

## RELATIONS BETWEEN LATVIA AND THE SOVIET RUSSIA, 1920–1922

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### ABSTRACT

On 18 November 1918, Latvian Provisional Government set itself the goal to establish Latvia as an independent and democratic country. Soviet Russia, since December 1922 – the Soviet Union was a country based on radically different principles from the rest of Europe. Latvia, like other countries, had to build relations with it, which became one of the most complicated tasks in Latvian foreign policy. The aim of this article is to outline the main tendencies in Latvian-Soviet relations (1920–1922) after ratification of Latvian-Soviet peace treaty in September 1920, the Baltic dimension and Latvian politics towards Soviet Russia.

**Keywords:** Latvian-Soviet relations, Latvian foreign policy, Soviet foreign policy, inter-war period.

### INTRODUCTION

Latvia's main tasks in the 1920s were to maintain its independence and security, to cooperate with the countries of the region (The idea of a Baltic Union, cooperation in the broader sense of the Baltic Sea region, which would include Poland and Finland), and to have mutually beneficial relations with the USSR and Germany. Latvian-Soviet relations occupied an important place in Latvian foreign policy. Latvia wanted to establish favourable economic relations with the Soviet Russia, while simultaneously forging contacts with the Western countries. It was important for Latvia to implement the terms of the Latvian-Soviet peace treaty of 11 August 1920. The question of the implementation of the peace treaty became one of the paramount problems in Latvian-Soviet relations. It affected

bilateral relations and engendered crises between the two countries, impacted the situation of Latvian citizens in the USSR, the situation on the border, etc.

Latvia and other countries in the region had to build relations with a territorially large, as well as politically and militarily dangerous neighbour, hence, research on this topic is essential and yields a better understanding of Latvian foreign policy towards its neighbours and the Soviet Russia's interests in Latvia and the region. It is closely linked to the issue of the Baltic collective security in the interwar period. Both in a broader and regional context, the issue of Latvian-Soviet relations is worthy of scholarly attention.

The aim of the study is to analyse Latvian-Soviet relations in 1920–1922, focusing on bilateral relations and their international context after the signing and ratification of the peace treaty. The tasks of the study are, firstly, to describe the main Latvian-Soviet relations in this period and the conditions under which they developed, secondly, to analyse the international dimension of Latvian-Soviet relations with an emphasis on regional security issues and, thirdly, to explore the Latvian policy towards Soviet Russia.

In the context of historiography, the monograph by Aivars Stranga on the Latvian-Soviet Peace Treaty of 11 August 1920 should be highlighted. In addition to detailed examination of the Latvian-Soviet armistice and peace negotiations, the monograph provides an insight into various aspects of Latvian-Soviet relations until 1925. The focus is on the relations between the two countries during the Soviet-Polish peace treaty in 1921, Latvia-Soviet relations in 1922 in the light of international events, the Treaty of Non-Aggression negotiations and Latvia-Soviet trade relations are discussed separately. In contrast, the 1920s and Latvia's relations with the USSR in the 1920s have been relatively less studied and often constitute parts of monographs or collective works (Andersons 1984; Stranga 2010; Stranga 1993). In his research, historian Andrejs Gusačenko focuses on the activities of Russian anti-Bolshevik movement in Latvia (Gusačenko 2022; Gusačenko 2020; Gusačenko 2019). In these studies, the author also touches upon the issue of Latvian-Soviet relations. There are several source publications which address different aspects of Latvian-Soviet relations in the 1920s–1930s (Jēkabsons 2003). A recent work by Polish historian is dedicated to the Latvian-Russian (Soviet) border issue (Materiski 2022), which is one of the key aspects of the relations between the two countries. However, this is the view from the outside with significant disadvantages, hence, it is particularly important for Latvian historians to research and answer these questions. Estonian historian Magnus Ilmjärv studied the topics related to the formation of foreign policy of Baltic states during interwar period (Ilmjärv 2004).

The current research is based on the materials of the Latvian State Historical Archive of the Latvian National Archives (Description 2 of the Eastern Division of the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Fund No. 2574), and the materials of Latvian press.

## THE BEGINNING OF RELATIONS

By October 1920, diplomatic relations between Latvia and Soviet Russia were fully established. On 20 September, Jānis Vesmanis became Latvian envoy to Russia, while Yakov Ganetsky took the position of the first Russian plenipotentiary representative in Latvia). In July–August 1920, Y. Ganetsky was involved in currency speculation in Riga, but Latvia accepted him quite promptly in order to commence building the relations with Russia as soon as possible. At the same time, the armistice negotiations between Poland and Soviet Russia started on 21 September, therefore Russia also did not want any problems in its relations with Latvia, which might negatively impact its chances in the negotiations with Poland (Stranga 2020, 139).

The first incident, which launched a series of crises in Latvian-Soviet relations, was connected with the activities of Russian emigres in Latvia, and with Soviet Russia's partially unfounded accusations that Latvia was facilitating the recruitment of soldiers into the "Russian Army" led by the leader of the White movement Pyotr Wrangel in Crimea.

The Latvian-Soviet peace treaty forbade Latvia to recruit soldiers for the armies hostile to the Bolsheviks on its territory. Since Summer 1920 the Soviet Union was informed about the recruitment of soldiers into the Wrangel army on the territory of Latvia, however, the diplomatic protest was expressed only in Autumn 1920. This caused the first crisis in Latvian-Soviet relations after the ratification of the peace treaty. Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs kept a calm tone in its communication, emphasising that Latvia was a "bridge" between the West and Soviet Russia, not part of a defensive alliance.

The real situation and the state of Latvian-Soviet relations was not as good as the representatives of the two countries tried to portray them in public. Shortly after the ratification of the peace treaty in Soviet Russia, Voldemārs Grīnbergs, Latvian official representative in South Russia and the Caucasus, was arrested in Yekaterinodar (Krasnodar) and subsequently shot. He was not accredited by the Soviet government, but he was acting as a consul, defending the interests of Latvian citizens and optants in the region, and his Latvian citizenship could not be questioned. This was a violation of Article 20 of the peace treaty. Five more Latvian citizens were shot in Petrograd (LNA-LVVA, 2574–2–17, 69). Latvia never received any

response from Soviet Russia about this incident, and it was only the beginning – the Soviet Russia continued to violate Article 20 of the treaty on a regular basis. Soviet Russia used the same “delaying” tactics with Latvia, as it had practiced during the peace negotiations, which showed that Soviet Russia was not interested in establishing normal relations.

Another escalation of relations began in May–June 1921 and continued throughout the summer. In May, two Soviet employees, Latvian citizens, were arrested for hostile agitation and espionage in favour of Soviet Russia (LNA-LVVA, 2574–2–21, 64). In June, Y. Ganetsky threatened to break off diplomatic relations. He blamed Latvia for planning to end diplomatic relations with the Soviet Russia, which was not true (LNA-LVVA, 2574–2–21, 80–84). Z. A. Meierovics, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, mainly focused on the non-fulfilment of the terms of the peace treaty. Incidents concerning the return of Latvian refugees, arrests of Latvian citizens in Soviet Russia and the evacuation of Latvian property were highlighted. However, it was clear that the Soviet Russia was not going to fulfil these conditions, hence, Z. A. Meierovics’ counter-arguments in June 1921 were not taken seriously.

## **INTERNATIONAL DIMENSION: SOVIET RUSSIA AND BALTIC COUNTRIES**

By 1920, the period of the “romantic revolution” was mostly over, and the Bolsheviks had to think realistically about what to do with the power they had gained. In Soviet foreign policy, cold calculation was combined with the utopian idea of a world revolution. (Nezhinsky 2004, 86–88). The Third Congress of the Comintern, held from 22 June to 12 July 1921, aimed at developing a strategy for a world revolution over a longer period. From this time on, the idea of peaceful cooperation with countries of all regimes began to dominate Soviet foreign policy, while remaining “under the siege of capitalism”.

During this period, Latvia tried to achieve cooperation between the countries of the region. The idea of the Baltic Union in 1919–1925 was to create a regional organisation of cooperation between states, based mainly on diplomatic cooperation, realised through conferences. The main obstacles to Baltic cooperation were a similar economic structure, disagreements between Poland and Lithuania over the Vilnius issue, and constant Soviet diplomatic pressure. Latvia was well aware that the idea of the Baltic Union was highly desirable and credible only in the public consciousness (Valdības Vēstnesis, 1921). Often, the idea of the Baltic Union was reduced to economic relations (Valdības Vēstnesis, 1921). Some Baltic diplomats and

politicians ignored the hostile attitude of Soviet Russia towards any form of Baltic cooperation.

From 18 November 1920 to 18 November 1921, the Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in addition to such tasks as the *de iure* recognition of Latvia and the signing of the Latvia–Soviet peace treaty, also emphasised the need to realize the Baltic cooperation project. When Latvia joined the League of Nations, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that only with this step “were also acquired all the rights and duties which a sovereign state can enjoy and claim” (Salnājs 1921). Russia observed the foreign policy of Latvia and the Baltic states as a whole, and tried to find a way to get involved in Baltic politics. After the Baltic conference in the summer of 1921, Soviet Russia proposed to organise a joint Russian-Baltic economic conference. Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and Finland responded to this proposal. This conference was held for the first time on 24–31 October 1921, establishing a permanent economic office in Riga, without achieving any specific results (Albats 1921).

The next step taken by Soviet Russia was to invite Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Finland and Poland to the Disarmament Conference in Moscow in December 1922, which can also be seen as an attempt by Russia not only to play a role in shaping the foreign policy of the Baltic states, but also to weaken them significantly. The Soviets demanded a fourfold reduction of the armies of the invited countries. As a response, Baltic countries demanded that non-aggression treaties be concluded first. This was not in the interests of the Soviet Russia, hence, the conference ended without results. Despite declarative statements about the need for Baltic cooperation and the Soviet threat, the Baltic politicians were still under the “influence” of victory and the newly gained independence. Their inability to find common ground only worsened the situation of the Baltic states and actually improved Soviet Russia’s chances in the region. For example, Estonian press expressed very naive view that Moscow had to prove at the conference that “it really wanted to give up its imperialist policy” (Valdības Vēstnesis, 1922). The Latvian government saw Latvia’s role as a “mediator” between countries (Valdības Vēstnesis, 1923).

In 1923–1925, the chances of the Baltic union were diminishing. During Baltic political conferences, the main topic of discussions was the relations with the USSR, West and also potential membership of different international organisations. By the mid-1920s, not only political circles but also the society were concerned about the future of such union. Poland’s arrogant attitude towards “small states” was also a source of growing concern. Relations with the USSR, on the other hand, were seen as broadly normal and favourable, which did not quite correspond to the objective reality (Aizsargs, 1924). The Soviet press spread the view that the union of

the Baltic states, whatever form it took, was in the interests of France and Great Britain with a view to weaken the USSR at the expense of the Baltic states: “These countries will do well, if they maintain and develop political and economic relations with the USSR individually” (Latvijas Kareivis, 1925).

## **LATVIAN VIEW ON SOVIET RUSSIA (USSR)**

Despite the Soviet Russia’s aggressive attitude towards Latvia, the government and the Foreign ministry continued to cherish hopes for a favourable relations with it, especially in economics. These hopes remained alive despite reports from Moscow, who stressed the importance of the Comintern and its tendency to influence the internal politics of other countries, including Latvia (LNA-LVVA, 2574–2–165, 21–30).

It is possible that in public the representatives of the Foreign ministry and government spoke gently about the USSR and the relations with it in order to avoid another scandal with representatives of the Soviet authorities, who often used any minor objection for their own benefit, thus exerting diplomatic pressure on Latvia. This is well illustrated by an example from the later period of Latvian-Soviet relations. In 1923, a careful choice of words and expressions of the Latvian envoy to Russia, Kārlis Ozols, was very well demonstrated in an interview. Ozols urged a softer attitude towards the fact that the USSR did not always (actually, never) respect the various aspects of the generally objective and adequate demands of the Latvian side. He justified this by the fact that both Latvia and the USSR for a long time had been embroiled in historical events. In the context of economic relations between the two countries, Ozols also drew attention not only to the mistakes of the USSR, but also to Latvian aberrations (Valdības Vēstnesis, 1923). Four years later, Ozols wrote in a confidential report to Foreign Minister Fēlikss Cielēns that “it is difficult to imagine really good and cordial relations with the Soviet Russia”. In his opinion, the Soviet plans were to start a world revolution and to destroy any anti-communist centres of the world, which was not possible. Ozols believed that the most effective method against Bolshevism was a positive attitude towards the USSR (LNA-LVVA, 1301–1–65, 18–19). Ozols’ statements characterised not only his own opinion, but also the overall position of Latvia.

The need for a policy of peace towards the USSR was constantly emphasised. While Latvia was ready to manoeuvre in its relations with the USSR, it was slightly annoyed by the failure of its neighbours to reach an agreement. On the one hand, Latvian politicians believed that “The Communist tactics are more familiar to Latvia than they think” (Latvijas Kareivis, 1925) while on the other hand, there was always a constant desire to confirm

that the Baltic states did not want to unite with a view to form any hostile alliance against the USSR: “Latvia does everything not only to make relations with Russia normal, but also to promote economic relations” (Latvijas Kareivis, 1925).

## CONCLUSIONS

One of the main aspects of the attitude exhibited by the USSR towards Latvia, i.e., attempts to preclude any form of united cooperation between the countries of the region, was already clearly visible during the War of Independence, especially during the liberation of Latgale. The Bolsheviks’ main aim was to reduce the expansion of Polish influence. Latvia was accused of planning a joint operation against Russia, and there were also quite visible and loud voices in Latvian politics advocating for a peaceful solution of the Latgale territorial issue. All this showed that, despite the obvious aggression of Soviet Russia against Latvia, a large number of local politicians at the turn of 1919 and 1920 still believed that it was possible to establish relations with this country on the basis of peaceful politics. Such illusions persisted after the War of Independence – Latvia sometimes mistakenly reduced all its national interests to economic cooperation with Soviet Russia/USSR. It would probably be correct state that Latvian political circles did not realise that the USSR was quite different from Latvia and other European countries.

Despite any domestic political circumstances, Soviet foreign policy did not correlate with the real interests of society and the state; more precisely, it correlated with the ideological and practical interests of the Bolsheviks. The goal of Soviet foreign policy in the region remained unchanged: to prevent the union of the Baltic states, especially with the participation of Poland. This was a concern for the USSR throughout the interwar period. Periods of “friendship” regularly appeared in the USSR’s relations with the region, but only at times when the USSR did not feel the need to become particularly involved in local affairs.

The failure of the Baltic Union was largely the result of the free will of the Baltic states themselves. This means that the USSR could have pursued any kind of policy in the Baltics – first of all, it was the Baltic disagreements that made impossible to create any union. Moreover, at a time when the USSR was preoccupied with the *de iure* recognition of its own state, the normalisation of relations with the West, it did not even take into account any proposals from either Poland or the Baltic states, but instead just kept promising what those countries wanted to hear. In the case of Latvia, these promises included the fulfilment of the terms of the peace

treaty and the conclusion of an economic agreement. Meanwhile, it must be kept in mind that it was important for the USSR to prevent any regional cooperation. If a functioning Baltic Union or some kind of alliance involving the Baltic states, Finland and Poland were to emerge, it would be much more difficult for the USSR to exert political pressure on these countries, thus risking its own interests in the region.

## ABBREVIATIONS

LNA-LVVA – Latvian National Archives Latvian State Historical Archive

USSR – the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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## LATVIJAS UN PADOMJU KRIEVIJAS ATTIECĪBAS 1920.–1922. GADĀ

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### ANOTĀCIJA

Latvijas Pagaidu valdība 1918. gada 18. novembrī dibināja neatkarīgu un demokrātisku Latvijas Republiku. Viena no Latvijas robežvalstīm bija Padomju Krievija, kopš 1922. gada decembra Padomju Savienība, kas izveidojās revolūcijas, pilsoņu kara un represiju rezultātā, kļūstot par ideoloģizētu un totalitāru valsti. Līdz ar to attiecību veidošana ar Padomju Krieviju kļuva par vienu no sarežģītākajiem uzdevumiem Latvijas ārējai politikai. Šī raksta mērķis ir akcentēt galvenās tendences Latvijas un Padomju Krievijas divpusējās attiecībās 1920.–1922. gadā, Baltijas reģiona kontekstu un Latvijas attieksmi pret Padomju Krieviju.

**Atslēgvārdi:** Latvijas un Padomju Krievijas attiecības, Latvijas ārējā politika, padomju ārējā politika, starpkaru periods.

### KOPSAVILKUMS

Kopumā Latvijas un Padomju Krievijas attiecības 1920.–1922. gadā var raksturot kā nepārtrauktu križu sēriju. To galvenās tendences iezīmējās jau miera sarunu un miera līguma parakstīšanas laikā. Galvenās problēmas Latvijas un Padomju Krievijas attiecībās šajā laika posmā bija, pirmkārt, padomju puses miera līguma nosacījumu nepildīšana, otrkārt, Padomju Krievijas neieinteresētība normālu attiecību dibināšanā un uzturēšanā, treškārt, Latvijas nepamatotas cerības, ka attiecības normalizēsies. Padomju pārstāvji regulāri draudēja ar diplomātisko attiecību pārtraukšanu, Latvijas pilsoņi bieži vien nepamatoti tika aizturēti un rezultātā ieslodzīti Padomju Krievijas cietumos, kā arī, neskatoties uz solījumiem, ekonomiskie sakari neattīstījās tā, kā to vēlējās Latvija.

Latvijas interesēs bija reģionālas alianses izveidošana, kas garantētu ne tikai ekonomisku attīstību un politisku vienotību, bet arī drošību. Tomēr reģiona valstu savstarpējās domstarpības neļāva nonākt līdz sadarbībai ar konkrētiem rezultātiem. Padomju Krievija izmantoja šīs nesaskaņas savās interesēs. Tas parādījās gan bilaterālajās attiecībās, gan Atbrūņošanas konferencē un arī pēc tam. Galvenā Padomju Krievijas metode bija attiecību veidošana ar katru valsti izolēti, tādā veidā manipulējot ar valstu savstarpējām pretrunām un nepieļaujot to izlīgšanu.