

# CREATING A “CASTLE OF LIGHT”

THE FORMATION OF LATVIA'S UNIVERSITY  
DURING THE FIRST REPUBLIC

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In the aftermath of World War I, the new Latvian state emerged as a result of the simultaneous implosion of the Romanov and Hohenzollern empires.<sup>1</sup> The Baltic Germans, the former hegemonic group, were almost completely replaced by politicians and intellectuals of the new nation's ethnic majority, the Latvians. Not surprisingly, this had radical implications for the academic sphere. The crucial matter of creating a Latvian “national” university may be seen as an example of the way this new nation was structured in both symbolic and practical terms. This academic institution provided an arena for rewriting the nation's past history and recreating its folklore customs – both essential to Latvian culture. Moreover, education at this university would now be conducted in Latvian, a language that had hitherto been seen as a simple peasant vernacular, entirely unfit for the purpose of scholarship and abstract reasoning. In these various ways, the new university would ensure the cultural independence of the new autonomous Latvia, making the earlier predominance of the Baltic German and Imperial Russian cultural spheres obsolete.

At the same time, it should be recognized that those in charge of the formation of the new university had to handle a number of problems and dilemmas. One of the major problems was the recruitment of a sufficient number of well-qualified academics, preferably fluent in Latvian, in order to make the university operational. Since ethnic Latvians had traditionally been a subordinated peasant population, the stratum of trained academics among them was very thin. In addition, the existing group of academics with a Latvian background had spent their university careers primarily in the Imperial Russian system, using Russian as the language of instruction and, in most cases, posted at universities in Russia. Their academic work had therefore been done within an Imperial Russian “knowledge regime” or epistemic community, based on

their academic experiences at Russian universities. To what extent would established ethnic Latvian academics be able to embrace and adapt to a new national knowledge regime at the Latvian university in Riga? Would they be motivated to join the unknown and unproven *Latvijas Universitāte* at all?

**IN REGARD TO** ethnicity, the organizers of the new university in Riga certainly faced a serious dilemma. While Latvian academics were relatively scarce, there was no lack of well-qualified Baltic Germans, the previous hegemonic group. To what extent would they be welcome among the staff of *Latvijas Universitāte*? Here, it seems, the national aspirations embodied in the university would conflict in some way with what I will call the “academic agenda”: the university's task of providing higher education based on solid scholarly and scientific research. European academia in general adhered to a specific knowledge regime: a set of notions of scientific quality and scholarly excellence, and the idea of an international community based on reason and enlightenment. These notions and ideas were hardly compatible with narrow and over-emphasized national aims.

## MAKING THINGS WORK: NATIONAL AND ACADEMIC CONCERNS

The Organizing Committee for the new university was formed in the summer of 1919 and consisted initially of representatives from three groups: academics belonging to the former Riga Polytechnical Institute, delegates from key government ministries, and representatives of several Latvian professional organizations. At the first meeting in August, seven Baltic German academics represented the faculties.

The ministries represented on the committee were the

Treasury and the ministries of Trade and Industry, Communication, and Agriculture. The convening Ministry of Education was represented by Minister Kārlis Kasparsons and the ethnic Latvian Pauls Valdēns, former head of the Tsarist Riga Polytechnical Institute. The Latvian professional organizations invited were those connected to the fields of engineering, law, education, and agronomy. Subcommittees for each faculty were swiftly put together to plan the further recruitment of academic staff.

**VERY SOON, ETHNIC** Latvians replaced the Baltic German academics as provisional deans of some of the emerging faculties. Of the seven Baltic Germans representing academia at the inaugural meeting of the Organizing Committee, only four were appointed as provisional deans for the first academic year. The very composition of the Organizing Committee, comprising prominent Baltic German academics, representatives of the provisional Latvian government, and Latvian professional organizations, probably created a basic uncertainty regarding the principles on which the new faculties would be constructed. In recruitment matters, should academic merit have priority over the government's political concerns or the Latvian organizations' nationalist ambitions? Moreover, the committee's electoral procedure required a two-thirds majority for new appointments, which meant that a sizable minority in the committee could block any controversial candidate. In addition, all academic appointments had to be approved on the political level by the Ministry of Education.

A key figure on the Organizing Committee was the young psychologist Pauls Dāle, who, in the absence of Kasparsons and Valdēns, acted as chairman and representative of the Ministry of Education as early as the committee's third meeting in August. After taking part in the War of Liberation in the summer of 1919, Dāle assumed a dual role as an elected



academic and chief official of the department of higher education at the ministry.

Practical problems facing the committee soon proved to be substantial. The material situation of the new Latvian government was precarious. It could command the resources of the former Riga Polytechnical institute, which consisted primarily of its buildings. Much of the laboratory equipment and most of the library had followed the institute's wartime evacuation to Moscow. Moreover, most of its academic staff could only lecture in German and Russian, the established university languages during Tsarist times – not in Latvian.

The language issue was tied to the dilemma of the university's dual aims: to provide academic excellence in education and research, and to participate in building the new Latvian nation-state. That the new university was designed to fulfill a national agenda is unquestionable. For many of the nationalist activists, a dream was coming true: the creation of an institution of higher education using the Latvian language. At the inaugural ceremony on September 28, 1919, this fulfillment was expressed symbolically in the choral version of the nationalist poem *Gaismas pils*, "Castle of Light", which prophesies that the "spiritual riches" of the Latvian people will one day be manifest after a long period of foreign oppression. The expressed aim of the new university was to gather a "national treasure of knowledge" on matters concerning the land, its history, geography, language, and spiritual culture.

Naturally, besides serving the national agenda, the new university was required to serve the needs of the new Latvian state by educating a new stratum of Latvian-speaking scientists, scholars, administrators, and professionals. In order to do this, however, academics would have to be found to staff the new faculties and make the whole educational structure operational. These academics also had to be qualified for the university's second aim: to provide education and to perform research of a very high standard. Here, the explicit ambition was to establish the University of Latvia among the best academic institutions in the world.

## RECRUITMENT MATTERS: FINDING SUITABLE ACADEMICS

One of the main problems facing the Organizing Committee in 1919 was how to bring "home" established Latvian academics from various parts of the Russian Empire. No efforts were to be spared. All prominent academics employed at Russian universities received telegrams telling them that they had been elected professors at the new national university in Riga, and exhorting them to return to their "fatherland".

Due to the persistent turmoil in Russia, however, not all of these messages reached their destinations. To facilitate matters, the Foreign Ministry was instructed to provide papers and material assistance to those Latvian academics who desired to leave Russia. Not all responses were positive. Some of the academic "exiles" who received telegrams apparently no longer perceived themselves primarily as ethnic Latvians. A thorough Russian or German education had led many of them to cross ethnic demarcations and assume another national identity – or a "supra-national" imperial identity. To their disappointment, the organizers of the new university in Riga found that some of the people they approached at Russian universities were rather skeptical about the whole project. Doubt about the new Latvian state's ability to provide adequate funding, and the serious lack of academic textbooks in the Latvian language, seem to have been major concerns among these skeptics. For others, the move to Riga was fraught with practical difficulties, especially if it involved the

transportation of scholarly collections and libraries, and the scholars' families.

Francis Balodis, for example, a renowned archaeologist and Egyptologist, was a professor at the University of Saratov on the Volga when he was summoned to Riga by the Organizing Committee. According to his autobiography, Balodis actually received the summons considerably later, and was given the choice by the Cheka of remaining in Soviet Russia in his capacity as professor, or leaving within twenty-four hours, without his archaeological collection, and also without his wife. Under these circumstances, Balodis maintains that he chose to remain in the Soviet Union as professor and vice-rector until 1924, when he finally managed to obtain permission to leave Russia together with his wife in order to participate in an archaeology conference in Vienna. Their true destination was Riga.

**HOWEVER, THE CASE** of Francis Balodis may have been slightly more complicated than he chose to express in his memoirs. As a student, he moved to Moscow University in 1906, and was clearly very well received. "In spite of the fact that I always emphasized my Latvian nationality", he wrote in his memoirs, "no doors were ever closed to me in Russia, up to the point when I was summoned to take up the post in Riga." At Saratov, he had an influential position in the faculty, and also occupied a new archaeological niche, excavating the ancient cities of the Golden Horde on the Volga. He states that he did not resolve to attempt the move to Riga until 1922, when he had established contact with Vice-Rector Razums at the University of Latvia. It appears that, for a long time, he found it quite rewarding to continue his academic work in Russia. The University of Saratov continued to operate without any major interference from the Bolshevik government until 1923, when matters changed drastically. Balodis's faculty was transformed into a teacher training college, and his academic work was subjected to political censorship. Only then, it seems, was Balodis convinced that serious scholarly work at Saratov had become impossible.

In a nationalist narrative it would, of course, be entirely natural for Latvian academics abroad to aspire to return. It should be borne in mind, however, that many of these academics had previously considered the entire Romanov Empire as the arena of their careers. In addition to those who were unwilling to leave their Russian universities, some of the invited Latvian professors, such as Francis Balodis, were prevented from doing so.

**ON THE OTHER HAND**, some Latvian academics arrived unexpectedly. One of these was the eminent economist Kārlis Balodis, who had served as a professor in Berlin since 1905. Apparently he was not among the invited scholars, but nevertheless received a warm welcome from the Organizing Committee. Balodis was actually given the honor of making one of the inaugural speeches when the new university was officially opened in September 1919. Several of these high-ranking Latvian academics were immediately inducted into the Organizing Committee, clearly adding to its academic weight.

The official histories of the University of Latvia have, of course, emphasized the "successful" recruitment of established Latvian academics, these histories in fact being themselves significant contributions to the nationalist project surrounding the creation of Latvijas Universitāte. They therefore tend to omit some phenomena and persons who do not fit the general picture. One person often conspicuously absent in the official histories is the eminent professor of chemistry Pauls Valdēns (Paul Walden), who had been employed at the Riga Polytechnical Institute between 1885 and 1919. A Latvian

by birth, Valdēns had made a distinguished career in the Tsarist university system and had become firmly integrated in Baltic German society. Valdēns took an active part in the initial meetings of the Organizing Committee, and was even elected chairman by a huge majority in September 1919. It seems clear that Valdēns was regarded as the prime candidate for the office of Rector of the new university. He was also the major link between the Baltic German academics of the former RPI and the Latvian provisional government.

Shortly after his election as committee chairman, however, Valdēns went to Germany for research purposes and, to the obvious chagrin of his committee colleagues, did not reappear when expected. Naturally eager not to lose one of the figureheads of the new national university, Dāle sent a number of missives exhorting Valdēns to return and resume his position in Riga. Valdēns replied with various promises but for different reasons the journey homeward was always postponed.

Within the Organizing Committee, Valdēns's evasions gave rise to some dissension. The economist Kārlis Balodis maintained that every effort should be made to secure Valdēns's return. Other members, however, described him as "uncommitted" and argued that people with more courage and enthusiasm were needed to develop the new Latvian university. Valdēns was formally removed as chairman of the Organizing Committee in November 1919 and replaced by the psychologist Pauls Dāle. Still, Valdēns's chair in chemistry was left vacant, and efforts to persuade him to return to Riga continued.

In a letter in German to the Ministry of Education, Valdēns declared that he was willing to return to Riga, but only on the condition that his scientific, juridical, and material circumstances were not in any way compromised. He demanded conditions similar to those he presently enjoyed in Rostock as the director of a department of chemistry at a 500-year-old university. In addition, he demanded the right to pick his own scientific collaborators and to lecture in the language of his choice, i.e. in German. The national cause appears to have been of very little importance to him. In his letter, Valdēns openly declared that, in the interests of science, he had for decades held himself aloof from all kinds of "national and political chauvinism".

**IN THE END** Valdēns chose to remain in Rostock permanently. He was one of the very few ethnic Latvians who enjoyed a solid reputation in the international scientific community, and would no doubt have been an excellent figurehead for the new university. Valdēns would have performed admirably in the role of an academic national hero, and his "defection" was certainly a great setback for the organizers. However, the Valdēns case also clearly shows that not every academic was interested in complying with the university's national agenda. For Valdēns, apparently, material conditions, resources for scientific work, and participation in a first-class academic community were more important than helping to realize the old dream of the Latvian nationalists: to create a university in Latvian territory using the Latvian language.

## LANGUAGE MATTERS

One of the crucial elements of the nationalist agenda was the use of Latvian as the language of instruction. In some faculties this proved to be difficult, especially in Mechanics, Chemistry, Medicine, and Law and Economics. The lack of qualified Latvian-speaking academics made it virtually impossible to give the Latvian language monopoly status at the new university.

This problem was apparent right from the start. The Organizing Committee had decided in September 1919 that Latvian

should be the main language of instruction, but that Russian or German could be used “when necessary”. A particular dilemma was posed by the predominantly Baltic German academics associated with the former Riga Polytechnical Institute. The Organizing Committee had access to a set of established professors and lecturers, some of them of considerable international reputation. Unfortunately, many of them could teach only in Russian and German.

The agronomist Paulis Lejiņš suggested in September 1919 that, in order to secure its national aims, the new university should primarily select young, competent candidates who could speak Latvian. This, he maintained, had already been done in his own faculty. Only two established Baltic German academics were offered positions in agronomy, and the staff was predominantly Latvian. This was evidently achieved in close cooperation with the provisional government’s ministry of agriculture, where Lejiņš had played a key role before his own academic appointment. In addition, the provisional dean, Jānis Bergs, was closely connected to the Latvian farmers’ cooperatives. The political influence of the ministry and the farmers’ associations was exceptionally strong in the formation of the Faculty of Agronomy.

In the committee, Paulis Lejiņš proposed that similar principles should apply when selecting staff for the other faculties. Younger and academically less distinguished Latvian-speakers should be given preference over more qualified candidates who could not teach in Latvian. A majority of the committee initially backed Lejiņš’s proposal, and only approved candidates whom they knew for certain to be Latvian-speakers.

This elicited a vigorous backlash from the predominantly non-Latvian staff in the Mechanics Faculty. The dean, the Baltic German professor Paul von Denffer, threatened to resign immediately if the faculty was not allowed to select candidates based on their scientific merit. In the face of this resistance, the committee back-pedaled. Chairman Pauls Dāle described the incident as a “misunderstanding”, and maintained that the faculty naturally had the final say in selecting academic candidates. Paul von Denffer was unanimously asked to remain as dean.

**JUST A FEW WEEKS** after the exchanges between von Denffer and the committee, there was a renewed discussion about whether to condone lectures in German. The Faculty of Architecture wanted to elect von Stryk, an established academic from the previous RPI who was clearly incapable of lecturing in Latvian. The committee member from the Latvian Society, Spricis Paegle, strongly argued against the election of staff who were not proficient in Latvian, and a majority of the committee postponed the appointment, deciding that every effort should be made to find Latvian-speaking academics. The appointment was then rejected at a subsequent meeting. It is quite possible that the prolonged and somewhat unexpected absence of Pauls Valdēns, the main link between the Baltic German academics of the RPI and the provisional Latvian government, considerably weakened the bargaining power of von Denffer and the other Baltic German deans.

Paulis Lejiņš and Spricis Paegle continued to press the language issue on several occasions during the autumn of 1919. Eventually, the Organizing Committee adopted the policy that former staff of the Riga Polytechnic should be employed if there was a unquestionable need for their particular qualifications. Otherwise, Latvian-speakers should be given preference. Former staff of the Polytechnic who opposed the Latvians’ national strivings should also be disregarded. Loyalty to the newly emerging state was obviously seen as crucial – this is not surprising, since at that time several hostile armed

forces were still present on Latvian soil. Not until spring of 1920 did the provisional Latvian government actually have full control over its territory.

## THE ORGANIZING COMMITTEE: NATIONAL, ACADEMIC, AND PRAGMATIC CONCERNS

Paulis Lejiņš seems to have followed a nationalist principle relentlessly during the initial years. When academics belonging to one of the ethnic minorities were put forward for appointment, Lejiņš frequently questioned the faculty’s choice and insisted that Latvian candidates be given preference. He appears to have been quite content to advocate the selection of Latvians who did not have the requisite academic qualifications: this should be remedied, he argued, by arranging for them to study abroad. Such a long-term strategy, however, certainly did not satisfy deans who urgently needed qualified academic staff to manage their teaching assignments.

Lejiņš’s nationalist priorities, and perhaps his quarrelsome style, appear to have involved him in conflicts with several other committee members. In the aftermath of a sensitive recruitment issue, Lejiņš complained that a Latvian professor in the Medical Faculty had called him a “German-hater” and “chauvinist”. Feeling the need to explain his position, Lejiņš declared that he was in no way hostile to Latvian citizens belonging to other “nationalities” if they had supported the Latvian government during the recent War of Liberation, or at least had remained neutral and were now loyal “in thought and deed”. He nevertheless felt it reasonable that all government institutions, including the newly founded university, should contain a representative proportion of ethnic Latvians. That meant that at least seventy-five percent of the academic staff should be of the majority ethnicity. Moreover, the university must, he argued, be infused with a Latvian spirit.

Lejiņš’s nationalist stance went further than merely promoting the use of Latvian as the academic language in all faculties. His agenda was clearly ethnically motivated. However, in the Organizing Committee’s discussions, Lejiņš and other members on the “national” wing always framed their arguments in terms of language proficiency, not ethnicity. Openly advocating an ethnic principle in recruitment was clearly not an option, because it would have been incompatible with established academic norms and practices. To some extent, the requirement that recruited academics should be proficient in Latvian appears to have served as a cloak for what was really a selection based on ethnicity. Considerations of academic excellence, and the practical need for qualified lecturers, seem to have been a secondary concern.

However, Paulis Lejiņš’s influence in the Organizing Committee appears to have weakened by the autumn of 1920. On September 1, Ernsts Felsbergs was elected the first acting rector, and Lejiņš, who had fulfilled these duties during the first year, resigned as vice-rector in November. By that time, some influential ethnic Latvian professors had returned from Russian “exile” and joined the Organizing Committee, changing its composition considerably.

**ONE OF THESE** “returnees” was the distinguished professor of linguistics Jānis Endzelīns. While his “national” inclinations cannot be doubted, he nevertheless stood out as the main proponent of a recruitment policy based primarily on academic merit rather than ethnicity. He consistently argued for criteria of expertise and academic excellence in the selection of candidates. As one of the university’s most acclaimed

scholars, Endzelīns’s opinions on these matters naturally carried great weight.

These new circumstances appear to have greatly reduced the influence of Paulis Lejiņš and the Faculty of Agronomy. After his resignation as vice-rector, Lejiņš seems to have become relatively marginalized in university politics. He was not elected to the newly established University Council in 1922, and did not hold any other posts at the university level during the rest of the 1920s.

Members of the Organizing Committee clearly believed in the university for a variety of reasons. The deans of the Medical Faculty appear to have been the most pragmatic, advocating the appointment of Baltic German specialists, condoning the continued use of German as a teaching language, and continuing to use German textbooks because they were the best available. For them, the main priority was to create a national university that would provide medical students with up-to-date scientific knowledge – and thereby provide Latvian hospitals with good doctors. Dean Roberts Krimbergs was also well acquainted with German medical academia, having received his scientific training at the universities of Heidelberg and Berlin.

**ACADEMIC PRIORITIES** were voiced most frequently by the deans of the faculties of engineering, natural sciences, and law and economics. These departments were led by academics with ample experience of the Russian and German university systems. As professional scientists and researchers, they were pragmatic about the choice of teaching languages. As the incident with von Denffer shows, they also disliked considerations of candidates’ ethnicity interfering with the process of staff selection. These faculties were clearly dominated by Baltic Germans in the early years. Latvian academics were usually in the minority and generally belonged to a younger generation.

Some of the Latvian scholars in the Organizing Committee also defended fundamental academic aims. The Latvian linguist Jānis Endzelīns in particular repeatedly questioned the committee’s refusal to endorse the appointment of distinguished Baltic German or Russian candidates. Endzelīns seems to have championed the ideals of academic excellence; because of his unquestionably Latvian credentials he was probably able to advocate this view from a stronger position than most of the other deans. For Endzelīns, evidently, the significance of a national university was strongly connected with its reputation as an institution of high academic standards.

The committee’s “national” wing, on the other hand, particularly Paulis Lejiņš, evidently saw its mission in promoting the Latvianness of the new university and thereby realizing the hopes and dreams of the nationalist movement. Lejiņš was certainly the most outspoken member of the “national” wing, advocating an ethnically motivated selection of Latvian candidates over more academically qualified Baltic Germans. In the tug-of-war between these diverging interests, the University of Latvia was formed. ✖

## reference

- 1 This article is a shortened version of a chapter in the author’s recent monograph *Between National and Academic Agenda: Ethnic Policies and “National Disciplines” at Latvia’s University, 1919–40*, in the Södertörn Academic Studies series. For full references, please consult the book.