

A PLACE BETWEEN NATIONS: THE IDEA OF A LATVIAN-LITHUANIAN STATE, 1884–1984

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ABSTRACT

Deterministic tendencies in history writing favour established states. However, more states have been proposed than created. The idea of a Latvian-Lithuanian state, often depicted as a passing notion of little significance, provides a prime example of an unrealised state-building project. Emerging in a colonial context, the idea of a Latvian-Lithuanian state survived revolutions and endured wars. Distinct periods of activity are discernible, during which underwent numerous reinterpretations, transforming from a predominantly Lithuanian émigré idea into a nascent Latvian exile movement. This article examines the trajectory of this notion which subsisted over a century.

Keywords: Latvian-Lithuanian state, unrealised state-building projects, Aistija, public diplomacy, émigré propaganda.

INTRODUCTION

There is a critical distinction between failed states and those which are never established. Nevertheless, the latter are often grouped together with the former, deemed to be failed state ideas. While there are debates on precisely what constitutes a failed state, the term essentially refers to a situation where a governing authority has lost control of its territory and borders. Proposed states that are not established do not share this characteristic. Such “unrealised state-building projects” rarely garner the same attention as their realised counterparts. This is striking considering that more states have been proposed than established. For example, as of January 2024, the United Nations is made up of 193 Member States, though between

1816 and 2016, more than 400 states were proposed (Griffiths 2020; United Nations 2024).¹ Nation- and state-centric tendencies in history writing depict the past as a series of events leading to the establishment of present-day states, contributing to the dearth of research. The latter effectively constitutes a survivorship bias, wherein research focuses on examples that have passed through a selection process while overlooking those that have not. Susan Mumm identified a comparable survivorship bias regarding the “Whiggish tendency of the historical profession” in examining larger and more successful organisations (Mumm 2010, 54).

Following the First World War, the collapse of empires gave way to a proliferation of proposed states, with a handful of independent states being established in Europe after the Paris Peace Conference. Numerous European state proposals did not successfully pass through the selection processes of the peace talks. Retrospectively, these unrealised proposals were a combination of overt calls for self-determination from smaller ethnic groups (e.g., Aromanians, Bessarabians, Pontians, Rusyns, etc.), and federative configurations of national groups. The idea of a Latvian-Lithuanian state is an example of the latter. It is found primarily within propaganda and public diplomacy of Lithuanian émigrés advocating for an independent Lithuania. Despite the idea being rather prominent at the end of the First World War, in the present day it is generally thought that “a Latvian-Lithuanian union had no prospects in reality” (Jaanson 2000, 269) and that it was an “unrealistic idea” (Perrin 2013, 188). Perception of its potentiality is significantly different from what it was during the final years of the First World War. As such, the aim of this article is to outline the trajectory of the idea to establish a Latvian-Lithuanian state, tracing its decline from a briefly popular notion to relative obscurity.

TRAJECTORY AND TRANSFORMATIONS

As a distinct political notion, “a Lithuanian-Latvian republic like France, Switzerland and similar states” (K. [Šliūpas] 1885, 2) was first articulated in the Lithuanian American press in 1885, in an article by Jonas Šliūpas (1861–1944). Šliūpas, who emigrated to the United States in 1884 to evade the authorities of Tsarist Russia, was a prominent figure of the Lithuanian national awakening. The idea for a common Balt state is inextricably linked to his persona. History writing that addresses the idea of a Latvian-Lithuanian state has changed little over the past eight and a half decades. In 1939, Bronius Kazlauskas (1910–1996), cemented the idea within the broader narrative of Baltic regional integration: “The first embryo of the Baltic Entente can be found in the works devoted [...] to show the usefulness

of a Letto-Lithuanian Union” (Kazlauskas 1939, 80). Thirty-seven years later, Kazlauskas’ work (originally published in French) was republished in English and the idea of a Latvian-Lithuanian state remained the “first tentative steps to develop the idea of union among the Baltic countries” (Kaslas 1976, 119).² Scholars have reproduced this narrative, gradually supplementing additional details, though it remains depicted as a preliminary step towards region-building which culminated in the Baltic Entente of 1934. This association began already during the interwar period. For example, Estonian diplomat and politician Ants Piip (1884–1942) noted “the idea of a united republic of Latvia and Lithuania [...] advocated by several Latvian and Lithuanian statesmen” (Piip 1933, 175) was among the first steps towards unity between Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians. While the idea of a Latvian-Lithuanian state did become entangled with broader region-building discourses, it maintained its own trajectory.

During the First World War, the idea of establishing a Latvian-Lithuanian state emerged as a prominent component of Lithuanian émigrés’ public diplomacy. Šliūpas began writing about “the Lithuanians hope to attain freedom for the Letto-Lithuanian race” (Szlupas 1915, 96) at the beginning of the war. Before the war, Juozas Gabrys-Paršaitis (1880–1951), the most prominent Lithuanian political figure in Western Europe before 1916 (Senn 1977, 16), distributed propaganda from the Lithuanian Information Bureau in Paris stating the “*Lettons (Latviai)* [...] belong to the Lithuanians, considered from an ethnological standpoint” (Gabrys 1911, 5). In 1915, the first article in the premier issue of the Lithuanian Information Bureau’s monthly publication *Pro Lithuania* was about “The Lettish-Lithuanian Nation”, stating that the “awakening of the Lettish-Lithuanian nation has become a fact” and “the future will bring the realization of her national aspirations” (Seignobos, 1915, 10). By 1918, these sentiments were widely reflected in émigré publications. For example, the claim that the Lithuanian nation was composed of “Lithuanians proper, Samogitians, [and] Letts” (Bielskis 1918, 6) was commonplace within the publications of the Lithuanian National Council of America, who also expounded the merits of a “Confederation of Latvia and Lithuania” (Norus, Žilius 1918, 45–46).

On the understanding that “Lithuanians and Latvians form two branches of one nation” it was agreed at a joint conference in Bern in August 1915 that participants would “demand the right to broad national autonomy for the Latvian and Lithuanian peoples” (Gimžauskas 2006, 61). The idea had prominent Latvian supporters, most notably the poets and playwrights Rainis (Jānis Pliekšāns, 1865–1929) and Aspazija (Elza Rozenberga-Pliekšāne, 1865–1943), who each held the notion before they married in 1897 (Genzelis, 2007, 75–76; Kaslas, 120–121; Kazlauskas 1939, 81–82; Rauch 1974, 31, 107). The Latvian Provisional National Council

dismissed the prospect in 1917, yet it persisted. For example, in 1918 Šliūpas published his most extensive work on the idea, *Lietuvių-Latvių Respublika ir Šiaurės Tautų Sąjunga* (Šliūpas 1918). In 1919, Oscar Vladislas de Lubicz Milosz (1877–1939) advocated the “creation of a Letto-Lithuania allied with Estonia” (Milosz 1919, 4), and Stasys Šalkauskis (1886–1941) envisaged that “Lithuania’s alliance with Latvia would unite the entire Letto-Lithuanian race with the aim of achieving [...] balance between the Germanic and Slavic worlds” (Šalkauskis 1919, 232). The notion of a Latvian-Lithuanian state was sufficiently prominent to come to the attention of peacemakers at the end of the war (JŠA F1-74, 138–145; Baxenfield 2022, 46–48; Baxenfield, Rāndi 2022, 192–194).

Among the most direct examples of the sincerity some individuals invested in a common state appears in *Revue Baltique*, a joint endeavour founded by Milosz and edited by Latvian writer and journalist Arturs Tupiņš (1889–1951). On the cover of its fifth issue, a statement by the editorial board reads, in part:

At that solemn moment, far away, on the shores of the Baltic, the fate of Lithuania and Latvia is decided [...] Six months have passed since we first wrote on our banner the project of the Letto-Lithuanian federation [...] We gave this idea our intelligence, our love. We will give it, if necessary, our blood (Revue Baltique 1919, 1).

While a common state was not pursued as part of an official policy, traces of it remained following the peace talks. An example of this is a public image campaign to engender support for recognition of an independent Lithuanian state. One of the principal sources of information for the campaign was the public diplomacy texts that had been written during the First World War, many of which claimed “Lithuania and Lettland, once united and independent of alien control, would form a magnificent agricultural State” (Molis 1920, 20). Elsewhere, campaign texts betray traces of the place a Latvian-Lithuanian state once occupied. For instance, where Latvia is absent in identifying “Lithuania and Estonia, [as] the so-called Baltic provinces” (Misiūnas 2008, 127), or referring to Lithuania’s “northern neighbor, [as] Esthonia” (Misiūnas 2008, 105).

The notion of a common state was also preserved among members of interwar Latvian and Lithuanian rapprochement societies. The Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society (*Latviešu lietuviešu vienotības biedrība*) was founded in Riga in 1921, and the Lithuanian-Latvian Unity Society (*Lietuvių-latvių vienybės draugija*) was established the following year in Kaunas. Šliūpas was not a member of either society, though he periodically attended their congresses to present his ideas about a common state (Mičiulis 2011, 94). The primary purpose of these societies was to foster good relations

between Latvians and Lithuanians, though the topic of a state in common regularly appeared. Within the broader dynamics of forging a regional alliance, the idea of a Latvian-Lithuanian state, based on ethnographical and (often, largely imagined) historical arguments, was overshadowed by bigger projects and grander narratives that culminated in the Baltic Entente. Nevertheless, to some people, the idea of a common state remained an important ideal. One such person was Jūlijs Bračs (1909–1984), a member of the Latvian-Lithuanian rapprochement society who graduated from the University of Latvia in 1935 with a master's in history. Saulius Pivoras has connected the ideas of Šliūpas with those of Bračs (Pivoras 1996, 84–85), who “paid special attention to tracing and clarifying the common threads of Latvian and Lithuanian history” (Sudrabiņš 1984). The year before Bračs graduated, he published a book, *No aistu vēstures*, presenting a common Latvian-Lithuanian history (Bračs, 1934). The book is composed of two parts. The first part contains a series of edited and annotated articles written by Frīdrihs Veinbergs (1844–1924), originally published in the newspaper *Baltijas Vēstnesis* in 1885. The second part of the book was written by Bračs, in which he expounded that the “unification of Latvians and Lithuanians cannot be linked to Pan-Baltia or any similar union” and that they should “unite on a national and organic basis” (Bračs 1935, 205). Bračs viewed Latvians and Lithuanians as a single nation and sought to unite them in a single country, with one parliament and one army, named Aistija (Akmentiņš 1992).

The Second World War and subsequent Soviet occupation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania abruptly ended the activities of the interwar rapprochement societies, and their members were dispersed. Along with many other citizens, members of these rapprochement societies that survived the conflict were displaced through a combination of fleeing abroad and deportation. During the deportations from the Baltic states in the early 1940s, thousands of Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians became interned in Soviet correctional work camps, or gulags. In the fourth largest Siberian gulag, there was a “unique illegal Baltic community, Aistija, which operated in the Vorkuta 40th mine camp” whose members believed that once the Baltic states would “regain their freedom, they will have to unite into one state on the basis of a federation” (Vaičiūnas 2016, 15) in order to preserve their independence. They were led by Oļģerts Miza (1921–1992), a Latvian student and teacher who had been conscripted into the Waffen-SS in 1943. Miza also devised a coat of arms for the clandestine group who met in secret to plan for their future state. Vorkuta, however, was not the only place of Aistijan activity after the Second World War. In 1941, two months before the Soviet army returned to the Baltic states, Bračs escaped to Allied-occupied Germany, where he was housed in a displaced

persons' camp in the vicinity of Hannover. From there he attempted to revive the idea a Latvian-Lithuanian state. Elected as a member of the board of the Latvian-Lithuanian Unity Society shortly before the Soviet occupation, Bračs re-established both rapprochement societies within a single organisation, from which a nascent Aistijan movement emerged. The communal living situation of displaced persons' camps appears to have been conducive to his aims, at least initially. Reports on activities are primarily found within Latvian and Lithuanian exile newspapers, particularly within the organisation's own bilingual news bulletin, *Aistija*, published irregularly between 1948 and 1966. Bračs claimed that joint activities in exile resumed in 1945, though this and other claims he made are difficult to corroborate. It appears that Bračs began his undertaking informally, resembling what occurred in Vorkuta, and subsequently took steps to formalise activities. Coordinated activities appear to have begun in 1948, when the first congress took place and Bračs was elected chairman. By this time, the idea of a Latvian-Lithuanian state had transitioned from a primarily Lithuanian émigré idea to a nascent Latvian exile movement.

By 1949, relocation and emigration already created significant administrative and operational difficulties. Critics of the movement found it to be "an incomplete replacement of the idea for a Baltic Union" and "an outdated idea" (*Latvija*, 22.08.1953, 1). Nevertheless, Bračs envisaged a worldwide movement spreading out from its epicentre in Germany, and he continued to promote this idea until the end of his life. According to Bračs, following the Second World War, 22 chapters were established across Europe, reaching a combined membership of approximately 1,000 individuals (Bračs 2000, 14). These membership numbers are probably an exaggeration, more likely reflecting the number of individuals attending activities and events. As supporters of the Aistijan idea began to relocate, scarce information suggests efforts to set up new chapters were rarely successful. In a bid to unite Latvians and Lithuanians, Bračs introduced common symbols believing the lack of them had been a shortcoming of earlier unity movements. The utility of symbols was recognised by Bračs from the beginning of his exile activities. A coat of arms was devised from those of the Latvian and Lithuanian republics: the three Latvian stars, beneath which stood the Pillars of Gediminas. Though it is unknown if this coat of arms bore a resemblance to that which was devised by Mīza in Vorkuta, there is a significant possibility it did; Bračs had been utilising the symbolism of the Pillars of Gediminas at least since his 1934 publication which featured them on its cover. A tricolour flag was also adopted, comprised of white, carmine red, and yellow, which Bračs described as being composed of two colours from each of the national flags of the interwar period: white and red for Latvians; and, red and yellow for Lithuanians (HI S30442, 12). However,

it is not a coincidence that these colours match those which meet when the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian flags are arranged geographically from north to south. Contrary to Bračš' explanation, the flag's symbolism can be traced to a little-known resistance flag from the Second World War. The Aistijan flag, utilised by Bračš to represent Latvian-Lithuanian unity, came from a symbol of Baltic states' solidarity (Baxenfield 2022, 57; Silamiķelis 2002, 9).

CONCLUSIONS

Though a marginal idea, the notion to establish a Latvian-Lithuanian state has a storied history. With sustained interest linking two periods of concerted activity, it can be divided into three distinct periods: 1) the era of Šliūpas, 2) the interwar period, and 3) the era of Bračš.³ Throughout these periods, the idea underwent several transformations. During the era of Šliūpas, it developed from uniting Latvians and Lithuanians in a federated state to the notion of it being the centre of a regional alliance that would be a balancing force between Germany and Soviet Russia. The idea of a common state was preserved among members of interwar rapprochement societies, while it simultaneously became embedded within broader narratives of Baltic unity. An attempted revival following the Second World War, incorporating symbolism, met with a lacklustre response from the wider exile community. The idea never regained the same degree of interest and support as it had during the final years of the First World War, when it predominantly resonated among Latvian and Lithuanian émigrés, dissipating in the impasse of the Cold War.

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ARCHIVES

HI – Herder Institute in Marburg

JŠA – Dr. Jonas Šliūpas Archive

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¹ In addition to the 193 Member States, the UN has two permanent non-member observer states, the Holy See (Vatican City), and the State of Palestine. The precise number of states that exist is a complex (and at times controversial) issue. Two opposing theories of recognition complicate the matter. The constitutive theory contends that a state does not exist until it is recognised, while declaratory theory maintains that a state can exist without recognition, as an acknowledgment of a de facto situation. Declarative theory, codified in the 1933 Montevideo Convention, is the more prevalent in international law. According to the criteria of the Montevideo Convention, as of January 2024, just over 200 states exist with varying degrees of autonomy. The latter notwithstanding, the number of proposed states remains significantly higher than those established.

² After emigrating to the US in 1946, Kazlauskas adopted the name Bronis J. Kaslas.

³ This periodisation was first proposed in James Montgomery Baxenfield (2022) "From Here to Aistija: The Baltic State that Never-Was". *Diacronie: Studi di Storia contemporanea*, 52 (2), 43–60.

STARPVALSTU TELPA: LATVIJAS–LIETUVAS VALSTS IDEJA, 1884–1984

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ANOTĀCIJA

Vēstures rakstīšanas deterministiskās tendences priekšroku sniedz izveidotām valstīm. Tomēr vairāk valstu ir ierosinātas nekā izveidotas. Latvijas–Lietuvas valsts ideja, kas bieži tiek attēlota kā pārejošs maznozīmīgs nodoms, ir izcils piemērs nerealizētam valsts veidošanas projektam. Parādoties koloniālā kontekstā, Latvijas–Lietuvas valsts ideja pārdzīvoja revolūcijas un pārcieta karus. Ir saskatāmi atsevišķi darbības periodi, kuros piedzīvotas daudzas pārinterpretācijas, no pārsvarā lietuviešu emigrantu idejas pārtopot topošā latviešu trimdas kustībā. Šajā rakstā aplūkota šī gadsimtu ilgā nodoma trajektorija.

Atslēgvārdi: Latvijas–Lietuvas valsts, nerealizētie valsts veidošanas projekti, Aistija, publiskā diplomātija, emigrantu propaganda.

Kopsavilkums

Vēstures rakstīšanas deterministiskā tendence pagātni attēlo kā notikumu virkni, kas noved pie mūsdienu valstu izveidošanas. Tomēr vairāk valstu ir ierosinātas nekā izveidotas. “Nerealizētie valsts veidošanas projekti” ir saņēmumi ievērojami mazāku uzmanību nekā realizētie. Latvijas–Lietuvas valsts ideja ir izcils piemērs šādam projektam, kas bieži tiek attēlots kā garāmejošs maznozīmīgs nodoms. Izmantojot Igaunijas, Vācijas, Latvijas, Lietuvas, Apvienotās Karalistes un ASV arhīvu avotus, šī pētījuma mērķis ir demonstrēt nerealizētu valsts veidošanas projektu potenciālu, atklājot pagātnes aspektus, kurus aizēno naratīvi, kas centrēti uz nāciju.

Parādoties koloniālā kontekstā, ideja par Latvijas–Lietuvas valsti pārdzīvoja revolūcijas, pārcieta karus un pārdzīvoja neatkarību, iegūstot un zaudējot atbalstītājus. Ir izšķirami trīs atšķirīgi darbības periodi, kuru laikā nodoms tika atkārtoti interpretēts. Sākotnēji to atbalstīja lietuviešu emigranti, bet Pirmā pasaules kara beigās tas piesaistīja starptautisku uzmanību. Visā starpkaru periodā Latvijas un Lietuvas tuvināšanās biedrības nodrošināja inkubāciju idejai, kas pēc Otrā pasaules kara atkal radās atkārtotā mēģinājumā izveidot kopīgu valsti. Līdz tam laikam šī iecere no idejas starp lietuviešu emigrantiem bija pārtapusi par topošo latviešu trimdas kustību, nekad neatgūstot tādu interesi un atbalstu kā pēc Pirmā pasaules kara.