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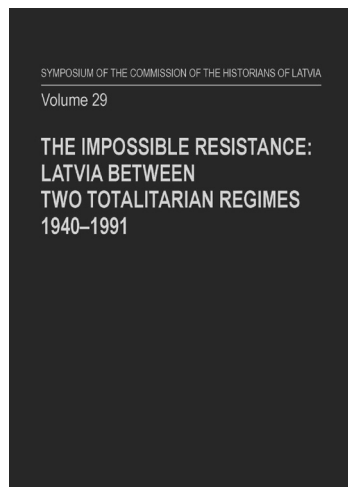
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Valters Nollendorfs, Valters Ščerbinskis (eds.). *The Impossible Resistance: Latvia Between Two Totalitarian Regimes 1940–1991*. (Symposium of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia, Vol. 29). Rīga: Zinātne, 2021. 264 pp. ISBN 9789934599163



Krājums veltīts pretošanās vēsturei un sniedz pārskatu par šīs pētniecības jomas stāvokli Latvijā. Tas iedalīts divās galvenajās hronoloģiskās sadaļās: pirmā – par kara laiku (1940.–1945. gads, ar dažām atkāpēm), bet otrā – par pēc-kara padomju okupācijas periodu līdz 1991. gadam. Saprotamu iemeslu dēļ kara laikam veltītajā sadaļā lielākais uzsvars ir uz bruņotās pretošanās fenomenu, lielākoties sekojot historiogrāfijā jau ierastām interpretācijām, bet vērtīga ir diskusija par ebreju glābšanu holokaustā kā pretošanās veidu. Raksti par pēckara periodu apskata pretošanos no citiem, brīžiem jauniem skatpunktiem. Īpaši interesanti ir mēģinājumi diskutēt par dažādām pretošanās formām Hruščova un Brežņeva laikos, kas līdz šim pārāk maz pētīts. Daži autori rosina domāt par nacionālkomunistiem, disidentiem un par čekas metodēm atšķirīgā rakursā, nekā tas darīts līdz šim. Jēdzieni “pielāgošanās” un “konformisms” tiek minēti dominējošās dihotomijas kolaborācija–pretošanās kontekstā, kas šķiet daudzsološi, bet autoru starpā

trūkst dialoga šajā jautājumā, kas jāuzskata par zaudētu iespēju attīstīt mūsu teorētisko domāšanu par pretošanos.

In the history of twentieth century Europe, with its global wars, totalitarian regimes, and genocide, there has been a strong impetus towards normative history, with the desire of every society to have been on the “right side” of events. For example, resistance to aggression and oppression is not only framed as an existential imperative in modern total warfare, but also as the morally right thing to do. We see this in the commentary on wars and conflicts in our own time. National resistance has, however, also been central to how various societies constructed the self-understanding of their own history of defeat and resurgence to be on the winning side in the Second World War; such narratives have been particularly dominant – and persistent – in Western European countries such as France or Norway. For the countries of Eastern Europe, that can by no means be considered as having ended up as winners in the Second World War, due to the decades-long experience of postwar Soviet persecution, Stalinist ideology lumped them in the same category as defeated Germany. Here, the focus was on the extent to which societies had collaborated with the evils of Nazism, in part as a way to keep them in a morally inferior position to their Soviet “liberators”.

Even after the regaining of independence, the paradigm of collaboration remained the predominant one in studies of contemporary history in Latvia. Upon attempting to re-join the Western-oriented family of nations, one of the demands on Latvia was that it come to terms with the role of local collaboration in the crimes of the Nazi occupation regime. Internally, however, this discourse from abroad demanding an examination of Nazi collaboration was mirrored by a traumatised post-Soviet society seeking answers regarding complicity and responsibility for crimes committed in the name of the Communist regime. For these reasons, since the 1990s, proportionally more resources have been devoted to promote research in Latvia into various aspects of collaboration during the years 1940–1991, than have funded historical research into the forms and actors of resistance. Early pioneers of this field in Latvia during the 1990s, such as Tāļivaldis Vilciņš or Heinrihs Strods, could only envy the situation of colleagues in Lithuania, who enjoyed much greater support from the state that emphasised from the beginning a narrative of broad-based national resistance as the foundation of successfully reclaiming independence.

This situation is finally changing, partly because there is by now a significant body of scholarly literature devoted to many aspects of collaboration during the Nazi and Soviet periods, but also likely due to the fact that there is an increasing perceived geopolitical threat emanating from Latvia’s neighbour to the East,

and the resilience of a society in times of war is of a greater concern to many people, not least the government and its international allies. It is thus in this context that one can welcome the appearance of the volume under review, the most recent volume published by the state Historians' Commission.

This anthology brings together separate chapters by eleven different historians, including three experts from abroad. The contributions cover aspects of political, military, cultural, and social history, and are divided roughly evenly between the wartime (1940–1945) and the post-war periods. While chronologically disproportionate, this is a logical division due to fundamental differences in the contexts for resistance in peacetime and war. Thus, three of the five chapters in the first section relate to armed or militarised resistance, even though the timeframe of one also extends over a decade into the post-war period. This division also reflects some of the particular circumstances characteristic of the different historical contexts: for example, in the first section there is a discussion of saving Jews in the Holocaust as an act of resistance, while the second section has contributions on whether a faction within the Communist Party can be considered resistance, and the relationship between dissidence and resistance in Soviet-controlled Latvia.

Looking more closely at the individual contributions in the first section, entitled “Soviet–German–Soviet Occupations, 1940–1945”, we find solid, competent presentations by established names in the field. Jānis Viļums provides a compact survey of the forms of non-violent resistance to Soviet rule that have been identified in two periods, namely 1940–1941 and 1944–1953, with the emphasis being more on the former than the latter. Following the historiography established by Vilciņš, much of the emphasis is on school-age youth. The text is, unfortunately, quite descriptive and misses the opportunities to offer deeper analytical insights in why non-violent resistance was ineffectual – according to what measure?

Jānis Tomaševskis in his chapter describes how Latvian partisans engaged the Soviets in a battle to liberate the town of Limbaži in the summer of 1941, independent of the advancing German forces. The description of the battle is well-documented and engaging, and its uniqueness is emphasised. Yet, when the author concluded that this episode more resembled a military battle by regular forces than guerrilla warfare, it becomes less clear how this should fit into the framework of partisan war used as the paradigm of resistance.

Uldis Neiburgs revisits the topic of the attempt to mobilise armed resistance to both the Nazi and Soviet regimes by creating a military wing of the democratic national resistance movement, the Latvian Central Council. Here, Neiburgs is actually implementing a narrative of resistance that is more similar to the models used in countries like Norway, where figures representing the interests of independent Latvia sought recognition and support from the Western allies for

their struggle to re-establish state sovereignty. Had Neiburgs done this more explicitly, and adopted more of a comparative engagement with the literature on Western European resistance movements such as in Norway, this could have offered fruitful insights regarding the opportunities and limitations for resistance in the various cases.

Zigmārs Turčinskis offers a concentrated overview of the various structures of armed resistance in Latvia during the first years of the reestablishment of Soviet control in postwar Latvia. The reader is left somewhat frustrated, however, by a text that lacks a coherent conclusion, tying up the material presented. This is even more of a shame, since Turčinskis very rightly introduced his chapter with an observation that Latvian society was completely unprepared for armed resistance at the loss of independence in 1940, and that German efforts to set-up stay-behind units in 1944 were only half-hearted. A reflection upon how these circumstances were reflected in the outcome of the postwar guerrilla resistance in Latvia, and whether – perhaps also how – these deficiencies were overcome, would have been a useful way to end a chapter that also serves as a bridge to the section mainly discussing non-violent forms of resistance during the coming decades of Soviet occupation.

Katrin Reichelt's contribution stands out in several ways. Firstly, it is more deeply grounded in the international scholarship on the rescue of Jews under Nazi occupation. By referring to Arno Lustiger's definition of "rescue as resistance", Reichelt also embeds her topic into the main theme of the anthology, resistance. Hers is also one of the contributions to this volume where the presentation of the empirical examples is structured analytically, rather than descriptively. The only real shortcoming of the chapter is that it does not adequately tie the novelty of Lustiger's rescue as resistance to how resistance has heretofore been viewed and defined in the Latvian historiography, or even in the other chapters in this same section of the book.

Much of what is presented in the first section is not entirely new; most of the authors have published similar texts before, albeit mainly in Latvian (or German, in the case of Reichelt). Nevertheless, having all of these topics presented side-by-side in accessible English does provide a useful summary of the state of research on resistance in wartime Latvia. New researchers coming to the field will likely find this a good starting point for future research, especially as some of the authors, Neiburgs, for example, suggest areas where further investigation could be of particular benefit.

The second section of the book, "Soviet Occupation 1945–1991" covers a longer period: while it is only looking at the Soviet regime, this regime changed aspects of its character – even if not fundamental aspects of its

nature – in the decades spanning the leadership of Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Gorbachev. Furthermore, the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras in particular have long been understudied by historians in and of Latvia. That these periods are also being explored, and that the contributions look at phenomena that test the limitations of the definitions of resistance that have used wartime – especially the Second World War era – occupation scenarios as their archetypes, make the contributions in this section potentially more novel for how we understand resistance in postwar Soviet Latvia.

Geoffrey Swain provides a summarising narrative on the context of the Soviet period from Stalin to Gorbachev, mainly from the perspective of what concerned the Communist Party leadership in Riga and Moscow. Its intent is clearly to provide a general background to the case studies discussed in the rest of the section. Nevertheless, it is the first text in the book to augment collaboration–resistance dichotomy with a third option, adaptation; but unfortunately, the theoretical implications of this innovation for understanding resistance in Soviet-dominated Latvia are never developed further, which is a missed opportunity from a scholar who has rare expertise both on Latvia, and the wider experiences of the communist bloc during the Cold War.

Ilze Boldāne-Zeļenkova deploys demographic data as a starting point for discussing how struggling to maintain unique aspects of Latvian cultural identity was a form of resistance to the political project of forming a new *Homo sovieticus*. In her discussion she also examines how the Soviet policy of “national in form, socialist in content” could be instrumentalised, both by a regime that wanted to make Latvia’s population more Soviet, and by actors in Latvian society who sought to manipulate this policy to ensure that as much of the “national” as possible was maintained. While the limitations of the major source base for the article – namely, oral history interviews – is mentioned in passing, given the heavy reliance on these sources and certain long passages quoted verbatim in the text regarding inter-ethnic relations in the Soviet period, it would have been better if the author had devoted a part of the text to actually engaging self-reflexively with the actual problems that using oral history interviews can entail for answering one’s research questions, similar to how I have had to grapple with the ethical and source critical issues of using *NKVD/KGB* archival materials in my own research.

In his chapter, Michael Loader builds on a decade of research on the Latvian national communists to dissect the question of how to categorise Eduards Berklavs and his like-minded Party colleagues: were they the persecuted dissenters that they were made out to be during the *Atmoda* (Awakening) of the 1980s, or were they just a group of upstarts who lost one of the many internecine factional struggles that periodically wracked the Communist Party? Drawing on key figures’

memoirs, Loader presents these prominent national communists as exhibiting adept agency in their control of the narrative about themselves in the final decade of the USSR. While admitting that his source base is problematic due to bias and factual reliability, since his focus is on how narratives and counternarratives were framed, he argues that these are good sources for the question he seeks to answer.

Whereas in the first section, there was a cluster of chapters on armed resistance, in this section, three authors each approach aspects of more grassroots forms of resistance in Soviet Latvian society from the 1960s to the 1980s. Mārtiņš Mintauris provides an engaging essay on how the security services would exert social control – a concept he admits the *KGB* themselves did not use – to suppress or prevent anti-Soviet activities. This is a novel discussion of the ways the security apparatus sought to forestall the development of mass resistance in an era when the brutal mass repression of Stalin was considered largely counterproductive by the Soviet leadership. Interestingly, Mintauris' findings lead him to raise questions about certain widely-held narratives about the extent of *KGB* power in Latvia during the waning years of the Soviet Union.

Along with that of Mintauris, the contribution by Eva Eglāja-Kristšone is one of the most thought-provoking and intellectually stimulating chapters in the volume. Resembling more of an essay than a research article, Eglāja-Kristšone's text engages in a theoretical discussion of collaboration and conformism, with Cold War Latvia as the context for the examples illustrating her arguments. Furthermore, she links her ideas to ongoing debates in other post-socialist societies, as well as refers to relevant sociological literature to frame her perspective. In doing so, she shows what Swain could have also done regarding inject his chosen concept of adaptation into the historiography of Latvia under the Soviets. An intra-book dialogue between Eglāja-Kristšone on conformism and Swain on adaptation would potentially make this volume stand out in current Latvian historical scholarship for exhibiting a hitherto largely unseen attempt to actively develop and refine theoretical concepts and approaches.

The final chapter of the section, and the entire anthology, is by Gints Zelmenis. Zelmenis takes on the task of mapping the relation between resistance movements and dissidents in Soviet-occupied Latvia, admitting that both of these terms are highly contested. Furthermore, he shows how the boundaries between the two are overlapping and fluid, especially since most expressions of resistance at this time are non-violent. In his conclusions, he admits that the division between the two phenomena he sets up is highly approximate, but that there are also problems deriving from the fact that there was often no consensus on how the actors defined these phenomena either. He offers useful suggestions for what further research could be done, and one hopes that these suggestions are heeded.

Framing the entire collection are two introductory texts. Daina Bleiere provides a relatively comprehensive discussion of the various definitions of collaboration and resistance, and how they apply to research on the Nazi and Soviet occupations of Latvia. The chapter is thorough and aims at covering the various ways collaboration and resistance have been systematised by different influential authors in the international scholarly literature, and how this has influenced the ways in which collaboration and resistance have been conceptualised in Latvian historiography. Bleiere rightly concludes that the study of both collaboration and resistance in Latvia have not adequately engaged with the broader discourses within the field, nor has there been much consistency in how these terms are applied. While the latter is potentially a cause of misinterpretation, the former is much more fundamentally problematic for reaching a better understanding. Historians should not mechanically apply terms and analytical frameworks, without having first understood the discourse from which they have arisen. Indeed, of the definitions and categorisations presented by Bleiere, all have collaboration and resistance as being opposites, or on a continuum: concepts like adaptation and conformism raised by Swain and Eglāja-Kristsonsone, have no place here, unfortunately. Furthermore, in the schemes described by Bleiere, the focus is often on actors and is static, rather than on behaviours and being more situational, which would arguably be more heuristically useful. Finally, while the classification Bleiere ascribes to Neiburgs lists the interesting aspects “opposed to”, “to struggle for”, and other variants, I believe it could be fruitful to develop this further, perhaps even to posit resistance in the way that Isaiah Berlin spoke of positive and negative freedoms.

Lastly, a few words should be said about the term “impossible resistance” to be found in the title of this volume, and discussed in the introduction by Valters Nollendorfs and Valters Ščerbinskis. While the rhetorical and emotive power of this term is undeniable, it is highly normative, implying that resistance in wartime to post-war Latvia under foreign occupation was doomed to fail. Even if the authors extend this concept to include the possibility of a consensus of definitions of resistance, I still find this an unfortunate leitmotif for this anthology. Yes, much of the forms of resistance described in this book and elsewhere in the historiography of Latvia can be deemed to have been unsuccessful, but this is with the privilege of hindsight. It would be a disservice to those who believed in resisting that what they were doing was doomed to fail and therefore pointless. Was not a life saved from Nazi genocide a victory in itself? Was not maintaining the idea of freedom through acts of dissent a contributing factor to the success of the popular mobilisation for renewed independence when the time finally came? The measure of individual acts of resistance should not necessarily be whether

they brought down the enemy there and then, but whether they contributed to the final victory in the end. This volume is a part of that conversation about Latvia's past, a conversation that needs to continue.

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