

# **Pavel Bermond-Avalov and the Formation of the West Russian Volunteer Army – Warlordism in the Baltic?<sup>1</sup>**

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*Warlordism is a phenomenon that emerges in a power vacuum during wars, civil wars and revolutions. There are many examples from the Russian Civil War where military commanders amassed absolute power in certain areas, without being subordinate to any state authority, or perhaps being subordinate in name only. Pavel Bermond-Avalov, who formed the West Russian Volunteer Army, is discussed as an example of a warlord from the era of the Baltic wars of independence. A large portion of his army was made up of the German soldiers and officers who, as members of Freikorps, had fought in the Iron Division under the command of General Rüdiger von der Goltz, or in other units in the first half of 1919. In the autumn of 1919, instead of fighting the Bolsheviks and the Red Army, he turned his weapons against the Republic of Latvia and marched on Riga.*

The focus on Warlordism is a relatively new feature in the toolbox of historians, who aim to explain the causes and dynamics of excessive violence in times of uncertainty. By identifying personalities who can be termed warlords, some scholars have already looked at the events of the Russian Revolution and the Civil War from this perspective in order to explain the rule of violence in local power vacuums.<sup>2</sup> While most of these examples

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<sup>1</sup> Parts of this article are based on the author's M.A. thesis.

<sup>2</sup> See for example: Richard B. Spence, "Useful brigand: Ataman' S.N. Bulak-Balakhovich 1917–21," *Revolutionary Russia* 11, no 1 (1998); Jamie Bisher, *White Terror. Cossack warlords of the Trans-Siberian* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); Joshua Sanborn, "The Genesis of Russian Warlordism. Violence and Governance during the First World War and the Civil War," *Contemporary European History* 19, no 3 (2010); Willard Sunderland, *The Baron's Cloak*.

focus on individuals and processes in the Russian armies' command centres or in the peripheries of Siberia or the Far East, the question remains whether the conflicts in the former Baltic provinces can also be analysed from this perspective. Here, too, the collapse of first the Russian and then the German empires opened up a power vacuum in which military entrepreneurs tried to use the absence of state structures to assert themselves in regional spheres of violence. So how might the focus on warlordism alter or enrich our perception of the multi-layered conflicts in the region?

To this end, I would like to examine a specific phenomenon of the civil war: the formation of the West Russian Volunteer Army (*Zapadnaja Dobrovolčeskaja Armija*) on the territory of the former Courland Governorate. This army caused one of the many scandals in the events of the wars of independence with its infamous attack on Latvian-defended Riga on 8 October 1919. Its history forms the final chapter of the German Freikorps campaign in the Baltic, which was carried out under the Russian flag – but also in cooperation with Russian troops. The military leaders associated with the formation of the West Russian Volunteer Army and the attack on Riga have already been referred to as warlords in both historiographical and journalistic arguments about the events.<sup>3</sup> In particular, the army's commander-in-chief Prince Pavel Rafalovič (Michailovič) Bermond-Avalov gives the impression of having left his mark on the war as a warlord of the Baltic region. His name appears omnipresent in the description of the conflict: be it in the frequently chosen designation of the 'Bermond Army' or with the promising term 'Bermondtiade'<sup>4</sup> for

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*A History of the Russian Empire in War and Revolution* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2014)

<sup>3</sup> Corresponding assessments can be found for example here: Björn Hofmeister "Goltz, Rüdiger Graf von der," *1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2016-10-25 [https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/goltz\\_rudiger\\_graf\\_von\\_der#GND\\_116765038](https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/goltz_rudiger_graf_von_der#GND_116765038), 1 February 2021; Baltic Defence College, <https://www.baltdefcol.org/index.php?print=1&id=1406>, 1 February 2021.

<sup>4</sup> See for example the title of Askolds Saulitis' documentary movie from 2009 "Bermontiāda" or Karsten Brüggemann, *Die Gründung der Republik Estland und das Ende des "Einen und unteilbaren Rußland". Die Petrograder Front des Russischen Bürgerkriegs 1918–1920* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2002), 424.

*Major General Count  
Rüdiger von der Goltz  
(1865–1946), Commanding  
General of the 6th Reserve  
Corps. 1919. Estonian  
National Archives (RA),  
EFA.706.0.338461*



the adventurous military enterprise of the West Russian Volunteer Army against the Latvian state, which almost iconically associates this episode of the Latvian War of Independence with the officer's name. However, since we can assume that the cases mentioned use the label of the warlord more intuitively than conceptually, I would like to raise the question: Should we consider Pavel Bermond-Avalov as a warlord of the military conflicts in the Baltic? And what about German officers who played a decisive role in the formation of the West Russian Volunteer Army, such as the commanding general in Courland Rüdiger Graf von der Goltz or the leader of the Iron Division Major Josef Bischoff? Were they warlords also?

To examine these questions, it will be necessary to take a closer look at the process of the formation of the West Russian Volunteer Army in order to place the alleged warlords in the context of the military and social dynamics of the period of upheaval. In this way, it is possible to evaluate the interplay of how, on the one hand, these military entrepreneurs significantly influenced the events and dynamics of violence – and on the other hand, to ask which external and internal constraints affected

their actions. Eventually, raising these questions can contribute to examining the complex social dynamics and power structures in the interstice between imperial disintegration and nation-state consolidation in the region.

## **Warlordism as a historiographical approach to understand the Russian Civil War**

The Russian civil war is rich in people who deserve to be called warlords. However, warlordism has not really been among the essential terms used to describe this conflict. One of the most prominent scholars of warlordism in the Russian context is Joshua Sanborn, who has also reflected on the use of the term. As he has shown, the concept originated in the description of military conflicts in China at the beginning of the 20th century and has only since the 1990s been applied to the description of new conflicts in Africa, Asia and Europe.<sup>5</sup> As Sanborn notes, it is also worthwhile to examine the Russian Civil War under this premise. Here, too, the collapse of the Tsarist Empire provided individuals with the necessary environment to act as warlords and dominate regional spheres of violence.<sup>6</sup>

But what is the added value of describing conflicts as warlordism? On the one hand, the intention is to explain the dynamics of violence within a structural power vacuum by focusing on charismatic and violent leaders. On the other hand, the approach can help to explain alternative, regionally limited power mechanisms that took the place of the collapsed state order. According to Sanborn, the concept is thus suitable for making it comprehensible why the rule of determined military men was able to replace the established bureaucratic state.<sup>7</sup> A corresponding analysis has to focus on the following questions: “What accounts for warlordism? How does it begin, and how does it end? What happens to societies and

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<sup>5</sup> Sanborn, “Genesis,” 195–196.

<sup>6</sup> His case studies are Lavr Kornilov and Roman von Ungern-Sternberg.

<sup>7</sup> Sanborn, “Genesis,” 197.

economies subjected to extended periods of warlord rule? These are all questions that the Russian case can help us understand.”<sup>8</sup>

And what about the Baltic case? Here, at the latest, the collapse of the German eastern front in the winter of 1918/19 had opened up a power vacuum, in which a multitude of stakeholders tried to gain control over the space. In addition to the nation-state movements and the Bolsheviks, the German army and White Russian troops were also a decisive factor in the region. Thus, a multitude of social and military conflicts overlapped here, making events appear extremely fast-moving and confusing. Therefore, it seems helpful to try to see whether examining the role warlordism played in this conflict contributes to a better understanding of how power-conscious militaries tried to exercise regional power and how the inner workings of the armies had changed since the end of the World War. For this purpose, the West Russian Volunteer Army will serve as a case study – an institution in which a wide variety of political and military stakeholders with different “reimperialisation” strategies came together and opposed, in particular, the consolidation of the Republic of Latvia proclaimed on 18 November 1918.

So how exactly is warlordism defined? Let us make use of the definition applied by Sanborn himself. Here he follows the argument of Pak Nung Wong, according to whom the warlord is “a military commander who autonomously exercises political power through the threatening use of force”.<sup>9</sup> In addition, two preconditions must be met in order to describe conflicts as warlordism:

“The fundamental precondition was state failure. [...] The second precondition is that there must be candidates to become warlords – men with military experience, sufficient individual authority to inspire obedience on the part of their men at arms, political ambition, interest in civilian affairs and a high tolerance for risk.”<sup>10</sup>

At a superficial glance, the context of the West Russian Volunteer Army in Courland in 1919 seems to fulfil many of these conditions. This

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<sup>8</sup> Sanborn, “Genesis,” 196.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 197–198.

was a space without military or even state order, characterised by arbitrary but also structural violence by the military protagonists. Power-conscious German officers around General Rüdiger Graf von der Goltz seemed to be pursuing their own political agenda here already before Colonel Pavel Bermond-Avalov, an ambitious Russian officer, appeared on the scene in the summer of 1919. Shortly after taking over the command of the troops in Courland he caused a scandal with his risky attack on Riga. In this article, I will attempt to reconstruct the process of the West Russian Volunteer Army's emergence and its self-image as an occupying force in Courland. With the focus on selected powerful officers, I will examine to what extent it is justified to actually describe them as autonomous warlords or whether they were not rather subjected to clear limits in their actions.

## **Courland 1919: occupation practice in a sphere of violence**

To begin with the circumstances: it is not difficult to define the area of the former Courland Governorate, which was to become the West Russian Volunteer Army's main concentration area in the course of 1919, as a territory of state failure. Here, the West Russian Volunteer Army was to inherit occupation authority over a region, which had been marked by extreme violence in the previous four years and where all preceding attempts to establish military or even civil order had failed.

The disintegration of state structures in Courland began in the course of 1915 with the withdrawal of the Tsarist army and the accompanying evacuation of the region. As Vejas Liulevicius has described, the army not only evacuated most of the regional population, but also dismantled industrial facilities and pursued an overall scorched earth policy.<sup>11</sup> The subsequent German occupation of Courland went beyond the objectives of a classic occupation administration. Instead, the apparatus of the

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<sup>11</sup> Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front. Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 17.

*Colonel Pavel Bermond-Avalov (1877–1973).  
Latvian War Museum  
(LKM), 110-I*



*Oberbefehlshaber Ost* (Supreme Commander of All German Forces in the East) pursued the establishment of state structures under the objective of fulfilling a “military utopia”<sup>12</sup> in order to cultivate the area. However, this standard could never be achieved due to a lack of efficiency and a ruthless treatment of the country and its people. On the contrary, it led to the continuous disintegration of any organising structures, which manifested itself, among other things, in the formation of local armed groups. These groups started attacks from the forests, which meant that even German soldiers could no longer feel safe on the roads of Courland. This contrast of the pretension of total control and the reality of the effective loss of it marked the entire period of German occupation.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Liulevicius, 54.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 78–81.

The collapse of the German eastern front at the end of 1918 was not to close this regional sphere of violence – quite the contrary. In the winter of 1918/19 the Red Army followed the retreating German forces and, as elsewhere, established a system of Bolshevik terror directed against all class enemies, here not the least against the Baltic German landowners and clergy.<sup>14</sup> In the spring of 1919, the *Baltische Landeswehr* (Baltic Territorial Army) – a local armed force of the Baltic Germans with one Latvian and one Russian battalion<sup>15</sup> – and formations of the German army advanced into Courland's territories. Here, in addition to the already known attacks by local gangs, they also had to face acts of violence by Bolsheviks behind the front. Thus, the entire population of the occupied area came under general suspicion and from then on, the Baltic German and German forces considered an own preventive terror as the only means of guaranteeing their security. Hence, many sources described the so-called *White Terror*<sup>16</sup> as even more extreme than the preceding Red one. The violent measures were explicitly understood as a means of establishing regional order and can be illustrated above all by the treatment of prisoners and civilians when gaining or losing local control. For example, in March Latvian newspapers reported the indiscriminate shooting of civilians by the *Baltische Landeswehr* upon the capturing of the port city of Windau<sup>17</sup> (Ventspils). In a subsequent systematic rounding up of all the men in town, more people were shot because of their suspicious appearance or because they could be linked to known Bolsheviks. Another report from Wainoden (Vainode) mentions the problem of how to deal with the “few dozen” prisoners during the rapid advance.

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<sup>14</sup> Georg von Rauch, *Geschichte der baltischen Staaten* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1970), 50–58.

<sup>15</sup> Wilhelm Lenz, “Deutschbalten und Bermond. Ihre Zusammenarbeit während der zweiten Hälfte des Jahres 1919” – *Die deutsche Volksgruppe in Lettland während der Zwischenkriegszeit und aktuelle Fragen des deutsch-lettischen Verhältnisses*, Herausgeber Boris Meissner, Dietrich A. Loeber und Detlef Henning (Hamburg: Baltica, 2000), 19.

<sup>16</sup> The commonly used term ‘White Terror’ refers to the dichotomy of the Russian Civil War and, in a somewhat simplified manner, places the *Landeswehr* as well as the German troops in common with the anti-Bolshevik movement in Russia.

<sup>17</sup> Since the article mostly refers to German-language source material, the German designation of the place name is usually given. The Latvian name is added in brackets when it is mentioned for the first time.





*Headquarters of the assault battalion (Stoßtrupp) of the Baltic Landeswehr before the attack on Riga, 22 May 1919. From the left: Rittmeister von Below, Rittmeister Girgensohn, Hauptmann Heinrich Graf zu Dohna, Kornet von Burmeister, Battalion Commander Lieutenant Baron Hans Manteuffel, Commander of the Baltic Landeswehr Major Alfred Fletcher, Rittmeister Baron Heinrich Manteuffel, Staff Doctor Dr. Kleemann, Rittmeister Fred Armistadt. RA, ERA.1298.1.461.12*

While shooting also occurred here, some detainees – “mainly members of the democratically elected self-governing bodies” – were sentenced to prison terms in summary trials.<sup>18</sup> Even German soldiers could become victims of terror if they were denounced or had contact with the enemy. A volunteer with the German troops reported how several volunteers were taken to the remand prison in Mitau (Jelgava) without a warrant because of a denunciation. Without being interrogated, they were taken back to the German border three weeks later under police guard and sent back

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<sup>18</sup> Übergriffe von 1. Reichsd. Militär & Behörden, 2. Landeswehr in Lettland und Estland, Latvian State Historical Archive (LVVA), 2575. f., 20. apr., 3. l., 66–67 (Translation: T.R.; as with all the following source citations and citations from non-English language works).

to Berlin. The same report also mentions the case of three soldiers who managed to save themselves from Bolshevik captivity and informed the German authorities of a plan of attack by the Red Army. They were also immediately taken to the Mitau remand prison, where, according to the report, they were shot.<sup>19</sup>

Also in Riga, which the Landeswehr had taken on 22 May 1919, the White Terror replaced the preceding Red one, as it had done in the countryside. The first ten days after the capture were thus characterised by indiscriminate shootings. Although people were also interned, the shootings on the open street apparently happened much more frequently. Here, too, suspicions and denunciations were sufficient reasons for executions. The Baltic German and German formations also showed openly anti-Latvian tendencies, as one aim was to eliminate supporters of the Latvian government. As Mark Hatlie has made clear in his study, revenge was not the only motive for the violence, but it was also a cold calculation to weaken the political rival. Casualty figures for this phase of white terror in Riga vary widely, ranging from 400 to 4500 victims. The executions in the city only abated when the Entente exerted more and more pressure on the German military leadership.<sup>20</sup>

In principle, however, the German General Command explicitly sanctioned this procedure and understood it as a necessity for establishing occupation policy order in the specific regional conditions. One operated in a space where the positions of the front changed so quickly that the warring parties usually had to give up territories before they could enforce any form of military or even state order. In addition, due to these circumstances, there were constant points of contact with the military opponent and his ideologies – and not too few of them in the rear of one's own front. These contacts had to be prevented. A letter sent by the German General Command to the American Commission to Negotiate Peace three weeks after the capture of Riga confirms these intentions. Here the leadership made it clear that it too considered “secret criminal

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<sup>19</sup> Übergriffe von 1. Reichsd. Militär & Behörden, 2. Landeswehr in Lettland und Estland, LVVA, 2575. f., 20. apr., 3. l., 62–65.

<sup>20</sup> Mark R. Hatlie, *Riga at War 1914–1919. War and Wartime Experience in a Multi-ethnic Metropolis* (Marburg: Herder-Institut, 2014), 125–132.

trials and rash executions the most unsuitable way to establish peace and order here in the country”.<sup>21</sup> The leadership was aware that “by not fully justifying the sentences, the nationality differences will only be aggravated, not alleviated”. For this reason, summary courts martial were always composed of a Latvian, a Baltic German and a German, in order to exclude revenge from nationalistic motives. The necessity of holding summary courts martial was justified with the argument that there was a lack of personnel and buildings for ‘public’ courts. At the same time, there was a need to work quickly in the courts in order to “get innocent convicts released” and to “have the most serious criminals judged before a possible counter-movement brought the Bolsheviks back to power”. This line of argument shows that the German general command was certainly interested in establishing order and attached importance to transforming the treatment of prisoners into forms of the rule of law. However, it also shows the dilemma faced by an institution that saw itself as a regional force for order.

However, the violent actions of the German and Baltic German forces were not only due to the General Command’s claim to order. Unsolicited arbitrary acts by members of the army as well as by unidentified men in German uniforms, who were still in the country in large numbers, were also commonplace and, despite the aspirations of the General Command, constituted a significant additional anarchic factor in the region. On several occasions, the Latvian government protested against these arbitrary acts of violence against the Latvian population. For example, as late as 24 August, Latvian Foreign Minister Zigfrīds Anna Meierovics addressed a note to the German envoy in which he vehemently protested against the excesses of the German troops:

“Our state institutions have officially ascertained facts which characterise the terror exercised by the German army detachments in Courland. The German troops are openly attacking Latvian commandant’s offices and parish halls, disarming the guards, destroying the commandant’s offices, appropriating money, abducting movable property and

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<sup>21</sup> Der Amerikanischen Kommission To Negotiate Peace [sic!], 12.6.1919, DSHI 120 Generalkommando 1, 33–34.

documents. [---] Every day brings new acts of violence and robberies by German soldiers. Various murders have occurred in Neuenburg und Frauenburg [Jaunpils and Saldus]. The prosecutor of the district court has so far recorded 400 cases of theft and robbery. The German soldiers trample fields and meadows with their horses and carry away grain, so that the inhabitants have a shortage of bread.”<sup>22</sup>

This comprehensive protest against the behaviour of German soldiers reveals that the policy measures of the General Command had not been able to establish order in the region even in August. Rather, there is much to suggest that the situation in Courland had rather deteriorated over the summer in the course of the changed political and military conditions and that the General Command was increasingly losing control over their soldiers. This is not least due to the changed conditions under which the German army had been operating since the disintegration of the eastern front in November 1918.

## **The West Russian Volunteer Army – Genesis of a failed army in a failed state setting?**

When the German 8th Army in the Baltic was in a state of dissolution after the Compiègne Armistice and the revolution in Germany, it was decided here, as elsewhere, to set up volunteer units to secure the borders of the Reich and maintain internal order. These Freikorps continued to follow the orders of the *Oberste Heeresleitung* (Supreme Army Command), which had established the *Oberkommando Nord* (Northern High Command) in East Prussia. Command of the front in Courland was transferred to the General Command of the 6th Reserve Corps, which henceforth also supplied the *Baltische Landeswehr* in addition to the German volunteer formations, of which the *Eiserne Division* (Iron Division) was the largest.<sup>23</sup> The command itself was held by General Rüdiger

<sup>22</sup> Eine Note des Aussenministers Meierowitz an den deutschen Gesandten, 24.8.1919, LVVA, 2575. f., 20. apr., 3. l., 80–81.

<sup>23</sup> Wilhelm Lenz, “Deutsche Machtpolitik in Lettland im Jahre 1919. Ausgewählte Dokumente des von General Rüdiger von der Goltz geführten Generalkommandos des VI. Reservekorps,”

Graf von der Goltz, who had already proven himself in the fight against Bolshevism in Finland in the spring of 1918, and who arrived in Libau (Liepāja) in early February 1919. Von der Goltz was anything but satisfied with the army's new structures. For example, the general was not exactly a friend of volunteer recruitment, which – in his own words – brought “highly evil elements, even numerous Spartacist agitators in disguise into the troops”;<sup>24</sup> but which he had to accept as a necessary evil. But the undesirable politicisation was not the only problem regarding the moral integrity of the troops. Thus von der Goltz saw that “the ignoble desire to ‘make oneself healthy’ in a foreign country by plundering” was also among the main motives for recruitment in Courland.

This was not only problematic from a military point of view. Moreover, it did not in any way fit with the high demands that the general placed on his subordinates due to his political aspirations. They were not only to act as exemplary soldiers, but also to cultivate Courland as peasant settlers after the end of the fighting. Corresponding plans to found German peasant colonies went back to goals of German policy during and even before the World War. And even in 1919, these ideas were not only still extremely present in the German general staff,<sup>25</sup> but were also extensively advertised on leaflets for the soldiers<sup>26</sup> and were still being lively discussed in German newspapers during the summer months.<sup>27</sup> In this way, it had indeed been possible to recruit a large number of volunteers for service in Courland.

The only problem was that the military and political situation had changed significantly in the summer. The settlement plan, which had encouraged a substantial part of the German volunteers to fight in the Baltic, was based on a treaty between the German Plenipotentiary General

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*Zeitschrift für Ostforschung* 36, no 4 (1987): 525.

<sup>24</sup> General Graf Rüdiger von der Goltz, Generalkommando VI. Reservekorps, an die Anwerbestelle Baltenland, March 1919, Document 4 in Lenz, “Machtpolitik,” 540–543.

<sup>25</sup> See Documents 1–4 in Lenz, “Machtpolitik,” 535–543.

<sup>26</sup> Siedlungsmöglichkeiten im Osten, LVVA, 2575. f., 20. apr., 7. l., 87–91.

<sup>27</sup> Paul Otto Ebe, “Ein Aufnahmegebiet für unsere Auswanderung,” *Stuttgarter Neues Tageblatt*, 25 June 1919, LVVA, 2575. f., 20. apr., 7. l., 84–85.

and the Provisional Government of Latvia of 29 December 1918.<sup>28</sup> This treaty, which allowed German soldiers fighting in Latvia against the Red Army to apply for Latvian citizenship, formed the legal basis for the presence of German troops in Courland. So did the Compiègne Armistice Treaty,<sup>29</sup> which stipulated that German troops should maintain their posts in Eastern Europe, and dated from a time when the Provisional Government of Latvia had been unable to raise its own troops. Moreover, since the Entente was only prepared to intervene in the Baltic to a very limited extent, the military alliance came about with Germany, which for its part had little interest in a Bolshevisation of the areas so close to its borders.

It soon became apparent, however, that the parties involved had different objectives for the further shaping of Latvia. While the Entente states rather rejected a “resurgence of Germany as well as Russia in the Baltic region”<sup>30</sup> and supported the government of Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis, the German military and the former Baltic German elites were opposed to a Latvian nation state under the leadership of Ulmanis’ government. Since no other major military power was willing to intervene in Latvia, these forces tried to exploit the situation in their favour. Already one month before the capture of Riga, there had been a putsch in Libau by the Baltische Landeswehr, in which Ulmanis and his government had been able to save themselves by fleeing to a ship under British protection. Subsequently, the Baltic German leadership installed a new pro-German government under the chairmanship of the pastor Andrievs Niedra, which, however, received no support from the population.<sup>31</sup> The Entente naturally protested against this action and demanded the recall

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<sup>28</sup> Hans-Erich Volkmann, *Die russische Emigration in Deutschland 1919–1929* (Würzburg: Holzner, 1966), 63–64.

<sup>29</sup> The 12th article of the Armistice Treaty did provide that “all German troops at present in territories which before the war formed part of Russia must [---] return to within the frontiers of Germany”, but only “as soon as the Allies shall think the moment suitable, having regard to the internal situation of these territories”. “Conditions of the Armistice with Germany (November 11, 1918),” *German History in Documents and Images*, ed. German Historical Institute Washington DC, [http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage\\_id=5003](http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/docpage.cfm?docpage_id=5003), 2 February 2021.

<sup>30</sup> Rauch, *Geschichte*, 61.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

of General von der Goltz at the beginning of May – demands that the politically ambitious general was able to fend off. But even after the capture of Riga, the Entente still did not demand the evacuation of the German troops from the Baltic. Instead, on 23 May, it ordered the German government to “order and ensure the remaining of all German forces in Latvia and Lithuania”.<sup>32</sup> The protagonists in Courland and Riga, however, had more far-reaching plans. Instead of holding their positions or following the retreating Red Army to the east, the Landeswehr and German units turned north, where they clashed in tense conditions with Estonian formations that had advanced in their turn at the beginning of June. Now, the Inter-Allied Military Mission finally demanded a German withdrawal as well as the “removal of half of all German troops to Germany”.<sup>33</sup> General von der Goltz rejected this demand, whereby the coincidence of these events with the decisive days of the peace conference in Versailles is probably unsurprising. The general apparently firmly expected the German side to reject the peace terms, which would also have reordered the power-political situation in the East.<sup>34</sup> Under these circumstances, the battle of Wenden (Cēsis) took place on 22 June, which the Estonian forces – surprisingly for the German side – won. Thus, the tide had once again turned for the German troops. The signing of the Treaty of Versailles reinforced the perception of defeat. It also affected the protagonists in the Baltic, since the entry into force of Article 293 annulled not only the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk, but also the previous treaties between Germany and Latvia, which concerned the settlement intentions of the soldiers. With regard to the conflict between the German Army and the Republics of Estonia and Latvia, the Strasdenhof (Strazdumuiža) Armistice Treaty was concluded near Riga on 3 July. According to the provisions of this treaty, the Ulmanis government was reinstated. In addition, the Baltische Landeswehr was now placed under a British commander and transferred to the front against the Bolsheviks. The treaty also stip-

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted from Lenz, “Deutschbalten,” 26.

<sup>33</sup> Rauch, *Geschichte*, 63.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

ulated the imminent evacuation of the German troops from the Baltic, while Riga and Livonia were to be evacuated immediately.<sup>35</sup>

Of course, these developments did not leave the German soldiers unscathed. According to Vejas Liulevicius, the moment of the signing of the Treaty of Versailles removed the Freikorps fighters even further from reality than was already the case before:

“The Freikorps men were involved in wild plans, as they cast about for a mission from which a coherent identity might grow. They were already in the Baltikum when they heard of the signing of the Versailles Treaty. Without much sense of broader political and military realities, they had hoped negotiations would be broken off, allowing Germany to resume the war. They reacted to the signing with shame, grief, and anger, finally simply rejecting the news. [---] If their sense of the realities of the world had been weak before, ties with the outside were now broken off entirely. Germany became ‘a land without reality’ to them.”<sup>36</sup>

Due to this perceived break with the homeland, the prospect of building a new home in Courland gained importance: “The vision of settlement was a powerful one, promising a permanent and stable identity.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, the simultaneous announcement that the Latvian government was backing away from its promise to grant citizenship to foreign soldiers due to the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles came as a shock. Neither a large number of soldiers nor the army leadership were willing to comply with the now stipulated evacuation. Other solutions were needed to keep the German troops in the area. In this respect, it appeared to be a fortunate coincidence that three Russian volunteer units, which had been recruited in the previous months from German prisoner-of-war-camps, had arrived in the Baltic in the summer. In Mitau, where the headquarters of the German troops was still located, the volunteer corps Graf Keller under the leadership of Colonel Pavel Rafalovič (Michailovič) Bermond-Avalov took up quarters at the beginning of June. Their self-declared goal

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 63–64.

<sup>36</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 237–238.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.



was to intervene in the events of the Russian Civil War from the Baltic and to help liberate the Russian homeland from Bolshevism. For the decision-makers in the German military, the presence of the colonel and his soldiers gave them the opportunity to realise what had long been discussed as the *Russian option* in the General Staff. Already before the battle of Wenden, a corresponding trick had been used and the soldiers of the Iron Division had been allowed to enter the service of the Niedra government for two weeks. So now conditions were to be created under which the German Freikorps could place themselves under a Russian supreme command. First, however, a number of questions had to be clarified in this regard. For example, the possibility of equipping and financing such a Russian army in Latvia had to be discussed. Also of importance was the question of when a transfer of German formations should take place. And last but not least, it had to be clarified which Russian officer was at all suitable to take over the supreme command.

An unexpected problem for such German-Russian cooperation, however, was that the Russian volunteers in Courland did not exactly present themselves as elite soldiers either. Reports from the German General Command on conditions in the Russian units paint a less than confident picture. A report of 15 August, for example, complained about “the large number of parasites and dubious elements within the individual units”.<sup>38</sup> However, “a certain cleansing has begun in this respect, which also extends to the new recruits”. “Increasing order and proper propaganda, which is the private work of capable non-commissioned officers”, have led to an improvement in the mood. However, even a month later, the problems had obviously not been solved. Another report of 9 September mentions the poor conditions at all levels, “since there seems to be a lack of the necessary equipment and the responsible agencies have by no means done what had to be done in view of the overall threatening situation and what could have been done with good will”.<sup>39</sup> The report saw the lack of organisation as being rooted in the Russian way of being:

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<sup>38</sup> Bericht, 15.8.1919, DSHI Generalkommando 4, 132–133.

<sup>39</sup> Meldung über die russischen Truppen in Mitau, 9.9.1919 Document 4 in Lenz, “Macht-politik,” 573–575.

“This lack of achievement is due in part to the chancery economy that prevails in the Russian departments and the long process of going through the channels, which inhibits the entire organisation and is likely to paralyse it completely in the near future. The lack of dedication to the cause of all leading circles is to blame for this, and, apart from the well-known Russian slovenliness, also a thoroughly careless treatment of the entire matter on the part of the officer corps.”

The officer corps in particular was “in no way aware of its very great responsibility under today’s conditions and, unbelievably, for the most part completely unoriented about the general political and military situation”. This also had an effect on the soldiers, who could “not be given any information about the situation”. If political convictions were expressed, they were obviously not helpful either: “The repeated and public stressing of the monarchist idea on the part of the officers is [---] completely out of place”. Political passivity was not the only problem, however:

“The almost unbelievable drinking and raving within the officer corps, which often degenerates into bad behaviour even on the street, is [---] known from the past, but is [---] nevertheless very unpleasant.”

The author of the report feared repercussions on the general morale:

“Even if all these phenomena have not yet undermined discipline, the confidence and mood of the troops has already suffered not insignificantly”. Therefore, he called for stronger discipline: “In the interest of the cause, much greater self-discipline must be demanded of the officer corps, for the prospect of an unchanged old lottery economy can and must depress the soldier and also undermine the whole structure in the long run.”

Incidentally, the problem did not only affect the officers. Also the recruitment of new soldiers was not to the satisfaction of the German authorities, who criticised “the inadequate selection of new recruits, which has made and still makes possible the entry of all kind of dark elements (including officers) – there are already detachments consisting almost entirely of unsuitable personalities”. Cooperation in particular proved difficult:

“The lack of capable organisers, devoted to the cause and familiar with the milieu, on both the German and Russian sides, is becoming more and more noticeable, and it seems more and more as if, due to a lack of contact, the reins of the enterprise are slipping away from the leading German hand.”

This was also evident from the lack of discipline on the German side:

“The behaviour of the German officers unfortunately differs little from that of the Russian officers and is often completely unqualified – for example, they are no longer afraid to address ladies in public in an improper manner. The wildest drinking [---] has also become alarmingly prevalent here, and this sets an example to the people that makes it completely impossible for the lower ranks to influence them in a good way, especially since the fulfilment of official duties is often severely affected by this activity. Of course, when admonished, the enlisted men always refer to the example of the officers. It is therefore no wonder that the troops are already claiming that the immorality of the officers is demoralising the troops by design.”

Another problem was that there were no German liaison officers in the Russian departments “who have an insight to their inner lives, are fully conversant in the Russian language and are familiar with Russian politics”. The report urgently called for changes:

“In any case, one gets the impression that German control of the Russian departments is almost non-existent. All these shortcomings must be remedied quickly and through close and constant personal contact if the German-Russian enterprise is not to be nipped in the bud or slip into other hands, both of which would mean a great embarrassment for us.”

Despite all the problems, it is clear from these statements that by the beginning of September there had obviously been progress on the question of the implementation of the Russian option. In fact, the individual Russian units had in the meantime become the West Russian Volunteer Army, to which numerous German forces also belonged.

## United in disobedience – The formation of the West Russian Volunteer Army

After the conclusion of the Treaty of Strasdenhof, Rüdiger von der Goltz had begun to pave the way for appropriate cooperation and to seek support from German governmental and military authorities whose approval he considered necessary. In this regard, he stressed the necessity that only German troops could provide protection against the Red Army. According to the state of affairs at the time, this was only possible under the Russian flag. The Oberkommando Nord shared this view and, in communication to the German Ministry of Finance on 1 August, urged that the Russian units continue to receive financial support from the German side.<sup>40</sup>

In this way, short-term financing was assured. However, the extent to which it would be possible to finance a German-Russian army from German government funds in the long term was questionable. For this reason, other sources of money had to be found. In this, the Baltic German political circles played an important role. Especially the former Land Marshal of the Livonian Knighthood Adolph Baron Pilar von Pilchau tried to support the contemplated military enterprise by building political cooperation. On 22 July, he had initiated the founding of the Military-Political Council for West Russia in Berlin, which was henceforth to be “the sole representative of Russia’s interests with regard to questions of the Western Front vis-à-vis the foreign powers and military and state centres of Russia recognised by them.”<sup>41</sup> In addition, it was to pool financial as well as political support for the opening of a new western front in the Russian Civil War. Pilar von Pilchau made it clear that the newly formed states in the Baltic were not to play too great a role in these plans:

“We are of the opinion that only those who do not know the country and its people can believe in the viability of the independent republics of Eesti and Latwija, which are protected by the Entente. We foresee

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<sup>40</sup> Volkmann, *Emigration*, 68–69.

<sup>41</sup> Protokoll der Sitzung des Militärpolitischen Rates Westrußlands am 10. August 1919, Document 9 in Lenz, “Machtropolitik,” 558–559.

*Baron Adolph (Alf) Pilar von  
Pilchau (1851–1925), Land  
Marshal of Livonian Knighthood in  
1908–1918. RA, EAA.1850.1.835.1*



that these dwarf republics, created and led by national chauvinists, will perish miserably after having plunged the inhabitants into the greatest misery through senseless socialist experiments vividly reminiscent of Bolshevism.”<sup>42</sup>

So while the general direction of the political program was clear, the Council’s core task of securing financial resources was not to be achieved. Therefore, Rüdiger von der Goltz became personally active in the matter and travelled to Kolberg, Weimar and Berlin in mid-August to coordinate with both military authorities and the German government. As a result, he was able to obtain transitional funding for the month of September for both the German troops and the Russian units. However, a further assumption of payments was out of the question.<sup>43</sup> While von der Goltz had thus temporarily left Mitau for this purpose, facts were created here in another way concerning the transfer of German formations to Russian

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<sup>42</sup> Quoted from Lenz, “Deutschbalten,” 33.

<sup>43</sup> Volkmann, *Emigration*, 70.

service. The possibility of the Russian option had already spread among the troops immediately after the Strasdenhof armistice and was actively discussed by the volunteers.<sup>44</sup> The mood among the troops, many of whom categorically rejected the idea of evacuation and insisted on keeping the promise of settlement, did not go unnoticed by General von der Goltz, who addressed the soldiers on this matter several times and urged them to be prudent. As early as 13 July, a corps order stated: “Every day, countless individuals and entire formations report to the General Command with the request whether they should transfer to the Russian divisions being formed here in order to fight in them for the liberation of Latvia from Bolshevism.”<sup>45</sup>

In this regard, it was emphasised that in principle “the Russian formations should be given every reinforcement and support by us for their task”. Therefore, “there is already no objection to the transfer of individuals, provide they leave their unit in an orderly manner”. However, it was pointed out that such a process would take place at “one’s own risk” of losing the German citizenship. The general expressed a different opinion on the transfer of entire units:

“Under no circumstances, however, is it permitted for closed formations to leave now. As long as we are here in the country, we must be prepared for an attack by the Latvians and Estonians at any moment. Every departure of a formation therefore means a weakening that can become disastrous. Of course, no troop leader can dispose of his weapons and equipment without the permission of the General Command.”

He stressed that after the decision to vacate the country, “the transfer, even of entire formations, will be supported to a large extent” – “provided that their future is also sufficiently secured financially”. Furthermore, the realisation of the plans also depended on the Russian side:

“The General Command can only consider the moment of transfer to the Russian formations to have come when the Russian leaders are in a position to pay the German volunteers and when it can be seen whether

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<sup>44</sup> Lenz, “Deutschbalten,” 29.

<sup>45</sup> Korpsbefehl Generalkommando VI. Res.Korps., 13.7.1919, LVVA, 2575. f., 20. apr., 7. l., 82.

the promises made by the Russian leaders will find their support in a future Russian government which is willing to keep these promises.”

Until these conditions were not met, “the transfer of entire formations without the permission of the General Command was prohibited”.

Such declarations and orders, however, could not prevent facts from being created by the troops themselves – or rather by a particular troop leader. On 23 August, the Iron Division, the largest association of German Freikorps, mutinied and refused the evacuation order issued at that time.<sup>46</sup> The commander of the Iron Division, Major Josef Bischoff, justified his high-handed action in a letter to his soldiers with the withdrawal of the settlement promise by the Latvian government and the lack of support for the soldiers in this matter by the German government: “I therefore consider it my duty now to uphold these rights of the troops myself. I will stand up with my whole person for their fulfilment. I have therefore forbidden the removal of the division to Germany.”<sup>47</sup>

Bischoff took full responsibility for this action, although he stressed:

“My move is not directed against the [German] government. I do not want to make a counter-revolution. But I will see to it that my troops receive what they have been promised, and as they have – heaven knows – deserved.”

However, he also made a number of demands, the fulfilment of which apparently made him willing to comply with the eviction order. These included securing employment for some of the officers and enlisted men of the Iron Division in the new Reichswehr and in the police, a salary and rations for further three months, the “fulfilment of the promise of settlement in Germany” and the “assurance of complete impunity for all officers, non-commissioned officers and enlisted men of the division who are merely acting on orders, an order for which I take full responsibility”. In addition, the list contained the demand that the division be placed together on the East Prussian border: “If then in winter or next spring Bolshevism appears again in the Baltic, the division will be ready to fight

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<sup>46</sup> Wilhelm Lenz, “Die Bermond-Affaire 1919,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 15, no 1 (1984): 19.

<sup>47</sup> Eiserne Division, 23.8.1919, LVVA, 2575. f., 20. apr., 7. l., 86.

it". These were demands that the German government obviously could not meet.

These developments, which led to the transfer of German formations under Russian supreme command, raise a number of questions: Does the mutiny of the Iron Division qualify as an act of warlordism? And how should one assess the role of the decisive persons in this development, Josef Bischoff and Rüdiger von der Goltz? Must these two individuals, for their part, not already be considered warlords of the Baltic region with their supposedly high-handed actions? Here, two strong military men obviously prepared the way for the formation of the West Russian Volunteer Army and the ensuing events, even before the supposed warlord Bermond-Avalov assumed supreme command. Did Bischoff and von der Goltz fulfil the criteria, as defined by Sanborn, to be considered warlords? Were they "military commander(s) who autonomously exercise(d) political power through the threatening use of force";<sup>48</sup> "men with military experience, sufficient individual authority to inspire obedience on the part of their men at arms, political ambition, interest in civilian affairs and a high tolerance for risk"?

Let us start with General Rüdiger von der Goltz: As has become clear from what we have gathered so far, he was an officer with great experience and decidedly political ambitions.<sup>49</sup> He was also definitely prepared to enforce his claims even by using force, although he always pretended to be guided in his actions only by military necessities and his mission to establish order. Despite the indiscipline of the soldiers, one gets the impression from studying the sources that the general was regarded as an undisputed authority in Courland and that his word carried weight in all cases.<sup>50</sup> The fact that the Iron Division ultimately mutinied against

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<sup>48</sup> Sanborn, "Genesis," 197–198.

<sup>49</sup> The fact that he still liked to propagate a corresponding self-image later on is shown not least by the title of the second version of his memoirs "As a Political General in the East": Rüdiger Graf von der Goltz, *Als politischer General im Osten (Finnland und Baltikum) 1918 und 1919* (Leipzig: Koehler, 1936).

<sup>50</sup> The Reichswehr Group Command III paid tribute to him with these words when he was recalled from the Baltic: "The spirit of patriotism and the sense of duty that enabled your numerically often outnumbered troops to achieve these feats was mostly owed to you [---]. How much the troop itself felt this, it proved to you through the trust placed in you. Respected,



his explicit instructions is of less importance in this context. Rather, it cannot be ruled out that in this way things had developed exactly in the direction intended by the general, but that no active participation in the breach of law could be proven against him – as had already been the case four months earlier with the coup in Libau. Moreover, such actions demonstrated von der Goltz's willingness to take risks, which he necessarily had to display and which was sometimes based on gross misjudgements of the political situation – as in the case of the wrongly anticipated rejection of the German signature on the Treaty of Versailles.

Overall, von der Goltz clearly played more than a military role and pursued the implementation of his own political agenda based on the goal of saving Germany's war aims in Eastern Europe. In doing so, he was concerned with far more than just fighting Bolshevism and securing Germany's borders, to which his mission was actually limited. Thus, he hindered the Latvian government wherever he could in his ambition to keep Courland within the German sphere of influence. In doing so, he skilfully adapted to the constantly changing conditions and thus repeatedly evaded the enforcement of the Entente's demand for his resignation. Only as soon as this step became absolutely unavoidable did he initiate the transfer of formations under Russian supreme command. There is no reason to doubt that the thoughts written down in the general's memoirs published in 1920 would not in fact have been the guiding maxims of his actions in 1919:

“At the same time, however, what could still be saved from the unfortunate outcome of the war had to be salvaged. Germany was the victor in the East. [---] Why should it not still be possible to pursue the Eastern policy prevented in August 1918 together with the ‘White’ Russians in some modified, adaptable form under the banner of fighting the Bolsheviks [---]? Why should it not be possible above all to initiate an economic and political rapprochement with the coming Russia? To the Russia which, after the slaughter of its own intelligentsia, hungered

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loved and revered as only rarely a leader is, you were the strong head that inspired the troop, which was composed so differently, with a unified spirit and enabled it to achieve so much.“  
Estorff an von der Goltz, 8.10.1919, DSHI 120 Generalkommando 5, 16–16v.

for German merchants, technicians, leaders, whose devastated, deserted peripheral provinces demanded industrious German farmers for its fertile soil? In this way, work and bread could be provided for many of those who had become homeless in the occupied and later ceded territories, but especially for my soldiers who had been recruited with the promise of settlement: Russia could no longer raise the objections it had before the war.”<sup>51</sup>

And yet there are also arguments that at least limit this image of an autonomously acting, politically ambitious and risk-taking protagonist. For example, it must be acknowledged that von der Goltz, for all his independent actions, was a fervent advocate of the classical army structure with its hierarchies, and he usually seemed to coordinate his actions with his superior command, while not openly resisting instructions to the contrary. He was obviously not a friend of the new developments that had so permanently upset the way the army functioned and also limited the enforcement of his command over the soldiers.

The developments that led to the transfer of German troops under Russian supreme command revealed that for all his obstinacy and revolutionary nature in his actions, he always carefully implemented his plan step by step and was always in dialogue with the Supreme Army Command and the German government. Of course, he was aware that the Entente still had leverage against an overly bold and aggressive approach on his part, such as the repeatedly threatened invasion of Germany. This represented an effective means of pressure for the general’s sense of patriotic duty. In the end, the impression prevails that his actions and decisions were not completely detached from the framework set by the circumstances. It is true that his decisions and actions were characterised by a strong individualism and a constant testing and pushing of boundaries. However, he did not obviously overstep these limits and the guidelines set for him, and he secured his position with his superiors on the essential points, as one would certainly not expect from a warlord. Moreover, he

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<sup>51</sup> Rüdiger Graf von der Goltz, *Meine Sendung in Finnland und im Baltikum* (Leipzig: Koehler, 1920), 127.

finally complied with his dismissal – albeit, of course, only after a long delay, while he had clarified the further development in his favour.

And Josef Bischoff? At first glance, he too could be considered a warlord. He too was an officer with great experience, had a close bond with his troops and showed his willingness to take risks when he instigated the rebellion of his soldiers. However, even in his case it is difficult to assess the situation in a clear-cut way. In Bischoff's case, too, it can be observed that he only started the mutiny when it became clear that the German government would not veto it and would secure the action financially, at least in the short term. Thus, he only accelerated the corresponding development. Taking into account the detailed demands he made for the benefit of his people, it can furthermore be assumed that a subjective understanding of justice was indeed the primary cause of his actions – and not the intention to appear as a political protagonist.

All in all, one must make an ambivalent judgement as to whether these two military men were warlords of the Baltic region. The actions of both individuals obviously bore certain signs of warlordism, but they were also not completely detached from the limits imposed on them by those whom they considered to be their political authority. Although their actions were extremely risky, both were also in constant dialogue with their superiors and usually obeyed orders given. In addition to being dependent on the support of the Supreme Army Command and the German government, on which in turn the Entente exerted great pressure, they were also dependent on the financial and political support of the Baltic German politicians. Neither of the two officers attempted to come to power via a coup. Rather, they used the positions to which they had been formally appointed to enforce their understanding of patriotic tasks and responsibility for their troops.

Thus, with due caution regarding the use of the term warlord, they should rather be denied this label. A corresponding assessment should, of course, neither trivialise nor justify the actions of the individuals. Instead, this judgement pleads for a closer look in future at the power structures within which von der Goltz and Bischoff operated – which is aimed not least at the self-image of the German authorities and army leadership. Obviously, the boundaries set by the government were so soft and spongy

that military leaders like von der Goltz or Bischoff could quite effortlessly act beyond their competence without being held accountable. Thus, they only broke these boundaries with deliberation as soon as the consequences that would result from such action were foreseeable. The reasons for the weak position taken by the social democratic government on this issue cannot be the subject of this article, nor can the extreme polarisation of political public opinion that it brought about, not only in Germany.

Regardless of whether one calls the protagonists warlords, it is undisputed that the departure of General Rüdiger von der Goltz and the transfer of the Iron Division to Russian supreme command once again changed the rules of the game according to which the protagonists in Courland acted. The events not only meant a break with the official command hierarchy of the German military, but also a general departure from the previously held claim that the German military should act as a force of order in the region. Did this open up the structures so that the field was now prepared for an autonomous warlord? A corresponding indicator would be that also the second factor that contributed to the founding of the West Russian Volunteer Army was due to the disobedience of another ambitious officer – Colonel Bermond-Avalov.

Also the Russian forces, which were now joined by the Iron Division and other German units, were actually no longer supposed to be in Courland. On 9 July, the White General Nikolaj Nikolaevič Judenič, who was formally in command of all Russian units in the Baltic, had given the order to embark for Narva. There all units were to join Judenič's offensive on Petrograd.<sup>52</sup> While Prince Anatol Pavlovič Lieven, who was in supreme command of the Russian troops in Courland and thus also of the formations recruited in Germany at his instigation at the time,<sup>53</sup> followed the order, by no means all of the Russian officers did so. Colonel Bermond-Avalov refused to comply with this order and remained in Mitau with his corps Graf Keller. In this way, he assumed command of all units remaining in Courland and became the first point of contact for the German General Command in all questions concerning German-Russian

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<sup>52</sup> Volkmann, *Emigration*, 67.

<sup>53</sup> Rittmeister von Rosenberg, *Die Bildung russischer nationaler Formationen an der baltischen Front* (Russische Korrespondenz, 1920).

cooperation.<sup>54</sup> But this step did not at once settle all conflict over the question of leadership of the Russian forces, and the process that had made Bermond-avalov the most powerful Russian officer in Mitau was anything but uncontroversial. Especially when the transfer of the German formations began to promise an actual position of military power, Bermond-avalov had to prepare himself for headwinds. There was certainly no lack of politically ambitious Russian officers who had taken up positions in Berlin or Mitau over the summer to spearhead the opening of a new western front of the civil war. In addition to General of the Cavalry Vasilij Viktorovič Biskupskij and the former Chief of the General Staff of the Tsarist Army Vasilij Iosifovič Gurko, Colonel Evgenij Pavlovič Vyrigolič, who had assembled another corps from former prisoners of war in Germany in the spring and was stationed in the north of Lithuania, also pursued corresponding intentions. The circumstance of the embattled supreme command led to the fact that “in the months of August and September 1919, Mitau briefly became one of the centres, along with Paris and Berlin, for the political and military planning of the Western Russian émigré groups”.<sup>55</sup> Various politicians and military officers appeared here either motivated to support Bermond-avalov in preparing an offensive against the Red Army or to undermine his position on the ground.

In this dispute, General Gurko represented the most serious and obvious choice for the supreme command of a new front of the Russian civil war. However, the general seemed to want to wait and see to what extent the enterprise actually promised serious possibilities of success and was ultimately not available. Colonel Bermond-avalov was not the preferred candidate because of his inadequate military qualifications. However, due to the position of power he had acquired on the ground in Mitau, he was able to fend off the intrigues of Biskupskij, who would have been only too happy to take over the position and had the support of the Military Political Council in Berlin. While von der Goltz emphasised in this respect that he “did not want to interfere in internal Russian affairs”,<sup>56</sup> it was ultimately

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<sup>54</sup> Lenz, “Bermond-avalov-Affaire,” 19.

<sup>55</sup> Lenz, “Deutschbalten,” 29.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

his personal decision that led to Bermondts's appointment. A choice that was probably also due to the fact that Bermondts had already fully integrated himself into the German structures.<sup>57</sup>

As a result, on 21 September von der Goltz concluded a contract with Bermondts "for the purpose of transferring the supreme command from German to Russian hands"<sup>58</sup> after the withdrawal of the German troops. This contract stipulated that the "Russian troops [---] were to take over a section of the front between Mitau and Riga and [---] thus the protection of the removal of the troops remaining to Germany". In the event of an attack, they were guaranteed the help of the "German forces still available". Furthermore, it was stated that binding contracts were to be concluded with the "Germans voluntarily remaining behind" and that the Russian High Command would "take over the governorate of Mitau and the German army installations against receipt on a date to be determined". Delicately, despite the previous break with Biskupskij and the émigré groups in Berlin, Bermondts also undertook "in the interest of the treaties to be concluded with the Germans, to comply with the political and economic directives of the Russian Military-Political Council in Berlin and in future to carry out his activities only in the closest agreement with it". The German government, namely Minister of Defence Gustav Noske, gave its approval to this arrangement in a telegram on 26 September:

"The Reichswehr Minister agrees with the proposal of General Graf Goltz, which provides for the transfer of command at Mitau to the Russians and calls for a decision by the German troops as to whether they a) wish to enter Russian service at their own risk b) wish to return to Germany on orders by rail or on foot. The orders to this effect are to be issued. The troops are to be informed that those who do not leave on the date ordered can no longer be paid from German funds. If the evacuation is delayed any further, the Americans threaten to take the most severe economic measures, blocking food supplies, refusing the loan."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>58</sup> Quoted from Volkmann, *Emigration*, 70.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted from *ibid.*, 71.

When von der Goltz was finally recalled on 3 October, he also formally handed over command to Bermond.

## **Pavel Bermond-avalov and the attack on Riga – rise and fall of a warlord?**

The developments described up to this point really suggest that we are dealing with a warlord. Bermond had defied the command hierarchy of the White movement on his own authority, asserted himself against a multitude of rivals for the supreme command of the army and now had an imposing army behind him.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, the colonel soon published a political programme of principles for a state reorganisation of Western Russia. When the West Russian Volunteer Army finally attempted to take Riga from the Latvian army in an attack on 8 October, he became notorious overnight.

This direct military confrontation had its origins in the tensions that had steadily increased between the government of Latvia and the German-Russian forces in Mitau since the Strasdenhof Armistice Treaty. The Latvian government insisted on carrying out the evacuation of Latvian territory from German and Russian troops. It also protested vehemently against the continuing terror of the occupying forces against the civilian population in Courland. In contrast to the first half of 1919, it could now do so from a strong position. The Armistice Treaty had strengthened the government politically. Moreover, it was now finally in a position to systematically raise its own troops. Last but not least, the proven Latvian forces from the *Baltische Landeswehr* under Colonel Jānis Balodis had now also come under the command of the Latvian Minister of War. In addition, the Battle of Wenden had shown that one could rely on the support of Estonian troops in the event of a threat. Of course, this new self-confidence did not go unnoticed by the members of the West Russian Volunteer Army. At the end of September, rumours of an immi-

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<sup>60</sup> The exact figures of the army's strength are still disputed. The figure of 50,000 soldiers that usually appears in research is probably too high.

nent Latvian offensive increased within the German and Russian units. Accordingly documented skirmishes at the demarcation line were probably started from both sides.

In this tense situation, Bermondts demanded in early October that the Latvian government allow his units to cross Latvian territory so that they could intervene in the war with the Red Army in eastern Latvia. The Latvian government refused this request for understandable reasons. Bermondts responded in his own way and ordered the attack on Riga. The Latvian government's refusal to comply with his demand was only one of many reasons that led to this decision, as will be shown.

Initially, however, this military enterprise was also connected to the proclamation of a political programme with which the commander-in-chief tried to explain his intentions and actions to the Latvian people. This programme indicates that Bermondts was also concerned with establishing order in his own particular sense. To this end, he had an appeal distributed in Latvian, Russian and German at the beginning of October. In it he declared to "all inhabitants" that he, as a "representative of the Russian power" had "taken over the administration and protection of the Latvian territory on 21 August of this year after the withdrawal of the German troops".<sup>61</sup> He announced that in future he would "not permit any disturbance of order, nor any attacks on persons or property, whoever it may belong to". He also pleaded for ideals of equality and united action for the common good:

"I call upon all, without distinction of nationality, party or creed, to return to peaceful activity and to submit in all things to the authorities appointed and confirmed by me, bearing in mind that that Russian sovereignty has always endeavoured for the welfare and prosperity of the country and had helped it to peace in the course of long years."

He thus invoked memories of the Russian Empire whose supposedly peaceful times he intended to restore. This was to be achieved by military means:

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<sup>61</sup> Allen Einwohnern, DSHI 120 Generalkommando 4, 24. (It is unclear to which event Bermondts refers here when he mentions the date 21 August.)



“The army I have raised is going into battle against the Bolsheviks, the worst enemies of the people – with whom villains are ready to make peace – in order to free Russia from their slave yoke. I call upon the people to support me in my enterprise with all their strength and not to listen to the whispers from the [---] enemies of freedom and culture.”

The “villains ready to make peace” mentioned here could of course only be the governments of Latvia and Estonia.

He also made clear that he had far-reaching plans for the further state development of Western Russia: “In the Latvian territories occupied by me, I will make all the preparations necessary for self-determination in accordance with the wishes of the population”. What exactly such self-determination meant in Bermond’s understanding remains to be discussed.

In another proclamation of 14 October, this time addressed to his own troops, Bermond specified how he envisaged the development of a new state order in Latvia:

“Do not believe the false rumours that the West Russian Volunteer Army has come to Latvia to re-establish the rule of the barons. No and again no! In Latvia’s self-government, two-thirds of the votes are given to the Latvians. Do not believe the fairy tales according to which I want to turn Latvia into a Russian governorate. This is not true, because this question cannot be solved by me, all the more so because the Entente takes the view that this matter can only be settled by the Russian National Assembly in conjunction with representatives of the Latvian people.”<sup>62</sup>

Once again he stressed the need to combine all forces to fight Bolshevism:

“I am pursuing only one goal and I will not be diverted from it. My aim is the struggle with Bolshevism until its final destruction. Whoever wants to help me in this struggle will be Russia’s friend and Russia will not forget her friends. But whoever will be an obstacle to me in this struggle is an enemy of Russia, and the time is not far distant when Russia will crush her enemies.”

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<sup>62</sup> Proklamation an die Avallof-Truppen, 14.10.1919, DSHI 120 Generalkommando 4, 5–6.



*The seat of the the Latvian Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Finance and State Audit Office in Riga after the battles. October 1919. Nowadays the seat of the Bank of Latvia. RA, EFA.114.A.253.810*

For him, anyone who professed recognition of the autonomy of the Baltic states seemed to belong precisely to that kind of “enemies of Russia”, even if they were undoubtedly anti-Bolshevik Russian military officers. Accordingly, he explained his refusal to obey Judenič’s orders with his patriotic understanding of duty:

“General Judenič and the North-West Government attached to him, which was formed at the instigation of the Entente, have already recognised the independence of the small republics of Estonia, Latvia and others, which are governed by governments pursuing a vacillating policy and are ready to break off the struggle with the Bolsheviks. Such a direction cannot count on the support of all truly Russian elements whose aim is the complete annihilation of Bolshevism and the re-establishment of a strong Russian Empire. The fulfilment of General Judenič’s order to

vacate Courland would remove this country from Russian influence and would favour the rapid development of Bolshevism.”

Thus, it was not only military-strategic necessities that had forbidden him to dissolve the front in Courland, but he also fundamentally invoked the fact that the “interests of Russia forbid the separation of the Baltic, which secures Russia the exit to the sea and whose interests have been connected with Russia from time immemorial”. These interests were also based on Bermond’s personal alliances: “It should be noted that the troops of the Western Army and the administration are supported by the local population of the Baltic Germans and Latvians, who see a favourable future for the Baltic States in a close affiliation with Russia.”

Bermond immediately put this political programme into practice after receiving the supreme command. This was expressed in particular in the establishment of a West Russian Central Council, which took on a similar function as the Military Political Council in Berlin and was charged with the administration of the occupation area. In addition, the provision of supplies and the financing of the army were among the tasks of the Central Council – both of which were by now more than difficult undertakings due to international pressure. In fact, however, initial successes were apparently recorded through a certain amount of support by the German arms industry.<sup>63</sup> However, since the funds were not sufficient to fully equip and pay for the army, the procurement of alternative sources of finance was necessary, as Hans-Erich Volkmann describes:

“Therefore the West Russian Council decided to print money [---], which was covered by the army stocks. This ‘Bermond money’, which appeared with Russian and German inscriptions, contrary to the expectations, acquired purchasing power in the military operational area as a kind of promissory note.”<sup>64</sup>

All in all, the picture that emerges here is that of an autonomous military entrepreneur who attempted to translate his position of regional power

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<sup>63</sup> Volkmann, *Emigration*, 71–72.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

based on military strength into a claim to political influence. Since he was met with only mistrust by his adversary in Riga, he decided to resolve the conflict by military means. For this purpose, among others, he also made a special effort to establish close ties with his soldiers, from whom he demanded unconditional loyalty in return.

However, much of this assessment cannot stand up to closer scrutiny. To begin with the acquisition of the supreme command: of course, Bermondts had put himself in the best position to take over the command in Courland by refusing to obey Judenič's orders. In the end, however, he achieved this goal primarily by ingratiating himself with von der Goltz, who appreciated the officer's less-than-honed profile. Thus, the mere formal act of transferring the supreme command (with the consent of the German government at that) does not correspond to the autonomous action one would expect from a warlord. Besides, von der Goltz was not the only person on whom Bermondts was immensely dependent. The decision to attack Riga, too, was not so much due to the supposed intrepidity and boldness of the commander-in-chief, but rather to his Baltic German advisors who pushed for it.<sup>65</sup> Thus one of Bermondts's advisors in Mitau, Eduard Baron Nolcken, commented on the attack on Riga with the words: "No one here was inclined to give up the game as long as one still had a trump card, such as military superiority, in one's hand."<sup>66</sup> However, the situation was complicated by the fact that this "trump card" was actually the last card still in hand. The German government's financing of the West Russian Volunteer Army had expired at the end of September. A new source of funds had not yet been found. Therefore, quick military successes were needed to keep the troops together.<sup>67</sup> Thus, the seemingly bold attack on Riga must be seen more as an act of desperation, born out of the inability to find other solutions to the manifold problems. Even in military matters, Bermondts was still extremely dependent on the German military leaders around Josef Bischoff, who continued to be responsible for military strategy. Bermondts himself would probably not have had the necessary skills if one takes his at best mediocre military career as a yard-

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<sup>65</sup> Lenz, "Bermondts-Affaire," 20.

<sup>66</sup> Quoted from Lenz, "Deutschbalten," 36.

<sup>67</sup> Lenz, "Bermondts-Affaire," 20.



*Colonel Pavel Bermond-Avalov and his staff officers. LKM S-692-n*

stick.<sup>68</sup> Even the political programme that was so pompously proclaimed under his name did not seem to stem from his initiative. Konstantin Graf von der Pahlen, who had taken the chair in the Mitau Central Council, informed Pilar von Pilchau in Berlin on 3 October:

“We have formed here a ‘Central Council for Western Russia’, a designation taken from Denikin’s army. A ministry à la Ulmanis or Esti or Judenič would have been ridiculous. [---] Bermond is also issuing an appeal to the population in the next few days, which I have written. Thus the beginning of the Russian set-up has become perfect.”<sup>69</sup>

As it transpires, Bermond had little to say in political matters also. It becomes clear: even if the contemporary press met this eccentric Russian

<sup>68</sup> Igor’ Varinov, Ivan Strelkov (Игорь Баринов, Иван Стрелков), “Kto vy, knjaz’ Avalov? Portret političeskogo avantjurista vremen Graždanskoj vojny v Rossii” (“Кто вы, князь Ава-лов?” Портрет политического авантюриста времен Гражданской войны в России), *Forum novejšej vostočnoevropejskoj istorii i kultury* (Форум новейшей восточноевропейской истории и культуры) 2 (2017): 141–144.

<sup>69</sup> Pahlen an Pilar von Pilchau, 3.10.1919, DSHI 190 LivSta 88, 1–2.

officer with the greatest curiosity and not least lively discussed his obscure biography, he was certainly no warlord of the Baltic. Assessments to the contrary are probably due not least to the narrative that he himself created in his highly detailed but also imaginative memoirs.<sup>70</sup> It is much more accurate to call Bermondts a puppet.<sup>71</sup> He was not a fig leaf for certain particular interests, but rather a puppet for anyone who had an interest in maintaining the conflict in the Baltic: the Baltic German elite who did not want to lose their property and influence to a new government; the German military, which wanted to save the lost World War at least in the East; the Freikorps members, who wanted to live on the dream of the settler soldiers and did not want to give up their promised clod in Courland. Of all things, the aspect of the enterprise that could really be considered Bermondts's personal concern – anchoring the army as an integral part of the white movement – turned out to be particularly unsustainable. In fact, with his refusal to obey orders, Bermondts contributed his own part to the failure of the counter-revolutionary undertakings – and Judenič declared him publicly a traitor for it. “Denikin and Kolčak, to whom he tried to explain his actions, seem to have shown no reaction whatsoever”.<sup>72</sup>

All these tendencies are confirmed by a detailed report, which an unnamed colonel of Bermondts's general staff gave to the consular representation of the Latvian government in Berlin on 22 November. According to his own account, the colonel had shortly before resigned from his service in Courland after he, like many other members of the Russian volunteer units, had “seen through the true intentions of Bermondts's enterprise”.<sup>73</sup> The colonel emphasised that the volunteers recruited in the POW camps in Germany had been systematically deceived about the intention of the undertaking:

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<sup>70</sup> [Avalov, Pavel], *Im Kampfe gegen den Bolschewismus. Erinnerungen von General Fürst Awaloff. Oberbefehlshaber der deutsch-russischen Westarmee im Baltikum* (Glückstadt und Hamburg: Augustin, 1925).

<sup>71</sup> This conclusion was already reached at the time, for example in the Inter-Allied Baltic Commission; Lenz, “Bermondts-Affaire,” 18.

<sup>72</sup> Lenz, “Bermondts-Affaire,” 20.

<sup>73</sup> Aus einer Unterredung mit NN. Oberst des Bermondtschen Generalstabes, 22.11.1919, LVVA, 2575. f., 20, apr., 7. l., 59–68.

“They were made to believe that they were being led against the Bolsheviks and that in a very short time they would each be able to return home. Courland was to be only a transit station for concentration. The Russians had no idea of the real plans, they were deceived all along and dragged into the Bermond-avalov adventure against their will. Exceptions were a few individual officers.”

The report also confirms that the action was a German affair:

“Bermond-avalov was only a straw man of the German masterminds, and the Russian officers who were in on it were only willing tools for German purposes. [...] Russians were only appointed to the administrative posts that were exposed to the outside world. Since few Russians were available here, ‘German Russians’ were taken, i.e. Baltic German barons who had been in Russian service and were outwardly considered Russians, but in reality were typical representatives of the interests of the Baltic German nobility clique.”

He also spoke about the financial agreements with German industrial circles:

“There were special trade and finance departments at Bermond-avalov’s staff for the economic exploitation of the occupied territories. The occupied and still-to-be-occupied territory was divided into district units. Each captured district unit had to be exploited according to plan: all raw materials and economic products were to be requisitioned, mobilised and transferred to Germany. In return, the German interest groups provided the corresponding finances and sold German industrial products in the conquered territory.”

The army’s action would thus have initiated goals of a “German economic tutelage of Russia”. He also confirmed that the German officers continued to command the action: “The supreme power of command was entirely in the hands of the Germans and also, for example, the plan of taking Riga was worked out by the Germans. Even all the orders and announcements were written by the Germans and then translated into Russian.”

Thus von der Goltz would also have been involved in the plans and even the local German state authorities would have been very accom-

modating: “The German legation and officials behaved very benevolently, even if they seemed officially neutral, they were privately most interested and spoke of the Bermondts enterprise as the ‘common cause.’ From the German side, the opinion was spread that the official orders of the German government should not be taken seriously.”

The descriptions show that the behaviour of the soldiers in Courland had also changed little for the better in the meantime:

“The characteristic and the motives of the German troops in Courland are rapacity and vindictiveness. One can certainly describe 80% of the German soldiers as robbers. There were regular organised gangs of robbers, in which officers also took part. If the robbers were arrested and the Russian officers demanded that they be sentenced, they were placed under German jurisdiction, but the most they were punished with was deportation to Germany. The German soldiers were involved in the illegal handling of German army property, they sold it to the Russians, but they were also prepared to sell German army property to the Bolsheviks, which they had already done in December–January 1919. The dregs of the old German army came to Courland to ‘make themselves healthy’ ‘to make roubles.’ There were many among them who had fled the courts of Germany [---].”

On the motives that had led the German soldiers to Courland, the colonel said:

“20% of the Germans were people who were lured here by the advertising agencies and were counting on settlement and earnings. Then there were convinced monarchists who wanted to fight for the restoration of the monarchy. The majority, however, were politically completely indifferent and prepared to serve whatever aims and undertakings. There were also a good number of Spartacists of a roughly terrorist hue.”

He also commented on the German-Russian cooperation in practice:

“The coexistence of the Russians and Germans was very bad. There were rivalries and mistrust between the German officers and the Russians, who felt left behind. The soldiers’ cohabitation was even worse than that of the officers. The old hostility of the prison camps played a role. The



Russians felt cheated and abused. When they were quartered there were almost always clashes between the Russians and the Germans. The Germans demanded all the better rooms for themselves. Even if these were already occupied by Russians. To get their way, the Germans threatened that they would withdraw to Germany and abandon the Russians. No detachment order where the Russians met with Germans passed without violence.”

But the internal processes in the Russian units had also been anything but peaceful. Here, the “Okhranka”, which Bermond-avalov had “modelled on the notorious tsarist ‘Okhranka’” as a “police organisation for the protection of his person”, played an important role. The report describes the self-image of this organisation as follows:

“The Okhranka served as a cover for extortion and robbery. Rich merchants who entered Bermond-avalov’s sphere of power were denounced by the Okhranka as Bolsheviks or conspirators against Bermond-avalov’s life, sentenced to death by Bermond-avalov and then robbed by Okhranka men. In this way, several merchants in Mitau perished and several travellers who had arrived in Mitau disappeared without a trace.”

However, Bermond-avalov had not been the driving force behind these events either, but had allowed himself to be guided in his actions by the intrigues of his subordinates. These intrigues had also taken place between the Russian military institutions themselves due to “competitive envy” and had cost some Russian officers their lives.

The report attributed the failure of the attack on Riga, despite military superiority, to strategic mistakes and the resolute defence of the Latvian army, as well as to the overall lack of combat readiness of the soldiers of the West Russian Volunteer Army:

“Bermond-avalov and the German commanders had promised the troops that Riga would be taken in no time, and that after a most pleasant and easy raid they would camp in Riga through the winter. However, when the first attempt failed and the troops were involved in heavy and prolonged fighting, the mercenaries’ spirit of enterprise sank and they declared that they ‘did not want to be destroyed for a few paltry marks.’”

Accordingly, the dissolution was not least due to the army's lack of money. The introduction of the own currency was "a definite mistake":

"The population, but also the troops, had no confidence in the value of Bermond's money. The forced exchange rate helped only a little. Bermond had held out the prospect that his money would be converted into German currency. This promise was not kept. Due to the failure of the money, the whole enterprise was hit in its most sensitive spot and disorganisation grew catastrophically."

The attack on Riga had initially been quite successful from the point of view of the West Russian Army in the first few days. After attacking Latvian positions on the Daugava, the German-Russian forces quickly advanced into the suburbs of Riga. Bermond then offered the Latvian government a ceasefire, which the latter refused. The Latvian army succeeded in halting the advance – also with the support of Estonian armoured trains and the British fleet – and counterattacked.<sup>74</sup> In addition, the Entente changed its policy in the face of the developments in Latvia and now went over to using the means of power at its disposal with regard to a final clearing of the Baltic from German troops. On 10 October, the decision came to blockade the Baltic Sea.<sup>75</sup> Pressure was also exerted by the Inter-Allied Baltic Commission, which had arrived in the Baltic under the leadership of the French General Henri Niessel and was firmly in favour of clearing the area and cutting off supplies.<sup>76</sup> General Walter von Eberhardt, who had succeeded Rüdiger von der Goltz in the German general command, was now trying to organise a halfway orderly withdrawal of the troops. This was made more difficult by the attacks, which were not only carried out by the advancing Latvian army. Gangs and other loose formations attacked the German-Russian troops and especially the railway lines, not only in Courland but also in the Lithuanian territory. On 14 November, the West Russian Central Council in Mitau dissolved.<sup>77</sup> By the end of November, the West Russian Army had left Mitau, which had been set

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<sup>74</sup> Rauch, *Geschichte*, 65.

<sup>75</sup> Lenz, "Bermond-Affaire," 20.

<sup>76</sup> Volkmann, *Emigration*, 73.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

on fire. On their retreat, the soldiers continued to loot and plunder – “leaving a trail of destruction”.<sup>78</sup>

The report of a medical officer vividly describes the dissolution of the military enterprise:

„All night long, the packed trains with refugees and wounded drove out of Mitau station, the heavily loaded baggage wagons rattled through the streets. Suddenly the convoy came to a halt; a wheel had broken on one of the army command’s carts and the crates came crashing down, breaking as they fell and emptying their contents. The ‘money’ of the ‘West Russian Volunteer Army’ fluttered airily in the wind, thousands and thousands of marks, but hardly anyone bent down to pick them up. ‘These cash notes, the value of which is secured by the army property [---], are considered official means of payment in the area of the West Russian Volunteer Army’, was written on them in German and Russian. Yesterday, one had still received goods for these papers in all the shops, had still received the most beautiful cake for them in the pastry shop Macht, yesterday Avalov was still Lord of Mitau. But today? Where is the prince, where is his Russian army, where is the army goods? Broken and scattered to the winds, just like these boxes and their millions.”<sup>79</sup>

The ‘Lord of Mitau’ himself had also escaped from Courland with one of these treks. After his transport had been caught in a Lithuanian attack, which according to the description of the same medical officer was repelled due to the courageous attitude of a first lieutenant, the commander-in-chief of the army made a final appearance:

“At the railway station in Schaulen (Šiauliai), Helling (the said first lieutenant; T.R.) was called to Avalov-Bermond-avalov, who had also been in the attacked train. The prince looked even paler than usual when he thanked him and awarded him the order of Stanislaus, II. class, for his conduct. I don’t know whether it was the excitement about having survived that had

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<sup>78</sup> Liulevicius, *War Land*, 243.

<sup>79</sup> *Darstellungen aus den Nachkriegskämpfen deutscher Truppen und Freikorps. Dritter Band. Die Kämpfe im Baltikum nach der zweiten Einnahme von Riga. Juni bis Dezember 1919*, Herausgeber Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt des Heeres (Berlin: Mittler & Sohn, 1938), 130–131.



Banknotes of the West Russian Volunteer Army. Museums of Haapsalu and Läänemaa Foundation collection, HM\_1194 N, 1209 N, 1210 N

erased all colour from his face, or shame at the behaviour of his Russians, with whom he had once hoped to wrest Moscow from the Bolsheviks.”<sup>80</sup>

This anecdote is emblematic of the image of this supposed warlord, who obviously found ceremonial procedures much easier to handle than the actual control of the enterprise associated with his name.

On 13 December, the last members of the West Russian Volunteer Army crossed the border into East Prussia. On the way back to Germany, the soldiers were treated differently depending on their nationality, Hans-Erich Volkmann summarizes:

“The German soldiers were disarmed, the Russian ones were placed in camps. About 4–5000 men of the Bermond-avalov Corps came to Neisse, 200 of the Vyrgolič Corps to Danzig. They were only given permission to enter Germany if they undertook to leave the Russian formations and remain in Germany.”<sup>81</sup>

## Conclusion

All in all, it can be said that the history of the West Russian Volunteer Army and its fight against the Republic of Latvia certainly bears signs of warlordism. The actions of German officers such as General Rüdiger von der Goltz or Major Josef Bischoff are particularly worthy of investigation, as they consistently drove other protagonists before them with their actions and constantly pushed the boundaries of what was possible and permissible. However, the prevailing impression is that they did not completely detach themselves from the hierarchical and power structures in which they operated, so that these protagonists should only with caution be called warlords. For whom the label of warlord certainly does not apply is Colonel Pavel Bermond-avalov. His function was rather limited to acting as a cover for a multitude of other stakeholders and, with his eccentric manner, to focusing the attention of contemporaries as a matter of fact as well as later historians.

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<sup>80</sup> *Darstellungen*, 131

<sup>81</sup> Volkmann, *Emigration*, 73.

Overall, the description of the history of the West Russian Volunteer Army as the last ray of hope for all those stakeholders who, for many reasons, rejected the reorganisation of the Baltic region according to nation-state criteria, will be accurate. In this respect, it is certainly not the last time to point out the strange role that the German government and other state agencies played in the matter. It is certainly no coincidence that the enterprise only fell apart when funding from the German government was stopped. Despite all public assertions to the contrary, the West Russian Volunteer Army must ultimately be seen as an institution by German grace – and definitely not as the work of an autonomously acting warlord. In this respect, the Latvian government was certainly not wrong when it officially declared to be in a state of war with Germany on 26 November – something that was only noted with surprise in Berlin a month later.<sup>82</sup>

The fact that funding and supplies could eventually no longer be provided also shows that despite the broad political networks of Baltic German and Russian émigrés, German military and industry, the Entente, despite its restraint, had leverage that could be used in support of the new national governments. This was probably a major difference from the other regions of the Russian Empire, where again much less pressure was exerted by the Entente and where power vacuums were thus more likely to favour the emergence of regional warlord regimes.<sup>83</sup>

Regardless of the outcome of this case study, however, it can be stated that the focus on warlordism is certainly suitable for examining the social complexity of military undertakings in civil war circumstances. This also applies to the West Russian Volunteer Army, where the analysis helps to trace the entanglements of different political interests and the changing ways in which volunteer armies functioned. Here, too, as it is so often in historical descriptions, the focus is on the interplay of (in this case very fast-moving) social and institutional structures and individual actions that change these structures. Finally, the example of the West Russian Volunteer Army also confirms that the only way out of the chaos and

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<sup>82</sup> Lenz, “Deutschbalten,” 15–16.

<sup>83</sup> Which is not to say that there were no warlords in the Baltic: Protagonists like Stanisław Bułak-Bałachowicz or even Gerhard Roßbach could be other interesting case studies.

violence of civil war society was through the reintroduction of forms of the rule of law. Despite all claims, neither the German General Command nor the commander-in-chief Bermond-Avalov were to succeed in this in Courland, but the Latvian government could. As can be concluded with Joshua Sanborn: “It took a state to win the war.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Sanborn, “Genesis,” 213.

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