

**BETWEEN RESISTANCE AND COLLABORATION:
LATVIAN PARTISAN AND SELF-DEFENCE
UNITS AT THE BEGINNING OF THE GERMANY–
USSR WAR IN THE SUMMER OF 1941**

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Research interests: Latvian military units in German and Soviet armed forces, collaboration and resistance to occupation regimes, changes in Latvia's cultural and industrial heritage caused by the Second World War, the development of the idea of Latvia's independence and its continuity in the 20th century

The article examines the attitude of irregular Latvian military units active in the territory of Latvia at the onset of the Germany–USSR war – national partisans and self-defence fighters – towards the Soviet and German occupation rules. Views on the relevant topic expressed in historiography are analysed, to help in understanding the notions of resistance and collaboration/collaborationism in the context of these military units. The article raises a topical research problem and suggests possible solutions with regard to the research of these issues.

Key words: national partisans, self-defence commandant's offices, armed anti-Soviet resistance, collaborationism, the Second World War

On 22 June 1941, as the Wehrmacht invaded the Soviet Union and the lands it had occupied, Latvia among them, several thousands of Latvian residents were ready to take up arms and fight against the Soviet rule and its military

and paramilitary structures.¹ The former were irregular military units, which for the most part had sprung up spontaneously. Their members are traditionally called national partisans, and their goal was driving out and destruction of the Soviet regime. Due to objective reasons, the German troops were the national partisans' natural ally in this struggle, although both parties benefitted from this unplanned co-operation. However, Germany's political tactics and strategy was not limited to liberation of Latvia and other Soviet-occupied territories, but was rather aimed at exploiting the local population for its own political and racial goals. Thus, the national partisan units were gradually dissolved or transformed into self-defence (*Selbstschutz*) units (commandant's offices), which incorporated also a large part of the (former) national partisans. Self-defence commandant's offices continued to carry out also "partisan" activities, however, their functions could also include the implementation of the Nazi' criminal goals, which were carried out in Latvia by *Einsatzgruppe A* and its counterparts. It led to the situation when the activities of the Latvian self-defence units, apart from elements of national resistance (anti-Soviet) movement, involved collaboration and collaborationism with German occupation authorities.

The topicality of the theme is related to the problem that either has not been addressed yet in a historical research or the offered solution has been contradictory. Namely, in the literature of Latvian exile as well as in Latvian national writings after the regaining of its independence, the dominant narrative has sometimes interpreted the Latvian irregular military units of the summer of 1941 only as fighters for independence and members of anti-Soviet armed resistance² while in the Soviet period and contemporary Russian historiography both these groups have been regarded as German collaborators and agents.³ Both historiographic trends have merged these groups together without trying to discern differences between them.

If we look into the newspapers issued in the summer of 1941 and in the subsequent period under the German occupation rule, we see that breaking down of the borders between national partisans and self-defence fighters started already at the time of their active operation: newspapers subjected to the German censorship, likely, purposefully avoided underlining the difference between voluntary partisans and self-defence units founded under the auspices of the German

1 It is estimated by Latvian historians that at least 6000 of Latvian residents participated in guerrilla warfare against the Soviets in the summer of 1941. However, this number should be evaluated carefully. There are no precise data or personnel lists available. See the chapter "Historical context".

2 E.g., Freivalds 1970; Lācis 2002, etc.

3 Samsons 1966, Krysin, Litvinov 2016, etc.

authorities.⁴ Such a narrative, although it was made intentionally by the Nazi propaganda machine, was inherited to some extent into post-war and even modern historical thought and assessment of what had happened.

Latvian political émigrés, who were the first to write an objective history of the relevant events in Latvia, have researched these groups separately, regarding the national partisans as members of national resistance movement⁵ and the “self-defenders” as participants of a German-organised collaboration.⁶ Contemporary Latvian historians have tried to identify similarities and differences in the activities of these units,⁷ however, no complex research into them has been conducted yet, apart from some groundwork carried out by the author of this article.⁸ Foreign researchers have addressed Latvian irregular military units in the summer of 1941 mostly in the context of the Holocaust, mentioning the complex nature of the problem only in passing.⁹ A certain exception in this regard is German historian Björn Felder who has focused his attention specifically on the issue of partisans and self-defence fighters.¹⁰ However, in general it can be concluded that the elements of resistance and collaboration/collaborationism have not been treated in a complex manner in the research of these two phenomena but rather viewed separately: as resistance to the Soviet regime (in case of partisans) and collaboration with the German regime (in case of self-defence fighters). Yet such an approach fails to reveal the close interconnection of these two phenomena and does not allow fully noticing the common and different features.

This article aims to analyse the theoretical and historical aspects of resistance and collaboration/collaborationism in the context of national partisans and self-defence fighters. In order to achieve this goal, the article tackles three tasks: 1) it briefly overviews the chronology and topic of the activities of national partisans and self-defence units; 2) the author analyses the theoretical discourses on resistance and collaboration/collaborationism, aspiring to adapt them to the situation in the period of the change of Soviet–German rule in Latvia in 1941; 3) the article examines the research problems of this theme through three concrete

4 Viļums 2003, 128.

5 Biezais 1984, 21.

6 Ezergailis 2000, 201.

7 Pelkaus 2004; Pavlovičs 2009 etc.

8 Tomaševskis 2020.

9 See e.g. Drapac 2002, 818; Gluckstein 2012, 74, etc.

10 Felder 2009, 219–223.

cases as well as suggests a new research direction that would enable a complex research of the topic.

In the theoretical part of the article the author has used works by Latvian and foreign researchers on the problems of resistance and collaboration and their application to the topic of national partisans and self-defence fighters. While researching this issue one should keep in mind that the period of activities of partisans and self-defence units was very brief, intense, and full of rapid changes and this has left a large impact on the specific character of relevant sources. Namely, many sources have perished under the conditions of war and occupations, but those that have survived must be viewed critically, considering the time and conditions under which they were created. In the analytical part of the article and when addressing the research problems, the author has used articles specifically dedicated to the relevant topic, works of summarising nature, as well as relevant source material.

Historical context

The period of activities of national partisans and self-defence units lasted for approximately two months: from the onset of the Germany–USSR war on 22 June 1941 when national partisans launched their operation to the second half of August of the same year when the majority of the Latvian self-defence commandant's offices were liquidated, i.e. converted into auxiliary police groups and subjugated to the local Latvian police office in case of rural communities or to the chief of the respective police station in case of towns.¹¹ This period almost fully overlaps with the period of operation of the German military administration in Latvia, during which the military and political resistance to the Soviet occupation regime came to an end and the period of German occupation began, among other things ushering in the local population's social, political, and military collaboration/collaborationism with the German occupation rule.

The idea of an armed resistance to the Soviet regime was brought up by anti-Soviet underground groups in Latvia, but the defeat of these groups in the spring of 1941 postponed such plans to a later period.¹² The main reason for

11 Orders issued by the local German commandant's offices, Valmiera and Valka district administrators, Valmiera Department of Labour Administration Agency and other authorities on the procedure of using the labour of prisoners of war and of their guarding, on the foundation of auxiliary police groups etc. *LNA-LVVA*, 1423–1–32, 25. lp.

12 Ciganovs 2006, 125–127.

the emergence of partisan units was the repressions carried out on 14 June 1941 when overnight 15,424 residents of Latvia were deported. The number includes also up to 560 former Latvian army officers who were arrested in the summer camp of the 24th Territorial Riflemen Corps in Litene and other places in Latvia. They were deported to Norilsk Gulag camps in Russia.¹³ Many militaries and civilians regarded the forest as the safest temporary location and there they spontaneously teamed up, procured weapons and planned the prevention of further repressions. The partisan units launched active operation as soon as they heard about the German invasion into the Soviet Union, i.e. already in the first days of the war. Such groups continued emerging for at least two coming weeks, practically covering the entire territory of Latvia. According to the researchers of the national partisans, in the summer of 1941 the activities of national partisans have been recorded in 129 rural communities in Latvia, i.e. in one out of four communities, the partisan activities altogether involving at least 6000 residents of Latvia.¹⁴

While the organisation of partisan groups had started already before the war, the self-defence units sprung up in municipalities covered by the respective orders of the German Army commandant's offices or security structures,¹⁵ or else such groups were set up by Latvian residents who had come into contact with the military intelligence service of the German Army (*Abwehr*) already before the war. The National Union of Latvian Soldiers, which was founded in Germany in the spring of 1941, was associated with the latter service, but only a few of its highest-ranking members (colonel Aleksandrs Plensners, lieutenant-colonel Viktors Deglavs, etc.) are known to have been involved in the organisation of the resistance movement, although before the war efforts had been exerted to create an agents' network capable of establishing contacts with the heads of the potential armed resistance groups.¹⁶ Likely, the organisation and co-ordination of anti-Soviet armed groups failed to take as broad a scope as had been planned and did not develop beyond the placing of a few above-mentioned officers at the head of Latvian self-defence forces, the active phase of which did not exceed two weeks.

13 Dambītis 2011, 296.

14 Strods 2002, 91.

15 E.g., Pāvils Tauriņš told Soviet state security interrogators after the war that on 28 June the commander of a subordinate unit of the German Army had appointed him the military commandant of Viesīte and he had fulfilled the relevant functions for six days and, during this period, recruited approximately 50 self-defence fighters. See: Strods 2005, 127.

16 Biezais 1985, 25–26.

On 5 July, Plensners came to Riga and met there Latvian officers who after the withdrawal of the Soviet authorities had started to organise and co-ordinate the activities of Latvian partisan and self-defence units in Riga and elsewhere. Plensners showed the officers the warrant issued by German rear-admiral Franz Claassen that authorised him “to assume the leadership of Latvian self-defence organisations in Latvian coastal areas controlled by the German Navy”. He was also obliged to report to the naval commander of this area, i.e. to Claassen himself.¹⁷ Although Riga was not a coastal area and was not controlled by the *Kriegsmarine*, Latvian officers respected Plensners’ authority and he was allowed to head the Latvian self-defence forces, issuing orders that agreed with the “line” of the German Army command.

It is important to note that the types of activities of Latvian irregular military units that had sprung up spontaneously and those established with the mediation of Latvian or German agents almost fully coincided, at least at the beginning. Namely, these groups engaged in military rather than policing activities: they took part in armed clashes/battles, swept the respective territories, captured individual Soviet soldiers and activists and handed them over to Germans, guarded military objects, etc. Meanwhile, security tasks in the rear of the Wehrmacht in Latvia were assigned also to German reserve police and national guard (*Landeschützen*) battalions, which were subordinated to Wehrmacht’s security divisions.

There are no precise data available but there is a reason to believe that only a minority of the members of Latvian irregular units and only a small part of self-defence units were involved in repressive (and criminal) activities, i.e., it was rather an exception than the rule. Thus, in most cases one can speak about the discrepancy of notions (partisans/self-defence fighters) rather than that of content (activities). The Latvian military units, which in the period from 3 to 15 July wrote reports to the headquarters of the Latvian self-defence units (operating outside Riga) headed by colonel Kārlis Dzenīt-Zeniņš, called themselves different names: partisans, self-defence group, *aizsargi* (former members of the paramilitary Aizsargi organisation) group, combat group, security service, auxiliary service, etc., which leads to the conclusion that these units did not operate under a single “regulation”. It was only from 9 June that the unit commanders seem to have followed some kind of guidelines in their written reports: in those written on 9–15 July there are mentioned only two names, “self-defence group” and “security service/police”.¹⁸ Such change likely was associated with the position taken by the commander of SS *Einsatzgruppe A* SS-*Brigadeführer* Walther

17 *Order of F. Claassen to A. Plensners (July 3, 1941)*. Latvijas Okupācijas muzejs, OMF 11650/13.

18 Tomaševskis 2015, 191.

Stahlecker towards the already existing Latvian military units and his attempts to channel the activities of these groups as he thought advisable.

Namely, in Riga the Latvian partisan and self-defence units formally ceased to exist on 7–8 July, when Stahlecker banned all kinds of Latvian military units, prohibited the wearing of Latvian army and *aizsargi* uniforms and declared that only he and he alone was responsible for security in the rear.¹⁹ However, the prohibition came into force only partially and did not fully stop the operation of such groups, instead achieving their gradual subjugation to the German authorities. As a tool to implement his goals, Stahlecker chose former military attaché of the Latvian Army in Estonia and Riga Latvians' commandant (as of 1 July) colonel-lieutenant Voldemārs Veiss and by an oral order of 7 July appointed him head of Riga self-defence service.²⁰ Henceforth, the operation of Latvian military units and its character clearly depended on Stahlecker's orders.

Apart from firmer control, the Germans also aimed to achieve the local residents' involvement in spontaneous Jewish pogroms. As the head of the Reich Security Main Office, Reinhard Heydrich, whom Stahlecker was directly subordinated to, underlined addressing the *Einsatzgruppen* a day after the occupation of Riga, "in no way should one hinder the self-cleansing attempts of anticommunist or anti-Jewish circles in the territories that will be newly occupied. On the contrary, they are to be encouraged, but making sure not to leave any trace of such encouragement, so that these local 'self-defense' circles could not later on point to orders or to political assurances that were given." Moreover, already before the war he had pointed out an essential aspect: self-defence groups were not meant to operate in a long-term period. On the contrary, these groups were to be encouraged to show discontent with the evicted Soviet rule by turning against the Jews "at this decisive moment".²¹ However, the residents of Latvia did not engage in such Jew-baiting (of the kind that took place in Lithuania) and it was possible to organise only artificial "pogroms" with the help of the Latvian auxiliary security police that was established in Riga in early July by the Germans and was headed by Viktors Arājs. Yet, neither Latvian partisans, nor self-defence fighters took part in such pogroms. Admittedly, the latter participated in other repressions targeted against the Jews.²²

19 Feldmanis 2008, 258.

20 Kangeris 2001, 154.

21 Naimark 2002, 480.

22 The topic of the participation of Latvian self-defence units in the Holocaust crimes in different Latvian municipalities has been addressed by Latvian historians Aigars Urtāns, Rudīte Viksne, Dzintars Ērglis, Uldis Lasmanis etc. The relevant articles have been published in the volumes of the Historians' Commission of Latvia.

On 20 June, there were issued new regulations on the forming of Riga Auxiliary Order Police (*Ordnungshilfspolizei*), appointing the above-mentioned Veiss as its commander. The partisan and self-defence units subordinated to colonel Plensners were to be dissolved and henceforth their count was limited to 3000. These reforms had to be implemented by 25 July.²³ However, comprehensive reforms were enforced gradually, and the process came to a completion in late August. Yet, the subjugation of the Latvian units had clearly entered its final phase, and from this period onwards we cannot speak about voluntary Latvian units operating outside any control. Auxiliary police units (in many municipalities still called self-defence commandant's offices) now collaborated with the German occupation authorities and in many districts took part also in repressive operations targeted against the local Jews. According to the findings of Latvian historian Rudīte Viksne, the self-defence units received orders mostly from the German *Ortskommandanturen* (commandant's offices of Wehrmacht) and in some communities instructions were also passed from the commander of *Einatzgruppe A* to the local self-defence commander through the head of the district. The first Jewish massacre in the territory of Latvia took place in the small Auce town on 22 July²⁴, with the participation of the local self-defence fighters. Latvian historian Juris Pavlovičs notes that "the German occupants' main goal was to see their orders and instructions implemented rather than themselves – the German occupants – necessarily being present everywhere."²⁵

Reflecting on the events that had transpired before the mid-August 1941, Stahlecker wrote: "In Latvia after the arrival of the German army there was established self-defence, which consisted of the representatives of different social groups and thus was not completely usable for political tasks. (...) Thus, the self-defence was re-organised into auxiliary police, which now consists of selected, loyal, and professionally trained persons. In the largest cities the auxiliary police is subordinated to the prefects."²⁶ In the same report written in October 1941, Stahlecker revealed the main reason behind the formation of self-defence units: "The self-defence units are organised for shootings", adding though that "their additional task is to fight against partisans and the Red Army soldiers who keep emerging in Estonia²⁷. Apart from that, they are responsible for

23 Kangeris 2005, 287.

24 Viksne 2004, 43–44.

25 Stranga 2006, 18.

26 Cit. in Strods 2005, 131.

27 Estonian mainland was occupied by the Germans in the beginning of September and islands – in the beginning of October. Stahlecker described the situation in mid-August.

the guarding of major military objects, bridges, warehouses, and other facilities subject to the threat of sabotage. Self-defence fighters also take part in conveying vehicles transporting prisoners.”²⁸ These goals set by Stahlecker (and the Germans in general) were met in most cases, using the local residents who, believing that they were fighting against the Soviet regime, in fact became collaborationists of the German occupation authorities.

Assessment in historiography

The issue of collaboration/collaborationism in the context of partisans and self-defence fighters has not been addressed in detail yet in scholarly research, while several historians have studied individual aspects of this topic. If the issue is addressed in a simplified manner, one may jump to the conclusion that the national partisans’ resistance to the supporters of the Soviet regime at the onset of the Germany–USSR war naturally places them in the camp of German collaborators. Those who knowingly co-operated with the German authorities (collaborationists) in their turn can naturally be excluded from the resistance movement because the Soviet regime in fact no longer existed in Latvia at that time. However, the issue likely is more complicated than the two statements above, because, first, the two groups (partisans and self-defence fighters) were not homogeneous and, second, it is impossible to draw a clear line between them in research at this moment. This chapter will examine those Latvian and foreign researchers’ views on the issue of resistance and collaboration at the onset of the Germany–USSR war that can be applied to Latvia’s situation.

In historiography, the notions of resistance and collaboration/collaborationism are viewed both in combination and separately. A specific aspect that has been rather extensively addressed by Western authors is the local population’s collaboration with the German occupation regime. Several scholars have focused on the German-occupied Baltic states and other territories that had fallen under the Soviet rule and experienced so-called double-aggression, i.e. a sequence of Soviet and German occupations replacing each other. Professor Vesna Drapac from the University of Adelaide believes that in most of these territories the German invasion was welcomed with a sense of relief and often even with enthusiasm. Thus, many individuals who collaborated with the Germans after their occupation considered that they were engaging in resistance to the Soviet

28 *Stahlecker’s Consolidated Report, October 15, 1941, 20.*

regime rather than collaboration.²⁹ Moreover, according to Professor Emeritus Dina Porat from Tel-Aviv University, the residents of the occupied Baltic States, for example, Lithuanians, had set a concrete price for their co-operation with the Nazi occupation authorities (including participation in genocide campaigns against Jews): the restoration of their statehood.³⁰ American historian István Deák has underlined that the residents of the Eastern European states that underwent several successive occupations, again and again, had to choose between resistance, collaboration, and adaptation. However, with regard to the local population's attitude towards the Jewish residents, the Nazi authorities would never have achieved such a "result" if they did not face "enthusiastic collaboration" from the part of many non-German Europeans.³¹

Among Latvian historians, Daina Bleiere has probably conducted the most thorough research of the notion of collaboration and collaborationism during the Second World War in the context of Latvia, where the population was subjected to three successive occupations: Soviet, German, and again Soviet ones. In this aspect the zone of the Hitler–Stalin Pact considerably differed from Western Europe. Daina Bleiere believes that the Baltic peoples' collaboration with the German authorities can largely be explained by the repressive policies pursued by the Soviet regime in 1940–1941 and the former's hope for the restoration of the independence of their states.³² Another Latvian historian, Inesis Feldmanis has underlined that "the Latvian population's mood and activities as well as attitude towards the German occupation authorities were considerably influenced by the first Soviet occupation and their aspirations to regain the lost independence of their states", from which it follows that the German occupation period "cannot be understood and more or less impartially assessed without keeping in mind two paradigms of evil: Communism and Nazism".³³

The above aspect must be kept in mind when evaluating not only the summer of 1941 (the period of partisans and self-defence fighters), but also the entire German occupation period. Both during the phase of the occupants' military administration and in the subsequent phases of German occupation, the harsh experience of the Soviet regime made many residents choose from between "the two evils" the one that best agreed with the interests of a significant part of

29 Drapac 2022, 496.

30 Porat 1996, 166.

31 Deák 2015, 2–4.

32 Bleiere 2014, 149.

33 Feldmanis 2010, 169.

the people,³⁴ i.e., they choose to fight against the restoration of the Soviet regime. Although it does not justify the possible crimes committed by these Latvian residents when collaborating with the German occupation authorities in the summer of 1941, it helps better to understand the motivation behind collaboration/collaborationism. In the research into the partisans and self-defence fighters, motivation is one of the most important issues.

In the post-war years the former national partisans, arrested and interrogated by the authorities of Soviet State Security, as the main motivation for their struggle against the Soviet occupation regime mentioned the prospect of the restoration of the national independence.³⁵ Yet, as demonstrated before, those who collaborated with the German occupation authorities could have had a very similar main motivation. Historian Bleiere has noted with good reason that “collaboration/collaborationism is possible when an independent state still exists in some form or when there exists a hope/chance that its independence can be restored.”³⁶ In the summer of 1941 a certain part of Latvia’s population cherished such hope.

German legal historian Dietmar Willoweit has emphasised that the situation in the Baltic States considerably differed from that in other German-occupied territories: “The aim of the Baltic guerillas was to hunt down the communist collaborators, and this activity cannot be described as collaboration with the occupying power.” Nevertheless, he argued, the persecution of Jews after the outbreak of the German–Soviet war was a completely different matter. It was possible only because the Nazi regime declared lawful an act which used to be a crime under the previous regimes in the respective countries.³⁷

American historian and Holocaust researcher Martin Dean has urged not to ascribe the Baltic populations’ collaboration/collaborationism solely to their attitude towards Communism, but rather to view it in a broader historical perspective, considering also the local social context. He believes that the motives for the collaborationism targeted against the Jews lay not only in different forms of anti-Semitism, but were also based in much more commonplace reasons, such as greed, self-seeking, anti-Communism, social pressure, and even alcoholism.³⁸ Latvian historian Kārlis Kangeris also considers that the causes of the relevant

34 It is quite impossible to provide precise data on the public attitude towards the restoration of Latvia’s independence and resistance to the Soviet regime. It is rather an “average” temperature, an educated guess of what the situation could have looked like.

35 Pelkaus 2004, 149.

36 Bleiere 2014, 154–155.

37 Willoweit 2007, 161.

38 Dean 2004, 124, 128.

events and the motives of individual actions should not be assessed one-sidedly and factors such as social ethics, beliefs, norms of behaviour and legal system should also be taken into consideration.³⁹

American historian Timothy Snyder has underlined the phenomenon of statelessness, without which such massive collaboration or annihilation of Jews on so broad a scale would have been impossible. He emphasises that before the Second World War anti-Semitism was a global phenomenon and there is no reason to believe that in the Baltic societies in the 1930s it was more present than in other countries, Western democracies included. However, in the German-occupied countries, especially in the formerly independent states that beforehand had been occupied by the USSR and in which not only the statehood, but also all democratic institutions had been liquidated, the Holocaust took the most active expression because the Jews (and other societal groups) had no access to any state support and were abandoned to their fate without any civic protection. In countries where the statehood had not been annihilated, no such thing was possible.⁴⁰

American-Latvian historian Andrievs Ezergailis, to a certain extent, disputes the above views, emphasising that the Germans were not ready to accept the collaboration/collaborationism offered by the Latvians. According to him, in the first weeks and months of the Nazi occupation there had been Latvians who had offered the Germans co-operation with the goal of restoring Latvia's statehood at least in a very limited form. The offers voiced by the head of the Latvian self-defence forces Aleksandrs Plensners, chief of its headquarters Viktors Deglavs, and other Latvians were rejected because the Germans were not ready to discuss the restoration of Latvia's statehood in any form.⁴¹ It must be added though, while the Germans were not ready to accept the collaboration that Latvians offered on their own initiative, Stahlecker and other officers of the German security structures were eager to accept it on their own conditions. D. Bleiere has come to a generalising conclusion that the Germans were interested in Latvian collaborationism (deliberate co-operation), but not in collaboration.⁴²

39 Kangeris 2007, 80.

40 Snyder 2015, 260.

41 Ezergailis 2004, 44–47.

42 Bleiere 2014, 154–155.

Complex research of resistance and collaboration

As the survey of views expressed in historiography shows, in Eastern Europe at the onset of the Germany–USSR war, resistance to the Soviets and collaboration/collaborationism with the Germans were closely related phenomena, and it is not easy to draw chronological, geographical, and other kinds of borders between them. However, the author of this article believes that one should nevertheless try to do so, in order to separate the legitimate resistance and justifiable collaboration from false resistance and criminal collaboration/collaborationism. At present, it is possible to offer a hypothesis that should be tested through a complex and empirical research of the two phenomena, gradually arriving at academically grounded criteria, which would allow drawing such borders. The author brings forward the following hypothesis: partisan and self-defence units should be regarded as a part of the national resistance movement until the phase when the latter started to engage in (criminal) activities which were outlawed according to the last Latvian Penal Law.

Such a hypothesis partly derives from the already mentioned Dietmar Willoweit's thesis that the Holocaust was possible in the Nazi occupied Baltics (and other territories) only because Germany had declared lawful an act that used to be a crime.⁴³ Despite anti-Semitism that was present in Latvia and other countries of the region before the war, it was impossible according to the Latvian Penal Law to act against compatriots in a way it was carried out in the summer of 1941 and later under the German occupation. The Latvian Penal Law is taken as a criterion here, but only in its spirit, not in letter. Therefore, the proving or overturning of the hypothesis is not a "legal exercise", since the Latvian Penal Law was not valid anymore. It is rather a "litmus test" on whether members of Latvian irregular military units were ready to follow the Law also under totalitarian occupation.

In normal circumstances, the state is responsible for defending their citizens against military aggression, violence, and injustice. As the Latvian state no longer existed, it was not able to defend its citizens, therefore, the latter had moral rights to defend their country, resist its occupier in order to restore the national independence. Several researchers have studied morality during times of war and tried to find a difference between just and unjust wars.⁴⁴ American political theorist Michael Walzer in his classical work on just and unjust wars stresses that when the state has surrendered, "there are still values worth defending, no one can defend them except ordinary men and women, citizens with no political or

43 Willoweit 2007, 161.

44 E.g., Walzer 2006; Fabre et al. 2014; Orend 2006, etc.

legal standing. (...) There are such values, or often are, that lead us to grant these men and women a kind of moral authority.”⁴⁵ Those who either because of their own inner evil or delusions committed crimes against their compatriots, had no moral rights to do so even if the occupier had authorised it.

Irish historian Tom Behan, who has researched Italian resistance against fascism during the Second World War, has emphasised that “in essence the Resistance is about democracy, direct democracy (..) All Resistance fighters made their own personal decision that it was right to risk their own lives for a cause – a very different decision from that of someone joining an army because they receive their call-up papers through the letter box.”⁴⁶ In the case of Latvian irregular military units in the summer of 1941, the moral and ethics played the decisive role. Those who resisted the Soviet regime, its military and paramilitary structures, had moral rights to do so because the regime had occupied Latvia and repressed a certain part of its society. On the other hand, those members of irregular military units who engaged in criminal and repressive actions, did not have moral rights to kill their peaceful compatriots who had been outlawed by the German occupational regime. Thus, we can use the Latvian Penal Law as a criterion in order to evaluate the moral rights and ethics of Latvian national partisan and self-defence units.

Proving or overturning of this hypothesis would be a certain challenge, however either of the outcomes would help to identify the “good” and the “bad” co-operation with the German occupation regime, i.e. collaboration and collaborationism. In an ideal case, in the course of research the activities of Latvian partisans and self-defence units would be investigated in each concrete community to establish the continuity of these units in terms of personnel and operations, the degree of their co-operation with the German occupation regime and their possible participation in repressive campaigns; the findings would allow drawing a line between partisans (members of resistance movement) and self-defence fighters (German collaborators / collaborationists) in each concrete community, also revealing when and how the transformation occurred there and showing the common and different features of their activity. The research of these aspects in communities where the partisan and/or self-defence fighters’ activities can be traced (in a part of Latvian communities such research has already been conducted through the efforts of Latvian historians) would provide a maximum broad view of the dramatic events in Latvia in the summer of 1941 and the participation of Latvian military units in the resistance movement against the Soviet

45 Walzer 2006, 178.

46 Behan 2009, 4–5.

regime and in collaboration with the German occupation regime. Latvian historian Aleksandrs Ivanovs who has carried out a study of the Latvian historiography of the Second World War has underlined that collaboration and resistance have been extensively researched in Latvia, yet “well-documented research of each aspect of the resistance movement and collaboration is needed, in order to achieve a more complete and concrete picture of the history of the Latvian people during the Second World War”.⁴⁷

In order to illustrate the research intent and partly its execution, the activities of partisan and self-defence units in three concrete Latvian municipalities will be briefly examined as case studies. These three cases are rather well researched by Latvian historians and show a range of varieties within the history of Latvian partisan and self-defence units. These cases could serve as rather typical examples of what were the variations of how the partisan and self-defence units were formed, how they acted, and what was their destiny. These are just a few cases, different from each other, but it is clear that they could be generalised on a narrower or wider scale, keeping in mind that the variation during further research could be much wider.

Case study No. 1. Ventspils. The Soviet authorities abandoned the Latvian NW port city of Ventspils on 27 June 1941 and on the same day a “security committee” was established there, consisting of the local voluntaries who were ready to take care of security in the city. As the city’s commandant was appointed former warrant officer of the Latvian Army Ādolfs Kandars (who was later replaced by Jānis Lūkins) who issued an appeal on handing over weapons and maintaining order in the city. Many voluntaries applied and in the coming days they functioned in the city and environs as a “mobile group” for arresting stray Red Army soldiers. On 1 July, the German troops arrived in the city.⁴⁸ The Germans established their own commandant’s office and on 2 July Latvian self-defence service was founded in Ventspils on the orders of the district commander colonel-lieutenant Friedrich Althoff.⁴⁹ A part of the members of the former “security committee”, i.e. the partisan unit also joined this service. On 9 July, the head of the Latvian self-defence forces, Aleksandrs Plensners, appointed colonel-lieutenant Kārlis Lobe as the chief of the self-defence forces in Ventspils district and lieutenant Osvalds Strauts – as the same in Ventspils city.⁵⁰ From then on, various orders restricting Jews were issued with Lobe’s signature, and in mid-July their physical

47 Ivanovs 2005, 44.

48 Pelkaus 2004, 44–45.

49 Ezerģailis 1999, 148–149.

50 Viksne 2003, 77.

annihilation started. It was carried out by self-defence fighters under the command of Osvalds Strauts, a 2nd *Einsatzkommando* of the SS *Einsatzgruppe A* commanded by Erchard Grauel and soldiers from the 1st Company of the German police battalion No. 9 who jointly murdered approximately 300 Jews. At least three campaigns to exterminate Jews took place in the city until October, but the participation of self-defence fighters in these operations has not been proved. Ventspils self-defence commandant's office was liquidated only on 8 October, which is a comparatively very late date, but it coincided with the annihilation of the last Jewish residents of the city.⁵¹

This example illustrates the partisans' own initiative in organising armed resistance as well as their gradual subjugation to the orders of the German authorities. Namely, until the arrival of the German troops, the group was led by their own leader, but after the founding of the self-defence service and the commandant's office it had to carry out not only security tasks but also repressive campaigns against the local Jews. Thus, this example shows that the former partisans, willingly or not, turned into collaborationists with the German occupation authorities.

Case study No. 2. Saldus. In several communities of Kuldīga district, at the onset of the Germany–USSR war, there emerged partisan groups; they started to organise to prevent the repetition of the 14 June 1941 deportations. As warfare broke out, partisans from Ciecere, Zvārde, Saldus, and other rural districts fired at Red Army troops and hampered their withdrawal as well as took part in arrests of the latter. These groups also used the opportunity and after the departure of the Soviet authorities took over power in rural centres and towns. On 29 June, the combined partisan unit of Ciecere and Zvārde rural districts marched to Saldus where they met with no resistance as the Soviet authorities and soldiers had already left the town.⁵² Later the same day the German troops arrived in the town, and a member of a partisan unit, former chief of Kuldīga district Saldus police station, Amandus Andersons, together with commander of Ciecere partisan group Miķelis Lilienšteins, founded Saldus commandant's office at the same time issuing a call for recruits for the newly established self-defence unit. The appeal was met with enthusiasm and in a few days about 80 fighters joined the unit.⁵³ After that, for several days the group carried out tasks typical for the national partisans of 1941: detained small groups of Red Army soldiers in the vicinity of Saldus and arrested local Soviet activists. After that a part of

51 Viksne 2003, 93.

52 Pelkaus 2004, 38–39.

53 Urtāns 2006, 118–119, 122.

the members of the self-defence commandant's office took part in the murder of Jewish citizens. According to the findings of historian Aigars Urtāns, around 4–5 July, self-defence fighters arrested and later (the exact date is not known) murdered several tens of Jewish residents of Saldus. Later more arrests and genocidal campaigns followed with the participation of self-defence fighters, who convoyed the Jews to the execution site where an unidentified execution squad murdered them.⁵⁴

The development of partisan and self-defence units in Saldus environs graphically shows transition from anti-Soviet resistance to pro-German collaborationism. In the presence of the German troops, the partisan unit was replaced by a self-defence commandant's office which incorporated also a part of the former partisans. For a few days, the members of the commandant's office were busy capturing Red Army soldiers and Soviet activists (which can be interpreted as armed resistance to the Soviet occupation regime), but later took part in arresting and killing of the local Jews (which, in turn, has to be regarded as collaborationism with the German occupation authorities).

Case study No. 3. Limbaži. On 4–5 July, the town of Limbaži was the site of a battle, likely most famous in the history of the 1941 national partisans. The formation of the partisan unit here was a complex phenomenon: three groups of militaries (altogether around 180 participants), the majority of whom were former officers and soldiers of the 24th Territorial Riflemen's Corps of the Red Army, joined forces to attack the town. The idea of attacking the town, which was guarded by Soviet militia, workers' guard, and Baltic Fleet sailors, came from Ādaži Latvian commandant's office, while military affairs were under the charge of Colonel-Lieutenant Arvīds Reke, who assumed the command of the attack.⁵⁵ The main part of the battle took place on 4 July when the attack was stopped due to lack of ammunition. On the next day, partisans, who included only few town dwellers, attacked again, but the city was already abandoned by the Soviets.

The absolute majority of partisans left the town after its liberation and the governance of the town was assumed by self-defence commandant's office headed by first lieutenant Fridrihs Švēde. Many persons who were not mutually related became self-defencemen in the coming days, launching retaliation against the supporters of the Soviet rule and Soviet soldiers remaining in the town as well against other personae non grata.⁵⁶ Researcher of the history of Limbaži region, Uldis Bērziņš, claims in his recently published work that “at the time

54 Urtāns 2006, 127, 131.

55 Pavlovičs 2009, 88.

56 Tomaševskis 2020, 137.

when people were shot in Limbaži, no German soldier or even German civilian was seen there⁵⁷. However, academic Latvian historians who have established the arrival of the German soldiers in the town already around 10 July, disagree with him.⁵⁸ Members of the self-defence unit participated in rounding up around 70 Jews and partly in their murders, which took place in three separate actions, from around 20 July until mid-September 1941.⁵⁹

The case study of Limbaži shows that there were communities, where the local partisans practically had no connection with the members of the later established commandant's offices and their activities. Notably, the activities of the members of the commandant's office reveal signs of collaboration and collaborationism with the German occupation regime and only very relative features of resistance to the Soviet regime. They can rather be interpreted as using one's newly acquired power for retaliation and achieving (German) political and racial goals.

Conclusions

In the first weeks and months of the Germany–USSR war, many Latvian residents cherished illusions about forthcoming restoration of national independence and thus favourably looked at possible co-operation with the representatives of the new rule. At the onset of the war, several thousands of Latvian residents joined armed units, which were fighting against the Soviet occupation regime; at the same time, this helped the German army to reach its military goals as it benefitted from having loyal military units in the rear. The German occupation rule and its security structures (Security Police and SD) were not interested in the development of Latvian military units and thus did their utmost to control and/or subjugate them. Self-defence commandant's offices, which had been formed on the basis of partisan units, also partially carried out tasks typical for partisan units (in this way resisting the Soviet occupation regime), at the same time taking part in fostering the Nazi's political and racial goals (in this way actively collaborating with the German occupation regime).

The authors, whose views are examined in the article, have noted the close relation between resistance to the Soviet regime and collaboration with the German authorities at the onset of the Germany–USSR war in those Eastern

57 Bērziņš 2021, 133.

58 Urtāns 2003, 257.

59 Ibid., 263–264.

European territories that were subjected to the succession of Soviet and German occupations replacing each other. While the author of this article does not justify the crimes committed by the local residents in collaboration with the German occupation authorities, he believes that the repressions earlier carried out by the Soviet regime served as a strong motivation both for those who wanted to resist the Soviet regime and for those who due to various reasons became German collaborationists. The authors, whose works are analysed in the article, with good reason have indicated that it would have been impossible for the Nazis to gather local collaborationists without the experience of Soviet repressions in 1940–1941, as well as to carry out their racial goals without the support from the local collaborationists.

The author believes that resistance to the Soviet regime and collaboration with the German occupation regime should be studied and analysed in context with each other, as only in this way it is possible to draw a line between resistance and collaboration/collaborationism. The article brings forth a hypothesis, which places a part of the self-defence units established under the German authorities in the category of the resistance movement, yet only as long as their activities were not against the last Latvian Penal Law. It means, they had moral rights to fight the Soviets, but they had no rights to commit criminal acts against their peaceful compatriots. Resistance to the Soviet regime is often associated with collaboration with the German regime as Germans were an ally of partisans and self-defence fighters; however, collaborationism with the German regime, i.e., participation in repressive campaigns against civilians and opponents of the German regime is often hardly related to resisting the Soviet regime. In many cases, such activities presented a crime according to the Latvian Penal Law but this law was no longer in force. It was possible only because the Nazi regime had legalised what previously used to be a crime.

Three different cases of Ventspils, Saldus, and Limbaži analysed in the article give an insight in the proposed research direction. Such an approach enables tracking how partisan units were formed, transformed and partly involved in the criminal activities of the German regime. However, these cases also show a tendency that was quite typical, namely, the membership of partisan and self-defence units often was partly or completely different, and those who justifiably resisted the Soviets often were different persons than those who willingly collaborated with the Germans. It can be concluded that in many cases resistance and collaboration had a quite clear border, at least on a moral and ethical level as a personal choice.

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STARP PRETOŠANOS UN KOLABORĀCIJU: LATVIEŠU PARTIZĀNU UN PAŠAIZSARDZĪBAS VIENĪBAS VĀCIJAS–PSRS KARA SĀKUMĀ 1941. GADA VASARĀ

Jānis Tomaševskis

Mg. hist., doktora grāda pretendents; vēsturnieks, Latvijas Kara muzejs

Zinātniskās intereses: latviešu militārās vienības vācu un padomju bruņotajos spēkos, kolaborācija un pretošanās okupācijas režīmiem, Latvijas kultūrvēsturiskā un industriālā mantojuma izmaiņas Otrā pasaules kara rezultātā, Latvijas neatkarības idejas attīstība un valsts neatkarības kontinuitāte 20. gadsimtā

Rakstā apskatīta Vācijas–PSRS kara sākumā Latvijas teritorijā darbojušos neregulāro militāro vienību dalībnieku – nacionālo partizānu un paš aizsardzības vienību – attieksme pret padomju un vācu okupācijas varām; analizēti viedokļi historiogrāfijā, kas palīdz saprast pretošanās un kolaborācijas/kolaboracionisma jēdzienus šo militāro vienību kontekstā; piedāvāta aktuāla pētniecības problēma un tās iespējamie risinājumi saistībā ar šo militāro vienību izpēti.

Atslēgas vārdi: nacionālie partizāni, paš aizsardzības komandantūras, bruņotā pretpadomju pretošanās, kolaboracionisms, Otrais pasaules karš

Kopsavilkums

Šī raksta mērķis ir analizēt pretošanās un kolaborācijas/kolaboracionisma teorētisko un vēsturisko problemātiku nacionālo partizānu un paš aizsardzības vienību kontekstā. Lai šo mērķi sasniegtu, rakstā risināti trīs uzdevumi: 1) īsumā apskatīta 1941. gada vasaras nacionālo partizānu un paš aizsardzības vienību darbības hronoloģija un tematika; 2) analizēti pretošanās un kolaborācijas/kolaboracionisma teorētiskie diskursi, mēģinot tos pielāgot situācijai padomju–vācu varas maiņas periodam 1941. gadā Latvijā; 3) ar konkrētu piemēru palīdzību apskatītas šīs tēmas izpētes problēmas, kā arī piedāvāts jauns pētniecības virziens (hipotēze), kādā būtu iespējama šīs tēmas turpmāka kompleksa izpēte.

Vācijas–PSRS kara pirmajās nedēļās un mēnešos daudzi Latvijas iedzīvotāji loloja ilūzijas par drīzu valsts neatkarības atjaunošanu, tādēļ labvēlīgi attiecās pret iespējamo sadarbību ar jaunās varas pārstāvjiem. Vairāki tūkstoši Latvijas iedzīvotāju kara sākumā iesaistījās bruņotās vienībās, kas cīnījās pret padomju okupācijas režīmu, un vienlaikus – palīdzēja vācu armijai sasniegt tās militāros mērķus, jo tās aizmugurē atradās tai lojālas militāras vienības. Vācu okupācijas vara un tās drošības struktūras (Drošības policija un SD) nebija ieinteresētas latviešu militāro vienību attīstībā, tādēļ darīja visu, lai tās ieročotu un/vai pakļautu savai varai. No partizānu vienībām izveidotās paš aizsardzības

komandantūras daļēji veica arī partizānu vienībām raksturīgus uzdevumus (tādējādi – pretojās padomju okupācijas režīmam), bet iesaistījās arī nacistu politisko un rasistisko mērķu sasniegšanā (tādējādi – aktīvi kolaborējot ar vācu okupācijas režīmu).

Pretošanās padomju režīmam un kolaborācija ar vācu varu Vācijas–PSRS kara sākumā bija cieši saistīta tajās Austrumeiropas teritorijās, kas piedzīvoja vienu otram sekojošu padomju un vācu okupāciju, kas atspoguļojas arī autora analizētajos historiogrāfijas darbos. Neattaisnotot vietējo iedzīvotāju veiktos noziegumus kolaborācijā ar vācu okupācijas varu, tomēr padomju režīma pirms tam veiktās represijas kalpoja par spilgtu motivāciju gan tiem, kas vēlējās pretoties padomju režīmam, gan tiem, kas dažādu iemeslu dēļ kļuva par vācu kolaboracionistiem. Rakstā analizēto autoru darbi pamatoti rāda, ka vāciešiem nebūtu nekādu iespēju īstenot savus rasistiskos mērķus bez plaša vietējo kolaboracionistu atbalsta.

Autors uzskata, ka pretošanās padomju režīmam un kolaborācija ar vācu okupācijas režīmu jāpēta un jāanalizē kopīgā kontekstā, jo tikai tā iespējams izšķirt, kur beidzas pretošanās un sākas kolaboracionisms. Rakstā izvirzīta hipotēze, kas daļu no vācu varas pakļautībā izveidotajām paš aizsardzības vienībām arī iekļauj pretošanās kustībā, taču tikai līdz tam brīdim, kamēr to darbība nav pretrunā ar pēdējo Latvijas Sodlu likumu. Tas nozīmē, ka nacionālajiem partizāniem un paš aizsardzības komandantūru locekļiem bija morālas tiesības cīnīties pret padomju varu, bet nebija tiesību veikt noziedzīgas darbības pret civiliedzīvotājiem. Pretošanās padomju režīmam bieži tiek saistīta ar sadarbību ar vācu režīmu, jo vācieši bija partizānu un paš aizsardzības vienību dalībnieku objektīvi sabiedrotie; tomēr kolaboracionisms ar vācu režīmu, tostarp piedalīšanās noziedzīgās darbībās pret civiliedzīvotājiem un vācu režīma pretiniekiem, nebija pretošanās padomju režīmam.

Apskatītie Ventspils, Saldus un Limbažu partizānu un paš aizsardzības darbības piemēri ilustrē rakstā piedāvāto pētniecības virzienu, kas ļautu saskatīt robežu starp pretošanos padomju režīmam un kolaboracionismu ar vācu okupācijas varu. Piemēros parādīts, kā neregulārās latviešu militārās vienības veidojās, transformējās un daļēji iesaistījās vācu režīma noziedzīgajās darbībās. Taču arī šie gadījumi uzrāda diezgan tipisku tendenci, proti, konkrētās apdzīvotās vietas partizānu un paš aizsardzības vienību sastāvs varēja būt daļēji vai pat pilnīgi atšķirīgs, un tie, kas pretojās padomju varai, bieži bija citas personas nekā tie, kas labprātīgi sadarbojās ar vāciešiem. Var secināt, ka daudzos gadījumos starp pretošanos un kolaboracionismu bija diezgan skaidra robeža, un vismaz morālā un ētiskā līmenī to var skaidrot kā apzinātu personisku izvēli.

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