

Transcribing Plays

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One would think that President Karlis Ulmanis is still among us. In post-Soviet Latvia, books and plays have been written, films and television shows produced, and musicals performed about him. In September 2012, Saeima (Parliament) organized a series of Latvian history lectures, the first featuring former President Ulmanis. As Latvia's last pre-war President, evaluating Ulmanis' actions in the last year of his presidency continues to preoccupy Latvians today. The continuity principle of Latvia as a state is closely related to the events of Ulmanis presidency during 1939-40. The legal basis for continuity is secure and recognized by most countries of the world. However, for Latvians, the question whether the right action was taken at that time, passively accept occupation or resist, still causes some stress.

In the fall of 2012, Dailes Theatre from Riga toured North America with Staprāns' play "Gūsteknis pilī" (Prisoner in the Castle) providing insight into the last months in the Presidential palace. Based on eyewitness accounts, the play reflects historical facts on a personal level. It shows the disintegrating mental state of Ulmanis under psychological and political pressure. Assessed politically, "Prisoner in the Castle" is a play within a play, showing how the Soviet Union orchestrated political theater to achieve Latvia's demise as an independent state. Staprāns play raises two issues: why did Ulmanis not resist, and why was there some support for Soviet power?

The geopolitical history of Eastern Europe helps answer Staprāns first question. After the First World War, Germany and the Soviet Union, traditional contenders for influence in this part of the world, were weak, unstable, consumed with internal revolution and major political changes. There was no desire or ability to project power to the rest of Europe. By the thirties both had somewhat recovered, offsetting and limiting each other's political influence in Eastern Europe. While the balance of power existed, Eastern Europe felt secure. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact ended this balance by dividing Eastern Europe into German and Soviet spheres of influence, thus ending East European security. After World War I the Allies had promised to defend Poland, but by 1939 would not do so, in part seeing a threat to themselves. German and Soviet troops occupied Poland within weeks. The Baltic States to the east and south were bordered by Soviet and German troops, the Baltic Sea enclosed their north and west, physically isolating them from the rest of Europe. Just like Sweden, the Baltics were neutral; however, Swedish neutrality meant selling war materials to Germany, thus ensuring a degree of protection. The Baltic States also sought help from the Allies, who denied it. Two neighbors from whom help might be forthcoming were Finland and Sweden. After WWI, Finland survived a bloody civil war and as a small country was unable to provide assistance. Swedish interests revolved around Germany and military help would violate its neutrality. The Soviet Union requested military bases in the Baltic States. In mere months European security was non-existent.

By the end of 1939 the Baltic States were on their own and this desperate situation was well known in Latvian government and military circles. Choices were severely limited: to submit to the inevitable or resist militarily. Latvia is situated on the European Great Central Plain, which

extends from France to the Ural Mountains, where natural barriers are few and territory is hard to defend. A successful military campaign in the Baltic States hinged on Baltic co-operation and a military supplier, which the Balts did not have. The Red Army, though not equivalent to Germany's Wehrmacht, used military tactics such as large-scale mass attacks. How long could the Balts stand alone against such tactics? If Latvia were to fight alone, the war would certainly be disastrous. If the Red Army won, reprisals would be bloody.

Finland is often cited as a successful resistance model. During the Winter War Finland fought bravely against great odds, but unlike the Baltic States, it has numerous natural obstacles and a land border with Sweden. Constructing the Mannerheim line of military defense, Finland was prepared for war and as well, received Swedish aid. The Soviets won anyway; in the following peace agreement Finland lost 10% of its territory and paid the Soviets significant amounts in reparations. But it did keep its sovereignty. As an integral part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the Soviet Union's intended takeover scenario for Finland did not vary from the one used in the Baltics.

What to do? In autocratic governance, decision making rests with the leader. Ulmanis was well aware of the situation: the insolation, Latvia's weakness, Poland's and Finland's defeat and the devastation of war. He understood the human cost of war; Latvia lost about a quarter of its population during WWI. All that Ulmanis had devoted his life to could be destroyed. The result of World War II was not yet known. Just as during the Great War, there was only hope for a brighter future. Ulmanis now faced major unsettling decisions. He retreats in the face of overwhelming odds, trying not to provoke or anger the Soviets, hoping that this will spare the nation. The enemy had to be shown a friendly face, resistance could be costly. Ulmanis famous expression "I will stay in my place, you remain in yours" was the result. Decision making was not easy. "Prisoner in the Castle" illustrates well Ulmanis' struggle, the doubts about the correctness of his choice and how heavily it rested on his consciousness. He appears isolated, impotent and mentally broken. Nevertheless hope did not wither. Even in the last days before Latvia's annexation, Ulmanis believed that the Allies would not allow the Soviet to do so.

The play's second question is related to individual and group readiness to support and serve the new order. First, individuals who support an invading force have existed in all times, so why wouldn't there be careerists and opportunists in this case? How prevalent wider public support for the new regime was, is questionable. Society is not monolithic. The Social Democrats in parliamentary elections often won around 30% of the votes. The Russian minority did not look as suspiciously at Soviet power as Latvians or the German minority. The Jewish community saw what happened to their kin in Germany and saw greater security with the Soviets. The May 15 1934 coup had generated opponents to Ulmanis. Support for Soviet power within these constituencies was not particularly high, but it did exist. Soviet propaganda and fear played a decisive role. Kirchenšteins, the Quisling of Latvia, is quoted as saying that "the real communists" i.e. adherents to communist ideology, were few.

A second explanation for support is psychological. Obedience and passivity in the face of overwhelming power is normal. This behaviour increases the chances of survival and may even

pay off. But this creates a dependence on favours from power holders, and limits individual choice to think and act. One can get used to long-term obedience and see it as "normal". One wonders if historically this has happened to Latvians.

However, looking back to the events of 1939/40, are we asking the right question; why did Ulmanis do what he did? A better question undoubtedly is what can we learn from 1939/40? These events show how a state can be subjugated without a military struggle and resistance, using existing public institutions, peaceful methods, public involvement, deceit, duplicity, and threats. This takeover methodology is shown in the play within a play in "Prisoner in the Castle".

Looking at today's Latvian politics we may ask is something similar to 1939/40 happening today? Russia's foreign policy is not very flexible; its basic principles remain the same regardless of regime type. Russia's objectives are expressed in the Diaspora policy, the creation of the Eurasian Economic Association and in its other public documents, pronouncements and actions: to include all of the former Soviet Union into the Russian Federation's field of influence, with a common economy, language, and values. Russia must once again be a superpower.

These objectives in Latvia are to be achieved using soft power. For example, the propaganda of the "large Russian market's enormous economic potential", Latvia's granting access to Europe for investors from CIS countries, and otherwise promoting closer economic ties with Russia. On the surface it sounds good, even desirable to ensure Latvia's economic growth during insecure times. But political power follows money. Latvia is small, and can easily be influenced by major investments. All modern empires (Britain, France, Russia, Netherlands, and Portugal) began with the expansion of trade, later evolving into colonialism.

The February 2012 attempt to introduce Russian as the second official language in Latvia failed, but ominously partly succeeded in Ukraine.

The Russian value system includes the Soviet historical perspective of Latvia's incorporation. Present day Latvia is not continuous from 1918 nor is it a "renewed state", but rather a new state created in 1991 and therefore must grant citizenship to all who were residents at that time. Latvian language media (Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze, Diena, and Latvijas Televīzija) participate in molding public opinion favorable to Russia.

Evidence of a second attempt to incorporate Latvia into Russia's sphere of influence is clear. This time, Latvians must act in a focused manner to maintain Latvian sovereignty. Let's learn and use defensive tactics from history to our benefit with a rational, non-emotional approach.