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THE GERMAN OCCUPATION OF LATVIA, 1941–1944.
SOME CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES
(Summary)

Keywords: Baltic States, occupation, the independence of Latvia, Holocaust, *Waffen SS*, opposition and resistance.

In general, the Nazi occupation of Latvia is considered by historiography as one extremely complicated and very controversial. German occupation replaced the first Soviet occupation, itself being painful and traumatic to the whole society in the Baltic States. However, those who hoped that Germany would revive the independent Latvia were disappointed. The sovereignty of the three Baltic States did not take part in Hitler's plans for the organization of territories in the East and from the outset, with only a few less significant exceptions, the Germans moved to eliminate almost systematically the elements that could have provided the illusion of regaining a degree of independence by Latvia.

One of the issues that have aroused the most controversy and debate in historiography, propaganda and not only on the German occupation of Latvia, or on the "German period" as it is called in the Baltic state, is linked to the formation and actions of so-called Latvian Legion, officially called the SS Legion of Latvian Volunteers. The history of this major unit, set up in January 1943, in a context where the collapse of the 6th German Army at Stalingrad was imminent, and the fate of war in the East was slowly beginning to turn against Germany and its allies, it is one full of controversy and mystification, of propaganda and false interpretations. It is certain that, despite assertions obstinately cultivated for decades by Soviet historiography and then by the Russian one, no soldier who was part of the Latvian Legion has ever been indicted for war crimes units, its units only fighting on the frontline against the Red Army.

Another painful and controversial aspect of the German occupation of Latvia is the almost total annihilation of the Jews in the small Baltic state during the Second World War. The Holocaust remains to this day the greatest tragedy in the recent history of Latvia. The cruelty with which the Jews were killed in Latvia, as well as the exact number of victims have not yet been sufficiently investigated, nor completely clarified.

Alongside these issues, the Latvian resistance against the occupation also remains, until today, a land of controversy. The use of propaganda by the occupying forces and the attempts to impose contrary ideologies, seemingly irreconcilable, along with falsification, demagoguery, intimidation and coercion, have made that any distinction between collaboration and resistance become extremely labile. But there are several

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elements that indicate the existence of a certain opposition and resistance against the German occupation in Latvia. Even if the number of those involved in the anti-German resistance is still, in turn, the subject of controversy, a serious milestone in this regard is the share of Latvian prisoners of Nazi concentration camps. The other movements, such as communism, for instance, that fought against the German occupier to restore Soviet power and not the independence of Latvia, rather indicate collaboration with an occupying power – the Soviet one. It must be emphasized, however, that the forms of resistance and collaboration have put so many forms, often closely interlinked, that a few new terms were introduced in historiography to more exactly describe the different types of activities.

Instead of conclusion, we can say that the return of the Soviets in the Baltic in 1944 was a real nightmare for the people of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Unlike the 1939–1941 period, when the Soviet occupation was done in stages that have given, initially, the impression of changes with relatively low impact and thus accepted by the citizens, this time the population of the Baltic States well knew to be consequences. In 1944 it was the Soviets' turn to act as “liberators” of Latvia, but at least for the period between 1944–1945, until the conclusion of military operations, the attitude and the general atmosphere in Latvia was dominated by expectance, by the wait for what was to happen.