

THE STORY OF AN UNREALISED COMMON CELEBRATION:
HOW LATVIA AND LITHUANIA PLANNED TO MARK
THE 700TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE BATTLE OF SAULE

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ABSTRACT *The Battle of Saule took place on 22 September 1236 in the Šiauliai area in Lithuania, at which the Lithuanians crushed the army of the Livonian Order that had launched a crusade to their lands from Riga. The Brothers of the Sword who tried to return to Riga via Semigallia (Zemgale) were harried and killed by the Semigallians, a Baltic tribe that became part of the Latvian and Lithuanian nations which formed later on. The date of the Battle of Saule has been marked in Lithuania and Latvia since 22 September 2000, by decrees of the parliaments of the two countries, as the Day of Baltic Unity, with the aim of reminding Lithuanians and Latvians of their ethnic similarities, and to encourage the closeness of the two kindred nations and the Lithuanian and Latvian states. The first time Lithuania and Latvia intended to commemorate the Battle of Saule together was in 1936, the 700th anniversary of the battle. However, the attempt to organise a shared celebration of the anniversary of the battle failed. This article seeks to answer the following questions: what prompted Latvia and Lithuania to organise the commemoration of the Battle of Saule in 1936; what were the meanings that accompanied the imagery of the Battle of Saule at the time; and why did the joint anniversary celebration not take place?*

KEYWORDS: *the Battle of Saule, nationalism of Lithuanians, nationalism of Latvians, history of politics, collective memory*

The Battle of Saule took place on 22 September 1236 in the Šiauliai area, when the Lithuanians crushed the army of the Livonian Brothers of the Sword Order (*Fratres militæ Christi Livoniæ*) that had launched a crusade to their lands from Riga. The Brothers of the Sword who tried to return to Riga via Semigallia (*Zemgale*) were harried and and killed by the Semigallians, a Baltic tribe

that merged into the Latvian and Lithuanian nations that later formed. The location that is thought to be the site of the battle, the village of Jauniūnai in the Joniškis district, was declared a historic monument in 1987. In 2000, the Parliament (*Seimas*) of the Republic of Lithuania included a new day to be marked in the Law on Memorable Days: Baltic Unity Day, 22 September. The choice of this day was explained in the parliament: ‘On 22 September 1236, the Lithuanians, assisted by Latvian warriors, defeated the army of the Brothers of the Sword in a battle near Šiauliai. The Battle of Saule (*Saulės mūšis*) became a symbol of unity between the brotherly nations.’ That same year, the Latvian parliament also decided to mark Baltic Unity Day in Latvia. Thus, from 2000, in both Lithuania and Latvia, the day of the Battle of Saule is commemorated as Baltic Unity Day, to remind the populations of both countries of the ethnic similarities between Lithuanians and Latvians, and to encourage closer cooperation between the kindred nations and the Lithuanian and Latvian states. The creation of a memorial is under way at the supposed site of the battle, although the latest research by the historian Tomas Baranauskas and the archaeologist Gintautas Zabiela shows that this localisation of the battle should be questioned.²

The first time Lithuania and Latvia both planned to mark the day of the Battle of Saule was in 1936, the 700th anniversary of the battle. However, attempts to organise a joint anniversary celebration failed. This article seeks to answer the following questions: what prompted Latvia and Lithuania to organise a commemoration of the anniversary of the Battle of Saule in 1936; what meanings lay behind the image of the Battle of Saule in Lithuania and Latvia at that time; and why did the idea of a common celebration of the battle’s anniversary collapse?

¹ Explanation of the Law on Memorable Days <https://e-seimas.lrs.lt/portal/legalAct/lt/TAK/TAIS.96983?positionInSearchResults=144&searchModelUUID=1d1059ca-a251-4414-865e-9eca162f895b> (accessed 11 August 2020).

² T. Baranauskas, G. Zabiela, *Saulės mūšio pėdsakų paieškos* (Vilnius, 2016).

The image of the Battle of Saule in memory cultures up to 1935

The Latvian and Lithuanian national movements that began in the 19th century developed like all other national movements in the era of national awakening: they were based (or tried to base their existence) on history, as an argument justifying their nation's right to cultural and political emancipation. The Lithuanian national movement turned its attention to the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania prior to the Union of Lublin (1569), an abundant source of examples of the tradition of Lithuanian statehood and military prowess. The image of the Battle of Saule was not very popular during the Lithuanian national revival; however, it was considered in historiography as a heroic episode from the past of the Lithuanians. *Apsakymai apie Lietuvos praeigą* (Stories about Lithuania's Past) by Maironis (Jonas Mačiulis) was published in Tilsit, East Prussia, in 1891. Since that was the time when publishing in Lithuanian in Latin script was prohibited, the book served as the main source for those wanting to learn about Lithuanian history in the Lithuanian language. There is an account of the Battle of Saule in *Apsakymai apie Lietuvos praeigą*, which gives its location as the Karsakiškis area (in the present-day Panevėžys district). According to Maironis, the army of the Livonian Brothers of the Sword was defeated by the Lithuanians under the command of Rimgaudas, with the latter being presented as the first grand duke of a unified Lithuania.³ Rimgaudas was a mythical Lithuanian duke, said to be the father of Grand Duke Mindaugas. *Apsakymai apie Lietuvos praeigą* was the main textbook on Lithuanian history for two decades. It only gave up its place to *Lietuvos istorija* (A History of Lithuania), written by Fr Antanas Alekna in 1911, in which the location of the Battle of Saule was not defined, and it was claimed that the army of the Brothers of the Sword was defeated by an army commanded by Grand Duke Mindaugas.⁴

³ *Apsakymai apie Lietuvos praeigą*. Parasžė Stanyšlovas Zanavykas (Tilžė, 1886), pp. 36–37.

⁴ A. Alekna, *Lietuvos istorija* (Kaunas, 1911), p. 7.

Even though the authors of these histories did not agree on the location of the battle, or on who the commander of the Lithuanian forces was, they both agreed that it was a victory achieved by the Lithuanians unilaterally. We should note at this point that these histories of the battle did not make the slightest mention of any Lithuanian-Latvian military cooperation during the battle, and neither did they allude to the existence of a Lithuanian-Latvian brotherhood in arms.

In the historical publications that appeared during the Latvian national revival in the middle and the second half of the 19th century, which formed the national history narrative, the 13th-century battles against the Teutonic and Livonian orders were an important component, presented as a heroic struggle for freedom. The crushing defeat of the Livonian Crusaders/Brothers of the Sword at the Battle of Saule was considered an important event in the history of the Latvian nation. Jānis Krodznieks-Krīgers, the first Latvian historian with a formal education in field, published a broad account in the magazine *Austrums* in 1886–1887, entitled *Par zemgaliešiem* (On the Semigallians). This was the first mention of the battle to localise the site in Zemgale.⁵ It is worth noting that after that, and up to the middle of the 1930s, no other professional Latvian historian paid special attention to the circumstances of the battle, and no attempts were made to locate the site.

On the eve of the appearance of the independent Latvian and Lithuanian states in 1918, the image of the Battle of Saule was not embedded in the collective memories of Latvians and Lithuanians as an important site of memory. Attention to early historical periods in Latvia and Lithuania was more pronounced in the first years of independence, when the countries were struggling for their political and cultural sovereignty; however, afterwards, public interest soon waned.

Images from the history of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (GDL) became more prominent again in Lithuanian memory culture at the end of the 1920s, when the authoritarian regime of Antanas Smetona established itself in government. Then, the actualisation

⁵J. Krodznieks, *Iz Baltijas vēstures. I daļa* (Rīga, 1912), p. 69.

of historical images from the times of the GDL became a point of policy in forming the collective memory, as the political regime sought to exploit it for its own legitimisation. The best example of the focused aims of the political regime was the Vytautas the Great anniversary campaign of 1930, devoted to marking 500 years since the death of Grand Duke Vytautas (1350–1430).

In the Republic of Latvia, interest in early history was also revived when the authoritarian regime of Kārlis Ulmanis became established following the coup in 1934. It was especially important for the regime to justify authoritarianism as a 'historical unavoidability', seeking to present an interpretation of Latvian history that would show that the authoritarian form of governance unfolded naturally, that it was best suited to society's needs, and that it actually had deep historical roots.⁶ The 13th century was the ideal period in Latvian history for this purpose, being presented in the national tradition of Romanticism as 'the struggle for freedom by the Ancient Latvians'. The romanticised image of the battle was further established in 19th and early 20th-century Latvian literature, published works and historiography. In this context, Ulmanis' authoritarian regime only extended the Latvian nationalist tradition that formed at the end of the 19th century. When reflecting on the objectives and social meaning of the historical sciences, Ulmanis himself stressed that 'history makes us believe in the existence of the nation and our power, it arouses and increases our love for the nation, and explains the significance of state government and the necessity for a state.'⁷ He thereby emphasised that one of the objectives of history was to legitimise the country's government. The history of Latvian statehood became a priority in academic research, seeking to uncover the very earliest testimonials of Latvian statehood. The 13th-century 'freedom battles' of the Semigallians and the commanders of Semigallian tribes became very relevant themes. For example, on 19 May 1936, the Cabinet of Ministers decided to appoint the poet Edvartas Virza, who was supported

⁶ T. Vilciņš, 'Zinātne Latvijas Republikā (1918–1940)', in: *Latvijas Zinātņu Akadēmijas Vēstis*, No 6 (1991), p. 109.

⁷ K. Ulmanis, 'Tauta un vēsture', in: *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls*, No 1 (1937), p. 9.

by the regime, to 'examine and describe the early Semigallian rulers', paying him significant annual commissions for the work.⁸ The regime needed the poet's narratives about mighty Ancient Latvian tribes that successfully waged wars against their enemies, until they finally submitted to the will of an autocratic ruler.

In the 'Ancient Latvia' historical narrative, Semigallians and their rulers were given a special role. As Ilgvars Butulis states, at the time, a mystical symbolic marker was attributed to this fact in Latvian history, while the political and ideological beginnings of the authoritarian regime were linked to the Semigallian rulers Viesturs and Nameisis.⁹ It is believed that Ulmanis had a personal interest in highlighting the tradition of Semigallian statehood, for he originally came from Zemgale, and could use the existing symbolic capital as the ruler of Zemgale to allege his legitimate succession of Semigallian statehood traditions.

In the 1930s, the heroic images of battles against the Crusaders and the Brothers of the Sword in particular took on an anti-Nazi tinge in Lithuania and Latvia: this was strongly enhanced by the Nazi rise to power in Germany in 1933. The propaganda narrative about heroic battles against the Teutonic and Livonian orders, with its distinctive anti-German character, was first expressed during the First World War. It was hardly noticeable in the Lithuanian memory discourse, but was rather strong in the Latvian discourse. In 1915, the Latvian Ethnographic Society (*Latviešu Etnogrāfiskā biedrība*) in Riga published a historical outline by an anonymous author entitled *Zemgaliešu simtgadu cīņas par patstāvību* (The Centuries-Long Semigallian Struggle for Independence). The fourth chapter was called 'The Great Victory of the Semigallians and the Lithuanians over the Bishop of Riga and the Elimination of the Order of the Brothers of the Sword', which was about the Battle of Saule, and stated that the Semigallians, together with the Lithuanians, defeated the Brothers of the Sword in this battle.¹⁰ This suddenly aroused interest about the Battle of Saule among Latvian publicists represented the anti-German pathos of wartime propa-

⁸ *Izglītības Ministrijas Mēnešraksts*, No 7/8 (1936), p. 58

⁹ I. Butulis, 'Ideoloģija un propaganda', 15. *majja Latvija* (Rīga, 2017), pp. 169–170.

¹⁰ *Zemgaliešu simtgadu cīņas par patstāvību* (Rīga, 1915).

ganda, since in summer of 1915 the German troops had captured the whole south-western part of Latvia and were stemmed at the outskirts of Riga.

The anti-German historical narrative grew particularly pronounced in Lithuania in 1933, when the Nazis, who had taken power in Germany, began to openly express their revanchist claims to the Klaipėda region: they were trying to make it a German land once more. A symbolic response to this Nazi revanchism in Lithuania was the première of the first Lithuanian opera written in the interwar period, at the State Theatre on 16 February 1934, to commemorate the 15th anniversary of Lithuania's independence. On this day, the work *Gražina* by Jurgis Karnavičius was staged, with its libretto written by Kazys Inčiūra, based on a poem by Adomas Mickevičius (Adam Mickiewicz).¹¹ The heroine of the opera was the mythical wife of the Lithuanian duke Liutauras, who died heroically fighting the Crusaders, whose Teutonic character was strongly highlighted in the opera.

The Lithuanian and Latvian political elites searched for images from the collective memory that would prove most effective in mobilising society against any potential Nazi aggression, and respond to the relevant foreign policy guidelines at the time. From 1933, seeking to improve their guarantees of sovereignty, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia started to actively create a collective security system in the region. The idea of the Baltic Entente, a union between Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, was reborn. The Treaty of Unity and Cooperation of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia was signed at the United Nations in Geneva on 12 September 1934. One week after the signing of the Baltic Entente Treaty, an article appeared in the Latvian press by the historian Hugo Riekstiņš that reminded readers that the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Saule would be in two years. Riekstiņš ended his article with the emotional exhortation: 'Let the commemoration of our old common struggles and victories unite our and our neighbours' forces for new struggles and victories!'¹² The Battle

¹¹ V. Jakubėnas, 'Gražina' Mūsų teatro naujoji premjera', in: *Lietuvos aidas*, No 39, 17 February 1933.

¹² H.R., 'Latvju un leišu ieroču brālība Saules kaujā', in: *Brīvā Zeme*, No 218, 24 August 1934.

of Saule was an ideal vehicle for historical imagery, which could be actualised as a reminder of the ethnic similarities between Lithuanians and Latvians, their shared historical destiny, and their friendship strengthened through the blood shed in fighting against a common enemy. At the time, the actualisation of this historical event had already commenced in the Lithuanian-Latvian unity discourse that was being promoted.

Organisation of the anniversary

There were public organisations in Latvia and Lithuania whose mission was declared as the determined allegiance of kindred nations, the Lithuanians and the Latvians. The Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society was founded in Riga in 1921, while an analogous Lithuanian-Latvian Unity Society started in Kaunas in 1923. They launched and offered lobbying support for initiatives that served in bringing the two nations and countries closer together. Some of the initiatives actively supported and implemented by these societies were related to the expression of memory culture. For example, in 1930, both societies became involved in the anniversary campaign honouring Grand Duke Vytautas of Lithuania.¹³ In 1932, the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society ensured that in Latvia, just as in Lithuania, the 550th anniversary of the death of Grand Duke Kęstutis of Lithuania would also be commemorated. The societies ensured that Independence Day memorial celebrations take place in both countries, presenting them as an organic episode from the same narrative about the two nations' struggles for freedom. All of this can be considered as attempts to construct a collective memory uniting the Lithuanians and the Latvians.

During a board meeting of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society in Riga on 4 October 1933, its chairman Jānis Rīteris read an announcement by one of the members, J. Lušys, who, in drawing attention to the common threat from Germany encroaching on the Latvians and Lithuanians if they failed to unite, reminded

¹³ Protocol of the first Joint Meeting of the Latvian-Lithuanian and Lithuanian-Latvian Society boards, Kaunas, 23–24 November 1929, Latvijas Valsts vēstures arhīvs (State Historical Archives of Latvia, henceforth LVVA), col. 2268, inv. 1, file 31, pp. 30–36.

the board of the Battle of Saule on 22 September 1236, when the Germans were crushed, and suggested a joint celebration with the Lithuanians in 1936 to mark the 700th anniversary. The board supported this initiative, and a member, the historian Janis Bērziņš, was asked to prepare an announcement about the battle. The board also decided to appeal to the Ministry of Education with the request that 'the day of the victory be considered a national holiday, and that it be marked in all schools as the first joint effort of Latvians and Lithuanians working together 700 years ago against the Livonian Order'.¹⁴

Note that the initiative for commemorating the anniversary of the Battle of Saule originated in Riga, not Kaunas. The society based in Riga was much more active, and even complained that the society operating from Kaunas was too passive.¹⁵ At the annual meeting of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society held on 11 March 1934, it was agreed that the Latvians and the Lithuanians should commemorate the anniversary of the Battle of Saule together in 1936.¹⁶ The organisational plans voiced by the Society's board testified to the goal of celebrating the anniversary with as much involvement and ceremony as possible.

However, the memorial event which was so energetically organised in Riga soon started to falter: this happened when more attention was paid to working out the location of the battle. It is likely that most members of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society believed that the Battle of Saule took place on Latvian territory. This could probably be explained by the fact that the initiative behind organising the celebration of the battle was born in Riga. Or at least it appears that the majority believed this, until the board meeting of 13 February 1934, during which the historian Bērziņš explained the history of the battle in detail, and noted that some

¹⁴ Protocol of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society board meeting in Riga, 4 October 1933, LVVA, col. 2268, inv. 1, file 26, p. 123.

¹⁵ Protocol of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society board meeting in Riga, 12 October 1933, *ibid.*, p. 127.

¹⁶ Protocol of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society board meeting, 11 March 1934, LVVA, col. 2268, inv. 1, file 29, p. 26.

historians believed it took place near Šiauliai in Lithuania, and not in the Vecsaule area in Latvia's Zemgale district.¹⁷ The board took steps to solve the question of the location of the battle, and in May 1934 it suggested that the universities of both countries, Latvia and Lithuania, try to examine the issue.¹⁸

At the board meeting of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society on 28 September 1934, Berzinis warned that he would soon be publishing articles about the battle in the press that could provoke some discussion, as his opinions about the location of the battle differed from those of other Latvian historians: he believed that it took place near Šiauliai. The meeting protocol shows that a strong desire to idealise the history of the battle dominated in the board, despite little being known about its location and participants. An idea put forward by Professor Juris Plāķis during the discussions that was highlighted in the protocol is quite telling: 'History cannot ignore national heroes, even if we know nothing specific about them,' and especially when news about their deeds had already become entrenched in the national memory. He gave the Swiss hero William Tell as an example.¹⁹

The opinion of Bērziņš did not suit the board of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society, leading it to the following resolution on 6 November 1934:

Bearing in mind that the board member of our organisation Associate Professor Bērziņš is of the opinion that this battle took place in Lithuania, near Šiauliai, and not in Latvia near Vecsaule in the Bauska district, even when other historians agree with the correct opinion that the battle took place near Vecsaule [underlined by the authors of this article], we ask Professor J. Plāķis to explain this matter to our other historians, Professor A. Tentelis and other young historians, such as [Gustavs] Lukstiņš, [Mārgers] Stepermanis and [Vilis] Biļķins.²⁰

¹⁷ Protocol of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society board meeting in Riga, 13 February 1934, LVVA, col. 2268, inv. 1, file 26, p. 134.

¹⁸ Protocol of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society board meeting in Riga, 30 May 1934, *ibid.*, p. 158.

¹⁹ Protocol of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society board meeting in Riga, 28 September 1934, *ibid.*, p. 167.

²⁰ Protocol of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society board meeting in Riga, 6 November 1934, *ibid.*, pp. 172–173.

However, it soon became apparent that Tentelis also thought the battle took place near Šiauliai in Lithuania. It was decided to ask for the help of historians again from both countries to determine the exact location of the battle.²¹

Meanwhile, the board of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society was taking practical steps towards organising the memorial celebration. Since historians claimed that the battle took place near Šiauliai, in January 1935 the board decided to make a suggestion to the Lithuanian-Latvian Unity Society to organise a congress of the Lithuanian-Latvian unity societies in Šiauliai in 1936, and to mark the anniversary of the battle with a joint song festival, in which the Latvian Defenders (*aizsargi*) and Lithuanian Riflemen (*šauliai*), paramilitary organisations from both countries, would participate. Complaints came from Riga at the time that the society in Kaunas would delay organising the song festival, as it was said that 'there is little interest in celebrating the [anniversary of the] Battle of Saule in Lithuania.' It was ultimately decided to request the Lithuanian-Latvian Unity Society in Kaunas to see to the Lithuanian aspects of the festival's organisation. The Riga-based society soon understood that the organisation of this event, which it was thought would be organised by the unity societies and paramilitary organisations in both countries, was not going to be as easy as initially believed, and that an interstate celebration would be basically impossible without the support and mediation of the highest government offices in the country.²² This probably explains why the governments of both countries started to become involved in the organisation of the celebration at this point, represented by the ministries of foreign affairs and diplomats from both countries.

On the first page of the official Lithuanian state newspaper *Lietuvos aidas* on 10 January 1935, front and centre, there was an ELTA announcement from Riga stating that the board of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society

²¹ Protocol of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society board meeting in Riga, 4 December 1934, *ibid.*, p. 174.

²² Protocol of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society board meeting in Riga, 8 January 1935, *ibid.*, pp. 177–178.

had suggested to the Lithuanian-Latvian Unity Society to organise a joint commemoration of the battle near Saule that took place 700 years ago. In this battle, as is known, the Lithuanians and the Latvians fought together to defeat the knights of the Teutonic Order on 22 September 1236.

Readers were informed of the plans to organise a joint song festival to mark the anniversary of the battle, and to hold the 12th Congress of the Lithuanian-Latvian Unity Societies on this occasion.²³ The declaration of this information in the government's official newspaper can be considered as confirmation that a decision had been made in Lithuania to celebrate the anniversary of the battle together with the Latvians.

Even though the idea of the commemoration of the battle had been accepted in Lithuania, during the rest of 1935, no specific activities related to the forthcoming anniversary took place in the country. At the end of October 1935, the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society officially informed the Lithuanian-Latvian Unity Society that Latvian historians had found that the battle took place near Šiauliai in Lithuania, and not in Latvia, which is why the Lithuanian-Latvian Unity Society should be responsible for organising the anniversary celebration, and urged the latter to present its recommendations for the organisation of the celebration.²⁴ The organisation in Kaunas agreed to arrange the memorial event; however, it did not hurry to share its ideas about the celebration itself, as it was most likely not in any great rush to burden itself with organisational matters.

In order to facilitate the coordination of the activities of 'friendship societies' in the Baltic States, the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Cooperation Bureau was founded in Riga on 1 July 1934. It brought together representatives of the societies operating in Latvia, the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity and Latvian-Estonian societies, as well as similar societies operating in Lithuania and Estonia. At a meeting of the Cooperation Bureau in Kaunas on 11 January 1936, it was decided to hold the Second Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Unity Congress in Kaunas in 1936, so that its

²³ 'Lietuviai ir latviai bendrai minės Saulės mūšį', in: *Lietuvos aidas*, No 8, 10 January 1935.

²⁴ Protocol of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society board meeting in Riga, 22 October 1935, LVVA, col. 2268, inv. 1, file 27, p. 34.

participants could take the opportunity to visit Šiauliai, and take part in the celebrations of the 700th anniversary of the Battle of Saule. It was intended that a monument honouring the heroes of the battle would be erected in Šiauliai in the future.²⁵

The decision to mark the anniversary in Šiauliai was also approved at the annual meeting of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society on 29 March 1936.²⁶ Even though the participants in the annual meeting agreed that the celebration should be held in Šiauliai, doubts arose again on the board over the location of the battle. The Society's chairman Riteris had said at the board meeting on 25 February 1936 that disagreements had arisen among historians, poets and writers over the location of the battle, whether it was near Šiauliai in Lithuania, or near Vecsaule in Latvia, which is why the Society wished to resolve the matter, and appealed for assistance from the Latvian Institute of History.²⁷ We should note that the Latvian Institute of History was an academic institution that had been founded quite recently, on 6 January 1936.

As preparations for the memorial celebration were under way in Lithuania, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs started receiving news that strong doubts were coming from Latvia as to whether the battle site really was near Šiauliai, and that the already planned joint commemoration of the battle in Lithuania might not go ahead. The Lithuanian envoy in Latvia, Vytautas Vileišis, was given orders to 'kindly ask' the Latvian government, reminding them of the approaching date, 'how long the discussions of this question at the Latvian Institute of History might still take'.²⁸ The board of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society also made a recommendation that the historians hasten to present their findings.²⁹

²⁵ 'Pošanās uz Saules kaujas svinībām', in: *Latvijas-Igaunijas Biedrības Mēnešraksts*, No 2 (1936), p. 31.

²⁶ Protocol of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society annual meeting in Riga, 29 March 1936, LVVA, col. 2268, inv. 1, file 29, pp. 30–31.

²⁷ Protocol of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society board meeting in Riga, 25 February 1936, LVVA, col. 2268, inv. 1, file 27, p. 70.

²⁸ Letter from J. Urbšys, the director of the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Policy Department, to the Lithuanian envoy in Latvia, 17 April 1936, Lithuanian Central State Archives (LCVA), col. 383, inv. 7, file 1882, p. 19.

²⁹ Protocol of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society board meeting in Riga, 28 April 1936, LVVA, col. 2268, inv. 1, file 27, pp. 88–90.

On 18 May 1936, Vileišis, the Lithuanian envoy, received a call from Gottards Wilhelms Nikolajs Munters, the general secretary of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Munters asked the envoy to pass on a request to the minister Stasys Lozoraitis to use all his influence to refrain from having a monument to mark the Battle of Saule erected in Šiauliai, as the site of the battle was still a subject of debate. Munters shared his regrets that the monument's construction would only intensify discussions, while the polemic could ruin the mood of the celebration.³⁰ It was not long before Kārlis Ludvigs Sēja, the Latvian envoy in Lithuania, passed on a different opinion from the Latvian government: it was recommended to dismiss altogether the idea of organising a joint commemoration of the battle.³¹ It appears that at this stage, the Latvian government had already decided that a joint Lithuanian-Latvian organised commemoration of the battle would not take place, whereas the Lithuanian government did not want to give up the idea of organising a bilateral celebration with the Latvians to mark the battle, and was inclined to search for a compromise.

The Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society found itself in a difficult situation: it did not want to dismiss the idea of organising an anniversary celebration of the battle with the Lithuanians, and yet at the same time it was forced to take a position that would not be in stark contrast to that of the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Thus, the board meeting of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society on 19 May 1936 focused on searching for arguments that could serve as obstacles as to why the memorial celebration could not be held in Šiauliai. Forced to search for arguments, the Society's board decided to rely on the findings of Vilis Biļķins, one of the younger generation of Latvian historians, who had claimed in a recently published study that it was still impossible to ultimately determine where the battle had taken place. In a letter sent by the Society to Lithuania, it was decided to stress that 'most of our young historians and even writers oppose the opinion of

³⁰ Letter from the Lithuanian envoy in Latvia V. Vileišis to the Lithuanian foreign affairs minister Lozoraitis, 18 May 1936, LCVA, col. 383, inv. 7, file 1882, p. 18.

³¹ Pro memoria of the Lithuanian minister for foreign affairs Lozoraitis, 19 May 1936, LCVA, col. 383, inv. 7, file 1882, p. 17.

older historians that the battle took place near Šiauliai,' and that it would not be possible to give a clear answer as to where the battle occurred prior to the congress; however, it was still necessary to mark the battle, as 'this was a celebration confirming the solidarity of both brotherly nations.'³²

We should remind readers that the board of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society had already stated that the most authoritative historians in Latvia believed that the battle took place in Lithuania, suggesting that this dynamism in the Society's position could only have been a result of the government's 'pressure from above'. The Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society tried to save the flailing commemoration of the battle. Its activists made the following suggestion to the Lithuanian ambassador in Latvia: Lithuanian historians could take the initiative to organise an urgent meeting of Latvian and Lithuanian historians in Kaunas or Riga, or immediately commence archaeological excavations at the likely battle sites near Bauska and Šiauliai, in order to identify the site before the approaching memorial date.³³ Lithuania's diplomats supported the idea, and even made some organisational moves in this direction; however, it soon became clear that the matter could not be resolved in a hurry.

A statement was made at the board meeting of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society on 14 July 1936 that an agreement on the site of the Battle of Saule could not be reached, so it was decided to leave the question open. Regarding Kaunas, the Society decided to explain the position that Latvian diplomats had already expressed: the celebration of the battle should be organised in Kaunas, Riga or Tallinn, but not in a specific location near Vecsaule or Šiauliai, as 'otherwise unnecessary misunderstandings could arise.'³⁴

The article 'The Battle of Saulė-Šiauliai', expressing the official government position, appeared in *Lietuvos aidas* on 16 July 1936.

³² Protocol of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society board meeting in Riga, 19 May 1936, LVVA, col. 2268, inv. 1, file 27, pp. 99–100.

³³ Announcement from the Lithuanian envoy Vileišis in Latvia to the Lithuanian minister for foreign affairs Lozoraitis, ? June 1936, LCVA, col. 383, inv. 7, file 1882, p. 16.

³⁴ Protocol of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society board meeting in Riga, 14 July 1936, LVVA, col. 2268, inv. 1, file 27, pp. 105–106.

The title alone declared that in Lithuania it was believed that the battle took place near Šiauliai, even though it was alleged that ‘the matter of location is not so important.’ It was stressed that Lithuanians would mark the anniversary of the battle, and that both the Latvians and the Estonians should mark the anniversary as well, as it was ‘a reminder of the joint battles of the Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians from earlier times against the expansive policies of the Teutons in the Baltic area.’³⁵ There was no intention of cancelling the celebration in Lithuania, and preparations for the anniversary went ahead regardless.

It was not long before the Lithuanian envoy in Latvia received a visit from the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society. Its representatives declared that if the participants in the Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian unity congress in Kaunas were offered a trip to Šiauliai to honour those who died in the Battle of Saule, neither the Latvians nor the Estonians would attend. Thus, the Society’s representatives, ‘wishing to avoid a misunderstanding that would only please the Germans’, asked the Lithuanian envoy to pass on this position to the Lithuanian minister of foreign affairs in advance, so that he would take the initiative into his own hands, and advise the organisers of the congress to celebrate the anniversary of the battle, but without mentioning the location where it unfolded. In a message to the minister, the envoy wrote as follows: ‘In this way, the Latvians want to leave the question unresolved, and unresolved for all time, so that they can also take the credit for the Battle of Saule taking place on their land, and that they were active in the fighting.’ In explaining the Latvians’ position to the minister, the ambassador noted: ‘It would perhaps be a shame not to honour the dead in the Battle of Saule in Šiauliai, but politically, we would lose the approval and goodwill of the Latvians.’ Vileišis noted that the matter was very important, and stressed that an unfavourable decision by the Lithuanians regarding Latvia could even signal the end of friendly relations between the two countries.³⁶ In the

³⁵ Dr A. V – kas, ‘Ruoškimės paminėti 1236 m. Saulės – Šaulių kautynės’, in: *Lietuvos aidas*, No 321, 16 July 1936.

³⁶ Announcement from the Lithuanian envoy Vileišis in Latvia to the Lithuanian minister for foreign affairs Lozoraitis, 20 July 1936, LCVA, col. 383, inv. 7, file 1882, pp. 12–13.

opinion of the Lithuanian envoy in Riga, the Latvian government was consciously sabotaging the idea of organising a joint commemoration of the victory at the battle in Šiauliai, and had only found a formal excuse for this aim: historians' arguments over the actual battle site.

At the same time, the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs received a letter from the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Cooperation Bureau, which was organising the congress in Kaunas. The Bureau claimed that it was prepared to organise a memorial celebration of the anniversary of the Battle of Saule at the Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian Unity Congress in Kaunas; however, 'as arguments had arisen in Latvia over the site of the battle', the Bureau was forced to abandon the idea, and offered to pass on the organisation of the memorial event to the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union.³⁷ It became clear that the Bureau would not be organising the celebration, while the suggestion to entrust the pro-government paramilitary body with the event's organisation was actually a prompt to the Lithuanian government not to wait, and make a political decision regarding the commemoration of the anniversary.

The Lithuanian government started to devise ways of getting out of this difficult situation, and slightly over a month later, the Lithuanian envoy in Latvia was informed that during the Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian Unity Congress in Kaunas, formalities would be limited to a lecture about the Battle of Saule by Professor Ignas Jonynas. The Riflemen's Union, which had taken over the organisation of commemorating the battle, did not plan to concentrate the celebrations in just one location, in Šiauliai, as had been planned, but across the whole of Lithuania. It was decided to move the date of the event from 22 to 27 September, and not to invite official representatives from Latvia or Estonia.³⁸ In this way, Lithuania finally agreed to dismiss the idea of organising a joint commemoration of the battle with the other Baltic

³⁷ Letter from the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian Cooperation Bureau to the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 20 July 1936, LCVA, col. 383, inv. 7, file 1882, p. 10.

³⁸ Letter from J. Urbšys, the director of the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs Policy Department, to the Lithuanian envoy in Latvia, 29 August 1936, LCVA, col. 383, inv. 7, file 1882, p. 5.

countries, and moved the date of the celebration one week ahead in Lithuania, so that it would not coincide with the Baltic Unity Congress taking place in Kaunas.³⁹

The establishment of the image of the Battle of Saule in memory cultures in 1935–1936

Alongside the preparations for celebrating the anniversary of the Battle of Saule, the history of the battle was also actualised in Latvia and Lithuania, in order to fix its image in the memory cultures. Professional historians were the first port of call in doing this. Jānis Bērziņš, the director of the State Archives of Latvia, published an article about the battle in January 1935, in which he reminded readers of the approaching anniversary. Presenting the idea of commemorating the anniversary at the battle site, he urged that the site should be determined. He claimed that the search for the site of the battle should take place in the Šiauliai district in Lithuania.⁴⁰ The article by this Latvian historian was the first scientific study on the Battle of Saule to be published in the interwar years in Latvia and Lithuania.

The Vytautas Magnus University professor Eduardas Volteris reacted to his Latvian colleague's article at the end of 1935, by sharing some brief insights in the press over the localisation of the battle, suggesting searching for the site in east Lithuania. Volteris suggested forming a scientific commission made up of Lithuanian and Latvian historians, which would not only visit likely battle sites, but, using archaeological and historical data, would determine where the battle took place, and decide once and for all 'how this battle in which the Lithuanians defeated the Germans should be commemorated'.⁴¹

³⁹ Announcement from the Lithuanian envoy V. Vileišis in Latvia to the Lithuanian minister for foreign affairs Lozoraitis, 7 September 1936, LCVA, col. 383, inv. 7, file 1882, p. 3; Protocol of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society board meeting in Riga, 21 August 1936, LVVA, col. 2268, inv. 1, file 27, p. 108.

⁴⁰ J. Bērziņš, 'Kur notika Saules kauja 1236. gadā?', in: *Izglītības Ministrijas Mēnešraksts*, No 1 (1935), pp. 1–19.

⁴¹ E. Volteris, 'Kur ieškotina Saulė-Šiauliai, 1236 metų mūšio vieta?', in: *Židinys*, No 12 (1935), pp. 567–568.

Soon after the release of Volteris' insights, an article about the Battle of Saule by Simas Sužiedėlis appeared.⁴² This was the first broad study of the circumstances and outcomes of the battle in Lithuanian historiography. As the author himself admitted, he was prompted to take up this theme by both the historiographical situation (the first Crusade to Lithuania had not yet received significant attention from Lithuanian historians), and the approaching anniversary of the battle, which 'reminds us of the joint Lithuanian-Latvian (Semigallian) battle front against the expansionist aspirations of the Livonian Order in the Baltics'.⁴³

Articles by other historians about the Battle of Saule also appeared in Lithuania in 1936. The historian Zenonas Ivinskis, who published a study about the battle at a similar time, claimed that in Lithuania, the question of localising the battle was considered 'mostly resolved in favour of Šiauliai', and this was reflected both in articles and school textbooks, whereas the Latvians 'were still arguing vehemently over' the battle site.⁴⁴ Bērziņš' view that the battle took place near Šiauliai was supported in the community of academic Latvian historians by Augusts Tentelis, the director of the Latvian Institute of History.⁴⁵ However, this view was shared by a minority, as the dominant opinion was that the battle took place in the Vecsaule area. The amateur historian Rihards Ērglis summarised the arguments of supporters of this view in his book *Zemgales neatkarības vēsture* (A History of the Independence of Zemgale).⁴⁶ In *Zemgaliešu cīņas ar bīskapiem un ordeni* (The Battles of the Semigallians Against the Bishop and the Order), published in 1936, the medievalist Vilis Biļķins, the director of the Riga City Archives, also tried to answer the question of the location of the battle. However, when he compared the arguments of supporters localising the battle in the Šiauliai and the Vecsaule

⁴² S. Sužiedėlis, 'Kautynės ties Šiauliais 1236 m.', in: *Athenaeum*, Vol. 6, notebook 1 (Kaunas, 1935), p. 13.

⁴³ *Ibidem.*, pp. 13–53.

⁴⁴ Z. Ivinskis, *Saulės-Šiaulių kautynės 1236 m. ir jų reikšmė* (Kaunas, 1936), p. 34.

⁴⁵ 'Pošanās uz Saules kaujas svinībām', *Latvijas-Igaunijas Biedrības Mēnešraksts*, No 2 (1936), p. 30.

⁴⁶ R. Ērglis, *Zemgales neatkarības vēsture* (Rīga, 1936), pp. 146–194.

areas, the author stated: 'We cannot be wrong in stating that the question of the location of the Battle of Saule is unresolvable.'⁴⁷

The greatest event in Latvian historical sciences associated with the anniversary of the Battle of Saule was the publication of the Latvian translation of the 'Livonian Rhymed Chronicle' in 1936,⁴⁸ with extracts of it often being published in the press. A whole collection of popular articles devoted to the Battle of Saule were published. A number of literary works were also published in Latvia to mark the anniversary of the battle. For example, on 22 September 1936, *Jaunākās Ziņas*, the largest and most influential Latvian newspaper, printed a poem on the theme of unity between Latvians and Lithuanians by the poet and politician Atis Ķeniņš, 'Kā priekš septiņsimti gadiem. Saules kaujas piemiņai' (Just like Seven Hundred Years Ago. In Memory of the Battle of Saule). The novel *Saules kauja* (The Battle of Saule) by Kārlis Fimbers appeared in the pages of the newspaper *Latvijas Kareivis* from 23 April to 12 July 1936, and was later published as a separate book.⁴⁹ The novel prompted readers to consider the historical parallels with the present situation, and the advantages of an authoritarian regime as the only way of ensuring national security in an epoch of unrest. Works of art also served to establish imagery regarding the Battle of Saule in the memory culture of Latvians at the time. The most famous and popular painting was *Saules kauja* by Voldemārs Vimba, reproductions of which often appeared in the press.

In 1935 and 1936, images of the Battle of Saule were actualised in various ways in different formats, from writing historical accounts to creating works of art and historical novels. The Latvian press suggested to readers that the Semigallians played an important, if not fateful, role in defeating the army of the Order of the Brothers of the Sword; even though this was not stated so bluntly, it was certainly the impression readers could have obtained. In Latvia, great efforts were made to entrench the Battle of Saule in the memory culture of the Latvians, because Latvian society still needed to have it established as an unquestionably heroic episode in Latvian history.

⁴⁷ V. Biļķins, *Zemgaliešu cīņas ar bīskapiem un ordeni* (Rīga, 1936), p. 76.

⁴⁸ *Atskaņu hronika: Ditleba Alnpeķes 'Rūnju hronika'* (Rīga, 1936).

⁴⁹ K. Fimbers, *Saules kauja* (Rīga, 1936).

A separate anniversary celebration

The Baltic Unity Congress took place in Kaunas on 20–21 September 1936. As was planned, on the first day of the Congress, Professor Ignas Jonynas gave a lecture about the Battle of Saule; this was the first and the only reminder of the anniversary of the battle at the Congress.⁵⁰ When the Baltic Unity Congress ended, in its press statement, the Lithuanian government announced that determining the location of the Battle of Saule was ‘not of fundamental importance’, and that when marking the anniversary of the victory, it was most important to stress that it was a joint victory by the Baltic nations.⁵¹

The intended celebration of the victory at the battle did not materialise: Lithuania and Latvia marked the anniversary separately. In Latvia, there was not a general nationwide memorial event with official ceremonies in Riga, the capital; however, the anniversary was marked across the country. In rural areas in Latvia, the anniversary was usually marked in combination with other occasions. For example, in Bauska, it was marked along with the 17th birthday of the city’s gymnasium (high school).⁵² The Latvian History Teachers’ Association also became actively involved in the commemoration of the battle, organising an excursion to the supposed site of the battle in the Vecsaule area on 27 September.⁵³ On 20 September, the Daugavpils branch of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society, and the Lithuanian consulate in Daugavpils, organised an evening devoted to the battle, in which local government representatives and soldiers from the Daugavpils garrison participated.⁵⁴ Evenings devoted to the anniversary of

⁵⁰ A. Daumantas, ‘Širdingos santarvės belaukiant’, in: *Lietuvos aidas*, No 438, 24 September 1936; J. Vileišis, ‘Antrajam trijų Pabaltijo tautų kongresui pasibaigus’, in: *Lietuvos žinios*, No 190, 26 September 1936.

⁵¹ A. Daumantas, ‘Širdingos santarvės belaukiant’.

⁵² ‘Bauskas ģimnāzija godina Saules kaujas varoņus’, in: *Bauskas Vēstnesis*, No 39, 25 September 1936; ‘Bauskas ģimnāzija apmeklēja Saules kaujas vietu’, in: *Zemgales Balss*, No 217, 24 September 1936.

⁵³ ‘Pa vēstures pēdām’, in: *Zemgales Balss*, No 220, 28 September 1936; ‘Vēstures skolotāji Vecsaulē’, in: *Bauskas Vēstnesis*, No 40, 02 October 1936.

⁵⁴ ‘Saules kaujas atcere Daugavpilī’, in: *Jaunākās Ziņas*, No 214, 21 September 1936.

the battle held at the end of September 1936 were also organised by the Ikšķīle branch of the Latvian Aeroclub⁵⁵ and the literature section of the Chemical Industry Trade Union.⁵⁶

Compared to Latvia, in Lithuania the anniversary of the Battle of Saule was celebrated much more widely, and with much greater enthusiasm. In Latvia, most of the anniversary events took place on 22 September 1936, but in Lithuania the main celebrations were held on 27 September. The main organiser behind the commemoration was the Lithuanian Riflemen's Union. The anniversary was marked in Mažeikiai, Vilkaviškis, Gruzdžiai, Panevėžys, Alytus, Šiauliai, and elsewhere. The main celebrations were held in Kaunas on 27 September, in which members of the Lithuanian government participated, along with army commanders and 'the organised and not organised public'. According to the press, around 10,000 people attended.⁵⁷

On the evening of the same day, Antanas Smetona, the President of the Republic of Lithuania, participated in a special meeting held at the Vytautas the Great Museum to mark the anniversary of the battle. After a round of official speeches and a lecture by Associate Professor Zenonas Ivinskis about the battle, a ceremonial document to commemorate the Saulė-Šiauliai battle was signed, which highlighted that the victory in the battle was achieved exclusively by the 'military genius of the Lithuanian nation': the Lithuanians truly celebrated the anniversary of their historic victory near Šiauliai.⁵⁸ There was no mention of any historical parallels to testify to the idea of a historic Lithuanian-Latvian brotherhood in arms that could be used to stress the idea of Baltic unity.

In his speech at the event, Smetona accentuated two points: the idea of unity between the Baltic States, or rather, the necessity for their consolidation, and the 'national unity' idea, which meant the unconditional loyalty of society to the political

⁵⁵ 'Saules kaujas atceres vakars Ikšķīlē', in: *Brīvā Zeme*, No 218, 25 September 1936.

⁵⁶ 'Strādnieku vakars Saules kaujas atcerei', in: *Brīvā Zeme*, No 240, 19 September 1936.

⁵⁷ 'Iškilmingai paminėta Saulės mūšio sukaktis', in: *Lietuvos aidas*, No 444, 28 September 1936.

⁵⁸ V. Zm., 'Saulės – Šiaulių kautynių paminėjimas', in: *Karys*, No 40 (1936), p. 996.

regime based on a hierarchical vertical order of government that was the only way of ensuring the state's sovereignty.⁵⁹ Ivinskis' public lecture was meant first of all to dispel any lingering doubts about whether the Battle of Saule took place near Šiauliai. In agreeing with the opinion that 1236 should be considered the end of the unification of Lithuania, along with the victory at the battle, Ivinskis also recommended marking the date of the establishment of the first Lithuanian state. He noted that the victory at the Battle of Saule was 'the first major triumph of the only recently unified Lithuania'.⁶⁰

The meanings behind the anniversary

Both in Lithuania and in Latvia, the celebration of the anniversary of the Battle of Saule was used to instil the idea of unity between the Baltic States, which was usually narrowed down to Lithuanian-Latvian unity. The propagandist unity discourse had to find a historical event whose imagery could be presented and actualised as evidence of centuries-long friendship, or a tradition of military cooperation. It was said that the Battle of Saule was very important to Lithuanians, and to Estonians and Latvians, as it was a reminder of the 'joint Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian struggle against the Teutonic invasion of the Baltic'.⁶¹ The most important message sent to the public in the Baltic countries about this battle was that, as was stressed in the official Lithuanian government press, 'It had to be a lesson and an example to the Baltic nations that only genuine, justified and well-organised unity was a strong pillar of resistance to foreign forces and the expansion of other cultures'.⁶²

⁵⁹ 'Jei Lietuva nebūtų buvusi stipri senovėje, kažin ar Pabaltijo tautos būtų išlikusios. Valstybės Prezidento kalba Karo muziejaus rūmuose IX.27 d.', in: *Trinitas*, No 40 (1936), p. 945.

⁶⁰ 'Iškilingai paminėta Saulės mūšio sukaktis', in: *Lietuvos aidas*, No 444, 28 September 1936.

⁶¹ A. Vasiliauskas, *Saulės-Šiaulių kautynės 1236 metais* (Kaunas, 1936), p. 23.

⁶² S. Vykintas, 'Saulės mūšio pasėkos', in: *Lietuvos aidas*, No 442, 26 September 1936.

It could be said that the imagery of the Battle of Saule as a testimony to historical friendship and blood spilt on the battlefield together was only suitable to a certain degree, as the position of Latvian and Estonian ancestors at the time of this battle was unclear, to say the least. Historians knew that there were warriors from the Latvian tribes among the Brothers of the Sword, which essentially spoilt the basis of the historical narrative being constructed as a joint Baltic struggle. This was the weakest link in the common Baltic struggle narrative, so much so that reasons justifying it had to be found.

Stepas Vykintas, who worked for the Lithuanian government's official newspaper *Lietuvos aidas*, tried to prove that in the battle, the Semigallians participated as 'strong supporters of the Lithuanians', for they killed fleeing Brothers of the Sword, while 'the other Latvian and Estonian families' allegedly eased the path to victory by retreating from the battlefield. It was said that only a 'narrow-minded historian' could accuse certain Estonian or Latvian tribes of joining the Brothers of the Sword: only the Germans' policies of violence and pitting one side against another could be blamed for this.⁶³ The two historians Ivinskis and Sužiedėlis stated that, from the very first days they settled in the Baltic lands, the Germans divided the Baltic nations and played them off against each other. It was highlighted that the greatest fear of the Germans was that 'kindred Baltic nations would join forces and wage war against them'.⁶⁴

As compensation for the hazy episode of military cooperation in the Battle of Saule, other testimonials of the Lithuanian-Latvian brotherhood in arms were given. For example, Vasiliauskas and Sužiedėlis reminded readers that in 1228, the Semigallians, together with the Samogitians and Curonians, destroyed a monastery and castle at Dünamünde (Daugavgrīva) established at the mouth of the River Daugava, and thereby 'blocked the route for knights travelling to Livonia'.⁶⁵

⁶³ Ibidem.

⁶⁴ S. Sužiedėlis, 'Kautynės ties Šiauliais 1236 m.', p. 23; Z. Ivinskis, *Saulės-Šiaulių kautynės 1236 m. ir jų reikšmė*, pp. 15–16.

⁶⁵ A. Vasiliauskas, *Saulės-Šiaulių kautynės 1236 metais*, p. 4; S. Sužiedėlis, 'Kautynės ties Šiauliais 1236 m.', p. 16.

While it was possible to 'discover' examples of military cooperation between the Lithuanians and Latvians in the 13th century, this was not the case with Lithuanian-Estonian or Lithuanian-Latvian-Estonian military cooperation. The involvement of Estonians in the battle narrative was its weakest element. Only abstract declarations about the participation of the Estonians appeared in the Lithuanian press, which were limited to stating that 'the battle near Šiauliai featured cooperation between Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians.'⁶⁶ In Latvia, attempts were made to relate the Estonians to the Battle of Saule through intermediate, meaningful links. For example, at a meeting of the Ancient Latvia Researchers' Society on 20 October 1936, Rihards Ērglis read an announcement about the Battle of Saule where he compared it to the Battle at Cēsis of June 1919, during which the joint Latvian and Estonian army forces defeated the Baltic German military forces. Ērglis stated that 'the very fact [of the Battle of Saule] was analogous to the Battle at Cēsis, where Latvians and Estonians fought against a joint enemy to defend the independence of both nations. Therefore, the Battle of Saule was a battle over a common issue.'⁶⁷ The fighting at Cēsis in Latvia was often brought up as an example of Estonian and Latvian military cooperation to follow.

The imagery of the Battle of Saule that turned into a historical testimony of Lithuanian-Latvian unity shifted from the pages of the press into public life in 1936. In October 1936, the newspaper *Latgales Vēstnesis* featured a major report on the visit of Lithuanian officials and officers from the Zarasai district to Ilūkste and Daugavpils in September 1936. The report revealed that, in their speeches urging closer Lithuanian-Latvian relations, both the Lithuanian guests and the Latvian hosts turned their attention to the past, reminding listeners of the Battle of Saule, which was supposed to show that 'only by acting together and in unity can Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia ensure a safe future.'⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Tr., 'Lietuviai ties Šiauliais prieš 700 m. sumuša vokiečius kardininkus', in: *Idomus mūsų momentas*, No 29, 21 September 1936.

⁶⁷ 'Saules kaujas piemiņai', in: *Brīvā Zeme*, No 240, 21 October 1936.

⁶⁸ 'Lietuvas viesi Ilūkstes un Daugavpils apriņķos', in: *Latgales Vēstnesis*, No 78, 06 October 1936; *Ibidem*, No 79, 09 October 1936.

Even more prominently than the idea of unity between the Baltic countries or Lithuanian-Latvian unity, the anniversary discourse on celebrating the Battle of Saule in Lithuania and Latvia accentuated the idea of a strong political autocracy. The old tradition of statehood in the countries was also highlighted. During the commemoration of the battle in Lithuania, it was presented as a historic testimony to the maturity of Lithuanian statehood, and an attempt was even made to mark it as an anniversary of Lithuanian statehood. At the time, the historian Ivinskis called the 700th anniversary of the battle a double and very significant anniversary, as, in his words, the victory was a 'triumph over the Germans, and the birth of the duchy of Lithuania'.⁶⁹ All Lithuanian historians who wrote about the battle at the time noted that the victory won by the Lithuanians was obvious confirmation of the consolidation of Lithuania as a state.

This insight by historians, that at the Battle of Saule, the Livonian Order could only be crushed by a unified Lithuania whose military forces were concentrated in the hands of one leader, was particularly favourable to ideologues of the authoritarian regime. Smetona, who headed the political regime in Lithuania, declared that the Battle of Saule was 'a great historical event that showed our Lithuania as a cohesive state, unified and disciplined, with a strong military command'.⁷⁰ The story of this successful Lithuanian opposition to the Brothers of the Sword was presented in the press under the influence of the government in order to promote the advantages of political autocracy, and even the need for a nation that wished to preserve its cultural and political sovereignty to have an authoritarian political regime. Historical parallels between the situations of the Lithuanians and the Latvians in the 13th century were used to instil this idea: for example, the press highlighted that up to 1232, the Brothers of the Sword had managed to 'take over almost all of the **divided** Semigallia' [words in

⁶⁹ Z. Ivinskis, 'Kautynės ties Saule – Šiauliais prieš 700 metų', in: *Trimitas*, No 39 (1936), p. 929.

⁷⁰ 'Jei Lietuva nebūtų buvusi stipri senovėje, kažin ar Pabaltijo tautos būtų išlikusios. Valstybės Prezidento kalba Karo muziejaus rūmuose IX.27 d.', p. 945.

bold were highlighted by the author of the cited article], while in 1236 Lithuania was **'no longer a disjointed state, but organised and strong'**. It was stressed that at the Battle of Saule **'victory was won by the brave sons of the already consolidated and unified Lithuania'** and the unified Lithuanians were contrasted with the Latvians and Estonians, highlighting that **'their statehood was at the time in a worse condition among those who were divided and frayed, and had long been enslaved by foreigners'**. Allegedly, Lithuania was the only state that understood **'the great power of unity, stayed strong and continued to grow in strength'**.⁷¹ The government sought to make the Battle of Saule a history lesson for the public, which taught society to unconditionally obey the political regime, which had concentrated all authority in one pair of hands.

It was merely a coincidence that the history of Lithuania edited by A. Šapoka and commissioned by the Lithuanian Ministry of Education appeared in 1936. This history textbook was in effect the official national history narrative. The description of the Battle of Saule (termed **'the battle near Šiauliai'**) was included in the narrative about the formation of Lithuanian statehood, claiming that the participation of Lithuanians in this battle was **'a campaign launched by the already unified Lithuania'**. The battle near Šiauliai was identified as the first victory on the battlefield by the already unified Lithuania.⁷² In this Lithuanian historical narrative, credit for the victory at the battle was attributed exclusively to the Lithuanians, and there was nothing that could confirm a Baltic **'brotherhood in arms'** in the 13th century, or echo the ideas of Baltic unity or friendship between the Baltic States. In this way, as a historical event, the battle served only the interests of the narrative of the Lithuanian statehood tradition, becoming a distinctly illustrative episode in the account of the beginnings of Lithuanian statehood.

The anniversary of the Battle of Saule was also exploited in the Latvian press for the political legitimisation of the authoritarian

⁷¹J. Ka., 'Vieningos Lietuvos pergalė', *Jaunoji karta*, No 39 (1936), p. 781.

⁷²*Lietuvos istorija* (Kaunas, 1936), pp. 50–51.

regime, to prove the advantages of Ulmanis' authoritarian government. At the end of December 1936, Roberts Malvess, a research fellow at the Latvian Institute of History, who spoke at the Bauske District Farmers' Day meeting, offered the following characterisation of the historical situation in the 13th century: 'Arriving in the Baltic region, in Semigallia, the Germans already found a strong tribal state with a king at the head. Only one step remained to the next stage: a national state. Even after the death of the leader Viesturs, the heroic Semigallian spirit was unbroken, and they were still capable of winning a major victory at the Battle of Saule [...] Learning from the mistakes of the past, we have today found the right path, a close, unified consolidation around the leader.'⁷³

The idea put to the Latvian and Lithuanian public focused on the need for an autocratic, firm government, and the advantages of the autocratic regimes in Lithuania and Latvia. In an article written for the anniversary of the Battle of Saule, Nikolajs Viksniņš, the leader of the Latvian History Teachers' Society, stressed that the battle 'clearly showed us how important a good leader is to the nation'. He insisted that if the Semigallians and the Lithuanians had had good leaders in 1236, then after the victory at the Battle of Saule, they would have completely eradicated the Brothers of the Sword.⁷⁴ It was also noted that at the time, Lithuania and Latvia did not lack 'good leaders'.

Why was there no joint celebration of the anniversary?

J. Vileišis, the vice-president of the Lithuanian-Latvian Unity Society, gave two main reasons why the idea of a combined Baltic celebration of the Battle of Saule failed: not wanting to annoy neighbouring countries by organising a joint celebration, allegedly the 'neighbours might not have liked it'; and the revival of the Lithuanian-Latvian argument over 'who was that historical Battle of

⁷³ 'Jāsāk ar pašu pamatu noskaidrošanu un pārkārtošanu', in: *Brīvā Zeme*, No 290, 21 December 1936.

⁷⁴ N. Viksniņš, 'Kauja pie Saules 1236. gada 22. septembrī', in: *Sējējs*, No 2 (1936), p. 1105.

Thermopylae, so important to the nation's honour'.⁷⁵ The neighbour Vileišis mentioned that should not be annoyed was Germany. In Lithuania, the government did actually avoid making moves that would irritate Germany. Neither did Latvia want this. From January 1936, relations between Latvia and Germany were quite tense. The reason for this were the decisions by Ulmanis' government that sought to reduce the economic influence of the Baltic German national minority in Latvia, and the narrowing down of the community's cultural autonomy. As a result of these decisions, in 1936, Latvian diplomats on numerous occasions received warnings from the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs that, 'From now on, German and Latvian relations can be civilised, but not friendly or heartfelt.'⁷⁶ Not wanting to worsen relations with Germany, the Latvian government decided to avoid any public declarations or actions that could be interpreted as anti-German or opposed to the Germans.⁷⁷ However, despite all this, it is doubtful that not wanting to annoy Germany was the deciding factor that blocked the way for the organisation of a joint anniversary of the battle. These doubts are encouraged by the fact that in Lithuania, for example, events to commemorate the Battle of Saule were widespread, and passed off without any open expression of an anti-German mood.

We believe that the reasons for Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia not to mark the battle's anniversary together outnumbered those that encouraged celebrating it together. What would the collective commemoration of the Battle of Saule have offered the three Baltic nations? Basically, it would only have been an opportunity for the states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia to demonstrate their unity, and to try to show that close friendship had been established between their nations way back in the past, during the struggle against the Brothers of the Sword in the 13th century. However, this idea had one drawback. As we have already mentioned, what quite soon became apparent was that finding a historical justification for the demonstrated military cooperation between Lithuanians

⁷⁵ J. Vileišis, 'Antrajam triju Pabaltijo tautu kongresui pasibaigus'.

⁷⁶ A. Zunda, 'Attiecības ar lielvalstīm', 15. *maija Latvija* (Rīga, 2017), p. 210.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 211.

and Latvians in the battle would be difficult, and it could only be based on hazy assumptions; however, it was even harder to find evidence of a 'brotherhood in arms' with the Estonians, and to find a sufficient reason for Estonia's participation in celebrating the anniversary of the battle. In effect, Estonia would only have become involved in celebrating the anniversary of the battle out of solidarity with Latvia and Lithuania. When it was decided to celebrate the anniversary separately in each country, any commemoration of the event in Estonia became completely meaningless.

Estonia could not exploit the symbolic capital of this historic victory, while the potential of Lithuania and Latvia to capitalise on the victory was unequal. A Lithuanian-Latvian combined commemoration of the anniversary would have implied sharing the symbolic capital of the victory between two nationalist ideology-driven political regimes. In short, Latvian nationalism and Lithuanian nationalism would have had to agree on the division of historical achievements, and this was a difficult exercise to solve, for in each country, a narrative about the battle had become established which treated the episode in history first of all as the property of the national history, and an object of pride, in order to highlight each nation's achievements on the battlefield.

The Latvian political regime, which relied on the history of 13th-century Semigallia, constructed the narrative about the struggle of the heroic Semigallians against the Brothers of the Sword, and searched for the roots of its statehood in this very period, wanted to weave the episode of the Battle of Saule into this same narrative, stressing the important contribution made by the Semigallians in winning the victory. Celebrating the occasion together with Lithuania would have interfered with this. First of all, it would have been difficult to accentuate the important role of the Semigallians on the battlefield. Also, it could have highlighted differences in the development of statehood between the Lithuanians and the Latvians, and not to the benefit of the latter: the disjointed Latvian lands would have contrasted with the Lithuanian state, which was born in the 13th century. This would have been a quiet reminder that the tradition of Lithuanian statehood was older and stronger than that of Latvia, and that would have been even less attractive

to the Latvian political elite than being reminded of the questionable achievements on the battlefield by the Semigallians. As a result, the Latvian government strove to organise the celebrations of the battle's anniversary separately, by applying a formal pretext: historians could not agree on the battle site.

By celebrating separately, Lithuania and Latvia could give their memorial events the meanings that were of most relevance to each country. The Latvian political regime could search for the source of Latvian statehood in 13th-century Semigallia, and actualise the Battle of Saule as a Latvian (Semigallian) victory. We believe that the contradictory information about the role and the merits of the Semigallians in the battle nonetheless served as an obstacle in making its commemoration in Latvia a widely celebrated anniversary, and Ulmanis' government decided to incorporate the battle into the heroic Latvian history narrative, and encourage everything that would entrench it as a place of memory, but it decided against organising a broad, public anniversary, as that might provoke a competitive battle between the Lithuanians and Latvians over sharing the credit for the victory on the battlefield.

Lithuania, meanwhile, transformed the commemoration of the Battle of Saule into a celebration of the beginning of its statehood: the main idea was that the victory in the battle was evidence that Lithuania was already an independent state ruled by one leader. The official historical narrative suggested to the public that only by obeying the will of the 'leader' at fateful moments in history could the nation be guaranteed political and cultural sovereignty: in this way, the advantages of authoritarianism over parliamentarianism were openly stated.

The commemoration of the Battle of Saule did not turn into a joint manifestation of unity between the Baltic States. The idea of unity between the Baltic States and the Balts as such marked the commemoration of the battle in Lithuania and in Latvia; however, it did not become the main idea behind the memorial events, as it was outweighed by the will of the Lithuanian and Latvian governments to utilise historical imagery to legitimise their respective political regimes, and underline their historical traditions of statehood.

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NEĮVYKUSIOS BENDROS ŠVENTĖS ISTORIJA: KAIP LATVIJA IR LIETUVA RUOŠĖSI PAMINĖTI SAULĖS MŪŠIO 700 METŲ JUBILIEJŲ

Santrauka

DANGIRAS MAČIULIS, MĀRTIŅŠ MINTAURS

1236 m. rugsėjo 22 d. Šiaulių žemėje įvyko Saulės mūšis, kuriame lietuviai sutriuškino į jų žemes kryžiaus žygį iš Rygos surengusią Livonijos ordino kariuomenę. Nuo 2000 m. rugsėjo 22 d. – Saulės mūšio diena Lietuvoje ir Latvijoje, šių šalių parlamentų sprendimais, sutartinai minima kaip Baltų vienybės diena, kurios paskirtis – priminti lietuvių ir latvių etninį bendrumą, skatinti ne tik giminingų tautų, bet Lietuvos ir Latvijos valstybių suartėjimą.

Pirmą kartą Lietuva ir Latvija kartu Saulės mūšio dieną ketino paminėti 1936 m., kai buvo minimas šio mūšio 700 metų jubiliejus. Tačiau tuomet bandymas surengti dvišalę mūšio jubiliejaus šventę žlugo. Straipsnyje bandoma atsakyti į klausimus, kas paskatino 1936 m. Latviją ir Lietuvą rengti Saulės mūšio jubiliejaus minėjimą ir kodėl jis neįvyko.

Teigiama, kad sumanymą 1936 m. surengti bendrą Lietuvoje ir Latvijoje Saulės mūšio jubiliejaus šventimą paskatino noras šį minėjimą panaudoti Baltijos šalių vienybės idėjos propagavimui. Lietuvos ir Latvijos politiniai elitai istorinį Saulės mūšio vaizdinį bandė išnaudoti kaip aktualizuojantį priminimą apie lietuvių ir latvių etninį bendrumą, bendrą tautų istorinį likimą bei bendrus istorinius šalių suverenumo priešus.

Tačiau sutartinis mūšio minėjimas Latvijoje ir Lietuvoje neįvyko, nes K. Ulmanio ir A. Smetonos politiniams režimams nepavyko pasidalinti šio mūšio pergalės simbolinio kapitalo – abiejose šalyse įsitvirtino toks pasakojimas apie Saulės mūšį, kuriuo siekta pabrėžti išskirtinius savo tautos nuopelnus mūšio lauke. Todėl Lietuva ir Latvija Saulės mūšio jubiliejų minėjo atskirai. Baltijos šalių ir baltų vienybės idėja ženklino Saulės mūšio minėjimus Lietuvoje ir Latvijoje, tačiau tai netapo pagrindine minėjimo idėja, nes ją persvėrė politinių režimų Latvijoje ir Lietuvoje noras pasinaudojus istoriniu vaizdiniu legitimizuoti savo politinius režimus ir pabrėžti savo šalių istorinio valstybingumo tradicijas.