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LATVIA, 1918–1920: A CIVIL WAR?

Aldis Minins

The post–World War I conflict that took place in Latvia between 1918 and 1920 was variously described as “struggle for freedom,” “war for liberty,” “independence war,” “civil war,” and so on. This article reviews the various concepts by discussing alternatives of statehood in Latvia. Its primary objective is to provide more evidence to the argument that the postwar conflict that took place in Latvia between 1918 and 1920 may be considered “a civil war.” By focusing on the Red and White terror campaigns, the author suggests that terror is one of the most overlooked aspects of the conflict that provides significant evidence for the perspective of “civil war.” He claims that the war was not “a class struggle,” as argued by Soviet historians, and calls for alternative explanations that would include the discussion of moral crisis, ideological conflict, ethnic and social hatred, clash of values, and the explosion of terror in Latvia.

Keywords: Latvia; civil war; alternatives of statehood; violence

American historian Arthur Meier Schlesinger compared the history of a nation with the memory of an individual. Just as a human being is afraid of losing his memory, the nation also does not want to embrace alternative interpretations of its past (Schlesinger 2006). However, our perceptions of the past are not fixed; they are not immune to intrusions or revisions that come from the present. I do not want to suggest that various concepts used to describe the post–World War I struggle in Latvia such as “war of liberation,” “struggle for freedom,” and “war of independence” should be dismissed. Today, they are dominant in the Latvian national historiography and are used by the Latvian media to construct the story of the building of the nation and the state. However, I would argue, that historians should be more aware of alternative views on the military conflict in Latvia. After all, this is one of the ways of avoiding the writing of history “according to the victors.” Viewing the struggle for power as a “civil war” would allow us to explain some of its most controversial features: moral crisis, ideological conflict, ethnic and social hatred, clash of values, and the explosion of terror and war violence in Latvia between 1918 and 1920. In addition to the discussion of the issue of why the conflict may be viewed as a civil war, my second aim is to show that terror was an inseparable part of this multidimensional conflict.

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What Is a Civil War?

There is no consensus on the definition of civil war. In a rather trivial yet basic way, a civil war is characterized as an armed conflict within the borders of a state between its citizens. However, large-scale riots could also be defined in a similar fashion. Usually, riots are not considered as civil wars, but in some cases it is assumed that uprisings, civilian mutinies, and guerrilla wars are also types of civil war. Very often civil wars follow rebellions and revolutions. Moreover, repressions (or terror campaigns) are often perceived as an integral component of civil wars. Civil wars may last from several days to many decades (Fearon 2004; Kalyvas 2006; Sambanis 2004; Simakov 1998).

Based on the various definitions of civil war proposed by the above-mentioned authors, I have selected a number of key processes and variables that, in my view, are most significant in defining a military conflict as a civil war. To qualify as a civil war, the conflict has to have the elements of the following processes:

1. **Nonviolent resistance** (formation of groups of like-minded people) against the ruling regime because of national, social, economic, religious, or other reasons;
2. **Violent uprising**, which is characterized by intensification of the conflict (turning repressive structures against the dissatisfied). It may be a conflict of average intensity (collisions between the dissatisfied and repressive structures, between the dissatisfied and supporters of the regime, or eruptions of ethnically, socially, or religiously motivated violence) or an armed conflict of high intensity (formation of paramilitary and military units and their involvement in open military actions);
3. **Armed struggle for power**, as war for control in/for the center and peripheries and for the separation from the center as in liberation or decolonization wars (characteristic to separatist multiethnic or multireligious states). On the one hand, such conflicts are based on the slogans of “liberation,” “freedom,” and “independence.” On the other hand, they rely on “separatism,” “radicalism,” and “terror.”

To qualify as a civil war, the above-mentioned processes must include a clearly observable fight among competing political forces for local and international support. The conflicting parties must employ mobilization, propaganda, and violence to reach their ultimate aim, which is the control over a specific territory. Political military opponents must be in charge of a definite territory that may change in the course of the conflict. They must support a functional government on the territory, or a government in exile. They must possess military forces (usually not regular armies, but paramilitary units). The opponents must also gain some international recognition and political, financial, and military support from outside, as it increases their chances of winning.

To what extent can these variables of civil war be applied to the case of Latvia? It is possible to argue that in 1919 there were three governments in Latvia: Kārlis Ulmanis' nationalist government, Pēteris Stučka's Soviet government, and Andrievs Niedra's pro-German government. All of them claimed authority over the whole of Latvia. They also represented the interests of various groups of Latvian society, and each had its own foreign allies and armed forces. Stučka's government was defending the rights of workers. In his turn, Niedra was protecting interests of the Baltic German

nobility and Germanized Latvians. Meanwhile, Ulmanis was defending the interests of the Latvian peasantry. Ulmanis's government was pro-Entente (initially, pro-German). In its turn, the government of Soviet Latvia was pro-Soviet, and Niedra's government was openly pro-German. Each government was receiving political, financial, and military support from different foreign states and had loyal armed formations. The regimes did not acknowledge each other and were in conflict. In general, the main lines of the conflict ran between the Latvian nationalists and the Bolsheviks, between the Bolsheviks and the Baltic Germans and between the Latvian nationalists and the Baltic Germans. In addition, the power struggle in Latvia was complicated by the presence of the monarchist, anti-Bolshevik forces of Pavel Bermond-Avalov (Павел Бѣрмон(д)т-Авалов), German volunteers, Estonian, Lithuanian, and Polish troops, the Entente's military specialists, volunteers from other European countries, and, finally, "green" peasant groups.

Historical Interpretations of the Conflict

How was the conflict conceptualized in Latvian historiography from the interwar years to the present? Studies conducted in Latvia in the 1920s and 1930s established a heroic and monumental narrative of the conflict as a Latvian "struggle for freedom" (*Brīvības cīņas*) or "war of liberation" (*Atbrīvošanas karš*). They were quite uncritical about its "heroes," such as the head of the Latvian government Kārlis Ulmanis or the commanders of the Latvian Armed Forces, Colonel Oskars Kalpaks and General Jānis Balodis. They also tended to vilify figures such as the leader of Soviet Latvia Pēteris Stučka, the head of the pro-German government Andrievs Niedra, the Commander-in-Chief of the Western Russian Voluntary Army Pavel Bermond-Avalov, and the Commander of the German occupation forces General Rüdiger von der Goltz. Moreover, the events of 1918–1920 were interpreted not so much by historians as by military professionals who have been personally involved in the war. These included Generals Mārtiņš Peniķis (1938b), Pēteris Radziņš (1921, 1922), and Fricis Virsaitis (1938). In these works, the conflict was studied superficially, with little perspective on the wider context of the Baltic region and the Russian Civil War. The concepts of the "struggle for freedom" and the "war of liberation," as developed during the interwar period, would be taken up again after World War II by Latvian historians in exile, and subsequently by various authors in the restored independent Republic of Latvia.

Historians are now reassessing the contribution made by earlier studies and are focusing on specific issues, especially on the foreign policy of the Latvian national government (Blūzma 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1994d, 1995a, 1995b, 1996; Cerūzis 2004; Feldmanis 1999a, 1999b, 2001; Jēkabsons 2007; Stranga 2000; Varslavāns 2008). Adding to the concepts of the "struggle for freedom" and the "war of liberation," they have begun to refer to the conflict as a "war of independence" (*Neatkarības karš*). In this way, they are explicitly revealing their predisposition and willingness to endorse the point of view of the victors. The concepts of "struggle for freedom," "war of liberation," and "war of independence" are intended, first of all, to legitimize the national statehood of Latvia.

Soviet historians did not endorse the national democratic alternative in Latvia. Although Soviet historians openly supported the Bolsheviks, in some cases they acknowledged some positive qualities of national democratic forces or even admitted some mistakes and deficiencies of the local Soviet regime. On the whole, they considered the conflict as “the class struggle for Soviet power in Latvia.” As a rule, their interpretations were opposed to the interpretations of the Latvian historians of the interwar period and exiled authors. Thus, in their works, *Stučka* and his commissars are described as heroes and the forces of the opposition as villains. The Soviets viewed the conflict in Latvia as an extension of the Russian Civil War (Bironis 1969; Millers 1967; Shteinberg 1983).

Starting with the second half of the 1980s, historians insisted on the necessity to reassess the concept of civil war that has been based on the thesis of “class struggle,” as offered by Soviet authors. Some noted that the class conflict was only one among many conflicts that constituted the civil war (Bernshtam 1992, 5, 17; Fitzpatrick 1994). Others completely rejected the thesis of “class struggle” because strict class divisions were an illusion in Latvia (Polyakov 1994, 283). Moreover, not only the workers, the “vanguard of the revolution,” but many other groups of society participated in the struggle for power. The fighting took place not only between social groups but also within them (Levin 1994, 235). The critique of the Soviet interpretation was that, by adding the “class struggle” to the notion of the “civil war,” the Bolsheviks simply tried to gain more political credibility and popular support.

In the Western academia, there is a well-established tradition of viewing the Russian Civil War as a series of separate conflicts. Robert Service claims that the armed struggle in the former territories of the Romanov dynasty was not one civil war, but several (Service 1998, 113). Norman Davies argues similarly that the concept of “Russian Civil War” does not fully convey its essence, because in reality it consisted of a whole series of civil and international conflicts (Davies 2009, 942). Niall Ferguson writes that after the defeat of Germany in the West, the war in the East acquired the form of many terrible civil wars (Ferguson 2006, 144). However, contemporary historians of Latvia do not follow the Western authors who take the view that there were several civil wars on the territory of the former Russian Empire.

In Latvian national historiography, there are only two instances when the concept of “civil war” has been used without endorsing the thesis of “class struggle.” The first comes from the interwar years and the second from the post-Soviet period. Nevertheless, this view has not gained significant acceptance in Latvia. Rudiņš (pseudonym of Latvian Army 2nd class war officer Pēteris Bērziņš) established a chronological framework for the “civil war” that started with Soviet Russia’s invasion of Latvia in late 1918 and ended with its defeat on 22 May 1919, when the Soviets were pushed out from Riga (Rudiņš 1930a, 1930b, 1930c, 1930d, 1930e). Yet it is almost impossible to provide precise chronological limits for the civil war in Latvia, since several dates may be taken as marking the beginning and end of the conflict. According to post-Soviet Latvian author Valdis Blūzma, who also supports the concept of a “civil war” without endorsing the thesis of “class struggle,” the war started in late 1918, when the governments of *Ulmanis* and *Stučka* were formed. He argues that it ended in early 1920, when *Stučka*’s government was disbanded, *Latgale* (the eastern part of Latvia) was liberated, and the government of *Ulmanis* obtained political and

military control over the whole territory of Latvia (Blūzma 1992, 11). Moreover, this period is also known for the desperate struggle of the Baltic Germans for their existence, their fight against the Bolsheviks (“survival war”), and their attempts to preserve their privileged status in Latvia.

Latvian historian Jānis Šiliņš criticizes the concept of “civil war,” indicating that the Baltic military campaign and the formation of Soviet statehood were inspired by Soviet Russia. He argues it was a financially and militarily supported aggression against the newly formed Baltic states, and therefore the conflict in Latvia (and throughout the Baltic) cannot be considered as civil war. Without the direct intervention of Soviet Russia, Soviet statehood in Latvia would never have been possible (Šiliņš 2011, 189–90). V. Blūzma also argues that Soviet Russia and Soviet Latvia maintained ties of dependence and that the Communist party of Soviet Latvia submitted to the leadership of Russia’s Communist (Bolshevik) party. The representatives of Soviet Latvia were full-fledged representatives in congresses of all Russia’s Soviet deputies. Furthermore, Soviet Latvia and Soviet Russia had a common currency and financial system (the Bank of Soviet Latvia was run by the Bank of Soviet Russia) (Blūzma 1998a, 17–18). Following Šiliņš’ and Blūzma’s thesis, it should also be noted that the German alternative (Niedra’s government) was entirely dependent on Germany. Unlike the supporters of Soviet and pro-German statehoods, pro-Entente forces (Ulmanis’ government) were significantly less dependent on outside help. They needed no external stimulus to form an independent state. After all, it was their long-cherished vision. Yet it is also clear that without the political, financial, and military support of the Entente, the independent state of Latvia would not have been formed. Historians Edgars Andersons and Alberts Varslavāns remind us that the political influence of Western powers in the Eastern region of the Baltic Sea was significant and often decisive (Andersons 1967, 428–9; Varslavāns 2008, 30).

Thus, the importance of external powers is clearly seen in the case of Latvia. In the second half of 1917, as well as in late 1918, Soviet statehood was organized from the Bolshevik center in Russia. The proclamation of independence of the republic of Latvia on 18 November 1918 and the formation of Ulmanis’ government were possible only after the *de facto* recognition on November 11 by the United Kingdom. The pro-German government of Niedra was formed under the supervision of the German General von der Goltz. It was in the interests of Berlin and the Baltic Germans to take over Latvia and to force the Entente to recognize Niedra’s government, but this plan was not successful (Andersons 1967, 457; Feldmanis 1999a, 30). Soviet statehood was brought on horse carts from the East, but the Ulmanis government, after two months of precarious existence outside the territory of Latvia, managed to arrive to Riga on the ship *Saratov* guarded by British warships (Varslavāns 2008, 25).

Alternatives of Statehood

How many alternatives of statehood were in Latvia? Discussions about the possible forms of statehood that could have arisen in 1918–1920 started already in exile (Andersons 1967; Šilde 1976) and resumed in the 1990s. In July 1991, speaking at

the World Congress of Latvian Scientists, Latvian historian Indulis Ronis mentioned three alternative forms of statehood: the Republic of Latvia, the Baltic Duchy, and the Socialist Republic of Latvia (Ronis 1993, 75). Blūzma also supports the view that three alternatives were possible on the territory of Latvia. First, a liberal democratic state could have been established on the basis of national self-determination with the support of the Entente. Second, a pro-German alternative could have been founded in the form of the Baltic Duchy associated with Germany. Although Germany lost the war in 1918, it remained undefeated on the Eastern front and tried to protect the interests of the politically and economically dominant Baltic Germans in the region. Finally, a radical left alternative could have been realized, which envisaged a proletarian dictatorship on the territory of Latvia. This alternative was supported by Soviet Russia with the help of Latvian Bolsheviks, the Red Riflemen, and their followers (Blūzma 1998b, 22).

Even though the national democratic alternative prevailed, this should not obscure the other possible forms of statehood. Left radicalism had the most realistic possibility to succeed in early 1919, but was discredited in the eyes of locals by Soviet agrarian, social, and economic policies that were followed by the Red terror. After the defeat of Germany in World War I and the November Revolution, the pro-German alternative became unrealistic. Nevertheless, Latvian historian Raimonds Cerūzis points out that the idea of the Baltic state was still alive in Baltic German circles between the spring of 1918, when the Brest-Litovsk peace concluded, and 1 February 1921, when Germany recognized *de jure* the Republic of Latvia (Cerūzis 2004, 57). Baltic German loyalty to independent Latvia remained a significant political issue throughout the interwar period.

Historians of the restored republic of Latvia have paid most attention to the three above-mentioned alternatives as the most realistic options. But there were at least four additional alternatives of statehood in Latvia. First, there was the possibility that a united Russia could be reestablished after the victory of anti-Bolshevik forces. In this case, cultural autonomy, instead of full independence, could have been granted to the Baltic provinces within a united Russia. Second, Adolf Šilde mentions that already before the events of 18 November 1918, the Latvian Interim National Council considered the possibility of creating a united territorial entity among Latvians and Lithuanians (Šilde 1976, 214–5). Similarly, Jozef Pilsudski suggested uniting Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, and Latvia into a single federal union, with Poland playing a leading role. The failure of this alternative was determined by the outcome of the Polish-Soviet Russian war (Dziewanowski 1969). Finally, there was also the alternative of a “divided Latvia.” In such a case, the Bolshevik regime would have come to power in Latgale. Indeed, after its defeat in Riga in May 1919, the Soviet Latvian government considered the possibility of adding Latgale to Soviet Russia (Stranga 2008a, 395). At that time Latgale could also have become part of Poland. Polish troops left Latgale (already freed from the Bolshevik troops) only in 1920.

So far there was little research on the popular support for Soviet, pro-German, and pro-Entente statehood alternatives. Most likely, the numbers of supporters for each were changing throughout the course of the conflict. For example, E. Andersons claims that, in January 1919, the Bolshevik government was welcomed by the majority of Latvia’s population as a defender of the interests of the Latvian nation. However, its

support evaporated in spring, when society faced a repressive Soviet policy. Gradually the population of Latvia learned that the Ulmanis government became less dependent on Berlin, which allowed it to win the support of the nation (Andersons 1967, 363, 428).

Terror

In the former Russian Empire, attempts at modernization unleashed a range of social processes, creating social instability during the process of transition. Tensions emerged between various national and social groups as well as inside them, that is, the dividing lines were both horizontal and vertical. These tensions were evident among and within those population groups that supported the above-mentioned alternatives of statehood in Latvia, and they were instrumental in motivating terror. High levels of violence were also determined by the fact that during World War I Latvian society became brutalized by mobilizations, requisitions, occupations, massive population displacement, and the general collapse of law and order.

One of the most significant contributions to the study of Red terror in Latvia was made by Jānis Šiliņš. He concluded that the decisive factor that led to terror in Latvia was an ideological conflict motivated by social and ethnic tensions. Baltic Germans were the primary targets of Red terror. They formed about 90% of all prisoners in Soviet prisons in Latvia. The Soviet decree of 25 April 1919, “On the representatives of Baltic landlords in Latvia,” envisaged the deportation of aristocrats and their family members from Latvia. The Bolsheviks did not implement the above decree only due to a lack of time, since they were forced from Riga a little more than a month after its adoption. In their stronghold of Latgale, the number of Baltic Germans was historically much smaller than in Rīga, Vidzeme (the northern part of Latvia), and Kurzeme (the western part of Latvia), where the numbers of terror victims among Baltic Germans were much higher.

Šiliņš singles out two stages of the Red terror campaign in Latvia: the first was the “chaotic stage” (November 1918–mid-January 1919), during which terror was used sporadically. The second stage was a period of “centralization of terror” (mid-January 1919–May 1919). According to Šiliņš’ calculations, the number of Red terror victims in Latvia was more than 2000 and about half were victims of revolutionary tribunals (i.e., they were eliminated in a centralized way). On average, the Red terror claimed at least 400 victims a month (Šiliņš 2011, 86, 94, 104). The Cheka was not operational in Soviet Latvia, as opposed to Soviet Russia, but this barely reduced the scale of terror. Among the institutions that conducted terror in Latvia were revolutionary tribunals, investigation commissions, political departments, and concentration camps (Stranga 2010, 67–70). The Statistical Commission of Soviet Latvia mentions 16 types of crimes for which people could be arrested: counterrevolution, belonging to the “White Guards,” belonging to the police, defection, espionage, service violation, offense to the Soviet government, failure to submit to Soviet government orders, dissemination of false information, speculation, robbery, murder, theft, production of vodka, criminal activities, and illegal possession of arms (Šiliņš 2009, 135). Eight concentration camps were formed on the territory of Latvia (four in

Rīga: Zaķusala, Kundziņsala, Sarkandaugava, Mežaparks, and four in Vidzeme: Valmiera, Gulbene, Pļaviņas, and Jērcēni). The Red terror was most severe in places where support for the communists was highest (Vecgulbene, Valka, Cēsis, Smiltene, and Rīga), testifying to its irrational and ideological character. The Red terror in Latvia was not so much related to the scale of actual anti-Bolshevik resistance as to the desire of the Bolsheviks and their supporters to “cleanse” the territories they controlled from their enemies (Šiliņš 2011, 86, 94, 104).

The Red terror affected Kurzeme and Zemgale (the southern part of Latvia) the least, where Soviet power stayed for only a couple of months. However, the population of Kurzeme and Zemgale went through two other stages of terror, when in spring 1919 the anti-Bolshevik forces gained control of the territory left by Stučka’s government, and, in autumn 1919, during the attack and retreat of Bermond’s army. Unlike the Bolshevik government, Latvia’s national government did not organize a campaign of terror and did not support state-sanctioned terror. However, it must be admitted that it did not fully eliminate arbitrary violence conducted by Latvian soldiers, such as robberies, rapes, and murders. Moreover, it was unable to control the revenge exacted by German troops, which was often endorsed at the command level. Data has not yet been systematized about the victims of terror committed by Latvian soldiers, German volunteers, Baltic Germans, and Bermond’s troops. Stranga indicates that the number of the victims of White terror could have reached between 1000 and 2000 (Stranga 2008a, 398). Thus, we may assume, the total number of terror victims killed by different forces could have been between 3000 and 4000 people.

James Fearon claims that a political military conflict that claims at least 1000 victims may qualify as a civil war (Fearon 2004). The use of quantitative criteria to define civil war is rather dubious, since there is a great variety in the numbers of victims killed in various civil wars, and the territories where civil wars have raged differ in size and population numbers. However, the total number of terror victims in Latvia was much higher than Fearon’s minimal threshold, which is widely used by different scholars.

Under the conditions of civil war, terror can be seen as “a solution for existing problems” (Melgunov 2006, 8–11). Usually during a civil war people are involved in a cycle of violence that may transform it into an “acceptable” rational practice. Terror may change their understanding of values such as justice, cooperation, compassion, and solidarity. Terror may also force people to fight for themselves by betraying their relatives and friends (Zubov 2009, 556).

Eyewitnesses described the “manners” of the Soviet regime in Riga in the first five months of 1919. Searches were carried out regularly in the city to seize jewelry, silver cutlery, tobacco, salt, sugar, alcohol, and clothing. Denunciations were a common practice among the servants of rich citizens of Riga and their family members (Volkov 2009, 380–1). For example, in January 1919, a nurse was detained in Mītava (Jelgava) because she was not able to help an injured soldier of the Red Army. She was denounced, accused of willful poisoning, and sentenced to death (Volkov 2009, 417).

As mentioned earlier, German inhabitants of Latvia were the primary targets of terror perpetrated by the Bolsheviks. Eyewitnesses confirm that at the end of 1918, when the Bolsheviks entered Riga, the following slogans were displayed around the

city: “Death to the Betrayers!” and “Death to the Germans!” Stučka himself offered to kill 100 Germans for every killed Bolshevik (Volkov 2009, 370–1, 375–6).

The Bolsheviks were not the only ones to direct their efforts against the Baltic Germans; they were joined by Ulmanis’s troops. In early 1920, the Latvian War Tribunal acquitted the holder of a Lačplesis War Order (the highest military award in Latvia) and three more Latvian officers who had raped and killed German women and murdered a German landowner and her two daughters in November 1919. At court, the accused openly declared that they hated Germans (Sprūde 2009). They were not sentenced and were acquitted as “heroes” of the Liberation War.

The Baltic Germans responded to Bolshevik and Latvian repressions with a campaign of White terror in the territories taken from the Bolsheviks. To the Baltic Germans, the barbarity that they experienced from the Bolsheviks in the first half of 1919 cemented the impression that all Latvians were Bolsheviks. Therefore, not only supporters of Bolsheviks but also ordinary Latvians (most of them inhabitants of Riga, who did not support the Bolsheviks) became the victims of revenge by the Baltic Germans.

Bermondts’s troops were especially ruthless. For example, in October 1919, they pierced out the eyes of Kārlis Fihtenbergs, an officer of the Latvian forces loyal to Ulmanis. They cut off his tongue and tortured him to death. Yet, unlike the Red terror, the White terror was motivated by revenge rather than ideological considerations of class. The above-mentioned examples show that terror was practiced on the territory of Latvia by at least three sides: the Bolsheviks, the Germans, and Latvian troops loyal to Ulmanis.

Throughout the civil war, terror was accompanied by xenophobia, vilification, and the labeling of perceived enemies. Contemptuous terms such as “Red beasts,” “White bloodhounds,” “Fritzs,” and “Landeszvēristi” (beasts of Landeswehr) were used extensively by various sides of conflict (Dzīlleja 1925, 70; Vīcups 1931, 9; Bērziņš 1995, 168; Stranga and Virsis 1990, 71).

In comparison with other peripheries of the former Russian Empire (e.g., Ukraine), Latvia was little touched by pogroms against local Jews during the civil war. Aivars Stranga mentions a few cases of robbery, beatings, and murders of Jews, but they hardly can be qualified as pogroms, because they appear to have been ideologically motivated. For example, anti-Bolshevik forces killed two Jews as supporters of the Bolsheviks in the violent, six-day battle for Kārsava in Latgale (Stranga 2008a, 414). Incidents of anti-Semitism were neither supported nor coordinated by the governments of Ulmanis, Niedra, or Stučka.

The civil war in Latvia also had an antireligious dimension. There were many attacks against clergymen and church property. For example, on 13 April 1919, a Central Workers Club was opened in the Vecgūbene church, and portraits of Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky were placed on the altar together with red flags. Similarly, 11 churches in the vicinity of Maliena were desecrated and shut down. In Catholic Latgale, the local inhabitants hid local clergymen from Bolshevik pursuers and resisted the robbery and desecration of a sacral site in Aglona. One of the hidden clergymen was Francis Trasuns, who later became a deputy of the Latvian Parliament (Stranga 2010, 74–75; Novickis 1929, 45).

Post–Civil War Relationship

Even if mutual distrust and suspicion are common in all wars, the opponents need not stay enemies for the rest of their lives. In 1921 and during the first four months of 1922, a total of 11,395 ex-soldiers of the Red Army, the former enemies of the Republic of Latvia, returned to Latvia with other refugees. However, the number of army veterans among the total number of those who returned (223,572) is not large (Bērziņš 1995, 240; Bartele and Šalda 1998, 28). Latvian historians Vitālijs Šalda and Tatjana Bartele argue that the Latvian authorities obstructed the repatriation of Latvian citizens belonging to certain categories of the population, including ex-Bolsheviks and ex-officials of the Cheka. Moreover, Latvian diplomats in Moscow tried to limit the arrival of significant numbers of landless peasants due to the fear that their presence would increase the social base of the Bolsheviks (Bartele and Šalda 1998, 26–29).

There were many Latvian Bolsheviks who had no desire to return to Latvia, as they were not satisfied with the government of Ulmanis. Many refugee families who had to flee to Russia during World War I accepted the new political regime in Soviet Russia. Moreover, a number of former officials and soldiers of Soviet Latvia remained confident supporters of the Soviet regime. Some held high-ranking positions in Soviet state administration, the military, as well as in academia. It is an open question whether the former Latvian rifleman Gustavs Klucis could have become an internationally famous graphic designer in interwar Latvia. However, most of these high-ranking Latvians did not survive the Stalinist repressions of 1937–1938. According to the USSR People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, in total, approximately 25,000 Latvians were arrested in the period between December 1937 and November 1938, and of these, 16,573 were sentenced to death (Riekstiņš 2009, 62).

During the interwar period, certain tensions existed between the supporters of the Republic of Latvia and those of Soviet Latvia who, during the civil war, changed their political views. A book published in the 1930s by Otto Vīcups, a retired Captain of the Latvian Armed Forces, gave evidence of the confrontation that continued well into the interwar years. Vīcups disclosed the names of several Latvian soldiers and politicians who had supported the Soviet regime in 1919. The scandalous book was broadly discussed in the Latvian media and forced several of the named officials to defend themselves in court. The debate forced some of the civil war veterans to change their views by accepting the official perspective of the conflict. There were many political converts. For example, the Latgalian Jānis Opincāns worked for the Bolshevik newspaper *Taisneība* during the civil war. However, in the interwar period he became a deputy of Parliament (Vīcups 1933, 121). Several former riflemen of the Red Army received respectable positions, though not the highest ones, in the military of Latvia. Moreover, in 1919, Roberts Lielbiksis, who later became the Commandant of the Latvian Parliament, had fought with the Red riflemen (Vīcups 1933, 151). Meanwhile, former Red rifleman Pēteris Avens joined the Latvian paramilitary organization *Aizsargi* (Bērziņš 1995, 151). In the 1920s and 1930s, the Political Department of Latvia (Security Service) was increasingly concerned with the political loyalty of former supporters of the Soviet regime.

The tensions of the civil war also continued between Baltic Germans and Latvians during the interwar years. The Baltic Germans did not forget the painful legacy of

war. As a result of the political transformation and the agrarian reform of the 1920s, they had lost much of their property and political privileges. There was a “media war” between Latvian and Baltic German newspapers in interwar Latvia. Both sides viewed the same events in a different light: for example, when writing about the defeat of Bolsheviks in Riga on 22 May 1919, where the Baltic Landeswehr played a decisive role, as well as during the battle of Cēsis. On 22 May 1919, a memorial was opened at the cemetery *Meža kapi* (Forest Cemetery) to honor dead soldiers of the Baltic Landeswehr on the anniversary of the liberation of Riga (Cerūzis 2004, 125–7). The Latvian press assessed this event rather negatively. Moreover, on 23 May 1929, the *Social-Democrat* newspaper published an article entitled “Liberators to be evicted from Latvia.” In this article, The Baltic Landeswehr was associated with bandits (Sociāldemokrāts 1929). On 9 June 1929, somebody tried to blow up the recently built monument. The local Baltic German newspapers accused the Social Democrats and the Central Union of Retired Latvian Soldiers of organizing the incident (Cerūzis 2004, 126).

From the point of view of Latvian national historiography, the Latvian civil war is considered a positive development leading to the emergence of national statehood, which survived in a democratic form until the Ulmanis *coup d'état* in 1934. Soviet historians saw democratic Latvia as superfluous; for the Bolsheviks, it remained an obstacle to the proletarian world revolution. For Baltic German historians, the civil war was a tragedy that resulted in the loss of property and privileges; it was most difficult to come to terms with the fact that, after several centuries of dominance, they had become one of the national minorities of Latvia.

Conclusions

Various concepts of “civil war” testify to the fact that historians lack a universally accepted definition of the phenomenon. The choice of the concept is often based on the subjectively determined parameters chosen by individual researchers. I argued that the military conflict that took place in Latvia between 1918 and 1920 could be easily classified and studied as a civil war that involved a whole range of conflicting parties. The use of the perspective of “civil war,” along the current dominant perceptions of “freedom battles,” “liberation war,” or “war of independence,” has its own advantages because it allows us to embrace the viewpoints of both the “winners” and “losers.” Moreover, it helps us to desensitize still-conflicting ideological views on the conflict and allows us to concentrate, as I demonstrated here, on such painful features of the war as multidirectional terror. Viewing the civil war in Latvia as part of a series of civil and interstate wars that swept the whole region from Finland to Turkey in the wake of the Great War also helps us to incorporate the Latvian case into a broader and more comparative international context.

The view supported by Soviet historians who saw the civil war in Latvia as simply a “class struggle” does not stand up to scrutiny. In Latvia, all groups of society (both national and social) participated in the power struggle that took place both within and outside these groups. The class tensions were only one element among many that prompted the escalation of violence. Bolsheviks usurped the concept of “civil war” by

merging it with their own explanation of “class struggle.” The other actors involved in the conflict avoided the concept of “civil war” because the Bolsheviks had appropriated it for their own ideological purposes. Furthermore, the concept of “civil war” was not usable, because it did not stress sufficiently the political legitimacy of the actors involved in the struggle for power. In this respect, “liberation war,” “independence war,” or “fights for freedom” were preferred as they lent more legitimacy to the contending sides.

During 1918–1920, Latvia was a battleground where several competing alternatives of statehood clashed with each other. However, there are no grounds to conceptualize the conflict in Latvia only as an “internal war.” The struggle was a complex process that involved local, regional, and international actors who interacted on various levels. Rather than being a “class war,” as Bolsheviks claimed, it was a “multi-dimensional conflict.” Perhaps the latter would be the most appropriate term to describe the power struggle that took place in Latvia because the term is stripped of any ideological connotations and refers rather to multiplicity of actors and layers of the conflict. However, the concept of “multi-dimensional conflict” does not have any emotional component, which is conveyed in concepts such as “civil war,” “liberation war,” “fights for freedom,” and “independence war.” Therefore, it would be too optimistic to expect its broader acceptance.

The civil war in Latvia lasted for more than one year (14 months), and it was accompanied by intense campaigns of so-called Red and White terror. The Red terror was motivated by ideological hatred and was centralized, while the White terror was sporadic and had the character of revenge. Brutality in the rear of the territory controlled by the Bolsheviks was greatly determined not only by notions of “class war” but also by failures on the front lines. There were several centers where terror was most appalling. Riga was the major one, since the Soviet government and its repressive institutions stayed in the city for five months. Also, there were three prisons and four concentration camps in Zaķusala, Kundziņsala, Sarkandaugava, and Mežaparks. The second center was in Vidzeme where several revolutionary tribunals and four concentration camps (in Valmiera, Gulbene, Pļaviņas, and Jērcēni) operated. Latgale must be mentioned as a third center where terror took place; the Soviet regime stayed there for a longer period of time than in other regions of Latvia. The wave of Red terror did not have enough time to expand into Kurzeme and Zemgale, since the Soviets managed to hold on there only for a couple of months. However, the populations in Kurzeme and Zemgale had to face two cycles of the White terror: the first one in the spring of 1919 when anti-Bolshevik forces occupied territories abandoned by the Reds, and the second one in the autumn of 1919 when the troops of Bermond-Avalov retreated into southwestern Latvia.

Revolutionary tribunals of the Soviet regime, arrests, concentration camps, hostage taking, draconic agrarian and minority policies, anti-religious policy, disrespect to private property, and family institutions were key factors that forced the population of Latvia to support Ulmanis' government. In comparison to the Soviet government, the interim government of Latvia did not try to establish its power using a centralized terror campaign. Yet it must be admitted that Ulmanis' government was not capable of controlling the random violence of some of its Latvian troops, including robberies,

rapes, and revenge-motivated murders. Moreover, the government was not able to prevent the White terror campaign conducted by the Freikorps and Baltic German troops.

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