ON GUARD FOR LATVIA’S STATEHOOD

Latvia’s Foreign Service Staff in Exile During the Years of Occupation

June 11, 1941 - August 21, 1991

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Within two months in 1940, Latvia's legal status changed dramatically. Soviet military forces occupied the country on June 17 and by August 5 Latvia's annexation and incorporation into the USSR was finalized. Nonetheless, the Republic of Latvia continued to exist de facto as a subject of international law.

Though the Soviet occupation regime destroyed the existing state and public institutions, it could not eradicate Latvia's diplomatic service. For the next 50 years, diplomats and consular missions continued to represent the Republic of Latvia de jure in the rest of the world. Their activities had both a legal and a financial basis:

- On 17 May 1940 the Cabinet of Ministers granted extraordinary powers to Kārlis Zarīņš, Latvia's Ambassador to the United Kingdom. Mr. Zarīņš was allowed to defend Latvia's interests, to prepare the work of Latvia's representations abroad and handle its finances and property.

- On 23 July 1940 US Under Secretary of State Sumner Welles issued a policy statement, which determined American policy toward Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania during the Second World War and afterwards. Washington did not recognize either of those states or the occupiers of the three Baltic States and their incorporation into the USSR. Therefore, after the death of Ambassador Zarīņš in 1963, the supervision of Latvia's diplomatic and consular service was taken over by the Latvian embassy in Washington.

- Latvia's gold reserves in foreign banks served as an important guarantee for the continued existence of Latvia's statehood. The US Government allowed a part of the deposits to be transferred to trusts. Income from the deposits was used to maintain Latvia's representatives not only in the United States but also elsewhere in the world.

Depending on each country's view of Latvia's occupation of Estonia Latvia's diplomats worked either in an official capacity or within the limits of personal diplomatic status. The status of honorary consuls was also limited. In most countries (except the  ____1____ the funds for the Latvian diplomatic and consular service were transferred to Denmark and the Netherlands, where the Latvian mission was forced to use Washington's funds for small operations. In 1972, the US Embassy in Paris opened an office for Latvia's representation in France. In the 1980s, the Latvian diplomatic and consular service was transferred to Belgium and Luxembourg.

In 1946 and April 1949, Latvia's diplomatic and consular representatives held 17 meetings to develop strategies for maintaining Latvia's legally independent status. On 4 May 1949 the newly elected deputies of the Supreme Council declared in Riga the restoration of the independent and democratic Republic of Latvia. After the formation of a new government, the possibility for cooperation between the diplomats in exile and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was discussed. According to the German occupation authorities from a meeting in Washington on 14 and 15 April 1941, "employees of Latvia's diplomatic service abroad answer to the line of Latvia's mission in Washington. All of them have expressed their readiness to cooperate with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia."

The position of Latvian diplomats was crucial in the years from 1938 to 1991 - the time of the national awakening and movement toward Latvia's independence. By the end of the 1990s, it had already evolved to a position as a reference point and an asset of the Latvian statehood. The Latvian representation in Washington continued to play a key role in the development of Latvia's foreign policy and international relations.