



## The Price of Free Lunches: Making the Frontier Latvian in the Interwar Years

*Aldis Purs, Wayne State University*

This article examines an important shift in state policy in Latvia in the 1920s, uncovers the workings of a secret, extra-legal government committee and outlines some fundamental assumptions of Latvian nationalists working within the central state before and after the authoritarian coup of 1934.

Throughout 1919 and 1920 the national ministries of the newly independent Latvia, particularly the Ministry of Interior and the Army identified the Socialist left as the primary threat to the new state's existence. The lessons of 1917 and the war for independence (fought first against Latvian Bolsheviks and then against German adventurists) seemed to be that the Soviet state with its share of Latvian leaders provided an alternate or 'revolutionary' state to the 'nationalising' state model of Latvian nationalists (Brubaker 1996: 47, 55-78). Latvia's Social Democratic Workers Party was suspect to the Latvian nationalists at the levers of the new state because it was unclear which vision it supported. During the first elections to parish and municipal councils, the Ministry of the Interior carefully tracked the election of 'untrustworthy' elements of the political left. Only after the military front moved eastward into territory that was the home to few Latvians did government suspicion fall on minority communities. The election of representatives from minority political parties to the Constituent Assembly and their demands for guaranteed minority rights (both within the Assembly and in the League of Nations) pushed the central state to re-prioritize potential enemies and threats.

The attention that bureaucrat-nationalists bestowed upon minorities corresponded to potential irredentist claims of potentially aggressive neighbors. When Poland invaded Vilnius, for example, the Ministry of the Interior cast a wary eye at the Poles of Southeastern Latvia. Difficult border negotiations with Estonia and Lithuania brought some state attention to Latvia's Estonian and Lithuanian communities respectively. The state also warily looked on Baltic German, Russian, Jewish, Belorussian, and Roma communities with some apprehension, although Jews and Roma did not have a titular state of their own.

Table 1: Latvia's Ethnic Composition by Province in 1920

	Latvian	Russian	Baltic German	Jewish	Belo-russian	Polish	Other
Vidzeme	81.97%	2.30%	5.97%	4.90%	0.53%	1.55%	2.78%
Kurzeme	83.04%	0.76%	5.90%	5.10%	0.25%	1.33%	3.62%
Zemgale	78.27%	4.75%	2.34%	2.62%	2.17%	5.06%	4.79%
Latgale	53.46%	19.78 %	0.16%	6.10%	13.47 %	6.10%	0.93%
Iluskte <sup>1</sup>	39.46%	17.22 %	0.41%	2.75%	17.22 %	21.66 %	1.28%
Riga	54.89%	6.68%	15.75%	13.63 %	N/A	4.33%	4.72%
Total	72.76%	7.82%	3.64%	4.99%	4.74%	3.42%	2.63%

Source: Skujeneeks(1922: 223).

<sup>1</sup> Ilukste *apriņķis* is a part of Zemgale province but fits more closely into the patterns of Latgale province.



There were two separate attacks on minority rights: one from the centre and one from the periphery. Attacks from the periphery originated in municipal councils and local politics. Local Latvian nationalist politicians at times attempted to discriminate against minorities from municipal chambers. The discrimination usually revolved around underfunding minority education, the language of street signs, and denying non-Latvians tavern and market licenses. This discrimination alternated between being an occasional nuisance to approaching endemic proportions. Here, however, there was legal recourse; the Constitution and other laws and decrees forbade this harassment and minority representatives could and did challenge this discrimination through official channels (in court, national ministries, the floor of the Saeima [parliament], and the chambers of the Cabinet of Ministers). Minority communities also organized politically and fought attacks on their rights within the political arena by using their political strength to demand minority protection as a price of coalition building (nationally and locally).

The bureaucrat-nationalists in the national ministries, however, were much more successful and more insidious in their undermining of minority rights. The Ministry of the Interior particularly pursued a Janus-like policy. Publicly, the Ministry castigated local councils dominated by Latvian nationalists that overstepped the legal protections of minority rights. The Ministry, however, also led a secret extra-legal joint committee designed to undermine the position of minorities. The committee originally looked at a wide variety of plans to guarantee Latvian ethnic interests, but ultimately settled upon a subtle policy that attacked minority education. Historically, Latvian nationalists cherished the role of education in their national awakening, and remembered how Tsarist Russification policy targeted education to slow the growth of Latvian nationalism. The democratic rights of the Constitution, however, prevented any outright attack on minority rights. Still, bureaucrat-nationalists believed that by manipulating education non-Latvians could be transformed into loyal citizens, and perhaps even completely assimilated. The dilemma was how to tamper with minority rights within the constraints of the law.

The province of Latgale was particularly vexing with its large minority populations, its borders with Poland and the Soviet Union, and its uniqueness relative to the rest of Latvia. Originally, national ministries contemplated administering the province differently, and less democratically, than the rest of Latvia. The fear was that a democratic order would lead to minority control. The Ministry of the Interior toyed with keeping the Kerensky system of local government, and thereby diluting minority influence.<sup>2</sup> An *apriņķis* (district) government based on ethnic curias was also considered in order to guarantee Latvian majorities, but the plan was abandoned with the election of the democratically spirited Constituent Assembly and Saeimas.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless some towns were secretly denied municipal rights due to their 'Jewish character' (Kinklavs 1920).

Increasingly, the Ministry also questioned the allegiance of minority schools along Latvia's new frontiers, particularly in Latgale. Nascent Belorussian separatism, for

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<sup>2</sup> Director of the Latgalian Affairs Department [*Latgales dariņānu nodalīa vadītājs*], September 1919, Latvia's State Historical Archives [*Latvijas valsts vēstures arhīvs*, hereafter LVVA], 3723, 1, 573, p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> Deputy Director of the Department of Local Government [*Pašvaldības departamenta direktora vietnieks*], Letter of March 17, 1920, LVVA, 3723, 1, 311, p. 88.

example, seemed to sprout from Belorussian schools and teachers. The Daugavpils commander secretly reported to the Ministry that:

Traveling around the border at the end of January, I gathered the following information about Belorussian schools, where I found that the people still held out hope for Belorussian separatism and that you could find the source of this separatist hope in the Belorussian schools, particularly from the Belorussian teachers.<sup>4</sup>

Likewise, Polish agitation was seen to stem from Polish schools and churches where priests distributed anti-Latvian literature and teachers taught that Latgale was really called Inflantu-Polska.<sup>5</sup>

The Ministry of the Interior's, and the bureaucrat-nationalists', dilemma was how to combat the perceived threat from the minority schools within the system of democracy and minority rights guaranteed by law. The legal obligations to minority education seemed guaranteed. One of the state's first laws was that the language of instruction was to be in the family's tongue, and the Law about Latvian educational institutions dictated that minority schools could not be inferior to Latvian language schools (Ulmanis and Kasparsons 1918; Tschakste and Bitte 1919). In 1923, for example, the Ministry was forced to overrule a decision of the Daugavpils municipal council that cut funding to a Belorussian school because the protest went through proper, public channels, and the law was on the Belorussians' side.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, when a Polish member of the Saeima complained of illegal obstruction and harassment of a Polish primary school as contrary to human rights and the laws of Latvia, the Ministry was forced to agree.<sup>7</sup>

The Ministry of the Interior, and other bureaucrat-nationalists found their solution in the congruence of the poverty of the frontier (east and southeast) and non-Latvian parents' overwhelming desire to send their children to school.

By the late spring of 1924, key bureaucrat-nationalists in central ministries decided that the interests of national survival were more important than due process and equality before the law. The first Secret Committee met on May 7, 1924, with representatives from most prominent ministries. The Interior Ministry led the committee, but it was always organized in a logical, bureaucratic sense with representation from many ministries. The Committee's (initially named the 'Joint Committee for Bringing the Border Zone Economically and Culturally Closer to the Rest of Latvia') inaugural session was attended by: A. Birznieks (Minister of Interior), A. Dzenis (Deputy Minister of Interior), E. Bauers (Minister of Agriculture), J. Jaunzems (Deputy Minister of Education), J. Zankevics (Director of the Department of Local Government), H. Dzelzītis (Supervisor of the State Land Bank), and V. Ludins (Chairman of the Commission on State War

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<sup>4</sup> Commander of Daugavpils District [*Daugavpils aprinā priekšnieks*], secret letter of February 11, 1925, LVVA, 3723, 1, 1991, p. 57.

<sup>5</sup> Report of April 15, 1924, LVVA, 3723, 1, 1991, p. 164.

<sup>6</sup> A. Jakubniekis, Letter to the Interior Ministry, January 28, 1923, LVVA, 3723, 2, 149, p. 87. Here the initiative to close the schools came from the Russian school representatives.

<sup>7</sup> Deputy of the *Saeima*, Letter of March 14, 1924, LVVA, 3723, 1, 1991, p. 162.



Losses).<sup>8</sup> The Minister of the Interior opened the Committee by stating the aims of the Secret Committee were:

to discuss all means that could be taken to bring the outskirts of the country closer to the state economically and national-culturally, and to already work out concrete plans that could be executed in the near future.

The Committee initially considered plans for colonising the border belt with Latvian farmers; using land reform as an agent to give ethnic Latvians land near the border, and minorities land in predominantly Latvian districts in western Latvia. In this first session, J. Zankevics of the Department of Local Government took a soft line, suggesting emissaries could be sent to the border propagandising for the Latvian State stressing the poor conditions in Soviet Russia and Poland. Nevertheless, the focus of the meeting was rural colonisation and potential urban colonisation as well.<sup>9</sup>

Less than three weeks later the Joint Committee reconvened, and the Ministry of the Interior was firmly in the driver's seat; Department of Local Government Director Zankevics outlined a detailed financial plan of the expenditures needed to make the border zone an attractive area for potential Latvian settlers. Schools, parish buildings, and roads had to be built, while generous financial support would have to be provided to school children and instructors. The total was over 750,000 Lats, 400,000 Lats for 1924 alone. The monetary costs initially dampened the bureaucrat-nationalists' enthusiasm. Francis Trasuns, the leader of Latgalian Latvians in the Saeima, questioned if the project was even possible. Trasuns' participation in the Committee underlined a constant theme through the committee's lifetime: parliamentary deputies frequently worked with the bureaucrat nationalists within the Committee in a manner quite opposite their public persona. Trasuns' doubts, however, may have planted the seeds for the ultimate transformation of the committee's work away from colonisation toward education. Trasuns lamented:

Border zone schools with Latvian as the language of instruction cannot be materially similar to the minority schools, but Latvian schools have to be of a higher quality. I doubt that with the budgeted 500,000 Lats it will be possible to reach a tangible solution to the question of the border zone.<sup>10</sup>

The solution was discovered during a routine perusal of the minutes of a parish government employees' conference in the fall of 1924. The district of Talsi was one of the most ethnically Latvian districts in all of Latvia, but was grappling with poverty caused by the war. The local politicians and governmental employees faced chronic absenteeism in schools, and realised that students were not attending simply due to poverty. During agricultural seasons almost all children stayed on the farm, but through the rest of the year many parents could not afford to provide a week's worth of groceries

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<sup>8</sup> Minutes of the Joint Committee for Bringing the Border Zone Economically and Culturally Closer to the Rest of Latvia (hereafter Joint Committee) [*Starpresoru apspriede par pierobežas joslas saimniecisku un kultūrçlu tuvināšanu parejai Latvijai, protokols*], May 7, 1924, LVVA, 3723, 1, 543, pp. 4-5.

<sup>9</sup> The chairman of the Commission for State War Losses was particularly keen to take city property from minorities and hand it over to Latvians as well. He stressed the necessity of not allowing more minorities into the area, probably a veiled reference to the unofficial policy of making it more difficult for non-Latvian refugees to return to Latvia.

<sup>10</sup> Joint Committee minutes, May 26, 1924, LVVA, 3723, 1, 543, pp. 10-11.

for their children to take to school.<sup>11</sup> Local government responded by subsidising free school lunches and dormitories. Attendance rose substantially.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout 1924 and 1925 the move to provide free lunches and beds accelerated through the wealthiest parishes of Latvia, but the central state decided against legislating free lunches nationally. J. Zankevics, the Director of the Department of Local Government, and the Director of the Section for Rural Local Government, P. Klinklavs, realised that free lunches could give Latvian schools a comparative advantage over minority schools in the Border zone region. Consistently, P. Klinklavs answered requests about free lunches from Latgale and the apriõis of Ilukste by denying any financial support from the central state, but slyly adding that free lunches could be provided if they were funded locally. Klinklavs understood the region's chronic poverty and inability to provide universal free lunches, but he imagined the Joint Committee could secretly and illegally funnel money to Latvian schools for a free lunch programme that would give them the needed comparative edge over minority schools.

By the summer of 1925, the free lunch programme [kopçdināšana] was successfully test run in a few isolated spots, and the Vice Director of Schools and the Director of the Department of Local Government drew up plans for implementation in a further twenty-five schools. The Committee was renamed the Joint Committee of National Border Zone Politics, but several of its members were not yet convinced of the merits of free lunches. The Chairman of the Department of the State Budget, J. Bensons, particularly advocated colonisation as the only 'guaranteed' solution for the security of the frontier. He stressed that budgets were thin and may disappear, whereas gifts of land to reliable Latvian farmers could create a class of ethnic 'Latvian Cossacks.' He further doubted the permanent effect of free lunches: free lunches will give nothing permanent, because foreigners will only be nationalists as long as they are well-fed, and afterwards not'.<sup>13</sup> Throughout several Committee sessions, J. Bensons, continued to propose different forms of colonisation as the only solution.

J. Zankevics, however, defended the free lunch programme and won the support of the majority of the Joint Committee with the rejoinder that economical colonisation plans could still be considered in the future.<sup>14</sup> Zankevics admitted that colonisation theoretically was the best option, but that its drawbacks were its costs, and its long-term nature. He continued:

Therefore we have to do that which are conditions allow. The Interior Ministry has reviewed the progress of free lunches, and its results already live up to the high hopes placed on them. In some places minority children have fled from their

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<sup>11</sup> See unpublished diary and memoirs of Līze Rungains in which this system is carefully explained. Most students were too far from their homes to travel to and from school daily, and had to board at the school the whole week. The expense of groceries and boards was too much for many peasant families, and the largest hindrance to mass education.

<sup>12</sup> Minutes of the Conference of Parish Representatives of the District of Talsi [*Talsu apriõia pagasta paðvaldību priekõtāvju apspriedes protokols*], October 15, 1924, LVVA, 3723, 1, 597, p. 17.

<sup>13</sup> Joint Committee minutes (now called Joint Committee on Border Zone National Politics) [*Nacionālas pierobež u politikas starpresoru komisijas*], June 30, 1925, LVVA, 3723, 1, 543, pp. 36-39. Bensons specifically referred to these colonists as 'Latvian Cossacks.'

<sup>14</sup> He suggested a plan to found agricultural and technical schools first in Russian and gradually shift them to Latvian, a plan to build roads half to improve the local economy but also for military advantage, and a plan of awards to motivate the 'naturally lazy, and indolent Russian'.



schools to Latvian schools. From what we give to these children we will reap much more in fostering national support, than we could with older, grown up minorities with many more resources. In a few years time we can strongly change children's' direction in our favour.

The crux of the effectiveness of the free lunch programme was the congruence of poverty along the border, Polish, Belorussian, and Russian parents' desires to educate their children, and a minority education law that allowed for minority schools where there were substantial minority concentrations, and the schools were well attended. The free lunch, which was budgeted at 20 santimes a day per student, but was often provided for as little as 8 santimes a day could be nothing more than hot tea and bread, but even this made a difference. Parents wanted to educate their children, but the cost of providing food for them while they attended school was often prohibitive. With the free lunch programme, this obstacle was removed, but the price of the free lunch was attending Latvian schools. As Latvian school attendance increased, minority school attendance decreased proportionately and when attendance fell below the needed minimum, the minority school was closed. Usually, an intermediate step first occurred in which the minority school was closed, but due to the continued concentration of non-Latvians, a mixed ethnic school would be opened whose primary language of instruction was, nevertheless, Latvian.

By the spring of 1926, J. Zankevics reported to the Joint Committee that the programme was working well, but some minority communities were frantically trying to stave off its effectiveness. In two apriõii, Ilukste and Jaunlatgale, several Polish grade schools had closed already, but Germans had responded by raising money privately to provide free lunches at their schools (Hiden 1987: 41, 51-53, 190-191). This type of private initiative shielded the relatively affluent German schools and urban Jewish schools from the effects of the free lunch programme. Raising money, however, was not an option for poverty-stricken Russian, Belorussian, and Polish communities.<sup>15</sup> Zankevics believed that these free lunches would, with time, 'take the sharpness' off of the minority question because the children affected would become a privileged clique that knew Latvian and their own mother tongue and could therefore work as loyal intermediaries with the Latvian State. He seemed to not believe in (or hope for) complete assimilation.

While many of the Joint Committee sessions became routine presentations of progress reports, with identifications of potential obstacles, the session of March 29, 1926 became a discussion of the *raison d'être* behind the free lunch programme. Although J. Zankevics maintained a pragmatic view that the programme would soften the minority question, other members of the Committee hoped that the programme would work miracles. A Vice-Director of the Schools Department, Zalits, saw free lunches as a solution to the most vexing concern of 'blood nationalists'; through the programme, the hearts, minds and souls of Latvians who had strayed could be won back. The bureaucrat-nationalist of Zalits' stripe could not believe that Latvia had so many minorities, and believed that successful Russification had converted many Latvians to 'mistaken' Slavic identities. Zalits described the direction of ethnic identity in Latgale as very unclear and cited the many children in Polish and Belorussian schools with Latvian sounding surnames. In his

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<sup>15</sup> Zankevics alleged that some Polish communities received money from Poland. If Polish funds were funneled to Polish schools, they were much less effective than German money to German schools.

opinion: 'our task is to save these Polonised and Russified children. If in their third year they start learning Latvian, then later they will feel Latvian'.

The Deputy Minister of the Interior, Velkme further interjected that the free lunch programme could actually create Latvians. Velkme boasted that in the Daugavpils apriņņis most Polish schools had closed even though many Poles lived in the apriņņis. He believed new efforts should target the Belorussian schools as well. Velkme further resuscitated the idea of colonisation, but now without aid. He argued that Latvians would move to the border zone without any aid, and that with time the area would become Latvian, by both colonisation and the free lunch programme. Velkme, unlike Zalits, did not see nationality as a question of blood, but conscious choice; minority students who took advantage of the free lunch programme would speak Latvian, they would start reading Latvian newspapers, and then for all practical purposes they would be Latvian.<sup>16</sup>

The session ended with concerns about the future. The Cabinet of Ministers was supportive of the programme and next year's budget was finalised, but parliamentary elections loomed the next year. Committee members worried that it would be increasingly more difficult to shield the activities of the secret Joint Committee from the eyes of minority politicians.

The secretive and criminal nature of the Joint Committee's work became a dominant theme in several following sessions. In October of 1926, for example, the Committee met to approve the budget for the following academic year and devised new methods for distributing funds to local schools. Zankevics, again, opened the meeting with the bottom line outlining how much was needed per student, per day, and announcing the budget had again increased, now at 96,000 Lats for the year. He warned that the Committee could not too aggressively expand the programme fearing that minority politicians may catch them in the act. The other Committee members, however, ignored his warnings and planned extensive expansion to more schools. Zankevics quickly brought them down to Earth, and blatantly identified the nature of the operation. He said:

The general parish budget consists of sums that are divided among all nationalities. We can not openly tell local governments about resources set aside for free lunches, because then we would also have to give money to minority schools, and that after all is not our idea. Therefore it is secrecy that ties our hands when it comes to finding resources. If we want to bring in the national principle, then at this time there is nothing else we can do..<sup>17</sup>

The Deputy Minister of the Interior Velkme, reiterated Zankevics' points, and mentioned that minority groups had gone beyond mere suspicion. Although some minority schools tried to match free lunches, a Belorussian complaint was also sent to the League of Nations. The complaint was not completely accurate; the Belorussians complained that local governments were not enforcing the national education laws. Of course, national ministries themselves had subverted these laws and often circumvented local governments in the process. The League ignored the petition; throughout the inter-war

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<sup>16</sup> The concerns and aspirations of the individuals involved in the free lunch programme largely reflected the individual's own idea of ethnic identity. They feared schoolteachers because teachers had been active agents in Latvian nationalism. They also identified newspapers, another important defining medium for themselves.

<sup>17</sup> Minutes of the Joint Committee, October 26, 1926, LVVA, 3723, 1, 543, pp. 47-49.



years the League's attention towards minorities was almost solely focused on Germans and Poles in Western Poland.<sup>18</sup> The bullet had been dodged, but Velkme stressed that the Committee had to deal personally with sympathetic officials in school administrations and local government more carefully.

The first Joint Committee meeting of 1927 brought a new twist – a new initiate to the conspiracy. M. Maike replaced the earlier representative of the State Comptroller's office and naively asked what the Committee did. Zankevics' reply almost had a hint of gleeful relish and bravado, but the long reply is particularly insightful. Zankevics outlined the work of the programme specifically:

You can surely say that the expenditures for the free lunches return several times, and cannot be appraised even in gold. With relatively minute sources we have accomplished much. First and most importantly in the national sense this work gives us the best and safest returns: minority children flood into Latvian schools where there are free lunches, and because of this many minority schools have closed. The continuation and expansion of the free lunch programme promises even greater rewards. Secondly, thanks to the free lunches schools are much better attended. And free lunches have bettered children's' health.<sup>19</sup>

Zankevics continued to describe the programme. Zankevics who in his public persona tirelessly pressed local governments to save every last santims on their local budgets said that 'there was no reason to try to save the state a mere 5,000 Lats' by supervising the programme more closely. Accounting, however, was becoming increasingly more difficult for the Joint Committee as minority schools asked for detailed receipts from Latvian schools that were able to offer free lunches. Furthermore, a few secret reports to sympathetic nationalist teachers had been uncovered and published; but the programme again weathered these mild controversies.

The main reason the Joint Committee was immune to scandal was its considerable and consistent support from across the Latvian political spectrum. Traditional interpretations of inter-war Latvia describe governmental paralysis caused by frequent cabinet shuffles.<sup>20</sup> The members of the Joint Committee, however, were primarily not elected officials, but bureaucrats. These bureaucrats did not turnover with cabinets. Likewise within the Interior Ministry there were general consistencies in policy from one Minister to the next. The most active Ministers got involved, but they did not rock the boat; the more dormant Ministers simply signed papers.

The Joint Committee and government operations in general, were further shielded from governmental paralysis by the ability to find 'fellow travelers' across Latvia's political spectrum. In 1927, for example, a Left coalition came to power and the important ministries of Foreign Affairs, Finance and Education were all in the hands of the Social

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<sup>18</sup> See the League of Nations' official entries: *The Admission of the Republic of Latvia, and Admission of New members into the League of Nations: Latvia*. For a discussion of the League and the Baltic States see Peters (1988).

<sup>19</sup> Minutes of the Joint Committee, March 1, 1927, LVVA, 3723, 1, 543, pp. 52-53.

<sup>20</sup> For the traditional interpretation of the rapid turnover and weakness of coalition governments see: Bilmanis (1951), Carson (1956), Šilde (1976). The nature of the fall of cabinets, however, should be re-examined. Many fell due to external events or the new coalition closely resembled the previous one. Coalition governments by definition are not stable, but the instability of Latvian parliamentary democracy has been exaggerated.



Democrats.<sup>21</sup> The Left coalition's reliance on minority political support, coupled with its egalitarian rhetoric and ideology should have meant an end to the free lunch programme. The new Minister-President and Interior Minister, Mariers Skujenieks, however, enthusiastically supported the programme. Furthermore, a new initiate, Brilovsks, represented Voldemars Bastjanis, the Social Democrat Minister of Finance who aggressively attacked government corruption in the Committee. Brilovsks not only supported the programme, but reported on its effectiveness in Ilukstes apriodis, where he said:

Now you can often see foreigners, school children, who freely and correctly speak Latvian. These young people will grow up to be real Latvian citizens.<sup>22</sup>

The ability to find common cause through Latvia's political parties applied throughout the parliamentary era. The parties, with the possible exception of the extreme radicals, were not monolithic institutions. Within each party there was a range of opinion over three key issues that transcended the specific concerns of the party. In regards to centralisation, within each party there were politicians keen on a highly centralised state structure, while there were others that championed local responsibility and power. On ethnic affairs, it ran the gamut from the slogan 'Latvia for Latvians', to a concept of the nation as a political unit containing all within the borders.<sup>23</sup> Finally, parties were divided over the greater good, national security and growth, or democracy. The authoritarian coup, which overthrew democratic rule in Latvia in 1934, was successful in part due to these divisions within the political parties. Almost across the board, some politicians did not actively oppose the regime because they were sympathetic to the regime's moves towards a centralised, ethnic Latvian State that stressed duty and survival over democracy and law. The workings of the Committee anticipated these developments.

The Joint Committee meeting of the spring of 1928 stressed the continuity of policy despite the pendulum-like change of governments. The Left coalition fell in early 1928 in part due to a controversial trade treaty with the Soviet Union<sup>24</sup> that visibly split the country and increased rumours of a coup. Within the Committee, however, 1928 was business as usual. The change in government meant nothing, the new right of centre Minister-President was as enthusiastic of the free lunch programme as the previous left of centre Minister-President. He even earmarked an additional 10,000 Lats for the free lunch programme. The greatest concern was that the apriodis council elections later in the year would return more minority politicians. If this happened, the money for the free lunch programme could not be funneled through apriodis governments. Still, this was more of a nuisance than a hindrance; the Joint Committee successfully rechannelled the

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<sup>21</sup> See the memoirs of Bastjanis and Cielçns for autobiographical accounts of Social Democratic control of Ministries, or Hugh I. Rodgers, *Search for Security: A Study in Baltic Diplomacy, 1920-1934* (Hamden, Conn.: Archer Books, 1975) for a scholarly analysis of Social Democratic foreign policy initiatives. The archival collection, LVVA, 1632, 2 contains documents on the Social Democrat Minister of Education Rainis' involvement in book censorship despite a public persona that stressed the freedom of the press.

<sup>22</sup> Minutes of the Joint Committee, October 18, 1927, LVVA, 3723, 1, 543, pp. 56-59.

<sup>23</sup> Arveds Bergs was a prominent Latvian of the political right, and a member of the Constituent Assembly and first *Saeima*. He also served briefly as Minister of the Interior. After losing in the elections to the second *Saeima* he continued his political work in the Riga City Council, and editing a conservative newspaper. In the newspaper, *Brīva Zeme*, he consistently called for a 'Latvia for Latvians', and criticized the Constitution, calling for its drastic revision.

<sup>24</sup> Again, see the works of Felikss Cielçns, and Hugh I. Rodgers as well as Anderson (1962) for the Soviet-Latvian trade treaty and subsequent fall of the left coalition.



money through the Ministry of Education, and into their centrally controlled education system.<sup>25</sup>

The Great Depression slowed the work of the Joint Committee and its free lunch programme more than any change in the electoral world of Latvia. As the Depression deepened, the 'relatively minute sources' which the Director of the Department of Local Government had referred to in better years were sacrificed along with the more general cuts in education and health care. The Joint Committee briefly returned to the use of land to guarantee security in the border belt and again earmarked land near the border for ethnic Latvian colonists. Here as well, democratic procedure irritated the Joint Committee's work, but did not derail it. The Joint Committee operated through the State Land Bank, but when a Pole was elected to the Land Bank's Council the operation was temporarily put on hold. As with the free lunch programme that switched from apriõis boards to the Ministry of Education, land distribution was moved to the Land Bank's Board<sup>26</sup> (on which the Pole was not elected).

The work of the Joint Committee was partially suspended by the economic crunch of the Great Depression. The national government had no superfluous income and as budgets were routinely slashed the Committee's work waned. Furthermore, minority communities were already suspicious of how Latvian schools were able to provide more services in financially healthy times; masking the funneling of money in times of massive cutbacks would have been difficult if not impossible. As Latvia emerged from the Depression, K rlis Ulmanis overthrew the parliamentary order before the Committee could reorganize. Ulmanis, however, represented everything the Committee stood for. The work of the Committee during the Ulmanis regime no longer needed the secret extra-legal approach to undermining minority education and democratic process; this became the standard operating procedure of the new authoritarian regime.

Free lunches became less significant. After all, with full and public support of the government huge resources could be spent to undermine the attractiveness of minority schools by building new, modern Latvian schools. Nevertheless, the core idea of the Joint Committee's work was used by the Ulmanis regime in its attacks on minority education. Instead of inviting domestic confrontation and international disfavor by closing minority schools outright, the Ulmanis regime continued the pattern of making Latvian schools more attractive. Then, as minority children left their schools, minority schools could be closed for lack of attendance. The end was never far out of sight; as minority schools closed and the only school became a Latvian or mixed school, the Latvian content of education was increased and assimilation foisted upon minority students. The radical change in education was disguised as 'rationalisation' of the school system, but its ethnic component seems clear. From 1934 to 1937, for example, 109 primary schools were closed, 30 were reorganized and 31 opened. Of these 109 primary schools, 71 were minority schools whereas only 5 of the 31 new schools were minority schools.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Minutes of the Joint Committee, March 6, 1928, LVVA, 3723, 1, 543, p. 60.

<sup>26</sup> Minutes of the Joint Committee, January 7, 1930, LVVA, 3723, 1, 543, p. 62.

<sup>27</sup> 'Reorganization of the Primary School Web from August 1, 1934 to September 1937' [*Pamatskolu tikla p rk rtojumi no 1934.g. 1. Aug-1937.g.sept.*] in LVVA, 1632, 2, 1306. Of the 71 closed minority schools, 35 were Russian, 14 Belorussian, 8 Jewish, 7 Polish, 6 German and 1 Lithuanian.

Several parishes and apriņiņis demonstrate how complete the changes were. In Ilukste apriņiņis, for example, by 1939 a minority education system that had fourteen schools serving 953 pupils (8 Russian schools with 643 pupils, 2 Polish schools with 128 pupils and 4 Lithuanian schools with 182 pupils) was reduced to four minority schools serving 214 pupils (one Russian school with 134 pupils and 3 Lithuanian schools with 80 pupils). Within this apriņiņis in Silene parish, the 1<sup>st</sup> Border Primary School became a mixed nationality school in the fall of 1939 even though 59 of its 62 pupils were ethnically Russian.<sup>28</sup>

The example of Gaura parish, located on the frontier with Soviet Russia is indicative of minority education under Kārlis Ulmanis. In the summer of 1939, near the very end of the Republic, the secret police reported to the Ministry of the Interior that there were reports of unhappy Russians in the parish. The Department of Local Government investigated and submitted a detailed report.<sup>29</sup> In Gaura parish, there were 10,857 residents, 10,104 of which were Russian. The parish council had six Latvians and fifteen Russians, while of the seventeen schoolteachers, nine were Russian, eight Latvian. The teachers spoke only Latvian amongst themselves, and in the three previous years, two Russian schools were converted to mixed nationality schools. Within the next year, a new modern Latvian grade school for 500 students would be opened, and with its opening the last Russian grade school would be closed. The army and the paramilitary organization, Aizsargi, maintained language skills after school. The report concluded that the Latvian schoolteachers could be more active in society to provide role models for the Russians, but that otherwise all was well:

There is no news or anything to suggest that the inhabitants are unhappy using the state language. All around I must admit that the use of the state language is increasing year by year, albeit slowly.

This was the reality of Latvia's much touted minority education system by the end of the Republic.<sup>30</sup> There were only 753 of 10,857 parish residents who were not Russian, yet Russian schools had been carefully curbed and eliminated. Ethnic Latvians were represented beyond their proportion in local administration, and school administration. Even after their years in Latvian schools, Russians were to remain exposed to paternalistic, assimilating Latvian nationalism in the army, and in day-to-day life. The Department's assessment of its minority citizens, however, was too optimistic. Minority grievances, chief of which was inadequate minority education, pushed minorities into support (sometimes very active support, often much more passive support) for the invading Soviet army in 1940.

The story of the Joint Committee is indicative of several themes in interwar Latvia's history. The first theme is that as war gave way to peace, the central state began to identify minority communities within Latvia as the greatest threat to the state's existence, particularly as potential fifth columns for neighboring states (Poland and the USSR seen as Soviet Russia). This assumption fueled into the general idea that Latvia

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<sup>28</sup> Ilukste Apriņiņis School Inspector's Yearly Overview, 1939/1940 first half year [*Ilukstes apriņiņa tautskolu inspektora darbības pārskats par 1939./40. Mācības gada 1. Pusgadu*] in LVVA, 6642, 1, 201, p. 81-88; 114.

<sup>29</sup> Ausmanis, Director of the Department of Public Order Police [*Kārtības policijas departamenta direktors*], August 1, 1939, LVVA, 3723, 1, 16,734, p. 20.

<sup>30</sup> Exaggerated accounts of the benevolence and liberalism of Latvia's minority education system can be found in most general accounts of inter-war Latvia including: Bilmanis (1951), Kavass and Sprudz (1972).



although not monolithic was a nation-state for ethnic Latvians. Ethnic minorities were not seen as an organic part of the citizenry (despite their legal status), but as a group of more or less threatening others. The central state saw Latvia's Baltic Germans and Jews as economic threats that due to their wealth and strength were not at all easy to assimilate. After the coup of 1934, the central state used its economic muscle to decrease the economic power of these two communities. Latvia's Russians, Poles, and Belorussians, however, were different. These communities were economically disadvantaged, had low literacy rates, and were poorly organized politically and culturally. Furthermore, they were geographically concentrated on Latvia's eastern frontiers.

The Joint Committee's work was an attempt to either assimilate some of Latvia's Slavic peoples through education or at least guarantee their allegiance to the state. Within the minutes of the Joint Committee's meetings we see a glimpse of differing ideas about nationality and identity (innate versus learned), but also a common determination to use the powers of the state against the spirit of the law and democracy. This penchant for statism long preceded the coup of 1934, but was symptomatic of it. Equally important, this view was shared by ethnic Latvian intellectuals, bureaucrats and politicians across the political spectrum. Their common general assumption that free lunches could shift school attendance and engineer identity is indicative of how they understood Latvia's eastern borders and communities. These ethnic Latvian bureaucrats (and others) saw an ambiguous ethnic frontier that had to be made Latvian to guarantee the survival of the state.

The 'success' of the bureaucrat-nationalists' efforts is difficult to measure. The free lunch programme, like the state itself, was short-lived. Fifteen years of free lunches (and in most places far less) was too little time to create the transformations that the bureaucrat-nationalists imagined. Nevertheless, the free lunch programme and the general nationalising policy of the state had a definite affect. By the 1935 census (still before the more all-encompassing efforts of the authoritarian regime), Latvia's chief statisticians discussed the ethnic transformations of Latgale Salnītis and Skujenieks (1936: 329-338). These statisticians differentiated between 'natural' (births exceeding deaths) and 'mechanical' (internal migration and change of ethnic affiliation) growth of ethnic populations. Although considerable more research must be done on this topic, provisionally 'Latvianising' the frontier was partially successful. From 1930 to 1935, for example there were nearly 20,000 more ethnic Latvians in Latgale by 'natural' means and over 27,000 by 'mechanical' ones (the Central Statistical Office was unsure how much of this was migration and how much was change of identity). The ethnic Russian community, however, also benefited at the expense of Belorussians and Poles. There were more than 11,000 fewer Belorussians in 1935 than 1930. More work needs to be done, but the state seems to have converted some to a Latvian identity while pushing others to an ethnic Russian one.

The free lunch programme sheds new light on the ethnic policies of Latvia during the inter-war years. The state, although not forceful and violent, clearly had malevolent intentions towards minority communities and acted on these intentions in the minutiae of state policy. The minutes of the Committee (and the work of the Census office) also suggest that Latvia's bureaucrat-nationalists uneasily merged an essential, primordial definition of ethnicity with an ability to alter ethnicity by careful governmental policy. They managed this contradiction by believing (or claiming) that many of Latvia's

Belorussians and Poles were Polonised or misinformed Latvians that were being 'reclaimed'. There was, however, a difference of opinion over this matter and the tensions surrounding different understandings of national identity confused policy decisions. Finally, the past presents a general lesson to the present. Latvia again faces tempestuous ethnic relations (similar in some ways, but also very different) and tension revolves around exclusive citizenship laws, naturalisation policies and language laws. The inter-war experience suggests that democratic process and law, although important, can be undermined by a state bureaucracy dominated by ethnic Latvians.

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