

## THE EMERGENCE OF AN AUTHORITARIAN REGIME IN LATVIA, 1932-1934

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Following the First World War democracy was in vogue throughout the Baltic and Eastern European area and there were numerous experiments with parliamentary rule. By 1939, however, only one state remained in fact an independent democracy; the rest gravitated toward some form of dictatorial rule. Latvia was one of those states which succumbed to authoritarianism. By 1934, various factors had exacerbated the problems of the existing political structure. With the failure of political reform in the spring of 1934, discontent within the army and the Home Guard (Aizsargi) was channeled by Prime Minister Karlis Ulmanis into a plan to overthrow the democratic political system. The plan was carried out in the night of May 15-16, 1934.

Before tracing and analyzing the events leading to the coup *d'etat*, it is necessary to consider Latvia's constitution and electoral law. Their provisions are important for understanding the emphasis placed here on political developments and will provide the background for the understanding of the attempts to alter, by reform or overthrow, the parliamentary system.

The constitution of the Republic of Latvia was adopted on February 15, 1922.<sup>1</sup> It provided for an independent democratic republic with the sovereign power vested in the people through its elected representatives. The president received considerable power but with the reservation that his acts had to be countersigned by the appropriate cabinet minister. The Council of Ministers was responsible, in turn, to the unicameral legislative assembly, the *Saeima*. This branch also exercised control over the executive in that the president was elected by the *Saeima*, and could be dismissed from office by two-thirds vote of all the deputies.

The *Saeima* was elected by a complex system of voting.<sup>2</sup> All citizens twenty-one years of age and over were entitled to elect 100 deputies by direct, secret, universal, and proportional vote. Latvia was divided into five electoral districts. Each elected its share of the 100 representatives in proportion to the number of voters the given district contained compared to the total voting population. Furthermore, the number of deputies assigned to each district was divided among the various contending parties on the basis of the proportion of the district vote which each received.

Any five citizens could form a party, and any 100 voting citizens could present a list of candidates for the *Saeima*. Since the parties were organized along class or interest lines rather than on broad political philosophies concerned with national welfare, numerous contending parties emerged. During elections, as many as thirty-nine parties sought mandates to enter the *Saeima*, and the majority of them achieved representation. In the four Saeimas, from 1922 to 1934, between twenty-two and twenty-eight parties were represented at any one time.<sup>3</sup>

Coalition governments were inevitable. They were highly unstable. From 1918 to 1934, sixteen ministries ruled the state. Their terms varied in length from two to twenty-seven months. The largest party, the Social Democratic, remained generally in opposition and refused to collaborate with the non-Marxists to form a governing coalition.<sup>4</sup> Because no agrarian or middle class party held more than a sixth of the seats in the legislative assembly, small parties exercised power beyond their size.<sup>5</sup>

While numerous cabinet changes may contribute to governmental instability, continuity in policy can be maintained if the same ministers reappear in successive cabinets. However, in Latvia, cabinet reorganization also involved a turnover of the majority of ministers. From 1918 to 1934, the position of Prime Minister and the ministries of Agriculture, Communication, Defense, Education, Finance, Foreign Affairs, Interior, Justice, and Labor were held by 94 different men. Eighty of these ministers appeared in no more than two cabinets and three-fourths of them held a portfolio in only one.<sup>6</sup> Quite often what dictated the assignment of a man to a cabinet post were not his qualifications but rather his party affiliation. Cabinet posts

were exchanged for a party's support in the *Saeima*. Only in this way was it possible to form a working, though unstable, majority.<sup>7</sup>

The existence of this instability led some national leaders to suggest changes in the political system. In the 1920's, the proposals encompassed either reform of the constitutional system or the institution of an authoritarian regime — as had occurred in Lithuania in 1926.<sup>8</sup> Similar suggestions appeared also in the 1930's.

In February 1932, the National Union deliberated the question of constitutional reform at its party congress. A draft proposal of changes was worked out and published in the party's organ. The draft proposed that the power of the *Saeima* be reduced while the position of the president be strengthened. The president was to be elected by the people, rather than the *Saeima*, for a five year term. He was to have the right to dissolve the legislative assembly and to force the resignation of the whole cabinet or a single minister. The *Saeima* could force the resignation of the cabinet but not through a simple majority vote. A vote of no confidence would now require the assent of two-thirds of the deputies.<sup>9</sup>

The efforts of the National Union towards reform were given added impetus by the Latvian Union. Formed in Riga as a cultural organization in 1868, the Union had been the center of the emerging nationalist movement. After the turn of the twentieth century, its political importance was rivaled by the emerging socialist movement but its influence on the Latvian middle class remained undiminished.<sup>10</sup> On August 28, 1932, the Union sponsored a convention, attended by 340 representatives of various Latvian organizations, to deal with political reform. The delegates supported the popular election of the president, and a change in the provisions regarding the participation of the electorate in referenda. These proposals were intended to be general in scope to facilitate the convention's Action Committee negotiations with the president, the Council of Ministers, and the *Saeima* on constitutional reform.<sup>11</sup>

The reformist activities of the National Union and the Latvian Union were opposed by other groups seeking more radical solutions to Latvia's political problems.<sup>12</sup> In 1932, the National Revolutionary Worker's Union called for the centralization of power in a head of state, and the replacement of the *Saeima* by a chamber of experts. The Latvian National Socialist Party, headed by J. Stelmachers, also saw the solution to Latvia's domestic problems in concentrating political power in the hands of a popular leader elected by the people. Similar views were held by the Economic Center, headed by Riga's City Commissioner, Emils Karlsons, and the Legion, a small organization headed by former Lieutenant-Colonel Voldemars Ozols and drawing its membership from the army and from those who had participated in the struggle for independence after the First World War. A more influential group having anti-parliamentary tendencies was the Firecross (*Ugunskrusts*). This group was formed in 1930 as a cultural organization and had a large following among intellectuals. Its goals, however, were political. It wished to eliminate the corrupt practices of party rule and the great influence of minorities in national life.<sup>13</sup>

Authoritarian tendencies were manifest not only in groups excluded from political power. Within the government, the overthrow of the political system was also considered. In 1932, the Prime Minister, Margers Skujnieks, the Defense Minister, Janis Balodis, and a Social Democrat deputy, Felikss Cielens, discussed the possibility of effecting a *coup* with the aid of the army. However, the army commander, General Krisjanis Berkis, refused support and the scheme was dropped.<sup>14</sup>

The movement toward reform or overthrow of the democratic system aroused some public interest, but otherwise, it made little progress. Interest group politics continued to be the dominant preoccupation of the political parties. This was particularly evident at the beginning of 1933 when the 1933/34 budget was being considered. The state budget had been continually decreasing since the 1928/29 fiscal year because of domestic and world economic problems. The new projected budget before the *Saeima* was to be 24 million Lats less than that for fiscal year 1932/33; a cut of sixteen per cent. Consequently, the attention of the parties was directed towards protecting the financial interests of their own supporters rather than towards using the debates over the budget to find general solutions to Latvia's financial difficulties.<sup>15</sup>

Like the parties, the government was equally averse to dealing with Latvia's domestic problems. While debates over the budget were in progress, the government pursued the nationalistic policies begun in 1929.<sup>16</sup> The Prime Minister, M. Skujnieks, and his Education Minister, Atis Kenins, introduced at the beginning of 1933 a bill which would cut off government subsidies to minority operated schools. It would also introduce Latvian as the language of instruction in all state supported educational institutions by August 1933.<sup>17</sup> The bill was aimed at reducing the cultural influence of the minorities, especially the Germans. This policy was in keeping with Kenins' declaration, in 1932, at the Democratic Center party congress that Latvia must have only a Latvian culture while no other would be allowed to exist.<sup>18</sup> This nationalistic measure had one further motive. It was to direct attention away from the country's financial difficulties and reduce criticism of the government.<sup>19</sup> Unexpectedly, however, the government's school proposal was defeated on February 3. The following day the cabinet resigned without the impetus of a vote of no confidence.

The resignation of the government created a cabinet crisis that lasted for seven weeks, until March 24. This crisis was compounded in March by a rumor that former Prime Minister, Karlis Ulmanis, was planning a *coup d'etat*. The suspicious activities of several officers, some of them trusted friends of Ulmanis, during the army's war games near Riga, aroused the mistrust of General Karlis Goppers, commander of the Vidzeme army division. He informed the Social Democratic deputy, F. Cielens, that Ulmanis might be organizing an overthrow of the government. Cielens passed on the information to Prime

Minister Skujnieks, and both agreed that the Social Democratic paramilitary organization was to be kept in readiness to resist any attack on the state order.<sup>20</sup> No *coup* took place. With the formation of a new cabinet by Adolf Blodnieks, the government crisis ended.

Party strife, however, did not end. International events were impinging on domestic affairs and there was no way in which this influence could be controlled by the new cabinet. During the last days of the Skujnieks cabinet, Adolf Hitler had become Chancellor of Germany. In Latvia the news was received with a certain apprehension as visions of a German "Drang nach Osten" were raised in newspapers.<sup>21</sup> Most disturbed by the developments in Germany were the Social Democrats. They attacked the new German government in the press and pushed through an anti-fascist motion in the March 17 session of the *Saeima*. This motion instructed the new Blodnieks government to expel all foreign fascists and close down their organizations. Furthermore, all Latvian organizations, as well as their publications, inimical to democracy were to be banned. Those specifically included were the Latvian National Socialist Party, the Legion, and the Firecross.<sup>22</sup> A month and a half later, the Social Democrats again attacked fascism during their May Day demonstrations.<sup>23</sup> In June they were joined by Jews in a boycott of German goods.<sup>24</sup> Germany reacted by placing an embargo on one of Latvia's largest export commodities — butter. For the government, the boycott and embargo complicated Latvia's diplomatic relations with one of her largest export buyers. Domestically the affair created difficulties for the government as it drew political support from many of those in agriculture affected by the embargo. The Germans soon revoked the embargo, but German imports of Latvian butter continued to decline.<sup>25</sup> Efforts by the government to negotiate a more favorable trade treaty on butter exports to Germany continued throughout 1933 and into 1934 but without any positive results.<sup>26</sup>

The Social Democrats continued their offensive against fascism in August. Although the Firecross had been dissolved in March, many of its former members united to form a political party — the Thundercross (*Per-konkrusts*). Social Democratic efforts to push through new measures against it failed.<sup>27</sup> Many middle class party deputies believed that the left's fear of a threat from the right was exaggerated. Those responsible for the crisis in Latvian political and economic life, they thought, were the Social Democrats themselves. Their opposition to political reform and the activities of their paramilitary organization, the Worker's Sport and Guard (*Stradnieku sports un sargs*), threatened the country's order and stability. Caught in the middle of this controversy, the government reacted by banning the Worker's Sport and Guard. Since measures had been taken previously against right wing organizations, the closing of the Social Democratic paramilitary organization would at least free the government from charges of favoritism toward any single political group.<sup>28</sup> The ban was, nevertheless, ineffective. The Worker's Sport and Guard reappeared soon as the Latvian Worker's Sport Union (*Latvijas stradnieku sportā biedribu savienība*).<sup>29</sup>

This right wing-left wing struggle flared up in November and December of 1933 and in March and May of 1934. Against the opposition of the Social Democrats, in November, the government arrested seven communist deputies for subversive activities. The next month, the left had its revenge by seeing the Thunder cross, its newspaper and its sister organization, the Fatherland Guard (*Tēvijas sargs*), declared illegal and banned.<sup>30</sup> In March 1934 the *Saeima* passed a motion instructing the Ulmanis government to discharge all state employees who belong to fascist or right wing organizations hostile to the state.<sup>31</sup> Two months later the Farmers Union party introduced a motion to dismiss from the government all former members of the Social Democratic paramilitary organizations. The motion failed to pass.<sup>32</sup>

This type of activity did not contribute to the effective operation of the government nor did it engender confidence in the democratic system. The constant party conflicts made it difficult for the *Saeima* to carry out its legislative obligations. More and more the cabinets assumed this responsibility by resorting to Article 81 of the constitution<sup>33</sup> which gave the Council of Ministers the right to issue regulations having the force of law between sessions of the *Saeima*. The loss of confidence in the system produced sympathy for its radical transformation among intellectuals, particularly academic youth whose interests were not always identical with the activities and aims of the political parties.<sup>34</sup> Dissatisfaction was evident also in the army and in the state bureaucracy. Both found parliamentary interference in their affairs arbitrary and annoying.<sup>35</sup> In the countryside, the agrarian population could not understand why they actually had no power or influence in cabinets headed by agrarian parties. This discontent infected also the Home Guard which drew most of its volunteer recruits from the rural areas.<sup>36</sup>

The inability of the parties to deal constructively with the domestic problems of the country revived the movement toward reform. In a special session of the *Saeima* on August 22, 1933, the Farmers Union announced its intention to submit a proposal for reform of the constitution which would give the president greater control over the legislative assembly and the cabinet. Two months later, on October 23, the reform proposal was introduced. It provided for the election of a president by the people for a term of six years. The president could dissolve the *Saeima* at any time and would have the power to force the resignation of either the whole cabinet or a single minister. Before a cabinet could assume the powers of government, it would have to receive presidential approval. Besides control over the *Saeima* and Council of Ministers, the president would have virtually an absolute veto over legislation. He could declare war or decree a state of emergency without consulting the cabinet. Furthermore, the president could temporarily abrogate freedom of the press, assembly, and strike when no state of emergency existed. Finally, to eliminate small parties from the legislative assembly, the number of deputies would be reduced from one hundred to fifty.<sup>37</sup>

On November 10, the proposal was accepted by the Public-Judicial Commission of the *Saeima* for serious consideration. It was inconceivable that the constitutional changes desired by the Farmers Union would not undergo considerable revision. The Social Democrats were firmly opposed to, any consideration of the reform project, suspecting Ulmanis, the leader of

the Farmers Union, of dictatorial intentions. The minority parties feared that it would eliminate their influence on Latvian political life. While accepting the necessity of reform, other parties could not agree on its extent and especially objected to the enlarged powers of the president.<sup>38</sup> To avoid the divisions over reform, some, like Prime Minister Adolfs Blodnieks, suggested changing the electoral law. By eliminating all parties with less than five deputies, the anarchic politics of the *Saeima* would be eradicated. Such a change would also be easier to carry out. Alternation of the electoral law needed only a majority vote while reform of the Constitution required the assent of two-thirds of the deputies.<sup>39</sup> However, the Farmers Union was opposed to such half measures<sup>40</sup> even though it gained the support of the Social Democrats as heated debates developed.<sup>41</sup>

Because constitutional reform encountered so much opposition, more forceful solutions began to be considered by various groups. Already in January 1934, one of Ulmanis' associates, General Janis Balodis, allegedly sounded out the attitudes of the Democratic Center and the Progressive Union on a "change of the state order."<sup>42</sup> The following month a plan was hatched within the Progressive Union to eliminate the *Saeima* in order to carry through a reform of the constitution. The scheme fell through when no definite agreement could be reached with the army on the role it would play in such an undertaking.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, rumors existed that the Legion, formally banned in March 1933, was also planning to overthrow the government; but when and how was not clear.<sup>44</sup>

On March 2, the Blodnieks government fell. The Farmers Union now sought to form a government with Ulmanis as prime minister. At its party congress, called just after Blodnieks received a vote of no confidence, Ulmanis indicated his determination to put through the reform of the constitution.<sup>45</sup> The congress decided also that in case the reform failed in the *Saeima*, it would be submitted to referenda until success was achieved.<sup>46</sup> The candidacy of Ulmanis was, opposed by the Democratic Center, the New Farmers and Smallholders, the Progressive Union, and the Social Democrats. For support, therefore, Ulmanis had to look to the minority parties, the Latgalian Christian Farmers, and other small groups. By March 17 he succeeded in forming a coalition and received a vote of confidence from the *Saeima*.

The reaction in the press and in the *Saeima* to the new government was that now the Farmers Union would seek to alter the constitution by force.<sup>47</sup> The prognosis was not altogether unfounded. It appeared that Ulmanis was already considering such a step when forming the new cabinet<sup>48</sup> — if the make-up of the cabinet and changes in personnel in other government and military posts are any indication. The key cabinet positions were filled by the Farmers Union.<sup>49</sup> The Prime Minister was Ulmanis. General Balodis was Defense Minister and, provisionally, the Justice Minister. V. Gulbis was Interior Minister and controlled the police and the Home Guard. In the latter, the Farmers Union had considerable influence since one of its deputies, Alfreds Berzins, was responsible for the organization and ideology of the Guard. He also had close ties with its commander, General Karlis Prauls<sup>50</sup>. In April, Ulmanis filled other key positions with politically reliable followers. The head of the political police, V. Ozolins, was replaced by J. Fridrichsons. General Krisjanis Berkis succeeded General K. Goppers as commander of the Vidzeme army division and the garrison in Riga.<sup>51</sup>

While these changes were taking place, the Farmers Union energetically continued to defend its reform plan. This did cover up preparations for a coup, otherwise, its efforts in the *Saeima* were fruitless. It was evident from the deliberations in the Public-Judicial Commission that the major provisions of the reform project had little chance of acceptance. By April the only proposals receiving support were for the popular election of the president, the dissolution of the *Saeima* by the president with new elections to take place within two months, the appointment of a cabinet by the president which must have the confidence of the *Saeima*, and the extension of the legislative term from three to four years.<sup>52</sup> In essence, the deputies retained their predominant power in the affairs of government. The revisions in the Farmers Union reform proposal now had to be placed before the *Saeima* for discussion. This was to occur on May 3. Because of the general opposition to the reform, even the revised proposals of the Public-Judicial Commission were bound to generate considerable opposition.

Faced with a watered down reform which was bound to encounter strong resistance in the *Saeima*, Ulmanis had two alternatives: either to submit the original reform proposal to a referendum as his party congress had stipulated, or change the constitution by force. He opted for the latter procedure. April 23 was designated as the day of the coup *d'etat*.<sup>53</sup> General Berkis and his Chief of Staff, Colonel O. Fogelmanis, and Adjutant, Captain Kalnins, were informed of the Prime Minister's plans. Others included were the commanders of the 5th Cesu and 6th Riga regiments — Colonel F. Viršaitis and Colonel R. Klinsons, and Colonel H. Rozensteins of the Army Staff. Neither the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, General M. Penikis, nor his aide, General M. Hartmanis, were brought into the conspiracy. The civilian participants included the director of the Interior Ministry's Administrative Department, J. Ansmits; the director of the Mail and Telegraph Department, B. Einbergs; the president's secretary, J. Rudums; and the Prefect of Riga, T. Grinvalds. The commander of the Home Guard was also informed of the coup, as well as his trusted regimental commanders in Jekabpils and Riga and the regimental commander's aide in Jelgava.<sup>54</sup>

Despite the preparations, the military operation was not carried out. Due to the indecisiveness of General Balodis, the Minister of Defense, it had to be postponed.<sup>55</sup> Another attempt was to be made two weeks later, on May 2.<sup>56</sup> As the date approached, orders went out, the Home Guard was issued live ammunition and instructed to proceed to Riga on May 1. Again, however, the orders were revoked. Balodis' doubts about the forceful step to be taken necessitated its postponement until the night of May 15-16.<sup>57</sup>



The issuance of live ammunition to the Home Guard just before the projected *coup* on May 2 had been observed by some Social Democrats in the provinces<sup>58</sup>—It was the first hint that something was being planned by the Ulmanis government. On May 3 another hint appeared during the discussion of the Farmers Union's reform proposal. The Social Democratic deputy, Fricis Menders, revealed that at a dinner in honor of General Berkis on May 1, Ansmits, the Interior Ministry's Administrative Department director, had asked the leaders of the Home Guard in attendance, how many men they would have ready if the constitution were changed in a different manner.<sup>59</sup> The implication was that the Farmers Union planned to overthrow the state order. This allegation was denied by its deputy, A. Berzins. Menders was merely exaggerating and distorting a remark made under the influence of alcohol. If there was any threat to the state, he said, it came from the Social Democratic paramilitary organization and from the speeches of its deputies.<sup>60</sup>

On May 5, the Social Democrats introduced a motion to dismiss Ansmits from his office. They added a warning that any attempt to overthrow the political system would be met with a general strike and armed resistance.<sup>61</sup> The Farmers Union replied to this move by putting forth a motion to dismiss from government posts all former members of the Social Democratic paramilitary organizations: the Worker's Sport and Guard, and its successor, the Latvian Worker's Sport Union. The Social Democratic motion was passed three days later but was repealed on Friday, May 11, on the motion of the Farmers Union. At the same time, the Union's motion was also defeated.<sup>62</sup>

From May 3 to May 11, the inconclusive maneuvers of the parties in the Ansmits affair were paralleled by inconclusive debates on constitutional reform. Of the revisions recommended by the Public-Judicial Commission only those calling for popular presidential elections and lengthening of the *Saeima's* legislative term received majority support by the second reading of the reform measure.<sup>63</sup> The third reading was to take place on Friday, May 18. By then, however, the *Saeima* was no longer in session.

In the afternoon of Tuesday, May 15, the Farmers Union deputy Berzins visited the staff headquarters of the Vidzeme army division. His objective was to verify that the preparations for the *coup* had been made. General Berkis assured him that all orders and details for the coordination of the army and the Home Guard were ready. At eleven in the evening, the leaders of the coup met in the Foreign Ministry to follow the course of events. Just before midnight news arrived that all army, Home Guard, and police units were following the predetermined plan. By 12:30 A. M. Wednesday, May 16, the government buildings, the *Saeima* building, the telephone exchange, the meeting hall of the Social Democratic paramilitary organization, and the trade union halls were occupied. The operation was carried out efficiently and encountered no resistance.<sup>64</sup>

As insurance against any opposition from the parties, a third of the leading *Saeima* deputies were arrested by the police.<sup>65</sup> The Social Democrats were affected most severely. Besides its deputies, from whom 200 weapons were confiscated, the leading members of the party in the provinces were taken into custody.<sup>66</sup> During the course of the day, their newspaper was closed along with thirty other publications. Decrees were issued abrogating freedom of the press and assembly. All political activity was declared illegal, and the *Saeima* was dissolved.<sup>67</sup>

With the government securely in their hands, the new leaders broadcast an appeal<sup>68</sup> to the people at eight o'clock Wednesday morning. It was signed by Prime Minister Karlis Ulmanis and Defense Minister Janis Balodis. It declared a state of emergency under Article 62 of the constitution. In the manifesto, the government tried to justify this extraordinary measure on the grounds of protecting domestic order and security. It claimed that the possibility existed of armed clashes between the Legion and other irresponsible groups, that deputies in the *Saeima* were threatening to send their paramilitary forces into the streets, that the people were embittered by the activities of the political parties and the *Saeima*, by the economic problems, and by the failure of constitutional reform. According to the appeal, the feeling of insecurity was widespread, and was accentuated by the rapid changes in international affairs. Consequently, the government deemed it necessary to take steps which would prevent the domestic tension from degenerating into a civil war. These actions, it said, were not aimed at undermining democracy, but rather, at strengthening it. They would create conditions in which the spirit and determination of the people, its unity, its economic prosperity, and its culture would be revived. The debilitating effects of class and party strife would be eliminated, and all classes and regions would be united with a non-party government in the reconstruction of the state.

In Riga the reaction of the citizens to the manifesto and the political change was favorable.<sup>69</sup> Business activity continued uninterrupted. By Thursday, May 17, the leaders of the coup reduced their security measures and announced the formation of a new government. It was headed by Ulmanis as Prime Minister and included representatives of all the major political parties. As the *Saeima* was dissolved, its powers and functions now reverted to the Council of Ministers until the reform of the constitution could be carried through.

The justification for the seizure of power as given in the manifesto encompassed politics, economics, and international affairs. For the most part, its arguments are not convincing. There was no real threat of civil war stemming from the activities of the Legion or other irresponsible groups. The Legion had been banned in March 1933, and its two leaders deported — one to Estonia and the other, to Lithuania. When they tried to re-enter Latvia, about May 5, 1934, they were arrested along with a small group of well armed men. According to the government investigation, the Legion's plan was the elimination of the *Saeima* and the government headed by Ulmanis. However, such a group was too small to be a significant threat to the state. Their armed action in May provided Ulmanis with the opportunity to justify the *coup* on the

basis of a threat from the left and the right and avoided the appearance that the security measures were a one-sided action directed at the Social Democrats.<sup>70</sup> Suggestions that the banned Thunder cross was planning an overthrow of the government have remained unsubstantiated.<sup>71</sup> The reference to the threat by deputies in the *Saeima* to send armed men into the streets was pointed at the Social Democrats. In the May 5 session of the *Saeima*, a Social Democratic deputy, Bruno Kalnins, had only asserted that any attempted *coup* would be met by a general strike and armed resistance. However, the lack of resistance to the military and police activities on the night of May 15-16 indicated that the Social Democrats were caught by surprise and had no real plan for armed action.<sup>72</sup> After the *coup*, the Ulmanis government attempted to prove that armed action was considered by pointing to the arms confiscated at the homes of several prominent Social Democratic deputies. During the trial of these deputies by a military court, the government was unable to produce any real evidence of a conspiracy against the state.<sup>73</sup>

Economic problems of the state seemed to have played little or no role in the decision to carry out the coup. 1932 was the worst year of the depression, but by 1933 the economic situation was improving.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, the depression had its immediate impact on products produced for export. Both agriculture and industry were affected by the closing of German and British markets, and by the devaluation of the pound sterling. To the Latvian government, the obvious answer to the state's economic predicament was development of agricultural and industrial self-sufficiency.<sup>75</sup> There was no attempt to improve the volume of export by bringing the value of Latvian currency in line with that of other European states. Yet it was this failure to go off the gold standard and devalue which restricted Latvia's foreign trade and, in turn, slowed down domestic economic activity. Had economic considerations been the cause of the coup, this devaluation should have been one of the main reasons. But the strongest parties, such as the Agrarian Union, the Social Democrats, and the Democratic Center were committed to maintaining the gold standard.<sup>76</sup> In June 1934, a month after the coup *d'état*, the new Finance Minister L. Ekis reaffirmed the government's intention to remain on the gold standard. He asserted that devaluation was of little significance in improving the economic situation of the country.<sup>77</sup> Not until 1936 was the gold standard finally dropped and the exchange rate of Latvian currency lowered.

A third major justification for the government's coup was the changing international situation in which Latvia needed to be strong and united to preserve peace in Eastern Europe and to protect her independence. Again, these reasons appear unconvincing despite claims by some authors that international events played a significant role in Ulmanis' decision to carry out the coup.<sup>78</sup> Regardless of the political organization of the state, the army was the only instrument that could protect Latvia's independence. Yet it was always small and could hardly resist the military forces of its larger neighbors. Moreover, a coup carried out by Ulmanis would not be well received in the Soviet Union. The Soviets considered the Farmers Union a fascist organization<sup>79</sup> and any seizure of power by its leader would only confirm that fascism was on their door step. Aware of this attitude on the part of the Soviets, Ulmanis apparently assured them that his policies would not be a danger to the Soviet Union. In reply, the Soviets agreed not to interfere with Ulmanis' plans.<sup>80</sup>

The actual reasons for the coup appear to encompass Ulmanis' desires for a strong executive and a unified country working toward a common goal. He was also dissatisfied with the activities of the political parties and their opposition to constitutional reform.

As a young man in the United States, between 1906 and 1913, he had studied agriculture, and was favorably impressed by American efficiency and initiative. In his writings on agriculture, he continually stressed the need for improvement, modernization, and unanimity in action in any endeavor undertaken.<sup>81</sup> Later, this desire for unanimity in action was transformed into a political attitude which emphasized national unity as the foundation of the state and demanded that citizens first of all serve the general welfare. The individual exists to serve the state and politics should, therefore, be based not on individual or class interest but on the interests of the nation and the state.<sup>82</sup>

Ulmanis was impressed also by the strong executive powers enjoyed by the president of the United States.<sup>83</sup> After the declaration of independence in 1918, *he* outspokenly championed a strong executive at the Constituent Assembly.<sup>84</sup> However, it opted for a weak president and a parliamentary form of government in which power was concentrated in the legislative branch. The subsequent history of cabinet changes, and the frequent use of Article 81 of the constitution by the cabinets to issue laws and regulations, probably increased Ulmanis' proclivity for strong presidential leadership. This tendency was reinforced in September 1933 when he visited Germany in order to recuperate from an operation. The German minister in Riga, Martius, reported that Ulmanis was interested in hearing from authoritative sources about Germany's domestic political situation. This interest, according to Martius, arose from the fact that Ulmanis did not consider the form of the parliamentary system as immune from alteration in the future. The organizations associated with the Farmers Union also had anti-parliamentary tendencies.<sup>85</sup> Writing to the German Foreign Office eight months later, Martius observed that Ulmanis had returned from Germany convinced of the advantages of the national socialist revolution for the rural population.<sup>86</sup> This did not mean that Ulmanis had decided already in 1933 to overthrow the democratic system in Latvia. The revolution in Germany appealed to him probably because party and class conflict had been eliminated from the political system, and a strong executive leadership provided a unity of direction and purpose for the nation. Furthermore, having been interested in agriculture throughout his life, and as the leader of the most important agrarian party in a country in which two-thirds of the population depended on agriculture, he could not be unaware that with a strong executive elected by the people agrarian politics would be promoted. In Latvia this had not been the case despite the fact that agrarian oriented ministers headed the majority of cabinets. The unstable coalition governments, and the opposition of the left and the minority parties, who favored industrialization, militated against this policy direction.<sup>87</sup>

When the Farmers Union presented its reform project to the *Saeima* in late October 1933, the influence of Ulmanis' thought was clearly evident. Its provisions provided for a strong executive with nearly dictatorial powers. As indicated by Ulmanis when the project was introduced, the issue was that of granting wider powers to the president and limiting those of the *Saeima*. On these major provisions the Farmers Union could not compromise. Yet, it was these major changes that were unacceptable to the majority of the political parties. By the spring of 1934 it became evident that the political system would remain unaltered. Although the election for the new *Saeima* was to come in October, there was little possibility that the basic configuration of the *Saeima* would change. The left and the minority parties would have sufficient power to block reform again because of the divisions among the middle class parties and their reluctance to accept strong executive leadership. The government in 1934 could have used the referendum to force constitutional reform but the mechanics involved in carrying it out, the time consumed, and perhaps uncertainty as to the results argued against using this procedure. Under these circumstances, Ulmanis chose to overthrow the existing political system rather than accept limited changes in the future.

Because of the resistance to the Farmers Union's reform project, the question arises as to why it was introduced. If there was little chance of reform along the lines proposed and if the government was not going to resort to a plebiscite, it would appear that more limited proposals for reform were necessary to insure their acceptance. One such proposal was the change of the electoral law. This was separate from the constitutional issue, it had more support, and it would have eliminated the numerous small parties which made coalition governments so unstable. The fact that they were not limited in character suggests that the Farmers Union's constitutional changes were introduced to force an unresolvable political conflict. The only means left to get out of the political impasse was to follow the course of action taken by Lithuania and Estonia, that is, to suspend the constitution. Because of the dissatisfaction in various sections of the population with the parliamentary system, such an action would not arouse much opposition. The favorable reception accorded the coup in Riga and the passive acceptance of the political change throughout the country<sup>88</sup> indicates that Ulmanis had gauged the popular mood quite well.

The suspension of the constitution did not strengthen democracy as Ulmanis had proclaimed in the government's manifesto of May 16. The active or passive acceptance of the *coup* merely stimulated the trend toward authoritarianism. Since parliamentary rule had disappeared, a new approach to government was begun. Again, as in 1918, the model for political organization came from Western Europe. The inclination, however, was no longer towards democratic rule but rather towards strengthening the power of the central authority. The model contemplated was the corporative system of fascist Italy. In January 1936, a corporative form of government went into effect with the creation of the National Economic Council and the State Cultural Council. Both acted in an advisory capacity with power remaining concentrated in the Council of Ministers, particularly in the hands of Ulmanis. As Prime Minister, he further consolidated his position three months later by also assuming the office of provisional president of the state until the new constitution was promulgated. By the outbreak of the Second World War, however, constitutional reform had not been completed.

1 The constitution is in: Alfreds Bilmanis, *Latvia as an Independent State* (Washington, D. C.: Latvian Legation, 1947), pp. 379-85; Osvalds Freivalds, *Latviesu politiskās partijas 60 gadus (Latvian Political Parties over 60 Years)* (Copenhagen: Imanta, 1961), pp. 197-206.

2 For provisions of the election law see Freivalds, pp. 197, 207-21; Bilmanis, p. 379.

3 Royal Institute of International Affairs, *The Baltic States* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938), p. 52.

4 To 1931 the Social Democrats in principle accepted collaboration with middle class parties. In 1923 they participated in a government for six months. There was some consideration to form a left coalition in 1926, but it did not materialize. After 1931 the Social Democrats refused to work in any coalition. See Felikss Cielens, *Laikmetu maina (In a Changing Era)* (Vol. 2. Lidings, Sweden: Memento, 1963), pp. 293-94, 431, 450, 451.

5 Voldemars Bastjanis, *Demokrātiskā Latvija (Democratic Latvia)* (Stockholm: Dr. Emils Ogrins, 1966), p. 135.

6 For lists of cabinet members see: Freivalds, pp. 64, 143-46; Georg von Rauch, *Geschichte der baltischen Staaten* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1970), p. 215; *The Times* (London), *Cuttings: Baltic States* (Jan. 1920-Aug. 1926), pp. 179, 277, 313, 363, 406, 435; *The Times* (London), *Cuttings: Baltic States* (Aug. 1926-May 1939), pp. 15, 73, 105, 161, 174, 208, 244.

7 Bastjanis, p. 135; N. Viksnins, *Latvijas vesture jauna gaisma (Latvian History in a New Light)* (Chicago: Draugas, 1968), p. 415, 432.

8 Juergen von Hehn, *Lettland zwischen Demokratie und Diktatur: zur Geschichte des Lettlaendischen Staatsstreichs von 15. Mai 1934* (Munich: Isar Verlag, 1957), p. 19.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

10 *Ibid.*, footnote 65, p. 20; Freivalds, p. 26.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 20-21.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

13 Freivalds, p. 127.

14 Viksnins, p. 433.

15 Politischer Bericht, "Zur innerpolitischen Lage Lettlands," 21. Januar 1933, Auswaertiges Amt, Pol. 5: Lettland: Innere Politik, Parlaments und Parteiwesen, Bd. 6, Reel 3506, E 632013, E632014. Hereinafter cited as AA, Pol. 5 Lettland.

16 For nationalistic policies since 1929 see: Chicago University, *Latvia: An Area Study* (George B. Carson (ed.). Vol. 1. New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, 1956), pp. 189-190.

17 Politischer Bericht, "Zur innerpolitischen Lage Lettlands," 21. Januar 1933, AA, Pol. 5: Lettland, Bd. 6, Reel 3506, E632014.

18 Hehn, footnote 51, p. 17.

19 Politischer Bericht, "Zur innerpolitischen Lage Lettlands," 21. Januar 1933, AA, Pol. 5: Lettland, Bd. 6, Reel 3506, E632014.

20 Cielens, Vol. 2, pp. 454-56.

21 Hehn, p. 18.

22 Bericht, "Socialdemokratische Interpellation," 18. Maerz 1933, AA, Pol. 2: Lettland: Politische Beziehungen Lettlands zu Deutschland, Bd. 5, Reel 3506, E631814. Hereinafter cited as AA, Pol. 2: Lettland.

23 Bericht, "Socialdemokratische Demonstrationen," 26. April 1933, AA, Pol. 2: Lettland, Bd. 5, Reel 3506, E631870, E631871.

24 Aufzeichnung, 14. Juni 1933, AA, Pol. 2: Lettland, Bd. 6, Reel 3506, E631886-E631890; Bericht, "Juedische Boycottbewegung...", 14. Juli 1933, AA, Pol. 2: Lettland, Bd. 6, Reel 3506, E631891-E631894.

25 Arnolds Aizsilnieks, *Latvijas saimnieciska vesture, 1914-1945 (Latvia's Economic History, 1914-1945)* (Sundbyberg, Sweden: Daugava, 1968), p. 549.

26 Telegram, 24. Maerz 1934, AA, Pol. 2: Lettland, Bd. 6, Reel 3506, E631927.

27 Alfreds Berzins, *Labies gadi: Firms un pec 15, maija (The Good Years: Before and After May 15)* (New York: Gramata Draugs, 1963), p. 133.

28 Hehn, pp. 26-27.

29 Bruno Kalnins, *Latvijas Socialdemokratijas 50 gadi (Fifty Years of Latvia's Social Democratic Party)* (Stockholm: LS-DSP Arzemju Komitejas izdevums, 1956), p. 264.

30 Hehn, p. 33; Politischer Bericht, "Innerpolitische Lage Lettlands bei Parlamentsschluss. ...", 23. Dezember 1933, AA, Pol. 5: Lettland, Bd. 7, Reel 3506, E632047.

31 Ralph Thompson, "Fascist Trends in N. Europe," *Current History*, Vol. 40 (May 1934), p. 243; Bericht, "Socialdemokratische Interpellation," 18. Maerz 1933, AA, Pol. 2: Lettland, Bd. 5, Reel 3506, E631814.

32 Hehn, footnote 166, pp. 44-45; Politischer Bericht, "Staatsumwaelzung in Lettland," 19. Mai 1934, AA, Pol. 5: Lettland, Bd. 8, Reel 3506, E632063. Hereinafter cited as Politischer Bericht, "Staatsumwaelzung in Lettland."

33 Cielens, Vol. 2, p. 496.

34 *Ibid.*, pp. 449-50; Bericht, "Nationalsozialistische Bewegung in Lettland," 11. Juli 1933, AA, Pol. 5: Lettland, Bd. 7, Reel 3506, E632036; Politischer Bericht, "Staatsumwaelzung in Lettland," ... E632061.

35 Politischer Bericht, "Staatsumwaelzung in Lettland," ... E 632061.

36 Voldemars Bastjanis, *Gala sakums (The Beginning of the End)* (Lidingo, Sweden: Memento, 1964), p. 18.

37 Hehn, pp. 29-30.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 30, 32.

39 Adolfs Blodnieks, *The Undefeated Nation* (New York: Robert Speller and Sons, Publishers, Inc., 1960), p. 222.

40 Berzins, pp. 138, 139.

41 Cielens, Vol. 2, p. 497.

42 Hehn, p. 42.

43 Hehn, pp. 67-68; Berzins, pp. 137-38.

44 Berzins, pp. 137-38.

45 Hehn, pp. 42-43.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 43, and footnote 158, p. 43.

48 Z. Unams, *Laiku atspulga (In Time's Reflection)* (Oldenburg: Loga Apgads, 1953), p. 10; Bastjanis, *Gala...*, p. 18.

49 Hehn, p. 36.

50 Berzins, pp. 103, 109.

51 Helm, p. 43.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

53 *Ibid.*, Appendix 2: "Minister Berzins on the coup d'etat of May 15, 1934 and the authoritarian regime," p. 67.

54 Berzins, pp. 146-47.

55 Hehn, Appendix 2, p. 67.

56 *Ibid.*

57 *Ibid.*

58 Bastjanis, *Gala...*, p. 24.

59 Hehn, footnote 166, p. 44.

60 *Ibid.*, footnote 166, pp. 44-45.

61 *Ibid.*, footnote 167, p. 45.

62 *Ibid.*, footnote 166, pp. 44-45; Politischer Bericht, "Staatsumwaelzung in Lettland," ... E632063.

63 Hehn, p. 38.

64 For description of the events on the night of May 15-16 see: Berzins, pp. 149-53.

65 Felikss Cielens, *Laikmetu maina (In a Changing Era)* (Vol. 3. Lidingo, Sweden: Memento, 1963), p. 11.

66 Cielens, Vol. 2, pp. 504-05; Politischer Bericht, "Staatsumwaelzung in Lettland," ... E632060.

67 Politischer Bericht, "Staatsumwaelzung in Lettland," ... E632057, E632058; Bilmanis, p. 81.

68 For the "Manifesto of the Government" see: Hehn, pp. 64-66.

69 Berzins, p. 156; Politischer Bericht, "Staatsumwaelzung in Lettland," ... E632059.

70 Politischer Bericht, "Staatsumwaelzung in Lettland," ... E632063, E632064.

71 Hehn, p. 41, 69.

72 Cielens, Vol. 2, pp. 501, 503.

73 Hehn, pp. 40-41; For discussion of the trial see: Cielens, Vol. 3, pp. 15-31.

74 Aizsilnieks, p. 582.

75 Royal Institute of International Affairs, pp. 145-46, 150, 151-53, 179.

76 Aizsilnieks, p. 600; Bericht, "Bevorstehender Besuch bei Ministerpraesident Ulmanis," 20. Maerz 1934, AA, Pol. 2: Lettland, Bd. 6, Reel 3506, E631923.

77 Aizsilnieks, p. 600.

78 Unams, pp. 8-9; Hehn, Appendix 2, p. 69.

79 Bericht, "Artikel Radeks ueber den deutschen Imperialismus und die faschistische Bewegung in den Baltischen Staaten," 19. Dezember 1933, AA, Pol. 2: Baltikum: Politische Beziehungen Randstaaten zu Deutschland, Bd. 1, Reel 3506, E 631643.

80 Kalnins, p. 269.

81 Paulis I. Lazda, "The Role of Karlis Ulmanis in the Formation of the Latvian State," unpublished Master's dissertation (University of Wisconsin, 1965), p. 30.

82 Hehn, p. 35; *Karlis Ulmanis: 75 gadi (Karlis Ulmanis: 75 Years)* (n. p. Briva zeme, 1952?), pp. 85, 174, 176, 183.

83 Lazda, p. 30.

84 Lazda, pp. 215, 217.

85 Politischer Bericht, "Reise des fruheren Ministerpraesidenten Ulmanis nach Berlin," 5. September 1933, AA, Pol. 2: Lettland, Bd. 6, Reel 3506, E031904.

86 Politischer Bericht, "Staatsumwaelzung in Lettland," ... E 632061.

87 Carson, Vol. 1, pp. 188-89.

88 Berzins, p. 156; Politischer Bericht, "Staatsumwaelzung in Lettland," ... E632059; Helmuth Stegman, "Aus Meinen Erinnerungen, II: Im sterbenden Parlament, der Saeima (1933/34)," *Baltische Hefte*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (April 1961), pp. 176-77.