
Working towards ‘An
Unforeseen Miracle’ Redux:
Latvian Refugees in
Vladivostok, 1918–1920, and
in Latvia, 1943–1944

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Abstract

During the First World War the survival of hundreds of thousands of Latvian refugees, dispersed across the Russian Empire, overlapped with issues of identity. Latvians in Siberia and the Far East created a refugee organisation complete with military, diplomatic and cultural programmes for themselves and their homeland. The key players attempted to recreate the same organisational trajectories and outcomes during the Second World War, under very different geopolitical conditions. This article presents new archival research and suggests new interpretations of the dynamic nature of political organisation, refugee experience and identity in Latvia through the first half of the twentieth century.

Introduction

During the extended upheaval in the Baltic states during the First World War and its aftermath, several hundred thousand displaced Latvians not only struggled to survive but also grappled with issues of political affiliation and social identity. Latvian refugees were far from home, but war and revolution called into question the location and meaning of home. Military campaigns and political uncertainty placed obstacles in the way of ‘return’. For refugees in European Russia, displacement was tempered by relative proximity: even if it became exceedingly difficult to travel from Petrograd to Riga, it could at least be contemplated. By contrast, for Latvians who found themselves in Siberia and the Far East – established settlers, political exiles, refugees and soldiers – displacement entailed other considerations and dilemmas. In 1918 Latvians in Vladivostok created an organisation that took on the characteristics of

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a miniature state, complete with military, educational and cultural programmes for Latvian refugees. Navigating the complex situation brought about by the Russian civil war, they eventually found their way ‘home’ to newly independent Latvia.¹

In Latvian patriotic discourse this episode is a footnote in the larger story of national independence, but the tale of displacement alone makes this a compelling episode.² It deserves to be better known because it also sheds light on a much more complex history of Latvian politics and national identity spanning the years from 1914 to 1945. This article shows how the key players recast the meaning of the refugee experience as they searched for a place in independent Latvia. More importantly, they tried to recreate the same organisational trajectories and results during the Second World War, despite the changed geopolitical conditions brought about by the Soviet and German occupations. Their attempts were futile, as we shall see, but their actions illustrate how people in times of war and crisis fall back on the experience of previous traumatic events. The meanings attached to displacement and state formation created by these displaced Latvians reflect more broadly on the representation of displacement. The following case study also suggests that refugees retain considerable agency regardless of the severity of their predicament.³

I

Population displacement in the Russian empire during the First World War contributed to its ultimate collapse. The experiences of displacement also influenced the construction of the successor states that replaced the old imperial polity. The elites that staffed and managed ‘national committees’ for refugee relief evolved (not always smoothly) into the national leadership that clamoured for independent statehood. In Latvia ‘the process of counting, organising, and administering refugees amounted to the formation of an embryonic political authority’.⁴ The wartime Latvian Central Welfare Committee (LCWC) played a prominent part in the founding of the Latvian Provisional National Council (LPNC) in late spring 1917. Its leadership saw itself

¹ Aija Priedite, ‘Latvian Refugees and the Latvian Nation State during and after the First World War’, in Nick Baron and Peter Gatrell, eds., *Homelands: War, Population and Statehood in Eastern Europe and Russia 1918–1924* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 38–42. Readers seeking a good general introduction in English to the history of twentieth-century Latvia are referred to the following works: Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Andrejs Plakans, *The Latvians: A Short History* (Stanford: Hoover University Press, 1995); George von Rauch, *The Baltic States: The Years of Independence, 1918–1945* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995); and Romuald J. Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States: The Years of Dependence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

² The classic account in English is Alfreds Bilmanis, *A History of Latvia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951). Bilmanis (1887–1948) was a leading Latvian diplomat who served in Moscow and in Washington.

³ Two wide-ranging studies of the impact of forced migration and social identity in modern Latvia are Vieda Skultans, *The Testimony of Lives: Narrative and Memory in Post-Soviet Latvia* (London: Routledge, 1998), and Modris Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak: A Story of Eastern Europe, World War II, and the Heart of our Century* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

⁴ Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999), 158.

as shepherding the Latvian nation through war and revolution to independence. The paramount individual example of this trajectory was Jānis Čakste, who played a leading role in each organisation and went on to become independent Latvia's first president. This narrative in itself is nothing new; it is a part of the founding myth of the independent Latvian state. Recent academic interest, however, has placed refugee experiences at the centre of questions of identity, national consciousness and state formation.⁵

The association between identity, consciousness and the state seemed to follow a straight line in Latvia, from refugee committee to national council and thence to statehood. Between 1915 and February 1917 independent political activity was proscribed and organisational energies flowed into refugee work. After the February Revolution the political arena opened out and the refugee committees correspondingly demanded Latvian autonomy. Following the Bolshevik revolution, however, autonomy within a Russian political entity lost its appeal to all but Latvia's Bolsheviks. As a result, the elite that pioneered refugee relief demanded full statehood. Latvian refugees shared this evolution of consciousness even if they played little direct part in decision making. In his 1918 diary Alfreds Goba portrayed Germany and the Baltic Germans as the constant enemy of Latvia. His views of Russia and Russians evolved in relation to events. For example, Lenin's attacks on his opponents led Goba to declare that 'Latvia no longer has a common road with Russia'. His developing consciousness reflected what he read in the newspapers of events in Latvia, Petrograd and Moscow. Goba, an avid consumer of political developments, complained bitterly when the news slowed or stopped for just a few days. This flow of information, be it in publications, first-hand accounts or rumour, was the connective tissue between the national elite and its constituency.⁶

How displacement became a formative experience for refugees and local elites far removed from Petrograd or Moscow is still poorly understood. A common assumption is that refugee groups and their elites in Russia's provincial towns and cities merely followed Petrograd's lead.⁷ Local chapters of the LPNC appeared in each of these towns and are presumed to have followed the pronouncements of the Latvian national leadership. Yet war and revolution are likely to have called into question the relationship between centre and periphery. The idea of a cohesive connection between the metropolis and locality was a myth, as an examination of events in Russia's Far East will demonstrate.

Vladivostok provided a refuge for a group of displaced Latvians who developed a military and a civic identity far removed from the emerging centre of Latvian politics. Prominent among them were Jānis Kurelis, Kristaps Upelnieks, and the husband and wife Voldemārs and Milda Salnais, who became the driving forces behind important organisations such as the Imants Regiment and the Siberian and Far Eastern Central

⁵ Priedite, 'Latvian Refugees'.

⁶ Entry for 15 January 1918, Alfreds Goba's diary (unpublished). Goba, a conservative, nationalist intellectual of the interwar period, lived as a refugee in Baku from 1915 to 1918. All quotations from untranslated sources are by the author.

⁷ Priedite, 'Latvian refugees', 42.

Office. Their wartime and postwar experience became a template for the very same Latvians who struggled with displacement and the loss of statehood during the Second World War.

Ostensibly Kurelis, Upelnieks and the Salnais couple had little in common. Born in modest circumstances in 1882, Jānis Kurelis volunteered for the Russian army as a seventeen-year-old and rose through the ranks. He saw combat in the Russo-Japanese war, collecting various medals and citations, and led a battalion on the Romanian front in 1914. Upelnieks, nine years younger than Kurelis, initially embarked on a career as a schoolteacher.⁸ He was mobilised in 1914 and saw action in southern Poland and Galicia before becoming an officer. Both Kurelis and Upelnieks subsequently transferred to the newly formed Latvian regiments, taking part in the battle for Riga during the summer of 1917. Both were demobilised later that year. Upelnieks initially stayed in western Latvia, but fled east in April 1918 when German troops occupied the country. Kurelis, by contrast, having reached the rank of colonel, was demobilised in Siberia. Instead of moving toward Omsk to join Kolchak's White Army, he travelled to Shanghai, where he, Upelnieks and two other Latvian officers were reunited by chance in May 1918.⁹ This cohort of officers developed a common outlook: they rose by merit through the ranks of the imperial army; they served in the new ethnically Latvian regiments; they fought the German army; and they finally abandoned hope of sustaining Latvian identity within a broader polity. With a civil war separating them from a German-occupied Latvia, and a German army seemingly poised to win the war, they faced the difficult task of how to work for the Latvian cause from Shanghai.

If this project was challenging enough, their prospective partners would have seemed unlikely allies before the war. To former tsarist officers such as Kurelis and Upelnieks, the radical couple Voldemārs and Milda Salnais had more in common with the Bolsheviks.¹⁰ Born in rural Latvia in 1886, Voldemārs Salnais was already active in illegal student groups in Riga in 1904.¹¹ Following his return to Riga after attending the Fifth Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party Congress in London in 1907, Salnais was arrested and sentenced to six years' hard labour in Siberia. In 1913 he was released but confined to Irkutsk province. In May he escaped to the United States, where he was active in its small Latvian social democratic movement. Milda, his wife, was also a radical student activist who fled to Switzerland in 1906 but returned to Riga, where she was soon arrested and exiled to Irkutsk for life. In 1910 she escaped and fled to western Europe and thence to the United States, where she too participated in local Latvian social democratic activity.¹² In 1917 the

⁸ 'Upelnieks, Kristaps Krišs', in *Lāčplēša Kara Ordeņa Kavalieri: Biogrāfiskā vārdnīca* (Rīga: Jāņa Sņēta, 1995), 535–6.

⁹ 'Kurelis, Jānis', in Pauls Kroders, ed., *Latvijas Darbinieku Galērija 1918–1928g.* (Rīga: Grāmatu Draugs, 1929), 109.

¹⁰ Voldemārs and Milda Salnais changed the spelling of their names several times. I have used the final version throughout.

¹¹ 'Salnais, Valdemārs', *Latvijas Darbinieku Galērija*, 74.

¹² 'Salnajs, Milda', *Latvijas Darbinieku Galērija*, 254.

couple left the United States for China. As committed Mensheviks, they found the route through Siberia blocked and decided to settle in Harbin. In June 1918 they founded an impressively titled local chapter of Latvia's 'Self-Determination Society', unconnected to other Latvian organisations. They worked as best as they could against the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, under which the Bolsheviks ceded control of the Baltic provinces to imperial Germany. Soon afterwards the Salnais couple, along with the group of officers in Shanghai and thousands of other Latvians, moved to Vladivostok after learning of the success of the Czech Legion in wresting control of large parts of the Trans-Siberian Railway from the Bolsheviks. Latvians in the Far East hoped that the Czechs' campaign for national freedom would speed their own return 'home'.¹³

Milda Salnais described Vladivostok as a 'rough and dirty town on the edge of chaos' where 'no one was exactly sure who had civil authority in the city'. Newly arrived refugees therefore looked to national communities for assistance.¹⁴ The Latvians forged a kind of symbiotic relationship with the numerically smaller French forces, who looked to Latvian military units to fill the security void and unload supplies intended for Kolchak's government in Omsk. Milda and Voldemārs created the Siberian and Far Eastern Central Office to provide services to the French, while the recent arrival of the Latvian officers Kurelis and Upelnieks, who were willing to command Latvian troops, helped the Central Office to negotiate with local French commanders. The Latvians agreed to help police the city in return for local recognition. On 7 November 1918 the French commander signed an agreement with the Central Office permitting the formation of a Latvian military unit under his overall control, named the Imants Regiment. Salnais, Kurelis, Upelnieks and others had gained an army, albeit with only a handful of soldiers.¹⁵ None of them knew anything about events in Latvia. They were completely unaware that they had created a national army some days before the declaration of Latvian independence on 18 November 1918.

Central Office emissaries now travelled throughout Siberia and China, urging people to join the new regiment. They targeted Latvian soldiers in Kolchak's army, who were encouraged to desert. Their reception by the White Army was, not surprisingly, hostile. On one occasion White officers reported to Japanese troops guarding the Amur railway that thirty-two Latvians en route to join the Vladivostok regiment were in fact communist troops. All of them were killed by the Japanese. Kolchak needed French support and they all needed Latvian longshoremen in Vladivostok, but White officers blocked the movement of Latvian troops, so that most of the soldiers who reached Vladivostok did so as deserters. Milda Salnais described

¹³ Geoffrey Swain, *The Origins of the Russian Civil War* (London: Longman, 1996).

¹⁴ From Milda Salnais's unpublished notes, 'At the End of the World', 4, 6, 11, 'Latvian National Council in Siberia' folder, Box 1, Voldemārs and Milda Salnais Collection, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University.

¹⁵ 'Imantas pulks', in Inta Petersone, ed., *Latvijas Būvības āņas 1918–1920 Enciklopēdija* (Rīga: Preses Nams, 1999), 129.

their pitiful and half-starved appearance after weeks in transit. In her words, the Imants Regiment looked like a motley group of refugees.¹⁶

With such material at the Imants Regiment's disposal, its officers regarded it as a hopeless fighting unit. Conditions were dreadful; the barracks were unbearably hot in summer and equally cold in winter. Officers had to share uniforms, those left behind joking that they had to stay in bed until their trousers were returned. Slowly military discipline returned, but the rank and file's suspect loyalty meant that weapons were rarely issued.¹⁷ An investigation into soldiers' discontent revealed that their mood was not helped by one officer's over-zealous attempt to reinstate full military discipline. Nevertheless, numbers continued to increase; at the end of 1919 the Imanta regiment stood at 1,114 soldiers and seventy-four officers.¹⁸

At the outset the regiment expected not to participate in the Russian Civil War. Their duty was to Latvia's territory, to which the troops hoped soon to be transferred. But this was a logistical nightmare – using the railway was out of the question and they had no funds to pay for an ocean voyage. Nor did they know what they would find when they reached Latvia, or even if they would be welcome there. In these circumstances the refugees and soldiers created a social, cultural and educational world for themselves. Arveds Švābe, the future historian, organised a cultural and education section for the troops, offering lectures by Salnais on Latvia's right to self-determination and by Zariņš on the prospective return home. The regiment formed a theatre, a choir, an art club and a photographic section that documented camp life. Sports were a particular obsession; football, baseball, volleyball and rugby teams competed among themselves and with others throughout Vladivostok.¹⁹

Voldemārs and Milda Salnais meanwhile worked feverishly to translate this activity into contacts with international agencies. The sports team forged links with the Canadian YMCA. Milda Salnais established relations with the US Red Cross. The Central Office bombarded French, British and US representatives with telegrams and communiques about Latvia's plight during the war. Salnais submitted notes to the Versailles peace conference on behalf of Latvia. Through mimicking the actions of a state and building ties with the allies, the Vladivostok Latvians hoped to bring their own state into being. It should be emphasised that this diplomatic flurry took place without any knowledge of events in Latvia. Milda Salnais likened this state of affairs to 'being a traveller behind a fence with no knowledge of the other side'. Not until 9 March 1919 did a Latvian newspaper bring news of the declaration of independence five months earlier. Milda spoke of a 'completely unforeseen miracle'.²⁰ The news was received with joy and scepticism alike. Most doubted Latvia's ability to survive. Many clung to the formula of a democratic, federated Russian republic with an autonomous Latvia. Švābe was unusual in accepting the new state.

¹⁶ Milda Salnais, 'At the End of the World', 10–11.

¹⁷ From Photograph Folder B, 'Vladivostokas fotos', Voldemārs and Milda Salnais Collection.

¹⁸ 'Imantas pulks', in Petersone, *Latvijas Brīvības cīņās*, 129.

¹⁹ The football team was popular and accomplished, beating all local teams apart from a British and Czech team. This section draws on various minutes, pamphlets and reports, Box 1, Salnais Collection.

²⁰ Milda Salnais, 'At the End of the World', 15–16.

News of the struggle for a Latvian state motivated members of the Central Office and the Imants Regiment to hasten their return. In the meantime a newly formed Siberian and Urals Latvian National Council included sections for foreign affairs (headed by Voldemārs Salnais), war (Jānis Kurelis), education, finance, justice and refugee affairs.²¹ In addition, a section for ‘the colonies’ was devoted to the welfare of Latvian settlers who had moved or been exiled to the Urals and Siberia before the First World War. The National Council now claimed these Latvians as a part of their constituency, moving far beyond their original stewardship of refugees and soldiers to act on behalf of all those who were ethnically Latvian. The council issued identity papers:

The Central Bureau of the Lettish National Council in Siberia and the Urals District hereby certifies that the bearer x whose photography [sic] with signature is given at foot, born in x province, x district, city of x is a Lett and citizens of LATVIA... Every assistance rendered by Allied representatives will be much appreciated.²²

The National Council vetted applicants for citizenship by asking questions about their ties to Latvia and their political loyalties. Those suspected of Bolshevik sympathies were denied the ‘passport’.²³ Restricting citizenship to non-Bolshevik ethnic Latvians echoed attempts by officials from Poland and Lithuania to define citizenship narrowly after having initially adopted more inclusive policies. The difference, of course, was that the Vladivostok Latvians had narrowed the base of prospective citizens without even having a geographic state.²⁴

In September 1919 the Vladivostok Latvians lost their military commanders when the Latvian government ordered Kurelis and Upelnieks to report to Latvia in order to question them in detail about the armed forces under their command in the Far East. Kurelis and Upelnieks travelled across the Indian Ocean, along the Suez Canal and across western Europe before finally arriving in Riga on 21 November, ten days after the lifting of the siege of Riga. In missing the most dramatic and defining moment of Latvia’s war for independence, Kurelis and Upelnieks, like all troops in the Imants Regiment, returned to Latvia after the cessation of major military action in Latvia’s war for independence.

On 18 November 1919 the Latvians in Vladivostok celebrated the first anniversary of Latvia’s independence. They set about the return to Latvia. In February 1920 the first contingent set sail from Vladivostok, arriving in Riga two months later. The final group reached Latvia in October. The Latvian general staff had already disbanded

²¹ The choice of names was not entirely random, but reinforces the lack of up-to-date news. The Latvian National Council was crucial in the months leading to 18 November 1918 in Latvia, Moscow and Petrograd, but was eclipsed by a more inclusive People’s Council. These differences were unknown in Vladivostok, Omsk or Irkutsk.

²² ‘Alfreda Strazda apliecība (pagaidu pase)’, reprinted in ‘Sibērijas un Urālu Latviešu Nacionālā padome’ in Petersone, *Latvijas Brīvības cīņas*, 263 (capitals in original).

²³ ‘J. Bruhmers’ Letter of 20 July 1920 to Voldemars Salnais’, Box 1, Voldemārs and Milda Salnais Collection.

²⁴ Konrad Zielenski, ‘Population Displacement and Citizenship in Poland, 1918–24’, in Baron and Gatrell, *Homelands*, 100–1; Tomas Balkelis, ‘In Search of a Native Realm: The Return of The First World War Refugees to Lithuania, 1918–1924’, *ibid.*, 83–7.

the Imants Regiment; some soldiers were demobilised and some were reassigned to other regiments, while others became border guards on Latvia's eastern frontier. The civilians were quickly absorbed into new government departments. Arveds Švābe was one of the few who tried to press his claims based on his role in Vladivostok. He requested a place in Latvia's Constituent Assembly as a representative of Latvians of the Far East. But his request was denied and he left the political arena to enter the University of Latvia.²⁵

Years later, when accounts of the Vladivostok Latvians came to be written, the confused period of 1918–19 was turned into a coherent narrative, in step with the grand narrative of the Latvian national movement as a whole. If in 1918 revolutionaries and other refugees were reassembling in Vladivostok to attempt new work under new conditions with new colleagues, this subsequently became a coherent process of state building. Yet this narrative misrepresented the actions of Latvians in the Far East in 1918 and 1919. The Vladivostok Latvians' diplomatic efforts were largely unheard of, their military accomplishments non-existent and even their cultural pursuits soon forgotten. All the same, their attempt to establish the elements of an independent state defined their identity, kept the refugees together and ultimately delivered them to an independent Latvia.

Kurelis, Voldemārs and Milda Salnais, and the others adjusted to Latvia, albeit not in conventional terms. On one level they enjoyed great success. Voldemārs Salnais was elected to parliament and served in several cabinets and frequently represented Latvia at international conferences, before becoming minister of foreign affairs and subsequently Latvian ambassador to Sweden, Norway and Denmark. He helped Imants Regiment veterans with jobs and citizenship issues. Milda Salnais championed women's rights, sat on the board of many charitable and cultural organisations, and ran unsuccessfully for a seat in parliament as a candidate from the women's list. Kurelis rose to the rank of general before retiring in spring 1940 shortly before the Soviet occupation of Latvia. Upelniņš studied economics and law at the University of Latvia and in Germany. However, this group struggled to reconcile their experiences in the Far East with the emerging narrative of Latvia's foundation. To be sure, in the huge official anniversary volume devoted to the republic, Voldemārs Salnais contributed a detailed article on 'The Siberian Latvians' National Movement'. But he ended on a plaintive note: 'What significance and weight did this whole movement have for Latvia as an autonomous republic?' His only answer was to quote a congratulatory telegram from Latvia's minister president, noting that the institutions in Siberia and the Far East had been appropriated by the Latvian government.²⁶

Historical memory has not been much kinder to the Vladivostok Latvians. The Imants Regiment is almost unknown to all but military historians, professional and amateur. The research wing of Latvia's war museum has undertaken the most extensive scholarly analysis of the Imants Regiment. The war museum's focus, in

²⁵ 'Švābe, Arveds', *Latvijas Darbinieku Galērija*, 78.

²⁶ Voldemārs Salnais, 'Sibīrijas latviešu Nacionālā kustība', in Alfreds Bilmanis et al., eds., *Latvijas Republikas Desmit Pastāvēšanas Gados* (Riga: Golts un Jurjans, 1928), 40.

publications and a museum exhibit, has been on the number of troops, the kinds of weapons and uniforms, and the challenging return journey to Latvia. The whole episode seems destined for footnote status, if it were not for two considerations. First, it reinforces the point about the centrality of population displacement for identity and state formation during and immediately after the First World War.²⁷ Second, the Vladivostok experience was dusted off and appropriated as a template for action during the Second World War, and by the very same key players. During the Second World War the crucial issue was not military efficacy, but the task of supporting displaced persons and safeguarding the nation. Thus the events of 1918 in Vladivostok became a point of reference as Salnais, Kurelis and Upelniņš became key players in Latvia's opposition to dual occupations during the Second World War.

II

Soon after the Nazi occupation of Latvia, the surviving remnants of Latvia's pre-war political elite began to build the institutional framework for opposition to German rule. Latvia's Central Council (Latvijas centrālā padome, hereafter LCC) emerged in summer 1942. Although few results were achieved before 1943, ultimately the LCC became an influential and well-organised group. There are two rival versions of its formation. According to the first version the Farmers' Union and the Social Democrats set aside their differences and asked Konstantīns Čakste, the son of Latvia's first state president, to lead the underground resistance. Soon after, in August 1943, the LCC brought together the leading political parties to struggle for the re-establishment of an independent Latvia.²⁸

The second version of the origin of the LCC begins with the Soviet occupation of Latvia in 1940. Voldemārs Salnais, who, as we saw earlier, was Latvia's ambassador to Sweden, Norway and Denmark, refused to return to Latvia when the Soviet government ordered him to do so. Instead he protested to the Swedish government about the Soviet annexation of Latvia. Announcing a new committee for Latvia's liberation, Voldemārs and Milda Salnais concentrated on presenting Latvia's cause to Western governments and gathering information about Latvia on behalf of diplomats in London and Washington, where the pre-Soviet occupation ambassadors were still recognised.²⁹ Salnais secretly sent letters to friends and acquaintances in Riga encouraging them to form a national resistance. In 1943 Salnais became the LCC's most important link to the outside world and, together with Čakste, began to outline a programme of action.

²⁷ First raised in Gatrell, *Whole Empire Walking*, and subsequently expanded upon in Baron and Gatrell, *Homelands*.

²⁸ Arnolds Auziņš, *Konstantīns Čakste* (Riga: Jumava, 2004), 32–46.

²⁹ Salnais submitted reports on conditions in occupied Latvia through the US embassy in Sweden to the US secretary of state. The reports are available in 'Part One: Voldemārs Salnais Reports. 1941–1944', in Andrew Ezerģailis, ed., *Stockholm Documents: The German Occupation of Latvia. 1941–1945: What Did America Know? Symposium of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia Volume 5* (Riga: Publishers of the Historical Institute of Latvia, 2002), 1–184.

The main achievement of the LCC was the declaration of 17 March 1944 (eventually signed by 190 leading political and cultural figures) which called for an end to occupation and the re-establishment of an independent Latvian state based on the constitution of 1922.³⁰ However, this was a tactical failure and neither accomplished any change in Nazi policy nor rallied the public to the LCC. Instead, heightened awareness of its links to other organisations in Estonia and Lithuania led the Gestapo to crush the LCC. In April 1944 Čakste was arrested and taken to Stutthof concentration camp, where he died on 22 February 1945. Most LCC leaders were either arrested or neutralised. In Stockholm, Salnais was appointed deputy chair of the LCC's foreign delegation. But just as the LCC collapsed under the weight of German repression, its military wing began its most daring enterprise, the so-called Kurelis group affair.

The LCC did not endorse terror or encourage immediate military action, but its plans called for the creation of the nucleus of a future Latvian armed force. General Jānis Kurelis and Captain Kristaps Upelnieks, his chief of staff, embarked on the task of 'uniting the nation in a struggle for its freedom'. Upelnieks did most of the preparatory work while Kurelis acted as the figurehead. Upelnieks cultivated contacts among Latvian officers in the German army. They also asked Salnais to explore the possibility of procuring weapons for the LCC army in Stockholm. Nothing came of this, but it testifies to the link between Salnais and the military. The officers' plans began to evolve in summer 1944, just as the Gestapo arrests decimated the LCC leadership in Riga.

In spring and early summer 1944, German military intelligence, ignorant of his role in the LCC, approached Kurelis about organising auxiliary troops for security duty and for potential partisan warfare behind advancing Red Army lines.³¹ Kurelis consented and appointed Upelnieks his chief of staff. The two organised an irregular force on the framework of the pre-war Riga area *aizsargi*, a home guard unit close to Kārlis Ulmanis, Latvia's authoritarian ruler at the outbreak of the Second World War. This group became variously known as the 5th Riga Aizsargi Regiment, the Kurelis group or simply the Kurelians. It defended the right bank of the Daugava river around Pļaviņas and Ķēgums. Initially the group had only a few hundred armed men. In August 1944 it acquired weapons and undertook reconnaissance missions behind enemy lines; most of its personnel either left to work on their farms or were forced to build defences. Meanwhile Upelnieks stepped up his contacts with Latvian officers in the German army and local auxiliaries. As the front became more fragile and the fall of Riga inevitable, the regiment relocated to north-western Latvia. Riga fell to the Soviets on 13 October, and throughout that month the German military command lost track of the Kurelis group.

³⁰ The full text of the declaration including all signatories can be found in Edgars Andersons and Leonids Siliņš, eds., *Latvija un Rietumi: Latviešu nacionālā pretestības kustība 1943–1945* (Riga: 2002), 420–34.

³¹ The most detailed English-language account of the Kurelis group is in Valdis Lumans, *Latvia in World War II* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 367–70.

The Kurelis group attracted locals, refugees and deserters. Suddenly alarmed by the emergence of this armed body inside Latvia, the German military reasserted its authority. General Friedrich Jeckeln, a senior SS and police leader in the occupied east, demanded a meeting with Kurelis and Upelniņš at which he tried to bully or entice them into bringing their forces in line with German authority. They refused to budge. Opting for a more radical solution, the German *Sicherheitsdienst* (SD) surrounded the Kurelis group on 10 November. Faced with the threat of annihilation, Kurelis surrendered. Upelniņš and seven other officers were tried on 19 November and executed the next day. Kurelis was deported to Germany. Hundreds of troops were deported to Stutthoff concentration camp; others were assigned to various German units. A splinter group commanded by Lieutenant Rubenis refused to surrender and successfully fought their way out of encirclement, even launching a successful counter-attack in which the commander of the Salaspils concentration camp was killed. Rubenis died in this skirmish, which constituted the only armed resistance to German occupation by those Latvians who were loyal to the idea of an independent state. From the outset the significance of the Kurelis group was hotly contested. The controversy continues to this day.³²

In the 1990s Latvian historiography seized upon the Latvian Central Council and the Kurelis group as an example of widespread Latvian resistance to occupation. However, historians have tended to judge events from a postwar perspective, focusing on the efficacy of the LCC and Kurelis Group. A different perspective emerges if we reflect on the participants' experience of displacement and the evolution of the ideas about state and society that they learned in Vladivostok during 1918–20. We should ask how these individuals interpreted the events of the civil war and how they worked to recreate these conditions. There are many contentious issues, some of which surfaced even before the group was dispersed. How many troops were under arms and how many of them deserted? What did they know of Upelniņš and Kurelis's plans? Indeed, what were those plans? How much did the LCC know about the Kurelis group? How popular and viable was the Kurelis group as the potential nucleus of a Latvian army?

The Kurelis group's legacy was initially described by its persecutors, in other words by the German officers in charge of dispersing the group, as well as by the Latvian officers aligned most closely with the German military. German reports highlighted a chaotic and confusing situation that was exploited by Upelniņš, by the senile Kurelis and by troops deserting the legion. Once order was restored, the group became irrelevant. However, the commanders of the Latvian divisions of the German army fought tenaciously to control the Kurelis group's legacy within the émigré memory of the war.³³ First, the role of the Kurelis group was downplayed or ignored. When asked about it, the officers themselves pleaded ignorance. Ultimately, the episode

³² Haralds Biezais, *Kurelieši: Nacionālās pretestības liecinieki* (Ithaca: Mezabele, 1991), 165–77.

³³ Rudolfs Bangerskis, *Mana Mūža Atmiņas: Ceturtā Grāmata* (Copenhagen: Imanta, 1958); O. Freivalds, *Kurzemes Cietoksnis: Dokumenti, liecības un atmiņas par latviešu tautas likteņiem 1944/1945 gada*, vol. 2 (Copenhagen: Imanta, 1954); Indulis Kazociņš, *Latviešu karavīri zem svešiem karogiem, 1940–1945* (Riga: Latvijas Universitātes Žurnālā Latvijas Vēstures fonds, 1999).

was attributed to misplaced idealism. Upelniēks was accused of a complete lack of political acumen, while Kurelis was dismissed as an old man, duped by Upelniēks and mostly unaware of the larger implications of the events swirling around him. The more belligerent attacks faulted the group for deserting their posts near the Daugava river, for causing the meaningless deaths of the Latvian soldiers killed in dispersing the group and ultimately for failing to defend Latvia from the Red Army.³⁴

Soviet historians also regarded the Kurelis group as a closed issue. Their initial assignment, namely to act as partisans behind Soviet lines, put them in the same category as Jeckeln's SS-Jagdverbände Ostland, colloquially known as the *meža kaķi* or wildcats. Even if they were a proto-nationalist army, this made them a clear enemy of the USSR. Soviet forces drew no distinction between the captured Kurelians and other hostile forces and may well have punished them more severely than rank-and-file members of the Latvian Legions. In the early 1960s, the Kurelis group received fleeting mention in a literary work on postwar partisans. That is, they were depicted as brutal soldiers full of misplaced idealism and manipulated by foreign intelligence agents. But they still possessed some sympathetic qualities and were more complex human beings than in previous Soviet depictions of postwar partisans.³⁵

The Kurelis group, the LCC and the relations between the two remained of interest to a handful of Latvian émigré academics in Sweden who continued to document their story. After 1991, historians in independent Latvia working with these Swedish Latvian academics seized upon the Kurelis group with a vengeance. Haralds Biezais largely discredited most of the old descriptions of the Latvian Legion officers as self-serving.³⁶ A steady stream of academic work tracked members of the Kurelis group to concentration camps in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Heinrichs Strods, the paramount authority on the anti-Soviet partisan war, has placed the Kurelis group in a broader context of opposition to occupation.³⁷ Most promising has been the discovery of the diary of one of its officers, Jānis Gregors, who was executed by the Nazis. The radio telegram communications between the LCC/Kurelis group and Sweden, and the list of LCC-sponsored escape attempts from Latvia to Sweden by fishing boat between 1942 and 1945, have also been published. We are also better informed about Latvian refugees in Kurzeme and Sweden.³⁸

This new research establishes that the LCC was a more formidable organisation than first imagined. Its ambition to create a postwar Latvian government was closer to being realised than hitherto thought. Likewise, the Kurelis group has re-emerged as a more serious fighting force within the embryonic LCC-sponsored state. This seemed

³⁴ Freivalds, *Kurzemes cietoksnis*, 68–78, is perhaps the worst example.

³⁵ Arvids Grīgulis's novel, *When the Rain and Wind Strike Against the Window* (Kad lietus un vēji sitās logā) (1964), depicted the post-war partisans in a style similar to that of Andrzej Wajda in his film *Ashes and Diamonds* (1961).

³⁶ Biezais, *Kurelieši*.

³⁷ Heinrichs Strods, *Latvijas nacionālo partizāņu kauš, 1944–1956* (Rīga: Preses Nams, 1996); *Latvijas nacionālo partizāņu kauš: Dokumenti un Materiāli, 1944–1956* (Rīga: Preses Nams, 1999); *Latvijas nacionālo partizāņu kauš III: Dokumenti, Apcerējumi un Atmiņas, 1944–1956* (Rīga: Preses Nams, 2003).

³⁸ Edgars Andersons and Leonids Siliņš, eds., *Latvijas Centrālā Padome LCP: Latviešu nacionālā pretestības kustība 1943–1945* (Upsala: LCP, 1994), 123–244, 286–93, 346–75.

more than a happy coincidence for Latvia, which struggled in the late twentieth century to come to terms with the legacy of collaboration during the Second World War. The LCC and Kurelis group seemed to be the standard-bearers of a principled and active Latvian resistance to wartime occupation, German and Soviet alike. For others, their stock rose too high because the LCC was slow to act, did so timidly and soon acquiesced. The Kurelis group fought no major battles, had little military or tactical value and soon surrendered. In his recent comprehensive survey of Latvia's experience during the war, Valdis Lumans concludes,

The popularity of the Kurelians among the Latvian public, like that of the Latvian Central Council, is debatable. Although their resistance caught the imagination of some Latvians and earned them status as resisters, their armed opposition – except for the Rubenis incident – appears to have been more myth than reality. They elicited nothing but disrepute and rebuke from both loyal legionnaires and pro-Soviet Latvians. Although one might therefore conclude that the Kurelians held the nationalist golden middle ground between the two extremes, having earned opprobrium from both the Germans and the Soviets, the middle ground in this instance, however, does not substantiate a strong case for anti-German resistance.³⁹

The LCC and the Kurelis group seem likely to be remembered as tragic failures. Some observers note that they hoped for a recurrence of 1918–20, when independence came as a result of Russian and German defeat and with the aid of the Allies. This flawed perspective is often attributed to the Kurelis group and more specifically to Upelnieks. As a US diplomat in Stockholm observed in July 1944, 'The Latvian people seem to have a naive and almost childlike belief that somehow or other, possibly through the application of the principles of the Atlantic Charter, their national independence is to be restored to them. This hope would appear to be . . . akin to wishful thinking in view of the extremely complicated situation which now exists in the Baltic area.'⁴⁰

If events are examined from a different perspective, then a quite different story emerges. If the actions of the chief Latvian participants are blamed for seeing the events of 1944 through the lens of 1919, then we should re-examine their experiences from 1918 to 1920. The four leading characters in this drama, Voldemārs and Milda Salnais, Jānis Kurelis and Kristaps Upelnieks, consciously drew on their Vladivostok experiences in 1919 to create a kind of template for a proto-Latvian national army and nation-state in 1943 and 1944.

III

It is difficult to prove that their collective experience in Vladivostok was the template for action in forming the LCC or the Imants Regiment. There is no telegram from Kurelis to Salnais mentioning the Vladivostok plan. But the interconnections between these individuals in 1919 and 1944 are overwhelming. Conspiratorial organisations by their very definition rely on close personal loyalty and unwritten, common assumptions about courses of action. Voldemārs and Milda Salnais, Jānis Kurelis

³⁹ Lumans, *Latvia*, 369–70.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 365.

and Kristaps Upelnieks knew each other from national, political action in the Far East. Those experiences shaped their conduct during the Second World War.

Voldemārs and Milda Salnais worked tirelessly to acquire news from Riga and pass it on to other Latvian diplomats and to the Allies. This thirst for information began with the Soviet occupation and intensified after the German invasion. Voldemārs Salnais implored Latvian politicians to organise opposition to German rule. He wanted Latvians to regain their independence with the assistance of the Western powers. By building connections to the Allies Salnais repeated the steps he had taken in Vladivostok a quarter of a century earlier. Kurelis and Upelnieks gathered together a mix of soldiers and refugees and forged a makeshift military unit that could be used as the nucleus of a Latvian army. This too echoes the actions they took in Vladivostok. They even drew upon their shared experiences of displacement in the Far East during the First World War as a recruiting device. Several of the Kurelis group officers had been in Vladivostok or Omsk in 1919; so, too, were many of the contacts they subsequently made among sympathetic Latvian officers who served with the German army during 1943 and 1944. For example, the Kurelis group found a sympathetic ear in Colonel Kārlis Lobe, a distinguished and much decorated Latvian officer in the German army who commanded the Imants Regiment in Vladivostok after Kurelis was recalled to Latvia.⁴¹ Kurelis and Upelnieks failed, not, as the US diplomat said, because of ‘wishful thinking’, but because the situation was more clear-cut than it had been in 1919. Now there was no Western military presence, just vague promises from Allied intelligence in Sweden. No Russian civil war had broken out. The German army acted decisively towards deserters and the Kurelis group was no match for the Wehrmacht.

The success of the Imants Regiment and the Central Office derived from their open-ended nature. They might not have contributed to the new Latvian republic’s military or diplomatic victories, but they succeeded beyond expectation in pulling refugees, soldiers, officers, deserters and revolutionaries together at the ‘end of the world’ and on the ‘other side of the fence’. The Vladivostok episode was born of the multiple displacements of war and revolution. The success of the Kurelis group similarly arose out of the circumstances of wartime displacement. This emerges from the diary of Jānis Gregors, an officer in the Kurelis group general staff, who was one of the eight men executed by the Germans on 20 November 1944. The diary’s dominant theme is one of forced migration. The round-up of forced labourers for deportation just prior to Riga’s collapse affected Gregors and the Kurelis group profoundly, and they raised this issue with the German high command. Gregors recounted German abuses as well as rumours of Soviet atrocities, but his greatest concern was their enforced departure from Latvia. The Kurelis group feared that Latvian troops would be transferred to Germany, that yet more Latvian civilians would be forcibly deported

⁴¹ Lobe even named the Latvian forces in the German army that he commanded at the Volkhov front the Imants Regiment. ‘Lobe Karlis’, in Arveds Švābe, ed., *Latvju enciklopēdija*, vol. 17 (Stockholm: Apgads Tris Zvaigznes, 1951), 1552–3; Lumans, *Latvia*, 327. Lobe was ultimately tried by the German army for Latvian nationalist sympathies.

and that the bankrupt pro-German Latvian elite had already abandoned their native land. Gregors argued that these fears fuelled the rapid growth of the Kurelis group. The deserters flocked to enlist not out of a desire to leave the war, but from fear of being made to abandon their country. Gregors poured scorn on Latvians who suggested that it was their patriotic duty to flee.⁴²

Gregors, like Salnais, Kurelis and Upelnieks, was no stranger to displacement, having experienced it during the First World War. Like Upelnieks, he trained to be a teacher before being mobilised in 1914. He became an officer in the Latvian Rifles and when they were transformed into the Red Riflemen he stayed on to fight for the Bolsheviks. After the civil war, Gregors ordered his troops to disperse, leading the Bolsheviks to place a bounty on his head. He made his way back to Latvia in 1921 and worked as a teacher during the 1920s and 1930s. His acceptance into the command headquarters of the Kurelis group underlined the flexible stance that Kurelis and Upelnieks had learned to adopt in Vladivostok.

This flexibility extended to perhaps the most remarkable event in the course of the Kurelis group's existence. After the main force surrendered, the Rubenis Battalion engaged in skirmishes with German forces for nearly a month, at which point their ammunition ran out and they scattered throughout the woods of western Latvia. This was the only case of Latvian nationalists fighting German troops. For a brief moment it also opened up the possibility of Soviet Latvian partisans fighting with Latvian nationalist partisans against German forces. The Soviet partisan group 'Red Arrow' (*sarkanā bulte*) operated in the same general vicinity and offered to assist the Rubenis group to escape the ambush in November 1944. Rubenis declined the offer, but on 8 December the surviving troops of his unit escaped from another German encirclement thanks to Soviet partisan support. Many of his troops joined forces with the Red partisans.⁴³ To be sure, it would be a mistake to make too much of this improvised and short-lived alliance. Commanding officers on both sides would scarcely have tolerated longer-term co-operation. Yet this episode on the battlefield illustrates the complexity and constantly shifting definition of friend and foe that defined the Vladivostok experience and on which Kurelis, Upelnieks and Salnais – the survivors of 1919 – hoped to capitalise a quarter of a century later.

IV

The events of 1944 brought no immediate, tangible benefits to the Latvian nation, state or any of the leading participants. Upelnieks and seven other leading officers were executed by the Nazis. Kurelis was deported to Germany from where he ultimately emigrated to the United States. He died in Chicago in 1954, leaving

⁴² Andersons and Siliņš, *Latvijas Centrālā Padome LCP*, 269. The diary is also available online at http://www.historia.lv/alfabets/K/ku/kurela_grupa/dokumenti/diengr/satur.htm.

⁴³ Dzintars Ērglis, 'Padomju represīvo orgānu arestētie Ģenerāļa Kureļa grupas dalībnieki', in *Latvijas Vēsturnieku Komisijas Raksti*, vol. 3: *Totalitārie Režīmi un to Represijas Latvijā 1940–1956 Gadā: Latvijas vēsturnieku komisijas 2000 gada pētījumi* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2001), 330–72. Soviet security forces eventually arrested the majority of those who joined the Red Partisans.

behind no personal record of these events. Voldemārs Salnais died in Stockholm in 1948, aware that an independent Latvian state was, at best, a distant dream. His commitment to providing refugee aid, cultivating strong ties with Western powers and reinforcing the institutions of a Latvian state suffered a catastrophic blow in 1946 when Sweden submitted to Soviet pressure and forcibly repatriated 151 Latvian soldiers to the USSR.⁴⁴ Milda Salnais continued to be active in Latvian émigré circles until her death in 1970, by which time an independent Latvian state was even more remote. Only Egīls Upelnieks, the son of Kristaps Upelnieks, could claim any macabre, albeit limited benefit from the entire affair. He was with the Kurelis group as a thirteen-year-old boy, but avoided arrest and capture by the Germans in November of 1944. He remained in Soviet Latvia and avoided initial Soviet persecution with a seemingly strong badge of wartime political loyalty – the Nazis had executed his father. Nevertheless, as the young Upelnieks matured, his father's nationalist credentials led to job dismissals and limited career opportunities.⁴⁵

The significance of the Vladivostok experience and the Kurelis group transcends their immediate failure. Failure assumes the possibility of success, and at the very least Kurelis, Upelnieks, and Voldemārs and Milda Salnais fared no worse than any attempt to preserve Latvian statehood during the war. Instead, their responses to displacement and crisis in 1918, and then again in 1944, challenge conventional assumptions about refugees. In Vladivostok in 1918, and again in Latvia in 1944, the events described above did not involve purely passive victims facing a catastrophe of biblical proportions. Voldemārs and Milda Salnais, Kristaps Upelnieks and Jānis Kurelis offer a different perspective. From the extreme distance of displacement in Vladivostok, in the midst of a chaotic, post-imperial Russian world, these Latvians managed to construct their own 'unforeseen miracle' and invented something that had not existed hitherto, namely an independent Latvian state. More than twenty years later, when these same individuals were faced with the demise of that state, they used their Vladivostok experience as the best possible template to try to bring about a second miracle.

⁴⁴ Lumans, *Latvia*, 390.

⁴⁵ Egīls Zirnis, 'Mūsu Karš tikai sākās', *Diena*, 11 Nov. 2006, 21.