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BREAK OUT OF RUSSIA: MIKĒLIS VALTERS AND THE NATIONAL ISSUE IN EARLY LATVIAN SOCIALISM

Ivars Ijabs

This article deals with the political thought of Miķelis Valters (1874–1968), whose early writings are considered to contain the first clearly articulated argument for independent and democratic Latvia. Until now, Valters's writings haven't been analyzed in their own historical and intellectual context, being subjected to Marxist and nationalist 'proleptic mythologies' instead. However, such an analysis provides us with important insights about the intellectual origins of Latvian political nationalism. Valters's early argument for independent Latvia derives much from the legacy of Russian *narodnichestvo* and from German liberal legal theory, rather than from Austro-Marxism, as suggested by previous commentators.

Keywords: Baltic states; history of political thought; nationalism; social democracy; Latvian independence

After they are pronounced, important political ideas seem to detach themselves from their immediate context and to obtain a life of their own. In this form they become instrumental for purposes of ideological legitimation, which often has little to do with their original meaning. The task of the history of political ideas is to recover the original context of influential political texts, and to identify shifts in their meanings during later interpretations and re-interpretations. When dealing with the history of Latvian political thought, two prominent interpretative traditions stand out: the nationalist tradition and the Marxist tradition. Both have roots in the early twentieth century, when Latvians started to reflect upon the intellectual origins of their political life, and important works have been written in both of these traditions.¹ The first

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finds its point of departure in the self-determination of the ethnic Latvian nation; the second, in the development of the class consciousness of the Latvian working people.

Since nationalist and Marxist traditions have dominated Latvian political thinking of the twentieth century, their prevalence in the history of political ideas seems to be quite natural. However, both approaches suffer from serious methodological limitations. Instead of concentrating on the contemporary meaning of particular political writings, these interpretations often choose a teleological perspective, i.e., they interpret political texts in light of later events. For the nationalist tradition, these events are the founding of independent Latvian state in 1918 and the restoration of independence in 1990–1991. For the Marxist tradition, they are the establishment of the short-lived Latvian Socialist Republic in 1918–1919 and the ‘restoration’ of Soviet rule in 1940. Both conceptions tend to disregard the context of early Latvian political thought, seeing early texts only as an overture to later political events.

Quentin Skinner, a major representative of the Cambridge school of the history of political thought, has devoted a lot of attention to such methodological fallacies. According to Skinner, many historians of ideas have concentrated upon what the author is saying, i.e., on the literal meaning of the text. What the author is doing in saying that is often disregarded. However, in order to understand the meaning of an utterance in its own context, we have to refer to its immediate context – whether the author was arguing, opposing, justifying, or criticizing the views and conceptions of his/her time (Skinner 2002a). This performative dimension is fundamentally important for the history of political thought, since it asks not only what an utterance means for us, but what it meant at the time when it was pronounced. Quite naturally, most researchers have their own preconceptions about what the author must have been saying. For example, we are often inclined to look at historical works through the prism of contemporary assumptions, finding elements of those doctrines in the writings of past authors. However, the price paid for these assumptions is that we often disregard the historical context and intentions of the author.

In this article I will turn to one of the classical texts of Latvian political thought: the article ‘Down with Autocracy! Down with Russia!’ written in 1903 by the young Latvian socialist Miķelis Valters. The following lines are widely regarded as the first open call for an independent and democratic Latvian statehood outside of the Russian empire:

‘You need your self-respect, not for your own good; you have to fight for the freedom of your own personality, because it is for the good of all people living in Russia’ – we say this to each and every human being. The same must be said to every nation of Russia: ‘establish your own self-respect, develop your own personality, your own substance, break out of Russia, strengthen the dispersive tendencies in Russia, because it is for the good of all nations and all individuals in Russia, broaden your liberty, try to become the master of your own fate, learn self-organization, self-government, learn your own justice and your own legislation.’ (Valters 1903b, p. 67)

Previous interpretations have been influenced by two teleological or, to use Skinner’s term, ‘proleptic’ mythologies. According to the nationalist interpretation, Valters is considered a far-sighted prophet of the Latvian state of 1918. In Marxist interpretation

he is a 'renegade' who had abandoned Marxism for 'bourgeois' nationalism. Neither of these approaches has succeeded in revealing the contemporary meaning of Valters's text, and its intellectual roots still remain to be clarified. My main thesis is that the previous research on this subject, which mentions Austro-Marxism as Valters's main source of inspiration, is misguided. He was much more inspired by Russian *narodnichestvo* and Western liberal legal theory, and he creatively mixed both. The nationalist and socialist elements in his theory do not contradict one another; on the contrary, they complement and enrich each other.

I

Despite Valters's fame as the first proponent of an independent and democratic Latvia,² his intellectual legacy has mainly been disregarded by academic research. This is particularly regrettable, because Valters is one of the very few Latvians who can be regarded as an original political thinker with a European outlook. His early works, which combine socialist and nationalist perspectives, can be legitimately compared in their theoretical scope and historical significance for Latvia to those of Kazimierz Kelles-Krausz in Poland (Snyder 1997). Although involved in practical politics and diplomacy, Valters always regarded himself as a political and legal theorist, an ideologue, and a cultural critic. His intellectual activity was incessant during his long life of 96 years, and his political writings mirror many important events of Latvian modern history – from the very beginning of democratic politics in the *Jaunā strāva* (New current) movement in the 1890s, to the last Soviet occupation and his exile to the West.

Valters's intellectual career is no less fascinating than his biography. In his youth he was active in the proto-Socialist newspaper *Dienas Lapa* (Daily page), edited by Jānis Rainis and Pēteris Stučka. After being arrested in 1897 by the Tsarist police, Valters escaped to Switzerland and became involved in the activities of Latvian exile socialists in the journals *Latviešu Strādnieks* (Latvian worker), *Proletāriets* (Proletarian), and *Revolucionārā Baltija* (Revolutionary Baltics). While writing for the main theoretical organ of German Social Democracy, *Die Neue Zeit* (along with Leo Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg), Valters defended his doctoral thesis in 1906 at the University of Zurich, on the political and economic views of Leo Tolstoy (Walters 1907). After the Revolution of 1905 he became involved in a discussion with Latvian orthodox Marxists on historical materialism in the arts (Valters 1908, 1909). In 1913 and 1914 Valters published two theoretical books on Latvian autonomy (Valters 1913, 1914). In 1917–1918, being a close personal friend and collaborator of Kārlis Ulmanis, he prepared the conceptual background for the agreement with Baltic Germans and Latvian Social Democrats in the framework of the People's Council (*Tautas Padome*), which later proclaimed the Republic of Latvia (Valters 1917a, 1917b, 1918). During the democratic period Valters became involved in a conceptual discussion with the Baltic German minority, in particular with Paul Schiemann (Schiemann 1926; Walters 1926). He advocated a reconciliation between two communities on the grounds of political nationalism and a republican vision of the state. However, in the late 1920s Valters became more and more dissatisfied with

the functioning of multi-party democracy in Latvia. He advocated an authoritarian planning of the economy and to some extent even prepared the theoretical basis for Ulmanis's coup of 1934 (Valters 1933). During the authoritarian period, Valters publicly participated in the legitimizing of the regime; at the same time, he wrote numerous private letters to his friend Ulmanis, urging him to revert to democratic practices. This correspondence was published by Valters following the Second World War, after he escaped to the West, where it caused a fierce fight between 'democrats' and 'Ulmanis' among the Latvian exiles (Valters 1957; see also Zaķe 2010, pp. 114–17). Valters was a staunch supporter of the democratic camp until his death in 1968.

The writing of the 'Down with Autocracy' article coincided with an important period in the history of the Latvian socialist movement. The 'New Current' group, active from 1893 until 1897 and consisting mainly of young intellectuals, was crushed by the Tsarist police. Its most influential members either escaped to the West (Fricis Roziņš, Valters, Frīdrihs Vesmanis) or were exiled to Siberia (Rainis, Stučka, Jānis Jansons–Brauns).

Around 1900, however, the first signs of a workers' movement started to emerge in the Baltic provinces. Workers' groups were organized in Riga, Jelgava, and Liepāja; strikes became ever more widespread; illegal literature and leaflets were published and distributed. The harsh economic conditions of the newly emerging industrial working class, dissatisfaction with the autocratic political system, as well as the economic and cultural dominance of the Baltic German nobility all contributed to the fact that the Baltic provinces were among the regions with the highest worker activity in Tsarist Russia. It is important to note that Latvian socialist organizations largely developed independently from their Russian counterparts. Even after the crush of the 1905 revolution, when the main organization of Latvian Social Democrats, the Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party (*Latviešu Sociāldemokrātiskā strādnieku partija*, or LSDSP, founded in 1904), decided to join the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party, the Latvian organization retained a considerable degree of autonomy. For example, the organization didn't split between Bolsheviks and Mensheviks until 1918. The Bolshevik-minded eventually joined Lenin's emerging regime in Soviet Russia, whereas Latvian Mensheviks took part in the foundation of the Republic of Latvia (Kalniņš 1983, p. 153–56).

In 1903, however, a united Latvian Socialist party had not yet been formed, and different groups competed for leadership between the newly emerged workers' groups. Former members of the 'New Current' group, now living as émigrés in Britain and Switzerland, got actively involved in these struggles. Since censorship rules were much harsher in Russia than they were in the West, and the first illegal newspaper published in Latvia appeared as late as 1904 (*Cīņa*, or 'Struggle'), the ideological foundation for the emerging movement was prepared mainly by émigrés, whose publications were smuggled to the Baltics. According to a close friend of Valters and one of the earliest Latvian revolutionaries, Ernests Rolavs,

Émigrés brought Baltics nearer to the Western Europe; they were mediators between the Baltic proletariat and Western European socialism and revolutionary practice. While living in England and Switzerland they observed the work of those

institutions of liberty, about whom they had scarcely heard anything in their homeland. Émigrés were a revolution in permanence, [they were] a general staff of the Latvian socialism. (Rolavs 1908, p. 27)

Miķelis Valters's relations with the Latvian Socialist emigration were complicated. He co-founded its first journal, *Latviešu Strādnieks*, in London and Zurich in 1899. He worked on the journal together with several Latvian Marxists who later became prominent, such as Roziņš, Vesmanis, Hermanis Punga, and others. However, the initial group split up as early as 1900, and both parts started to fight each other fiercely for influence among workers' groups in Latvia. The first part, which retained the name Latvian Social Democratic Union in Western Europe (*Vakareiropas Latviešu Sociāldemokrātu Savienība*, or *VLSDS*; later called the Unionists, or *Savienībnieki*), conceived socialism rather broadly. This group, including Valters, Rolavs, and Emīls Skubiķis, consisted mainly of intelligentsia. The Union was rather weak in terms of organization and membership, but had much broader ideological ambitions, exemplified by Valters's writings. The second group, with Roziņš, Vesmanis, and Punga, formed the core of the future LSDSP. Later joined by Rainis, Stučka and Jansons, this group was much more orthodox Marxist in its ideology. It was better organized than the Union and had a much broader membership, especially among workers in Latvia. In 1904 this group formed the ideological basis for the LSDSP, which became the main organization of Latvian Social Democracy by winning the support of most (though not all) workers' groups in Latvia. In 1904, LSDSP already had around 2,400 members. It was by far the largest Latvian political organization of that time, and during the revolution, where the Party played a leading role, its membership increased to 17,000 (Švābe 1958, pp. 588, 600). The Bolshevik wing of the LSDSP also played the main role in the Latvian Socialist Republic of 1918–1919. The other, much smaller group, the Unionists, after the crush of the revolution of 1905, decided to join the Russian Socialist Revolutionaries, or SRs, and after several years of marginal existence eventually died out. It is important to note that the LSDSP's interpretation of early Latvian socialist history became the official interpretation of the Soviet period. This interpretation started to label the LSDSP's former Unionist rival Valters a n of the Soviet period. This interpretation started to label their former Unionist rival Valters a 'renegade' and a 'bourgeois nationalist' (Jansons-Brauns 1910, p. 111; Upīts 1910). All this despite the fact that Valters's early socialism was in certain important respects much more radical than that of the Party, and his main opponent at the time was precisely the Latvian right-wing, bourgeois nationalism.

II

When approaching Valters's early texts, historians often interpret them from the perspective of their later significance. They tend to be influenced by what Skinner calls 'mythologies of prolepsis'. It is:

the type of mythology we are prone to generate when we are more interested in the retrospective significance of a given episode than its meaning for the agent

of that time The characteristic, in short, of the mythology of prolepsis is the conflation of the asymmetry between the significance an observer may justifiably claim to find in a given historical episode and the meaning of that episode itself. (Skinner 2002b, p. 73)

Valters's intellectual legacy has been subjected to two types of such mythology. The first is the Marxist version, which sees Valters as a socialist 'renegade' who has abandoned the orthodox Marxist doctrine for 'bourgeois' nationalism. The second is the Latvian nationalist interpretation, which praises Valters as a prescient, almost prophetic thinker who created exactly the same vision of political self-determination that was eventually fulfilled in 1918. It is important to note that both these conceptions are proleptic. They interpret Valters's early writings in light of a later event – that is, in light of his separation from the Social Democratic movement and his subsequent involvement in the establishment of independent Latvian statehood in 1918. What Valters really meant when publishing his article 'Down with Autocracy! Down with Russia!' in 1903 still remains to be investigated.

The Soviet Marxist interpretation of Valters as a 'bourgeois nationalist' and a 'renegade' originated with his early opponents among Social Democrats, with whom he entered into polemics before the World War I – first and foremost, with Janis Jansons-Brauns and Andrejs Upīts. This interpretation was the dominant one during 1940–1991, when most historians referred to him as a bourgeois nationalist, opportunist, or renegade (Dūma & Paeglīte 1976, pp. 51–53; Grigulis 1957, p. 16; Millers & Stumbaņa 1965, pp. 45–50; Šteinbergs 1960, p. 12). This conception recognizes that Valters was among the earliest Latvian Social Democrats, assuming, however, that he later 'betrayed' Socialism and turned toward bourgeois nationalism. Dūma and Paeglīte wrote in 1976 that

M. Valters, fully denying the class antagonism in a bourgeois society, got into the swamp of opportunism. This led him into the dirty waters of bourgeois nationalism and religious mysticism. Valters gathered around him all those Latvian émigrés who were unfamiliar with the proletarian internationalism and who sooner or later abandoned the revolutionary movement. (Dūma & Paeglīte 1976, p. 51)

This interpretation seems to assume that there is only one form of 'real' socialism, represented by the orthodox Marxist Latvian Social Democrats. All other forms of socialism are essentially bourgeois, and, since Valters separated himself from the main group of Latvian Social Democrats and later became involved in the creation of the Republic of Latvia, his earlier work must also be 'bourgeois' nationalist.

The second proleptic interpretation sees Valters as a far-sighted prophet of Latvian democratic statehood. Since Valters himself participated in the foundation of the Republic of Latvia in 1918, the interpretation of his 1903–1905 writings in terms of later nationalism seems to be quite natural. Moreover, Valters himself liked to emphasize his role as the first advocate of Latvian independence. During the interwar period he was praised as such by several influential journalists, like Ernests Arnis and Ernests Blanks. The latter even described Valters as a national hero, 'who brought the idea of the Latvian state like a flaming torch through the night of Russian

slavery, and no storm could extinguish it' (Blanks 1923, p. 42). This tradition was carried on in exile after World War II, in particular by Valters's close friend the historian Ādolfs Šilde (Šilde 1985, 1991a, 1991b), and also after the restoration of independence (Dribins 1997; Mednis 2005; Ščerbinskis 1997). However, this approach also has serious deficiencies. It tends to assume that Valters's vision of Latvian statehood corresponds to the liberal democratic and capitalist state, eventually created in 1918. All those elements of Valters's writings which do not fit this interpretation are dismissed in curious ways. Leo Dribins writes that Valters in his early writings does not fully succeed in giving a formulation of Latvia as a liberal democratic nation-state – assuming that he wanted to do exactly that (Dribins 1997, p. 63). Imants Mednis declares that in Valters's writings the idea of an independent Latvia has been formulated 'in an unclear and inconsistent manner' (Mednis 2005, p. 18), assuming some metaphysical existence of the idea which Valters could not fully approach. Instead of asking what Valters was actually doing in his article, this proleptic interpretation presupposes that Valters in his early writings was anticipating the events of 1918. Moreover, his vision is sometimes represented as an element of the seemingly continuous saga of Latvian self-determination, starting from the Young Latvians (*jaunlatvieši*) of the 1860s and 1870s and leading up to the creation of an independent nation-state in 1918. So, to Ernests Runcis (Arnis), Valters appears as a 'direct heir of the traditions of the heroic age of our cultural nationalism, and as such he becomes a part of the development of our societal ideology' (Arnis 1930, p. 584). From the point of view of the history of ideas, these interpretations seem at least problematic. First, Valters regarded the dismemberment of Russia and the foundation of independent Latvia as part of an all-Russian socialist revolution. The main difference between him and the orthodox Social Democrats lies not in Valters's lack of support for the ideals of socialist revolution, but in his aversion to centralization and his preference for small, self-organizing communities. Secondly, Valters probably even more than most Social Democrats hated the 'official' Latvian nationalism of the Riga Society of Latvians (*Rīgas Latviešu biedrība*, RLB), which claimed for itself the legacy of the Young Latvians and the role of the main representative of the interests of the Latvian nation.

III

'Down with Autocracy! Down with Russia!' appeared in the fourth issue of *Proletāriets*, since Valters took over the editing of the journal in Summer 1903.³ The immediate occasion for writing this article was provided by Russia's imperialist policies in the Balkans (in particular, by its double-faced attitude towards Macedonian anti-Turkish insurgents). For Valters, however, these events provided an opportunity to express his views on revolution, statehood, and democracy. He starts his theoretical elaborations with an overview of the historical development of the relations between an individual and the state:

A human being originally is placed in a situation, where he is only a subject of duties; it is fully subordinated to the state power . . . The second status is to some extent a civic status, the so-called *status libertatis*, or the status of independence.

A human being has some legally secured sphere of liberty. The third status is the positive one, which includes all individual rights to the state action, courts, defense, etc. (*status civitatis*). The fourth status is the status of active citizenship. This includes the right to take part in state institutions. (Valters 1903b, p. 65)

This development of the individual from an 'animal with duties' to an active citizen endowed with political rights had already been realized in the West. In Russia, Valters says, even the first stage has not been passed. The task of Social Democrats is to promote this further development. The ultimate goal is formulated in terms of the development of personality:

Our political program is firstly one of the strengthening of personality. The oppressive direction of the government is opposed by another: by emancipation. It is obvious what it means regarding an individual. However, concerning the views regarding the personality of a nation, the situation is much less clear. (Valters 1903b, p. 66)

Valters deliberately draws parallels between individual and national personalities, since it allows him to advocate the development of national communities similar to that of an individual personality – from full subjection to self-determination. However, he also marks a difference between individual and national personalities. For national personalities, independence and the status of active citizenship coincide: if a nation wants to be an active player in the community of nations, it has to develop its own institutions. In other words, it has to become a state. Russia, however, cannot fulfill this function as a state. It not only prevents individual persons from achieving civil and political freedoms, it also suppresses individual nations and prevents them from developing their own personalities. Therefore, the goals of individual and national emancipation coincide: the Russian state has to be dismembered and, in fact, destroyed. In Valters's conception, this would lead to the fulfillment of 'the ideal of personality development'. Therefore each nation has to 'establish [its] own self-respect, develop your own personality, [its] own substance, break out of Russia, strengthen the dispersive tendencies in Russia' (Valters 1903b, p. 67).

This none-too-sophisticated construction is often regarded as the first theoretical elaboration of Latvian political nationalism. It is important to note that, first, Valters talks here from the perspective of a Social Democrat, although he clearly avoids Marxist terminology. Second, the words 'Latvia' or even 'Baltics' do not appear in the text. Valters advocates the dismemberment of Russia as the task of the all-Russian proletarian revolution. In fulfilling this task, however, the state power in Russia would not be taken over by the dictatorship of the proletariat, as proposed by Marxists. The Tsarist Empire must be split up into small, self-organizing national communities.

When looking at the conceptual background and possible influences of Valters's theory, the influence of contemporary German legal theory comes to the fore. The doctrine of four statuses (or *Statuslehre*) stems from the work of Georg Jellinek, one of the most influential legal scholars of the time. Although Valters does not provide sources, as a law student in Bern and Zurich he had probably read Jellinek's classic book *The System of the Subjective Public Law* (1892), where the *Statuslehre* is laid out

(Jellinek 1892). Valters refers to Jellinek's work also in his other articles, in particular to the latter's famous triadic definition of the state as 'state nation, state territory, and state power' (Valters 1904, p. 76). This allows us to conclude that Jellinek has been a source for Valters's own theoretical work from that time.

Jellinek's influence deserves special attention here. Jellinek's *Statuslehre* is basically a categorization of human and civil rights, later often used in constitutional law. Jellinek is looking at them from a developmental perspective, as a gradual broadening of the sphere of individual freedom *vis-à-vis* the state. This typically Western historical development of individual rights serves for Valters as a model for Tsarist Russia, where the population has not even passed the first stage of *status subjectionis*. The four-stage developmental model seems to sanction a Western-type political evolution also in non-Western countries. Moreover, Jellinek also uses the term 'personality' (*Persönlichkeit*), and the historical development of four statuses is at the same time the development of personality – from a feudal serf, bound to the land, to a modern, democratic citizen.

However, this is the point where Valters parts ways with Jellinek. For Jellinek, personality is synonymous with person, meaning the legal ability to be a subject of rights. This ability depends on the state as an already existing 'community of right' (*Rechtsgemeinschaft*). Jellinek, a legal positivist, explicitly notes that 'a being becomes a personality, gets elevated to a legal subject, when the state grants him the ability to effectively call for legal protection. The state creates the personality in this way' (Jellinek 1892, p. 82). For Valters, on the contrary, the 'national personality' does not depend on its relation to the state. It actually precedes the state; the state is founded by the national personality and becomes its highest expression. National personalities exist in Russia, although the repressive state doesn't recognize them. To Valters, nationalities must not fight for their recognition in the framework of Tsarist Russia. The Tsarist Empire, according to Valters's remark in some earlier article, is not a state at all, but rather a bunch of slaves, since it does not recognize any rights of its citizens (Valters 1903a, p. 2). Nationalities have to work for the dismemberment of Russia in order to establish their own national statehoods.

This statement might seem to be an expression of a pure political nationalism for small nations of the Russian empire, a deeply felt want for the political self-determination of Latvians. However, it is necessary to put this statement in context, both intellectually and politically. Valters was not only making abstract statements about the dismemberment of Russia. He also hoped to be understood by his readers, by his fellow Social Democrats. He referred to a certain tradition, which saw the dismemberment of Russia as a desirable goal of social emancipation. His statements were in line with the tradition of Russian *narodnichestvo*, especially Alexander Herzen and Mikhail Bakunin.

IV

Whenever the intellectual background of early Latvian socialism is discussed, Marxism is usually considered the most important and almost the sole significant influence. Several early socialists, who later wrote their memories about this period, explicitly

denied any role of other political teachings. Janis Jansons-Brauns, an influential revolutionary writer and cultural critic, praises the situation in the 1890s, saying that Latvian revolutionary youth was theoretically so mature that it couldn't be seduced by any other doctrine than Marxism (Jansons-Brauns 1924). This tradition of seeing all early Latvian socialists as Marxists found its continuation in later generations of Latvian Marxists, both in Soviet historiography (Dūma & Paeglīte 1976; Grigulis 1957; Šteinbergs 1960) and among the anti-Soviet democratic Left (Kalniņš 1956, p. 8; Menders 1959, p. 76). Even if there were any other theoretical expressions of socialism (like the writings of the Unionists), they were commonly regarded only as 'deviances' or pathologies of Marxist theory, rather than anything else.

Surely, Marxism was an important source of early Latvian socialism. It came to Latvia from two different directions. Since a growing number of Latvians were studying at Russian universities in the 1880s and 1890s, they often got acquainted with the works of so-called legal Marxism, especially with the writings of Peter Struve and Georgii Plekhanov (Jansons-Brauns 1924, p. 24). Indeed, *Dienas Lapa*, the very first legal socialist newspaper, can itself be regarded as a part of the all-Russia phenomenon of legal Marxism. This phenomenon itself deserves attention. Since all the attention of the Tsarist authorities was directed toward fighting terrorists and conspirators of the *Narodnaya Volya* type, in the early 1890s it was possible to propagandize Marxism openly, albeit in a scientifically veiled and positivistic form. It talked much about the capitalist development of the means of production, about historical materialism, and workers' self-organization; and, for obvious reasons, much less about the proletarian revolution.

Along with Russian legal Marxism, another Marxist influence came from Germany. Some of the early Latvian socialists had visited Germany in the early 1890s, where they became acquainted with the organizational and theoretical strength of the German Social Democracy. Rainis's visit to Berlin and Zurich in 1893, where he met August Bebel and listened to Karl Liebknecht, is the best-known example (Rainis 1985 [1907], p. 88) – mainly because of his own anecdotal expression that he went to Germany and brought back Latvian Social Democracy in his suitcase. Other sources of German influence must also be mentioned, like Pauls Dauge and others.

However, it is important to note that Marxism was not the only theoretical source for early Latvian socialists. At least among certain groups no lesser influence was exercised by Russian Populism or *narodnichestvo*.⁴ The main group of Latvian socialists that gathered around *Dienas Lapa* from the very beginnings deliberately avoided any influence of the earlier Russian revolutionary tradition. They considered it too counter-productive, radical, and pathetic *vis-à-vis* the more 'scientific' and sober-minded doctrine of Marxism (Akurāters 1924, p. 93; Rolavs 1908, p. 21). This strategy can be considered justified, since the legal propaganda of Marxism in *Dienas Lapa* was possible only insofar as any resemblance to revolutionary *narodnichestvo* was avoided. This, however, does not mean that this tradition had no influence among Latvian socialists.

Narodnichestvo cannot be regarded as a coherent political doctrine. It is rather a diverse set of philosophical, social, and economic views that dominated Russian socialist circles from the 1860s to the 1890s. Its main theoretical problem was the modernization 'from below' of authoritarian and backward Russia. However, *narodniki* disagreed among themselves about the very basic features of this modernization. The most common conviction was that Russia on its road to socialism must somehow

bypass the capitalist stage of development. The typical Russian forms of agrarian and artisan communities (*obshchina* and *artel'*) had to serve as the basis for the future socialist society. Most *narodniki* didn't believe in political reforms from above; some were distinctly apolitical. Many were convinced of the moral superiority of the peasant masses, which must liberate themselves with the help of revolutionary intelligentsia. However, when the initial 'going to the people' movement of 1872–1874 died out, *narodnichestvo* turned to conspiratorial tactics and terrorism.

The theory of *narodnichestvo* is rather eclectic. Alexander Herzen, usually considered its progenitor, introduced the rather Rousseauian theory of the inherently socialist nature of the Russian peasant. Mikhail Bakunin saw in the anarchic Russian peasantry the potential for creating a stateless society. Later, *narodniki* became much more influenced by Marx – indeed, the first Russian Marxists, like Plekhanov and Axelrod, initially were active members of *narodnichestvo*. However, the most influential theorists, like Lavrov and Mikhailovskii, explicitly denied Marxist historical materialism and the primacy of the industrial proletariat. They created influential theories about 'the heroes and the crowd' and 'critically thinking personalities', who move the progress of humanity. In other words, they concentrated on the role of the intelligentsia. This social stratum in Russia is indebted to the poor and toiling people, and hence has to lead it toward progress, helping to achieve socialism. Although not all *narodniki* supported terrorism, they laid much more emphasis than Marxists on individual heroism, an active revolutionary fight, and romantic self-sacrifice. This made *narodnichestvo* attractive to those spirits who weren't so much fascinated by the universal and quasi-natural laws of historical materialism, but rather wanted an immediate, active fight against the hated autocracy.

Initially these theoretical fights went almost unnoticed in the Baltic provinces. Although there is some marginal evidence of the presence of *Narodnaya Volya* in 1880s, it did not affect the public debate in any serious way (Jansons-Brauns 1924, p. 12; Rolavs 1908, p. 19). However, when the Latvian socialist movement started in the 1890s, works of the most important *narodniki* played a part. The legal Marxist *Dienas Lapa*, according to the Unionist Jānis Akurāters, 'wanted to keep the examples of Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Herzen from the crowd, since they would destroy their theories about classes and capitalists' (Akurāters 1924, p. 93). Nevertheless, these examples found entrance in early Latvian socialism. Rainis notes in his letters that his turn to socialism actually was due to the influence of *Zemlya i Volya* (Rainis 1985 [1907], p. 87).⁵ The later leader of the Latvian Bolsheviks Frīcis Roziņš (Āzis) is reported to have read *narodniki* authors Herzen, Chernyshevskii, and Dobrolyubov in the early 1890s (Millers & Stumbaņa 1965, p. 14). The famous revolutionary journal *Kolokol* ('The Bell') circulated among workers in Riga around the turn of the century (Luters (Bobis) 1960, p. 29). And, most importantly, the intellectual legacy of *narodnichestvo* deeply influenced the Unionists and their ideas about Latvian independence.

V

Authors who have commented on the intellectual origins of Valters's early political thought have often mentioned the influence of Austro-Marxism, Otto Bauer, and Karl Renner. The earliest statement of this influence can be found in what is still the

most comprehensive work in the historiography of the Latvian national idea, *The Development of the Idea of Latvian State*, written by a Baltic-German author, Helene Dopkewitsch (Dopkewitsch 1936, p. 12–17). Later this influence was also mentioned by Uldis Ģērmanis (Ģērmanis 1992, p. 10) and Ieva Zaķe (Zaķe 2008, pp. 45–6). Indeed, the works of Bauer and Renner are extensively quoted in Valters's later writings, especially in his extensive study *The Question of Our Nationality* (Valters 1914, p. 49ff). However, there is no evidence of Austro-Marxist influence in his 1903–1905 writings, when the idea of independent Latvia was first proposed. Indeed, the assumption about the influence of Austro-Marxism on Valters's early writings is problematic also from the theoretical point of view. If Valters wanted the division of Russia, a territorial partition of the empire into autonomous nation-states, then authors who defend national-cultural autonomy against the territorial claims of national communities could scarcely be relevant for him. So, the Austro-Marxist influence on Valters's early writings is rather improbable. What is much more visible is the influence of *narodnichestvo*. It seems to be decisive for his political theory, and his conception of Latvian independence has been formulated in the context of this legacy as well. In order to demonstrate it, we have to turn to Valters's works written before the 'Down with Autocracy' article. Although these writings are largely disregarded by previous research, they provide a framework for the conception of independent Latvia.

In 1899 Valters, together with Roziņš, Rolavs, Punga, and others, participated in the publication of the magazine *Latviešu Strādnieks*, which published only eight issues before it was shut down because of the split among Latvian socialist émigrés. Valters contributed three articles to this magazine. The article 'From Latvian Social Life' (*Iz latviešu sadzīves*, Valters 1900a) is the most well known, since it might have triggered the polemics between mildly nationalist Valters and firmly internationalist Roziņš (Treijs 1973, p. 54). However, the two other articles are completely disregarded, although they are highly significant as evidence of Valters's intellectual development. The first article celebrates the tenth anniversary of Chernyshevskii's death (Valters 1899), the second is an extended obituary of Petr Lavrov (Valters 1900b). In both articles, Valters sees himself as a follower of the Russian tradition of emancipatory politics, beginning from the Decembrists. What Valters takes from this tradition is its anti-Tsarist radicalism, denial of liberal dreams about the benevolent reform from above, and the praise for popular revolution. The specific economic content of narodnicism is scarcely present here. Valters's discourse is dominated by political radicalism, heroism, and self-sacrifice:

whether life or death – it doesn't matter. The most important thing is not to think only about oneself, not to think about the narrow and the personal, about the world of one's own coats and shoes. One must bring the words of popular awakening in the caves of life, where the majority of the humanity is still in chains, soaking in poverty and in ignorance. (Valters 1900b, p. 123)

Valters not only knew and respected *narodniki* authors. These authors are the only ones he mentions and quotes in his early works. The same applies also to his German-language articles published in *Die Neue Zeit* in 1900–1901 (Valters 1900c; 1901). These articles are devoted to the imperialist foreign policy of Tsarist Russia,

in particular to its expansion in the Southeast Asia. The question of imperialist policies is closely tied to the critique of Russian domestic politics. Ever since the reign of Peter the Great, Russia has attempted to conquer new territories and to subject foreign nations, especially when access to the sea might be acquired. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Russian state was weakened by the failure of its foreign policy in the Crimean War. This provided a space for domestic liberalization attempts, associated by Valters with the names of Herzen, Ogarev, and Bakunin (Valters 1901, p. 200). Valters clearly identifies himself with the *narodniki* tradition. He praises its emancipatory thrust, criticizing, however, the anti-Western and pan-Slavic elements as well as the anti-individualist dreams about the peasant commune. In order to achieve a new, socialist reordering of society, these elements must be purged from the tradition of Russian revolutionary socialism.

VI

Although the influence of narodnicism on Valters might be visible now, it is still unclear whether his ideas about the dismemberment of Russia and Latvian independence can be traced back to this tradition. *Narodniki* in general didn't devote much attention to the fate of small nations of the Russian empire. Indeed, some of them were ardent Russian nationalists and defended pan-Slavic solutions. An important insight into this problem was provided by Valters himself 30 years later, in a rather marginal article devoted to his own intellectual biography. He writes:

To be an active fighter, a bearer of ideas – this was taught to the Latvian youth by Mikhailovskii, Chernyshevskii, Bakunin Who provided us with the best arguments against the old Russia if not Alexander Herzen, this excellent stylist, who taught in his émigré writings that Russia must be divided, that each and every freedom fighter can desire only the extermination of Russia. This spiritual flooding inspired our young minds, and it also ignited the demand for a liberated, autonomous, political, and spiritual Latvia. (Valters 1931, p. 1124)

In this article, Valters also provides us with the initial source of the 'spiritual flooding' of his youth. It is Ernests Rolavs, Valters's friend and fellow Unionist, who was killed in 1907 by the punitive expedition. While studying in Moscow, where he was involved in an underground opposition group, Rolavs brought to Latvia the works and influence of 'the great fighters of the Russian people Mikhailovskii, Chernyshevskii and Bakunin' (Valters 1931).

When Valters mentions Herzen's influence, he is referring to the early *Kolokol* articles of 1859, devoted to the Polish question (Herzen 1859). In Herzen's view, Poland, like other nations, has an undeniable right to secession from the Russian empire. Any union between the two nations can be formed only on the basis of free and voluntary federation. Moreover, decisions about secessions or federations must be made by the people themselves, and based on linguistic, religious, and cultural considerations rather than on conquests and dynastic rights. Nevertheless, Herzen's plea for federalism actually is subordinated to his conception of social emancipation. Poland has 'an inalienable, absolute right to its existence as a state, independent from Russia' (Herzen 1859, p. 273), since the Russian Empire is a despotic autocracy,

where the majority of the population is still enslaved as serfs. However, Herzen was convinced that Poland will – indeed, it must – remain in federation with liberated Russia, which would abolish serfdom, secure individual rights, and introduce a federalist constitution. Herzen recognizes the right to secession because of his opposition to Russian despotic centralism, which should be abandoned in the nearest future. However, he does not support anything like the dismemberment of Russia.

The author who advocated a complete dissolution of the Empire was Mikhail Bakunin. His influence on Valters seems to be larger than that of Herzen. The very idea of social self-organization from below, emphatic statements that the Russian state was nothing more than a ‘bunch of slaves,’ the advocacy of small autonomous communities, the anti-authoritarian pathos – all these explicit traits of Valters’s political thinking find their parallels in the works of Bakunin. Moreover, Valters in his later works mentions and praises Bakunin as one of the few Russians who have understood the significance of the national question (Valters 1914, p. 53; 1931, p. 1124). The text Valters is referring to is Bakunin’s speech at the 1868 congress of the League of Peace and Freedom. Bakunin not only talks of the dismemberment of the Russian Empire here:

What would be the first, the necessary aim [of the revolution]? The dissolution of the empire, because while the empire exists, nothing good and vivid can happen in Russia And I think that if we want an entire and absolute dissolution of the empire, we can only hate its lust for power, and consequently its victories in the North, in the South, in the East, and in the West. (Bakunin 1920 [1868], p. 101)

He also defends the political self-determination of Latvians along with other small nations of Tsarist Russia. A historiography of the Latvian national idea should pay attention to the fact that Bakunin, the father of modern anarchism and an influential *narodniki* thinker, in a way defended an autonomous, democratic Latvia already in 1868, when most Latvians didn’t even dream of such development.

I want Finland to be free and capable of organization according to its own will and of uniting with whom it wants. I say the same openly also about the Baltic provinces All the rest of the population [apart from the German nobility and bourgeoisie] consists of Latvians and Finns [i.e., Estonians], i.e., of elements absolutely alien to the German nationality; even more than alien – hostile, since there is nothing more hated by this population than the Germans. It is quite natural: can a slave really love his master and torturer? I myself heard a Latvian peasant saying: ‘we are waiting for the moment when we will be able to pave the road to Riga with German skulls.’ . . . What will happen with them in the future, which national group will they join, is hard to predict. One thing is clear, and no sincere and earnest democrat, whether Russian or German, will deny it: this nation has an indisputable right to decide on its own fate independently from those 20,000 Germans who have oppressed, still oppresses, and are hated by it – independently from any German union and from the Russian empire. (Bakunin 1920 [1868], p. 103)

Valters doesn’t mention Bakunin in his articles in *Proletāriets*, probably because it would easily qualify him as an anarchist and disqualify him as a Social Democrat.

However, Bakunin's influence, recognized by Valters in his later works, has been significant for his ideas about Latvian independence. When he urges Latvians to 'strengthen the dispersive tendencies in Russia, because it is for the good of all nations and all individuals in Russia; broaden your liberty; try to become the master of your own fate; learn self-organization, self-government', his thinking clearly fits into the discourse of Bakunin. However, this influence also has its clear limits. Bakunin in 1868 opted for the destruction of all states, for workers' communes, and for a global federation of such communes. Valters in 1903 sees self-organization in terms of republican ideals: people must create their own states by means of democratic participation. If Bakunin saw the workers' self-organization from below as a means against the repressive, despotic state, Valters regarded a particular form of the state as the highest form of such self-organization. The gradual broadening of individual rights and freedoms toward full citizenship, according to Jellinek's *Statuslehre*, coincides with the increasing self-organization of society in autonomous institutions. An independent state is the final goal and fulfillment of such self-organization. Bakunist anti-authoritarianism and an emphasis on workers' self-organization are still retained by Valters; the institutional form is radically different. Instead of a global federalism of workers' communes, Valters chooses a direct participation in a democratic state, which recognizes and protects the rights of individuals.

VII

Now, when the intellectual context of Valters's 'Down with Autocracy' article is clarified, one has to turn to its meaning in the given historical situation. What was Valters doing in his article? Whom was he addressing, and for what purpose? Some commentators have suggested that Valters in his early articles was criticizing the orthodox Latvian Marxists, like Roziņš and Jansons-Brauns, for their anti-national stance (Šilde 1985, p. 111). This assumption is not quite correct. Valters's criticism of Marxist internationalism made him famous after the 1905 revolution, when he engaged in an extensive debate about historical materialism with the leading members of the LSDSP. In 1903, however, the LSDSP had not yet formed, and the Unionists, whose ideological leader was Valters, still hoped to play a decisive role in the unification of Latvian Social Democracy.⁶ Hence, even if Valters disagreed with the orthodox Social Democrats on national issues, Marxism was not openly criticized during this period. Indeed, Valters refers positively to Marx as a thinker who first emphasized the political struggle of the proletariat (Valters 1903b, p. 1). What Valters was actually criticizing is the political subservience, materialism, and the pro-Tsarist stance of the Latvian bourgeoisie and nationalist intelligentsia – especially Frīdrihs Veinbergs and Andrievs Niedra, but also Vilis Olavs-Plutte, Fricis Brīvzemnieks-Treulands, and others. The initial revolutionary thrust of the first awakening (Auseklis, Juris Māters) had been lost; the official nationalism of RLB has turned into a repressive, reactionary ideology, slavishly loyal to the Russian autocracy. Therefore the idea of national autonomy must be taken over by the revolutionary Latvian proletariat:

The old generation, the 'fathers', didn't leave us anything we could be proud of; their only legacy is a weak soul and credit unions, their only idea – to be feeble

and lazy. Through our own forces we want to become other than you, we want to raise our self-respect and to leave to the future more than feebleness The last ten years make up twice and thrice all the efforts of the last century. In this decade the Latvian revolutionary and the Latvian citizen were born This is the best proof that only in this way can we raise the new Latvia and the new people for it. (Valters 1904, p. 77)

Valters's demand for the dissolution of Russia must be viewed in this context. The Latvian bourgeoisie is reactionary, politically compromised, and collaborationist. The Latvian working class, on the contrary, still possesses energy, organizational capacity, and heroism. The bourgeoisie is not only slavishly loyal to the Tsarist government; it also benefits from the repressive power of the government that protects its interests. Indeed, they both lead a common fight against the Latvian working class. If Social Democrats could dissolve the Russian Empire and create an autonomous and democratic Latvian state, that would also mean a victory over the Latvian bourgeoisie, whose main supporter is the Tsarist regime. Valters wants to show that social emancipation from the Latvian bourgeoisie and national emancipation from the Russian autocracy are two sides of one and the same coin:

The people of Russia have to liquidate the state, and this liquidation can be only the work of the Russian proletariat itself. But this negative work must be supplemented with a positive action: the formation of a new organized community, which would differ from all previous efforts by an expropriation for the benefit of the working class and consequently for the benefit of the whole society, but also by the entrusting of a larger mission to each political national community. (Valters 1903a, p. 2)

These lines were written by Valters a few months before the 'Down with Autocracy' article. They show to what extent the vision of the dissolution of Russia was a part of broader socialist project, directed against the dominance of the Latvian nationalist bourgeoisie. The critique of Marxist internationalism came later, when the Unionists did not succeed in joining the LSDSP, and the Party, obsessed with centralization tendencies, started its own campaign against the Union.

VIII

Both proleptic interpretations – seeing Valters's contribution to political theory either through the Marxist prism of a victorious working class, or through the nationalist prism of the creation of the Latvian statehood – are not completely invalid. They allow us to put Valters's early writings in a broader perspective of the development of Latvian political thought. Since nationalist and Marxist traditions are the most significant ones in the historical perspective, such an approach might be partly justified. However, when particular episodes of political thinking are interpreted only retrospectively, from the point of view of later events, their specific meaning might get lost.

Valters's legacy is the case in point. His writings are usually interpreted either as if he knew what will happen in the future (the nationalist perspective) or as if he should

have known what will happen in the future (the Marxist perspective). Much less attention is devoted to his sources and to what Valters really meant when he formulated his theory of Latvian statehood. When we turn to these questions, the situation becomes much less self-evident. Valters's ideas about Latvian autonomy have their roots in different, even contradictory traditions: first and foremost, in Western liberal legal theory (Jellinek) and in the political theory of Russian *narodnichestvo* (Herzen and Bakunin). Valters used both these traditions creatively in order to achieve his own goals; namely, to convince his readers about the necessity to fight the Latvian bourgeoisie by dissolving the Russian Empire and creating national workers' republics.

To say that Valters's early work must be understood in its own historical context does not mean to deny any continuity between his early writings and later theoretical activity as an ideologue of the Latvian state. Of course, when Valters in 1917–1918 helped Ulmanis to prepare the conceptual ground for Latvian independence, he retained much of his earlier views – e.g. the emphasis on the direct democracy, extensive social rights of the workers, and other elements. However, we cannot assume any metaphysical existence of the idea of the Latvian state and ignore the context and author's intentions in making particular theoretical statements. This would mean the loss of any opportunity to achieve insight into how political ideas are related to practice, how they are born, gain popularity, and eventually die out. In 1903 Valters's ideas about the division of Russia were not accepted even by all his fellow Unionists, and for the majority of the population they were simply unknown.⁷ In 1914 his book *The Question of Our Nationality* received much more public attention, and in 1917–1918 his brochures and articles helped to form the theoretical basis of state-building. In all these episodes, Valters used different theoretical frameworks and urged his audience to take different opportunities in different historical contexts. In order to understand the development of the Latvian national idea, these frameworks and contexts have to be studied in their own right, without necessary reference to some proleptic mythology.

The history of Latvian political thought, like that of Latvian politics itself, has always been subjected to influences from different sides. Both Western European and Russian cultures, discourses, and intellectual traditions have made their impact on Latvian political thinking. Hence it always bears marks of hybridity and a multicultural heritage. This also applies to Latvian nationalist thought, which combines different theoretical influences. Identifying these influences and their interaction is important not only for seeing Latvian political thought in a broader European context. It is also necessary in order to understand the specific features of Latvian nationalism and political culture in general.

Notes

- 1 For the Marxist perspective see Upīts 1921, 1930; Laizāns 1961, 1966; Šteinbergs 1960, 1982; Vāleskalns *et al.* 1976. For the nationalist perspective see Birkerts 1927; Dopkewitsch 1936; Ģērmanis 1990; Dribins 1997.
- 2 Most history textbooks include references to Valters and his above-mentioned slogans (Bleiere, Butulis *et al.* 2005, p. 55; Bērziņš (ed.) 2000, p. 218). Valters has been twice included in the list of the most outstanding Latvian democrats

- (Mednis 2005; Šilde 1985). His home town, Liepāja, celebrated Valters's 130th anniversary in 2004 and in 2009 unveiled a memorial plaque, as well as a public library in his name. The Ministry of the Interior celebrates him as its first minister. It organized a student essay contest in 2004 and named a medal after him. Several academic publications have also appeared (Boge 1999; Kalnciema & Cera 2005; Peļše 2002).
- 3 *Proletāriets* was originally published by a group of Latvian Social Democrats living in the USA. However, in 1903 they joined VLSDS, and the editing was entrusted to Valters. The American group withdrew from the cooperation in late 1904, mainly because of ideological reasons. Valters and Ernests Rolavs created a new journal, *Revolucionārā Baltija*. See W. 1905.
 - 4 For terminological discussion see Pipes 1964. I will use the term 'narodniki' not only because of its shortness, but also because in the Latvian context of the time this term was not translated but used in its Russian version 'narodņiki'.
 - 5 Whether Rainis himself was a member of the *narodniki* organization led by Kārlis Aizups in 1882–1883, as suggested by some authors, is still unclear. See Birkerts 1925, p. 33–4; Upītis 1965.
 - 6 The question of the Unionists possibly joining the Party was discussed among Social Democrat groups in 1903–1904; this initiative was supported by the so-called Kurland group, led by Pauls and Klāra Kalniņš, as well as by Rainis. See Endrups 1936.
 - 7 However, one cannot fully agree with Aivars Stranga, who writes that Valters and the Unionists 'didn't have any political and ideological influence in Latvia at the beginning of the [twentieth] Century. Whatever they wrote in *Proletāriets* in Boston or Zurich, it didn't have more influence on events in Latvia than Parisian fashion-papers would have' (Stranga 1998, p. 15). Even Valters's opponents recognize that his articles were known and discussed among Latvian Social Democrats of the time (see Dauge 1933, p. 568). In the 1905 revolution the Unionists played a significant role, which was less important than that of the LDSDP, but nevertheless quite visible. In terms of the number of deaths among its members, Union was the second largest revolutionary organization that took part in the 1905 revolution (see Stučka (ed.) 1933, pp. 773–4).

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