

Wartime Latvia: Viktors Arājs, Hell's Plowman

OVERVIEW

The intent of this chapter is to establish, contextualize, and analyze the wartime events in Latvia. It is divided into two parts. The first lays out the necessary historical background of the territory of twentieth century Latvia from the Middle Ages through the Second World War. It also examines the commander of the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police, Viktors Arājs, the composition of his unit, and its specific contributions to the Nazi cause. The second part focuses solely on analyzing the motives behind the men of the Arajs Kommando. It is an attempt to situate the Arajs Kommando and its crimes intelligibly within Latvian history. The examination of the investigations and trials that took place after the war pursuant to these crimes forms of the basis of this work's subsequent chapters. First, it is necessary to know and understand what those crimes were, and the context in which they were committed.

THE DEEP HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

For more than 700 years, the territories that would become Latvia were ruled by a military, religious, and merchant elite of Germans—conquering crusaders and their descendants. This minority ruling class of Germans maintained its lordship over the proto-Latvian peasantry under successive empires even after it could no longer maintain its own exclusive suzerainty over the territory. This class maintained its unassailable ascendancy

until the emancipation of the serfs in their lands by the Tsar in the early nineteenth century. That decree set in motion a series of developments that undermined and eventually unseated the Baltic Germans.

Emancipation brought the gradual advent of a Latvian middle class. With education, Latvian print culture developed along with national consciousness and aspirations for independence. The first armed rumblings were to be observed in the unsuccessful 1905 Revolution—jointly put down by the Russian autocracy and its local aristocratic German allies. But the cataclysms of the First World War and the Russian Civil War afforded the chance for a nationalist movement to militarily defeat all of its enemies—the detested Baltic Germans, the White Russian monarchists, and the newly birthed Red threat—one-by-one. Independence was declared on 18 November 1918, although the fighting persisted until the last opponent withdrew from the arena in 1920.

Latvia's first experience with self-government took the form of a parliamentary democracy. It functioned well during the 1920s and minority rights were respected. However, political gridlock, international turmoil, and the Great Depression combined to see the parliamentary democracy fall to an indigenous dictatorship, in much the same way as these factors combined to produce democratic failure and authoritarian successor regimes across much of Europe. Kārlis Ulmanis, the Vadonis, or "Leader," used the slogan "Latvia for the Latvians," banned all political parties, and imposed strict censorship, fatefully blinding the population to the menacing and portentous events transpiring in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union after he came to power in 1934.

The pivotal year between the summer of 1940 and that of 1941 saw the imposition of a new Soviet regime on Latvia. During this brief period, known as the Baigais Gads, or "Year of Horror," tens of thousands were killed or deported to the Soviet interior. Soviet control also occasioned massive economic dislocation and the pauperization of the country. The commencement of Operation Barbarossa put Soviet power in Latvia quickly to flight. What followed is the chief concern of this chapter.¹

¹Several helpful synthetic general histories of Latvia form the basis for this summary, for instance: Andrejs Plakans. *The Latvians: A Short History*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press and Stanford University, 1995. Some of these were offered as part of the exiles' post-war public relations offensive, but remain very useful sources. For example: Alfred Bilmanis. *Dictionary of Events in Latvia*. Washington, DC: The Latvian Legation, 1946. Also see: *Crossroads Country Latvia*. Edgars Andersons, ed. Waverly, Iowa: Latviju

The Sword Brothers

The land now called Latvia has ever occupied a strategic geographic position. Archeological evidence of Viking and proto-Russian and Ukrainian cultures shows that the land was traversed by traders and raiders since time immemorial. Its existence as a land that supplied amber, furs, and honey was vaguely known to the Mediterranean world during the flourishing of the Roman Empire.

However, if history begins when people start to record events by the written word, then the pre-literate peoples of present-day Latvia entered history at the tip of German crusaders' swords in the last few years of the twelfth century. The best records of the first conquest of the territory by the Teutonic and Livonian Orders, referred to by Latvians as Zobeņu Brāļi, or "Sword Brothers"—comes from the *Chronicles of Henry of Livonia*.² He depicts an indigenous agricultural society composed of numerous fractious pagan tribes. These were gradually subdued by the foreign knights through the direct application of force aided by political maneuvering that sought to pit one tribe against another. Forced conversion to Christianity and serfdom awaited all those who were not wiped out.³

What emerged was not quite the classic feudal system of the high Middle Ages elsewhere in Europe in that power remained radically decentralized. The military caste was autonomous and its barons were independently powerful enough to prevent the emergence of a kingship. Where the sword went, the Cross followed. Like everywhere else in Europe, secular power was complimented and rivaled by the ecclesiastical, and despite the theoretically religious commission of the Livonian and Teutonic Orders from Popes Celestine III and Innocent III, the barons jealously defended their corporate independence. Rīga quickly became a fully-fledged Catholic archbishopric, while smaller centers in the territory became bishoprics. Next in power behind these two forces

Footnote 1 (continued)

Gramata, 1953. Other histories created for native Latvian audiences are also instructive, for example: P. Dreimans. *Latvju Tautas Vēsture*. Copenhagen: Imanta, 1958.

²Henricus Lettus. *The Chronicle of Henry of Livonia*. James A. Brundage, ed., trans. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

³Andrejs Plakans. *The Latvians: A Short History*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press and Stanford University, 1995, pp. 14–29.

in the lands called Courland and Livonia was the Hanseatic League, the great north-German trade network of free cities that would include Rīga after 1282. Beneath these three competing groups was the mass of the peasantry.

Interestingly, in what Heinrich von Treitschke called “the classical land of peasant oppression,” one other dynamic set Courland and Livonia apart.⁴ Unlike elsewhere in Europe, the system of social stratification was fully congruent with linguistic, ethnic, and ultimately national difference. The most durable aspect of the society’s structure—unchallengeable German privilege and perpetual indigenous peonage—would persist under three separate expansionist powers: the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Swedish Empire, and the Russian Empire.

The unrelenting hegemonic status of the Germans in Courland and Livonia meant that both the nascent Latvian people and Jews, who began arriving in the territories in the 1600s, were similarly cast in the role of underlings. Both groups’ rights were curtailed by the German barons, clerics, and merchants. For example, until perhaps the mid-1600s, both Latvians and Jews were effectively priced out of the chance to become householders in Rīga.⁵ Other historical circumstances also retarded the growth of a distinctly Latvian form of anti-Semitism. Firmly locked into their station as a permanent peasant underclass, the nascent Latvian people experienced no economic competition from Jewish storekeepers, peddlers, and craftsmen. Also, Christianity was very long in taking root in the hearts of the peoples indigenous to Courland and Livonia. Pagan symbols, folksongs, stories, and other cultural artifacts still enjoy currency in Latvia today, being sold to tourists in the very shadows of the Germans’ stone churches in Rīga’s medieval Old Town. The concepts undergirding Christian anti-Semitism were as foreign to the local peoples as the religion itself. The elaborate pagan belief system

⁴Gershon Shafir. *Immigrants and Nationalists: Ethnic Conflict and Accommodation in Catalonia, the Basque Country, Latvia, and Estonia*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 131. It was also dubbed “the heaven of nobility, the paradise of the clergy, the gold mine of foreigners, and the hell of the peasants.” *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁵Andris Kolbergs. *The Story of Riga: History of Riga Old Town*. Rīga: Jāņa Sēta Publishers & Printers, 1998, pp. 24–25. The author argues that the householders of Rīga bore a common allegiance to that city-state that outweighed ethnic tensions. He admits, however, that “non-Germans” bore a huge set of special prohibitions.

against which Christianity was pitted had no preconceptions about or historical baggage associated with Jews.

The Russian Imperial Period

Courland and Livonia came under Tsarist rule in the early 1700s—spoils of the Great Northern War with Sweden, which polity had, in turn, won the lands from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth the century before. They were considered “partly autonomous territories” of the Russian Empire.⁶ This designation is not to be misunderstood as meaning that the local populations at large had any involvement in government or administration. It meant simply that the Baltic Germans who had dominated not only the political, but also the religious and economic life of Livonia and Courland since the 1200s were “partly autonomous” from the Tsar’s court in Petersburg. Of all the territories of the western reaches of the Russian Empire—and quite distinct from the “pale of settlement,” as further Jewish immigration to the Baltic provinces was barred by Alexander I in 1805—those of Courland and Livonia were almost alone in their absence of pogroms.⁷

Between 1817 and 1819, fully forty years ahead of their counterparts elsewhere in the Russian Empire, Latvian serfs were emancipated.⁸ The peasant emancipation was the first among other profound developments that followed during the middle decades of the century and culminated in the emergence of a distinct Latvian national consciousness.⁹ Beginning

⁶Georg von Rauch. *The Baltic States: The Years of Independence, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, 1917–1940*. Gerald Onn, trans. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1974, p. 9.

⁷A comprehensive and dispassionate chronicle of Latvian Jewish history is: Josifs Šteimanis. *History of Latvian Jews*. Edward Anders, rev. ed. Helena Belova, trans. Boulder: East European Monographs and New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. It includes excellent and detailed interwar statistical summaries as well.

⁸Gershon Shafir. *Immigrants and Nationalists: Ethnic Conflict and Accommodation in Catalonia, the Basque Country, Latvia, and Estonia*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 131. In Lattgallia, the eastern portions of the territory that would become Latvia, serfs were only emancipated—together with the rest of the Russian Empire’s serfs—in the 1860s.

⁹Georg von Rauch. *The Baltic States: The Years of Independence, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, 1917–1940*. Gerald Onn, trans. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1974, p. 9.

in the 1840s, the natives began to explore their own history as a nation, though even as late as 1860, some forty years after the reform, the majority of them still identified themselves not as a nationality, but rather as “people of the country.”¹⁰ Only with the rapid industrialization and commercialization that began in earnest in the 1860s, and which coincided with the first large-scale peasant purchases of land, did national sentiments begin to have an audience amongst a burgeoning educated social stratum of self-conscious “Latvians.”¹¹

It is no coincidence that at the same time, the first sizable classes of Latvian university students were graduating. Prior to these growing yearly waves of graduates, upwardly mobile elements of the indigenous population were tempted to avoid alienation by assimilating as best they were able into the ranks of the Baltic Germans, commonly even adopting Latvianized German names.¹² But by the 1860s, a critical mass of educated Latvian middle-class people had emerged. As described by Benedict Anderson, “The general growth in literacy, commerce, industry, communications and state machineries that marked the nineteenth century created powerful new impulses for vernacular linguistic unification within each dynastic realm.”¹³ The processes essential for “second-wave” European nationalism were all finally present in what was to become Latvia.

¹⁰Gershon Shafir. *Immigrants and Nationalists: Ethnic Conflict and Accommodation in Catalonia, the Basque Country, Latvia, and Estonia*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 132.

¹¹Arnolds Spekke. *History of Latvia: An Outline*. Stockholm: M. Goppers, 1957, p. 308.

¹²Gershon Shafir. *Immigrants and Nationalists: Ethnic Conflict and Accommodation in Catalonia, the Basque Country, Latvia, and Estonia*. New York: State University of New York Press, 1995, p. 132. This was actually judged a Volkstumswechsel, or “change of nationality.” Racial ideas were apparently not part of the makeup of the Baltic German psyche at that time. Also see: Georg von Rauch. *The Baltic States: The Years of Independence, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, 1917–1940*, p. 7. In fact, one important study of the Baltic Germans during the second half of the nineteenth century found that they believed “that linguistic nationality was a subsidiary function of social class.” Anders Henriksson. *The Tsar’s Loyal Germans: The Riga German Community: Social Change and the Nationality Question, 1855–1905*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983, p. 107.

¹³Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. Ed. London: Verso, 2003, pp. 77–78.

The Revolution and National Independence

At the outbreak of the First World War, the lands that were soon to become Latvia were still subject to the Tsar. Latvians, together with some Baltic Germans, fought loyally in the ranks of the army of the Russian Empire for years against the Kaiser's forces. Much of this fighting took place in Courland and Livonia, where the Latvians zealously acquitted themselves as some of Nicholas II's best troops. However, 1917 brought the abdication of the Tsar, the collapse of the Russian war effort, and the descent of the Empire into civil war between "Whites" and "Reds," with non-Russian nationalists asserting themselves along the Empire's vast western periphery.

The fledgling Bolshevik government, anxious to cease hostilities with Germany to free it to attend to the consolidation of its own power in Russia, effectively ceded what would become Latvia to the German Reich by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March of 1918. Many people in the territories of Courland and Livonia had their own vision of the post-war order that did not include the seamless resumption of German dominance, however. A week after Germany signed an armistice and conceded defeat on the western front, the Latvian independence movement headquartered in Rīga and led by Kārlis Ulmanis, took the opportunity to declare a state. The date was 18 November 1918. At that time, a host of non-government forces vied for control of the territory besides those of the new government of pro-independence Latvians and their indispensable Estonian allies: monarchist "White" Russian forces, German Freikorps composed of a mixture of a local Baltic German Landeswehr and breakaway German Army personnel calling themselves the "Iron Division," and the new Red Army that included some pro-Communist Latvians with a rival Bolshevik Latvian government in train. A very hard fight—including the loss of Rīga to the Communists at one point and to the Germans at another, and involving the making and breaking of tactical alliances—was over by 1920. In international diplomacy and by virtue of the facts on the ground, the Republic of Latvia was confirmed and became a member of the League of Nations.

In effect, the revolutionary emergence of the Latvian state represented the arrival of political and economic modernity in the territory, with the social dislocation that that leap necessarily entailed. Compared with the status quo antebellum, with the most to lose as vestiges of the feudal

system, the Baltic Germans lost the most, while Jews, with the most to gain from complete legal emancipation, also gained the most.

Finally, comprehensive land reform was enacted. After decade upon decade of vehemently attempting to preserve an increasingly dysfunctional, inefficient, and patently unfair estate system against reform, the old Baltic barons were virtually dispossessed by edicts of the Saeima, the popularly elected Latvian parliament that dominated both the new executive and judiciary branches. The Baltic Germans' active attempts to diplomatically thwart the very inception of the Latvian state and then to kill it in its cradle with armed force left them with very few friends or favors to call upon. A relatively more prosperous and productive Latvian peasantry resulted from the reforms. At the same time, in the democratic Latvian state, Jews were accorded, at least on paper, rights equal to those of every other citizen. This increased freedom meant a vast improvement over life as a Jewish subject of the Russian crown and Latvian Jews were able to succeed culturally and economically in the newly created liberal environment.

In the Republic of Latvia, minority rights were observed by the government with attention to international norms and treaties. Russians (10.59% of the total population of Latvia), Jews (4.79%), Germans (3.19%), Poles (2.51%), and smaller minorities were free to send their children to schools run by their own respective communities.¹⁴ The government did not tamper with religious observation of any stripe or sect. Minorities were also free, if they could muster the votes, to elect their own representatives to the national legislative body, the Saeima—and did so. Nor were they impeded from printing their own newspapers and journals or from participating at high levels in the economy. As a rule, religious, cultural, educational, and economic autonomy for minorities prevailed. The borders were never closed and personal and public communication and travel were never hindered in either direction.

That is not to deny that institutional discrimination against minorities did occur. Some government policies certainly tended to favor Latvians or were outright exclusionary. Quota systems operated unofficially, for

¹⁴Census is from 1935. Josifs Šteimanis. *History of Latvian Jews*. Edward Anders, rev. ed. Helena Belova, trans. Boulder: East European Monographs and New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 181.

example, in certain university admissions.¹⁵ The military, especially, was a jealously guarded province, with the officer corps almost entirely of ethnic Latvian background. Much evidence exists pointing to the routine bullying of Baltic German conscripts by Latvian drill instructors in the peacetime Army. Fluency in Latvian was a prerequisite for any government job and minorities did not frequently find employment in the civil service.

It was not a perfect system. By the end of the 1920s, amid growing international turmoil and political radicalization in Europe, the parliamentary system became gradually more unstable. As elsewhere in Europe, the onset of the Great Depression ratcheted up the vitriol and acrimony and led the public to seek increasingly radical solutions in the voting booths and in the streets. Well after Lithuania and about the same time as Estonia, Latvia too succumbed to the trend sweeping Europe: one-man rule. Already a national icon as an Independence War hero and the state's first President, Kārlis Ulmanis took power in a coup, dissolving the Saeima and casting himself as the bringer of order in May 1934.

The Ulmanis Dictatorship

Oddly, one of the most accomplished alums of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln was the Latvian Independence War hero Kārlis Ulmanis. After graduating with his diploma in agriculture, returning to his home in the Russian Empire, and acquitting himself with a storied war record as a freedom fighter, he became one of Latvia's Founding Fathers. No Washington or Cincinnatus, however, after the interlude of the late 1920s and the climax of the political and economic crises at the end of that decade and the beginning of the next, Ulmanis determined to intervene again—this time unilaterally and without reference to the will of the citizens or the democratic process he had fought for and helped to establish.¹⁶

While among the mildest of Europe's right-wing dictatorships of the period, its fundamentally authoritarian nature is not to be forgotten.

¹⁵Bernhard Press. *The Murder of the Jews in Latvia: 1941–1945*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2000, p. 27.

¹⁶For a classic post-war Latvian exile reckoning with the Ulmanis legacy, see: Edgars Dunsdorfs. *Kārļa Ulmaņa dzīve: Ceļnieks, Politīķis, Diktators, Mocekļis*. Stockholm: Daugava, 1978. The title means: *The Life of Kārlis Ulmanis: Traveler, Politician, Dictator, Martyr*.

Two conclusions are ultimately the most important for the purposes of this study. First, various policies enforced by the anti-democratic Ulmanis regime played concretely into the hands of Latvia's large, hostile neighbors during their subsequent respective takeovers, such as the consolidation of state direction of banks and industry that would later facilitate nationalization and centralized control for running the occupied country's economy on a war footing. Second and perhaps equally significant, the censorship of the press by the government, though designed to preserve absolute neutrality and avoid provoking either the Nazis or the Soviets, wound up simply keeping the Latvian people terrifically ignorant of the true meaning of international developments and the nature of the two emergent totalitarian systems that would shortly envelope them. Hence, Ulmanis left the people of Latvia, Jews and non-Jews, unprepared to cope with the coming tests.

When Ulmanis seized power, no fatalities were incurred, although opposition leaders on both the extreme nationalist Right and especially the Communist and Social Democratic Left were immediately arrested and sent to labor camps. There was no Ulmanis dogma, philosophy, worldview, or ideology. As evidenced by its actions, the regime did not respect personal freedom and scorned democracy, but it was pragmatic and enacted fairly successful policies without much interference in the affairs of the country's minorities. While promoting the slogan of "Latvia for Latvians," the government did not subscribe to racism or anti-Semitism.

In character, Kārlis Ulmanis's public image stood in great contrast to most of Europe's other right-wing 'strongmen' of the 1930s. Ulmanis did not project the image of the medal-bedecked Generalissimo, the overbearing aspiring Caesar of the modern-day, or the ragaholic visionary of racial politics that have become some of the twentieth century's most enduring and embarrassing political clichés. The regime and persona of Kārlis Ulmanis are more resistant to caricature. He fostered the image of a post-partisan pragmatist: a self-assured father figure and neutral technocrat standing above the bickering, dithering, and sophistry stereotypically associated with the last gridlocked governments of the Republic he had both founded and toppled. Ulmanis never approached developing a fanatical personality cult remotely comparable to those of Hitler or Stalin during his tenure as "Vadonis," the Latvian word for "leader." Ulmanis always wore a suit. There was no Party, much less a Party uniform. In fact, all political parties including the Agrarian Union Party from which

Ulmanis had himself emerged were banned. The duration of his tenure was unconstitutional, but credibly or not, he was viewed by many as a competent quasi-regent who would administer Latvia until the crises passed and democracy could be safely and responsibly reinstituted.¹⁷

Ulmanis's foreign policy was quiet and moderate. Latvia had no territorial claims against its neighbors, nor any notable irredentist problems. With Latvia's sizable Russian and German populations, the government had every incentive for gentle policies toward minorities. There was far more continuity than change between the parliamentary government's liberal attitudes towards minorities—including Jews—and Ulmanis's, although as a rule their situation was less favorable after his coup than before. The government's chief foreign policy goals were to avoid stepping on Nazi or Soviet toes; strengthen economic and diplomatic relations with Great Britain, France, and the United States; and continue attempts to forge a Baltic political bloc with mutual military guarantees—the latter effort brought to naught by insoluble differences between Poland and Lithuania regarding territory.

Domestically, the rule of Ulmanis was not without some impressive economic accomplishments. Most notable was Latvia's rapid recovery from the effects of the global depression through government infrastructure initiatives like rural electrification and public-private cooperative enterprises that led to large profits from the export of lumber and dairy products (drawing seasonal labor from Lithuania and Poland owing to Latvia's nearly full employment) as well as high-quality consumer electronics like cameras and radios.

Older Latvians living in exile after the war, remembering the Latvia in which they grew up, often likened Kārlis Ulmanis to a "Saimnieks." It is a difficult term to translate in this context but roughly means the (male) head of the household, the master of his house, pater familias, or patriarch.¹⁸ In their minds, Ulmanis symbolized the high-water mark of independent Latvia. His popularity at the time seems to have been genuinely widespread, at least among ethnic Latvians. With the passage of time,

¹⁷ Andrejs Plakans. *The Latvians: A Short History*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press and Stanford University, 1995, pp. 132–143. Also see: Bruno Kleimanis. Author's interview with Bruno Kleimanis. Gaithersburg, Maryland, 10 August 2003.

¹⁸ See for example: Alma Rusley. Author's interview with Alma Rusley. Garrett Park, Maryland, 10 November 2002.

he became an almost totemic figure to many who considered themselves Latvian patriots.¹⁹

The “benign” dictatorship was undone by decisions taken far outside the control of any Latvian. In Moscow, during the night of 23–24 August 1939, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Non-Aggression Pact was signed between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, removing the last obstacle separating Hitler from his war. Underneath the mild-sounding title of the agreement were manifold odious secret provisions. Among them: a new partition of Poland by the two bellicose totalitarian signatories; a guarantee that Germany would not be threatened by another two-front war when it turned its attention to France and Britain; and the consignment of Finland, the Baltic states, and Bessarabia to the Soviet sphere.

Little time was lost by the Soviet Union in asserting control over the countries illegally ceded to its sphere of influence by Hitler and the Nazis. Within two months, it had forced a “Mutual Assistance” agreement on Latvia, allowing the presence of nearly 30,000 Soviet military personnel on sovereign Latvian soil. After spuriously alleging a series of provocations on the part of the Latvians, the Soviets engaged in a brief exercise in sham diplomacy by demanding emergency “negotiations” with the governments of the Baltic states for the establishment of Soviet military bases on their respective territories. With no capacity to resist, the Soviet threats and ultimatums were heeded. Soviet control of Latvia was effectively established by a military occupation that began on 17 June 1940.

The Baigais Gads, or “Year of Horror”

The Baigais Gads, or the “Year of Horror,” is the term current among Latvians to denote the year of Soviet occupation from the entrance of Soviet troops in June 1940 through the subsequent establishment of a Soviet puppet regime and absorption into the USSR to the forcible ejection of the Red Army and Soviet control by the Wehrmacht in early July 1941. A total of about 35,000 people were killed or deported during

¹⁹In fact, later events suggest that he was also a revered symbolic figure among Soviet Latvians as well, if only secretly. It could not have been entirely by coincidence that Ulmanis’s grandnephew, Guntis, who had spent his childhood in Siberia and most of his adulthood in Latvia under the surname Rumpitis, was elected president in post-Soviet Latvia in 1993.

that one year of Soviet control. This figure approaches about 2% of the total population of the country at the time. In its most spectacular exercise of power, on the night of 14–15 June 1941, the Soviets conducted a massive sweep of the country. Literally overnight, the NKVD managed to round up and deport almost 15,000 people. One week later, German Army Group North chased the Soviets out—a juxtaposition of events that made a fateful impression on the Latvian population.

Self-appointed president-for-life Ulmanis urged calm in the face of initial Soviet military occupation, famously telling his people to remain in their places just as he would remain in his.²⁰ He was soon deposed in obviously illegitimate “elections” with close to 99% turnout rates. A pro-Soviet regime was installed that immediately requested Latvia’s admission into the Soviet Union. Stalin graciously accepted the staged request and Latvia became the 15th Soviet Socialist Republic. Banners proclaiming the good news were shipped by rail from factories in the Soviet interior.

Radical Soviet reform measures were imposed rapidly. Industries were nationalized while agricultural land and livestock were divided and distributed to smallholders in preparation for full-scale collectivization. Banks were nationalized and private savings were confiscated. Ordinary consumer products long taken for granted immediately became scarce or unobtainable except on the black market. The educational system at all levels was “revolutionized.” Schoolchildren were fed crude propaganda while the more sophisticated university students were required to study Marxism-Leninism. Faculties were purged. Virtually whole libraries were boxed up and pulped as subversive to the People’s cause. Church attendance was sternly discouraged, services were disrupted by agitators, and notable clergymen disappeared. Pre-occupation affiliations with organizations deemed “counter-revolutionary” were punished retroactively. The Latvian officer corps was decimated as politically unreliable and the vacancies were filled by Soviet commanders. The men were given political instruction and folded into the Red Army. Soviet troops left their new Baltic bases and were seen everywhere in public. Portraits of the old leader were replaced by bigger portraits of the new foreign one. Escape from the country was made nearly impossible, except through the

²⁰ Andrejs Plakans. *The Latvians: A Short History*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press and Stanford University, 1995, p. 144.

intercession of the USSR's geo-strategic partner, Nazi Germany. This was done as part of Himmler's resettlement scheme for the "repatriation" of "ethnic Germans," and applicants had to meet certain "racial" requirements.

It has been claimed, and not only in Soviet propaganda literature, that the *Baigais Gads* was a "made-up tragedy" first proposed in the Latvian-Nazi collaborationist press during the war and then further embellished and mythologized by Latvian exiles in the West after the war to justify Latvian collaboration with the Nazis and participation in the Holocaust. This 'confabulation thesis' does not hold up to scrutiny.

That Latvian Jews were deported by the Soviets in numbers disproportionate to the size of their community is certainly true. In fact, Latvian Jews were deported to Siberia at more than twice the rate of their non-Jewish Latvian neighbors.²¹ However, it should be unnecessary to point out, neither the Soviets nor the Nazis published statistical data on the demographic makeup of those murdered or deported.

It is also true that some of the deported Latvians, including Jews, would return from Siberia in the 1950s and 1960s. But people at the time could certainly never have imagined that this would be the case. Also, when those men and women did return to Latvia, they often did so as physical cripples and psychological wrecks.

In any context, but especially a pre-Holocaust context, a nation that loses 2% of its population—not to mention the most visible 2%, including all high-level government officeholders, military leaders, athletic and artistic celebrities, economic magnates, and so on—in the span of one year to state-orchestrated violence cannot be said to have endured a mere "made-up tragedy." *Nothing but an event on the scale and of the nature of the Baigais Gads could have prepared Latvians to welcome Hitler's army given their long and acrimonious history with the Germans.* Soviet abuse alone can account for the weird and wonderstruck welcome of the swastika into Riga documented in Propaganda Minister Goebbels's film reels.

What happened to the Latvians under the Soviets in 1940–1941 was the worst conceivable fate at that time. What was to happen to the Latvian Jews under the Nazis, however, was so bad that it was not even

²¹Jewish overrepresentation among the deportees was more a reflection of Jewish overrepresentation in economic activities that caused them to be classified as "capitalists" and "class enemies" in the eyes of the Soviet authorities, than a reflection of racial persecution.

conceivable. Ironically, most Latvian Jews who survived the war did so because they had been deported to the Soviet interior during the Baigais Gads. Seen retrospectively, a non-Jewish Latvian's nightmare scenario was the greatest stroke of good fortune that a Latvian Jew could have hoped for.²² As a percentage, only Lithuanian Jews faced more grim odds under Nazi occupation than Latvian Jews.

What Latvian leadership might have coalesced to oppose the Nazis or attempt to chart a more independent course were all dead or gone, from Ulmanis on down. The Soviets had taken care of that. Such leadership as did arise was quickly co-opted or eliminated. On 1 July, Walter Stahlecker, the commander of Einsatzgruppe A who was tasked with the murder of every Communist and, as became clear by the end of that month, every Jew—man, woman, and child—in Barbarossa's northern sector, arrived in Rīga.²³ The first person he met was Viktors Arājs.

The Plowman: Viktors Arājs

Before the summer of 1941, Viktors Arājs, whose last name means "plowman," was fairly unremarkable. His biography, which he himself articulated several times—whether for his fraternity in 1935, for the university in 1941, or before medical examiners and judges in the second half of the 1970s—gives no indication of what he would become under German occupation. It reveals only a hard-working man, the son of a single mother, who struggled to better his social position and was interested in all aspects of the law—both its philosophy and its implementation.²⁴

²²It is estimated that approximately 10,000–15,000 Jews, a number approaching perhaps one-sixth of the Jewish population, escaped to the Soviet Union before the Wehrmacht's advance in 1941. Josifs Šteimanis. *History of Latvian Jews*. Edward Anders, rev. ed. Helena Belova, trans. Boulder: East European Monographs and New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 125. Also see: Dov Levin. *Baltic Jews Under the Soviets, 1940–1946*. Jerusalem: Centre for Research and Documentation of East European Jewry, Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1994, pp. 159–170.

²³Ian Kershaw. *Hitler, the Germans, and the Final Solution*. Jerusalem: International Institute for Holocaust Research, Yad Yashem. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008, p. 105.

²⁴The following section is based on the following principal accounts that Viktors Arājs gave of himself. See: StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-08. "Arājs Verfahren." Sonderband 24, pp. 4259–4260. Viktors Arājs. "Lebenslauf." 7 January

On 13 January 1910, Viktors Arājs was born in the hamlet of Baldone, not far from Rīga. His mother, Berta Burkevičs, had some Baltic German background which may have increased her son's appeal to the race-obsessed German authorities during the Second World War. Nevertheless, his facility with the German language was poor at the beginning of the war, since it was generally not used at home. His father, Teodors Arājs, had an interesting life. He fought in the Army of the Russian Empire from the beginning of the First World War as a conscript. Somehow, against the backdrop of the Russian Civil War, Teodors found himself in China having apparently chosen the losing side of that conflict, for he was killed by the Soviets after the Second World War officially for fighting on the side of the Russian Whites. In the interwar period, however, he returned to Latvia with a Chinese wife. He divorced Berta in 1927 and with that, took leave of his former family entirely. Viktors also had a younger sister, Elvira.

Both the Arājs family home and the farm of Viktors's surviving grandparents were destroyed in the First World War. The young Viktors, his sister, and their mother relocated to Rīga. When he was old enough, Viktors was sent to the countryside to earn money as a cowherd. When his grandparents died, Berta used the inheritance money to establish a boarding house in Jelgava with Elvira, while Viktors continued down his humble career path of cowherd and agricultural day laborer. He attended school only in winter when there was no farm work to be done. At age 16, he threw in with a group of itinerant carpenters. Eventually, Viktors enrolled in school in Jelgava, where he excelled in his studies.

Footnote 24 (continued)

1941. Also see: StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-02. "Arajs Verfahren." Sonderband 4, pp. 676–710. Viktors Arājs. "Protokoll in der Ermittlungssache gegen Maywald u.a." Hamburg, 30 July 1975. Also see: StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-06. "Arajs Verfahren." Sonderband 27, pp. 3273–3279. Viktors Arājs. "Protokoll über die Vernehmung des Angeschuligten Viktor Arajs." Hamburg, 24 March 1976. Also see: StaH. 213-12. Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG. 0044-012. "Arajs Verfahren." Sonderband 54, pp. 8674–8684. Dr. Müller and I. Dalibor. "Nervenärztliches und psychologisches Gutachten," Hamburg, 26 February 1977. Also see: StaH. 213-12. Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG. 0044-018. Handakten-Sonderbände "Arajs." Band 3, pp. 502–522. Prof. Gramann. "Beginn der Vernehmung des A. zur Person." Kiel, 7 November 1977. Also see: StaH. 213-12. Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG. 0044-018. Handakten-Sonderbände "Arajs"—Band 3, pp. 529–542. "Arajs: Das stimmt alles." Kiel, 17 March 1978.

After graduating in 1930, he enlisted in the Vidzeme artillery regiment, eventually being promoted to Corporal. At the same time, he was able to secure his admission to the law school of the University of Latvia in 1932 with his full tuition paid by scholarship. Additionally, within a few years he was able to gain membership in Lettonia, the most prestigious Latvian student fraternity about which more will be said below.

Although Viktors had done remarkably well climbing the social rungs from landless peasant to a respected up-and-coming student in the capital, he was still poor. Looking for part-time work, he fatefully joined the police reserve. This side occupation gradually took more and more time away from his studies, eventually causing him to suspend his studies altogether several times. He went career in 1935 and received a posting outside of Rīga, interrupting his studies for the foreseeable future. It was on this posting that he met his wife, Zelma Zeibots.

In 1939, then Lieutenant Viktors Arājs retired from the police force to rededicate himself to obtaining his law degree. Indeed, he was awarded the degree in March of 1941, but by then Latvia had become part of the Soviet Union. He was licensed to practice Soviet law. This was Viktors Arājs less than four months before the German invasion: once a peasant, now newly-minted Soviet jurist with military and police background, married, and living in the capital.²⁵

The Composition of the Arajs Kommando

Dr. Walter Stahlecker, commander of EG A, learned of Viktors Arājs through his official translator, the Baltic German Hans-Eugen Dressler. Dressler remembered Arājs from before the war when he drilled under Arajs's supervision in the Latvian Army. He recalled Arājs fondly as one of the few instructors who did not show him any prejudice because he was a Baltic German. Here, as was so often the Nazi way, hugely consequential decisions were made and events and outcomes determined

²⁵Andrew Ezergails has written an excellent summary of the early life of Viktors Arājs, agreeing that it offers little insight into his subsequent arch-criminality. See: Andrew Ezergails. *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941–1944: The Missing Center*. Rīga and Washington, DC: The Historical Institute of Latvia in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996, pp. 175–180.

totally haphazardly on the basis of personal contacts, connections, and cronyism.²⁶

On 4 July 1941, the newly-established Latvian language daily newspaper, *Tēvija*, or “*Fatherland*,” ran the following announcement. It turned out to be the original muster call for the Arājs Kommando.

A CALL

All nationally-thinking Latvians – members of Pērkonkrusts, students, officers, Home Guards [“Aizsargi”], and others, who wish to take an active part in the cleansing of our country from harmful elements, can register themselves at the Headquarters of the Security Kommando at Valdemars Street 19, from 9–11 and from 17–19.²⁷

Arājs wished to command a unit composed of radical nationalists and the cream of pre-war Latvian society. He wanted members of Pērkonkrusts as well as the Aizsargi, military officers, and university students to join his unit. The first two groups largely failed him—even if only perhaps for reasons beyond their control—but the second two satisfied him in the unit’s early days. However, the Kommando’s recruitment base had to be greatly enlarged by the inclusion of men from less socially exalted cadres, also including peasants and workers, before it could expand to its ultimate size of approximately 1,200 men. Each group and its connection to the Kommando will be explained in turn below.

As to the nature of Pērkonkrusts, one sometimes comes across the formula “Donnerkreuz = Hakenkreuz,” or “Thundercross (Pērkonkrusts) = Hookcross (swastika).”²⁸ In today’s parlance, Pērkonkrusts was a “hate group.” And its members incontrovertibly did collaborate with the

²⁶Cross-referencing a list of convicted Kommando members with the album containing all members of the Lettonia fraternity yields seven names in common. Although this seems like a small number, when they joined the Kommando it was tiny and in its infancy. For Lettonia alone, at least seven of the first 40 or so recruits represents a fairly significant showing. Furthermore, this list is certainly not comprehensive, especially as this author does not have comparable information regarding the other, smaller, fraternities.

²⁷“Uzaicinājums.” *Tēvija*. Nr. 4. 4 July 1941.

²⁸See, for example: StaH. 213-12. Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-02. “Arājs Verfahren.” Sonderband 6, pp. 1177–1226. “Namensliste. Auswertung aus dem Buch *Daugavas Vanagi*.” Undated, presumably prepared by prosecutors in the Arājs case as a summary of the contents of *Daugavas Vanagi—Who Are They?* to identify persons of potential interest. It identifies Arājs as the “Führer” of Pērkonkrusts. It also says: “Donnerkreuz = Hakenkreuz.”

Nazis in a variety of capacities, from pseudointellectual scribblers of repellent racist diatribes to shooters of Jews. These individuals are not to be defended, nor are their contributions to Hitler's cause to be minimized. However, to identify the whole group or would-be "movement" as allied with German National Socialism per se is to make a serious error. Pērkonkrusts was certainly fanatically nationalist, anti-Communist, and fascist-oriented. It favored authoritarian single-party (if it was their party) or even one-man (if he was their man) rule, pro-natalist policies and the active enforcement of 'traditional' gender roles and norms and the persecution of gays and persons of other gender identities, economic protectionism with aspirations of autarchy, militarism and the national security state, strict immigration controls, discriminatory language laws, quotas in university enrollment and in the professional occupations according to ethnic identity, and the like, while it rejected internationalism and pluralism of any stripe.

But to describe Pērkonkrusts as "National Socialist" is to ignore completely its foundational ideological hatred of Germans, *specifically*, as the principal hereditary enemy of the imagined ethnically and culturally pure Latvian "Tauta"—a term much more readily identified with the ethnically charged German word "Volk" than the blander English equivalent "People." For more than 700 years, the ruling German minority had been a detested presence. Compared to Jews or even the pre-Soviet Russians, the Germans were by far the key target for Latvians' historical resentment and animosity. Far from fetishizing such crackpot racial theories as were current across almost all of Europe at the time, however, Pērkonkrusts's ideology was largely simply an outgrowth of this concrete historical legacy: seven centuries of exploitation, brutalization, and segregation at the hands of Germans, coded by language and ethnicity. Pērkonkrusts, awful as its views indubitably were, was simply the most radical manifestation of the anger that could for the first time be lawfully expressed in public in the freedom of the first democratic and independent Latvia.

Pērkonkrusts was, nonetheless, also almost prototypically a part of Europe's so-called New Right in the 1930s. This was owed to a unique historical contingency: the traditional conservative elites of pre-independent Latvia belonged to the pre-World War One German baronial class. They were largely dispossessed by the land reform of the early parliamentary period after having gambled and irreversibly destroyed their own legitimacy in a Latvian national state by their subversive pro-Kaiser

machinations and outright military opposition during the Independence War. All this built upon their previous historical baggage from the repression that followed the 1905 Revolution and went back all the way to the year the German knights arrived in the territory in the Middle Ages. In other words, since Latvian national independence was predicated on the removal of foreigners, or at least non-ethnic Latvians—overwhelmingly of German extraction—from access to the levers of power, there simply were no Old Regime fossils left in the running. Pērkonkrusts could not, by virtue of the transformation that had occurred, have been other than part of Europe's 'New Right.'²⁹

Whatever squalid "philosophies" they may have held in common with some groups in this category in other European countries, however, in Latvia Pērkonkrusts was notably deficient in at least one defining characteristic of the New Right: the politics of mass mobilization. At no point in history did its membership exceed approximately 6,000 people in a country of about 2,000,000 that included 1,500,000 ethnic Latvians.³⁰ They were declared illegal by the right-wing Ulmanis government.

Also, unlike their stance towards the Italian Fascists, the Romanian Iron Guard, the Hungarian Arrow Cross, the Croatian Ustaše, the Nationaal-Socialistische Beweging in Nederland (or "National Socialist Movement in the Netherlands"), much less the pro-Anschluss

²⁹For a good article on the influence of the Latvian right-wing during the first independence period, see: Ieva Žaķe. "Latvian Nationalist Intellectuals and the Crisis of Democracy in the Inter-War Period," in *Nationalities Papers*, Vol. 33, No. 1, March 2005.

³⁰Andrew Ezergailis. *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941–1944: The Missing Center*. Rīga and Washington, DC: The Historical Institute of Latvia in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996, p. 81. This figure represents the Nazi German intelligence services' best estimate, and was also cited in the Hamburg Court's 1979 verdict against Viktors Arājs. StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG. 0044-015. Sonderband 49, p. 8. Landgericht Hamburg. "Urteil. Im Namen des Volkes. In der Strafsache gegen Viktor Bernhard Arajs, geboren am 13. Januar 1910 in Baldone, Kreis Riga/Lettland, wegen Mordes." Hamburg, 21 December 1979. Pērkonkrusts itself claimed twice as many adherents. The founder of the group, Gustavs Celmiņš, produced an autobiography after the war. Gustavs Celmiņš *Eiropas Krustceļos*. Esslingen: Dzintarzeme, 1947. The title means "Europe at a Crossroads" and it is wholly dedicated to anti-Communism. An organization calling itself "Pērkonkrusts" exists in present-day Latvia, but has very little truck indeed with the society at large. Its activities seem limited to organizing sparsely attended ceremonies at the Brothers' Cemetery, occasional demonstrations at the "Jewish" embassy, and maintaining a website: <http://www.perkonkrusts.lv/>.

Austrians, or even many Baltic Germans living in Latvia before the war for that matter, the Nazis had no interest in working together with Pērkonkrusts.³¹ The proof that the organization, however despicable, cannot accurately be described as “Latvian Nazi” is that the actual Nazis themselves outlawed the group during their occupation as hostile to German interests. After a honeymoon period of about two months, the group was banned and its leader, Gustavs Celmiņš, was eventually sent to a concentration camp for operating an underground press. Pērkonkrusts insisted upon “Latvia” as a geopolitical concept, and whatever other common ground they may or may not have shared, this was unacceptable to the Nazis. Fruitful collaboration was a non-starter once German intentions—which did not involve any future reconstitution of the independent Latvian state—became clear.³²

Indubitably, some members of Pērkonkrusts joined the Kommando, presumably for hyper-nationalist reasons. Their numbers must have been few, for although victim testimony refers often to Pērkonkrusts in the role of persecutors, the organization is mentioned in perpetrator testimony exceedingly rarely.³³ And those who did join the Kommando would have been compelled to repudiate their membership in Pērkonkrusts when the ban was imposed by the Nazis.

The Aizsargi, or “Home Guards,” are frequently mistakenly portrayed as “Latvian pro-Nazi nationalist army members” and the like.³⁴ “Home Guards” is a very imprecise translation of the plural Latvian term “Aizsargi.” The connotations of the word come closer to the literal

³¹See: Andrew Ezergailis. “Collaboration in German Occupied Latvia: Offered and Rejected,” in *Latvia Under the Nazi German Occupation, 1941–1945. Materials of an International Conference*. 12–13 June 2003. Rīga: Symposium of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia, Volume 11, pp. 121–138.

³²The ban was reinstated less than a short two months into the German occupation, on 17 August 1941. See: StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-05. “Arājs Verfahren.” Sonderband 11, pp. 2058–2061. Adolfs Šilde. “Vernehmungsniederschrift.” Münster, 17 October 1975.

³³It should not be forgotten that members of Pērkonkrusts assisted the Nazis in other ways. For a detailed assessment, albeit one that emphasizes Pērkonkrusts members’ collaboration, see: Katrin Reichelt. “Between Collaboration and Resistance? The Role of the Organization ‘Pērkonkrusts’ in the Holocaust in Latvia,” in *Latvijas Vēsturnieku komisija, Holokausta Izpētes Jautājumi Latvija*. Rīga: Latvijas vēstures instituta apgāds, 2003.

³⁴For example: Julia Robinson. “Julia’s Story,” in *The Unfinished Road: Jewish Survivors of Latvia Look Back*. Gertrude Schneider, ed. New York: Praeger, 1991, p. 46.

German meaning of “Abwehr,” a word signifying “defense” with a prefix denoting the idea of “warding off.” As a rule, they were not, as many have charged, “pro-Nazi extremists,” except insofar as they shared the Nazis’ determination to oppose Communism along with the bulk of the Latvian populace at the time. It would be more instructive to think of them as an aging, culturally conservative, male, and rural bulwark against radicalism or change of any stripe in Latvian society. The members of this group were generally respected in Latvian society because of their association with the Independence War. The Aizsargi had also been part of the informal coalition behind the 1934 coup of Kārlis Ulmanis, who was himself an Independence War veteran. But that was precisely the problem with the Aizsargi in 1941: too many were twenty years past their fighting prime. Though the Aizsargi did have a “youth” component, the Jaunsargi (“Young Guards”), and the group’s membership was especially singled out for persecution by the Soviets in 1940–1941, they too largely disappointed Arājs. Almost never in the depositions of captured Kommando members after the war is the Aizsargi organization mentioned. The simple but undoubtedly resonant inclusion of their name in Arājs’s appeal, however, certainly strengthened its potency.

With members of the former Latvian military, Arājs was more successful: many of the Kommando’s first entrants came from this set of men. Two factors, both concerning the preceding Soviet occupation, help explain their attraction to collaborationist formations including the Arājs Kommando. The first is the surrender of Latvia to the Soviets in the summer of 1940 without a fight, and the second is the subsequent incorporation of the Latvian armed forces into those of the Soviet Union. Although both eventualities were completely beyond the power of these men to change, the Army was exposed to back-to-back accusations first by some Latvians of being cowardly and then by the Germans of being influenced by Communism. As a further twist of the knife, both of these developments also seemed to confirm Soviet claims that Latvia had entered the Union voluntarily.

The Ulmanis government’s policy of offering no resistance to the entrance of the Red Army in 1940 was the only real option Latvia had in response to Soviet ultimatums and threats.³⁵ It likely saved many Latvian

³⁵This capitulation is still viewed with anger as an act of cowardice among some Latvians. Most, however, admire Ulmanis’s stoicism and appreciate that his situation was quite impossible.

lives, although not that of Ulmanis himself. Unlike the plucky and much-admired Finns who famously mortified the Red Army in the Winter War (November 1939–March 1940), the Latvian Army, following its orders, did not use force to oppose the Soviet takeover. The soldiers thereafter could not even take pride in having bloodied the enemy in a hopeless but hard-fought war. They had not given the enemy battle. This fact was probably a more-or-less conscious factor in the algebra of motivations among the former-military segment of the Kommando membership. Joining German or German-sponsored military and security forces for some men may have been considered a potential vehicle of the recovery of self-respect and a feeling of manhood. It promised to take them down an avenue for both proving themselves and taking revenge against the source of their humiliation.

Further compounding the fact that the Red Army had taken Latvia without firing a shot was the later incorporation of the Latvian soldiery into the Soviet military. The rank and file of the pre-war Latvian armed forces was transmuted into the 24th Territorial Corps of the Red Army. This new formation was composed of the politically purged rump of the pre-war Latvian Army's officer corps together with a transfusion of mainly Russian officers and political commissars. Therefore, since many of the Kommando's personnel had first belonged to the Latvian military, a good number of them had also been folded into the Red Army in the year preceding the German invasion. This category of men had an urgent need to prove their loyalty to the new German occupiers in 1941. There was hardly a more direct route to proving one's anti-Communist bona fides than volunteering to do the Nazis' "dirty work."

A conspicuous segment—probably a plurality—of Arājs's very first recruits came from the lofty ranks of university. With the University of Latvia (quickly demoted to the "University of Rīga" by Nazis eager to excise the concept of "Latvia" from history) closed by the German occupation authorities for an indefinite period of time, joining some kind of security force in the summer of 1941 seemed like a good option to many. The majority of the student population of Rīga, a modern, highly-developed city, was constituted of eligible military-age males. Perversely then, the university formed a natural pool of recruits who were standing by. Many were caught up in the furious excitement of the times and had few other attractive options.

As a subset of the recruits from the University, those individuals in the initial group of volunteers who became the hard core of the Kommando

were drawn from the “korporacija,” or student fraternities.³⁶ After the war, men who got into the Kommando on the ground floor described the fraternities as “the skeleton” of the Kommando.³⁷ In interwar Latvia, such associations were highly prestigious and served as lifelong social patronage networks and ‘good ol’ boy’ clubs. Obtaining membership was a major distinction and a powerful indicator of the promise of future success and social prominence. They were also quite exclusionary. Arājs’s fraternity, Lettonia, for example, recruited only male ethnic Latvians: Russians, Jews, and Germans were ineligible, but were free to found their own less esteemed and influential associations. As bastions of elite bourgeois class enemies and nationalists, the fraternities were immediately banned during the first Soviet occupation and eager to make a comeback in the summer of 1941. Their very mention in Arājs’s recruitment call would itself have been viewed as a repudiation of the fleeing Communists and a proud demonstration that their power in Latvia was gone.

More than just a student, Arājs himself was a member of Latvia’s largest and most esteemed fraternity: Lettonia.³⁸ Members of the

³⁶In the interests of full disclosure, it must be noted that this author’s father and paternal grandfather both joined Lettonia.

³⁷BStU ZUV 63 Bd. 12, pp. 40–54. Aleksejs Proškovičs. “Zeugenvernehmungsprotokoll.” Rīga, 6 April 1978, p. 7.

³⁸“1932–1940. I, II Turpinājums,” in *1870–1988. Album Lettonorum*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Augstums Printing Services, Inc., 1988, p. 13. His name also appears in the alphabetical listing. Ibid., p. 29. Also, the yearbook contains two pictures of Viktors Arājs, although the pages on which they appear are not numbered. The first photograph is a small oval portrait. In the second, he stands with a wistful expression in a snowy forest with a group of nine other Lettons posing in 1935. His unremarkable entry reads:

927. (Arājs, Viktors,) kalēja Teodora un Bertas, dz. Burgevicis d., * 13. X 1910, Baldones Dravniekos. Apmekl. Jelgavas pils. 4. Pamatsk. un Valsts Jelgavas arodsk., 30. I abit. Jelgavas klasisko ģimn. 32. II Latv. Univ., iur. L. u. 35. I T. 36. I.
† 22. I 1988, Vācijā.

It merely indicates his membership number (927) and that he was born to the smith, Theodore, and Berta, neé Burgevicis, and describes his educational background. It then indicates when he was accepted as a candidate into the fraternity, and when he was initiated as a fully-fledged member one year later. The entry ends by correctly noting the date and place of his death. It should be mentioned that this seemingly minimalist entry is, in fact, the same format as all of the other entries, which are similarly spare.

fraternity, individually called “Lettons,” provided an appreciable number of the unit’s first recruits. To choose a prominent example, Leonīds Jansons, who was to testify in many of the post-war trials including that of Arājs himself, joined the unit in the first days of July 1941. He knew Arājs only because of their mutual membership in Lettonia.³⁹ “I personally handed out the identification papers that Arājs had signed to the members of the Latvian Auxiliary Police [sic.] and maintained the personnel rosters.” He was convicted of participation in the shooting of approximately 50 male Jews in the Biķernieki Forest in the first weeks of the German occupation.⁴⁰

Overlapping with the Lettonia connection, an appreciable number of the initial few score of members of the Kommando were recruited on the basis of personal acquaintance with Arājs in other spheres of life, such as the pre-war Latvian Army. Some also joined upon the advice of friends or family members who knew Arājs through various happenstances. In other words, the ranks were filled at first by roughly the same informal mechanism by which Arājs was given the green light to instantiate the armed unit in the first place—his pre-war acquaintance with one of Stahlecker’s aides. There are many examples of men being drawn to the Kommando because they knew Arājs. It does not, however, seem that even the first wave of recruits were drawn in by charisma or personal magnetism, although Arājs was very handsome. Instead, most accounts show men just stumbling into the Kommando because they needed a job and they knew that Arājs was hiring. Many such depictions are suspect because their narrators subsequently tried to distance themselves from the man and obscure their commitment to the unit and its mission. Nevertheless, it is a nearly consistent feature of the entire body of testimony. For example: after being laid off from a desk job in the office of Rīga’s Central Prison—repurposed from its former NKVD days in form if not in function—an unexpectedly unemployed Arnis Upmalis was perhaps worried about being drafted for labor in Germany.⁴¹ He spoke on the matter with his older brother. “My brother was an acquaintance with

³⁹“1932.–1940. I, II Turpinājums,” in *1870–1988. Album Lettonorum*. Lincoln, Nebraska: Augstums Printing Services, Inc., 1988, p. 29. Jansons was member number 989 to Arājs’s 927.

⁴⁰StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-04. “Arājs Verfahren.” Sonderband 10, pp. 1964–1977. Leonīds Jansons. “Protokoll über eine Zeugenvernehmung.” Rīga, 12 May 1971.

⁴¹Coming so early in the war, this may have just been an excuse produced for interrogators.

Arājs through the University. Jānis Upmalis studied in the medical faculty there and Arājs, as my brother said, studied in the Law faculty.” Until 1940, when the organization was dissolved by the Soviets, both were members of the Lettonia student fraternity. In January 1942, the younger Upmalis joined the Kommando. “Arājs answered that I would have to keep guard duty [“daß ich Wachdienst zu leisten haben würde.”].”⁴²

Another member of the Kommando, Kārlis Kencis, also joined based on his personal acquaintance with Arājs. He was the son of a career officer in the Latvian Army who had been deported, along with Kencis’s mother, by the Soviets in the Baigais Gads. His brother was killed by Soviet forces near Leningrad; he had presumably volunteered as a *Hilfswillige*. Such volunteers, called *Hiwis*, were locally-recruited non-German men attached individually or in small groups to frontline Wehrmacht units or Luftwaffe air defense batteries as helpers. The exact circumstances of Kencis’s brother’s death are unknown, but he was killed virtually as soon as the city was reached by German forces. Apparently in an effort to continue the family’s military tradition, Kencis claimed at his trial that he applied for membership in the unit “Since for me Arājs was not an unknown person and I really wanted to ready myself for military service [“mich ja für den Militärdienst zur Verfügung stellen wollte.”].”⁴³

As the Kommando was transformed into a professional standing unit, its ranks were filled out by men from less exalted social tiers. Laborers, farmhands, and other working-class men fleshed out the expanding outfit until they constituted the absolute majority. The easily-anticipated post-war Soviet “class enemy” canard that the Arājs Kommando was composed purely of men of bourgeois background has been refuted by scholarship.⁴⁴

⁴²StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-08. “Arājs Verfahren.” Sonderband 22, pp. 3995–4002. Arnis Upmalis. “Zeugenvernehmungsprotokoll.” Rīga, 21 November 1975. In Russian parlance, the term “faculty” is used to denote what in English is called a “department.”

⁴³StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-05. “Arājs Verfahren.” Sonderband 11, pp. 2090–2097. Kārlis Kencis. “Vernehmungsniederschrift.” Kaiserslautern, 22 October 1975. Also see: StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-05. “Arājs Verfahren.” Sonderband 11, pp. 2203–2207. Kārlis Kencis. “Vernehmungsniederschrift.” Kaiserslautern, 13 November 1975.

⁴⁴See the excellent: Rūdite Vīksne. “The Arājs Commando Member as Seen in the KGB Trial Files: Social Standing, Education, Motives for Joining It, and Sentences Received,” in *Holokausta Izpētes Problēmas Latvijā: Latvijas Vēsturnieku Komisijas Raksti*. 2. Sējums. Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2001.

The reality is much more troubling in that, over time, Latvian men from all sections of society were attracted to it. Although they joined at different times and for different reasons, which will be treated below in detail, the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police ultimately would draw men from all stations, high and low, in Latvian society.

*The Arajs Kommando and Terror in the Nazi Ostland*⁴⁵

One of the major historiographical bones of contention about Latvian participation in the Holocaust, and the Arajs Kommando's contribution in particular, centers around the question of whether, as Andrew Ezergailis has phrased it, the crimes committed were of "passion" or of "organization." Bound up with either answer to this question is an implication about the relationship between, and relative blame to be apportioned to, the German and Latvian perpetrators, respectively. In fact, the Kommando perpetrated the Holocaust along the lines of both models. At its inception, the unit rampaged in a manner only relatively loosely directed by Einsatzkommando 2, in accordance with Heydrich's instructions to foment local pogroms without leaving any trace of German involvement in order to strengthen the appearance of local spontaneity. Quickly, however, the unit came under a form of paramilitary discipline, ordered by its Nazi masters. In time, the Kommando matured into a professional death squad, the actions of which were under tight German control.

The Kommando, in its infancy in July and August 1941, conducted what have been termed "wild actions." These included the pogrom-esque burning of Rīga's beautiful synagogues. At least in the case of the Choral Synagogue on Gogol Street, the arson was committed by Arājs and some of his men on the orders of Einsatzkommando 2. This earliest phase of the Kommando's existence was also characterized by random

⁴⁵Andrew Ezergails has also written a fairly comprehensive account of the Kommando and its activities. See: Andrew Ezergailis. *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941–1944: The Missing Center*. Rīga and Washington, DC: The Historical Institute of Latvia in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996, pp. 173–202. For an unsurpassed synthetic history of Latvia in the Second World War, albeit one that intentionally avoids centering on the Holocaust in Latvia, see: Valdis O. Lumans. *Latvia in World War II*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006.

home invasions of Jews that ended in the arrests (usually of males) and the theft of property. All of the Kommando's initial activities were carried out locally in Rīga.⁴⁶

As a first step to permanence, the growing unit was installed in a bank building on Valdemārs Street that had been nationalized by the Soviets but was formerly owned by a Latvian Jewish family. It was centrally located in downtown Rīga, securely walled and gated, contained ample office space to conduct logistics for a relatively small unit of men, boasted a canteen as well as a large cellar easily converted into a holding area for detainees, and also had a garage. Multiple accounts lead to the plausible conclusion that female prisoners were commonly raped in the building.⁴⁷ From this base, detachments of the Kommando were sent to perform various missions that included the escort of Jewish forced laborers; the guarding of the camps being established by the Germans such as Salaspils, Jungfernhof (Jumpravmuiža), and Kaiserwald (Mežaparks); making arrests and confiscating property at the homes of Jews; and conducting shootings in the Biķernieki Forest.

The Biķernieki shootings were the first real test of the Kommando and the resolve of its members. Designated (and overwhelmingly Jewish) prisoners—at first it seems most were men, many of military age—were taken from the Kommando's own detention area and later exclusively from the Rīga Central Prison on busses and, if necessary, flatbed trucks, to pre-selected locations in the forest. This happened in the early hours of the morning. If properly executed, the sun would just have risen when the disoriented prisoners and their "guards" arrived. Only very early risers in the city would be on the streets to observe the convoy. The forest was not distant, probably a trip of some 20 or 30 minutes depending on how deep into the woods the site was situated. German supervising officers and, often, Arājs himself, would arrive early by automobile. Kommando troops would be taken in trucks separately

⁴⁶According to USSR Ereignismelding Number 15 of 7 July 1941, 400 Jews had already been killed in Rīga. These killings definitely involved, possibly exclusively, members of the embryonic Arajs Kommando.

⁴⁷See, for example, StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-08. "Arajs Verfahren." Sonderband 22, pp. 3912–3923. Ella Medalje. "Zeugenvernehmungsprotokoll." Rīga, 18 November 1975. Also see: StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-04. "Arajs Verfahren." Sonderband 10, pp. 1990–1995. "Zelda-Riwka Hait." Bath Yam, Israel, 26 September 1975.

from the officers. A guard or two would ride along in the trucks with the victims. Upon arrival, procedures seem to have varied; in general, the efficiency of the operations increased with practice and the number of victims per operation increased concomitantly with the Nazis' rising confidence in the unit's capabilities. The number of victims per execution fluctuated between 200 or 300 up to a maximum of about 1,000. The pits were invariably prepared beforehand, dug out by Soviet Prisoners of War. The victims were let off of the trucks in groups of ten—or, if the trucks needed to return to Rīga for another load, were made to sit on the ground within earshot, but not sight, of the ongoing shooting. When their turn came, the ten victims of each group were made to stand along the edge of the pit. Usually, 20 shooters in two rows kneeling and standing, respectively, delivered one salvo per group from full-size battle rifles. These were usually English or Czech weapons of the former Latvian Army. The victims were supposed to topple back into the grave. In practice, dead or dying victims sometimes had to be kicked into the grave. It seems that sometimes a ratio of two shooters per victim was deemed superfluous and ten victims would be apportioned to ten shooters. No escape from these operations has been documented. Machine gunners were posted visibly to deter any mass attempts at flight. It cannot be determined when or how the transition to primarily targeting woman and child victims was made. The testimony of former Kommando members suggests that military-age male Jewish victims were exclusively selected for shooting in Biķernieki for most of the first month of the Kommando's operations.⁴⁸ As a rule, alcohol was in fact not consumed at the site but for reasons of safety and efficiency only given to the actual shooters after the operation, while drivers and those maintaining the cordon were rewarded with a less generous ration.⁴⁹ Exceptions were apparently made during longer operations.

⁴⁸See, for example: StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-09. "Arājs Verfahren." Sonderband 29, p. 4875. Jānis Labans. "Vernehmungsprotokoll." 26 August 1947. "When I myself took part in the shootings, the victims involved were exclusively Jews of male gender, who were brought from the Central Prison and among whom were to be found tradesmen, employees of Soviet institutions, and other occupational groups." By October, he had graduated to killing Jewish old people, women, and children. Ibid., p. 4876. Also see: StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-09. "Arājs Verfahren." Sonderband 25, p. 4502. Alexanders Vanags. "Vernehmungsprotokoll," Rīga, 11 January 1945.

⁴⁹Ibid.

This is how most of the members of the Kommando passed July, August, and September 1941. The shootings proceeded at a pace of at least two per week. In relatively short order, the unit cohered, and the volunteers were issued standardized weapons by Einsatzkommando 2. Gradually, the hodgepodge of Latvian Army uniforms and different armbands described in the post-war testimonies disappeared in favor of SD uniforms with the identifying armband of the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police. The actions of the Kommando became ever more systematized and coordinated.

Another step on the ladder of the unit's increasing sophistication and capabilities was the simultaneous routinization of the so-called "Blue Bus actions." While approximately half of all Latvian Jews lived within easy reach of the Arajs Kommando in Rīga, the other half did not. Swedish busses from the capital city's public transport authority were commandeered by the Germans and given to the Kommando. Using these capacious blue-painted busses, detachments of 30–60 men could be conveyed throughout the Latvian hinterland. The Jews of Latvia's villages and small towns were rounded up and concentrated by personnel of Einsatzkommando 2 and provincial Latvian police and volunteers. Then the men of the Kommando would arrive, dismount, and perform the shooting. Graves for the victims and food, alcohol, and fuel for the Kommando's return trip were provided locally. Disappointingly little additional concrete information is available about this itinerant function of the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police. No Jewish survivors were ever left behind who later emerged to describe these operations, although several of the drivers survived the war, were captured, and gave testimony.⁵⁰ Only a few of these excursions have been documented at all, however, the most notable being those directed toward Madona and Liepāja, where the shootings were comparatively large and Viktors Arājs himself was probably present. These mobile operations began in July and continued into December 1941. Unfortunately, little more can therefore be said except that by the time they ceased, for all intents and purposes,

⁵⁰For example: StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-02. "Arajs Verfahren." Sonderband 4, pp. 841–850. Jānis Franks-Pranks. "Zeugenvernehmungsprotokoll." Rīga, 24 May 1974.

every Jew in Latvia was either imprisoned in the large ghettos in Rīga, Daugavpils, and Liepāja or dead—many at the hands of Arājs's men.⁵¹

Already by the middle of October 1941, just before the Rīga Ghetto was sealed, according to Dr. Walter Stahlecker, the commander of Einsatzgruppe A, 30,025 Jews and 1,843 Communists had been executed. In other words, more than one in three Latvian Jews were already dead.⁵² The Arajs Kommando was indispensable in producing that figure. But a new challenge awaited Einsatzkommando 2. German authorities in Rīga were told to expect a massive transport of Jews from the Reich and Reinhard Heydrich's Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia amounting to well over 20,000 people. The highest Nazi police authority in Latvia and the architect of the Babi Yar massacre outside of Kiev the previous September, the Höhere SS- und Polizeiführer Lettland, or "Higher SS and Police Leader" in Latvia, Friedrich Jeckeln, decided that to accommodate the fresh deportees, the Rīga Ghetto needed to be cleared. Thus 25,000 Jewish inmates were to be killed—a challenge that required the participation of the proven killers of the ensanguined Kommando of Viktors Arājs.

The shootings occurred over the course of two days: 30 November and 8 December 1941, at a site Jeckeln personally had chosen in Rumbula Forest 10 kilometers distant from the ghetto. On each day, the operation began before first light and lasted until after sundown. He did not entrust the actual shooting at the pits to Latvians and had his own men perform that role using captured Soviet submachine guns—probably PPD-40s—set to fire single shots. However, Latvians were necessary to carry off the entire operation by brutally rousing and assembling the inmates, organizing them into columns of 1,000 persons each, and ensuring that none escaped along the way. They were, of course, authorized to use deadly force at their discretion to prevent escapes and eliminate stragglers. In the event, approximately 1,000

⁵¹For a candid account of the shootings in the Latvian countryside from a Wehrmacht observer later taken prisoner by the British, see: Neitzel, Sönke, and Harald Welzer. *Soldiers: German POWs on Fighting, Killing, and Dying*. Jefferson Chase, trans. New York: Vintage Books, 2012, pp. 101–104. The Latvians "are known to be the most brutal" but "the Germans directed affairs... there was terrific bitterness against the Jews at DVINSK, and the people simply gave vent to their rage."

⁵²NARA II. Nuremberg Document L-180. "Einsatzgruppe A Gesamtbericht bis zum 15. October 1941."

Jewish victims were killed before even reaching Rumbula. Arriving in the forest, the victims were rushed by Latvian guards under German supervision through a conveyor belt of stations at which their shoes, clothing, and valuables were removed for sorting and redistribution later. The pits themselves were cavernous, with ramps carved into the sides. Victims were forced to descend the ramp and lay prostrate on the layers of victims previously shot. It was called “sardine packing” and it was a method devised personally by Jeckeln to achieve maximum utilization of the pits’ volume. When it was over, the Jewish population of Rīga—over 43,000 in 1935—was reduced to fewer than 1,000 men capable of labor. Arājs and his men had taken part.

Strikingly, membership in the Arajs Kommando seems to have been fluid, with people both volunteering to join and choosing to leave the unit during its first phase prior to its official militarization detailed below. Jānis Vabulis was a civil administrator who worked for the District Commissariat of the City of Rīga throughout nearly the entire period of German control from August 1941 to April 1944. In August of 1941, he was introduced to Viktors Arājs himself by their mutual acquaintance Konrāds Kalējs. Over time, Vabulis was made aware of the deeds of the Kommando, but learned that some personnel were desperate to leave it. Among them, for example, was Edgars Rikurs, a Lieutenant in the former Latvian Army who joined the Kommando in its first days. Rikurs personally told Vabulis that “he [Rikurs] was no murderer, but a soldier and that he did not wish to take part in murdering people.”⁵³ According to Vabulis, “Since he no longer wished to serve in the Arajs Kommando, he [again] became a soldier and fell at the front, as was reported in the press.” Another man whom Vabulis knew from service in the Kommando was also trained in the peacetime Latvian Army. This man, Feliks Dibietis, gained a reputation even among other Kommando members for exceptional cruelty during actions, but soon committed suicide—an alternative form of permanently leaving the unit.⁵⁴

⁵³Edgars Rikurs appears in Ezergailis’s compilation of the names of the members of the Latvian SD. See: Andrew Ezergailis. *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941–1944: The Missing Center*. Rīga and Washington, DC: The Historical Institute of Latvia in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996, p. 389.

⁵⁴StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-09. “Arajs Verfahren.” Sonderband 29, pp. 4947–4952. Jānis Vabulis. “Zeugenvernehmungsprotokoll.” Rīga, 29 March 1976. Feliks Dibietis, who must be identical, appears in Ezergailis’s compilation of the names of the members of the Latvian SD. See: Andrew Ezergailis. *The Holocaust in*

Vabulis's claims conform to a more general pattern in the wider testimony collected after the war. Further bolstering his credibility is the unusual circumstance that Vabulis rescued and eventually briefly married a Jewish woman, Selda Schepschelowitch, who escaped from her work detail in November 1941 and alternately hid with either Vabulis himself or his parents for the duration of the war and later moved to Israel.⁵⁵

Even if a relatively small number out of the total complement of the Kommando, there are other proven examples of men who voluntarily joined the Kommando and then later exited it for various reasons. Jānis-Eduard Zirnis, who will reappear in a later chapter, is the most important member of this subset of Kommando members for the purposes of this study.

In summary, during the first months of killings—at least up until the Rumbula Action in late 1941 and maybe even up to the time of an SS training program in Germany in early 1942 to create a more militarily proficient force, individuals could enter or exit the Kommando with little difficulty, although perhaps not quite exactly at will. However, once the unit's mission changed from mass execution of unarmed civilians to a more militarized combat role, it seems to have been much more difficult to exit, while entrance requirements and training prerequisites became more stringent. In other words, when the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police was gradually repurposed over the course of 1942, it also made a transition from a militia group to a regular force. Up until that point, there had been a notable, if statistically small, rate of personnel turnover in the Kommando. This was not the case after the unit was, in a word, professionalized. With this transition came a new mission profile and a great increase in the danger faced by Kommando members.

Having proven the reliability and capability of himself and his Kommando, Viktors Arājs and a large group of his men were given

Footnote 54 (continued)

Latvia, 1941–1944: The Missing Center. Rīga and Washington, DC: The Historical Institute of Latvia in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996, p. 385. Vabulis's name sometimes also appears as Babulis—evidently a result of mistransliteration from Russian: the Cyrillic character denoting the “V” sound is identical with the Latin “B” character.

⁵⁵StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-09. “Arājs Verfahren.” Sonderband 29, pp. 4947–4952. Jānis Vabulis. “Zeugenvernehmungsprotokoll.” Rīga, 29 March 1976.

training at the elite SS and Police school at Fürstenberg, in the Reich. At the same time, all of the regular men of the Kommando received training with pistols, rifles, light machine guns, orienteering, and topography, as well as almost daily political education about the merits of National Socialism and the necessity of the fight against Bolshevism.⁵⁶ At this moment in early 1942, the Arajs Kommando was institutionalized and became something much more than an improvisation by the commander of Einsatzgruppe A. Arājs was promoted to Major, indicating command over a battalion-sized unit. The smattering of pre-war Latvian uniforms and occasional hybrid uniforms involving Latvian and German elements, not to mention civilian clothing with a variety of identifying armbands bearing different colors, ensigns, or phrases, seem to have proliferated before the unit was formally institutionalized. Now, all men of the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police wore the uniform of the SD and bore standardized arms. In conjunction with its new permanent status and expanded role, the Kommando was given a larger and more high-profile headquarters. The move took place in early 1942, just as the first graduating class from officer training, which included Arājs himself, returned to Rīga from Germany. Like the old headquarters, the new building at 99 Krišjānis Barons Street was also located in the heart of the city. In fact it was well known: it was formerly the Latvian military academy. Thus did the Nazis stroke the egos of Arājs and his men and elevate their profile. It is also possible that it was a conscious attempt to besmirch the honor of the former Latvian Army by this grotesque association and spuriously widen, by insidious implication, the circle of complicity in the murder of the Jews of Latvia.

The Nazis obviously had plans for Arājs and his group of true-blue “willing executioners,” to borrow a much misused term, who had already proven their effectiveness and utility to Hitler’s cause. As a unit, the Kommando had previously enjoyed no formalized training. Although perhaps something approaching a majority of recruits already had some firearms training either in the Latvian Army or police, officer training for the Kommando’s leadership and the additional military training for the men represented a quantum leap in the unit’s progression from an ad hoc crew of militants to a disciplined, standing force.

⁵⁶StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-09. “Arajs Verfahren.” Sonderband 25, pp. 4427. Juris Schumskis. “Vernehmungsprotokoll,” Rīga, 10 April 1945.

After exhaustive study, Andrew Ezergailis produced this rough tabulation of the known victims who were directly killed by members of the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police in Latvia:

Bīķernieki (July–September 1941)	5,000
Bīķernieki (foreign Jews, January–March 1942)	8,000
Jews of provincial towns (July–December 1941)	9,000
Gypsies and the insane	2,000
Latvian communists	2,000
Total	26,000 ⁵⁷

Thus, the minimum number of murders directly committed by the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police in Latvia is approximately 26,000. The numbers here also do not reflect Arajs Kommando participation in support roles such as at the two gigantic Rumbula massacres. Andrew Ezergailis has speculated that the Kommando's total death toll might be "easily" twice the number he was carefully able to determine for Latvia alone—for the unit's area of operations was expanded beyond tiny Latvia's borders in 1942.⁵⁸

With the Jews of Latvia dead or well in hand as slave laborers in camps together with the Jews later deported from the Third Reich to Latvia, new work for the men of the Kommando was found. As German military fortunes declined on the Eastern Front, partisan activity in the rear increased and threatened small occupation garrisons and inadequately guarded supply lines. Western Belarus, including Minsk, already appended to the artificial polity of the Reichskommissariat Ostland, was one such hot spot conveniently located next door to the General District of Latvia. It would be the Kommando's new major area of operations.

Unlike the collection, transport, and execution of unarmed civilians in friendly territory, the unit's new mission was actually quite dangerous. With a new base in Minsk, rotating detachments of the Kommando became heavily involved in anti-partisan hunts and reprisal actions across the swamps and countryside of Belarus, where irregular pro-Soviet units operated. There, Arājs began to quickly lose members

⁵⁷Andrew Ezergailis. *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941–1944: The Missing Center*. Rīga and Washington, DC: The Historical Institute of Latvia in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996, p. 188.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

of his unit for a new reason: the Kommando took a very high rate of casualties.⁵⁹ In fact, it is no hyperbole to state that one major reason that many of the Kommando's members did not face trial after the war was because so many had been killed before it was over. First, elements of the Kommando participated in the massive "Swamp Fever" anti-partisan sweep in September 1942. It was the first of several such operations, carried out with ferocious brutality and criminal actions collectively against the entire populace of occupied Belarus, in which the men of the Kommando were involved. But the largest of these was Operation "Winter Magic," that took place in the winter of 1942–1943. Indeed, Viktors Arājs himself did not survive the increasingly dangerous anti-partisan campaign unscathed; he received a combat injury in late 1943.⁶⁰

Further attrition of the unit's men occurred even after the unit itself was disbanded sometime in late 1943 or early 1944. By then, the danger posed by the returning, resurgent Red Army far eclipsed that of the partisans. Most other armed Latvian formations had already been, or were in the process of being, absorbed into the Latvian Legion, which was founded with Adolf Hitler's signature in March of 1943. With the real front inexorably approaching, the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police was cannibalized for manpower and perhaps nearly all of its able personnel were transferred into the Legion. Sturmbannführer Viktors Arājs was inducted into the Legion and sent to the infantry school at Bad Tölz in late 1944. He remained in the Legion until he surrendered to the British at the end of the war.

The combat deaths of so many of Arājs's men made the capture, interrogation, and trials of the surviving members, including Arājs himself, that much more important for obtaining both knowledge of the Kommando and its deeds as well as exercising some small measure of justice for its victims.

⁵⁹Andrew Ezergailis. *Nazi/Soviet Disinformation About the Holocaust in Nazi-Occupied Latvia: 'Daugavas Vanagi—Who Are They?' Revisited*. Valters Nollendorfs, ed. Rīga: Latvijas 50 gadu okupācijas muzeja fonds, 2005, p. 37.

⁶⁰Andrew Ezergailis. *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941–1944: The Missing Center*. Rīga and Washington, DC: The Historical Institute of Latvia in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996, p. 178.

ANALYSIS OF THE MOTIVES

Motives

Approaching the motives of the perpetrators of the Arajs Kommando's crimes can only be accomplished by breaking the issue down into three separate questions. First, why the Kommando was able to attract the members that it did in July 1941 can be easily explained by both individual and structural factors. The second question of why a new recruit willingly remained, once he understood the Kommando's real mission and especially the blood-soaked duties of its members regarding the killing of women, children, and other objectively non-threatening victims is vastly more resistant to comprehension. A similarly difficult third question must also be answered: why were men willing to join the Kommando later in the war—say in mid-1942—even after its original gruesome purpose and past misdeeds were known to anyone who cared to know, and certainly to anyone who wished to throw in with it?

Below is an analysis of a series of six hypothetical “push” and “pull” factors behind joining the Kommando early and, less convincingly perhaps, behind remaining in the Kommando as a participating member or joining it later in the war. These are explained in descending order of significance. They are: misdirected anti-Soviet sentiment; the material advantages of membership; the initial aura of credibility surrounding the German forces and, by extension, their local allies; the pre-war authoritarian conditioning supplied by the Ulmanis dictatorship; the dynamic ethno ideological relationship between the German and the Latvian perpetrators; and lastly, the combination of scant indigenous Latvian anti-Semitism and the waterfall of anti-Semitism descending from the conquering Nazi state.

Before this analysis can commence, however, a serious epistemological note on the sources upon which it must necessarily be based should first be highlighted. As is to be expected, the Nazis tried to destroy as many of their internal documents related to the “Final Solution” as possible before their ultimate defeat. Fortunately, some of the most crucial documents related to the “Holocaust by bullets” in the Baltic have survived: the first and a draft of the second Comprehensive Report of SS-Brigadeführer Walter Stahlecker, the commander of Einsatzgruppe A, as well as a large number of Situation Reports—summaries of the grisly progress being made by the Einsatzgruppen compiled

for consumption in Berlin, to name the most important, high-level examples. Unfortunately, almost no documents generated specifically by the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police are known to exist, although some may still be held secretly in Moscow. While deliberate destruction of such mundane documents as must have existed—payroll stubs; applications for medical leave; receipts for office and cleaning supplies; transfer forms; weapon and ammunition inventories; alcohol ration cards for the unit; sign-out sheets for vehicles from the motor pool; gas and electricity bills for the headquarters building; in short: everything pertaining to supply, logistics, and human resources management—can be taken for granted, there is another consideration. It is known that, as far as possible, operational orders were only given orally to Arājs and his lieutenants by their German superiors. The mundane paperwork that kept the wheels of the Kommando spinning was destroyed. But the kill orders were never committed to paper in the first place. Just as a signed order by Hitler to carry out the Holocaust never existed, so no written orders from Stahlecker, Jeckeln, or Dr. Rudolf Lange—Viktors Arājs's direct superior—to Arājs to carry out mass shootings exist.

Apart from the summary reports at the top level, therefore, the chief source base for this and every other chapter in the present study is, by necessity, that material which was produced during the post-war investigations and trials. To make their cases against the Kommando's killers, prosecutors around the globe have augmented the scanty wartime record at hand with the words of these men themselves. Obviously, the various explanations defensively proposed by accused members of the Kommando after the war must be handled carefully, as must the testimony of their unrepentant sympathizers. Below, the large body of testimonies is analyzed critically and skeptically, leaving behind, hopefully, a residue of the truth.

Lastly, the nature of the extant sources does not permit an analysis of interpersonal and group dynamics within the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police such as Christopher R. Browning's memorable dissection of Reserve Police Battalion 101.⁶¹ The Arājs Kommando's members were tried in many different countries over many years. The investigators who produced these testimonies were rarely in direct dialogue with

⁶¹Christopher R. Browning. *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1992.

one another. Of course, the social-psychological factors and phenomena explained by Browning in *Ordinary Men* no doubt similarly obtained to some degree among the men of the Arajs Kommando, but the historical and situational context within which the Latvian volunteers of the Arajs Kommando operated was quite different from that of the middle-aged German conscripts of Reserve Police Battalion 101. Therefore, when appropriate, elements of social-psychological analysis will appear here. However, this study will also adduce a separate set of very particular historical and situational factors that are necessary to account for the behaviors of the Latvian men of the Arajs Kommando in the specific context of a collaborator unit of volunteers perpetrating the Holocaust in their country.

Misdirected Latvian Anti-Soviet Sentiment

After the war, investigations into the crimes of the men of the Arajs Kommando examined the question of motive very seriously. Taken together, a key general feature that emerged during the prosecutions of the men of this unique Latvian unit was the competition between anti-Semitism and anti-Communism as explanatory factors for their actions—a tension absent or much weaker in dealing with perpetrators from notoriously anti-Semitic countries or who grew up under anti-Semitic regimes. The Soviets predictably believed that anti-Communism lay behind the crimes of Arājs's men and that anti-Semitism, if present, was wholly epiphenomenal. Meanwhile, Western authorities tended to believe the opposite and presumed that anti-Semitism was the root of the perpetrators' evil and dismissed claims of anti-Communism as feeble excuses.

This question, even if for the wrong reasons, the Soviet system answered correctly. Soviet interrogators *unanimously* found hostility to Communism to be the primary motivating factor behind their guilty captives' wartime crimes. Soviet ideology could hardly produce or understand any other but the "counter-revolutionary" hypothesis, besides that of crass material enrichment, perhaps. It was a tautology: fascism itself was fundamentally understood as anti-Communism and, hence, its agents acted out of anti-Communism. The dictum of the Communist line stated that racism and anti-Semitism were superficial elements by which the capitalist-imperialist system manipulated the masses and created "false consciousness" that masked the perpetrators'

underlying anti-Communist and anti-proletarian class motives. Neither were the Soviets interested in emphasizing Jewish victimization as special, or admitting that the Jewish fate was worse than what generic “victims of fascism” suffered. Soviet interrogators would not likely have credited those few who confessed their anti-Semitism and would have pressed for the “real” economic and counter-revolutionary reasons behind their behavior. But that so few of the captured men even offered it as an explanation for their murderous actions at all is remarkable and should not be dismissed.⁶²

Meanwhile, in Western investigations, defendants’ pleas that they had acted out of hatred of Communism were often viewed as a fig leaf to hide the anti-Semitism that was too frequently assumed to be the basis of all perpetrator motivations. Suspects being interrogated in the liberal-democratic West during the Cold War, after all, had every incentive to emphasize their anti-Communism and deny anti-Semitism.

What seemed to be two very different forces—anti-Communism and anti-Semitism—to both sets of interrogators were simply two sides of the same coin *in the understanding of the perpetrators back in 1941*. But the historian can still ask which was primary. In the case of the Latvian perpetrators, they seem to have become anti-Semitic because in particularly traumatic historical circumstances they were virulently anti-Communist and allied to the virulently anti-Communist *and* anti-Semitic Nazis. More on the question of Latvian anti-Semitism will appear below in a separate section of this chapter. First, Latvian anti-Communism and how it came to be expressed, de facto, as virulent anti-Semitism will be examined.

Indeed, the most crucial motivating “pull” factor in joining the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police was the desire to strike out against Latvia’s Communist oppressors who, with the arrival of Germany’s forces, were in disarray. Anti-Semitism per se was actually a trivial component of most Latvian perpetrators’ outlook *except insofar as it could be made to mean anti-Communism*. The Nazis were able to convince a large enough section of the non-Jewish Latvian population that “Jew” and “Communist” were interchangeable terms in order to fill the quota

⁶² Rūдите Vīksne. “The Arājs Commando Member as Seen in the KGB Trial Files: Social Standing, Education, Motives for Joining It, and Sentences Received,” in *Holokausta Izpētes Problēmas Latvijā: Latvijas Vēsturnieku Komisijas Raksti*. 2. Sējums. Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2001, p. 375.

of local collaborators necessary to carry out the “Final Solution” in that land. It was a fairly simple matter of trading on the suffering endured by Latvians during the preceding year of Soviet occupation. The Nazis only needed to stoke a pre-existing hatred among the Latvians with their propaganda and to make it interchangeable with their own pathological and all-consuming object of hatred. This is not a far-fetched or apologetic notion. After all: it should be remembered that the identity of Jews with Communism—“Judeo-Bolshevism”—was already an article of faith among most German troops and had widespread currency amongst the German public, and the publics of most other European countries as well, particularly in Eastern Europe. Propaganda for all audiences was produced to reinforce the linkage. But for Germans *concretely*, the belief in the identity of Jews with Communism was based largely upon vague recollections of the national humiliation and instability of 1918 and 1919 and the economic and political chaos that followed. Meanwhile, branded onto the brains of the Latvians who were to become the Nazis’ partners in crime, were red-hot, personal, direct, and devastating encounters with Soviet power in the immediate past from which they were ostensibly rescued by the German Army. It should not be surprising that a traumatized population with the intensity of anti-Soviet hatred resulting from one year of real Soviet domination could be easily convinced of the guilt of any scapegoat whatsoever. Therefore: independently of the actual identity of the victims, to understand the Latvian perpetrators requires knowledge of *who they thought—or at least were told—that their victims were and why this may have seemed credible to them.*

There were, indeed, a few Jews who ranked fairly highly in the Soviet Latvian hierarchy. Simon Shustin, the infamous NKVD chief, was the personage most frequently mentioned in the subsequent propaganda as the embodiment of the unity of “the Jews” with Communism. But the few real anecdotal examples alone could come nowhere close, of course, to proving that Bolshevism was some kind of Jewish plot. Other figures, such as the Soviet-installed Prime Minister of Latvia during the Baigais Gads, Augusts Kirhenšteins, supposed arch Jewish-Communist traitor, were falsely asserted to have been Jewish to help beef up the objectively rather small numbers of Jews in the Soviet occupation apparatus. However, as visible symbols, they could serve the ideologically poisoned, the enraged, and the undiscerning as corroborating evidence of the larger Nazi trope of the grand Judeo-Bolshevik world conspiracy.

Usually, the tendency to accept false generalizations and false facts—such as that the Communist occupation was staffed overwhelmingly by Jews or that Kirhenšteins was a Jew—indicates the prior existence of such an ethnic prejudice. A pre-existing and unexamined assumption that Jews are evil would go far to explain the readiness with which some Latvians, as they observed and mentally processed events, were prepared to lash out with an absolutely misplaced sense of grievance and righteousness. But such a pre-existing prejudice hardly existed in Latvia prior to 1940. This circumstance—the relative absence of pre-war anti-Semitism—seriously frustrates efforts at understanding the violent Latvian response unless focus is directed to the deliberate and unrelenting Nazi attempt to force the notion of the equivalency of “the Jews” and Communism on the Latvian public.

As further evidence constantly adduced were the well-known demonstrations of a segment of the Jewish population and its real, if perhaps short-lived, enthusiasm for the Communist takeover in 1940. The motivations of these people are readily apprehended, for Soviet rule, bad as it was, held fewer terrors for Jews than Nazi rule. Even if Jews were over-represented among the Soviets’ deportees, it was not because they were Jews but because they were clustered in groups identified as “capitalist” class enemies. On the other hand, the Nazis threatened every Jew without exception. Naturally, therefore, Soviet rule was preferred as a means of forestalling an even more menacing Nazi occupation. The natural distaste of any minority for living under a right-wing nationalist dictatorship and a heavy dose of naiveté about what the Soviets were really about—courtesy of that same dictatorship’s media censorship—is all that further need be adduced. However, given the sensitivity of the matter, it should be pointed out that such a scholar as Dov Levin, among the greatest Jewish historians of the Baltic, has documented in great detail the relationship between the Soviet Communists and the Jewish communities in the Baltic. In general, his expertise centers on Jews in Lithuania, but his knowledge of Latvia is also extensive. Levin agrees that a sizable segment of the Jewish population welcomed Soviet rule, and for idealistic, ideological, and material reasons.⁶³

⁶³See, especially: Dov Levin. *The Lesser of Two Evils. Eastern European Jewry Under Soviet Rule, 1939–1941*. Naftali Greenwood, trans. Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1995. Also see: Dov Levin. *Baltic Jews Under the Soviets, 1940–1946*. Jerusalem: Centre for Research and Documentation of East European Jewry, Avraham Harman Institute of Contemporary Jewry, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1994.

Added to these dubious examples based on kernels of reality, distorted and amplified as they were, the Nazis added totally bogus 'evidence' for their constant claims of the supposed Judeo-Bolshevik enemy as well. The Germans forced men easily identified as Jewish by their Orthodox garb to exhume the bodies of Soviet victims most famously in the capital but also, whenever practicable, in the larger provincial towns as well. The devious intent of these staged rituals was to demonstrate a linkage between Communist atrocities and the Jews. The trauma of the Latvians was diabolically instrumentalized to work in favor of Einsatzkommando 2 as the daughters, wives, and mothers of the dead were invited, on film and motion camera, to identify the mutilated and putrefied remains of the victims of the NKVD—victims that Jews had just laid out in fly-swarmed rows under the summer sun of 1941. The effects of this practice cannot be quantified, but the framing in a single image of a woman consumed by grief, a mutilated and rotten cadaver, and *a fearful Jew with filth and blood literally on his hands as he held a gravedigger's shovel* was not difficult to read. It must have had a powerful effect upon a traumatized and now wrathful people. As a technique, it was demonstrably effective in recruiting young men for the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police:

In closing, I would like to add ["anführen"] why I went to the SD at the young age of 16. The Russians had deported my father. After the Germans showed up ["Nach dem Einrücken der Deutschen"] a mass grave was opened in the courtyard of the Central Prison in Rīga. According to the official tally, there were 800 in the mass grave who had been shot. I walked around between the corpses and looked for my father who might have likewise been shot, since my mother had collapsed during her search of the dead. Later it was established that the atrocities against my people had been carried out by the Russian NKVD-people who were predominantly Jewish men and women.⁶⁴

While the claim that the majority of the NKVD's personnel were Jewish is totally erroneous, it is also completely irrelevant for the purposes of establishing the motives of the men of the Arājs Kommando: that *they thought they were* is enough. Why they grasped and acted upon false

⁶⁴StaH. 213-23 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-03. "Arājs Verfahren." Sonderband 7, pp. 1329–1334. Egons Jansons. "Noch zur Person." 10 August 1961.

beliefs about Jews, not the falsity of those beliefs as historians can demonstrate now, is crucial for explaining their behavior.

The view that “Communist” and “Jew” were the same was cemented by yet more deliberate misrepresentations. These other effective means of spuriously linking Communism to Jews were hardly more subtle. The rituals of humiliation and public violence against Jews visually reinforced the concept of the existence Judeo-Bolshevism. One prominent observer said that in the early days of the German occupation, he saw Jews being pushed [“vorangetrieben”] down the streets by Arajs Kommando men who were mockingly forcing them to sing Communist songs.⁶⁵

The man who noted this was Dr. Julius Bračs, who had been a professor at the University of Latvia before the war. He was commissioned by the Propaganda section of General Commissar Otto-Heinrich Drechsler’s Civil Administration for the General District of Latvia to head up a project documenting Soviet crimes during the Baigais Gads.⁶⁶ This project was to serve the dual purposes of providing anti-Communist propaganda and contributing to internal security by identifying Latvians who worked with the Soviets. As such, Bračs was well-situated after the war to testify about these matters, although his words must be treated cautiously.

Completely in accord with high-level German wartime documentation, Bračs charged that “the first members of the Arajs Kommando were people whose relatives [“Angehörige”] had been carried off [“verschleppt”] by the Russians.”⁶⁷ This observation was quite correct. Walter Stahlecker himself, the commander of Einsatzgruppe A, specifically reported his success in recruiting his eager non-German gunmen from that large segment of the population who had had family members murdered or deported by the Soviets during the 1940–1941 occupation.⁶⁸ A testament to the efficacy of Nazi efforts to equate Communism with

⁶⁵StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-05. “Arajs Verfahren.” Sonderband 12, pp. 2355–2371. Dr. Julius Bračs. “Protokoll über die Vernehmung des Zeugen Bracs.” Hanover, 14 November 1975.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-02. “Arajs Verfahren.” Sonderband 4, pp. 861–868. Dr. Julius Bračs. “Fortsetzung der Hauptverhandlung.” 15 May 1970. He was testifying in the case of Erhard Grauel in West Germany.

⁶⁸NARA II. Nuremberg Document L-180. “Einsatzgruppe A. Gesamtbericht bis zum 15. Oktober 1941.”

Jews, the apparently unreconstructed and unapologetic Bračs was still convinced of the formula as late as 1970, and was furthermore comfortable in revealing his conviction to prosecutors in West Germany. He recalled the first Soviet occupation, saying that in the Soviet Latvian government

[t]he Jews were especially prominent [“exponiert”]. For me, that was dismaying [bestürzend]. In the organized mass demonstrations, the Jews marched in the front ranks... There were native Jews and those who came from the Soviet Union. The names of the leading Jews were known to everyone. Not much was spoken about that, because most people were afraid of surveillance [“Bespitzelungen”].⁶⁹

Unlike the members of the Arajs Kommando, however, Dr. Bračs claimed he never saw any of the real dirty work being done: “No, that I never did at any point. *Not even out of historical interest was I ever a spectator on a killing field* [“Exekutionsgelände”], at a mass shooting [emphasis added].”⁷⁰

But those who were present and participated in mass shootings generally tended to agree with Bračs's position on the matter. On a series of mass shootings at Dreiliņi on Rīga's eastern outskirts in 1943, for example, in the course of the final liquidation of the Rīga Ghetto, one confessed Kommando member told prosecutors:

I would have also extraordinarily disgraced myself in the eyes of my comrades if I had refused [to perform] this service. We belonged to an elite troop. I saw the whole thing as an act of vengeance [“Vergeltungsaktion”] against the Jews for the Russian mass murders in Latvia, my homeland. The NKVD people who were responsible in that connection were mostly Jewish men and women... At the time I had such a feeling of revenge [emphasis added].⁷¹

⁶⁹StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-02. “Arajs Verfahren.” Sonderband 4, pp. 861–868. Dr. Julius Bračs. “Fortsetzung der Hauptverhandlung.” 15 May 1970.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹StaH. 213-23 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-03. “Arajs Verfahren.” Sonderband 7, pp. 1344–1346. Egons Jansons. “Der/die Beschuldigte befragt, ob er/sie etwas auf die Beschuldigung erwidern wolle, erklärte:” Undated.

One Kommando member who joined as late as April 1942 explained that he was looking for work and joined the Kommando at the suggestion of a friend. He knew what the Kommando was about before joining: “I knew that they were hunting and killing Communists and Jews who were devoted to Soviet power.”⁷²

An unconfirmed story was told by a convicted member of the Kommando about a young man called Ustups who joined the unit and volunteered to be in the shooting teams “with deliberate conviction [“gewissen Überzeugung”].”⁷³ According to this testimony, the family of Ustups, including mother, father, and an unspecified number of siblings, had been killed during the Soviet occupation. He was easily identified because, although they killed his whole family, the NKVD had only “ripped the nails from [his] fingers.”⁷⁴ If this story is true, it may be that his life was spared because he had denounced his family under torture. Either way—and whether true or not—the anti-Communist profile of “Ustups” is almost archetypically that of the Arajs Kommando recruit of the summer of 1941.

The officially promulgated public consensus proposed by the pro-Nazi occupied Latvian press, the entirety of the military and civilian occupation authorities, and the SS and Police, was firstly, that not every Communist was a Jew, but that every Jew was a Communist and bore collective (and individually punishable) responsibility for the horrors of the Baigais Gads. Secondly, the German Army was the only force that could protect Latvia from a Judeo-Bolshevik return and that German goodwill toward Latvia had been sufficiently proven in the summer of 1941. Third and lastly, the permanent peacetime settlement with respect to Latvia after the conquest of the USSR would be contingent on the Latvians’ contribution to the German cause during the war.

⁷²StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-09. “Arajs Verfahren.” Sonderband 25, pp. 4427. Juris Schumskis. “Vernehmungsprotokoll,” Rīga, 10 April 1945.

⁷³The name “Ustups” appears in Ezergailis’s compilation of the names of the members of the Latvian SD, although no first name is given. See: Andrew Ezergailis. *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941–1944: The Missing Center*. Rīga and Washington, DC: The Historical Institute of Latvia in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996, p. 390.

⁷⁴StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-05. “Arajs Verfahren.” Sonderband 11. pp. 2090–2097. Kārlis Kencis. “Vernehmungsniederschrift.” Kaiserslautern, 22 October 1975.

Still, the Soviets were not wholly bereft of Latvian supporters. Some down-and-out segments of the urban proletariat whose fortunes rose during the 1940–1941 occupation were not hostile to the Soviets, to whom they owed their temporarily elevated station and prestige. Men from this category and conviction were not among the first muster of men who joined the Arājs Kommando, to say the least.⁷⁵ Instead, they either fled in the train of the Red Army or were, presumably, among the 1,843 non-Jewish Latvians listed by Stahlecker as shot (at least in part by the Kommando) in the first months of the German occupation under the category of Communist “traitors.”

The Soviets might have made much of bringing women out of the “traditional” sphere to which the Ulmanis regime had circumscribed them in propaganda and, to the extent possible, in reality. Working class women especially could have experienced something of a liberation with the establishment of the Communist system. They could perhaps have been a natural pro-Soviet constituency. However, the gigantic plunge in living standards, NKVD terror accompanied by what was widely regarded in Latvian society as a foreign takeover, and the accumulated sum of everyday intrusions into ordinary life and the family by the Communists seem to have effectively nullified any support the Soviets might have hoped for from women as a bloc.⁷⁶ Neither were women allowed in the Kommando, it should be superfluous to point out.

Ironically, if hatred of Communism was a motivating factor for those who joined the Kommando, so too was favorable past association with Communism. One Edgars Jurgitis, who joined the Kommando in the middle of July 1941, concluded his explanation to a Soviet Military Tribunal in 1946 by saying that “I did not desert the Red Army. I was forced to enter the police, because I possessed no other means of earning a living [“Lebensunterhalt”]. In addition, I feared that the Germans would persecute me since my wife’s brother had been a [Communist]

⁷⁵This part of Latvian society would, later, make its contribution to the ranks of the Kommando, however. See: Rūdite Vīksne. “The Arājs Commando Member as Seen in the KGB Trial Files: Social Standing, Education, Motives for Joining It, and Sentences Received,” in *Holokausta Izpētes Problēmas Latvijā: Latvijas Vēsturnieku Komisijas Raksti*. 2. Sējums. Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2001.

⁷⁶See the memoir of Irene Zarina White. *Fire Burn: World War II Diaries*. Self-published through Xlibris, 2006. Also see: Alma Rusley. Author’s interview with Alma Rusley. Garrett Park, Maryland, 10 November 2002.

Party member since 1917.”⁷⁷ This statement captures two motivating material factors, adducing at once a foolproof ward against the ill omen of associations with Communism, and an economic imperative.

The Material Advantages of Membership

Mundane material reasons also provided a “push” factor towards the Kommando even as it competed with other nascent collaborationist formations for Latvian recruits in the early days of the German occupation. The Kommando could offer by far the greatest rewards at by far the least risk to life and limb to willing able-bodied males. The repugnancy of its duties notwithstanding, the Kommando was, from a totally amoral standpoint of pure selfishness and self-preservation, the best deal in town. Although the perks would change during the course of the war, members initially were even free to sleep in their own beds at home instead of barracks and could always count on receiving adequate supplies of food and liquor. Beyond the baseline necessity of the first and the comfort of the second, members could, besides their steady pay, also expect some amount of unofficial remuneration in the form of jewelry or clothing all the way up to whole furnished apartments. Finally, at least until around the middle of 1942, service in the Kommando guaranteed a post far from the front. All the while, members also enjoyed the confidence of the German power establishment—the value of which cannot be quantified in an occupied country.

Personal enrichment is always an obvious motive, but it still needs to be contextualized. Among other forms of insecurity that prevailed under the Soviet regime of 1940–1941 were those of wealth and income. After being subjected to various Communist nationalization, expropriation, and social leveling schemes, some Latvians were, in a literal sense, looking for payback in July 1941. Soviet policies had included the forfeiture of the contents of savings accounts above ludicrously small sums, the requisition of personal automobiles, the splitting up and communalization of apartments, the radical division and redistribution of farmland and livestock, and so on. A new nomenklatura of Soviet-imported civil officials

⁷⁷StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-08. “Arajs Verfahren.” Sonderband 24, pp. 4329–4333. Edgars Jurgitis. “Gerichtssitzungsprotokoll.” Rīga, 4 October 1946.

and military officers, along with their indigenous collaborators, supplanted the old elite and lived well. Meanwhile, the sudden vacuum of quality consumer goods led to the establishment of a black market that effectively priced the remnants of the middle class out of the comforts to which they were accustomed. Worse, these policies were implemented on a “shock” basis, with no time set aside for gradual adjustment or acclimatization. The aim of the policies was also nakedly to extract the wealth of the country and ship it eastward. Soviet soldiers paid for goods that had never been obtainable in the Soviet Union with worthless currency that the Latvians were forced to accept. Troop trains entered the main station in Rīga and most returned to Russia laden with high-quality consumer products unknown in the USSR. The rest returned with Latvian prisoners. Store windows quickly were stocked with cardboard pictures of food and plastered with brave slogans about Soviet productivity even as all valuable moveable goods were nakedly extracted.

This immediate background of scarcity could only have increased the allure of easy riches. The preceding state-directed impoverishment of the populace served to exacerbate a phenomenon well-attested to in other national case studies of the Holocaust: the frenzied rush for Jewish property.

Rīga's Jewish population—nearly half of the country's Jews—constituted approximately 11% of the city's total in 1935. It was approximately 43,000 strong.⁷⁸ The nature of the community had been that of a prosperous and relatively cosmopolitan northern European port city: generally middle and upper middle class and substantially assimilated. As such, Jewish families disproportionately fell victim to Soviet depredations as putative “class enemies” in 1940–1941. To choose one famous example: a Jewish banking family had previously owned the building that was to become the Arajs Kommando's first headquarters on Valdemārs Street. At least two Jewish witnesses later attested to the fact that “This was a villa-style [“villenartiges”] house. Before 1 July it housed [“Dort war... untergebracht”] the Banking House of Aron Schmuljan. Pērkonkrusts

⁷⁸For excellent statistical data about the Latvian Jewish population, see: Josifs Šteimanis. *History of Latvian Jews*. Edward Anders, rev.ed. Helena Belova, trans. Boulder: East European Monographs and New York: Columbia University Press, 2002, pp. 179–205.

requisitioned it. In any case, the bank was already nationalized in the Russian time [1940–1941].”⁷⁹

To whatever degree they had managed to emerge from the Communist-engineered upheavals unscathed, Jewish families were specifically targeted that much more in the summer of 1941 and their remaining property again subject to summary theft. In other words: if the Soviets had not taken something, the Nazis and their henchmen did. Furthermore: if a Jewish family still inhabited a comfortable and semi-well-appointed apartment or house even after a year of the deliberate Communist-style pauperization of the country, this was easily seen as proof that the Soviet system favored Jews. From there it was no stretch to internalize an identity between the two. Thus, ironically, *even the act of stealing from Jews could, in such a context, reinforce in the minds of Kommando members the notion of an alliance between Jews and Communists*. At the very least, it was a convenient way for a man to justify his thievery to himself.

In conclusion, it can be said that the wartime-specific political and economic conditions in Latvia, on the heels of the year-long Soviet disruptions, were considered dangerous enough by a large enough section of the non-Jewish Latvian population to convince some of them that serving the Nazis away from the front lines by participating in volunteer paramilitary units like the Arajs Kommando was the surest route to securing their own personal comfort and safety. In short, seeming safety, regular pay, steady meals, abundant liquor, and occasional opportunities for officially-sanctioned theft were considered by many men to be adequate compensation for the job of mass murder.

The Initial Aura of Credibility

Linked to the perverse Judeo-Bolshevik propaganda was the persistent portrayal of Hitler and Germany as the rescuers of Latvia. The fight was cast as Europe versus the combined monsters of Jewish Bolshevism and degenerate oriental barbarism. This claim naturally lost credibility over

⁷⁹StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-02. “Arajs Verfahren.” Sonderband 5, pp. 981–985. Efraim Janowski. “Vernehmungsniederschrift.” Hamburg, 18 August 1975. Also see: StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-08. “Arajs Verfahren.” Sonderband 22, pp. 3959. “Zeugenvernehmungsprotokoll.” Matis Samuilowitsch Lutrinsh. Riga, 4 January 1975.

the course of the war as it was undercut by exhaustive manpower levies; food, fuel, and property requisitions; high-handed Nazi behavior and occasional sneers at Latvians; the German authorities' mulish refusal to discuss post-war Latvian independence, autonomy, or even "Slovakia status"; and finally, increasingly ominous German military defeats at the front. Nevertheless, it would have appeared self-evident to most non-Jewish Latvians in the summer of 1941 that the Germans were their saviors. No army had ever been defeated and humiliated in Latvia as easily as the Germans had defeated and humiliated the hated Red Army—one week after the terrifying nationwide night-time sweep of 15,000 people for deportation to Siberia by the NKVD, no less. While the Nazis found eager collaborators everywhere their army marched, virtually no other country invaded by Germany received the Wehrmacht with as much broad-based public enthusiasm as did Soviet-trampled Latvia.

In a world turned upside down, in which the Germans were cast, for the first time in Latvian history, in the role of liberators, Viktors Arājs made his appeal. He specifically sought people who considered themselves patriots. He called for military officers, hypernationalist Pērkonkrusts members, police, students, and the old veterans who made up the Aizsargi to join his force. Even if he failed to entice many suitable volunteers from the Aizsargi, their inclusion in his call possessed a totemic significance to the public. And Arājs indeed succeeded in recruiting educated members of the university student body and especially from his prestigious fraternity, Lettonia. To boot, he also drew trained and vengeful men from the Latvian Army, the very symbol of cherished independence. These groups—on the page and on the street—lent their credibility to the Kommando and gave its operations a veneer of respectability in the early days, both to the public at large and to prospective recruits.

Under the Ulmanis regime, the Latvian public had been trained incessantly to revere the armed forces, old and young, in the forms of both the Aizsargi and the professional Army. The two holiest sites of the civil quasi-religion of Ulmanis's Latvia were the Freedom Monument and the Brothers' Cemetery—both firmly associated in Latvian history and ritual with the military. The former, the site of national holiday ceremonies commemorating Latvia's first independence declared on 18 November 1918, stood in the center of the capital, flanked by honor guards. The second was the resting place of Latvia's dead veterans from the War of Independence and also frequently had been the backdrop for

Ulmanis's speeches and solemn public rites and observances. The place is impressive: massive megalithic horsemen whose lowered flags touched the ground under which heroes were buried, blessed under the downcast eyes of the goddess of fortune (Christian imagery is conspicuously lacking at both sites).⁸⁰

Youth, in true 1930s dictatorial style, was fetishized and worshipped under the Ulmanis regime as it was elsewhere in Europe, in both fascist and Communist systems. The inclusion of "students" might have evoked the pre-war cult image. Their presence symbolized Latvian vigor as well as a Latvian future.

The only possible 'black sheep' in the coalition desired by Arājs, as it was advertised, was Pērkonkrusts. Judging by its tiny pre-war membership, this long-banned organization did not enjoy much popular support. Yet in the minds of the public—or at least that of Viktors Arājs, assuming he actually authored the call personally—that organization might have ridden the Nazis' coattails. The New Right's seemingly undeniable ascendancy in the year 1941 might have given Pērkonkrusts some credibility. Also, its members had been singled out for special persecution during the Soviet occupation *as Latvian nationalists*. Their inclusion in the call could have been interpreted as an emphasized rejection of Soviet authority and of seeming German tolerance for Latvian nationalism.

These considerations were the most fleeting and help explain little beyond the motivation of the men of the Kommando for initially joining. In July 1941, scores of young Latvian men were tempted to associate themselves with men from groups of high pre-war social standing—something Arājs himself indeed desired. This imperative would only have been heightened by the context: the war of all wars was thundering all around them. Bloody revenge was in the air and a man who wore no uniform was barely a man at all.

The Pre-war Authoritarian Conditioning of the Ulmanis Regime

Studies of mentalité are notoriously elusive and complex, leading to conclusions that are often difficult or impossible to verify with certainty.

⁸⁰Some of the world's finest Jugendstil and Art Nouveaux style architecture and monuments can be found in 1930s Latvia.

Yet, the years of dictatorship in Latvia that preceded the Second World War presumably had some impact on the minds of the men who joined the Kommando. The pre-war legacy of authoritarianism in Latvian society seems to have removed whole categories of behavioral options from the minds of at least some of those who engaged in the atrocities. This tendency towards obedience seems, logically, to have been strongest among the youngest members of the Kommando—the least experienced and most eager to impress and be validated. One confirmed Kommando member, seventeen years old at the time, explained that

The whole thing was presented like an execution [“Das Ganze war wie eine Exekution aufgezogen”] and it absolutely never entered my mind that I could possibly refuse to carry out the order... In all of our instructional hours, nothing was ever said to us to the effect that we could refuse orders in certain situations [“ist uns nichts darüber gesagt worden, daß wir in irgendwelchen Situationen Befehle verweigern konnten”].⁸¹

This statement might be more than simply a reformulated plea by the killer that he had only been following orders. He goes further, saying that refusal to obey orders had been, for him, literally inconceivable.

The imposition of military discipline and the attendant role adaptation that it implies may have been eased by the pre-war experiences of the recruits.⁸² Most, aged between about 17 and 24 by 1941, had spent their formative teenage years under the authoritarian Ulmanis government. Their minds forged under dictatorship, even the civilian men who joined the Kommando did so already accustomed to living in strict hierarchies that demanded obedience to authority.⁸³ The seven years prior to the killing summer of 1941 were spent in a regimented society cultivating a nationalist outlook, which in turn was confounded and outraged by the Soviets.

⁸¹StaH. 213-23 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-03. “Arājs Verfahren.” Sonderband 7, pp. 1344–1346. Egons Jansons. “Der/die Beschuldigte befragt, ob er/sie etwas auf die Beschuldigung erwidern wolle, erklärte:” Undated.

⁸²For an updated version of the urtext of the role-adaptation thesis, see: Philip Zimbardo. *The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*. New York: Random House, 2007.

⁸³The famed scientific study of the psychological phenomenon of obedience to authority is: Stanley Milgram. *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View*. New York: Harper, 1975. Also see: V. Lee Hamilton and Herbert Kelman. *Crimes of Obedience: Toward a Social Psychology of Authority and Responsibility*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.

By the same token, press censorship and the other trappings common to dictatorial states robbed the men of the experience of living in a pluralistic society and, concomitantly, of the freedom to form, express, and defend their own views.

It would be in error to overemphasize this point—to do so would be to take from the men of the Arajs Kommando their historical agency and responsibility for their actions. Furthermore, it is virtually impossible to empirically demonstrate. Nevertheless, that the men's backgrounds were steeped in dictatorship is not a factor in explaining their actions that can be wholly discounted.

The Dynamic Ethno-Power Relationships Between Perpetrators

The National Socialists' proclivity to establish racial hierarchies everywhere they cast their gaze is notorious. They did this not only with their enemies, but also with their allies and clients. Therefore, there were important limits to and inherent tensions in any partnership between Latvian and German perpetrators.

Nazi ideology variably placed the Latvian "race" on different levels of the racial hierarchy, depending on the Nazi espousing it. In general, Latvians occupied a middling rung, but one much higher than Russians owing to Latvia's proximity to Scandinavia and Latvians' seven century-long contact with Germans. Nevertheless, a radical racial culling of the population was envisioned for after the war, with the details to be decided later. To give an idea of the level of Nazi contempt for Latvians, the German civilian occupation authority forbade marriage between German military personnel and even Estonian women who, on the Nazi scale, were valued considerably more highly than Latvian women.⁸⁴ One Nazi report on the "The Biological Condition of the Latvian Race ["Volk"]" was so bold as to make statistical projections out to the year 2000. It hinted at the necessity of a liquidation of unworthy elements before their numerical preponderance became a threat to the racially pure inhabitants of the country whose birthrate, owing to selfish decadence and the pernicious influence of Marxist materialism,

⁸⁴LVVA. Fond R-69. Reel 2, Opis 1A, Folder 6, p. 313. Der Reichsminister für die besetzten Ostgebieten. "Betr.: Heirat von deutsche Wehrmachtsangehörigen mit Estinnen." Berlin, 13 April 1943.

was declining.⁸⁵ Other Nazis toyed with the idea of “Germanizing” and assimilating the supposed racially worthy segment of the Latvian population and using the remainder for labor until they eventually vanished through attrition.⁸⁶ Many additional examples of Nazi proposals for a post-war demographic revolution in the Baltic could be noted here. Put in bald terms, population decimation and even a partial genocide were being casually contemplated against the Latvian nation among some of those persons at the apex of power in the Third Reich.

Hints of the beginnings of a “demographic revolution” were already very arguably emerging during the war. The first stages of such a plan were even implemented in 1939–1940 under the auspices of Reichsführer-SS Heinrich Himmler in the form of the resettlement of the Baltic Germans and some claiming German ancestry.⁸⁷ “Wiedereindeutschung [“re-Germanization”]” processes to be applied to those judged worthy were established: resettlement in the Reich, education in German culture and Nazi ideology, training in the German language, and so on. Not only Baltic Germans but also ethnic Latvians seeking to escape Soviet power during the Baigais Gads were included. The other side of this coin—the selective thinning out of the Latvian population—was also begun during the war. For example, Latvian “work-shy,” dubbed “asocials,” formed a major part of the non-Jewish population of the Salaspils concentration camp. More notably, a squad of Arajs Kommando men “liquidated” hundreds of Latvian psychiatric patients—regarded as “useless mouths” and “life unworthy of life”—in April 1942.⁸⁸

An aside should be made. In one sense, the Red Army did save the Latvians who fought on the side of Germany from themselves—the ones whom they did not kill, anyway. Whatever the perils of immediate

⁸⁵LVVA. Fond R-70. Reel 5, Opis 5, Folder 35, pp. 62–65. Provenance unknown. “Die biologische Lage des Lettischen Volkes.” Undated.

⁸⁶LVVA. Fond R-69. Reel 2, Opis 1A Folder 6, pp. 156–159. Regierungsrat Trampedach. An den Herrn Reichskommissar für das Ostland. “Betr.: Eindeutschung der Letten.” 24 November 1941.

⁸⁷For more on the subject, see: Richards Plavnieks. *“Wall of Blood”: The Baltic German Case Study in National Socialist Wartime Population Policy, 1939–1945*. Master’s Thesis. The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2008.

⁸⁸See: StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-01. “Arajs Verfahren.” Sonderband 2, pp. 411–418. Käthe Eckstädt. “Protokoll.” Mülheim, 23 March 1974.

reabsorption into the Soviet Union, which are not to be minimized, the long-term plans of the Nazis promised much worse. As radical and extreme as the Nazis' various schemes were, they have to be taken seriously. The Nazis have proven what they were capable of.

It is firmly established in the literature that no mass shootings took place solely on Latvian initiative, but only under German authority.⁸⁹ This proposition rings true in light of the common sense assumption that the Germans were committed to controlling every last weapon on the territory they occupied, particularly as they were well aware of historical Latvian animosity towards the Germans.⁹⁰ The presence of armed natives beyond the gaze of German supervision was anathema to the goal of securing total power. German personnel were always present at the shootings and gave oversight and direction when not, as they quite often did, participating directly, weapon in hand.

Under such circumstances, the Latvians could always tell themselves that the Germans were making them do it, designating the targets, providing the logistics, and giving the orders. For their part, the Germans could make themselves believe that it was really the Latvians

⁸⁹Even authors criticized by Ezergailis for imputing too much agency to the Latvians themselves such as the following all variously admit the necessity of German command input—even if only pushing on an open door. See: Peter Klein. “Dr. Rudolf Lange als Kommandeur der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD in Lettland: Aspekte seines Dienstalltages,” in *Taeter im Vernichtungskrieg: Der Überfall auf die Sowjetunion und der Völkermord an den Juden*. Wolf Kaiser, ed. Berlin: Propyläen, 2002. Also see: Andrej Angrick and Peter Klein. *The ‘Final Solution’ in Riga: Exploitation and Annihilation, 1941–1944*. Ray Brandon, trans. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009. Also see: Wolfgang Curilla. *Schutzpolizei und Judenmord: Die Dienststelle des Kommandeurs der Schutzpolizei in Riga*. Berlin: Edition Hentrich, 2005.

⁹⁰Among the members of the Nazis' leadership caste, paranoia of partisans and franc-tireurs is well known. Much has been written, also, about the apparent contradiction contained in the orders of the Einsatzgruppen: the natives were to be disarmed, but simultaneously to be enlisted as auxiliaries in the killing of Communists and Jews. The solution was to arm the necessary numbers but discipline and order their actions—another contradiction, since the mission of the Einsatzgruppen was also to foment and document pogroms proving that the natives rose of their own accord against their erstwhile oppressors of Judeo-Bolshevik persuasion. In Latvia, in the event, at least after the first week or so of July 1941, generally all that could be done was to create the *impression* that this was the case. For information regarding the engrained institutional fear of partisans in the German command hierarchy, see: Isabel Hull. *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005.

who were the inhuman (or perhaps *subhuman*?) killers, while they distanced themselves both physically and via this psychological abstraction. These respective attitudes and division of labor might well have made it easier for both the Latvians and the Germans to keep doing what they were doing in the task of killing. It can well be imagined that the existence of two distinct groups of perpetrators operating at opposite ends of the command hierarchy made it easier for both to 'get on with it.' It was a self-reinforcing dynamic, undergirded by the two parties' objective power disparity and supported, for the Germans at least, by ideological assumptions of racial difference. This mechanism may have functioned within individuals of both groups to diminish or even shed the psychological burden of responsibility for the deaths—objective reality aside, of course.

Perversely, both Latvians and Germans invoked this division of labor as an alibi or at least a mitigating factor after the war as the accused attempted to absolve themselves. Latvians could tell themselves as well as interrogators, judges, and courtroom audiences that nothing happened except under German control and direction. Viktors Arājs himself claimed as much at his trial. Meanwhile, the former German overseers could tell themselves and the same post-war interrogators, judges, and courtroom audiences that it had been the Latvians who were the depraved butchers and, if anything, German participation had functioned to bring order to the slaughter and thereby lessen, in some measure, the suffering of the Latvians' victims.

For example, the shotgun marriage of psychological convenience during wartime bore post-war offspring such as the following grotesque reframing of the events. SS-Obersturmführer Arno Besekow was attached to Einsatzkommando 2 and is one of the figures who most frequently appears in later testimonies at the side of the pits.⁹¹ He would, after the war, blame Latvians he identified as,

the Pērkonkrusts people who were known by their brownish, earth-colored uniforms [sic. the Pērkonkrusts uniform was grey and black]. They wore blouses, riding pants, and high boots. The Pērkonkrusts people separated themselves into two sections of which one would rest while the other

⁹¹Andrew Ezergailis. *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941–1944: The Missing Center*. Riga and Washington, DC: The Historical Institute of Latvia in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996, p. 190.

conducted executions... I also know that [Obersturmbannführer Rudolf] Batz [who first commanded Einsatzkommando 2 and, thus, was Besekow's superior] established connections with the Pērkonkrusts people and often sought them out... The members of the Waffen-SS [some members of his details at Bīķernieki were actually Waffen-SS] gave the mercy shots, since the Pērkonkrusts people did not do so. One can only describe the conduct of the members of the Waffen-SS like they were administering the last rites to the victims ["dass sie den Opfern den letzten Dienst erwiesen"].⁹²

Also according to Besekow, the members of the Waffen-SS whom he described at the sites did not like shooting. Besekow explained that "sometimes they let curses flow ["teilweise stiessen sie wüste Flüche aus"] and sometimes tears ran down their faces." No matter the self-exculpating lies told by Besekow, in reality, among other things, he was responsible for instructing inexperienced Latvian shooters as to the distance they should stand from their targets to avoid mussing their uniforms with the blood, potentially dangerous bone fragments, and sundry tissue that would burst from their mutual victims' wounds.⁹³

The Nebulous Phenomenon of Latvian Anti-Semitism

The question of Latvian anti-Semitism is particularly interesting because, prior to the Second World War, Latvia had not been known as a home of anti-Semitism. In the context of Eastern Europe, together with Estonia and in sharp contrast to Lithuania and Poland, Latvia was almost singularly devoid of anti-Semitism. In fact, even more strangely, if Latvians did harbor historical animosity towards a specific ethnic minority in their country, it was towards the Germans. The historical context explained at the beginning of this chapter underscores the poverty of Daniel

⁹²StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-02. "Arajs Verfahren." Sonderband 4, pp. 772–784. Arno Besekow. "Protokoll." Hamburg, 19 February 1965. For more on Besekow and the makeup of the death squads at Bīķernieki, see: Ezergailis, Andrew. *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941–1944: The Missing Center*. Rīga and Washington, DC: The Historical Institute of Latvia in association with the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 1996, pp. 222–225.

⁹³StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-04. "Arajs Verfahren." Sonderband 10, pp. 1964–1977. Leonīds Jansons. "Protokoll über eine Zeugenvernehmung." Rīga, 12 May 1971.

Goldhagen's reductionist thesis when he dismissively assumes that Latvian culture was "profoundly anti-Semitic."⁹⁴

This is not at all to say that Latvia was without anti-Semitic extremists. Pērkonkrusts was the largest bloc in interwar Latvian society that affirmed anti-Semitism as part of some sort of "philosophical" worldview or political platform. However, the membership of this organization comprised less than half of 1% (6,000 out of around 1,500,000 people, or 0.4%, in 1935) of the ethnic Latvian population before the Second World War. History can rightly discount their importance, even if their claims of twice the number of members cited here were true. After the installation of Ulmanis as dictator, furthermore, this pitiful "movement" was banned. During the war, the highest Latvian official of the pre-1940 government living abroad, the ambassador to the United States and longtime friend of Kārlis Ulmanis, Dr. Alfreds Bilmanis, made explicit guarantees to the World Jewish Congress that after the war, the rights of Latvian Jews in the restored independent state would again be respected.⁹⁵ His repudiation of anti-Semitism during the war touched upon a topic about which even the Western Allies are well known to have equivocated while combat operations were ongoing.

Understandably, after the Holocaust and the undeniable participation in it by so many Latvians against their neighbors, the huge majority of Jewish accounts of this relationship—from the earliest post-war iterations by, for example, Max Kaufmann in 1947 to the volumes of witness memoirs compiled more recently by Gertrude Schneider in the 1980s and 1990s—cast it in very blackened terms.⁹⁶ These depictions often refer to Jewish shock at Latvian anti-Semitic attitudes, speech, and behavior, *but almost universally only after the arrival of the Germans.*

⁹⁴Daniel Jonah Goldhagen. *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996, p. 406.

⁹⁵See, for example: "Nazi Victims Give Freedom Pledge: Representatives of 9 Nations Ravaged by the Nazis Also Promise Aid to Minorities," in *The New York Times*. 7 June 1942, p. 43.

⁹⁶For generally unfavorable interpretations of the relationship between Latvians and Jews, see: Max Kaufmann. *Churban Lettland: Die Vernichtung der Juden Lettlands*. Munich: 1947. Also see: *The Unfinished Road: Jewish Survivors of Latvia Look Back*. Gertrude Schneider, ed. New York: Praeger, 1991. Also see: Bernhard Press. *The Murder of the Jews in Latvia: 1941–1945*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 200. The original was published in German in 1992: Bernhard Press. *Judenmord in Lettland, 1941–1945*. Berlin: Metropol-Verlag, 1992.

They were quite right to do so. But even an account that notes “the pervasive anti-Semitism endemic to Latvia” also admits that before the war “the Latvian Jewish community pulsed with vitality.” It boasts of Jewish educational institutions and “seats of higher learning,” and “a splendid Jewish press, libraries, publishing houses,” theaters, and museums, and notes that Austrian Jewish refugees had “found a haven in Riga.”⁹⁷ The “Latvian hordes” that appear in account after account always seem to have suddenly arrived along with the Germans “with a brutality unmatched by any other European country.”⁹⁸

In fact, the mirror image of this attitude also prevailed. Latvians’ attitude toward Latvian Jews—however scant and distorted its justification—was also that of shock and a sense of betrayal. As argued above, the Latvians who shot Jews did so at least in large part because they saw them as traitors to Latvia and collaborators with the Communists. The court that convicted Viktors Arājs himself concluded that there was no evidence suggesting that even he had harbored anti-Semitic attitudes before the war.⁹⁹

The book most frequently adduced by Latvian apologists to explain the historically harmonious coexistence of Jews and Latvians before the Second World War is Frank Gordon’s *Latvians and Jews Between Germany and Russia*.¹⁰⁰ Gordon deliberately produced his account, in fact, as pushback against the negative view shared by most other Latvian Jews and German Jews sent to die in Latvia. In it, he encouraged them not to “blame ‘the Latvians’” and noted that “[t]he brown fascists were masters at setting peoples against each other.”¹⁰¹ To the extent that real anti-Semitism emerged during the war, it did so at the instigation of the Nazis through their propaganda. Also, the repeated acts of killing and the observation

⁹⁷Steven Springfield. “A Life Saved by a Beating,” in *The Unfinished Road: Jewish Survivors of Latvia Look Back*. Gertrude Schneider, ed. New York: Praeger, 1991, pp. 121, 122, 128.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁹⁹StaH. 213-12 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG. 0044-015. “Arājs Verfahren.” Sonderband 49, pp. 7987–8168. Landgericht Hamburg. “Urteil. Im Namen des Volkes. In der Strafsache gegen Viktor Bernhard Arājs, geboren am 13. Januar 1910 in Baldone, Kreis Riga/Lettland, wegen Mordes.” Hamburg, 21 December 1979, pp. 143–148. “Grundlagen der Feststellungen zur subjektiven Tatseite.”

¹⁰⁰Frank Gordon. *Latvians and Jews Between Germany and Russia*. Revised Edition. Stockholm, Riga, and Toronto: Memento and Daugavas Vanagi, 2001.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, pp. 83, 126.

of Jews who had been subjected to every conceivable method of mockery, robbery, and dehumanization probably functioned to actually instill a previously absent anti-Semitism in the perpetrators.

Finally, none of this is to say that the Jews who were killed were not ultimately killed simply because they were Jews. Indeed they were. However, given the long-term context of the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish Latvians, it appears very probable that the anti-Semitism evident in 1941, 1942, and 1943 was almost solely a product of Nazi instigation, exploiting a volatile local situation, rather than an autonomous local product emerging free of outside influence. The Nazis, by claiming that *their* Jewish “enemy” was identical to the Latvians’ perceived enemy—the Soviets—gave those men who were willing to kill an outlet to see their wishes of revenge fulfilled in a way that did not jeopardize their own personal safety (in fact, it was enhanced), promised some lucre, and even allowed them to posture as patriots in a land not only saturated by Nazi propaganda, but where any semblance of a free civil society had long been dead.

SUMMARY

The Second World War in Latvia can be regarded as yet another in a near millennium-long string of perennial conflicts fought in Eastern Europe. The “Bloodlands,” as Timothy Snyder has so memorably described these territories combined, have historically been engulfed in the struggles between various iterations of West and East.¹⁰² While massive bloodshed and atrocity have doubtless attended every one of these struggles, that between the Nazis and the Soviets distinguishes itself from the rest not only by its staggering enormity, but also by the Holocaust. The question of Latvian participation in it requires an answer.

The Holocaust could and would never have occurred in Latvia without the policy of the Nazis who commanded and orchestrated it. Without the Soviet occupation and the trauma of the Year of Horror, 1940–1941, the Holocaust would still have undoubtedly taken place there so long as the occupying Nazis had demanded it, but it very likely would not have had the benefit of the participation of nearly as many

¹⁰²Timothy Snyder. *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.

willing Latvian executioners as it did in the actual event. Yet, the Soviet occupation that preceded the German one can only go so far in making explicable the decisions taken by the men of the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police to take up their posts in that organization and discharge their hideous, Nazi-appointed duties. Other factors intervened, including crass, material appeals; the electrifying sensation of being on the winning side of an apocalyptic war; the pre-formed authoritarian mindset with which most of the men entered that war; the warped and unequal inter-racial relationship between the Nazi German overlords and their subservient Latvian collaborators, who found common ground in hunting their mutual Jewish quarry; and the interbreeding of the foreign incarnations of anti-Semitism with whatever pre-existing domestic anti-Semitism as may have been found.

That there were no non-Jewish voices to publically oppose the Kommando's doings is a testament to the level of oppression imposed by the Nazi occupation as well as the methodical determination with which the Soviets before them had decapitated Latvian leadership cadres. But it also suggests a more thoroughgoing and deeper societal decay among the everyday people—ordinary people who had long lived in a political culture saturated with propaganda; who might not have even remembered enjoying real freedom of speech; and who were afraid, mourning, outraged, and in search of scapegoats. Proof that society was a shambles is that someone like Viktors Arājs could succeed in stepping in as a leader and find people willing to join with him to plow the furrows of Hell.

The Sole Exception

In Düsseldorf, West Germany, in May 1961, Egons Jansons (no relation to Leonīds Jansons), a Latvian immigrant born in Rīga in 1925, was arrested at ten-thirty at night for threatening random passers-by with a pistol. The police who disarmed him found a second pistol on his person and a total of fifteen rounds of ammunition. At the station, it was discovered that Jansons had been in and out of jail ever since the end of the war, earning a rap sheet that included numerous counts of fraud, attempted fraud, and petty larceny across the entire breadth of the Federal Republic of Germany. When averaged out, Jansons had

been arrested once nearly every year since 1945.¹⁰³ To this record, he seemed determined to see a new charge added: murder in connection with National Socialist violent crimes. In August, while still in remand awaiting trial for his alarming public gunplay, Jansons spoke with a priest named Kauffenstein and thereafter penned a confusing and ungrammatical but very passionate letter to the State Prosecutor in Düsseldorf, Mr. Abramowski, *entirely unique in all the annals of the Arajs Kommando*:

This conversation was [inspirationally] decisive to my letter to you today. In my heart [I have been] decided for days – yet I have lacked the courage to confess myself before worldly judges. Freely [“Unbeeinflusst”], in full realization of the gravity of my plea of guilt and the consequences to be expected – in order to be rid of the weight on my conscience [“Gewissenlast”] that I have borne for nearly twenty years and which, especially in recent months, has allowed me no peace. To obtain God’s irrevocable and permanent reconciliation [“Verbindung”] and forgiveness, I declare: as a member of the Latvian Security Kommando [“Sicherungskommando,” sic.] of the Commander of the Security Police and SD in Latvia, did I in two cases in the year 1943, personally shoot two members of the Jewish and Russian people, respectively. Additionally, on multiple occasions I took part in Ghetto-to-Salaspils [escort] actions. Today I would relinquish all that is dear and precious to me if I could undo this [“wenn ich das ungeschehen machen könnte”] – I repent of it deeply and am ashamed of myself. And I am prepared to accept the punishment I am due without objection or complaint and lay in abjection!¹⁰⁴

Every detail offered by Jansons in subsequent statements corresponds exactly to what is known today, from the dates of the Fürstenberg police training to uniform descriptions to the demographic composition of the inmate population at the Salaspils concentration camp by gender, national origin, approximate average age, and total number. Nothing he said is at odds with the known reality as proven in courtrooms either before or since, and accurately maps onto the known timeline of the

¹⁰³StaH. 213-23 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-03. “Arajs Verfahren.” Sonderband 7, pp. 1335–1236. Der Polizeipräsident in Düsseldorf. “Bericht.” 11 August 1961.

¹⁰⁴StaH. 213-23 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-03. “Arajs Verfahren.” Sonderband 7, pp. 1329–1334. Egons Jansons. “Noch zur Person.” 10 August 1961.

Kommando's development. He was certainly telling the truth or, at least, was telling some of it.

In the late summer of 1942, Egons Jansons was stationed in the area of the Salaspils concentration camp and regularly had the duty of escorting and guarding labor columns between the camp and various work sites. The killing of his first innocent, Jansons describes as follows:

Alerted by the alarm siren, we assembled with about twenty men in front of the guardhouse. A ranking fellow countryman [*"vorgesetzter Landsmann;"* the meaning of *Landsmann* is ambiguous here, but seems to refer to a Latvian superior] then led us into the camp, where the Jewish labor groups were assembled. The Communists and work-shy were not assembled. One Jew stood slightly apart from his group. After a while, a German Sergeant [*"Oberscharführer"*] from the Headquarters [*"Kommandantur"*] came. He affirmed that the Jew standing apart there was supposed to be shot. He also gave the reason for it, *but I no longer know what was mentioned*. I stood in the first rank of the three columns as the left wingman. The Sergeant designated me and both of the two comrades standing behind me in the second and third ranks for the shooting. The Jew who was to be shot was led to the vicinity of a concrete wall... The man continued to pray and called to Jehovah. He stood with his face to us. From a distance of about ten paces, the three of us in the detail fired a salvo at the man from our Czech rifles... The man fell and was immediately dead. After a little while, we were then marched back out of the camp. The one who was shot remained where he lay while we departed... That evening, *I heard that the Jew was supposed to have stolen something*. At the time, I was 17 years old. The shooting of this unarmed man had agitated me exceptionally. I got drunk the evening after the shooting. I had had the intention to travel to my mother in Rīga that evening. Rīga was only 17 kilometers distant from the camp. Because of this experience, I did not go to Rīga... How old the one who was shot was, or what he was called, I do not know. Like all of the Jews, he wore civilian clothing. I only remember that he shouted "Jehovah" before he was shot. What language he spoke, I do not know [emphasis added].¹⁰⁵

The fact that the victim was alleged to have committed the offense of theft—whatever that could possibly have meant in his context—invites the suggestion of a connection with Jansons's own post-war serial

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

misdeemeanors on the same charge. It is especially curious that early in the confession he claimed to have forgotten the alleged charge, but later admitted that the Jew had been accused of stealing. The apparent ineptitude that led Jansons to the interior of so many West German jail cells may have been, if not intentional, then perhaps unconsciously symptomatic of guilt, a wish to perhaps identify more somehow with his victim, and the need to feel himself redeemed in some measure through experiencing some form of punishment.

In his second story, Egons Jansons related how he was ordered, fairly fresh from his SD police training, to execute a Russian male during the gigantic “Winter Magic” anti-partisan operation in Belarus in early 1943. Suddenly coming under machine gun fire, the German supervisor of his column of the Kommando believed that the Russian, who had been attached to the platoon as a guide [“Wegführer”] and interpreter, had attempted to lead them into an ambush. This was later proven not to have been the case, and the column eventually arrived safely at its destination by following the then-dead Russian’s instructions. Nevertheless, upon a direct order, Egons Jansons shot the man in the head with a non-government issue Walther PPK handgun that he privately owned. With German forces, it was quite common for troops to bring their own sidearms with them to combat areas as backup weapons.¹⁰⁶ Jansons was one of the few who would, however, continue the practice of carrying a weapon into peacetime civilian life.¹⁰⁷

After Operation Winter Magic, Egons Jansons returned to Rīga, where he twice attended mass shootings of 100–200 Jews from the Rīga Ghetto in April or May of 1943. This is plausible in that it was the period that immediately preceded the relocation of the ghetto’s last remnant of Jews to labor camps across the country that began in July 1943 and ended with the closing of the ghetto in November of that year. The two executions he attended may have been the killing of those inmates no longer considered fit for work. Jansons said that he personally drove groups of victims to the Dreiliņi suburb of Rīga and waited about 100 meters away for them to be shot. He described “the

¹⁰⁶The practice was not discouraged, although those who engaged in it were not issued ammunition for their extra gun because of the logistical hassle necessitated by maintaining inventories of various and sundry, rather than standardized, calibers.

¹⁰⁷StaH. 213-23 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-03. “Arajs Verfahren.” Sonderband 7, pp. 1329–1334. Egons Jansons. “Noch zur Person.” 10 August 1961.

wailing [“jammern”] of the people” as “simply terrible.”¹⁰⁸ By 1944, Jansons had been transferred to the Latvian Legion. Fighting on the Eastern Front against the Red Army for the remainder of the war, he was wounded three times. In March 1945, the hospital where he was convalescing in western Germany was captured by advancing US forces. His entire family had stayed behind in Latvia. With his family, therefore, he had had no post-war contact. And by the time of his confession, he had been living separated from his West German wife for a year and a half.¹⁰⁹

After months of further investigation in the fall of 1961, it was eventually decided by the State Prosecutor not to pursue any charges against Egons Jansons except those related to his recent episode in Düsseldorf where he had publically brandished his pistol. Several reasons were given, including that Jansons had been a minor at the time of the events and additionally, that as such, he would have been particularly vulnerable to the maleficent Nazi indoctrination he had been given. As importantly, it was observed that both of the shootings had occurred upon direct orders with no sign of personal malice or base motives. The Jew was shot as an offending prisoner, rather than as a Jew, it was decided. And the shooting of the Russian might have been partly justifiable in context, since Jansons could plausibly have believed himself to be protecting the safety of his unit. Also, the latter incident having taken place in an area of active military operations, refusal to carry out the order could have been met with summary justice for Jansons himself, reasoned Düsseldorf’s senior public prosecutor. Although all of this information came purely from Jansons’s own accounts, investigation was halted. The prosecutors concluded that “It is therefore, on the grounds of a lack of suitable evidence to the contrary, to be assumed that these killings should be seen not as murder but as manslaughter [“Totschlag”].”¹¹⁰ Unlike murder, the statute of limitations had run out for the crime of manslaughter. Under West German law, Jansons could not be tried for the crimes to which

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

¹⁰⁹Ibid.

¹¹⁰StaH. 213-23 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-03. “Arajs Verfahren.” Sonderband 7, pp. 1337–1338. Kepper. “Vfg. Der Leitende Oberstaatsanwalt bei dem Landesgericht Düsseldorf.” 16 August 1961. Also see: StaH. 213-23 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-03. “Arajs Verfahren.” Sonderband 7, pp. 1347–1351. Kepper. “Der Leitende Oberstaatsanwalt bei dem Landesgericht Düsseldorf.” 27 October 1961.

he himself had voluntarily confessed once they were defined as just manslaughter.

Having been so informed, Jansons later wrote back to Abramowski at the prosecutor's office that the notice "was my most beautiful Christmas present. It has already pained me a thousand times to have taken part in the shooting actions as a young man... I thank you again for the great understanding that you have shown me. Devotedly Yours, Egons Jansons."¹¹¹ For his role in the atrocities, Egons Jansons, like the absolute majority of the other members of the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police, was never punished by any court. He was, however, exceptional insofar as *he is the only member of the Arajs Kommando to ever have volunteered himself to justice unsolicited and uncoerced.*

In the following chapters, such post-war fates as are known of his less candid and forthcoming officers and comrades from the Kommando will be explored. While Egons Jansons confessed of his own accord and was spared by a lenient prosecutor using the technicalities of West German law, his former friends never ceased in their efforts to evade the law and defeat the course of justice.

Long before Jansons spoke up in West Germany—indeed before the war was even over—Soviet authorities were not making for themselves a reputation for leniency, nor would they require any such voluntary admissions as his.

¹¹¹StaH. 213-23 Staatsanwaltschaft Landgericht—NSG—0044-03. "Arajs Verfahren." Sonderband 7, pp. 1352–1353. Egons Jansons. "An die Staatsanwaltschaft beim LG-Düsseldorf, Herrn StA Abramowski." Düsseldorf, 7 January 1963.

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