story even more vividly. The claim by the Union that it spoke for the whole rural population was being challenged by the presence in the Saeima of a Christian Farmers Party, a Left Workers and Farm Workers Party, a New Farmers and Smallholders Party, a Lettgallian Progressive Farmers Party, a New Farmers Union, a Workers and Poor Peasants Party, and a Russian Farmers Party.23 None of these smaller parties, to be sure, was numerically strong, but their combined parliamentary strength of thirty seats was substantially greater than the Union's fourteen. In 1931, the Agrarian Union received a total of 118,443 votes and the other rural parties a total of 280,626. By this time, the Union had ceased to be able to unify the confessional and economic interests of other aspiring rural-based political groups. Indeed, by the time of the 1934 coup, the Union's share of the popular vote had decreased to approximately 12.2%, to its lowest level ever.

At the same time none of the other larger parties—including the Social Democrats, who continued to address agricultural wage-workers and other dissatisfied rural subpopulations as if they were less developed provincial versions of the urban proletariat -- held much appeal for the non-
Union rural voters either. On their side, the Social Democrats were also losing control over their primary constituency: the Social Democrat seats in the Saeima decreased from 38 in the first to 21 in the fourth. Vilification of political opponents increased, becoming a staple of parliamentary debates and the lifeblood of both the party newspapers and the yellow press. By the early 1930s there was growing substantial disillusionment with the Saeima across the whole political spectrum. Many observers were beginnings talk in terms of a "crisis of the parliamentary system."24

Though its popularity in the electoral arena was diminishing, the Union’s role in the life of the new Latvian state cannot be measured by these numbers alone. In a parliamentary situation where "blocks" were a necessity for a government to be formed, the record clearly shows that the Union was more successful than other parties in creating the coalitions necessary for keeping the Saeima from paralysis. Stung by these successes, its main rivals, particularly the Social Democrats, constantly accused the Union’s parliamentary members of buying the cooperation of splinter parties by means of outright bribery or with promises of special-interest legislation.25 Moreover, the Union as a prominent political organization supplied, as did other large parties, a steady stream of capable persons to the so-called "permanent government" – the administrators and technicians in the ministries that were essential not only for the reforms of the 1920s that laid the institutional infrastructure of the state but also later to keep the machinery of the state a going concern as parliamentary coalitions came and went in the Saeima. In the absence of a reliable civil service system and with only an embryonic educational system in place to train technical experts, the political parties through their local and district chapters could speedily identify able and promising individuals and secure government appointments for them. This informal system of recruiting to the "permanent government" invited corruption and favoritism, of course, but the interwar record of agrarian reform and the beginnings of welfare-state institutions suggests that without this expedient the job of "state-building" would have slowed considerably.

The Union in the 1930s

In November, 1933, the Union introduced legislation to change the 1922 Constitution’s 19th paragraph which deal with Presidential powers. In essence, the proposal meant to change the President into a popularly elected official (instead of one elected by the Saeima) and to expand the office’s powers and prerogatives. During its first two readings the measure received substantial support, but before its final version could be voted on, Ulmanis, together with a handful of Union loyalists and the Latvian Army leadership, carried out a coup on May 15, 1934. On May 16, the Latvian citizenry was told that the Constitution of 1922 had been suspended, the Saeima dismissed, and that all political parties and political organizations - including the Union - had been dissolved. When the coup occurred, Ulmanis had just formed a cabinet in which he was Prime Minister and Foreign Minister; in 1935 when the term of the sitting national President Alberts Kviesis expired,
Ulmanis had himself appointed to that office as well. From 1934 to June, 1940, Ulmanis therefore headed an unelected government consisting of a Cabinet of Ministers of his own choosing and, of course, the "permanent government" in the ministries. They were all instruments of his personal rule.

From May 1934 onward, the Agrarian Union no longer existed as a political organization, since such organizations were forbidden in Ulmanis' Latvia. Because during the 1920s Ulmanis and the Agrarian Union had become nearly indistinguishable, historians (and certainly those politicians who were driven from the political arena by the coup) have continued to make an easy association between the Union and the authoritarian period that followed, even suggesting that the Union as a political party had planned a coup for a long time. These charges are unverifiable. There is no evidence that the rank-and-file Union members knew of Ulmanis' aspirations, and, indeed, there is considerable debate about how long he himself had nursed the idea of a coup. It is true, of course, that after May, 1934, a large number of the most prominent Union politicians served for longer or shorter period in Ulmanis' government, but so did a substantial number of other pre-coup politicians, including many from other parties. The only persons systematically excluded from the Ulmanis regime were those who had been prominent in the parties of the left, primarily the Social Democrats.

The sudden transformation of Latvia's political institutions was not in itself a solution to the country's social and economic problems, of course. These would have had to be confronted by any regime — democratic or authoritarian. Ulmanis had been interested in matters agrarian all of his adult life (he was born in 1877), and now he was in a position to move the country's agricultural problems to center stage and to assign the well-being of farmers highest priority. This he did with gusto. Indeed, the conceptual apparatus in his speeches after 1934, when he discussed the nature of the Latvian state, frequently used a metaphor that was familiar to virtually all who heard him — namely, the traditional Latvian farmstead (seta) presided over by a strong head (saimnieks), whose responsibilities included not only allocation of a farmstead's labor force but also the moral upbringing of those under his charge. The saimnieks represented the farmstead to the outside world -- in the pre-modern Latvian world -- to the owner of the landed estate on which the farmstead was located and to regional authorities. He also dealt with other farmsteads heads as an equal. In this view, the farmstead embodied unity of purpose: disagreements were resolved by the saimnieks, who made sure that all the farmstead's inhabitants realized that the survival of the farmstead took precedence over everything else. This metaphor for the state excluded by definition the notion that all interests deserved equal attention and that representatives of varied interests should take turns governing. The saimnieks was not so much a charismatic, dynamic leader (Fuhrer) in the Hitler or Mussolini mold as a wise, just, and moral guide of his people. 26

In line with this general philosophy, Ulmanis moved in the next two years toward a pronounced statism in national economic matters by creating four structures called kameras for
commerce and manufacture (Dec, 1934), agriculture (March 29, 1935), crafts (Dec., 1935) and labor (May, 1936). Consisting of representatives from private-sector organizations and the government, these structures were intended to coordinate individual and national economic planning. For example, instructions to the Agricultural Kamera, shortly after its founding, from the Minister of Agriculture included the following injunction: "Henceforth each farmer in his farm has to draw up an economic plan and the following year's budget, in which production planning is coordinated with the government's instructions and market needs. [Such plans] should seek to move away from dependence on only a few crops, and, instead of expanding the area sown, should seek to raise the quality of production." 27

Obviously, Ulmanis intended to rely heavily on the expertise of the "permanent government" and on his own abilities to convince the Latvian citizenry to subordinate their disputes to the greater good of the nation. 28 It would be Ulmanis, however, who would define what that greater good was, and the technocrats in the ministries who would by means of carrots and sticks ensure that the population was moving in the desired direction. The fact is that the Ulmanis government had inherited the accumulated agrarian problems of the parliamentary period, including the unanticipated consequences of the Great Reform of the 1920s. The Great Reform was brought to a formal conclusion in 1937. At that time, however, there were still thousands of rural people who did not have land but who wanted it, and thousands of smallholders who relied for survival on various kinds of government subsidies. Moreover, as Ulmanis repeatedly pointed out in his speeches, hardship on smallholdings was leading to their abandonment and the government had to find a way of keeping the farmers on the farms. Whether these problems could be solved with the help of dirigisme implemented through the technocrats in the ministries remained to be seen. But the Agrarian Union, as a party, played no role in any of this. Those of its leaders and rank-and-file members who worked for the Ulmanis government in the period 1934 to 1940 did so less because of their former party affiliation than because of their expertise in fields the government found valuable for and relevant to its plans.

Postlude

In June, 1940, the Soviet army occupied Latvia and Ulmanis' personal rule came to an end. Ulmanis himself was deported and died in Siberian exile in 1942. The Agrarian Union as an organized political entity had ceased to exist eight years before, and the post-1940 political history of Latvia involved an entirely different cast of players. Those of the Union's former leaders who survived the 1940-1944 Soviet and German occupations became émigrés in 1944 and tried to revive the Union in 1948 in the DP camps of West Germany. By that time, however, the Union was no more than one of several dozens of émigré organizations which had no political arena to be active in and no goals to aspire to other than protest against Latvia's Sovietization. 29 But in 1990, during the
proliferation of new political grouping in the perestroika period, a new Agrarian Union was founded, claiming organizational continuity with all the interwar agrarian parties collectively. When Latvia regained its independence in 1991 and in 1993 elected a new Saeima (the fifth, the fourth having been elected in 1931), the Union was represented in this body with twelve deputies. In the 1995 election of the sixth Saeima, however, the Union did not receive the minimum 5% of the total vote for any parliamentary representation. To the 1995 voters, the Union may have seemed to have lost its way, because some its leaders continued to proclaim that “farming is the basis of the Latvian economy,” while others urged the country’s speedy inclusion in the European Community, which step, of course, would mean the eventual abolition of any special status for Latvian farmers. 30
Appendix: The Historiography of the Latvian Agrarian Union

Given the importance of the Union in the interwar years, the absence of a history of the organization—even a Latvian-language history— is somewhat surprising. Twelve of the eighteen interwar prime ministers in the period of parliamentary rule (1918 to 1934), and three of the country's four interwar presidents—Gustavs Zemgals (1927-1930), Albiets Kviesis (1930-1936) and Ulmanis (1936-1940)—were all Union men. The ubiquitous Ulmanis, one of the founders of the Union, occupied the prime minister's office in the parliamentary period no less than five times and it was also Ulmanis who organized and carried out the 1934 coup. Paucity of sources may partially explain the lack of a written history. The internal records of the Union were only partially archived when it was dissolved in 1934, and the subsequent political upheavals in Latvia—presidential rule (1934-1940); Soviet occupation (1940-1941); German occupation (1941-44); execution, deportation, and emigration of pre-war party leaders (1940-44); and incorporation into the Soviet Union (post-1945)—scattered the source collections that were held privately. A recent start in correcting this situation is a collection of relatively uncritical historical essays about the Union—Heinrihs Strods and Antonijs Zunda, eds. Latvia Zemnieku savienības vēsture > izcelsme, attēlība, mūsdienas [The History of the Latvian Agrarian Union: Founding, Development, and Current Situation] (Riga: Preses Nams, 1995). At this writing the most informative printed sources about the Union's interwar history are the memoirs of its founders, leaders and admirers (see Klīve, Beļzinš', Šilde in Note 14, below) and its ideological—Social Democratic—enemies (see Cietlēns, Note 21, and Bastjaņis, Note 24, below). These were all published in emigration.

The most challenging personality in the Union's interwar history is, of course, Kārlis Ulmanis, about whom there exists only one serious biography—Edgars Dunstors, Kārlis Ulmanis dzīve > celtnieks, politikis, diktators, mocēklis [The Life of Kārlis Ulmanis: Pilgrim, Politician, Dictator, Victim] (Stockholm: Daugava, 1978). The author, one of the most accomplished Latvian historians of the twentieth century, is an émigré and therefore did not use whatever sources may have existed in Latvia (the Latvian SSR when the book was written). Ulmanis was born in 1877 and was suspected by Czarist authorities of sympathizing with the revolutionaries of 1905. He was imprisoned for a few months and, upon being freed, fled to Germany and then the United States, where he lived from 1906 to 1913, earning in 1909 an MA degree in dairy science at the University of Nebraska. Absolutely committed to the idea of an independent Latvia, he appeared equally committed to his party and to parliamentary democracy until 1934, when he led the bloodless coup that ended the existence of both. As "dictator" after 1934, he was insular and ascetic, but also increasingly fond of popular adulation. The symbiotic relationship between this enigmatic man and his party, and the related question of what he intended to accomplish with his 1934 coup, need not only to be chronicled but also analyzed. During imprisonment by the Soviet authorities in 1941/42
in Krasnovodsk, Turkmenistan, he wrote a retrospective account of the 1930s, which is now available in Indulis Ronis, ed. Karlis Ulmanis trimda un cietuma [Karlis Ulmanis in Exile and in Prison] (Riga: Latvijas vestures instituts, 1994).

Notes

1 The official name of the political party the paper discusses was Latvies’u Zemnieku Savienība, literally translated “The Latvian Farmers’ (or Peasants’) Union.” The word zemnieks in Latvian means either “peasant” or “farmer,” depending on the chronological context, and does not carry with it the negative connotations the former English word. The historian Edgar Anderson, in his Latvia: Country and People (Stockholm: M. Goppers, 1967), p. 240, translates the name as “Latvian Agrarian Union” and we have followed his usage.

2 Research for this article was part of a larger research project on the "Socio-Economic Consequences of Agrarian Reform: The Case of Latvia," funded by a grant from the National Council for East European and Soviet Studies (Grant 810-23). The author expresses his gratitude to the Council.


15 On the founding of the Agrarian Union see A|dolfs Kl_ve, Briva\ Latvija > Latvijas taps'ana [Independent Latvia: The Founding of the Latvian State] (New York: Gramatu Draugs, 1969), pp. 195-202; A|dolfs Kl_ve, Latvijas neatkar_{bas} gadi [The Latvian Independence Years] (New York: Gramatu Draugs, 1976), pp. 72-92; Alfre\ds Be\rzin\%s', Labie gadi > Pirms un pelc 15.maija [The Good Years: Before and After May 15] (New York, 1963: Gramatu Draugs), pp. 86-102; Adolfs Silde, Latvijas ve*sture, pp. 155-156. These authors were either Union leaders or were sympathetic to the Ulmanis regime after 1934.


17 S*ilde, Latvijas ve*sture, pp. 155-156.

18 S*ilde, Latvijas ve*sture, p. 155.

19 Latvie\su zem nieku savien_{has} 1922.g. Saeimas ve\dels\'anu platforma [The Platform of the Agrarian Union for the 1922. Saeima Election] (Riga, 1922).


22 Fel\likss Cie\l\ns, Laikmetu main\\%a\l [In Changing Times] (Vasteras, Sweden, 1963), pp. 405-446. Cie\l\ns was one of the ideological leaders of the Social Democratic Party and served as a cabinet minister in a number of the 1920s governments.


24 As did, for example, one of the leaders of the Social Democratic Party, Valdem\rs Bastja\nis, in his memoirs Gala sa\kums [The Beginning of the End] (Lidingo, Sweden, 1964, pp. 15-26.

25 Valdem\rs Bastja\nis, Demokr\alisk\a Latvija [Democratic Latvia] (Vasteras, Sweden, 1966), pp. 190-239.


28 Edgars Dunsdorfs, Ka\rl\%a Ulman\%a dz_ve > cel\%inieks, politik\%is, diktators, moce\klis [The Life of Karlis Ulmanis: Pilgrim, Politician, Dictator, Victim] (Stockholm: Dauga, 1978), pp. 346-360

29 V. Klive, “LZS darb\ba trim\da [The Agrarian Union in Exile]” in Heinrihs Strods and Antonijs Zunda, eds. Latvijas Zemnieku savien_{has} ve*sture > izce\l\sm\e, att \r\ba, mu\d\st\has [The History of the Latvian Agrarian Union: Founding, Development, and Current Situation] (Riga: Preses Nams, 1995), pp. 143-172.

30 Valdis Z\_ars, =Latvijas Zemnieku savien_{has} (LZS) ve\dels\'anas kampan\%as anal\_ze [Analysis of the Election Campaign of the Latvian Agrarian Union].” Sociolog\'ijas un Politolog\'ijas Z\'urnals (June, 1995), No. 6, pp. 22-23.

31 Reprinted speeches by Ulmanis and excerpts from his speeches and writings can be found in Ka\rl\%is Ulmanis > Runas un raksti 1899-1918 [The Speeches and Writings of Karlis Ulmanis], I Riga, 1939; and in Sigizmunds Tim\sans, comp. Ka\rl\%is Ulmanis > Atzin\%as un runu fragmenti [Karlis Ulmanis: Thoughts and Speech Excerpts] (Riga: Prizma, 1990).