



'Making Forgotten Voices Heard': Geoffrey Swain's Contribution to Latvian Historiography

Marina Germane

To cite this article: Marina Germane (2016) 'Making Forgotten Voices Heard': Geoffrey Swain's Contribution to Latvian Historiography, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 68:10, 1813-1823, DOI: [10.1080/09668136.2016.1257682](https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1257682)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2016.1257682>



Published online: 21 Dec 2016.



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



Article views: 107



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

‘Making Forgotten Voices Heard’: Geoffrey Swain’s Contribution to Latvian Historiography

MARINA GERMANE

THE THEME OF CONTINUITY IS A RECURRENT ONE IN LATVIAN historiography. Many of those working in the field have previously observed that given the country’s highly fragmented history of foreign domination, wars, destruction, and regime changes, it is difficult to form a coherent historical narrative without succumbing to the politicisation of history and the temptation of being selective about the past. Each new regime appropriated events and characters that it deemed beneficial, and attempted to discard the rest; one official myth was substituted for another; and replacement, rather than transition, often dominated the historical discourse.¹

None of these problems are, strictly speaking, specific to Latvia or its historiography—one just has to recall Hannah Arendt’s famous dictum that ‘we can no longer afford to take that which was good in the past and simply call it our heritage, to discard the bad and simply think of it as a dead load which by itself time will bury in oblivion’ (Arendt 2004, p. xxvii). Mark Mazower has warned of the politicisation of history as reading ‘the present back into the past’ and called for a different kind of history that would be ‘less useful as a political instrument but bringing us closer to past realities as just one possible outcome of our predecessors’ struggles and uncertainties’ (Mazower 1998, pp. 11–2).

The problem of continuity in Latvian historiography, however, is further compounded by the fact that, over the course of the twentieth century, Latvia bore the full impact of the clash between the two totalitarian ideologies, communism and Nazism, each of which, in Mazower’s words, presented itself as an ‘End to History’. Both ideologies excelled at mass propaganda aimed at control and submission, whose ‘atavistic remnants’ can be still traced within Latvian society today, as persuasively argued by Kaspars Zellis (2012). The horrifying years from the Soviet annexation in 1940 to the end of World War II and the ‘return’ of the Soviet troops in 1945 saw a rapid change from one extreme totalitarian regime to another, the Holocaust, and fierce partisan warfare—directed both against the Nazis and against the Soviet Union—as well as inevitable collaboration with both occupying powers; and then the subsequent 45 years as the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic. All these inflicted a trauma on the national psyche that

¹See, for example, Plakans (1995, 1999, 2011), Zellis (2006, 2012), and Dribins *et al.* (2009).

still lingers. The post-1991 collective soul-searching, which is still under way, has brought with it many shocking revelations, unpleasant truths, and dismantled myths.

Geoffrey Swain's path into Latvian historiography, by his own admission, first originated from his extensive studies of the Russian Revolution, leading him first to the Latvian Riflemen, and then to the history of Soviet Latvia during and immediately after World War II. Both his studies of the Bolshevik Revolution and his other field of expertise—Socialist Yugoslavia—have in my opinion equipped him admirably for dealing with the task at hand, especially considering his long-standing interest in deviations from Marxist–Leninist dogma, also known as the 'third way': in his writings, Swain repeatedly asserts the 'special character' of Latvian socialism, from its ideological origins within the Social Democratic movement to the National Communists of the 1950s. He is also determined 'to restore to the historical record' the voices of those who were marginalised or forgotten, the voices that had been 'drowned out' by the dominant ideologies of the time (Swain 2010, p. 45).

Perhaps no other subject in Latvian history has given birth to as many myths as the Latvian Riflemen. They were renowned for a range of different achievements in their history: for their military courage when, as separate units within the Russian Imperial Army, they defended the Baltic territories against the Germans during World War I; for the crucial part they played in the October Revolution and the subsequent Civil War when the majority of them supported Lenin and the Bolsheviks in 1918; and for their role in installing the 1919 Latvian Soviet government of Pēteris Stučka. They suffered Soviet repression against them in 1937–1938, and then again in 1941, and were also written out of history by Soviet historiography until the 1950s. More generally they have been known for their alleged Latvian patriotism, and their often-asserted overall Latvianness. The controversial history of the Latvian Riflemen has inevitably become a matter of contention, and every subsequent Latvian political regime has given its own interpretation of the question as to whether they were heroes, victims, or traitors.²

Swain explored the history of the Latvian Riflemen in two journal articles, published four years apart: whereas the 1999 article traced the Riflemen's gradual disillusionment with communist internationalism, the 2003 article is a biographical portrait of their famous commander, Jukums (Ioakims) Vācietis. Swain's starting point is the short-lived Latvian Socialist Soviet Republic (January–May 1919); he describes how Pēteris Stučka's government, which had initially enjoyed overwhelming public support, within a few weeks managed to alienate the majority of the Latvian population by its 'narrow guild ideology' of the working class and 'inadmissible policies' toward the peasantry. A truly dogmatic thinker, Stučka was convinced that Latvia, which he believed to be superior to Russia in terms of industrial and agricultural development, was ripe for socialist transformation. Enthusiastic popular support led him to believe, mistakenly, that no concessions were necessary. With an unmatched revolutionary zeal, he started to nationalise land and collectivise the means of production. Collectivisation was quickly followed by food shortages and growing public discontent, to which Stučka responded with brutal repressions. As a result, writes Swain, 'a huge gulf had opened between the ruling Communist Party and the majority of Latvian peasants', and the communists were driven from power (Swain 1999, p. 668).

Searching for the causes of this massive rift between 'the leaders and the led', Stučka's brutal policies notwithstanding, Swain puts forward a proposition that the origins of discontent could be traced back to the summer and autumn of 1918 among the ranks of the Latvian

²For a concise summary of the Latvian Riflemen's portrayal in Latvian historiography, see Zellis (2014).

Riflemen, the Revolution's 'Praetorian Guard'. Having provided crucial support to Lenin and the Bolsheviks during the early months of 1918, the Riflemen's revolutionary fervour quickly wore off, and morale, especially after the suppression of the Left Social Revolutionaries' (Left SRs) uprising in July 1918 (in which the Riflemen yet again played a crucial role), was at an all-time low. In short, they returned to Latvia 'already disillusioned with the Soviet experiment' and not so keen on implementing it at home (Swain 1999, p. 667). Supporting his argument with findings from the Riga archives, Swain traces the main reasons for the Riflemen's discontent: aside from the ideological confusion after the doomed Left SR uprising (with which many of the Riflemen sympathised), he mentions their unwillingness to be incorporated into larger Soviet divisions, as in the case of the 6th regiment, and to be stationed further away from their native Latvia; their growing reluctance to suppress food riots and peasant disturbances; their concerns about the growing difference in pay rates for officers and soldiers; and the overall exhaustion after bearing much of the brunt of fighting. To summarise, Swain persuasively demonstrates that the loyalty of the revolution's 'most disciplined force' could not have been taken for granted any longer.

What seems to me less convincing, however, is the notion of 'Luxemburgism', and especially the way Swain extends it to Latvian social democracy as a whole, and not just to its communist offspring. Swain has loosely defined Luxemburgism as a 'narrow guild ideology of the working class' and has referred to 'inadmissible policy' toward the peasantry. In a less pejorative description, he has referred to Latvian democracy's 'Germanic tradition', in the sense of it being closer to the ideas of Rosa Luxemburg than Vladimir Lenin (Swain 1999, p. 668). In support of this theory, he cites the former Latvian Social Democrat Bruno Kalniņš on the origins of the party, which is rather ironic, as Bruno Kalniņš, writing in exile and with the advantage of hindsight, had every reason to wish to distance the LSDP from its Russian counterparts and subsequent events. Besides, while insisting on the party's Germanic roots, Kalniņš (1956, p. 94; 1972, pp. 134–35) actually posited that, as a result, Latvian social democracy developed in the 'Western Socialist spirit'. He mentioned August Bebel, and not Rosa Luxemburg, as a source of inspiration—and Bebel, after all, had more success as a parliamentarian than a revolutionary. But this is not to disprove Swain's general notion that Latvia had its own brand of social democracy, and its own brand of communism—he is quite accurate here, as his overall work on Soviet Latvia convincingly proves—but rather to question whether Luxemburgism is indeed a fitting label for it. And to be fair, Pēteris Stučka, without any doubt, had many ideological affinities with the German communist (especially in his views on the agrarian question); however, even he differed from her in at least one significant aspect. Luxemburg was unwavering in her opposition to the very idea of nation and was not prepared to make any sentimental concessions either to her native Poland, whose long-sought independence she fiercely opposed, or towards the Polish Jews during the pogroms of 1903–1906 (sternly advising them, instead, not to expect recognition of their cultural rights under capitalism). Stučka, by contrast, proved himself a very flexible internationalist when it came to his native Latvia. As observed by the Latvian historian Leo Dribins, although the Latvian people will never forgive Stučka for the 'red terror' of 1919, they will also remember 'how Stučka opposed Latvia's Russification, sometimes harshly arguing with the big comrades from Moscow'; this, according to Dribins, distinguished him positively from the later communists, like the 'spineless toadies' A. Pelše and A. Voss (Dribins 2005, p. 135). Moreover, it is certainly not a coincidence that Stučka would become a source of inspiration for the National Communists of the 1950s—a choice unlikely only at first glance.

The Riflemen's legendary commander Jukums Vācietis (1873–1938), who was also the first commander-in-chief of the Red Army, cuts an intriguing figure: born into a poor rural family in Kurzeme, he followed a military career path in imperial Russia, reaching the rank of lieutenant colonel prior to the start of World War I. In 1916, he became the Commander of the legendary 5th Zemgale Latvian Riflemen Battalion (later Regiment). Vācietis played a crucial role in suppressing the Left SRs' uprising in July 1918, thus saving the Bolshevik government and being appointed, as a reward, Commander of the Eastern Front. Two months later, after re-taking the city of Kazan in a crucial battle (the first unsuccessful attempt, in August 1918, had sent the Latvian Riflemen into retreat) Vācietis was promoted to Commander-in-Chief of the Red Army, a post he held until August 1919, when he was arrested on counterrevolutionary charges. After eight months of imprisonment, he was acquitted and spent the remaining part of his life teaching war history in Soviet military academies before being arrested and executed in 1938, along with other high-ranking military personnel, as an 'enemy of the people' spying for the 'fascist' Latvia. Notably, he never joined the Communist Party.

Swain's sympathetic portrayal of Vācietis is largely based on his papers in the Latvian State Archives and upon the advice of the Latvian historian Valdis Bērziņš, a renowned authority on the Latvian Riflemen. Swain paints Vācietis as a hard-working, highly driven individual; a military professional who tried to avoid politics as much as he could; a talented army commander who was capable of implementing ruthless strategies in order to achieve victory, while at the same time caring deeply for the men in his charge. (Overall, it seems that the aforementioned gulf between 'the leaders and the led' in 1918–1919 was none of Commander Vācietis's doing.) As Vācietis never joined any political party, his precise political convictions—if any—remain a matter of speculation. Swain argues that, considering Vācietis's own social background and career history, it is easy to see why after the October Revolution he at first 'had no difficulty supporting the Bolshevik–Left SR Government', or was later keen to fight the counterrevolution of Kolchak and Denikin. But 'it is less clear', writes Swain, 'why he should be so determined to crush the Left-SR uprising in July 1918' (Swain 2003c, p. 74). This is, asserts Swain, the real enigma—much more so than Vācietis's untimely dismissal in 1919. This is perhaps even more enigmatic if one remembers what we have learned from Swain's previous article, and what is further highlighted here: that it was crushing that uprising that brought down the overall morale of the Latvian Riflemen and resulted in their disillusionment with the Soviet leaders (but not, apparently, with their Commander).

The explanation suggested by Swain runs as follows: Vācietis had no fundamental political disagreements with the Left SRs; indeed, he sympathised with them. But he did what he felt he had to do in order to avoid being dragged back into war with Germany, describing the uprising, in a telegram to Petrograd, as 'a provocation against Soviet power by some madmen wanting to drag Russia back into the war with Germany when she was not yet ready' (Swain 2003c, p. 77). Swain's supporting argument is three-fold. First, Vācietis was determined to avoid massive loss of life in what he saw as pointless operations. He had been long-convinced that the Russian Army was in no shape for protracted military action. Swain mentions how as early as in 1909, in a controversial speech given at the graduation dinner at the General Staff Academy, Vācietis predicted that the Russian Army, being in a poor state and divorced from its people, would not survive a European war. This conviction was further strengthened by the fact that it was the Latvian Riflemen who bore the brunt of the German counter-assault during the Christmas Battles of 1916—Vācietis was no longer prepared 'to pull the Russians' chestnuts out of the fire' (Swain 2003c, p. 77). Secondly, Vācietis believed that Germany

was nearing collapse even without any further confrontation—a view that ran against the majority opinion among the General Staff that Germany could not be defeated until spring 1919. At the same time, he feared that if this needless confrontation did occur, then it would be Soviet Russia which could collapse and fall prey to German counterrevolutionism. And, thirdly, Vācietis's opinion on the new Soviet General Staff was hardly any higher than his rather critical assessment of the General Staff of the Imperial Army: Swain illustrates this latter point by vivid descriptions of Vācietis's frequent clashes with Mikhail Bonch-Bruевич.

It is, overall, a case well argued, as well as meticulously documented. On a slightly critical note, however, Swain bases his assessment of the possible motives behind Vācietis's fateful decision largely on the account provided by Vācietis himself. And although Swain at no point claims this account to be exhaustive, perhaps it would come across as slightly less one-dimensional had he at least considered other possible factors at play, such as, for example, Vācietis's extreme ambition and determination to succeed, so often highlighted by his other renowned biographer, the Swedish–Latvian historian Uldis Ģērmanis (*Ģērmanis & Vācietis 1956; Ģērmanis 1969–1972, 1974*).

Partisan warfare in the Latvian territories during World War II, when national partisans resisted the Nazi regime while at the same time opposing the return of the Red Army, remains, understandably, one of the most controversial—and most studied—periods in Latvian history. Building on published and unpublished sources, including NKVD files, as well as on the works of Heinrihs Stords, Zigmārs Turčinskis, Bjorn Felder, and Dzintars Ērglis, Swain produces, in his own words, a 'snapshot' of partisan warfare in Latgale from July 1945 to February 1946. His goal is to explore, as the war neared its end, the growing ideological and tactical disagreements between the Latvian National Partisan Union (*Latvijas Nacionālo partizānu apvienība—LNPA*) and the Latvian Fatherland Guards Union (*Latvijas Tēvzemes sargu (partizānu) apvienība—LTSpA*), operating in the Abrene and Daugavpils districts of Latgale respectively, as well as internal divisions among the members of both organisations, linking them both to their different political pasts and their different visions of the future. While generally supporting Felder's thesis on the merger between different political strands in the partisan movement in the summer of 1945, during the preparation for a planned national uprising supported from abroad, Swain argues that this rapprochement, even at its height, was not without tensions—tensions that turned into fundamental disagreements as the prospects for foreign intervention waned. Those disagreements mainly concerned acceptable methods of struggle and tactics, ranging from building a wide but largely passive underground network in the expectation of British intervention, to taking immediate action, like raids on polling stations in order to disrupt Soviet elections.³ The other important division was between those who supported the goal of re-establishing a democratic Latvian State, and those who pined for Ulmanis' dictatorship. Swain describes how by the summer of 1946, with no help from abroad on the horizon, the partisans' stance hardened: in statutes and statements, references to the Latvian constitution were replaced by praise for Ulmanis and his post-1934 'national government'. The gist of it was that there was a dividing line 'between those who had fought both Nazis and communists and those who had fought only communists' (Swain 2007, p. 212). Swain concludes that 'by summer of 1946, the national partisans were almost exclusively

³Swain cites the LTSpA statutes stipulating that such methods should be 'allowed by God, the law and Christian morality' in order to be used to establish a government 'guided by God and a Christian conscience'; these clauses were removed in October 1945 (Swain 2007, p. 201).

those who had fought only the communists and were well on the way to becoming something more akin to isolated die-hards, whose violence was as likely to terrify ordinary Latvians as impress the West' (Swain 2007, p. 212).

Returning to the theme of national partisans in an article published in 2009, Swain tells an uplifting, though ultimately tragic, story of yet another wartime underground organisation, the Latvian Central Committee (LCP)—'an attempt made by Latvian democrats towards the end of 1944 to emulate the Warsaw Uprising and fight against both the German occupiers and the returning Red Army' (Swain 2009, p. 242). He traces the origins of the LCP to a small circle of democratic opposition to the Soviet occupation of 1940 that formed around Professor Konstantīns Čakste (the son of the first president of Latvia) and mainly consisted of staff and students of the University of Latvia. Their efforts were curtailed by the arrival of the Nazis. In 1942, they started to regroup, this time joining ranks with the underground organisation of the former Social Democratic Party under the leadership of Bruno Kalniņš. The democrats and Social Democrats took the lead in forming the LCP; they were joined by representatives of the former Peasant Union and the former Latgale Christian Union; all these political parties had previously been banned in Latvia after the coup of 1934. The LCP soon established contacts with Latvian émigrés in Sweden, as well as with Latvian ambassadors, Voldemārs Salnais in Sweden, Kārlis Zariņš in London, and Alfred Bilmanis in Washington who had, albeit precariously, remained in their respective posts until then. Salnais and Zariņš forged a good working relationship—as much as diplomatic sensitivities allowed—with the MI6 station in Stockholm. The LCP divided its activities between raising awareness abroad and trying to secure closer ties with the Allies, and organising resistance at home.

The LCP's attempts at international diplomacy were, understandably, fraught with difficulties, financial, organisational, and legal. When eventually they had to abandon their ambitious plan to establish a Foreign Delegation of the LCP, it was not for a lack of trying. In Latvia, they organised various acts of sabotage, burning down flour mills and grain elevators, and formed partisan groups in the forests. They also challenged the legality of conscription to the Latvian legion, collecting 189 signatures among prominent members of pre-war society in a letter of protest later distributed in the West. The LCP became a reliable source of information on the situation in Latvia in the West with the help of radio transmissions, regular boat trips to Swedish Gotland, and the use of the diplomatic bag between Stockholm and London. With the approach of the Red Army, the LCP intensified its activities, hoping for an immediate uprising—for which they joined forces with the *Aizsargi* commander General Jānis Kurelis. On 9 September 1944, the LCP announced the renewal of the Latvian State. It was not, however to be. With Kurelis arrested by the Germans and his men disarmed, many LCP members arrested by the Soviet authorities and most importantly, with the British intervention failing to materialise, the LCP was disbanded, and, as Swain writes, quickly sank into obscurity, with its activities often misunderstood in Latvia and literally unknown abroad.

The LCP was unjustly forgotten, insists Swain, arguing that it is of the utmost importance 'to recover this episode in the history of that country's democratic movement, so that students both in Latvia and beyond its borders know that in the struggle between two totalitarian systems of the twentieth century, defending the country from one by siding with the other was not the only option' (Swain 2009, p. 260).

The story of the LCP continues, in a way, in Swain's 2012 article, which analyses the attitude of the British government towards the recognition of the annexation of the Baltic

states by the Soviet Union in 1940 (Swain 2012b). Focusing on the relations between the Foreign Office and Ambassador Zariņš in 1944–1945, and through the extensive use of Foreign Office records, Swain tells the story of how the British Government's probable inclination to recognise the annexation in 1942 changed to a full reversal of this stance in 1945; and how much the relentless efforts at unmasking Soviet talk of 'autonomy for the Baltics' of Ambassador Zariņš (who, in turn, was kept well-informed on events in Latvia by the LCP) and his Estonian and Lithuanian peers contributed to that 'change of heart'. As the Cold War settled in, the Baltic Question went away on its own, writes Swain, allowing Britain to retain 'the moral high ground of not having recognised the Soviet annexation of the Baltic States, even though during the Second World War it had twice been willing to do so' (Swain 2012b, p. 360).

In an article published in 2003, Swain returns to the theme of the collectivisation of Latvian agriculture, this time spanning the period from 1944, when the Latvian Communist Party (LCP) returned victoriously to Latvia bearing the soon-to-be-broken promise not to repeat 'the previous mistakes', to the fateful deportations of the 'kulaks' in March 1949, in which over 44,000 people were deported on 25–29 March alone. Building on extensive available evidence,⁴ Swain undertakes a painstaking examination of the background to the brutal process of collectivisation, aiming to answer the questions as to when the decision to collectivise was taken, how controversial it was, and why the progress of collectivisation in Latvia was so remarkably slow. He posits that a belief in the possibility of a 'third way' for Latvian agriculture among Latvian communist leaders is central to understanding the collectivisation narrative; whereas some of those leaders leaned towards the 'third way' in acknowledgement of the historical strength of individual farmsteads in the regions, for others it was 'the only way to make sense of the chaos in the Latvian countryside and meet the Soviet government's delivery targets' (Swain 2003b, p. 40). Other factors, such as a difficult relationship between the Latvian Communist Central Committee Bureau and its supervising body, the USSR Communist Party Central Committee's Bureau for Latvia,⁵ as well as the wider international situation,⁶ and diplomatic considerations,⁷ played their part. Finally, Swain links Tito's insubordination and the expulsion of Yugoslavia from the Cominform, failure to collectivise being one of the charges levelled against them, to Latvian deportations in order to explain 'why in January 1949 Stalin finally lost patience with his Baltic comrades' inability to grasp the nettle of collectivisation' (Swain 2003b, p. 55).

⁴The collectivisation of Latvian agriculture leading to mass deportations of the 'kulaks' in March 1949 has been widely documented in Latvian historiography since the collapse of the Soviet Union, with an extensive collection of related documents published by the Latvian State Archive in 2000. LVA (2000), available at <http://www.itl.rtu.lv/LVA/rll/index.htm>, accessed 1 September 2016.

⁵The USSR Communist Party Central Committee's Bureau for Latvia was established in December 1944 with a view of closely monitoring all activities of the Latvian Communist Party under the leadership of Jānis Kalnberziņš, as well as providing necessary 'guidance'. It was felt in Moscow that the local party was not collectivising agriculture or combating the 'nationalist bandits' energetically enough, and that the support for the Soviet system in Latvia could have been overwhelmed. For a detailed account of the tense relationship between the LCP, the Bureau and the NKVD, see Swain (2003a).

⁶Both the 1945 Potsdam Conference and the Paris Peace Conference of 1946 gave rise to persistent rumours about possible British interventions in the Latvian countryside, strengthening resistance to collectivisation.

⁷At the time of the Peace Conference, a delegation of the Anglo–Soviet Society visited Riga to investigate the allegations of oppression made by Latvian émigrés in Sweden and Germany.

But the slow pace of collectivisation was not the only matter of contention between the LCP Bureau and their supervising body, the USSR Communist Party Central Committee Bureau for Latvia. The question of ethnic Latvian membership of both the Komsomol and the Communist Party was just as controversial, as Swain (2012a) compellingly demonstrates.

The ‘national cadres’ problem within the Soviet Union (the problem of the communist party leadership of titular nationalities in their respective republics) had always been acute: on the one hand, their active participation was necessary both from a practical standpoint, and from the point of view of the regime’s legitimacy; on the other, those ‘national cadres’ often strove after greater independence and exhibited other so-called ‘nationalist tendencies’. Latvians fondly remember their National Communists, who, during Khrushchev’s Thaw of the 1950s, attempted to resist Russification and ensure more autonomy for Latvia, putting forward initiatives such as the abandonment of the planned hydroelectric station that required the damming of Daugava, and a plan for the economic development of the Latvian SSR that daringly took into account Latvia’s own interests as opposed to those of the USSR as a whole, and opposing Russification policies in education. Their idealistic plot was quickly foiled, and a purge followed in 1959, albeit not nearly as brutal as Stalin’s purges (dismissals and deportations, rather than executions). Fascinatingly, Swain describes how a very similar scenario unfolded earlier within the ranks of the Latvian Komsomol: keen on recruiting ethnic Latvians, Moscow extended membership to those with a ‘doubtful background’, only to take fright a few years later and instigate a purge. Going back a decade earlier and examining the period when three of the National Communists, Indriks Pinksis, Eduards Berklavs, and Vilis Krūmiņš were cutting their political teeth as Komsomol leaders, Swain draws a line of continuity ‘between the Komsomol as it operated under the leadership of future National Communists and the National Communism movement itself’ (Swain 2012a, p. 1241). Using extensive archival materials and numerous interviews from the collection of the Centre for Oral History at Daugavpils University, Swain demonstrates that during Krūmiņš’s tenure as the Komsomol First Secretary, ‘consistent efforts were made to turn the Komsomol towards the “core nationality”’, while both political training materials and reports to the Central Party Committee were increasingly written in the Latvian language. Recruiting ethnic Latvians into the Komsomol necessarily implied less strict control over the ‘ideological past’ of the new members in either bourgeois Latvia or during World War II, and a somewhat lax attitude toward their church attendance. All these changes were cemented by the relative success of the Latvian-language newspaper *Padomju Jaunātnē*, especially when compared to its Russian-language counterpart; newly recruited Latvians turned out to be more diligent in taking newspaper subscriptions, by which the paper’s efficacy was measured.

The *Padomju Jaunātnē* also became the first victim of the 1952 clampdown on the perceived ‘manifestations of nationalism’ that would last until Stalin’s death: its editor was dismissed and replaced by a Russian. At the beginning of the Thaw, Krūmiņš, who had by that time become the Second Secretary of the Latvian Communist Party, promptly restored the ‘core nationality’ policy in the Komsomol. A new editor of the *Padomju Jaunātnē*, Kristaps Kaugurs, would remain in his post until being dismissed—on charges of National Communism—in 1959. Krūmiņš himself was dismissed in 1960.

Swain concludes that for all his reforming zeal, Khrushchev found it no easier to cope with the Latvian claim to its own national peculiarities than to accept the Yugoslav claim to

their own path to communism. But if Khrushchev's uncertainty led him first to encourage the national communists in 1956 and then to purge them in 1959, his successors had no such qualms: any manifestations of 'bourgeois nationalism' were banned outright.

In a chapter within an edited volume published in 2010, Swain revisits several previous themes. He examines the case of the folklorist Jānis Niedre (former social democrat first turned communist and then, allegedly, nationalist) and his downfall in 1943, caused by his two rather meek published articles: one gave too much credit to the former 'bourgeois' Education Minister Atis Ķeniņš, already exiled as a 'reactionary' by the Soviet masters; the other contained a thoroughly veiled message that at the end of the war, Latvia's re-incorporation into the Soviet Union was not the only option. Swain maintains that Niedre was not a 'lone former Social Democrat communist dissident', but a voice of a 'vanished communist orthodoxy' (Swain 2010, p. 48). Swain tentatively suggests that the moderate dissent on the question of cooperation with the nationalist forces in the struggle against the Nazis, and on the possible ways of Latvia's incorporation into the Soviet Union after the war, demonstrated by Niedre, along with the Latvian communist leaders Otomars Oškālns, Wilhelms Laiviņš, and Milda Birkenfelde, could be viewed as an early harbinger of the national communist movement.

Once again, Swain turns to the tragic fate of the national partisans (or 'bandits' in communist parlance) and the Latvian Central Council, who put their—ultimately futile—hopes in Latvia being set free by British intervention. If Soviet historiography 'set in stone' the portrayal of the Left partisans as national heroes, and the Right partisans as Nazi collaborators, post-1991 popular and even some academic writing has attempted to portray the Left national partisans as 'Soviet agents', denying the existence of any indigenous communist ideological roots. Swain is determined to set the record straight, stressing the 'democratic voice' of the first wave of the movement and highlighting the close similarity, to a certain point, between the goals and aims of the Left and the Right Latvian partisans who were subsequently drawn far apart by Cold War developments. Even Augusts Kiršteins, the head of the puppet Soviet Republic in 1940, receives a sympathetic hearing: according to Swain, it may not yet be time to rehabilitate Kiršteins, but

it is time to recognise that even Kiršteins was a product of his time, a time when ideological struggle between fascism and communism attracted many idealists to the communist cause, only to discover that the communist cause and the machinations of the Soviet system were by no means one and the same thing. (Swain 2010, p. 58)

Swain's *magnum opus*, *Between Stalin and Hitler. Class war and race war on the Dvina, 1940–46* (2004) brings separate strains of his research on Latvia together. This homage to the Latgalian town of Daugavpils, dedicated to its 'resilient people' is both meticulously researched and vividly told. The book encompasses six memorable years in modern Latvian history with its kaleidoscopic change of regimes and ideologies. Full of historical detail, it sets an ambitious goal not just of providing a scrupulously documented history of those turbulent and often horrifying events in the eastern Latvian region (which in itself is no small feat), but also of comparing the two totalitarian regimes that, in quick succession, came to dominate that history, and to assess the self-destructive force of one, and the surprising longevity of the other.

After masterfully setting the scene in the first chapter—on the brief history of Daugavpils and on its complex ethnic religious, and social composition, as well as aptly summarising the interwar history of Latvia from the proclamation of independence in 1918 to the last year of

the authoritarian rule of Kārlis Ulmanis and the arrival of the Soviet troops in the summer of 1940—Swain proceeds to tell his tale chronologically. There is a chapter on the ‘terrible year’ of Soviet occupation and deportations in 1940; three chapters on the Nazi occupation, including one on the Holocaust, from 1941 to 1944; and three further chapters on the remaining two years after the return of the Soviet forces that focus on post-war reconstruction, the land reform, the communists’ fight against the national partisans, and on the daily realities of life in Stalinist Daugavpils (from the construction of a brand-new tram network to food shortages and to replacing the old interwar intelligentsia with a new Soviet one).

The amount of archival research that went into this book is staggering, and at times feels overwhelming. Swain skillfully weaves individual stories and vignettes into the larger narrative; by giving this ‘human touch’ to the fateful historical events, he successfully brings out their horrible absurdity. Giving us a glimpse into the bewildering reality of the time is not a goal in itself, as Swain warns the reader in the introduction to the book. Still, it is, along with his thorough analysis of the pre-existing social and ethnic cleavages among the population, instrumental for his portrayal of the breakdown of conventional morality in wartime Latvia.

Drawing parallels with Alexander Dallin’s famous 1957 study of Odessa, and Amir Weiner’s 2001 study of the Vinnitsa region during World War II, Swain uncovers differences in the pace of land reform, the struggle put up by the nationalist partisans in Latvia, and the general attitude towards the occupiers among the population; perhaps unsurprisingly, he links those differences to the fact that Latvia was an independent country between the two World Wars (Dallin 1957; Weiner 2001).

In a subchapter on ‘comparative terror’, Swain asserts that Daugavpils suffered less under communism than it did under Nazism; Nazi rule proved to be more horrific both in terms of mass killings—‘there was no Soviet equivalent to 20,000 Jews killed by the Nazis in Latgale region, 13,000 of them in Daugavpils’ (Swain 2004, p. 214)—and in terms of deportations—‘it was not only that the communists deported fewer people than the fascists, but that the methods they used were less random’ (Swain 2004, p. 215).

On the subject of collaboration, Swain’s conclusion is that only a minority of the population took an active part in carrying out atrocities, while the rest remained passive, ‘allowing others to act in their name’ (Swain 2004, p. 213). He makes a poignant observation that ‘most Latvian communists and Latvian fascists believed that when they joined their respective organisations, they were joining movements of European and even worldwide significance for a better future’ (Swain 2004, p. 218). Supporting his argument by a comparison between the two administrations’ policies on industrialisation, health, and education, Swain argues that, all things considered, Soviet communism offered a more rational, modern, and dynamic vision of this future, while the Nazi rule proved to be structurally incoherent.

Overall, in his works on Latvian history—be it on the Latvian Riflemen, the national partisans, the national communists, or the Komsomol leaders, Swain always steers clear of sensationalist claims and provides well balanced and meticulously documented accounts; indeed, the amount of historical detail Swain unleashes on his reader is not, indeed, for the faint-hearted; sometimes, perhaps, to the detriment of analysis. He possesses an uncanny ability to identify gaps and inconsistencies in existing accounts—that which ‘does not quite fit’ in historical narratives—and at making links and connections that were previously missed,

thus emphasising the contingent nature of history. Geoffrey Swain's utmost conviction that the voices of all those who have made history deserve to be heard will remain an inspiration to other historians of Latvia.

MARINA GERMANE, Independent Scholar. *Email:* marina.kru@btinternet.com.

References

- Arendt, H. (2004) *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, NY, Schocken Books).
- Dallin, A. (1957) *Odessa, 1941–44: A Case Study of Soviet Territory under Foreign Rule* (Santa Monica, CA, RAND Corporation).
- Dribins, L. (2005) 'P. Stučka', in Buceniece, E. (ed.) *Ideju vēsture Latvijā. Jaunā strava—20. gs. sākums/ Antoloģija. I. daļa* (Rīga, Raka).
- Dribins, L., Žvinklis, A., Stranga, A., Bleiere, D., Žagars, Ē., Šteimans, J. & Šneideris, I. (2009) 'Priekšvārds', in Dribins, L. (ed.) *Latvijas ebreji un padomju vara. 1928–1953* (Rīga, Latvijas Universitātes Filozofijas un socioloģijas institūts).
- Gērmanis, U. (1969–1972) 'Zemgaliešu Komandieris', *Jaunā Gaita*, 76–90, available at: http://jaunagaita.net/jg89/JG89-90_Germanis-XII.htm, accessed 2 November 2016.
- Gērmanis, U. (1974) *Oberst Vācietis, und die lettischen Schützen im Weltkrieg und in der Oktoberrevolution* (Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell).
- Gērmanis, U. & Vācietis, J. (1956) *Pa aizputinātām pēdām* (Stockholm, Daugava).
- Kalniņš, B. (1956) *Latvijas sociāldemokrātijas 50 gadi* (Stockholm, LSDSP Ārzemju Komitejas izdevums).
- Kalniņš, B. (1972) 'The Social Democratic Movement in Latvia', in Rabinowitch, A., Rabinowitch, J. & Kristof, L. K. D. (eds) *Revolution and Politics in Russia. Essays in Memory of B.I. Nikolaevsky*. Russian and East European Series, Vol. 41 (Bloomington, IN & London, Indiana University Press).
- Mazower, M. (1998) *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London, Penguin Books).
- Plakans, A. (1995) *The Latvians. A Short History* (Stanford, CA, Hoover Institution Press).
- Plakans, A. (1999) 'Looking Backward: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries in Inter-war Latvian Historiography', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 30, 4.
- Plakans, A. (2011) *A Concise History of the Baltic States* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Swain, G. (1999) 'The Disillusioning of the Revolution's Praetorian Guard: The Latvian Riflemen, Summer Autumn 1918', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 51, 4.
- Swain, G. (2003a) 'Cleaning up Soviet Latvia', in Mertelsmann, O. (ed.) *The Sovietization of the Baltic States, 1940–1956* (Tallinn, KLEIO Ajalookirjanduse Sihtasutus).
- Swain, G. (2003b) 'Deciding to collectivise Latvian Agriculture', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 55, 1.
- Swain, G. (2003c) 'Vācietis: The Enigma of the Red Army's First Commander', *Revolutionary Russia*, 16, 1.
- Swain, G. (2004) *Between Stalin and Hitler. Class War and Race War on Dvina, 1940–46* (London & New York, NY, Routledge Curzon).
- Swain, G. (2007) 'Divided We Fall: Division within the National Partisans of Vidzeme and Latgale, Fall 1945', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 38, 2.
- Swain, G. (2009) 'Latvia's Democratic Resistance: A Forgotten Episode from the Second World War', *European History Quarterly*, 39, 2.
- Swain, G. (2010) 'Forgotten Voices: Reflections on Latvia during World War Two', in Smith, D. J., Galbreath, D. J. & Swain, G. (eds) *From Recognition to Restoration. Latvia's History as a Nation-State* (Amsterdam & New York, NY, Rodopi).
- Swain, G. (2012a) 'Before National Communism: Joining the Latvian Komsomol under Stalin', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 54, 7.
- Swain, G. (2012b) "'The Highest Flights of Circumlocutory Art': Britain, Latvia and Recognising the Soviet Annexation of 1940", *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 43, 3.
- Weiner, A. (2001) *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press).
- Zellis, K. (2006) "'Baigais gads"—mīts un tā evolūcija', in Zellis, K. (ed.) *Mīti Latvijas vēsturē* (Rīga, Latvijas Universitātes žurnāla 'Latvijas Vēsture' fonds).
- Zellis, K. (2012) *Ilūziju un baiļu mašīnērija. Propaganda nacistu okupētājā Latvijā: vara, mediji un sabiedrība (1941–1945)* (Rīga, Mansards).
- Zellis, K. (2014) 'Touched by Eternity: Image of the Latvian Rifleman in the Collective Memory of Latvia', *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls*, 4, 93.