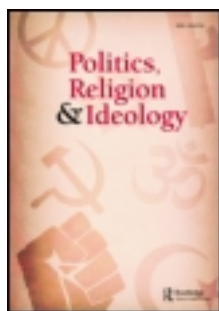


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## Happy Birthday, Mr. Ulmanis! Reflections on the Construction of an Authoritarian Regime in Latvia

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**ABSTRACT** *The authors of the article analyse the ideology of the authoritarian regime which lasted in Latvia from the coup d'état on 15 May 1934 until the beginning of the Soviet occupation on 17 June 1940. A variety of sources (newspapers and books of the analysed period) are used for the article. The birthday celebrations of authoritarian leader Kārlis Ulmanis are used as a case study to show the performative elements of the regime. The authors argue that during the short period of authoritarian rule in Latvia, the new political culture known as authoritarianism was widely supported and popular due to the dominance of the performative and festive practices used by the political elite to establish an ideal model of popular support for the regime. The regime can be defined during these six years as a 'perpetually festive regime'. The authors show how the Latvian regime was influenced by similar trends of political culture in mass entertainment as the rest of interwar Europe. The glorification of Ulmanis was a central theme in the public activities of the regime and had a quasi-religious character – mutual love of nation and its Leader was proclaimed as the ultimate goal of the public sphere. The regime used the nationalist mythology of the pre-Christian age of mighty and glorious Latvian warriors to reinforce the historical legitimacy of the regime.*

### Introduction: Theoretical Framework

The aim of this article is to analyse the performative aspects of the authoritarian regime by concentrating on one particular event – the festivities and ceremonies dedicated to the 60th birthday of the main figure of the regime and its glorified Leader<sup>1</sup> – authoritarian president K. Ulmanis.

Performance within an authoritarian regime will be interpreted in the article as a set of tools (using the term created by William Sewell Junior in his analysis of functions of culture<sup>2</sup>) aimed at obtaining a predominant status for a new interpretation of reality – the parliamentary period was proclaimed as harmful to the very existence of the Latvian nation and parties were declared illegal in a government announcement the day after the coup. Various tools were created for the local, Latvian situation and also borrowed from different European authoritarian neighbours. To be effective, these tools had to include various elements, which could reach a wider audience not only in the capital of

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<sup>1</sup>In publications of the time of the authoritarian regime Ulmanis was often called *Vadonis* [Leader] with a capital V.

<sup>2</sup>W. Sewell Junior, 'The Concept(s) of Culture' in E.V. Bonnell and L. Hunt (eds) *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 46.

the country, Riga, and major cities, but also in small local communities, disseminating the same message and eliminating possible variations or oppositions. New technical tools, such as mobile cinemas, newsreels, radio, recorded and broadcasted speeches of the Leader and ministers, as well as the production of mass shows, using the latest light and stage equipment, helped to create the performative aspect of the new authoritarian regimes throughout Europe. Latvia is only one regional Eastern European example that illustrated the pan-European tendencies of mass politics in the interwar period towards mass entertainment as a substitute for democratic participation. The Latvian case shows that the democracy rejected in 1934 was replaced with little opposition and almost non-existent public disapproval by a perpetual sequence of mass tailored activities, such as national and regional, professional and even age-oriented festivals, mass theatrical performances, building projects and contributions for new monuments, etc. Among these forms of performative authoritarianism, the birthday celebration of the head of state was one of the highlights of the six years of continuous celebrations, supporting the glorification of the personal 'achievements' of the Leader. This kind of politics can be defined as political messianism. Like in religious messianism, this kind of messianism is striving for a leader who points the way to the goal. Its point of reference is the human will that transforms the world.<sup>3</sup>

There are several aspects important for the subject of analysis undertaken in this article that allow one to view the authoritarian regime in Latvia as a part of political performative culture in 1930s Europe: (1) the blurring of boundaries between private and public in the figure of the dictator and the representation of people in political regimes<sup>4</sup>; (2) the role of urban landscapes as a type of stage for human action – 'the urban landscape served not merely as passive scenery but played a more dynamic role in the everyday mediation of political and cultural discourse'<sup>5</sup>; (3) the role of intellectuals in designing and propagating the ideology of the authoritarian regime<sup>6</sup>; (4) mass-mobilisation in the process of consensus-building.<sup>7</sup> The role of personalities and personal charisma in times of political and economic turbulence in interwar Europe is an important factor to be taken into account when we talk about the dictatorships of that period. As Emile Durkheim writes, society 'deifies' a man who personifies its principal aspirations. Collective representations 'empower' him and make others reflect on their inferiority.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>One of the most important theorists of 'political messianism' was Jacob Leib Talmon. See H.O. Seitschek, 'Eschatological Interpretations: Vondung, Talmon' in H. Maier (ed.) *Totalitarianism and Political Religions: Concepts for the Comparison of Dictatorships: Theory and History of Interpretation*, Vol. III (London; New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 165–173.

<sup>4</sup>For an examination of the cult of the leader in various interwar countries see H. Maier, 'Political Religions and their Images: Soviet Communism, Italian Fascism and German National Socialism', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 7:3 (2006), pp. 267–281.

<sup>5</sup>J. Hagen, 'Parades, Public Space, and Propaganda: The Nazi Culture Parades in Munich', *Geografiska Annaler Series B: Human Geography*, 90:4 (2008), p. 349.

<sup>6</sup>Liah Greenfeld's recent work on nationalism makes extensive use of the writings of intellectuals. She thinks that the intelligentsia's views represent the dominant understandings about nation, state and individual in a particular setting. L. Greenfeld, *The Spirit of Capitalism: Nationalism and Economic Growth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup>For an approach that goes beyond the top-down approach of consent or dissent in trying to understand the issue of reception of authoritarian/totalitarian political regimes by the ordinary people see Y.W. Kim, 'From "Consensus Studies" to History of Subjectivity: Some Considerations on Recent Historiography on Italian Fascism', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 10:3–4 (2009), pp. 327–337.

<sup>8</sup>F. Pearce, *The Radical Durkheim* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 31.

The effectiveness of ‘charismatic personalities’ is not primarily a function of their intrinsic characteristics. ‘Charismatic’ qualities are inevitably context-dependent and need to be socially sustained. The appeal of such leaders to their followers depends upon a shared background of culture – of style, symbols, myths, etc.<sup>9</sup>

The personality cult of Ulmanis, as well as other cults in interwar European authoritarian and totalitarian regimes was a collective creation of various groups and individuals, masses, political elites and individual influential ideologists – personal assumptions and ambitions mixed with collective aspirations and frustrations. The heroic element of the Leader’s personality is often used as a tool in order to establish the Leader’s cult. Eastern Europe shows many regional similarities in the formulation and dissemination of authoritarian culture in the everyday life of society in the 1920s and 1930s. For example, Polish authoritarian leader Józef Piłsudski was proclaimed a national hero. He had organised the Polish legions which had fought for the country’s independence in World War I. He became the head of state between 1919 and 1922, leading the Polish offensive against Bolshevik Russia.<sup>10</sup> Similar patterns of image creation can also be traced in the case of Ulmanis. As the first prime minister of independent Latvia he enjoyed a certain romantic aura as one of the founders of the Latvian state. Even his opponents, among whom social democrats were the majority, had to admit that: in a short book that was published before the authoritarian period in 1926 an unknown author criticised Ulmanis in many ways. However he had to admit that Ulmanis was ‘the most popular Prime Minister in Latvia’.<sup>11</sup>

### Historical Context of Emerging Authoritarianism in Latvia. Ideological Background

The Republic of Latvia was established in 1918 as one of many new nation states that emerged from the ashes of European empires during World War I. Its short interwar history (lasting from 1918 until 1940) can be divided into three parts: (1) the development of democratic structures (constitution, major economic and social reforms, gradual international recognition of new state, parliamentary elections), which lasted from 1918–1922; (2) a parliamentary period, with established right and left-wing parties and various small political unions outside the parliament from 1922 until the coup on 15 May 1934 carried out by the Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis (1877–1942) and supported by the military elite; (3) an authoritarian period, which lasted for six years from May 1934 until 17 June 1940 when the Soviet Army occupied Latvia and forced Ulmanis to approve the establishment of a new, pro-Soviet government that gradually, during the summer of 1940, dismantled the statehood of Latvia turning it into one of the Soviet republics (formally established on 21 July 1940 when the so-called ‘People’s Parliament’ voted unanimously to petition to join the Soviet Union).

There are a number of reasons why the coup took place in 1934 and why Ulmanis, who was prime minister, then seized power and interrupted democratic parliamentary culture. It is, as in other European cases, a combination of various factors, both national and global. The international context should be mentioned first – authoritarian or totalitarian rule was introduced in most Eastern European countries during that period. For example, 1926 was the year of the four coups in Greece, Poland, Portugal and Lithuania. In Greece military rule only lasted a few months and the parliamentary regime was restored, in Poland

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., pp. 31–32.

<sup>10</sup>S. Lee, *The European Dictatorships 1918–1945* (London; New York: Routledge, 1987), p. 266.

<sup>11</sup>*Ulmaņa valdīšanas četri mēneši* [Four Months of Ulmanis’ Rule] (Rīga: J. Jātnieks, 1926), p. 3.

Marshal J. Pilsudsky staged the coup and remained the virtual dictator of Poland until his death, in Portugal the army also emerged as a crucial stabilising factor.<sup>12</sup> The newly established regime in Latvia used the political shift from democratic pluralism towards the rule of a 'strong hand' to legitimise authoritarianism.

Secondly, there were influential social-economic factors – at the beginning of the 1930s Latvia experienced a severe economic crisis. As indicated by Stranga, the lowest point of the recession was in 1932 but in 1933 it started to improve.<sup>13</sup> Another factor was the political culture – traditions of democracy were weak, Latvia as a new republic did not have an experienced democratic political elite. There were several representatives of the Latvian cultural elite who served as deputies in the State Duma before World War I and in various municipal councils. Although they had some experience of limited political participation, none of the future members of the Latvian parliament (*Saeima*) were accustomed to conducting politics in a democratic system. Learning by doing was a major form of political experience in the new democracy that was created out of a provincial region of a declining absolutist state.

This goes hand in hand with the institutional factor – the political landscape in Latvia was extremely fragmented, the constitution (loosely based on the basic law of the Weimar Republic) allowed very small political groups to be elected to parliament.<sup>14</sup> Governments often changed and, in spite of the active involvement of citizens in political organisations and elections, the level of dissatisfaction with the democratic system and political pluralism based on consensus and negotiations was constantly growing at the beginning of the 1930s. As a result there were a number of political forces that aimed to undermine and consequently overthrow the existing political system. Most of them were small ultra-radical right-wing groups that had neither clear vision nor the means to accomplish their plans. These groups were well-known and monitored by the Political Police.<sup>15</sup> Ulmanis, who in 1934 was prime minister, had the best opportunity to bring about his scheme of removing the democratic system – various political and logistical tools were at his service. One of these tools was the political affiliation of the head of state – the president, who, according to the Latvian constitution was and still is a purely symbolic figure, with very limited political power. The State President Alberts Kviesis came from the same political party (The Agrarian Union) as Ulmanis and *post factum* agreed to the sudden change of political regime, helping to legitimise it in symbolic discourse on the changing constitutional order. He continued to fulfil his duties despite the fact that in the authoritarian regime his role became hollow and merely symbolic – to provide additional symbolic legitimacy to the Ulmanis government. After 1937, when Kviesis' term was over, Ulmanis became the state president and Kviesis left the political establishment with no new political function provided. One of the widely used tools to legitimise the regime

<sup>12</sup>D.G. Williamson, *The Age of Dictators* (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2007), pp. 134–135.

<sup>13</sup>A. Stranga, *LSDSP un 1934. gada 15. maija valsts apvērsums. Demokrātijas likteņi Latvijā* [The Social Democratic Workers Party of Latvia and the Coup of 15 May 1934. Fate of Democracy in Latvia] (Rīga: Author's publication, 1998), p. 107.

<sup>14</sup>The influence of the constitution of Weimar Germany on the basic law of Latvia should not be exaggerated. Some influence also came from Swiss and French constitutional laws. During debates in the Constitutional Assembly on the basic law of Latvia the most mentioned were American constitutional principles. V. Blūzma, 'Rietumu konstitucionālo tiesību kultūras ietekme uz Latvijas Republikas Satversmes tapšanu (1920–1922)' in J. Bērziņš, *Latvijas valstiskumam 90. Latvijas valsts neatkarība: ideja un realizācija* [90 years of Latvia's Statehood. Independence of the State of Latvia: Idea and Realization] (Rīga: Latvijas Vēstures institūta apgāds, 2010), pp. 135–136.

<sup>15</sup>V. Ščerbinskis, '1934. gada 15. maija apvērsums: cēloņi, norise un sekas' in V. Ščerbinskis and Ē. Jēkabsons (eds) *Apvērsums: 1934. gada 15. maija notikumi avotos un pētījumos* [The Coup. Events of 15 May 1934: Sources and Research] (Rīga: Latvijas Nacionālais arhīvs, Latvijas Arhīvistu biedrība, 2012), pp. 17–19.

was the message distributed in the declaration of the new government in the first hours after the coup about threats from political right-wing radicals who supposedly planned to overthrow the parliament and establish a brutal dictatorship. Thus the Ulmanis coup was presented as a moderate one, which was a positive alternative to the radical version.

Valters Ščerbinskis mentions differences in the assessment of the coup between accounts by professional historians and authors of memoirs. The majority of researchers (Edgars Dunsdorfs, Aivars Stranga, Mārtiņš Virsis, etc.) reject the idea that deficiencies in the parliamentary system were a cause of the coup.<sup>16</sup> Contemporary sources point to the highly fragmented condition of parliament and the rise of international discourse critical of democracy.<sup>17</sup> Juan J. Linz, a Spanish sociologist and political scientist has pointed to the crisis of parliamentarism as an important factor. He thinks that 'in Spain, Portugal, Poland and the Baltic republics, the crisis of parliamentarism was probably more important than social conflicts and even the economic crisis after 1929'.<sup>18</sup> Latvian historian A. Stranga mentions several personality traits that stimulated Ulmanis' decision to organise the coup – his tendency towards authoritarianism, aspiration for power and inability to live without exercising power.<sup>19</sup>

The dictator's relationships with his ultra-radical rivals remained tense. Their organisations ('Thunder Cross' and others) were restricted and persecuted.<sup>20</sup> The same can be said about the relationships of dictatorships with ultra-radicals in a number of other European countries. In Lithuania the regime of Antanas Smetona, established in 1926, adopted the right-wing nationalist LTS or Tautininkai as his official party but frequently found himself at loggerheads with its more extreme elements, notably the followers of Augustinas Voldemaras (prime minister 1926–1929) and the secret Iron Wolf organisation. From 1934, with the rebellious Voldemaras jailed and Iron Wolf banned, Smetona's personal power stood unchallenged.<sup>21</sup> In Romania, King Carol, who was an admirer of Mussolini's regime, was prepared to ally with the fascist right but soon he found it an encumbrance and, in 1938, the Iron Guard was banned.<sup>22</sup> When in Estonia the Estonian War of Independence Veterans League (EVL), a paramilitary organisation originally composed of those who had fought communists and Russians in 1917–1918, won absolute majorities in local elections in the three largest cities at the beginning of 1934, the recently elected president Konstantin Päts seized emergency powers disbanding the EVL.<sup>23</sup>

One of the areas of controversial transformation was the system of political participation in the new political order without a parliament. The concept behind the political-administrative system introduced by Ulmanis and borrowed from the Italian fascist state was

<sup>16</sup>E. Dunsdorfs, *Kārļa Ulmaņa dzīve: Ceļnieks. Politikis. Diktators. Mocekļis* [The Life of Kārlis Ulmanis. Traveler. Politician. Dictator. Martyr] (Rīga: Zinātne, 1992).; Stranga, op. cit.; M. Virsis, 'Apvērsuma priekšvakarā' in V. Leitāns (ed.), *Pretstatu cīņā. Latvija 1917–1950* [Struggle of opposites. Latvia 1917–1950] (Rīga: Avots, 1990), pp. 176–185.

<sup>17</sup>V. Ččerbinskis, 'Leaders, Divided Society and Crisis. The Coup d'État of 1934 in Latvia, its Causes and Consequences' in M. Housden and D.J. Smith (eds) *Forgotten Pages in Baltic History: Diversity and Inclusion* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 188–187.

<sup>18</sup>J. Linz, 'Fascism and Non-democratic Regimes' in Maier, op. cit., p. 231.

<sup>19</sup>Stranga, *LSDSP un 1934. gada 15. maija valsts apvērsums*, op. cit., p. 111.

<sup>20</sup>'Thunder Cross' was already banned by the Riga District Court before the coup – on 30 January 1934. It continued to work illegally and in its underground publication *Ziņojums* (Report) criticised the new regime for lavishness and pomposity. The political police monitored its activities. In June 1934, 97 persons were arrested after an illegal meeting organised by 'Thunder Cross'. U. Krēšlīņš, *Aktīvais nacionālisms Latvijā, 1922–1934* [Active Nationalism in Latvia, 1922–1934] (Rīga: Latvijas Vēstures institūta apgāds, 2005), pp. 151–153.

<sup>21</sup>M. Blinkhorn, *Fascism and the Right in Europe, 1919–1945* (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000), p. 83.

<sup>22</sup>Lee, op. cit., pp. 285–286.

<sup>23</sup>S.G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945* (London: University College London, 1995), p. 324.



called 'the corporate chamber principle'.<sup>24</sup> In July 1926 Mussolini established a ministry of corporations with himself as minister. Each corporation consisted of representatives of employers and workers from the same economic or industrial sector and three representatives from the government, who acted as referees and final adjudicators. In 1938 Mussolini decided to abolish the chamber of deputies and replace it with the chamber of *fasci* and corporations. The corporate state was supposed to be a new form of politics.<sup>25</sup> Following an example set by Italy in Latvia at the end of 1934, the first chamber – the Chamber of Trade and Industry – was established. In total there were six various chambers in charge of their respective fields. Chambers had a consultative function, they were financed and controlled by the state through ministries. The state also appointed their members.<sup>26</sup>

In this field no progress was made either – ideas of establishing a quasi-parliamentary system were in the air – the coup itself was introduced as a short-term solution until the new parliamentary reform had to be introduced. Thus authoritarianism was defined as a stage on the way to a reformed parliamentarism, which never came into existence before the end of the regime, but was exploited as a symbolic political term. From time to time, Ulmanis showed signs of readiness to introduce further reform that would allow for more democratic participation in decision-making through chambers. In 1937 he announced: 'These chambers one day will experience that the people for whom they have been established and are working, will be able to elect those who will take care of them and will work for them freely and independently.'<sup>27</sup> But even then he immediately added that in all of that discretion was necessary. Ulmanis differed from similar regimes in neighbouring countries in his negative attitude towards establishing a political organisation that would serve the needs of the regime. In Lithuania there was the Lietuvių Tautininkų Sąjuga, and in Estonia in 1935 Päts established a political organisation, 'Isaamaaliit'.<sup>28</sup>

The new regime built its ideology on the concept of romantic nationalism with ethnic community as its foundation, which was widespread in the nineteenth century in various Eastern and Central European regions that later became independent states. Ethnic nationalism was influential in the Latvian national movement in the late 1870s and was carried on into the parliamentary period of the Republic. It did not always gain the upper hand – the phrase 'Latvia's people' (instead of Latvian people) in the constitution of 1922 is one of the examples of that; however, this concept was constantly challenged. On 27 May 1920 the Constitutional Assembly adopted The Declaration on the State of Latvia that included the concept of political nation. However, already in spring 1920 another slogan, 'Latvia for Latvians!', emerged in public discourse. One of the first high-profile politicians who at that time openly expressed uneasiness about growing ethnic nationalism was the Major of Riga Andrejs Frīdenbergs.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup>K. Blese, 'Kārlis Ulmanis', *Izglītības Ministrijas Mēnešraksts* [Monthly of the Ministry of Education], 9 (1937), p. 192; Chambers formally represented interests of those working in the field they controlled. They supervised associations of people working in the respective field.

<sup>25</sup>A. Todd, *The European Dictatorships: Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 118–119.

<sup>26</sup>*Neatkarīgā valsts, 1918–1940*, vol. 2 of 20. *gadsimta Latvijas vēsture* [A 20th Century History of Latvia], ed. V. Bērziņš (Rīga: Latvijas Vēstures institūta apgāds, 2003), pp. 603–604.

<sup>27</sup>'Valsts prezidenta vēsturiskā runa Pļaujas svētkos', *Jaunākās Ziņas* (JZ) [The Latest News], 6 September 1937, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup>Stranga, *LSDSP un 1934. gada 15. maija valsts apvērsums*, op. cit., pp. 198–200.

<sup>29</sup>A. Stranga, *Ebreji Baltijā* [Jews in Latvia] (Rīga: LU žurnāla 'Latvijas Vēsture' fonds, 2008), p. 417.

The Latvian authoritarian regime defined the nation as ‘an idea of common blood, common land, common customs, common history, and common honour’.<sup>30</sup> The slogan ‘Latvia for [ethnic] Latvians’ was often mentioned in various media, including mass festivals and staged ceremonial events, however it did not turn into militant anti-Semitism or systematic repression of ethnic minorities as seen in Germany. As expressed by one of the ideological promoters of ‘new’ Latvia, Artūrs Kroders, the regime focused on the ‘nation of Latvians inhabiting and ruling their own independent country in cooperation with neighbours and other nations, developing fair social relationships and a political system that guarantees the unity of the nation and its economic prosperity’.<sup>31</sup> Thus the new regime tried to establish a more or less consequent ideology of ethnic nationalism with the idea of the economic and cultural predominance of the ethnic majority at the expense of minorities. The closing of Russian schools (the number of grammar schools decreased from nine to two) and Russian periodicals and restrictions in purchasing real estate (1939–1940) were some of the limitations imposed on the Russian minority. In 1937, the regime did not allow the importing of Polish textbooks for schools from Poland and it refused to open a Polish kindergarten in Daugavpils. This conflict was intensified by the pro-Polish activities of some local Poles inspired by the aggressive policies of Poland towards Czechoslovakia in 1938.<sup>32</sup> The ‘divide and rule’ principle was often employed – the regime supported right-wing Jewish groups but repressed left-wing Jewish organisations. The left-wing Zionist organisations Hashomer Hacair and Borohov-yugn were closed. Gordonia, an organisation of a similar kind, managed to stay open longer than these two but in 1937 it was also closed.<sup>33</sup>

Another aspect that occupied an important place in the ideological programme of the new regime was its appeal to farmers as a predominant social group because in the interwar period Latvia remained an agrarian country. Agriculture and a peasant’s life played a special, rather mystical role in the ideology of the authoritarian regime. The dictator stated that ‘agriculture is the basis of our nation’.<sup>34</sup> Types of traditional farm work were associated with the character-forming of an individual.

Conditions of agricultural work and production are especially favourable for creating a positive type of person that unites positive features of individual psyche with a sense of community that restricts undesirable dispositions in human nature and nurtures natural, religious feelings, morals and tradition in an individual.<sup>35</sup>

In 1929 Ulmanis, who studied agronomy in the US and in Latvia, published a work with the title ‘How to Develop and Make Our Agriculture Profitable’. It was written as a programme with plenty of practical suggestions regarding how to improve the situation in farming. It can be characterised as a romanticised nostalgia for the past of the rural nation. There are lines that express his ideological thesis, suggesting that ‘if agriculture prospers, the state also

<sup>30</sup>Ministru prezidenta Dr. K. Ulmaņa runa “Atdzimšanas dziesmas” svētkus atklājot’ in *Raksti par jauno valsti: ministru prezidenta Dr. Kārļa Ulmaņa trīs runas un Kultūras fonda godalgotie ievadraksti* [Writings on the New State: Three Speeches of the Prime Minister Dr. K. Ulmanis and Introductory Articles Awarded by the Culture Foundation] (Rīga: Paġalms, 1935), p. 13.

<sup>31</sup>A. Kroders, ‘Jaunā ideoloģija’ in *ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>32</sup>Stranga, *LSDSP un 1934. gada 15. maija valsts apvērsums*, op. cit., pp. 222–223.

<sup>33</sup>B. Volkovich, *Jevreiskije organizacii v Daugavpilsē* [Jewish Organizations in Daugavpils, 1920–1940] (Daugavpils: A.K.A., 1998), pp. 28–29.

<sup>34</sup>K. Ulmanis, *Lauksaimniecības ekonomiskā un politiskā nozīme* [The Economic and Political Meaning of Agriculture] (Rīga: Latvijas Universitāte, 1935), p. 449.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 455.



prosper's'.<sup>36</sup> The following lines illustrate a romanticised idea of a peasant nation free from capitalism:

The spirit that rules among peasants will never be the spirit of naked capitalism because in a peasant's life, desire for profit is not only the ruler and dominator (. . .) There are also other things. Love of work in the field, attachment to the native land, earning for independence and self-dependence, kinship traditions and many other impractical reasons besides economic ones speak their own language.<sup>37</sup>

Ulmanis' romantic conservatism and image of the Latvian nation as a conservative, Lutheran, pious 'ideal peasant' can be seen also in his ideas for criteria for the evaluation of private farms. Among various factors, church attendance was mentioned.<sup>38</sup> The rural population, viewed as the basis of the nation with qualities superior to other groups, was combined and confronted with calls for intensive industrialisation. Industrialisation became an integral element of the ideology of the new regime – there are other speeches by the Leader that show another dimension of the dictator's political and economic thought. Following the demands of the industrial age, maximal use of technologies was to be supported by the state. Ulmanis himself wrote about need to modernise farms. It would, according to the Leader, free farmers' wives of hard work in the fields (here we can see that in spite of the regime's patriarchal values there was an element of modernisation as emancipation present in its ideology). Ulmanis refers to Switzerland where 'men are milking and rearing cows'.<sup>39</sup> Thus, technological modernisation of farms and the preservation of the traditional pre-industrial rural way of life were united in the vision of the peasantry. Modernisation was not viewed as harmful to tradition, because technological progress could support and secure tradition, liberating peasants from heavy manual labour. Tradition in turn could improve the consequences of modernisation and was defined in terms of what we could call conservative anti-capitalist critique.

Ulmanis' pragmatic attitude towards the various political ideologies of interwar Europe, such as Marxism, went hand in hand with striving for modernisation and the preservation of the traditional habitats of the agrarian nation. Ulmanis criticised Marxism and the Communist Party was forbidden in Latvia, but it would be wrong to describe him as a militant anti-socialist. Again, an ideology which was developed to its extreme in neighbouring Bolshevik Russia, later the USSR, was viewed by Ulmanis as a useful ideological innovation, mainly in its economic dimension: 'Marxism has a great historical role that none of us would be willing to deny, it introduced new ideas to the doctrines of farming, social economics and political philosophy. It developed economic liberalism to its final stage.'<sup>40</sup> At the same time his conservatism places him in line with his contemporaries, men whose characters had been formed in the nineteenth century. Pilsudsky was born 1867, Pāts and Ulmanis in 1877, Miguel Primo de Rivera and Pétain in 1870.<sup>41</sup> Alongside examples of ideological eclectics of the new regime, concerning the ethnic nation, economic and political pluralism and visions of a rural society, the regime developed the image of the head of

<sup>36</sup>K. Ulmanis, *Kā pacelt un padarīt ienesīgu mūsu lauksaimniecību* [How to Develop and Make Our Agriculture Profitable] (Rīga: Zemnieka Domas, 1929), p. 5.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., pp. 404–405.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 370.

<sup>40</sup>Ulmanis, *Lauksaimniecības ekonomiskā un politiskā nozīme*, op. cit., p. 455.

<sup>41</sup>Linz, op. cit., p. 252.

state, preserving the same pattern – combining various, often conflicting elements in the image of the Leader of the new, authoritarian state. Elements of the public image of the head of state as a unique political figure and hero were often combined with that of a democratic, simple and humble care-taking father of the nation.<sup>42</sup> The following chapters will focus on the tools and tendencies of the glorification of K. Ulmanis using one case study – festivities dedicated to the 60th birthday of the president in 1937.

### Stage for Glorification: Ulmanis' Birthday Celebrations

Ulmanis was born on 4 September however the celebrations of his birthday in 1937 lasted for several days. On the day before Ulmanis' birthday, boy scouts organised an event on the square in front of the president's palace. Ulmanis received a torch from them that was taken from *Airītes* – a memorial place related to the independence battles. Journalists employed religious descriptive language and called it 'holy fire'.<sup>43</sup> On 4 September (Ulmanis' birthday) the Leader's working day started early – already before 7 a.m. he was greeted by a choir, and then he went to the Brothers' Cemetery – a memorial dedicated in 1936 that had a special significance in the political liturgies of the state.<sup>44</sup> Later the dictator received official addresses from various organisations, the media, army and government. The largest delegation (about 300 people) came from the Riga municipality. There were also representatives of the counties of Latvia, all coming with gifts. Ulmanis also met representatives of the youth organisation *Mazpulki* [Little Regiments]. The *Mazpulki* were under the special care of Ulmanis because it was he who while studying in the US was inspired to create an agrarian youth organisation (like 4-H clubs in the US). In Latvia, such an organisation was established in 1929.

Ulmanis' birthday was marked by audiences at which the Leader received addresses from officials representing various groups of society and from foreign ambassadors. Ulmanis' birthday served as an opportunity to construct the recent history of Latvia in a way that situated the Leader at the centre of the foundation of the Republic of Latvia and assigned him a crucial role in establishing the new state. Representatives of various cities in their official address to Ulmanis congratulating him on 60 years of life stressed that – 'you are inscribed in the history of Latvia on 18 November and 15 May'.<sup>45</sup> Two symbolic dates – the day of proclamation of independence and the day of the coup – were linked together around Ulmanis as a person who made both dates and events happen. Representatives of various ranks of society rushed to express their loyalty to the Leader.

The aforementioned audiences took place in the White Hall of Riga castle, former residence of the Tsarist General Governors of Livland. For the first time this hall was decorated with the new emblem of the Leader – a hawk flying towards the sun.<sup>46</sup> This provided the opportunity for selected representatives of the masses to greet their dictator, thus creating a sense of unity between the nation and its Leader – a popular theme among ideologists of the regime. The theatres of Riga had special performances in the evening. The birthday was also celebrated by army troops all over Latvia; events consisted of propagandistic speech and the singing of patriotic songs. At some of these events a bust of Ulmanis was

<sup>42</sup>For more on the ideology of the authoritarian regime in Latvia see D. Hanovs and V. Tēraudkalns, *Ultimate Freedom – No Choice: Authoritarian Culture in Latvia, 1934–1940* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

<sup>43</sup>'Svētuguns no Airītēm Valsts Prezidentam', *Saldus Avīze* [Saldus Newspaper], 5 September 1937, p. 1.

<sup>44</sup>'Nebijusi visas Latvijas svētku diena', *Lauku Pastnieks* [Rural Postman] 24–25 (1937), p. 238.

<sup>45</sup>'Latviešu zeme sveic savu Vadoni', *Kurzemes Vārds* [Word of Kurzeme], 5 September 1937, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup>'Pervomu graždaninu Latvii prinesli pozdravenijja predstaviteli vseh slojov naselenija', *Segodnja* (Se) [Today], 5 September 1937, p. 5.

displayed.<sup>47</sup> The authoritarian regime in Latvia, unlike some other regimes (for example, the USSR), did not generally display busts or sculptures of the Leader outdoors.<sup>48</sup> However it was probably only a matter of time before such monuments would have started to appear had the regime lasted longer.<sup>49</sup> There was an unrealised plan to create a square in the medieval part of Riga where a monument to an unnamed hero would stand.<sup>50</sup>

In the churches and synagogues of Latvia, special worship services were organised to pray for Ulmanis. Religious leaders and heads of Christian churches participated in the glorification of Ulmanis and were active during the festivities dedicated to the 60th birthday of the head of state. Lutheran Archbishop Teodors Grīnbergs praised the dictator for his support of religion. Ulmanis was called a 'protector of Christianity'.<sup>51</sup> The first two pages of Lutheran newspaper *Svētdienas Rīts* [Sunday Morning] included a sermon delivered by the archbishop that started with praise for Ulmanis.<sup>52</sup> It is interesting to note that the Catholic publication *Katōļu Dzeive* [The Catholic Life] had only a short notice on the jubilee that neutrally informed readers that many citizens had sent him congratulations and that Catholic bishops were also among those who had personally greeted him.<sup>53</sup> The Chief Rabbi of Riga had a special sermon for that occasion. A special service was also organised in the Orthodox cathedral in Riga, conducted by Metropolitan Augustine.<sup>54</sup> These examples of state–church relationships reflect the fact that authoritarian regimes in inter-war Europe respected institutional religion (something that cannot be said about totalitarian regimes). In some cases (Slovakia and Croatia) nationalism based upon a sense of religious distinctiveness led to a blurring of the line between religion and politics. In Slovakia a nationalist party motivated by a conservative Catholic ideology came to power under the leadership of Monsignor Tiso.<sup>55</sup> In Latvia, the leaderships of the main churches were reluctant to create such a symbiosis of church and state. Latvia also did not have a state church, therefore it was more complex to build such close relationships with one or more churches.

On 5 September 1937 the Third All-Latvia Harvest Festival took place in Jelgava. The name of this festival conformed to the special role assigned to peasants as mentioned earlier in this article. The harvest festival was intended to be an opulent event that attracted large numbers of participants. Mass media wrote that railways transported about 170,000 people to the festival. In addition to that, another 15,000 people came to Jelgava by bus.<sup>56</sup> During the festival a golden wreath with 60 spikes was presented to Ulmanis by the Chair of the Chamber of Agriculture, Rūdolfš Dzērve. The institution he led financed the production of this festival.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>47</sup>'Karavīri godina savu augstāko vadoni', *Latgales Vēstnesis* [Latgale Messenger], 6 September 1937, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup>There is information that an Ulmanis bust in 1940 was displayed in the square of one town in Latgale.

<sup>49</sup>It is interesting that a street nearby was renamed Kārļa Street (this is what 13 Janvāra Street was called before World War I). In 1938 a bust of the first State President Jānis Čakste was displayed in the castle square (also in the medieval part of Riga) thus creating a precedent for displaying figures of the state's first persons.

<sup>50</sup>J. Lejnīks, 'Pieminekļis Kārļa Alberta laukumā', *Māksla Plus* [Arts Plus] 3 (1997), pp. 17–20.

<sup>51</sup>T. Grīnbergs, 'Sirsnīgs svētības vēlējums Valsts prezidentam, kristīgās reliģijas aizstāvim un atbalstītājam', *Svētdienas Rīts* [Sunday Morning], 12 September 1937, pp. 290–291.

<sup>52</sup>'Arhibīskapa T. Grīnberga runa', op. cit., pp. 289–290.

<sup>53</sup>'Dzimtine', *Katōļu Dzeive* [Catholic Life], 10 (1937), p. 393. For more on the attitude of Latvian media see D. Hanovs and V. Tēraudkalns, op. cit., pp. 93–94.

<sup>54</sup>'Blagodarstvennoje molebstviye v pravoslavnihi hramah po sluchaju 60-letija Prezidenta gosudarstva', *Se*, 4 September 1937, p. 8.

<sup>55</sup>Linz, op. cit., p. 264.

<sup>56</sup>'Dzelzceļi plaujas svētkos pārvadājuši 170 000 pasažieru', *JZ*, 6 September 1937, p. 8.

<sup>57</sup>'Zelta vārpu vainags Vadonim', *Zemgales Balss* (ZB) [Voice of Zemgale], 6 September 1937, p. 2.

Masses of people gathered in Jelgava were entertained and educated by the performance of 'Renewal of Zemgale', staged by Jānis Muncis. Local newspaper *Zemgales Balss* [The Voice of Zemgale] wrote – 'lights allowed one to see the performance as a colourful book of pictures where the next page is even more beautiful than the one before'.<sup>58</sup> The performance was attended by more than 2000 participants. It transported viewers in their imagination to thirteenth-century Zemgale. A number of well-known Latvian composers were involved in writing music for the performance, including Teodors Kalniņš, Jānis Mediņš and Jānis Vītoliņš.<sup>59</sup> Songs in the performance also included congratulations sent to Ulmanis from the past by thirteenth-century Zemgalian tribal leader Namejs who died fighting against the Teutonic Knights. Author of these verses Aleksandrs Grīns put the words 'You, Leader, have been predestined to outgrow me in spirit'<sup>60</sup> in Namejs' mouth. Large bonfires lit up the city to make the festival even more impressive. 'In the dimness of evening from the darkness of ancient centuries we were addressed by the heroes of the ancient Zemgalians, by their fights and aspirations. Through all of that, the voices of contemporary Latvia were heard.'<sup>61</sup> As we will see again and again in this article many intellectuals were supportive of the regime. They were familiar with the rhetoric of the regime because they had in the years before the coup focused on the crisis in politics, culture and the economy themselves. As stated by Ieva Zaķe, 'their visions were caught in the webs of past trauma, a never-ending sense of injustice, cultural exclusionism and distrust of non-Latvians'.<sup>62</sup> When Ulmanis came to power, he generously backed his supporters among nationalist intellectuals. Jūlijs Druva, a newspaper editor, was made into the head of the Chamber of Letters and Arts; just quoted Grīns was selected to serve as an editor of a new morning newspaper created by the regime. Intellectuals explained that the positive attitude towards them was due to the fact that the regime itself was based on superhuman goals and ideals. At the same time there were others who faced restrictions – for example, radical nationalist Ādolfs Šilde was banned from publishing or taking up any government job.<sup>63</sup>

For the media, the beginning of September 1937 was a hectic time because all periodic media were obliged to include information about the aforementioned events. The popular magazine *Atpūta* [Leisure] devoted a special issue to Ulmanis' birthday celebrations (No. 670, 3 September 1937). It includes selected photos from the Leader's homestead ('Pikšas') and from the battles for the liberation of Latvia (military conflicts with German and former Tsarist troops in 1919–1920).<sup>64</sup> Photos from his studies in Nebraska (US) and in Leipzig (Germany) were also published. Some photos depicted Ulmanis as an ordinary working person – driving a tractor, in the field, with a slice of bread in his hands. Those compiling the special issue did not avoid more formal occasions, like one in which Ulmanis planted an oak, a symbol of strength in Latvian pre-Christian mythology.<sup>65</sup> Articles and photos in this and other periodicals provide a detailed account of where, when and how birthday celebrations were staged. Of course, researchers today should be aware of the limitations of these sources designed for propaganda purposes. However it

<sup>58</sup>'Zemgales atmoda', *ZB*, 6 September 1937, p. 7.

<sup>59</sup>A. Bērziņš, 'Lielo tautas svētku saviņņojums', *JZ*, 7 September 1937, p. 10.

<sup>60</sup>A. Grīns, 'Dziesmas no "Zemgales atmodas"', *Aizsargs*, 10 (1937), p. 655.

<sup>61</sup>'Trešie lielie visas Latvijas plaujas svētki', *Izglītības un Zinātnes Mēnešraksts*, 10 (1937), p. 394.

<sup>62</sup>I. Zaķe, 'Latvian Nationalist Intellectuals and the Crisis of Democracy in the Inter-war Period', *Nationalities Papers*, 33:1 (2005), p. 105.

<sup>63</sup>I. Zaķe, *Nineteenth-Century Nationalism and Twentieth-Century Anti-Democratic Ideals: The Case of Latvia, 1840s to 1980s* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), pp. 93–98.

<sup>64</sup>*Atpūta* [Leisure], 3 September 1937, pp. 13–14.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 15.

does not undermine their role in being both transmitters of certain prefabricated ideological messages and creators of feelings and expectations in readers.

### Analysis of Rhetoric and the Performative Aspects of Celebrations

In authoritarian and totalitarian states, birthdays of dictators were not private affairs but events of national importance. Stalin's 70th birthday on 21 December 1949 was marked by a large exhibition of gifts with about 8000 items selected for display. There was a special state committee to oversee the public events marking the dictator's birthday. Hundreds of birthday letters were sent to him. There was an event in the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow where he accepted flowers from the Young Pioneers and was greeted by delegates coming from all over the country.<sup>66</sup> When Mussolini celebrated his 41st birthday in 1923, more than 30,000 congratulatory messages were sent to him. He was praised for the great work he had accomplished 'for the good of Italy and of humanity'.<sup>67</sup>

The special issue of the journal *Aizsargs* [Defender]<sup>68</sup> dedicated to Ulmanis' birthday celebrations included a biography of Ulmanis that started with a paragraph titled 'Happy Nation', which connected happiness and peace with the messianic coming of a master who provides 'order, fair pay to all according to their work, encourages the exhausted and comforts those who mourn'.<sup>69</sup> The last phrase seems to be taken from biblical text (Isaiah 61:2, 'to comfort all who mourn', English Standard Version). The Russian newspaper *Segodnja* [Today] published an article on the front page where Ulmanis was called 'sower of the Latvian land'.<sup>70</sup> The publication *Skolu Dzīve* [School Life] was categorical in its demands – 'he who is against the Leader is against a strong, great and mighty Latvian nation'.<sup>71</sup> Aspects of the dictator's personal life (Ulmanis remained a bachelor) that were otherwise contrary to the patriarchal values promoted by the regime, were employed to show the self-abnegation of the Leader. Ulmanis was depicted as a person who came from a rural district and who did not have a family because his whole life was dedicated to the people of Latvia who thus became his abstract family – 'his only rest is trips to the countryside where he comes from'.<sup>72</sup>

Not only personal features of the Leader's character and life but also places related to his biography featured high in the glorification staged during Ulmanis' birthday celebrations. Ulmanis was born in Zemgale and therefore that part of Latvia was set apart as a special region in the political geography of the new authoritarian regime. In contrast, Latgale, the Catholic dominated eastern part of Latvia, was viewed as the 'younger sister' and the regime's efforts of Latvianisation were directed towards the 'normalisation' of Latgalian culture according to the current political and cultural norms. Some members of the Latgalian political and cultural elite quickly understood the trend and tried to fit into the dominant discourse. A couple of weeks after the coup, in one of the leading Latgalian

<sup>66</sup>N. Ssorin-Chaikov, 'On Heterochrony: Birthday Gifts to Stalin, 1949', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 12:2 (2006), pp. 355–375.

<sup>67</sup>'Benito's Birthday', *Time*, 1:23 (1923), p. 14.

<sup>68</sup>This is a name of a paramilitary organization in Latvia. Its name often is left untranslated in foreign publications.

<sup>69</sup>A. Francis, 'Latviešu tautas vadoņa 60 gadi', *Aizsargs* [Defender], 9 (1937), p. 571.

<sup>70</sup>Velikij sejatelj latishkoi zemli', *Se*, 4 September 1937, p. 1.

<sup>71</sup>L. Breikšs, 'Cieši ap Vadoņa karogu!', *Skolu Dzīve* [School Life], 1 (1937), p. 22.

<sup>72</sup>'Latvijas valsts dibinātājs un Tautas Vadonis Dr. K. Ulmanis' in *Kārļa Ulmaņa 60 gadi: 1877. 4. septembris – 1937.: svētku raksti* [Ulmanis' Sixty Years: 4 September 1877–1937] (Rīga: Zemnieka domas, 1938), p. 366. (This is a Latvian translation of an article that appeared in German *Leipziger Neuste Nachrichten*. Author unknown.)

newspapers, Francis Kemps (later arrested for opposing the regime) spoke of Latgalians as the 'lesser part of the nation' and a culturally 'less developed province'.<sup>73</sup>

We can also observe the role of geography in the cult of other dictators of that time, for example, in the triumphal entry of Hitler in his hometown of Linz where he had spent much of his early youth. On the evening of Saturday 12 March 1938, Hitler stood on the balcony of the Old Town Hall to proclaim the new importance of *Anschluss*.<sup>74</sup>

Latvian intellectuals were quick to disseminate the ideological message of highlighting the role of Zemgale and supported the idea of a glorious region where the Leader was born and spent his childhood. In the works of writer Aleksandrs Grīns, the territory inhabited by Zemgalians became a state with the most highly developed culture and military power that was superior to other tribes – 'seven hundred years ago the strongest of our ancient Latvian states was Zemgale'.<sup>75</sup> The character qualities of its inhabitants were especially praised – 'freedom was more important to them than fatherland'.<sup>76</sup> This helped to prove the writer's argument that later, after the German invasion in the thirteenth century, many Zemgalians chose not to be defeated but left their territories and moved to ancient Lithuania where they assisted in creating the mighty Lithuanian state. The thesis of the strong Zemgalian state was supported also by some professionals in the field: for example, by a graduate of St Petersburg Archaeological Institute, Rihards Ērglis, who wrote that 'Zemgalians lived in their land in prosperity and managed to establish a strong state that could have formed the basis and core for a wider Latvian state (or even for a state of Baltic nations) had the Germans not invaded us'.<sup>77</sup>

The ideological interests of the propagators of the regime in the pre-Christian past of lands now inhabited by Latvians raised hope among Latvian neo-pagans<sup>78</sup> that the regime would especially favour them. Ernests Brastiņš, one of the founders of *dievturi* (God-keepers) movement, called Ulmanis 'a genius' and wrote that 'in order to fulfil an idea of establishing the state of Latvia, God sent a man who received more heavenly gifts than others'.<sup>79</sup> However, very soon they were discouraged. Although the new regime used the idea of being a true Latvian state, closer to its ethnic roots, neo-paganism did not become an official religion.

The largest urban centre in Zemgale was Jelgava. Therefore it is no surprise that the high point of Ulmanis birthday celebration – a theatrical mass performance attended by thousands – was staged in that city. Here the role of Zemgale in the dictator's biography overlaps with two other closely linked issues:

(1) The presentation of Ulmanis as a fulfilment of an imagined heroic and glorious past of the land. Jelgava was the ancient capital of the Duchy of Courland (1562–1795) where an eighteenth-century palace built for Duke Ernst Johann von Biron by Bartolomeo Francesco Rastrelli, the same famous Italian architect who also built imperial palaces in St Petersburg and in its outskirts, was still standing. Ulmanis wanted to create a link between his regime and the rule of the German dukes. His visit to Jelgava was not an isolated event but one in series of activities and projects undertaken especially by intellectuals. A Latvian linguist of

<sup>73</sup>F. Kemps, 'Pi sliģšņa uz jaunū dzeivi', *Latgolas Vārds* [The Word of Latgale], 30 May 1934, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup>R. Hahn, 'What Occurred at Linz: A Memoir of Forgetting', *American Scholar*, 81:2 (2012), p. 39.

<sup>75</sup>A. Grīns, comp. *Varoņu grāmata* [Book of Heroes] (Rīga: Varavīksna, 1935), p. 43.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>77</sup>R. Ērglis, *Zemgales neatkarības vēsture* [History of Independence of Zemgale] (Rīga: Grāmatrūpnieks, 1936), p. 314.

<sup>78</sup>By neo-paganism is meant here any group that claims to restore or to continue the ancient religion of the given territory.

<sup>79</sup>Brastiņš Ernests, 'Laimīgā diena', in *Kārļa Ulmaņa 60 gadi: 1877. 4. septembris – 1937.: svētku raksti*, op. cit., p. 305.



German origin, Ernests Blese, wrote a short hagiographic biography of Ulmanis. It even includes references to the Duchy of Courland and its colonies in Tobago and Gambia.<sup>80</sup> Distant historical parallels were used also by other enthusiastic propagators of the new regime – ‘he [Ulmanis] did the same as Oliver Cromwell in England of 17th century. He dismissed the Parliament’.<sup>81</sup>

(2) The Latvianisation of urban spaces often dominated by other ethnic groups in the past – Germans and Russians (in the eastern part of Latvia – Latgale). The German invasion was repeatedly interpreted as a dramatic point in Latvian history, a fatal moment that stopped the prosperity and cultural development of the nation. The argument of 700 years of serfdom was used to foster anti-German sentiment. Like everything else, history had to serve the needs of official ideology. As written by Professor Alexander Ivanov (Daugavpils University),

the authoritarian political regime of K. Ulmanis used historiography not only as an instrument for maintaining the ethnic identity but also as an ideological tool of re-identification of ethnic communities.<sup>82</sup>

The birthday celebration was used to symbolically claim the city of Jelgava, in the past important for Baltic-German nobility, as a Latvian space. It was done by naming the former palace of dukes after the legendary thirteenth-century Zemgalian ruler Viesturs. Ulmanis told the public: ‘We are building this palace anew; we will be the ones to finish building it. This palace belongs and will belong to us as its true builders’.<sup>83</sup> In September 1937, the same month as Ulmanis celebrated his birthday, *Zemgales Balss* reported with satisfaction that in Jelgava in 1935 compared with 1897 the number of Germans had decreased from 27.7% to 6.8% and the number of Latvians had increased from 45.7% to 78.9%. The newspaper also included statistics on the Russian and Jewish presence in the city but only the percentages of Germans and Latvians were printed in bold.<sup>84</sup>

The transformation of places by renaming or rebuilding them was characteristic of Ulmanis’ regime. Blese, in an already quoted text, praises the Latvianisation of cities and outlines shifts in urban geography where certain places charged with a symbolic value were given political priority and value. It is a ‘new Latvian Riga of Dr. Kārlis Ulmanis with the Freedom Monument at its centre and its grand new buildings in view of old Riga, with shining streets covered with asphalt, new boulevards and squares’.<sup>85</sup> Blese referred to new impressive building projects initiated by Ulmanis that according to his plan had to change the historical centre of Riga and strip it of buildings that evoked memories of the medieval German-ruled Hanseatic city.

An analysis of rhetorical elements of various speeches given during the birthday celebrations indicate the importance of the peasantry – a theme that, as already mentioned in this article, was part of the regime’s ideology. In the process of glorification, the social background of the dictator, a son of well-to-do peasants, turned out to be not an obstacle but a sign of destiny preparing him for his special role in Latvian history. ‘In ancient Rome there was a custom to invite consuls to their high post from the plough. Destiny

<sup>80</sup>Blese, op. cit., p. 179.

<sup>81</sup>R. Dēliņš, ‘Četras sastapšanās’, *Sējējs* [Sower], 9 (1937), p. 911.

<sup>82</sup>A. Ivanov, ‘Historiography as Framing and Support Factor of Ethnic Identity: The Case of Historiography of Latgale’ in V. Volkovs, D. Hanovs and I. Runce (eds), *Ethnicity. Towards the Politics of Recognition in Latvia: 1991–2012* (Riga: Zinātne, 2013), p. 301.

<sup>83</sup>Valsts prezidenta runas noslēgums’, *ZB*, 6 September 1937, p. 8.

<sup>84</sup>‘Jelgava top skaista un latviska’, *ZB*, 13 September 1937, p. 7.

<sup>85</sup>Blese, op. cit., p. 193.

has decided that the first important consul of the Latvian nation, our Leader, State and Prime Minister also come “from the plough”.<sup>86</sup> Members of the political elite close to Ulmanis claimed that ‘agriculture forms the basis of culture of all humankind ( . . . ) A peasant’s lifestyle, morals and customs are a source of civilisation, rights and social structure’ (J. Birznieks, Minister of Agriculture).<sup>87</sup> Regions less affected by industrialisation were sometimes depicted as more ‘pure’ and therefore admirable. For example, the author of one of the essays included in a collection of articles aimed at forming a new ideology of dictatorship characterises the inhabitants of the eastern part of Latvia, Latgale, as children closer to nature. ‘Latgalians are kind and humble, untouched by civilisation and culture’.<sup>88</sup>

Fascination with peasantry is not a novelty but it is linked to nationalism in general. These ideas can be traced back to German influence, especially Herder. The same happened all over Europe. In Hungary a number of intellectuals stood behind this idea. They were called ‘populists’ because being close to the ‘roots’ of the nation was important to them. The peasantry was regarded as a true guardian of national values.<sup>89</sup>

Ulmanis’ birthday celebrations revealed the constant role given to mass performances by the regime. Alfrēds Bērziņš (Minister of Public Affairs, 1937–1940) pointed to its ideological role – according to him the ‘Renewal of Zemgale’ was ‘deeply moving and patriotic, that is important for national renewal’.<sup>90</sup> Masses were prepared and ‘tuned in’ by creating a sense of expectation – newspapers informed the readers that even on the night before the main event ‘life on the streets of Jelgava did not stop. Streets were full of people and thousands of people continued to arrive’.<sup>91</sup> The stage director Muncis justified the need for his own creation and similar performances with the following words:

The authoritarian state system ( . . . ) needs a wider audience and other principles of stage arts than one provided by the former theatre that was closed in the circle of its narrowly subjective formalism. Large national festivals, mass processions and large open-air performances are closely linked to the ideological unity of nation and state. Only such a unity can create monumental forms that are reflections of all experiences of this age and the spirits of time.<sup>92</sup>

Muncis was also known as the stage director of another large-scale propaganda performance ‘The Song of Renewal’ staged soon after the coup in July 1934 in Riga.<sup>93</sup> He was influenced by Italian Futurist aesthetics and theatrical reforms in Russia. From 1915–1919 he studied theatrical arts in Moscow and Petrograd where he was influenced by the Russian futurist Vsevolod Meyerhold.<sup>94</sup> V. Meyerhold collaborated with another famous Futurist, Vladimir Mayakovsky, who wrote a socialist dramatic play *Mystery–Bouffe* (first staged in 1918). It

<sup>86</sup>J. Birznieks, ‘Dr. K. Ulmaņa loma mūsu lauksaimniecībā’, *JZ*, 4 September 1937, p. 2.

<sup>87</sup>J. Birznieks, ‘Dr. K. Ulmaņa loma mūsu lauksaimniecībā’ in *Raksti par jauno valsti: ministru prezidenta Dr. Kārļa Ulmaņa trīs runas un Kultūras fonda godalgotie ievadraksti*, op. cit., p. 196.

<sup>88</sup>V. Lejasozols, ‘Latgale un mēs’, in *ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>89</sup>D. Némédi, ‘Remarks on the Role of Peasants in Hungarian Ideology’, *Journal of Popular Culture*, 29:2 (1995), pp. 69–70.

<sup>90</sup>A. Bērziņš, ‘Lielo tautas svētku savīļņojums’, *JZ*, 7 September 1937, p. 10.

<sup>91</sup>‘Dižsārti vēsta par Pļaujas svētku sākumu’, *Kurzemes Vārds*, 5 September 1937, p. 3.

<sup>92</sup>J. Muncis, ‘Trešo pļaujas svētku brīvdabas izrāde Jelgavā’, *JZ*, 4 September 1937, p. 15.

<sup>93</sup>For analysis of ‘The Song of Renewal’ see S. Radzobe, ‘Song of Renewal – And the Tradition of Political Mystery’ in A. Cimdiņa and D. Hanovs (eds) *Latvia and Latvians: A People and a State in Ideas, Images and Symbols* (Riga: Zinātne, 2010), pp. 89–106. See also D. Hanovs, ‘The Performance Song of Renewal. A Political Liturgy in an Authoritarian Regime’ in *ibid.*, pp. 107–142.

<sup>94</sup>G. Augusts, ‘Jānis Muncis un latviešu masu propagandas teātris’, *Jaunā Gaita* [New Pace], 96 (1973), [http://zagarins.net/jg/jg96/JG96\\_Augusts-par-Munci.htm](http://zagarins.net/jg/jg96/JG96_Augusts-par-Munci.htm) (accessed 19 July 2012).

was written in the style of medieval mysteries using the biblical allegory of Noah's Ark – the bourgeois were placed in the 'clean' category, while the proletariat of various professions were 'unclean'.<sup>95</sup> Futurism was used by Italian fascists as well as by early Bolsheviks in their mass performances. A number of Latvian artists were influenced by this school of arts and philosophical thought. The Latvian authoritarian industry of mass political entertainment, managed by the Ministry of Public Affairs, followed examples of mass festivals abroad very closely and commented on mass actions in the media. Another example from *Zemgales Balss* – the newspaper reported in details on the Nazi Congress in Nurnberg – 'many spotlights lit up the historical buildings of the city and after the sun set, in all houses candles were lit. There was no house and no window without the blaze of candles.'<sup>96</sup>

## Conclusion

The history of the Latvian dictatorship in the 1930s shows that the wider European context is very important for understanding its causes, origins and its ideology better. In its usage of mass performances, Ulmanis' regime was close to its eastern neighbour, the Bolshevik regime, and used some of the tools of Italian fascism and German Nazi propaganda. However, of all three regimes Ulmanis' was closer to Mussolini's. As written by Hans Maier, 'both communism and National Socialism consciously burned their ships behind them, risked the entirely new, the unprecedented – and thereby, of course, a total break and self-destruction'.<sup>97</sup> This cannot be said about Ulmanis, who tried to maintain the appearance of legitimacy by making continuous promises to adopt the new constitution and by trying to gain wider support for his regime by involving politicians who formerly belonged to parties in opposition to his equally dissolved Agrarian Union in the state administration.

Reading media reports on similar festivities, one cannot overlook individual and collective excitement, whether genuine or deliberately shared, produced and experienced by journalists, the audience and representatives of the political elite. The opulence and splendour of mass performances, both technical and aesthetic, were used to create and disseminate collective emotions during festivals, such as the birthday festivals of K. Ulmanis. A citizen's duty, entertainment and education can all be found in the performances staged during the years of the authoritarian regime, including the birthday celebrations of Ulmanis. Roger Griffin argues that culture was appropriated in order to generate consensus and mobilise the population. He mentions the key features as being the proliferation of public works to forge 'sacred' spaces and the introduction of ceremonies and rituals aimed at the regeneration of the nation.<sup>98</sup> Following philosopher G. Debord we can interpret these phenomena as a sign of modernity – 'in all its specific manifestations – news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment – the spectacle epitomises the prevailing model of social life. ( . . . ) This society is based on the spectacle in the most fundamental way.'<sup>99</sup> Regular festivities and the constant creation of new rites was part of the political culture sustained by the dictatorship in Latvia.

<sup>95</sup>B. Jangfeldt, 'Ja' dlja menja malo. Revoljucija/ljubovj Vladimira Majakovskovo [ 'I For Me is Not Enough. Revolution/Love of Vladimir Mayakovsky ] (Moskva: Kolibri, Azbuka-Attikus, 2012), p. 175.

<sup>96</sup>'Nacionālsociālistu kongresā', ZB, 10 September 1937, p. 1.

<sup>97</sup>H. Maier, 'Political Religions and their Images: Soviet Communism, Italian Fascism and German National Socialism', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 7:3 (2006), p. 272.

<sup>98</sup>R. Griffin, 'Staging the Nation's Rebirth' in G. Berghaus (ed.) *Fascism and Theatre: Comparative Studies on the Aesthetics and Politics of Performance 1925–1945* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996), p. 23.

<sup>99</sup>G. Debord, 'The Society of the Spectacle' in N. Mirzoeff (ed.) *The Visual Culture Reader* (Milton Park: Routledge, 1998), pp. 143–144.

Patterns similar to ones observed in Latvia have been developed in other non-democratic European states in the interwar period. The mentioning of parallels to other European non-democratic regimes in the 1930s still causes uneasiness in contemporary public discourse because in mass perception Ulmanis is remembered as a martyr who stayed in his position until the very end of the independent state, and the whole period of interwar independence has been given the name 'Ulmanis' times'. Besides, Ulmanis' regime used the nationalist mythology of a golden pre-Christian age as well as Latvianised previous political powers like the Duchy of Kurzeme to produce the collective memories of the Latvian nation long before it became a nation in the second half of the nineteenth century and a nation state in 1918. Values promoted by this kind of ideology remain conservative as is characteristic in other authoritarian regimes of the given period. This has been noted by Alan Todd – 'whatever their origin, authoritarian regimes are firmly committed to maintaining or restoring traditional structures and values'.<sup>100</sup>

As was shown in the article, by making certain aspects of the dictator's private life public (for example, not hesitating to describe Ulmanis as a single man) official ideology blurred boundaries between private and public. The dictator's life became a symbol of self-sacrifice for the country. Because of his identification with the state, Ulmanis' birthday became a public event where every citizen could and should participate. Urban landscapes played a special role in staging these festivities because in cities Ulmanis could develop his far-reaching plans of building monuments and functional buildings that would serve the needs of the regime and at the same time would point to the imagined bright future. It shows that the regime was not completely agrarian but had big plans for modernisation. Electric power stations, new highways and cities with reconstructed roads and new, functional offices were included in this project.

Intellectuals played an important role in propagating the new ideology. The regime existed for too short a period for this ideology to develop into a completely unified system; however, there were signs that re-education of all age groups was under way. Starting from children and youth organisations and ending with churches and professional organisations – thus was the network that provided the state with tools that would help to mobilise masses when needed.

Ulmanis remains a controversial figure in contemporary Latvian political culture – criticised by a growing number of intellectuals but still glorified by many, including some established politicians. During the last municipal elections of 2013 the Agrarian Union posted in one of the major newspapers a political advertisement that started with the slogan 'Vote for the party of Kārlis Ulmanis!' Then in the following paragraph one of candidates in brief words tried to link Ulmanis, economic prosperity and the Agrarian Union.<sup>101</sup> On 15 May 2013 the National Association 'All For Latvia!' – 'For Fatherland and Freedom/LNNK' – organised its traditional ride with cars and motorcycles to commemorate the coup and the 'golden years it started', as stated by one of the leaders of its local branches.<sup>102</sup> Another example from contemporary Latvian culture is the musical drama 'The Leader' at the National Theatre. Silvija Radzobe points to the similarities between the text of 'The Song of Renewal' and 'The Leader' and writes, 'it is hardly believable that the person who composed the libretto for Vadonis could not have read Song of

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<sup>100</sup>Todd, opt. cit., p. 12.

<sup>101</sup>'Balsojiet par Kārļa Ulmaņa partiju!', Latvijas Avīze [The Paper of Latvia], 14 May 2013, p. 3.

<sup>102</sup>16.05.2013. Nacionālā identitāte: Vienības braucienā par godu Kārlim Ulmanim – veicinot garīgo apvērsumu Latvijā, <http://spektrs.com/video/16-05-2013-nacionala-identitate-vienibas-brauciena-par-godu-karlim-ulmanim-veicinot-garigo-apversumu-latvija/> (accessed 16 July 2013).

Renewal'.<sup>103</sup> One of the authors of this musical, Kaspars Dimiters, says about his work: 'I created it with a clear sense that it will be a monument to the only master of the Latvian nation Kārlis Ulmanis.'<sup>104</sup> As expressed earlier in this article, Ulmanis' popularity is related to the fact that in public memory he remains the martyr who stayed until the very end. He is also one of the best known interwar Latvian political leaders. Another factor is that a lot of people are still looking for a messianic type of leader who will rule with a strong hand against corruption and fragmented party politics and will act as a good landlord. The phenomenon of Aivars Lembergs, Mayor of Ventspils, who in spite of being accused of financial crimes and being called an 'oligarch' remains popular and still keeps his position in his municipality is an illustration of the contemporary political scene of Latvia.<sup>105</sup>

What Latvia needs is an intensive public debate, not only on the six years of the authoritarian regime, but also on the history of Ulmanis' glorification since the 1990s. No doubt this would add value to the contemporary Latvian political discourse where an idea of a strong hand and 'Knight in Shining Armour' coming to solve problems is still widely used by politicians. Another question to debate is how the performative dimension of politics influences the quality of political discourse. This connects the past with the present because in spite of different political contexts, the performative nature of politics still has its share of the process of shaping and guiding the political sympathies of citizens.

### Notes on Contributors

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<sup>103</sup>Radzobe, op. cit., p. 104.

<sup>104</sup>M. Brants, 'Celies, vadoni, es esmu vadāms!', <http://politika.lv/article/celies-vadoni-es-esmu-vadams> (accessed 16 July 2013).

<sup>105</sup>Lembergs who likes theatrical appearances on the local political stage is compared with Italian politician Berlusconi by some journalists. A. Ozoliņš, "'Ir': Berlusconi, Lembergs un maukas', <http://www.delfi.lv/news/comment/comment/aivars-ozolins-ir-berluskoni-lembegs-un-maukas.d?id=43437461> (accessed 16 July 2013).