



The Commission of Historians in Latvia: 1999 to the present

Andrejs Plakans

To cite this article: Andrejs Plakans (2018) The Commission of Historians in Latvia: 1999 to the present, Journal of Baltic Studies, 49:1, 87-102, DOI: [10.1080/01629778.2014.937905](https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2014.937905)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01629778.2014.937905>



Published online: 08 Aug 2014.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 222



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



The Commission of Historians in Latvia: 1999 to the present

Andrejs Plakans

Iowa State University

ABSTRACT

In 1999, the President of Latvia, Guntis Ulmanis, created a Commission of Historians and charged it with investigating the nature and consequences for Latvians and Latvia of the two occupations (the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany) the country experienced during the years of World War Two and afterwards. Special focus was to be direct to the Holocaust and to the multiple forms of repression practiced by the Soviet Communist regime. The Commission consisted of some 13-15 local, regional, and international scholars with specialized knowledge and, in some cases, personal experience, with the double occupation. The findings of the Commission were to be published in the form of a book series, with each volume devoted to a particular topic and containing reports delivered at international conferences or generated by ongoing research. The historical knowledge thus accumulated was to be disseminated widely, in the hope that it would become a basis for further research on this crucial and still-controversial period of Latvian history. A quantitative analysis of the twenty-seven Commission volumes published to date offers a capsule view of the Commission's research efforts and research strategies, describes the subjects covered so far, and summarizes some of the criticism attracted by the Commission as well as its contributions to the sum total of Latvian history.

KEYWORDS Latvia; WWII; history research; occupation; historical commission

Among the main events at the start of the “singing revolution” in the Latvian SSR was the 1–2 June 1988 plenum of the Latvian Writers’ Union, during which a well-known Latvian media personality, Mavriks Vulfsons, referred to the events of June 1940 in Latvia as “an occupation” (Heimane 2010, 145–49; Īvāns 1995, 120). Putting into play a term used for decades by Latvian Western émigrés, Vulfsons’s description of the 1940 Soviet takeover of Latvia shocked the Communist Party chieftains at the plenum, but quickly moved into public discourse and remained there ever since. Even two decades after Latvia regained independence, use or rejection of the term “occupation” is frequently the key to how someone stands on many other issues and therefore the word has become a kind of symbol of the cleavages in the Latvian population about the meaning of crucial turning points of the country’s twentieth-century history.¹ Profound disagreements about the past are not unique to Latvia, of course, and similar disputes have taken place in many other post-communist Eastern European countries. In most countries it has become the task of historians to correct the

“deformations” – as they are termed – created by the heavily ideologized “history” that the Communist Party served up to legitimize its monopoly of power.

In Latvia, the job of dis-establishing the Party’s official historical “line” began in the late 1980s and has taken many forms. One important component of these efforts has been the work of the Presidential Commission of Historians (henceforth CH) created on 13 November 1999 by President Guntis Ulmanis.² This article focuses on the body of published work – altogether 27 book-length volumes (see Appendix 1) – the CH has produced since its creation. It is true that as an organization the CH has its own internal (and to some extent a professional-political) history that at this juncture remains to be thoroughly researched and described (Onken 2007; Pettai 2011, 266–72). The present analysis, however, puts that internal history to one side in order to concentrate, first, on the place of the Commission in the recent history of Latvian history-writing, and second, at greater length, on the *Nachlass*, the body of historical knowledge the CH has generated and that is likely to remain when the CH completes its mandate.

As the Latvian Communist Party during the late 1980s lost its ability to dictate what kinds of history should not appear in print, the institutional base of Latvian historiography began to experience change as well (Onken 2003). Scholars who made their living researching and writing history continued mostly to be attached to the Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences. But when the Academy changed its basic structure in the mid-1990s, the Institute, with its cadres reduced, eventually moved to the University of Latvia, where it has remained as an autonomous unit. Organizationally, the Institute now belonged to the same large organization as the Faculty of History and Philosophy, the Faculty in which most academic historians in the Soviet period (Keruss et al. 2010) had received their early training and continued to receive it after 1991. During the 1990s, there also took place an expansion of other institutions of higher learning throughout the country, and a few of these new universities (e.g. Daugavpils University, Stradiņš University) created a cluster of positions for historians as well. Simultaneously with these developments, *popularwissenschaftlich* writings about the Latvian past proliferated as new book publishers came into being and competed in a book market. Some publishers (such as *Daugava*) that had been mainstays of émigré Latvian history-writing relocated to Latvia (in *Daugava’s* case, from Stockholm to Riga). History books that had been well known among Western émigré Latvians for decades (authored by such scholars as Arnolds Spekke, Ādolfs Šilde, Uldis Ģermanis, and Arvēds Švābe) were republished in Latvia, bringing into sharper relief the difference between accounts of the Latvian past taken for granted by Latvian readers outside the USSR and the standard accounts that had been around for the last decades of the Soviet period in the Latvian SSR itself. Employment opportunities for younger historians during the 1990s opened in a host of other cultural institutions with a historical orientation: museums, the national archive system, the Occupation Museum (founded in 1993), as well as government entities (such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) where non-Latvian language skills were highly valued. Entrepreneurial individuals found funding for history journals (such as *Latvijas vēsture*) that eventually stood the test of time and joined the prestigious *Latvijas vēstures institūta žurnāls* that had been the flagship periodical for Latvian historians for a long time. All of these developments had the cumulative effect of diminishing the centrality of any single institution concerned with Latvian history. History writing appeared to have entered an era of competition, and readers had to

learn to judge written work not by reference to the institutional membership of the author but by reference to the quality of each individual piece of writing. The importance of once significant prestige hierarchies among working historians was fading or at least changing. The old rule-of-thumb by which, for example, serious *researchers* from the Institute of History could be distinguished from *pedagogues* at the universities lost its relevance; nor could published history be assumed to have value because of one-or-another institutional imprimatur on a book's cover.

The relatively short period of time during which these momentous changes were reshaping the context of historians' work necessitated among them a mental reorientation to new and evidently permanent realities. In reaction, some individuals in the older generations retired (some leaving Latvia altogether), and some were asked to retire when a vetting of their Soviet-era credentials revealed serious problems. Many in the older and middle generations made the transition successfully, however, with several scholars republishing in reworked form the Soviet-era monographs on which their prestige as researchers had rested. Younger historians, of course, did not need to re-fashion themselves because their publications during the Soviet era, when they were historians-in-training, had been minimal or non-existent. Others, being younger still, came into the re-cast profession with entirely open minds, deeply interested in "Western" paradigms of doing history. A handful of émigré Latvian historians of various ages could help somewhat with the Western profession, being intimately familiar with its *habitus*, but the number of such guides remained small and diminished as time passed. Thus many younger Latvian historians ventured into the "Western" professional world on their own via grant programs that in some cases financed a year in a Western institution of higher learning for no more grandiose a purpose than reading Western historical literature, and in other cases provided sufficient support for acquiring an MA degree, and in a few instances a PhD as well. By the beginning of the twenty-first century the population of Latvian historians had become multi-faceted. More importantly, the reworked forms of Latvian academic history being produced by these changes showed every sign of becoming durable contributions. A new history of Latvians and Latvia was coming into being (e.g. J. Bērziņš 2000; V. Bērziņš 2000), and its under- or unresearched aspects were expected to be worked on as in any "normal" evolving historical profession. This promising mixture of transformative intellectual and institutional change created the setting in which the Commission of Historians began its work and informed the Commission's publications that began to appear in the year 2000.

The composition of the CH at its founding included 13 members from Latvia and six from other countries (the aggregate number would change somewhat from time to time). It had an elected head, the senior archeologist Andris Caune, at the time the Director of the University of Latvia's Institute of History. The Cabinet of Ministers issued the enabling directives for the CH on May 4, 1999, charging the Commission with "research about the 20th-century history of Latvia, with special attention to be paid to the analysis of the occupation [of the country] by two totalitarian powers – communist USSR and national-socialist Germany". The CH was also expected to explain the results of its research to both the local and an international audience; moreover, it was to recruit younger historians to the study of the problems of the twentieth century.³ In practice, the charge required the CH to focus on three distinct periods of the recent Latvian past: the Soviet occupation of the country by the USSR during 1940–1941, the occupation by Nazi Germany from 1941–1945, and the Soviet

re-occupation period from 1945 to the end of the 1950s. At the beginning, the Commission's research efforts were divided into a series of tasks for four working groups concerned with (1) crimes against humanity in the territory of Latvia 1940–1941; (2) the Holocaust in Latvia 1941–1944; (3) crimes against humanity in the territory of Latvia in the period of Nazi occupation 1941–1945; and (4) crimes against humanity during the period of Soviet occupation 1944–1956. The research of the CH was funded from the budget of the President's Office, with monies allocated from this Office to the annual budget of the Institute of History and then paid out to the researchers as salaries.

Formally, the CH has functioned as an advisory body to the President of Latvia, alongside other Presidential commissions dealing with strategic analysis, the state language, constitutional law, heraldry, minorities, the military, and clemency. Over its 14-year existence, the CH has retained its original general structure, with personnel changes occurring most frequently among the representatives from the international community. Nearly all Latvian and international members of the CH at the time of appointment were active historical researchers (some retired but still active) in other institutions, so that as a body they comprised a group of professionally trained specialists. The most notable change came in January 2010 with the retirement of the chairman, Andris Caune, who was replaced by Inesis Feldmanis, professor of history in the Faculty of History and Philosophy of the University of Latvia and a member of the CH from the beginning.⁴ Over the course of its existence, the CH has been successful in co-opting into its ongoing conference and publications efforts a wide array of researchers from other fields, with their contributions becoming part of the edited conference proceedings that bear the name *Vēsturnieku komisijas raksti* (Papers of the Commission of Historians) and render the entire collection interdisciplinary. Researchers in adjunct fields have generally been included because of their specialized knowledge of the WWII and post-war periods or their knowledge of primary (frequently archival) sources.

The Commission began its work during the years 1999–2000, and has continued to chip away at its ambitious agenda until the time of this writing. The economic downturn in Latvia, starting in 2007–2008, made it necessary to revise the agenda downward since all state-funded programs and institutions were required to make major, and in some cases disastrous, cuts in their operating budgets. Reductions in the President's Office budget (and hence that of the CH) did not necessarily mean cessation of all research on the CH agenda since most of the personnel working in and with the Commission continued to have incomes from other sources – the University of Latvia, the museum system, the Institute of History, and the National Library. Perhaps more significant effects were felt from reductions in the staff of the national archive system and from the reduced availability of funds for CH-sponsored conferences and publications. Judging by the infrequency of CH-sponsored activities in recent years the pace of work of the Commission has settled at a much lower level than in the first decade of its existence. At the same time, the CH has succeeded over the years in assembling a large number of independent-minded scholars for a common effort, which is a signal accomplishment in the post-1991 atmosphere of steadily growing academic individualism.

By the year 2013 the Commission's ongoing work had resulted in the publication of 27 separate volumes from 250 to 600 pages in length (see Appendix 1).

All but two of these volumes contain edited papers from the conferences (usually two) held in a preceding year, together with other studies recruited later. Several volumes consist primarily of transcribed primary-source documents. Most volumes were organized and edited by one or several Commission members, and a few have had guest editors. Because of the Commission's link to the President's Office, the daily Latvian press has treated the appearance of many of these publications as a newsworthy event. Beyond such prestige-enhancing features, the volumes manifest no sign of having had their contents shaped by any "official" pressures. All 27 are perfectly recognizable examples of similar academic publications: the scholarly depth of the contributions is uneven, the editors appear to have spent differing amounts of time eliminating redundancies, and not all authors have spent the same amount of time in reworking conference drafts into publishable papers. In principle, the volumes have targeted not only a specialized but also a general audience, and for a time each has been available for purchase by the general public in the familiar bookstores in downtown Riga, Latvia's capital. The larger meaning of the entire corpus is that it constitutes a major component of the written output of all working Latvian historians during the past 14 years and, when a thorough history of Latvian historiography comes to be written, will have to be evaluated as such. The assessment offered here is a preliminary form of such an evaluation.

In view of the Commission's formal connection to the President's Office, a fair question is whether the research output collectively has to be treated as "official history".⁵ Or, to put it more crudely, are the sum total of the findings of the CH historians merely the byproduct of an "official" post-Soviet ideology of the Latvian state, and do they simply endorse the preferred historical interpretations of those in power since the end of the 1990s? The Latvian language refers to such historical works as *pasūtīta vēsture* (commissioned history, i.e. history written according to the specifications of those who have paid for it). Another reason for exploring the power-history nexus lies in the longer-term history of Latvian-history writing. From the founding of the Latvian state in 1918 onward, the writing of national-level history has never been entirely free of government entanglements. The tie was established during the first independence period (Bolin 2012, 183–256), and of course continued in an especially graphic way during the long Soviet era. In the interwar years, the nexus manifested itself in the form of a state-funded higher educational system, with the income of the professoriate coming almost entirely from the national budget, and in an Institute of History (founded in 1936 at the initiative of the authoritarian president Kārlis Ulmanis) that explicitly used a state-endorsed research agenda. In the Soviet era, as is well known, there was a nearly complete subordination of Latvian historiography to the ideology of the Communist Party. At no point in the long decades since 1918 is it possible to say that Latvian historians as a distinct *grouping* of professionals were in a position to confront, question and oppose political power if that proved to be necessary. There was no single professional organization of historians in the first independence period, and such organizational independence was unthinkable during the Soviet years. The power-history nexus was always identifiable, but of course that did not mean that all history writing was "commissioned" or that those in power were always interested in, or capable of, dictating this or that conclusion about the past.

The post-1991 situation has been more complex, possessing some of the features of the pre-1940 system but also absorbing the influences from the historical professions of the Western democracies. There the distinction between the "public" and

“private” sectors has been long-standing, with historians’ organizations belonging to the category of NGOs (non-governmental organizations). In Latvia, however, since 1991 virtually all research endeavors in all academic and research fields, including history, have existed and continue to exist largely because of funding allocated to them in the national budget via institutions of higher learning, museums, archives, and research institutes, such funding being supplemented by research monies obtained through competitive grants from western European foundations and various sources in the European Union.

Because the aggregate income of all working historians in Latvia originates, in whole or in part, in the national budget, the probability that the Commission’s work would be uniquely tilted toward the outcomes that people “in power” (the President, the Cabinet, or the parliament) would prefer to read seemed small to begin with. It is doubtlessly true that the existence of the CH has directed some resources, and therefore some research effort, toward an era of recent Latvian history that otherwise might have received less attention. Yet a close reading of the CH publications *in the context* of general attitudinal shifts in the history-linked thinking in the Latvian population since 1991 strongly suggests that the research agenda of the CH has been very close to what might be termed the “popular agenda” about the Latvian past. Until the 1989–1991 period it was precisely the history of the twentieth century – especially the loss of statehood in 1940 and the occupations that followed – that was most subject to Party-dictated distortions and, therefore, most in need of reworking. This was common knowledge among historians and non-historians alike. Moreover, during the 1990s the print world in Latvia was saturated by waves of *popularwissenschaftlich* history (e.g. Ģērmanis 2009), virtually all of it aimed at filling “blank spots” in the Latvian past and “uncovering” the aspects of the Soviet period over which Party ideologues had drawn a veil of secrecy. The CH and its enabling document, in other words, reflected this mood by conceptualizing the events of 1940–1941 and 1944 through the late 1950s as containing many as yet undefined “crimes against humanity”. An unquestionably innovative step taken by the CH was to bring the period of the Nazi occupation (1941–1945) under the same detailed scrutiny as the Soviet years. Within the general time framework of 1940–1960 used by the CH, the “German period” would receive much more research attention than it had ever received before. In addition, the presence in the CH of historians and researchers from other countries, including Western countries, meant that the Commission’s work would incorporate not only subjects of interest to Latvians but also those of a much more inclusive audience. This was particularly important for such topics as the Holocaust, since the weight of public opinion, even by 1999, clearly favored explication of the anti-humanity crimes of the *Soviet* regime. For many, the four-year period of Nazi occupation had receded into the distant past – it had become truly “historic” – while life under an oppressive Soviet regime, having continued for decades after World War II, was still a recent emotion-laden memory and had to be attended to immediately.

Quantitative description is one useful way to review the participants and scope of the work in these 27 CH volumes, and [Tables 1](#) through [3](#) present types of counts. [Table 1](#) is a simple summary of the number of different authors appearing in the collection, and the frequency with which each contributed. There were altogether 190 different authors offering 486 separate written pieces.⁶ The contributions generally have the features of research reports (short and focused), but most appear to be revised, though still relatively short, conference presentations, with only a few having

Table 1. Frequency of contributions (*n* of contributions = 486).

Frequency	Authors	Frequency	Authors
1	98	15–16	2
2–3	48	18–19	3
4–6	18	20	2
7–9	8	24	2
10–12	9		<i>N</i> = 190

the length of full-fledged book chapters. Slightly more than half of all authors appeared in the 27 volumes only once, as befitting their rather specialized research. The multi-contribution authors, unsurprisingly, were all researchers living and working in Latvia (mostly in Riga); several were (and are) permanent members of the CH but all belong to a cadre of specialists known for their expertise in the World War II period and/or their knowledge of the inner workings of the occupation regimes. Many of these authors had already published widely in other venues, having developed “research programs” on relevant WWII subjects – the deportations, the resistance, the Holocaust, repressive mechanisms, the partisans – during the 1990s, so that the CH publications became one additional outlet for their ongoing work. The contributions of the specialists are almost always archive-based findings (in contrast with others that are methodological or theoretical in nature) and thus constitute components of the “new historical information” that was the primary goal of the CH. A number of these researchers were (and are) prominent members of the Latvian historical profession (e.g. the late Henrihs Strods, Aivars Stranga, Inesis Feldmanis, Daina Bleiere, Rudīte Vīksne, Irene Šneidere) and their contribution to the CH volumes invariably read like the work of seasoned veterans of the profession. At the same time, use of the term “elite” for the CH researchers would be misleading, since the full list of participants suggests that the conference/publication organizers always cast their net much wider than that term implies. Systematic outreach beyond the best-known names was one of the CH assignments, so that younger scholars such as Ritvars Jansons, Eriks Jēkabsons, Uldis Neiburgs, Kaspars Zellis, and Artūrs Žvinklis also contributed multiple works. The thought was that these younger researchers, through work on their dissertations, had become familiar with the archival base for understanding the inner workings of Nazi- and Soviet-era institutions, both civilian and military, as well as with all the languages (Latvian, German, and Russian) required for their informed use. The generational merging in the contributors’ list, in other words, suggests inclusivity. Yet there is no doubt that the weighty presence of the Commission’s endeavors in the Latvian history landscape for a period of some 14 years has *seemed* to privilege the post-1940 era of Latvian history at the expense of other centuries of the Latvian story. Whether this seeming favoritism is true in terms of resource flows within the national budget and among historically oriented scholarly institutions cannot be determined from the evidence in the CH volumes alone.

From the outset the CH needed to involve in its work scholars from other countries, and [Table 2](#) summarizes how this assignment was implemented over time. Not surprisingly, the countries of residence represented most frequently among contributors – beyond Latvia – were the other two Baltic states (Estonia and Lithuania), and then Russia and Germany – the two lands most directly involved in the history of the two occupations. In rough terms, slightly over half of all the *contributors* to the CH volumes came from Latvia. If we were to cross-tabulate the number of *contributions*

Table 2. Country of residence of contributors (*n* of contributors = 175)⁷.

Country	No.	Country	No.	Country	No.	Country	No.
Latvia	93	Poland	7	Canada	2	Moldova	1
Estonia	13	Belarus	4	Ukraine	2	France	1
Lithuania	10	Sweden	2	Norway	1		
Russia	13	Gr. Britain	2	Netherlands	1		
Germany	9	Finland	2	Romania	1		
US	8	Israel	2	Czech Rep.	1		

with the author's country of origin, the result would be very much in favor of Latvian scholars also. The countries with minimal representation (one or two persons) signal an effort by the CH organizers to introduce a comparative dimension in those volumes where comparisons were relevant. In many instances, the subjects that foreign specialists reported on had to do with the instrumentalities of German or Soviet occupation of their own countries, eliciting comparisons with Latvia. The Latvian émigré historians were represented prominently by Andrievs Ezergailis (USA: Holocaust) and Kārlis Kangeris (Sweden: mechanism of occupation), both of whom contributed multiple reports. Holocaust researchers from abroad included some survivors (e.g. Edward Anders) and well-known scholars of Jewish life in the Baltic region (e.g. Dov Levin). In a number of instances the CH counted on external experts to provide synthesizing accounts – “state of the art” presentations – about a particular research area (military policy, extermination practices, local reception of the occupying power) and the research that was still needed.

Finally, with the help of [Table 3](#) the discussion can be shifted from contributors to the *themes* of their contributions, which presents special problems. In overseeing the progress of contributions toward eventual publications, the CH editors wisely refrained from squeezing them into the kinds of either/or classifications [Table 3](#) uses, therefore most of the essays in the 27 volumes are not as structurally and thematically one-dimensional as the table implies. A different analyst could place

Table 3. Main focus of contributions.

1. Historiography (54)
2. Resistance (47)
3. External attitudes toward Baltic (27)
4. Analogous events in other countries (47)
5. Soviet occupation (1940–1941; 1945–1960)
deportations (21), KGB and security services (19), liquidation of the army of the Republic of Latvia (10), press and propaganda (9), legal system (5), 1940–1941 (3), foreign policy (3), agriculture (3)
2 each – statistics, prisons, censorship, Latgale, libraries, MPs, scientists
1 each – iconography, pre-1940, education, housing, museums, local government, ideology, nationalities, economic policy, academe, filtration camps, administration, diplomats
6. German occupation (1941–1945)
Holocaust (86), occupation policy (14), Latvian Legion (8), propaganda (7), economics (5), Baltic Germans (3), diplomats (3)
2 each – military, Arājs Commando, monuments
1 each – church policy, laws, popular attitudes, race theory, <i>Wehrmacht</i> , press
7. Other subjects
general (30), change of occupying power (10), demography (9), collaboration (7), émigrés (5), post-1991 (4)
2 each – flight and exile
1 each – teaching WW II, comparisons, WWII, DP camps, Occupation Museum, family separation, rehabilitation, historical memory

them in different categories and, indeed, many could easily fit into several categories. In addition, some contributions were unclassifiable, because they were concerned mainly with a general “setting of the stage” or discussed issues not relevant to World War II and the occupations. Nonetheless, a summary table – however imprecise around the margins – is necessary to highlight how over time the complexity of CH research grew to fit the complexity of the subject matter. Topics that seemed in the abstract to be cleanly distinguishable tended to merge with each other when written description presented “the facts” but also explanations of the facts and sought to place the investigation into a precise historical framework. This is not surprising: after all, the CH’s mandate called for continuous in-depth investigations of a mere 20-year period during which numerous complex *systems* and *networks* of human activity overlapped and interacted with each other, producing not a clean-cut and simple time-defined story but a multi-layered set of stories with many actors who were alive before the stories started and after they had ended, and who interacted with each other in the interim.

The aggregate figures for the large categories (numbered 1 to 6) and their sub-categories do suggest, however, that the CH conference organizers and editors of the volumes were generally able to keep the venture within its mandated mission. The Soviet and German occupations have remained in a commanding position for 14 years for the entire period. The German occupation was easier to delineate conceptually because it had a clear beginning and a clear end (July 1941–May 1945). By contrast, the Soviet occupation had a distinct first phase (1940–1941) but a longer-lasting second one that, as defined in the original brief, was to end, as far as CH research went, sometime in the later 1950s or early 1960s. [Table 3](#) also shows, however, that idiosyncratic presentations were always part of the picture, since some research reports were really structured more by the specific interests of the individual author than by the issue at hand. Professional courtesy prevailed in such instances: once a team of “specialists” had been identified and invited to participate, the CH organizers could not easily back away from off-center contributions.

[Table 3](#) also reveals a determined effort to establish a proper inventory of the methods needed and the sources available for a thorough study of the Soviet and Nazi occupations of Latvian territory: this explains the large number of contributions (Category 1: 54) dealing with the historiography of the two subjects. One problem was finding the appropriate balance of the research time spent on the two occupations. The early division of the research effort into four “teams” (see above) meant that the early published volumes – one in the year 2000, two in 2001, four in 2002, two in 2003, and four again in 2004 – were able to report steady progress on both occupations almost simultaneously. Of the first five volumes appearing in print, one dealt with the overall impact on Latvia of World War II, one with the repressive policies of totalitarianism as a system, and three on different aspects of the German occupation (the Holocaust in Latvia, the occupation as such, and the information flow from Latvia to the outside world during the occupation). The “tilt” toward the German occupation period in these early publications was meant to correct the dearth of detailed knowledge among both scholars and general readers of the 1941–1945 (“German”) period. A continuous exposé of the human cost of the *Soviet* occupation had been taking place since 1945 in the voluminous writings of Latvian exiles in the West, and many of these studies had been making their way into Latvia as reprints and republications from 1988 onward. Moreover, the WWII years of the Soviet occupation were the centerpiece

of the writings being generated from the late 1980s by those in the contemporary population in Latvia who had experienced repression but had to keep silent for four decades. By contrast, the historical literature on the *German* years was relatively meager: a few publications (memoirs, polemical accounts) among Latvian emigrés, including the systematic efforts of the Latvian historian at Ithaca College in the USA, Andrievs Ezergailis, to open the subject of the Holocaust in Latvia to thorough scrutiny (Ezergailis 1996). The early publications of the CH clearly meant to restore some balance by devoting the second volume of the series (2001) entirely to the problems of Holocaust research in the Latvian territories.

In bringing both occupations under its lens and keeping both there, the Commission appears to have been working on the assumption that a full understanding of each could be best achieved by recognizing that, for the purposes of *historical explanation*, the two were intertwined. Both were triggered by the prolegomena, course, and aftermath of World War II throughout which the main historical actors in the region were the USSR and Nazi Germany. A full explanation of individual human decisions producing specific events, activities, and behaviors had to incorporate the larger context within which they unfolded, and this larger context consisted of two warring superpowers interacting with occupied and subordinated local populations. The first Soviet occupation could not be understood without reference to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in August 1939, and the military base agreement of October of that year. The 1941 German occupation of Latvia could not be understood without reference to the Soviet occupation of the preceding year (what Latvians had designated as *Baigais gads* [annus horribilis]). In turn, the years between 1945 to about 1955 in Latvia – the first decade of the Soviet re-occupation and the continued resistance posed to Soviet power by the national partisan (“the forest brothers”) movement – could not be properly understood without reference to the German period, the existence of the Latvian Legion from 1943 onward, and the “Courland Kettle” in the last months of the war. The post-war policies of the second Soviet occupation period at least until the death of Stalin in 1953 – the filtration camps, the work of the Extraordinary Commission in 1945, the punishments meted out to the residents of the Latvian territory for “collaboration with fascism” – all testified to the existence of long-term effects of World War II in the Baltic area long after the German capitulation of May 1945. None of this, of course, would come as a surprise to anyone already familiar with this complex history. The relatively short period of real historical time under scrutiny – 15–20 years or about a third of a human lifetime – was locked in the memories of those who lived through it and wrote about it as a single multi-link chain of destructive, threatening, repetitious and traumatizing events. The nuts-and-bolts research on specific topics made the linkages abundantly clear, so that in their introductions and conclusions many published contributions in the 27 volumes stress that the *de-contextualization* of this or that particular phenomenon during the entire 1940–1960 period results in oversimplification and loss of understanding.

In Table 3, no particular significance should be attached to the frequency counts for the various *subcategories*. The low numbers for them can be read as indications of how much more research needs to be done in spite of 14 years of work. The subjects needing further exploration include the policies of the two occupying powers toward religious institutions; the economic policies of the two regimes; such socio-demographic matters as the long-term impact of the separation of families through deportation, conscription, and labor recruitment; and the particulars of the Latvian

civilian personnel (technical experts, specialists of various kinds) who were employed in the administrative structures permitted by the two occupying powers (especially the so-called *Landeseigene Verwaltung* [Indigenous Administration] of the German period). The aggregate demographic impact of the war and the two occupations – estimated to have cost Latvia one-third of its population by the end of the 1940s – also remains based mostly on estimates and needs further examination. The entire question of collaboration remained tangential through the first 25 volumes, but a special conference was held on the subject in October of 2009 and its proceedings appeared later as Volume 26. As Table 3 suggests, much of the work of the CH researchers has been focused on the mechanics of repression, particularly on those that involved the destruction of human life or the forceful removal of human beings from the territory of Latvia. Work on the specifics of everyday life (*Alltagsgeschichte*) under both occupations still needs a great deal of attention.

Considered as a separate entity, the CH volumes have distinguishing characteristics just as any other body of publications emanating from a single source. Some of these features appear in Tables 1 to 3, and in a longer analysis other features could be examined. A very different problem concerns the *impact* these volumes have had on the readership and on the historical profession in Latvia. This problem, however, has to remain unresolved for the time being because the series is not finished and the work of the CH itself has not formally concluded. Several observations are possible nonetheless from the evidence at hand. In 2010, when the leadership of the CH changed hands, the new director, Inesis Feldmanis of the History Faculty of the University of Latvia, observed that the Commission should do more to popularize its work,⁸ implying that not enough outreach has been done to date, but offering no suggestions about how such an implication could be tested. Unfortunately, the larger impact of what is essentially academic research is very difficult to gauge under any circumstances, in large part because to reach the general public academic findings normally go through a longish course of being filtered through media reports. Quantitative measures of the impact of the 27 CH volumes do not exist, even though most serious published Latvian-language materials about WWII and the two occupation regimes contain citations from them. At the same time, other indicators could be used to argue that the emerging profiles of the two occupations have managed to do little to change public discourse about the World War II period and its aftermath. The “occupation question” continues to roil Latvian political life and appears to be leading a life entirely detached from the factual material presented in the Commission’s output. Thus, whether additional clarifying “facts” about the 1940–1960 decades have changed or will change the nature of non-specialist opinion is very much an open question. Contemporary modes of engaged thought in the general public and in the intelligentsia seem at times to be fed less by historical “facts” than by current concerns about the relative distribution of political power among Lettophones and Russophones and about the foreign policy interests of the Russian Federation. The willingness of the media and of political activists to surrender politically useful stereotypes about the WWII period is another complicating element. The recent emergence in Latvian academe of the systematic study of historical memory – how “facts” and personal experiences about the two occupations are remembered and how they enter the thinking of the current population (Kaprāns and Zelče 2011) – is a welcome development. Yet the work of researchers in this subfield continues to document continuing differences between patient endeavors at uncovering and

ordering heretofore unavailable historical information and the general public's willingness to consume that information selectively.

This raises the important question of just how far complicated historical epochs – as the 1940–1960 period most assuredly is – can be effectively “popularized” without diminishing that complexity. In funding the Commission, the Latvian government was willing to use budgetary resources to help *problematize* an epoch that during the Soviet period from the Party's viewpoint was considered unproblematic – i.e. who the “enemy” was is clear and unchallengeable. The period continued to appear unproblematic in the wave of anti-Soviet writing and sentiment that followed 1991, except that now the nature of the “enemy” was redefined. The intent of the CH was to supply public discussions with a record that would document fully, beyond all shadow of doubt, the events and processes that seemed forever contested. But a fact-focused and fact-laden history – what happened? when? who was involved? who was responsible for what? what terminology was appropriate? – has never been particularly *popular* anywhere because this type of history-writing is unlikely to add drama to past events. Rather, it is more likely to reveal the ironies, tragedies, subtleties, contingencies, and ambiguities of human behavior under stress. By contrast, the essence of popular history is simplification, dramatization, and the creation of an unambiguous narrative with self-evident heroes and villains.⁹ The research of the CH has opened many questions to which no simple answers can be offered, and the “master narrative” that may emerge in time will most likely show the presence, in all the involved populations, of the entire spectrum of human behaviors from the morally praiseworthy to the most brutal.

It also has import to note that publications not directly linked to the CH but authored by contributors to the CH volumes have indirectly circulated its research by means of general and specialized histories. Judging by secondary sources used and by internal references, the two complementary bodies of work – the CH publications and those that might be called their “companion literature” – are closely related. This is not a surprise, since the authors or editors of the latter frequently have also been the multi-contribution authors in the CH endeavors. Perhaps the most notable work was a general history of Latvia in the twentieth century, which has since been translated into some five languages and has now become a standard reference work for twentieth-century Latvian history (Bleiere et al. 2005). Another is a comprehensive volume entitled *Latvia in The Second World War* (Bleiere et al. 2008), which is not likely to be displaced by any similar work of synthesis soon. More specialized works comprise long annotated “lists” of names: persons repressed during the first Soviet occupation, and people deported during the June 1941 and 1949 deportations (Pelkaus 2001; Šķinķe 2007; Bleiere and Riekstiņš 2007). A recent multi-author volume, entitled *Latvian Jews and Soviet Power 1928–1953*, consists of a detailed examination of the history of Latvia's Jewish minority during the first independence period and the Soviet years (up to the death of Stalin) (Dribins et al. 2009). Numerous document collections have also appeared in Latvian and other languages, presenting the originals of the archival material used by many of the Commission's volumes (e.g. Šneidere 2001; Plakans 2007). The widening of research on the Nazi occupation period has led to, among other original studies, published doctoral dissertations on aspects of those years (e.g. Zellis 2012). With the appearance of each of these works, the amount of information about the Soviet and Nazi occupation periods now in wide circulation has been increased substantially. Also, the progress reports of the Commission to the

President outline an impressive amount of interaction with public institutions, the school system, as well as the Occupation Museum in Riga.

The “impact” question thus remains unanswerable at this juncture. When the Commission does terminate its work officially, Latvian historical research on WWII and its aftermath will continue in the pre-CH venues – the universities, the Institute of History of the University of Latvia – and among the scholars working in museums and the archival system. How the new information yielded by the work of the CH comes to be absorbed into such research is a historiographical question, to be answered in the course of time. The supportive research structures may also change as the current economic austerity regime takes its toll so that even the short-term future remains unpredictable. Whether the work of the CH will have had a synergistic effect on Latvian history-writing still remains to be seen. Notwithstanding the economic difficulties, new initiatives have been launched. Thus, for example, in 2010 there took place in Riga the very first congress ever of all Latvian historians, which, the organizers hoped, would generate a professional *esprit de corps* and additional further efforts at self-organization. In 2011 a Latvian-Russian international commission was created to promote cooperation between historians in both countries, which was especially important from the Latvian point of view in light of the need for access to Russian archival collections concerning the WWII period and the Soviet phase of Latvian national history. In the realm of popularization, a new publications series called “The Small Historical Library” was launched in 2010 in order to provide the general public with short accounts written by specialists of important aspects of Latvian history (Mazā bibliotēka 2013). Even if future years witness no additions to the CH publications list, the Commission’s contribution to the sum total of written Latvian history about the twentieth century remains self-evident and undeniable. Twenty-seven volumes of permanent and exploratory findings about the two occupations and their aftermath have added to the totality of Latvian historical writing a dimension that it otherwise might not have had.

Notes

1. See Denis (2008). A 2009 poll of 400 twelfth-grade students reported that 54% of the ethnic Latvian students considered the June 1940 events an “occupation” whereas only 29% of the ethnic Russian students did so (reported in Sprude 2009).
2. All documents concerning the founding of the Commission of Historians can be found through the home page of the Office of the President of Latvia (<http://www.president.lv>) under the heading of “Komisijas” [Commissions].
3. The enabling directives were signed by the Prime Minister Vilis Krištopāns.
4. For Feldmanis’s conception of his and the Commission’s future work, see the interviews with him in *Latvijas avīze*, 29 January 2010 (“Bez Vesturnieku komisijas vairs nevar”), and in *Latvijas Vēstnesis*, 2 February 2010 (“Daudzu mīklu atrisinājumam vēl nav pienācis laiks”).
5. There are surprisingly few English-language analyses of the genre of historical writing usually referred to as “official history”. One major survey of types of history writing (Wolf 1998) has no entry for it, though the term appears in nine other entries. A discussion of the genre in the realm of military history can be found in Higham (1970) and in Grey (2003). The question of “official history” in connection with the work of the CH has recently been discussed briefly by Zelče (2009, 48).
6. Five contributions had three authors and 25 were co-authored.
7. The numbers in Table 2 are approximate since it proved impossible to identify the place of residence of all contributors at the moment their contributions were published. Also, in some

cases, given the 14-year time frame, some contributors changed their place of residence in the time period between contributions.

8. See the interviews with Feldmanis in *Latvijas avīze*, 29 January 2010 (“Bez Vēsturnieku komisijas vairs nevar”).
9. An example of an erudite “popular history” is Ģermanis 2009. This work was first published in 1958 by the Latvian emigre publishing house *Daugava* in Sweden and experienced five reprintings there. Six more printings of it have appeared in Latvia since 1991. In announcing the appearance of the 11th (updated) printing in 2009, the internet portal DELFI (19 January 2009) used the following sentence: “Although the book depicts Latvian history, it can be read as a novel” An English translation of it appeared in 2007.

Notes on contributor

Andrejs Plakans is professor emeritus at Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, USA. His most recent book on Baltic-area history is “A Concise History of the Baltic States” (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

References

- Bērziņš, J., ed. 2000. *Latvija 19. Gadsimtā: vēstures apceres*. Rīga: Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Apgāds.
- Bērziņš, V., ed. 2000. 20. *Gadsimta Latvijas vēsture*. Rīga: Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Apgāds.
- Bleiere, D., I. Butulis, I. Feldmanis, A. Stranga, and A. Zunda. 2005. *Latvijas vēsture: 20. gadsimts*. Rīga: Jumava.
- Bleiere, D., I. Butulis, I. Feldmanis, A. Stranga, and A. Zunda. 2008. *Latvija Otrajā Pasaules Karā (1939–1945)*. Rīga: Jumava.
- Bleiere, D., and J. Riekstiņš. 2007. *Latvijas iedzīvotāju pirmā masveida deportācija. 1941.gada 14. jūnijs*. Rīga: Latvijas valsts arhīvs.
- Bolin, P. 2012. *Between National and Academic Agendas: Ethnic Politics and ‘National Disciplines’ at the University of Latvia 1919–1940*. Södertorn: Södertorn högskola.
- Denis, S. 2008. “The Story with History.” In *Manufacturing Enemy Images: Russian Media Protrayal of Latvia*, edited by N. Muižnieks, 79–107. Rīga: University of Latvia.
- Dribins, L., A. Žvinklis, A. Stranga, D. Bleiere, Ē. Žagars, J. Šteimans, and I. Šneidere. 2009. *Latvijas ebreji un padomju vara 1928-1953: Zinātnisks apcerējums*. Rīga: Latvijas Universitātes Filozofijas un socioloģijas institūts.
- Ezergailis, A. 1996. *The Holocaust in Latvia 1941–1944*. Rīga: Historical Institute of Latvia and the US Holocaust Memorial Museum (Latvian translation 1999).
- Ģermanis, U. 2009. *Latviešu tautas piedzīvojumi*. Rīga: Atēna.
- Grey, J., ed. 2003. *The Last Word? Essays on Official History in the United States and British Commonwealth*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Heimane, I., ed. 2010. *Radošo savienību plēnums. 1. un 2. jūnijs*. Rīga: Jumava.
- Higham, R. 1970. *Official Histories: Essays and Bibliographies from Around the World*. Manhattan: Kansas State University Press.
- Īvāns, D. 1995. *Gadijuma karakalps*. Rīga: Vieda.
- Kaprāns, M. and V. Zelče, eds. 2011. *Pēdējais karš: atmiņa un traumas komunikācija* (Rīga: Mansards).
- Keruss, J., I. Lipša, I. Runce, and K. Zellis. 2010. *Personības, Struktūras, Idejas: Latvijas Universitātes Vēstures un filozofijas fakultātes vēsture padomju laikā*. Rīga: Latvijas Universitātes Akademiskais apgāds.
- Mazā biblioteka 2013—see <http://demoshistoria.lv/portals/par-sēriju>. Accessed July 14, 2014.
- Onken, E.-C. 2003. *Demokratisierung der Geschichte in Lettland. Geischichtspolitik und staatsbürgerliche Bewusstsein im ersten Jahrzehnt der Unhanhangichkeit*. Hamburg: Kramer.
- Onken, E.-C. 2007. “The Politics of Finding Historical Truth: Reviewing Baltic History Commissions and Their Work.” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 38 (1): 109–116. doi:10.1080/01629770701223619.
- Pelkaus, E., ed. 2001. *Aizvestie. 1941.14. jūnijs*. Rīga: Nordik.
- Pettai, E.-C. 2011. “The Convergence of Two Worlds: Historians and the Emerging Histories in the Baltic States.” in edited by M. Housden and D. J. Smith *Forgotten Pages in Baltic History: Diversity and Inclusion*, 263–280. Amsterdam: Rodopi.

- Plakans, A., ed. 2007. *Experiencing Totalitarianism: The Invasion and Occupation of Latvia by the USSR and Nazi Germany 1929-1991: A Documentary Survey*. Bloomington, IN: Author House.
- Šķinže, I., ed. 2007. *Aizvestie. 1949.25. marts*. Rīga: Nordik. Two volumes.
- Šneidere, I., ed. 2001. *Latvija padomju režī ma varā 1945-1986: dokumentu krājums*. Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds.
- Sprude, V. 2009. "Plaša sabiedrībā un vēstures mācība," *Diena*, February 9.
- Wolff, D. R. 1998. *Global Encyclopedia of Historical Writing*. New York: Garland Publishing.
- Zelče, V. 2009. "Vēsture, atbildība, atmiņa: Latvijas pieredze,." In *Latvija: pārskats par tautas attīstību: atbildīgums. 2008/2009*", edited by J. Rozenvalds and I. Iļjābs, Rīga: Sociālo un politisko pētījumu institūts.
- Zellis, K. 2012. *Ilūziju un baiļu mašīnērija. Propaganda nacistu okupētajā Latvijā: vara mēdiji un sabiedrība (1941-1945)*. Rīga: Mansards.

Appendix 1

Publications of the Commission of Historians

- (1) *Latvija otrajā pasaules karā (Latvia in World War II)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2000).
- (2) *Holokausta izpētes problēmas Latvijā (The Problems of Holocaust Research in Latvia)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2001).
- (3) *Totalitārie režīmi un to represijas Latvijā 1940.-1956. gada (Repressions of the Totalitarian Regimes in Latvia 1940-1956)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2001).
- (4) *Antisemitisms un tā izpausmes Latvijā: vēstures atskat. (Antisemitism and Its Manifestations In Latvia: A Historical Retrospective)*. Guest Editor Leo Dribins (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2002).
- (5) *Stockholm Documents. The German occupation of Latvia – 1941-1945: what did America know?* Guest editor: Andrew Ezerģailis (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2002).
- (6) *1941. gada 14. jūnija deportācija – noziegums pret cilvēci (The June 14, 1941, Deportations in Latvia – Crime Against Humanity)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2002).
- (7) *Okupācijas režīmi Latvijā 1940.-1956. gadā (The Occupation Regimes in Latvia from 1940 to 1956)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2002).
- (8) *Holokausta izpētes jautājumi Latvijā (Questions of Holocaust Research in Latvia)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2003).
- (9) *Padomju okupācijas režīms Baltijā 1944.-1959. gadā: politika un tās sekas (The Soviet Occupation Regimes in Latvia: Policy and Its Consequences)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2003).
- (10) *Okupācijas režīmi Latvijā 1940.-1959. Gadā (The Occupation Regimes in Latvia 1940-1959)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2004).
- (11) *Latvija nacistiskās Vācijas okupācijas varā, 1941-1945 (Latvia in the German Occupation, 1941-1945)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2004).
- (12) *Holokausta izpēte Latvijā (Holocaust Research in Latvia)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2004).
- (13) *Totalitārie okupācijas režīmi Latvijā 1940.-1964. gadā (The Totalitarian-Occupation Regimes in Latvia 1940-1964)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2004).
- (14) *The Hidden and Forbidden History of Latvia under Soviet and Nazi Occupations 1940-1991* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2005).
- (15) *Totalitārie režīmi Baltijā (The Totalitarian Regimes in the Baltic Area)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2005).
- (16) *Okupētā Latvija 20. gadsimta 40. gados (Occupied Latvia in the 1940s)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2000).
- (17) *Nacionālā pretošanās komunistiskajiem režīmiem Austrumeiropā pēc Otrā Pasaules Kara (Resistance to Communist Regimes in Eastern Europe After World War II)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2006).
- (18) *Holokausta Latvijā (The Holocaust in Latvia)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2006).
- (19) *Okupētā Latvija 1940-1990 (Occupied Latvia 1940-1990)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2007).

- (20) *Latvija un Austrumeiropa 20. gadsimta 60.–80. gados (Latvia and Eastern Europe in the Years 60–80 in the Twentieth Century)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2007).
- (21) *Latvijas vēsture 20. gadsimta 40. – 90. gados (Latvian History from 1940 to the 1990s of the 20th Century)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2007).
- (22) *Ārvalstu arhīvu dokumenti par okupācijas režīmu politikā Latvijā 1940–1968: dokumentu krājums (Documents in Archives outside Latvia about the Occupation Regimes in Latvia 1940–1968)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2008).
- (23) *Holokausta pētniecības problēmas Latvijā (The Problems of Holocaust Research in Latvia)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2008).
- (24) *Baltijas reģiona vēsture 20. gadsimta 40. – 80. gados (The History of The Baltic Region in the Decades 1940–1980 of the 20th Century)* (Rīga: Latvija vēstures institūta apgāds, 2009).
- (25) *Okupācijas režīmi Baltijas valstīs 1940–1991 (The Occupation Regimes in the Baltic States 1940–1991)* (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2009)
- (26) *Okupācija, Kolaborācija, Pretošanās: Vēsture un vēstures uztvere (Occupation, Collaboration, Resistance: History and Perception)* (Rīga: Latvijas Okupācijas muzeja biedrība, 2010)
- (27) *Otrais Pasaules Karš un Latvija: Notikumi un Sekas. 20. Gadsimta 40.60.gadi (The Second World War and Latvia: Events and Consequences 1940-1960s)* (Rīga: Zinatne, 2011).