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NOTES AND COMMENTS

A LATVIAN IN THE POLITBUREAU

A Political Portrait of Arvids Pelše

For the first time a representative of the Baits — the Latvian Arvids Pelše — was co-opted to full membership of the Politbureau of the Soviet Communist Party after the 23rd Congress of the Party. None of the three Baltic Communist Parties — Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian — had been represented on the highest decision-making body. Another Latvian communist, Janis Kalberzins, served for a while as alternate member of the Presidium of the Soviet Communist Party. Kalberzins was promoted to the top after the defeat of the "antiparty" group by Khrushchev in July of 1957 and served apparently until 1959, when the Latvian CP was purged for nationalist deviations.

It is not accidental that it was a Latvian communist who rose to the top. The Latvian Communist Party has always been stronger than any of the other Baltic parties, reflecting in a sense the fact that Latvia was a highly industrialized country even before World War I and possessed conditions conducive to communist strength. Even before the Bolshevik seizure of power the Latvian Social democracy was closely associated with Lenin. Latvian communists played an important role during the October Revolution and the Civil War. When the Bolshevik attempt to establish a soviet regime in Latvia during 1918-1919 was defeated, thousands of Latvian revolutionaries remained in Russia and here obtained training in various institutions. The importance of the Latvians in the CPSU is evident from the following figures: in the Sixteenth Party Congress (1930) Latvian delegates comprised 4.3% while the Latvian share of the population amounted only to 0.09%. Pelše is one of those Latvian communists who resided in Russia between the wars, and by training and experience he is probably more Russian than Latvian, with absolute commitment to Moscow.

Arvids Pelše was born in Zemgale region of Latvia in 1899. His parents were prosperous farmers. During World War I the young Pelše left for Petrograd to continue his studies. It is here that he first encounters the Bolsheviks, joins the Party and participates actively in the 1917 Revolution. His party membership dates from 1915, thus in age and revolutionary experience he is a senior to his colleagues on the Politbureau. After the October Revolution Pelše was elected to the People's Council of Petrograd. He was active in the revolutionary movement in Latvia as well.

After the Civil War and service in the Red Army Pelše spent the inter-war years in the Cheka, OGPU. In 1940 he graduated from the Moscow Institute of Red Professors and subsequently worked for a while in the People's Commissariat of State Farms.

When the Soviet Union occupied Latvia in 1940, Pelše having knowledge of the Latvian language, was sent there for propaganda work and became a member of the Latvian Central Committee. He retreated to the Soviet Union when the Germans occupied Latvia and returned to Latvia again in 1945, this time as one of the secretaries of the Latvian CP, in which position he remained until 1958. That year he was appointed as second secretary of the Latvian Central Committee.

Through the years Pelše has moved very cautiously and survived Stalin's purges and those of his successors and remains in good standing with the present-day rulers in the Kremlin. His major asset has been his ability to remain in the background and blindly and obediently serve his superiors in the Kremlin. Being one of the few remaining old guard communists, who have participated in the drafting of the Communist Party Program in 1918, he finally has been awarded the top post on the Politbureau.

In 1959 the Latvian Communist Party was shook by a purge. Evidently a number of top ranking communists, including deputy chairman of the Latvian Council of Ministers E. Berklavs and tens of other top functionaries, attempted to push for economic development consistent with national, i.e. Latvian, local interest and resources. Such nationalist or "localist" deviation from all-Union interests could not be tolerated by Khrushchev. The purge that followed propelled the "Moscovite" Pelše to the position of first secretary of the Latvian CP. Thus, during the following years Pelše presided over an almost continuous cleansing of Latvian CP of "nationalist elements". What was it exactly that the Latvian party was being purged for? Pelše attacked the "nationalists" in a thorough Moscovite manner:

These comrades have, after the re-organization of the system of industrial management and the establishment of National Economic Councils, by over-emphasizing the local interest of our Republic, fatally drifted toward a trend of converting Latvia into an independent economic unit, trying to justify their actions by arguments that the administrative economic district must be developed as a unit.

Comrade E. Beklavs, former Deputy-Chairman of the Latvian Council of Ministers, for instance, relentlessly strived to direct the development of our Republic toward national self-sufficiency and isolation. He has repeatedly objected against boosting production of railroad carriages and diesel engines in favor of promoting the development of consumer and food industries. The produce of which, in his opinion, should be reserved mainly for consumption in our own Republic... Comrade P. Dzerve, Director of the Institute of Economics, even aspired to invent a new system of economic planning. He suggested to organize the industry of our Republic into two separate groups, the one containing the industrial enterprises which produce for the needs of the Soviet Union, but the other concentrating mainly on serving the needs of local consumption. He even went so far as to claim, without reason, that there is a shortage of labor in Latvia, and suggested a halt in the increase of production of those branches of industry the produce of which is not being consumed in our Republic.

Some of our comrades, induced by completely baseless worries that our Latvian Republic might lose its national identity to stop the objectively national process of population shifts. In their speeches they repeatedly maintained for instance that the mechanical increase of the population of Riga should be prevented by all means. Such an attitude is not only harmful, but also politically dangerous. By cultivating national isolation they identify themselves with bourgeois nationalism, they impair not only the interest of all other peoples of the Soviet Union, but endanger also the vital interest of the Latvian nation. (Padomju Latvijas Komunisti (Riga), Sept. 1959).

Pelše's experience in police work and long-time residence in Russia made him an ideal candidate for purging Latvian nationalists, when the first Latvian Communist Party Congress under his direction met in 1960, the new Central Committee elected lacked about thirty former members, while the Bureau had seven new members out of eleven.

There can be little doubt that Pelše's performance must have impressed the leadership in the Kremlin. At the 23rd Congress of the CPSU he was elected Chairman of the Party's Control Committee and granted full membership status on the Politbureau. One can't help but wonder, whether his meteoric rise to a position dealing with disciplinary problems within the Communist Party is not connected with his activities in the Latvian purges. His background in police work and the full membership on the Politbureau are suggestive that we may see an intensified cleansing of the ranks of the Communist Party, which has grown so rapidly in the last few years and, no doubt, has attracted numerous opportunistic or nationalistic-localistic elements. The tightening of the rules for admission into the Communist Party, as well as exclusion from the membership, seem to point in a direction of at least a mild purge.

It is, perhaps, not by a coincidence that in his remarks to the 23rd Congress Pelše emphasized his fifty years in the party and his participation in "crushing the enemies of the party — trocky-ites, all kinds of 'leftists', and right oppositionists, also factiona-lists..." (Tiesa, 1966, April 1, p. 2). He also noted that in the past years insufficient attention was paid to the study of Marxism-Leninism. It will possibly be one of his concerns to see to it that the extremely young party membership is sufficiently ideologically indoctrinated and discipline tightened. If, indeed, a cleansing of the ranks is in the works, Pelše can be expected to do a thorough job.

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