

## Information Warfare and Disinformation: The Example of the Occupation of Latvia in June of 1940

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**Abstract.** Applying the concept of information warfare, the study examines the influence of the USSR on the information space of Latvia during its occupation in June 1940 and taking over power. Using memoir literature, the article presents the characteristics of media activity. The research analyses the contents of the 17–19 June issues of the most influential newspapers “*Jaunākās Ziņas*”, “*Brīvā Zeme*” and “*Rīts*” in order to detect disinformation published therein and information available to people. It was concluded that the USSR successfully implemented the information warfare, achieving complete control of Latvia’s information space. The main information materials provided to the audience of the Latvian media contained blatant misinformation, as they defined the relations between Latvia and the USSR as friendly and the Red Army as a friendly army.

**Keywords:** Occupation of Latvia, information warfare, misinformation, Latvian newspapers “*Jaunākās Ziņas*”, “*Brīvā Zeme*”, “*Rīts*”

### Introduction

In recent years, the term “information warfare” has been extensively used in academic and public space. There are several explanations of this concept, however, one of the most frequently used definitions is the one provided in the NATO brochure addressed to the general public: “Information warfare is an operation conducted in order to gain an information advantage over the opponent. It consists in controlling one’s own information space, protecting access to one’s own information, while acquiring and using the opponent’s information, destroying their information systems and disrupting the information flow” (NATO 2020). During the last decades, the rapid development of information and communication technologies and their importance in all spheres of life has increased the knowledge about the meaning of information warfare.

This phenomenon is not new in itself. Information wars have always been a part of warfare, as well as deliberate creation and maintenance of political and social crises. The explanation of war by Carl von Clausewitz, a theory of war classic, is suitable for the description of its essence: "... war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means" (Clausewitz 2007, 28). These other means also include manipulation of information, closing down or taking over of mass media, spreading disinformation, propaganda, blocking communication channels. In this context, historical accounts highlight Napoleon Bonaparte's skill to use information to seize power in France, George Washington's successful use of false anti-British propaganda in the American Revolutionary War, and propaganda in the World War I. Information warfare played an important role in the Vietnam War, it was also present in the US military operations in Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan (see Farwell 2020; Rid 2020; Seib 2021). The concept of 'information warfare' in the politics and defence of Western countries is mostly designated by the concept 'strategic communication.' This means the use of messages, words, actions, symbols, images to influence the opinion of the target audience, which in turn would contribute to achieving the intended goals. In the Russian military sphere and politics, the use of the concept of information warfare is typical (Fridman 2020). The "Military Encyclopaedic Dictionary" published on the website of the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation states:

*An open and violent collision between states in which the enemy's resistance is suppressed by the use of means of harmful influence on his information sphere, destruction or disruption of the normal functioning of his information and telecommunication systems, [undermining] the security of his information resources [and] obtaining unauthorised access to them, as well as [employing] massive informational and psychological influence on the Armed Forces' personal and the population of the enemy in order to destabilise society and the state (Quoted in Fridman 2020, 47).*

This definition shows that the Russian military considers information a part of war, even prioritizing it over conventional military operations. The information warfare here is defined in two formats: information-technical and information-psychological. The first is related to information technology, communication channels and infrastructure, technical creation and use of data, as well as programming. The second is focused on influencing the minds of population, elite and military personnel, working with people's knowledge and emotions. Despite the fact that these spheres are different, they overlap and interact, as, for example, psychological influence is achieved through information technology (Jonsson

2019, 95–96). The activities of the Russian Federation in the spread of disinformation and manipulation of information have prompted and still compel to pay ever increasing attention to the phenomenon of information warfare specifically in the interpretation perpetuated by Russia, which allows for a more effective analysis of the information operations carried out by this state (Freedman 2020; Seib 2021, Ch. 5). The Baltic states, especially after their accession to NATO, have been and still remain among the targets of Russia's information warfare (Seib 2021, Ch. 5; Fabian, Berzins 2021; Chakars, Ekmanis 2022).

This study examines the situation in the field of information in the first days of the occupation of Latvia in 1940. The Russian Federation's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has prompted the analysis of historical events – the previous occupations of neighbouring countries executed by Russia and the comparison of present and past military actions. The aim of the research is to uncover the information provided by Latvian mass media on 17–19 June 1940 and assess the information available to the population about the occupation taking place in those days and the demise of the state of Latvia. In order to achieve this, the following research questions have been proposed: 1) can the activity of the Latvian media and the information provided by them be evaluated as an information warfare operation of the USSR; and 2) did the available information enable the population of Latvia to understand the unfolding events?

## Methodology

The study examines the information that appeared in the most widely read Latvian daily newspapers “*Jaunākās Ziņas*” (“Latest News”; hereinafter – JZ), “*Brīvā Zeme*” (“Free Land”; BZ) and “*Rīts*” (“Morning”; Ri) during the first days of the occupation, during which the control was seized over the entire territory of the state, the most important administrative and communication institutions and the army. During the pre-occupation of Latvia, the circulation of JZ reached 250 000, BZ – 180 000 and Ri – 100 000–110 000 copies (Butulis 2017, 178–179).

The research analyses the newspaper issues published on 17, 18 and 19 June. On 20 June, the newly formed government of Latvia, which was essentially a Soviet puppet government, began its work. This measure was followed by the complete takeover of Latvian institutions and their placement under Soviet control. By changing editors and journalists, the media also were appropriated. I have discussed the depiction of the events of the summer of 1940, mainly July and early August, in the press in an earlier published article (see Zelče 2011). The research was conducted using the qualitative content analysis method, analysing the text of newspaper issues and discussing thematic categories: priorities of agenda; sources of information and the normality of media routines.

A compilation of data found in memoir literature regarding the work of media in the first days of the occupation of Latvia has been created in order to characterize the context of the situation.

## Results

### 1. Characterisation of the information space

In the historical literature dedicated to the occupation of Latvia, the main attention is directed at its political, diplomatic and military dimensions (for example, see Gore, Stranga 1992; Strods, Bleiere *et al.* 2007, 166–243; Stranga 2022; Bleiere, Kangeris 2022, 55–87). Less consideration has been given to Soviet information and disinformation dissemination measures, although it is recognized that the Soviet occupation regime quickly gained control over Latvia's information space (Zellis 2018, 103). This was facilitated by the situation that had developed during the authoritarian regime of Kārlis Ulmanis, when a comprehensive and complex censorship system had been created for the media. The Ministry of Public Affairs, established in 1937, was in charge of media activities. This institution also produced the major articles on the functioning of state power, politics, international relations, which were sent to the editorial offices of periodicals with a mandatory request of publication in newspapers or magazines. During the authoritarian regime, the press was completely unified, it only provided information flattering to the government and the authoritarian leader Ulmanis (Butulis 2017, 176–177). In his memoirs, JZ editor Jānis Kārklīņš ironically wrote that the editor-in-chief of the newspaper received orders from officials also over the phone or a game of cards and a glass of cognac (Kārklīņš 1990, 203). In 1939, an unequivocally positive image of the USSR was constructed in the public space of Latvia, pursuant to the course imposed by the government, which was the one of neutrality and maintaining good relations with the USSR. The media no longer included any critical information about this country in their content. After the signing of the mutual aid agreement between Latvia and the USSR on 5 October 1939, which determined the placement of Soviet military bases on the territory of Latvia, a wide range of USSR propaganda materials also entered the public space (Strods 2007).

Likewise, on 17 June, when the Red Army entered the territory of Latvia, the media operated in the previous regime. They published only the statements prepared by the authorities. 17 June was Monday, the Latgale Song Festival had taken place in Daugavpils over the weekend, which, among others, was observed by many media workers. BZ and Radiophone of Latvia journalist Konstantīns Karulis in his memoirs wrote that during the song festival there was anxiety among journalists about the entry of the USSR military forces into Lithuania and the attack on the Mašleniki border post in the Abrene district and they had

discussed these events with each other, while waiting for the information to be provided to the media from the minister of public affairs, Alfrēds Bērziņš. Karulis also recounts the story of Alberts Liepa, the foreign editor of the newspaper Rī, that on 15 June he had received a message about the occupation of Lithuania from the German branch of “United Press.” Liepa did not dare to publish it on his own initiative and tried to coordinate it with the Office of the President. Ulmanis forbade its publication, stating that it was false and could not be distributed further. Similarly, on 17 June, newspaper editors were waiting for the government to provide information for publication in the press about the current events in Latvia (Karulis 2000a, 15).

Neither on the evening of 16 June nor on the morning of 17 June did the Latvian government inform the population about the entry of the USSR troops into the state. Information was provided only at 12:00. The appearance of Soviet military equipment and soldiers on Latvian roads and city streets came as a surprise for many (Gore, Stranga 1992, 128–129). Soviet troops reached Riga at 13:30. Their first actions were the capture of the post office building, where the telegraph, telephone exchange and radio broadcasting centre were located. Radiophone broadcasts were interrupted. Alfrēds Bērziņš protested this by telephone to the USSR envoy Vladimir Derevyanski and received an answer that from then on, the Red Army would govern Radiophone “in the common interest of all.” Broadcasting of music was permitted, but creation of the spoken word could only take place with the permission of Soviet representatives (Dunsdorfs 1992, 374). The USSR envoy also demanded that each day’s radio program be coordinated with the embassy of USSR (Komplektov 1990, 401). The first secretary of the embassy of France, Jean de Beausse, also emphasized the termination of telephone communications in his memoirs (Boss 1997, 59). Karulis remembered that Radiophone received a phone call from the USSR embassy, demanding that “no information other than what comes from the embassy should be given about the arrival and movement of Soviet troops in Latvia” (Karulis 2000a, 16). Juris Zīverts, at that time – a very young journalist of BZ, in his memoirs expressed the assumption that people who listened to Moscow radio were better informed about the course of the occupation of Latvia. According to him, it was they who greeted the Red Army in the streets of Riga (Zīverts 2011, 140–141).

Several memoirs describe the situation in newspaper editorial offices. The writer Alfrēds Dziļums came to the editorial office of JZ on 17 June. He recalled that agitation reigned there. Jūlijs Lācis, who later became a member of the Soviet puppet governments, told him: “What formerly was, is done with, friend! But let’s try to live!” (Dziļums 1991, 238). Zīverts recounted that that already on 17 June, representatives of the Red Army, dressed in military uniforms without insignia, came to the editorial office of BZ. Their task was to ensure that “only true and correct articles” appeared in the newspaper (Zīverts

2011, 144). Zīverts also recollected that the pieces written by himself and his colleagues were altered beyond recognition. Many articles, especially the texts of politicians' speeches, came directly from the USSR embassy. He, being an eyewitness of the events, reckoned that the newspaper published "fabricated news that was completely contrary to the events and speeches that we observed, saw and heard. It was no longer journalism. It was a conscious lie" (Zīverts 2011, 148). Karulis noted that on 20 June, when unofficial information about Latvia's new government began to circulate among journalists, he managed to interview its potential head, Augusts Kirhenšteins, and obtain valuable information, but it was not allowed to be published in the newspaper, because only official materials about the government were permitted for publication (Karulis 2000b, 15).

Memoir literature contain repeated admissions that there was a hunger for information in those days of June. People from the countryside used to go to Riga to see what was happening with their own eyes and evaluate it, because they could not obtain clarity about the current situation from the media content. Agronomist and politician Jānis Lejiņš wrote in his memoirs that on 17 June in Riga, "I saw people on the street in large crowds standing near shops and listening to radio news" (Lejiņš 1971, 179). During this time, rumours grew, facilitated by the lack of information in the media. This is completely understandable, as people sought an explanation for what was happening and tried to understand what the change of power and the presence of the Red Army promised for their future (see Bergmanis 2003; Dūra, Gundare 2004, 101–105).

The most important events in public space of the days of occupation were Ulmanis' drive around Riga on the afternoon of 17 June and his radio address in the evening of that day. The president's drive around the city can be evaluated as a form of direct communication, the purpose of which was to calm the population by announcing that everything that is happening was approved by the Latvian government and that Ulmanis has not fled abroad in this situation (Stranga 2022, 410). Ulmanis addressed the nation on the radio at 22:15, the next day his speech was published by the press. The speech took place in the presence of a representative of the USSR. It contained the legendary words: "I will remain in my place, you remain in yours." The President also stated that everything that was happening was for the future of the nation and its "peace and prosperity" (Dunsdorfs 1992, 374–377). This speech, too, although not really giving a true designation of what was happening, served to reduce the anxiety of the residents and to implement the occupation measures. The data reflecting the situation in Latvia's information field and shaping thereof are fragmentary, however, they lead to the conclusion that already in the middle of the day of 17 June, all communication channels were managed by the USSR and thus only the content created by it or the content accepted by the occupation institutions could be distributed.

## 2. Priorities of media agenda

The priorities of the newspapers' agenda are clearly demonstrated by the placement of articles on the front page and the size of the letters of their headlines. It must be said that the agenda priorities of the examined newspapers JZ, BZ and Rī were not completely identical. On 17 June, the central topic of JZ was the Latgale Song Festival and the 16 June statement submitted by the USSR to the governments of Latvia and Estonia with the request for the establishment of a new government and the conditions for permitting the entry of Soviet troops. JZ also informed its readers about the arrival of parts of Soviet troops across the border of Latvia early in the morning and the ongoing meeting of the Latvian government. At the forefront of international news were the events in Lithuania, whose territory the Soviet troops had already taken over and where the formation of a new government was taking place.

Rī focussed on the Latgale Song Festival. The 17 June issue of the newspaper gave the impression that it had been delayed and still reflected the previous day. BZ, on the other hand, concentrated most directly on the decisive events for Latvia on 16 and 17 June, leaving the Latgale Song Festival in the background.

The next day, all newspapers published Ulmanis' radio speech on the front page, but it was given a different title in each. In BZ, its title was "State President K. Ulmanis' address to the nation", in Rī – "State President's address to the nation", whereas in JZ – "I will remain in my place, you remain in yours. President's call to the nation". Rī also placed on its front page the announcement of the USSR to the Latvian government, information about the 17 June government meeting. All the newspapers published the order on the ban on gatherings signed by the Minister of Internal Affairs, K. Vedenieks. On the front pages of JZ and BZ there was also a short message about Ulmanis' drive around Riga and the greetings "Long live the President!" being called out. See Figure 1–3.

In terms of newspaper agenda priorities, on 19 June the events in Latvia share the place with international developments. The newspapers published information on the Latvian government's work on their front pages, especially regarding the establishment of a communications headquarters for cooperation with the Red Army. Among the priorities of news disseminated by newspapers there were also the arrival of the Deputy Chairman of the People's Commissars of the USSR Andrei Vyshinsky in Riga by high-speed train, the statement of the USSR embassy that it had not appealed to the Latvian government with a request to limit the gathering of people and that the Soviet troops were satisfied with the warm attitude and congratulations of the local population.

On 19 June, news about the situation on the French fronts, the German bombing of England, the reactions of Japan and the United States to the events in Western Europe, the plans of the United States to create a labour service, and the meeting between Hitler and Mussolini in Munich also appeared on the front



Figure 1. The “Jaunākās Ziņas” front page. 19 June, 1940. Collection of Misiņš’ Library, University of Latvia Academic Library.



Figure 2. The “Brīvā Zeme” front page. 19 June, 1940. Collection of Misiņš’ Library, University of Latvia Academic Library.





Figure 3. The “Rīts” front page. 19 June, 1940. Collection of Misiņš’s Library, University of Latvia Academic Library.

pages of newspapers. JZ, BZ and Rī offered different international news on their front pages. The issues of 19 June left the impression that the editorial offices of newspapers were trying to catch up with the coverage of world events. They had also reported these events in the previous days, however, the news about the dramatic events in Europe had receded to the second position in terms of importance. Even the demise of France acquired this secondary status.

In Latvia, the occupation of the country was on the agenda of the major newspapers, but it was marked by other words. The press, publishing the texts proposed by the government, gave this event the discourse of successful cooperation between the Latvian government, the USSR embassy and the Red Army, despite some disagreements and minor misunderstandings.

### 3. Information sources

Latvia’s largest newspapers created their content based on several sources of information. The main source of news about international events and political events in Latvia was the Latvian telegraph agency “Leta” (LTA). It was founded as a state information institution, but in 1922 it became an autonomous commercial enterprise under the supervision of the State Chancellery. LTA had contracts with

the world's most influential news agencies and an extensive network of its own foreign correspondents (Švābe 1950–1951, 1456).

After the *coup d'état* instigated by Ulmanis, LTA became a consistent pillar of the authoritarian regime. The official announcements of the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (TASS), such as the 16 June announcement of the USSR to the Latvian government, were also presented under the name of LTA. On 17 June, along with this announcement, JZ on its front page published the 15 June statement of LTA, stating that the TASS report on the conflict between the USSR and Lithuania contained a deviation from truth, because there was never a Baltic military entente, since Lithuania never joined the military level of Latvia–Estonia of 1 November 1923. It should be noted that BZ published this news on the fifth page. In subsequent issues of newspapers, however, there was no longer any difference between LTA and TASS messages. Regarding the events in Lithuania, JZ and RZ offered LTA news, references of Moscow Radiophone programs and TASS news. Regardless of the fact that JZ was informed about Germany's success in the war against France and the situation in Germany by its special correspondent from Berlin, along with these reports, JZ also published Moscow's perspective on these events, referring to the newspapers "Krasnaya Zvezda", "Izvestiya" and Moscow Radiophone. As to the events in other parts of the world, such as Japan, India, Turkey, Egypt, newspapers offered LTA news. Compared to JZ, BZ contained relatively fewer references to the information provided by TASS and the Moscow Radiophone. Very rarely did references to TASS appear in the pages of Rī.

Special correspondents of newspapers were also an important source of information. They mostly reported the news by telephone. In 17–19 June, JZ published the messages of the newspaper's correspondents in Berlin, London, Stockholm, Tallinn and Kaunas. BZ made use of the information received from Berlin, Tallinn and Kaunas correspondents, while Rī received special messages from Berlin, Tallinn, Kaunas and Rome. BZ and Rī also posted brief information about the key events in Europe that were reported by the newspapers there.

News and articles published in newspapers about the events in Latvia were prepared by their editorial offices. The author's name was indicated only for larger publications. In most cases, they were authors who were not employed in editorial offices and whose articles were devoted to specific scientific and cultural topics, as well as travelogues.

To sum up, it should be said that factually the newspapers contained abundant information, which was provided from all the aforementioned sources. However, the publications lacked editorials and politicians' comments, opinions of persons respected in society and public discussions, which could help the users of the press to navigate in the bevy of events, to form an idea of the overall picture and the future.

#### 4. Normality of media routine

In the first days of the occupation, Latvian newspapers retained their usual image and format. Next to its title, BZ used its long-standing motto: “For Latvia, national, beautiful, powerful.” The content of the newspapers in general showed that they tried to work in their customary rhythm. This is clearly evidenced by the publication of the novels in sequels. BZ continued to publish the novel by Jānis Sārts “*Zilie krasti*” (“Blue Coasts”) and “Hotel Shanghai” by Vicki Baum, JZ – “*Atriebības laulība*” (“Revenge Marriage”) by Julia Mowbray (in Latvian transcription – Džulija Mobreja) and Vilis Lācis’ “*Pazudušā dzimtene*” (“Lost Homeland”), while and Rī – “*Svešās asinis*” (“Foreign Blood”) by Margerita Mekki (in Latvian transcription – Margerita Mekija). Newspapers published the reviews of theatre life, book news, sports news, anecdotes, weather reports and other materials regularly included in newspaper issues. On 17 and 18 June, newspapers continued to post descriptions of the Latgale Song Festival, which had an enthusiastic discourse. Newspapers devoted several pages to commercials and personal advertisements. As before, people were looking for work or offering themselves as workforce, companies were promoting their products, service providers were advertising their services. The obituaries, as usual, took up half a page or an entire page of the newspaper issue. Newspapers also featured the current repertoire of Riga’s theatres and cinemas. For example, JZ and BZ advertised the screening of the film “Stepan Razin” by “*Mosfilm*” in the cinema “Spendid Palace”.

The newspapers looked at topics pertaining to the ordinary life in Latvia – school graduations, preparation of peat, production of drain pipes, involvement of urban dwellers in agricultural work, hay making, application to various educational institutions for the new academic year, Latvianization of surnames, preparation for Midsummer celebrations. The customary routine was disrupted only by individual publications, for example, on 19 June, JZ posted an instructive article “Do not buy excessive bulk of goods”, in which it was pointed out that the desire of many people to acquire stocks of food and various things was a mistake. The newspaper emphasized that food soon went bad and was perishable, therefore, large stocks of it could turn into a loss, whereas there was no need to worry about the lack of manufactured goods, because it was said that the shops had large stocks thereof. Newspapers continued to publish materials with positive content about the USSR. For example, on 18 June, JZ posted an article by Professor Arvīds Kalniņš about scientific achievements in the Soviet Union. BZ published the articles of the writer and director of the National Theatre Jānis Grīns about his visit to Moscow. They were worded in the form of a favourable but restrained message. Grīns pointed out that there were many shops and there was no shortage of goods in them, only they were mostly cheap and simple. He also pointed out that there were no private companies in Moscow, there were many tourists in the city, there was a means of transport that he had never seen

before – a trolleybus. Simplicity prevailed everywhere, while luxury and chic were lacking. Grīns mentioned that it was difficult to buy postcards and newspapers. He summarized: “Many educated and intelligent Latvians still see Russia as it was in 1919 or 1922, as they personally saw it last time. No, Russia has completely changed, it has a new, very vigorous state system” (Grīns 1940, 7).

In general, the content of the press routine imparted a discourse of normality to people’s lives in Latvia. Despite the dramatic events in Western Europe and in the country itself, the newspapers created an illusory impression that people’s lives in Latvia continued in their usual rhythm and that practically nothing had changed.

## Conclusions

In conclusion, in response to the proposed research questions, it can be said that the USSR implemented information warfare during the occupation of Latvia in June 1940. As the Red Army entered the capital of the state, the main communication channels of the time were taken over – telegraph and telephone. This meant complete isolation of communication and introduction of control over information received from foreign countries. This also meant control over materials received by LTA from the outside world and materials sent out. The representatives of the Soviet occupation also had complete command over the Riga Radiophone, with less direct control over the work of newspapers’ editorial offices. Materials prepared by the newspaper editorial offices about the occupation of Latvia did not appear in the newspapers themselves. Instead, they published only official materials that were coordinated with the USSR embassy or created by its employees. Thus, it can be said that the USSR controlled all the main information flows and thus the entire information space of Latvia.

The main informative materials provided to the Latvian media audience contained blatant disinformation. Therein, the relations between Latvia and the USSR were defined as friendly and the Red Army depicted as a friendly army. President Ulmanis and Latvian media leaders directly participated in the spread of this disinformation. Disinformation was thus successfully applied in the implementation of the occupation. The people of Latvia did not have true information about the unfolding events. They had to make personal attempts to distinguish between disinformation and truth. Presumably, at first many did not succeed in this endeavour. It was difficult for people to navigate the events of that time – both local and international – and to comprehend the overall picture of the world, as well as to develop effective scenarios for their actions and behaviour. By occupying Latvia, the USSR successfully used information warfare in addition to diplomatic and military operations.

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