



The Peculiarities of the Formation of the Border Guard of the Republic of Latvia: the Example of the 4th Daugavpils Border Guard Battalion (1991–1997)

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After the Republic of Latvia regained its independence, the question of its border status has become essential for its security, or as the Department of Public Security put it at their recruitment advertisement for the Border Guard service in September 1991: “the most important part of an independent state is its border” (LSBGA 41 – 01 – 02 – 169).

With the creation of the Ministry of Defence, already by November 13th 1991 it immediately began the herculean task of forming proper Latvian Armed Forces. By December 13th 1991 the basis of the Military Administration of Border Guard Forces was established and the formation of the seven battalions of Daugavpils, Liepāja, Jelgava, Ludza, Valmiera, Viļaka, Ventspils (later Sēlijas) was started (Latvijas valsts atjaunošana (1986. g. – 1993. g.), 1998, 336).

On February 1st 1992 the Airport of Riga was the first functioning Border Checkpoint, when the control over it was taken over from the Border Guards of the Russian Federation (*Latvijas drošība un aizsardzība* 1995, 211). By January 2nd 1992 there were 2,309 state positions reserved for the Border Guard units from the combined 2,452 positions at the Ministry of Defence. Out of them, 226 formed the 4th Daugavpils Border guard battalion (AMOF LR 1 – 5 – 22). It was on the checkpoint where the Latvian border with Belarus and Lithuania was guarded. Due to its location, it eventually became the largest Border Guard battalion, additionally, by 1994 already more than 90% of border violations occurred on the checkpoints facing Belarus and Russia, therefore, putting even more pressure on the battalion (*Lauku Avīze* 1994 3). There were three main problems that are the main focus of this paper: the inability of some soldiers and sometimes even officers to speak the official state language and overcome the so-called “Soviet mentality” which often resulted in the lack of discipline and incompetence when dealing with

administrative tasks. The paper was written using traditional methods of historical science research. For the analysis of archival materials as well as press sources and memoirs, the comparative method of history was used to conduct critical research and to obtain the most reliable information.

The Problem of State Language

The lack of knowledge or ignorance when using the official state language rather infamously even reached the press articles of that time. For example, in the newspaper "*Diena*" in its 29th of March 1994 issue there was a critical article regarding the situation in Daugavpils, the author even quoted an anonymous letter from a soldier serving in the Border Guard forces, who complained about "sometimes it feels that we are serving in the Russian Armed Forces" (*Diena* 1994, 6). This article, similarly to the correspondence between the MOD and the troops, illustrated that part of the problem was the attitude of some soldiers and officers serving regarding the use of the Latvian language.

For career officers or soldiers, or administrative staff working for the Latvian Armed Forces, the question regarding the skills to properly use the state language were regulated rather quickly. For comparison, already by December 20th 1992 the National Guard of Daugavpils had to have attestation completed, and by April 4th 1994 an order by the battalion commander Ivars Veļiks stated that those serving in the National Guard battalion and not having a certificate acknowledging their skills were to leave their state – sponsored positions in the unit (AMOFRL 1 – 5 – 22).

When compared to the rest of the Border Guard battalions, the lack of knowledge of the Latvian language, or even worse, deliberately not using it when communicating were harshly criticized in the press. Both the contemporaries of that time and the press articles linked this problem directly to the inherited traditions from the Soviet Armed Forces, which can partly be agreed upon. For comparison it has to be mentioned that the paper "*Tēvijas Sargs*" usually focused on the successes of the Border Guard battalion of Daugavpils, mostly emphasizing the amount of trespassers caught on such a large area to guard, albeit they did touch upon the problem of the state language described as a "work in progress" (*Tēvijas Sargs* 1996, 4).

The former MOD Mr. Tālav Jundzis also recalls traveling to Daugavpils at that time and already by the year 1990 noticing a lot of advertisements for the Latvian language courses both in the city of Daugavpils and the nearby collective ownership farms at that time. He recalls how the locals lamented not having the option to practice Latvian in their everyday life. They learned in their courses regularly, but had no opportunity to practice the language due to the lack of Latvians around them. Additionally, even if they travelled to Riga everyone would answer their questions in Russian anyway (Author's interview with Tālav Jundzis in 2018).

Regarding the situation in the city at the beginning of 1990s, it is interesting to point out, that in the context of the 74th Anniversary since the formation of the

Red Army on February 20 in 1992, the Border Guard forces received an order to increase their combat readiness for the state of alert. The heterogeneous ethnic composition of the city was also taken into account, during this occasion, the Border Guards were reminded to: “especially in Riga, Daugavpils, Ventspils, and Liepāja to avoid any kind of conflict situations” (LSBGA 41 – 01 – 03 – 20). The criminogenic situation from time to time got so out of hand that it forced the local authorities to send additional troops to patrol the streets. Such an example can be seen in February 1994, when the soldiers from the 4th Daugavpils Border Guard battalion were sent to patrol alongside the Garrison of the Ministry of the Interior as well as those serving in the 34th National Guards battalion (LNA RSAD 1229 – 1 – 17 – 15).

The Lack of Discipline

Over time a common problem for the battalions of the Latvian Border Guard emerged – the lack of discipline of conscripted soldiers, especially when compared to career officers and soldiers who had the intention to stay after their mandatory service was over. The Border Guard battalion of Daugavpils was not an exception. An interesting example of this tendency shows that the statistics of the year 1995, when the battalion could be considered fully staffed and established, revealed that there were 1,513 disciplinary punishments, out of which, 1,337 or 87,4%, came from conscripted soldiers, while out of the combined 2,171 awards, this group only received 1,367 or 63% of the honours. In comparison, the career soldiers received 39 or 0,3% of disciplinary punishments and 399 or 18,4% of the awards. Out of the disciplinary punishments with 58,2% or 89 cases, the abuse of alcohol during the service dominated, while in 25 cases (16,2%) the soldiers were late from their service leave and in 20 cases (13,1%) they were absent without having their leave, or to put it simply, deserted (LNA RSAD 1229 – 1 – 40 – 75).

The problems of discipline were evident by another case on September 6th 1993, when five soldiers of the Border Checkpoint of Kuļbova were punished for using diluted alcohol. The report also states that three out of five soldiers had previous records of disciplinary punishments, two of them were punished for drinking and during active duty they deserted (LNA RSAD 1229 – 1 – 9 – 39). A more interesting report dating September 7 states that the soldier Viktor Rutko from the Medimu company was disciplined for failing to report a fight which broke out between him and his unit against unnamed local civilians regarding the rape of a woman. It seems like the Border Guards were protecting the girl, because V. Rutko was punished slightly only for failing to report this incident on time, while the case itself did not seem to show up in the local newspapers at that time (Ibid., 49).

Relatively often checks were made to test the quality of the Border Guard service, occasionally, they also helped in catching corrupt Border Guards. One such example was the check made in the Subates checkpoint from September until November 1993, when it revealed that some of the Border Guards stationed

did not register the cars crossing the border from two specific companies, which in three months time brought illegally 300 tonnes of fuel from Lithuanian (LNA RSAD 1229 – 1 – 17 – 62). The investigation later on revealed that two shifts of Border Guards and six shifts of the Customs staff were responsible for this and later they were dismissed from their service (LNA RSAD 1229 – 1 – 18 – 40).

It is possible to speculate, that a party as a safeguard against corruption, especially regarding the low wages, several long-serving Border Guards received relatively large birthday bonuses for their round birthdays. This happened mostly around the year 1994 stretching a little into the year 1995, although due to objective reasons, like the Border Guard service being formed only on December 13th 1991, they could not have served longer than for four years (LNA RSAD 1229 – 1 – 17 – 44; 53; 77). It is interesting to point out, that some soldiers received birthday bonuses even for half-round anniversaries, for example when reaching 25 years of age (LNA RSAD 1229 – 1 – 18 – 27).

Later, in 1996 an incident occurred in the 1st Valmiera and 4th Daugavpils Border Guard battalion which resulted in the deaths of several soldiers, and which caused a wide uproar in the eyes of the public. Despite being widely discussed in the press, these incidents mostly illustrate not some problems specific to Daugavpils battalion, but they rather represent problems of discipline and neglect of regulations, which were quite common for the Latvian Armed Forces in general (*Austrālijas Latvietis* 1996, 5–6).

Additionally, the lack of resources also hampered the number of systematic check-ups of the troops. When re-establishing the protection of the Latvian borders, most units were deployed in almost barren checkpoints with barely enough subsistence for a week and a theoretical plan of resupplying themselves when proper logistics were established. From time to time, some of the soldiers deserted their posts. To get them back, special tracking units were formed, which took up additional resources which could be used for guarding the Border (Ibid., 28). A good example of the lack of resources is the equipment: even in April 1995 the uniforms of the soldiers of the 4th Daugavpils Battalion Rapid Response Group did not completely match.

Despite the constant lack of funding, a considerable effort was made to celebrate several holidays, especially the summer solstice Jāņi. The sub commanders of the battalion were given permission to send up to 15% of the soldiers on holidays during this time while the rest were to plan and participate in: “cultural, sporting and recreational activities” (Ibid., 25). One of the most likely reasons why such a care was taken to celebrate Jāņi, in comparison to a more international holiday, like Christmas, could probably be linked to the fact that many border guards came to the battalion from Russian speaking families, therefore, these cultural events helped with the integration and education of these soldiers into the Latvian society.



The soldiers of 4th Daugavpils Battalion Rapid Response Group in April 1995

Source: Latvia War Museum

Problems of Administration

According to the author, a rather interesting problem really did seem to be much more characteristic to Daugavpils battalion, unlike, for example, the Border Guard battalions of Liepāja and Valmiera. Some of the officers and staff of Daugavpils battalion regularly could not meet the deadline set to them by their superiors. This problem was especially apparent in their administrative tasks. Despite the fact that educational courses were organized regularly with the purpose of preparing the staff for working with documents, (Ibid., 32), there were still complaints even at the beginning of 1996 about missed deadlines for orders which required a written answer or at least an explanation why the order was not carried out on time (LNA RSAD 1229 – 1 – 40 – 98).

In comparison, the battalion of Valmiera already had a detailed analysis on a monthly basis, viewing the situation on their respective Border checkpoints as well as the situation regarding the discipline of the soldiers by June 1992 (LNA RSAW 1233 – 1 – 2 – 70). Daugavpils battalions made these reports much later, even going as late as 28 July 1995, when they analysed the situation regarding the statistics of the last six months (LNA RSAD 1229 – 1 – 29 – 13). There seems to be complaints about transports crossing the border not being certified in either the registration journal or the observation log (LNA RSAD 1229 – 1 – 40 – 124),

but their rarity is most likely to indicate incidental failures rather than deliberate systematic malpractice.

Conclusion

In summary, it has to be concluded that the 4th Daugavpils Border Guard battalion stood out amongst other Border Guard Forces with the intensity of their work, mostly resulting in a much higher cross-border traffic, on the Belarusian-Lithuanian borders, when compared, for example, to the checkpoints with Estonia guarded by the battalion of Valmiera.

The lack of knowledge and skills, using the state language can, most likely, directly be linked to the administrative problems, meaning, that simply there were not enough experienced, skilled professionals who could read and write in the Latvian language, and who could sufficiently do the paper work, and much more importantly, be ready to relocate to the eastern border of Latvia and work for the Border Guard forces for a wage, which administrative professionals would consider below their skills.

However, despite all difficulties, those serving in Daugavpils Border Guard battalion managed to successfully fulfil all the duties required from the unit, advance them and by 7 January 1997, when it was transferred under the command of the Ministry of Interior, the battalion was already fully staffed and operational.

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Viesturas Rasnācis

Latvijas Republikas sienas apsargos tarnybos formavimo ypatumai: 4-ojo Daugpilio pasienio apsargos bataliono pavyzdys (1991–1997 m.)

S a n t r a u k a

Pagrindinės sąvokos: *Latvijos istorija, pasieniečiai, Latvijos kariškiai, Latvijos universitetas, socialinės ir ekonominės aplinkybės.*

Latvijos Respublikai atgavus nepriklausomybę, ypatingą svarbą įgavo jos sienos statuso klausimas. Įkurta Gynybos ministerija jau 1991 m. lapkričio 13 d. pradėjo rūpintis Latvijos kariuomenės sukūrimu. Latvijos Respublikos sienos apsargos pajėgos buvo pirmosios pajėgos, kurias suformavo Gynybos ministerija. Iki 1992 m. sausio 2 d. Gynybos ministerijoje iš sujungtų 2452 pozicijų pasienio būriams buvo skirtos 2309 valstybės pozicijos, iš jų 226 sudarė 4-ąjį Daugpilio pasienio apsargos batalioną, kurio tikslas – saugoti Latvijos sieną su Baltarusija ir Lietuva. Ilgainiui šis batalionas tapo didžiausiu pasienio apsargos batalionu. Iki 1994 m. Baltarusijos ir Rusijos kontrolės punktuose buvo įvykdyta daugiau nei 90 proc. sienos pažeidimų – tai sąlygojo dar didesnę spaudimą batalionui.

Kaip vienas iš tame batalione tarnaujančių pasieniečių privalumų buvo tai, kad praktiškai visi čia tarnaujantys pasieniečiai laisvai kalbėjo rusiškai. Būtent šia kalba dažniausiai buvo bendraujama su nelegaliai sieną kertančiais kontrabandininkais ir migrantais. Tačiau daugeliui pasieniečių, ypač atvykusių iš rusakalbių šeimų, atlikti administracines užduotis buvo gana sudėtinga – jie turėjo rimtų problemų, tvarkydami dokumentaciją.

Buvo ir kita problema: kadangi tuo metu Valstybės sienos apsargos tarnyba buvo privaloma, daugelis pakviestųjų į tarnybą patekdavo ne savo noru, todėl tokie kariai dažnai būdavo nedrausmingi. Daugeliui jų trūko motyvacijos tinkamai atlikti pareigą. Be abejo, ši problema nebuvo būdinga tik 4-ajam Daugpilio pasienio apsargos batalionui – tuo metu ji buvo aktuali visose Latvijos kariuomenės pajėgose.

Nepaisant visu paminētu sunkumu, batalionas, atspindēdamas spartu ne tik Latvijas Republikos, bet ir visu triju Baltijas valstību vystymāsi, dar iki 1997 m. iš esmės išsprendė didžiąją dalį savo logistinių ir administracinių problemų. Kai batalionas tapo pavaldus Vidaus reikalų ministerijai, jis jau turėjo reikiamą štabų skaičių ir veikė visu pajėgumu.

Viesturs Rasnācis

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S u m m a r y

Keywords: *Baltic Studies, History of Latvia, Border Guards, Latvian military, University of Latvia, social and economic circumstances.*

After the Republic of Latvia regained its independence, the question of its border status has become essential for its security. With the creation of the Ministry of Defence, already by 13th November 1991, it immediately began the herculean task of forming proper Latvian Armed Forces. The Border Guard Forces of the Republic of Latvia was the first main force formed by the Ministry of Defence, by 2nd January 1992 there were 2,309 state positions reserved for the Border Guard units from the combined 2,452 positions at the Ministry of Defence. Out of them, 226 formed the 4th Daugavpils Border guard battalion. Its aim was to guard the Latvian border with Belarus and Lithuania. Due to its location, it eventually became the largest Border Guard battalion, additionally, by 1994 already more than 90% of border violations occurred on the checkpoints facing Belarus and Russia, therefore, putting even more pressure on the battalion.

The fact that practically all of the border guards serving in the battalion spoke Russian fluently definitely was a much needed skill when dealing with contrabandists and migrants who crossed the border illegally. However, when dealing with administrative tasks, for a lot of the border guards, especially the ones coming from Russian speaking families, this proved to be quite troublesome, since they had significant problems writing the reports and other written tasks on the time set to them by their superiors.

Additionally, due to the fact that the border guard service at the time was mandatory, many of those drafted against their will suffered from the lack of discipline. For most of them this was because they lacked motivation to serve adequately, they were looking for ways to easier endure their service rather than stay in the military service afterwards. Of course, this problem was not an exception for the 4th Daugavpils Border Guard battalion, this issue was common in the entirety of the Latvian Armed Forces at that time, it was the crucial location of the battalion that made this problem so troubling.

Despite all of the difficulties mentioned above, the battalion, somewhat mirroring the rapid development not just of the Republic of Latvia but of all three Baltic States, advanced

quite quickly and by the year 1997 it sorted most of its logistical and administrative problems. When it was transferred under the command of the Ministry of Interior, the battalion was already fully staffed and operational.

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