1-2011

The Gendered Plight of Terror: Annexation and Exile in Latvia 1940-1950

Irene Elksnis Geisler
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations
Part of the European History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations/409

This Dissertation-Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.
THE GENDERED PLIGHT OF TERROR: ANNEXATION AND EXILE IN LATVIA 1940-1950

by

Irēne Elksnis Geisler

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of The Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy Department of History Advisor: Marion W. Gray, Ph.D.

Western Michigan University Kalamazoo, Michigan June 2011
THE GENDERED PLIGHT OF TERROR:
ANNEXATION AND EXILE
IN LATVIA 1940-1950

Irēne Elksnis Geisler, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2011

Drawing on methodologies employed in Oral History and Memory scholarship, this qualitative study utilizes the lens of gender to explore narratives contesting time-honored notions of violence, war and peace. It examines Latvia's history through the voices of women from 1940 to 1950. This project seeks to interpret Latvian history based on the experiences of those who survived invasion, exile and deportation. It positions the narratives of women at the center rather than at the margins of historical analysis. The project analyzes themes central to women's social roles in order to attain a more complete understanding of war, exile and people's relationship to national identities focusing on three interconnected analytical topics: (1) Latvian ethnic nationalism and gender relations; (2) women's empowerment and subordination in war; and (3) methods of coping and resistance. This study finds that the narrators' perceptions, understanding and experiences of this historical period were a product of their gender roles, as well as their age, social status and personal individuality. Women's narratives and memories reveal the centrality of gender in the construction of Latvian national identity.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my father Auseklis Elksnis, who passed away during its completion, and to my beloved mother Alma Elksnis, both of whom were central characters in this work. Without their love, support and inspiration, this dissertation would not have been possible. I would also like to dedicate this work to the memory of my dear professor and member of my dissertation committee, Dr. Nora Faires, who also passed away several months before this project was completed.

Irēne Elksnis Geisler
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply indebted to Dr. Marion Gray, my mentor, chair of my Dissertation Committee, and my Supervising Professor, for his excellent guidance, caring and encouragement. Dr. Gray assisted me in conceptualizing my project. He guided my research and patiently corrected my writing. His sound advice helped me to complete my Ph.D. I would sincerely like to thank Dr. John Norman for helping me to develop background in Russian and Eastern European History, for participating on my dissertation committee and for offering his enduring support. I would like to express grateful acknowledgment to Dr. Andrejs Plakans, the most significant expert on Latvian history in the U.S. Your expertise and guidance on the history of Latvia was invaluable. It was an honor to have you participate in my dissertation. Special thanks to Dr. Eli Rubin for his astute insight and willingness to participate in my final defense committee at the last moment.

I would like to thank Dr. Irēna Saleniece, a leading scholar in the pioneering of the reconstruction of Latvian history, whom I have grown to know as a dear friend. Your work has been inspirational for my research and professional career. My gratitude to Iveta Bogdanovica, and staff and students at Daugavpils University, Latvia. Thank you for the opportunity to join you on the Oral History expedition to Preļi, for sharing with me your rich compilation of oral history testimonies and for your never ending willingness to help. Many thanks to Māra Zirmīte, Dr. Baiba Bela...
Acknowledgements – Continued

Krūmiņa, Dr. Dāgmsē Beitrēna, Ieva Garda, Edmunds Šūpulis and my other colleagues at the Latvian National Oral History Project for welcoming me into your group, helping coordinate my oral history interviews in Latvia, and giving your encouragement and best suggestions. I am grateful to the Museum of Occupation of Latvia for sponsoring my Fulbright research, and Lelde Neimane for her expertise and direction in identifying sources and research techniques. A heartfelt thank you to the Latvian State Archives, and Iveta Šķiņķe for her generous professional guidance, friendship and advice. To my dear friend and companion in Latvia, Inga Grauze, thanks for hosting me at the apartment building which has come to be known as the “Fulbright House,” for the many hours of discussion and travel in the country of my heritage. Lastly, I offer my regards and blessings to those who were willing to share your life stories and oral histories in formal interview settings. My research would not have been possible without the support of all of you.

I would like to thankfully acknowledge that this work was supported in a large part through the Fulbright Student Fellowship for study in Latvia through the U.S. Department of State and Western Michigan University’s Graduate College Dissertation Completion Fellowship. My research was also partially supported by generous research grants through the American Latvian Association and
Acknowledgements – Continued

DaugavasVanagi Latvian Relief Organization, the Beatrice and George Beech Graduate Fellowship and the Scholarship for Mature Women through the Kalamazoo Chapter of the American Association of University Women. The Judith F. Stone Award and the A. Edyth Menge Scholarship, both through the History Department at Western Michigan University, supported specific aspects of my professional development. I am deeply grateful.

Irēne Elksnis Geisler
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .......................................................................................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ......................................................................................................... iii

LIST OF TABLES .................................................................................................................. x

LIST OF MAPS ..................................................................................................................... x

LIST OF FIGURES .............................................................................................................. xi

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................ 1
   Connecting Collective Memory and Historical Source ....................................................... 1
   Historiography .................................................................................................................. 6
   Oral History and Latvian Memories of the Second World War ...................................... 8
   Theoretical Perspectives that Guide my Research ............................................................ 14
   Theory, Thesis and Methodology ...................................................................................... 19
   Conclusion ........................................................................................................................ 23

II. THE FIRST PERIOD OF NATIONHOOD AND THE SHAPING OF LATVIAN MEMORY ................................................................................................................................. 25
   Nation Building and Land Reform in the Interwar Years ................................................. 28
   Everyday Life in the Interwar Years .................................................................................. 38
   Conclusion ........................................................................................................................ 52
Table of Contents—continued

CHAPTER

III. THE FIRST SOVIET OCCUPATION: IDENTITY, POWER AND OPPRESSION .......................................................... 54

Waiting for War ........................................................................ 60

The Events of the Soviet Takeover and Occupation: The National Song Festival ............................................... 69

The Year of Terror ..................................................................... 75

Soviet Takeover of Administrative Functions and Information Media ................................................................. 78

Nationalization of Land, Collectivization of Agriculture .......... 81

Reduction of the Standard of Living and Sovietization of the Economy ................................................................. 85

The Molding of Latvian Children and Youth ......................... 89

Repressions, Deportations and Terror ..................................... 92

Conclusion .............................................................................. 95

IV. THE DEPORTATIONS OF JUNE 14, 1941: THE SEARCH FOR STRENGTH AMID INDIGNITY AND DESPAIR ............. 99

Arrests, Executions and Expulsions ........................................ 101

The Trauma of Deportation ..................................................... 105

The Banished .......................................................................... 108

The Journey to Siberia ............................................................. 113

The Struggle for Survival ......................................................... 124

Coping and Resistance ............................................................ 128

Conclusion .............................................................................. 134
### Table of Contents—continued

**CHAPTER**

V. **THE GERMAN OCCUPATION 1941-1945: POWER HEGEMONIES AND ISSUES OF CULTURE, POWER AND PLACE** ................................................................. 137

- On the Front Lines of War ................................................. 145
- Germans as Liberators or Oppressors ................................ 149
- Nazi Rule: Takeover, Terror, Repressions and Atrocities ...... 153
- Civilian Conscript ............................................................. 162
- Military Conscript ............................................................ 166
- Daily Existence ............................................................... 176
- Conclusion ........................................................................ 178

VI. **FLIGHT TO THE WEST 1944-1945** ................................. 183

- The Decision to Flee .......................................................... 185
- The Journey West .............................................................. 196
- The Perilous Flight into Exile ............................................. 202
- Conclusion ........................................................................ 209

VII. **EXILE IN THE WEST: GOD'S LITTLE BIRDS** .................. 211

- No End to War: A War Not Their Own .............................. 218
- Refugees and Displaced Persons ....................................... 228
- “War Criminals” and “Nazi Collaborators” ........................ 235
- Cultural and Political Endeavors ...................................... 240
- Into Diaspora ................................................................... 250
- Conclusion ........................................................................ 258
LIST OF TABLES

1. Population of Latvia 1897-1935 .................................................. 43

LIST OF MAPS

1. Baltic States During Interwar Years ............................................. 27
2. Eastern Europe 1939-1940 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact Spheres ........ 59
4. Ostland: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Byelorussia ................. 144
5. Latvian Soldiers as Part of Occupied-Nation Army Battle Routes
   1941-1945 .............................................................................. 175
7. Occupied Zones in Germany and Austria: Administratively Territorial
   Changes in Europe after WWII 1945-1955 ................................. 217
LIST OF FIGURES

1. Daugavpils Song Festival Poster ................................................................. 73
2. Latvians in Siberian resettlement camps .................................................. 99
3. Cargo train with the deported before departure to Siberia June 1941 .......... 101
4. Bundled bodies of the deceased thrown from trains on route to Siberia...... 120
5. Women dressed in Latvian folk attire, Glasenbach Austria ....................... 244
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Connecting Collective Memory and Historical Source

The capacity for individuals to remember as well as to forget and particularly to communicate their recollections with others is innately human. This sharing of memories in a society leads to the construction of collective memory and in turn reinforces the sense of identity and belonging within a community. Although each person’s memories are unique, collective memory selects what is considered important in a given population. Because collective memory is constructed by many persons not just by a single individual whose preconceptions may be more personal than societal, the stereotypes embedded in collective memories are a reflection of the culture in which they circulate.

Women’s shared memories reveal a women’s culture which is less public and may be perceived as less dramatic than men’s. However, my research reveals that Latvian women during the twentieth century, collectively and as individuals, participated in the public sphere in their own fashion, empowering themselves to shape their own lives in many ways. Latvian women participated in public events, such as national song festivals; they bought and sold at markets, attended public institution and community gatherings, and had their own social networks. Through
these networks, women communicated information, and supported each other and their families. During the Second World War Latvian women worked as war nurses, communications personnel and secretaries for both the Nazi and Soviet military regimes. They resisted their foreign oppressors by harboring individuals and families scheduled for deportation and execution, and by providing food and vital information to partisans who took refuge in nearby forests. The survivors of Siberian exile exhibited remarkable adaptation to their merciless surroundings as they clung to life, and at times even experienced cheerfulness in the face of tragic human events. Seemingly minor routines and rituals often assumed an important role for women in situations of extreme suffering. Latvian women developed their own coping techniques and methods of defying authority such as camaraderie through song, the sharing of scarce food, or painting folk symbols on everyday kitchen utensils and decisively asserting their determination to conserve their humanity.

The reminiscences of Latvian women and men are useful as a basis of information for recreating the events of the Second World War and its aftermath. They describe Latvian daily life, the horrors of the Soviet and Nazi occupations and of active warfare, and the social transformations under foreign rule and in exile. Even so, these recollections may often appear vulnerable and undependable. Each person’s perceptions, understanding and experiences of this historical period are distinctive. As such, memories may be influenced by trauma or lack of knowledge. Different people may view the same event in various ways. Additionally, historical perceptions are influenced by a narrator’s gender roles, as well as his or her age, social status and
personal individuality. Furthermore, the reminiscences may seem marked by nostalgia, or bitterness, and might at times embrace emotion and symbolism in their imaging. On the other hand, they indicate what the narrators felt and thought at the moment of detention, deportation or flight, and how the survivors learned to orient themselves, adapt and cope to their alien surroundings, whether in refugee camps in Western Europe or deported to Siberia. As a historical source, when used in conjunction with other resources, I consider memories vital in enabling the documentation and writing of the history of the general populace -- the people who experienced the terror of the war, annexation, and exile first hand.

The relationship between Memory and History continues to be a debated issue despite the growing popularity in the use of oral histories, life stories and personal documentation over the past four decades in scholarly research.¹ Professors mistakenly discourage students from using oral sources for historical information. Latvian scholar Ilgvars Misans, in a conference at the University of Latvia, while commending Daugavpils University History Department for their excellent work in the field of oral history, also expressed reservations about life stories as foundations for the historical record. According to Misans, by the very nature of oral history,

---

researchers “cite information of their own creation.” Alessandro Portelli contends that oral history “tells us less about events than about their meaning.” He argues that oral sources are less suited to preserving the past than to creating memory.

Oral historians, more so than those who rely on written records, feel the need to discuss the limitations of their sources. When investigating a given event, for example, researchers utilizing oral documentation will go to extremes to capture the memories of many different people, cross-reference their findings with other testimonies pertaining to the same issue and compare these with other genres of sources in order to verify accuracy. In contrast, traditional historians utilizing the “seminar and the archival method” do not feel the same need to justify their sources. These so called “scientific methods” seem to inherently imply authenticity, impartiality and truth.

From my own research, Ina P., a Latvian emigrant, shares an interesting story reflecting on the accuracy of written documentation that can be amended by personal

---

1 Ilgvars Misans, "New Ideas and Approaches to the Study of Latvian History," in *Latvian National History Student Conference* (University of Latvia, Riga 2009).
5 Current professional historical scholarship, founded on the scientific method, began to emerge predominantly in the eighteenth century. The seminar experience, available to men who could afford to study at universities, and the use of archives were foundations of this new professional history. As a result elite males as professional historians made politics and the state the center of their narratives, relegating personal documentation, such as memoirs and travel diaries to amateurism. Ibid., 117.
memory. She explains why three sisters in her mother's family, according to official birth records, have the identical birthday.

There were eight children... there were five girls and three boys. The three boys were the youngest ones. Three of the sisters had the same August 30th birthday. As a child I found it so fascinating... Then as a teenager one of my aunts mentioned that Grandma had to go into the village to Grobiña and register the births...a little while later...a week or two later. Well, there was one girl born on August 30th already so this one was just a day or two off so she registered her on August 30th. And a year or two later another girl was born. Oh, they're all at the end of August, so they all had an August 30th birthday.7

The types of documents typically recognized as valid historical sources may, in fact, not always be reliable. This is not only true in cases of unintentional misdocumentation, such as in the above example, but also in situations of deliberate misrepresentation or distortion of records for political agendas or profit motives as discussed later in this section. The oral history record enables historians to include accounts from women who have left fewer written documents. Judith Tydor Baumel contends that oral histories and autobiographies are indispensable in researching such groups as Holocaust survivors and women. “[T]he special nature of Holocaust research in general, and in unique problems facing those exploring Holocaust-related issues of gender in particular, caused me time and again to... adopt oral history as a principal data source.”8 I suggest that the same would apply to peoples such as citizens of Post-Soviet nations, Eastern European refugees and deportees such as the

7 Ina Plavina, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI." (Interviewed by: Irene Elksnis Geisler on June 18, 2009).
8 Baumel, "You Said the Words You Wanted Me to Hear: Women's First Person Accounts of the Holocaust."
Latvians, and especially the women among these groups. Latvian scholar and informant Baiba Bela-Krumina emphasizes that traditional written history generally omits the history of the common person whether in Latvia or the United States. She refers to "history's white spots," meaning the history, which concerns people's daily lives, which is otherwise undocumented, and which in "men's perspectives" are unimportant.9

Historiography

Histories of Latvia traditionally represent the male experience as the norm in historical scholarship.10 There is, however, a growing body of scholarship about the roles that Western and Eastern European women played in the Second World War and the postwar migration, placing women within a broader gender framework during and after the war. Women's experiences in war differed depending on whether hostile forces occupied their country, whether they were in the position to support the war effort from the home front, or whether they were forced to flee their homelands.

Historian Donna Budani describes the experiences of women who survived

---

the wartime occupation of Italy. In contrast to traditional explanations of the experience of war, Budani’s feminist interpretation focuses on the ways in which Italian women negotiated their social worlds.\textsuperscript{11} Marion A. Kaplan in examines Germany under the regime of Adolf Hitler, 1933-1944 and reveals how Jews contended with their increasingly barbarous circumstances during Nazi rule. Paradoxically Jewish women wanted to leave Germany well before men, but fewer women actually did. Parents sent sons into the unknown more readily than daughters; women remained behind sending their husbands and families abroad thinking that they were for the moment safe; many remained because they were elderly and could not secure sponsorship.\textsuperscript{12}

A significant number of contemporary scholars writing about women’s and gender experiences during this period utilize sources such as women’s memoirs, diaries, and the practice of oral history, materials considered largely unconventional in writing history. As historian Mary Muldowney explains, women’s responses to major events or to social and economic changes may not be fairly represented by the predominantly masculine interpretations that have shaped official reports and documents on which most of the writing of history has been founded.\textsuperscript{13} Notable publications by Latvian women include the anthropological work of Vieda Skultans’ from the University of Bristol. Skultans utilizes oral histories from over 100

\textsuperscript{11} Donna M Budani, \textit{Italian Women’s Narratives of Their Experiences During World War II} (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter, UK The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 36
\textsuperscript{12} Marion Kaplan, \textit{Between Dignity and Despair: Jewish Life in Nazi Germany} (Oxford, UK Oxford University Press, 1998), 231
informants and relays the violence and chaos of the postwar years in Latvia, the brutal process of collectivization, and the problems of the return from exile. The works of contemporary scholars Sonya O. Rose and Marion Kaplan particularly influence my project. It utilizes the interpretation of social interactions based on society’s own norms and categories and attempts to show how seemingly minor routines and rituals assume an important role for people in situations of extreme distress. Sometimes daily rituals were coping mechanisms and even systems of rebellion.

Oral History and Latvian Memories of the Second World War

In authoritarian systems, power is maintained in large part through the control of memory. Historical sources are frequently created by representatives of power. In the case of Latvia, official documentary records were produced by those who formulated the ideology of occupation and deportation and who organized and carried out acts of terror and repression. Consequently, Latvians often consider the spoken word more trustworthy and truthful than the written word. As argued by Vieda Skultans, “the textual paradigm did not have undisputed dominance and the printed word was mistrusted and sometimes seen as deliberately misleading.... Latvian memories conflicted with official versions of history.” Accordingly, “[i]f history

books lie, memory acquires a central importance for the preservation of authenticity and truth as well as a peculiar poignancy."^{16} Yet, the end result of remembering in Soviet Latvia was often perilous. As explained by native Latvian Inga G., people were terrified of talking about their experiences during the Soviet occupation. Parents shielded children and families by keeping silent. Inga was born in 1956 and therefore has no personal recollections of the war or early post-war period. In school Inga learned that the Latvian period of independence was marked supposedly by great poverty and famine, and the workers were oppressed by a dictatorial government. In 1939 the great Soviet Union purportedly emancipated the Latvians; the populace greeted the Red Army, peasants eagerly joined kolkhozes, and from then on the great Soviet culture flourished. Inga reported that her grandfather spoke briefly to her about the German occupation period during the Second World War, but not until after 1991, when Latvia reestablished independence, did Inga’s father feel safe to reveal his life story, his experiences as a soldier during the Second World War, and his deportation to Siberia. Inga was shocked when she finally heard his detailed narrative. She shares feelings of deception and disillusionment. Inga believes that she should have been told.\(^{17}\) Ironically, in an effort to protect their children and loved ones, families fostered feelings of mistrust and concealment.

Asja O. blames herself. According to this Latvian resident, while as a young woman she was singing songs of praise to Lenin and Stalin, other Latvians such as

---


^{17} Inga Grauze, "Oral History Interview, Jūrmala, Latvia," (Interviewed by: Irene Elksnis Geisler on December 26, 2009).
her godfather were being tortured in the salt mines of Siberia. Asja was born in 1924. Although she has adult memories of the Second World War and post-war era, she had no knowledge of many of the events that transpired during this period until after 1991, when people finally felt free to speak. In an effort to come to terms with this time in her life, Asja joined the Christian Church. She expresses feelings of guilt and shame at her own naïveté. And although she has confessed her sins and received the Sacrament of Penance through the church, she says that she is unable to forgive herself.18

These responses are common. The oral histories collected by Baiba Bela-Krumina reveal that it was more typical for parents to not tell their children “how it actually was.” She cites an example of a man who fought in the war effort as a member of the Latvian Legion but did not talk about this to his children.19 According to Lelde Neimane, historian at the Occupation Museum of Latvia, interviewers recognize a generational divide when they talk to both young and old regarding this time. Neimane shares still another variation on this theme. Children were socialized “with mother’s milk” in regard to to what could be discussed at home and in public. She states that in certain cases a child would inadvertently reveal family conversations resulting in the subsequent arrest and deportation of the entire family.20

Similarly, Iveta Šķiņķe, historian at the State Archives of Latvia, explains that people

19 Bela-Krūmiņa, "Oral History Interview, Rīga, Latvia."
generally discerned what could and could not be discussed. She describes Soviet times in Latvia as “silenced times” when people not only avoided speaking about political issues amongst each other but also avoided discussing intimate matters. Therefore even after many years information was not communicated and events remained buried.\textsuperscript{21}

After the reestablishment of independence in 1991, Latvian scholars have addressed the disconnect between official history and memory by developing a strong oral history practice utilizing biographical and life history approaches. The two main oral history ventures in Latvia are at the University of Latvia in Rīga and at Daugavpils University in Daugavpils. Māra Zīrnīte originally instituted the Cilvēkmuzejs (People Museum) in the late 1980’s with the purpose of collecting and preserving Latvian life stories. In 1991, after the international recognition of the independence of Latvia, Māra Zīrnīte joined with the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Academy of Sciences in founding the National Oral History Project. Zīrnīte’s venture, in her own words, creates a “master story” that fills and commemorates the “silenced gaps” in Latvian history left by its fifty years of Soviet rule. By 2002 the project had accumulated over 2,000 life stories, and today it boasts well over 3,000. Zīrnīte sees life stories as tools for strengthening national identity for Latvians. Her primary aim is to justify Latvia’s existence by strengthening the values

\textsuperscript{21} Iveta Šķijše, "Oral History Interview, Rīga, Latvia," (Interviewed by: Irene Elksnis Geisler on May 25, 2010).
and character of Latvians, and the identity of the Latvian nation. Baiba Bela-Krūmiņa, an assistant professor with the University of Latvia with a PhD in Social Sciences, was the Senior Researcher and Project Director of National Oral History Project up to 2009. Bela-Krūmiņa agrees with Zirnīte, that life stories are useful tools in strengthening national identity in Latvia. She goes further to reason that the tendency in life story scholarship in Latvia has been to preserve the more distant past and interview mainly the elderly. She envisions this medium in the future extended to more recent history and connecting multiple generations and age groups.

Irēna Saleniece founded and currently oversees the Oral History program at Daugavpils University. Saleniece, professor and History Department Director, believes life history research is indispensible considering the uncertain accuracy of historical documents left by the Soviet era. She urges the use of oral histories in unison with traditional documents. Saleniece founded the Daugavpils University Oral History Center in 2003. While Zirnīte’s project extends to all of Latvia and outwards towards exiled Latvians, Saleniece’s focus is on detailed local history, particularly the history of local communities and specific to the southern region of Latgale and Sēlija.

Lelde Neimane and Iveta Šķipke are historians at the Occupation Museum of Latvia and the National Archives of Latvia, which are also institutions that foster,
collect and study oral histories. Both the Occupation Museum of Latvia and the National Archives of Latvia have created systemized collections of documents, photos, artifacts, letters and printed materials in order to illuminate the history of fifty-years of occupation. Lelde Neimane, historian at the Occupation Museum of Latvia, explains that people wrote “what was needed” during Soviet times in official documents, personal statements and biographies so as to acquire jobs, obtain funding, be admitted to schools and join networking organizations. Consequently, one must know how to read these documents, “as if through a filter” to obtain the truth. Therefore, she too stresses the simultaneous use of documents and oral histories.²⁵ Šķiņķe, historian at the National Archives of Latvia, agrees. She works with those documents that were produced during the Soviet Era and believes that both kinds of sources, traditional and oral, need to be compared in research. According to Šķiņķe, during the Soviet times, the procedure was that documents needed to be “ironed out” and proposals were written according to “how it should be.” However, Šķiņķe warns that often peoples’ memories are also influenced by what they have studied or read. “The more one reads,” she notes, “the more one’s memory is influenced by what one has read or how one believes one may be perceived.” She adds that, as a result, less educated informants are often more open and candid in their statements.²⁶ Thus, while it may be evident that traditional documentary sources of the Second World War and post-war period are imperfect, so too oral histories alone are neither totally

²⁵ Neimane, "Oral History Interview, Rīga, Latvia."
²⁶ Šķiņķe, "Oral History Interview, Rīga, Latvia."
reliable nor adequate; both types of sources must be utilized in a thorough analysis of this period. These five scholars emphasize the importance of oral histories in the research of history, and their collective wisdom has profoundly influenced my methodology.

Theoretical Perspectives that Guide my Research

Eric Wolf states that ethnohistory has come about to separate “their” history, the history of the suppressed or omitted, from “real” history, the study of the purportedly civilized. He maintains that the more ethnohistory we know, the more clearly “their” history and “our” history emerge as part of the same history.27 This perspective guides my research. When Wolf referred to “their history,” he was concerned with those segments of humankind that stand between the primitive tribe and industrial society. He was not considering women as a group without a history. Yet, women have been a part of the anonymous in history. Because many women’s accounts, such as those of Latvian women during and following the Second World War, have been published as fiction, they have seldom been considered part of traditional history. Their voices have been silenced, as described by Michel-Rolph Trouillot who groups women alongside workers and slaves within socio-cultural, political, economic and ideological constructs that define their positions.28

---

However, the silencing of women’s voices arguably goes beyond patriarchal and hegemonic power politics. As Kathleen Canning points out, while it may be unproblematic to hypothesize that men and women experience, remember and therefore tell their stories in different ways, women’s works become an issue within the genre of history due to the discipline’s adamant claim of objectivity.\(^\text{29}\) While I believe that Latvian women’s narratives are profound and meaningful, I acknowledge that these works often do not fit well with traditional written social histories in which there are clear winners and losers, enemies and redeemers. Latvian women’s voices are complicated with transitions between the details of society and culture, as opposed to the linear focus and uniformity of the professional male historian. Thus, women’s accounts appear to merge conflicting arguments. Often their narratives seem to be more concerned with perceptions and experiences than with “empirical truths.” Many of the works written by these women about their struggles following the Second World War are in the form of novels, such as Angelika Gailite’s book *Ceļniece: Pieredze un Vērojumi* and Ingrīda Vīksna’s *Mums Jābrien Jūrā*. Agate Nesaule in her memoir recalls stories that people told in Latvia during the Russian occupation – “urban legends.”\(^\text{30}\) Additionally, Nesaule explains that her sense of past is provisional because it depends on her memory.


I am persuaded by the viewpoint of Bonnie Smith who argues that histories rooted in patriarchal thought describe the world in a “universal way” rendering reality as it never is. On the other hand, women’s narratives depict the past as a series of constantly varied perspectives such as in a landscape, where “real” history can be seen from different points of view and in different lights. Post-modern and post-colonial scholars have questioned whether there might be experiences of the past that cannot be captured by the customary methods of the discipline of history. I believe that the approaches suggested by these scholars can be fruitfully applied in the Latvian situation. Dipesh Chakrabarty asserts that autobiographies are extremely public when written by men, and when written by women they tell the story of family. He indicates that Bengali women’s voices also combine contradictory themes, similar to those discussed by Latvian women regarding the Second World War. Consequently, historians have been able to deny these voices of ambivalence because the customary constructions of the past require a sense of history where there are no contradictory trends or multifarious struggles. Lloyd Kramer asserts that looking at constructs of the past from a literary perspective opens doors that separate scholars from their own culture. He maintains that scholars should recognize the role of language in the creation and description of historical reality, and that the historian’s task is to develop dialogue in which the autonomous past is allowed to question our

31 Smith, The Gender of History; Men, Women, and Historical Practice, 170.
recurring attempts to reduce it to order. According to Kramer, the past has its own “voices” that must be respected.\textsuperscript{33}

Karl Jirgens raises the notion of an innovative form of “history writing” specifically as it applies to Latvia, merging the boundaries of historical and literary genres, and the “blurring of conventional literary borders.” Jirgens argues that in respect to the Baltic nations, and particularly Latvia, \textit{mythic truth} is of greater significance than any scientific controversies over factual substantiations. He suggests abandoning a fixed notion of “truth” and embracing “truth” as a complicated, multifaceted phenomenon. As numerous scholars have previously demonstrated, history can be viewed as merely a version of what has happened, usually written by or under the influence of the winners. Jirgens maintains that myths have arisen in the Baltic countries in response to centuries of foreign occupation and oppression by multiple victors. Hence, many versions of “truth” have evolved. Yet, clearly Latvia’s history abounds in bloodshed and warfare. “Putting any empirical ‘will to truth’ aside, there can be a consensus that Latvia has been the victim of centuries of hostile invasions and that these hostilities now define a traumatized psychic condition that has become part of a national identity and a national myth.”\textsuperscript{34}

In his comparative analysis of Agate Nesaules’ and Alexandrs Pelēcis’ books, which were based on their experiences following the Second World War, Jirgens


asserts that empiricism and objectivity are ultimately impossible under the traumatic events of deprivation, torture and imprisonment. He explains that these works are structurally and conceptually postmodern as well as postcolonial as they address the interrelationship between physical and psychic entrapment. The theory behind this approach entails the realization that to some degree, the mind itself becomes “colonized” as a basic component of the understanding of the complexities of the post-colonial condition. Thus, in spite of the retreat of Soviet authority from Latvian territory in 1991, the collective Latvian mind remains subjugated. Latvian authors battle with those forces that would silence or alter the larger “collective memory of genocide.” In effect, these authors are moving beyond the empirical to the experiential. “Like impressionist painters, they include emotive and subjective responses in their accounts of the devastation.”

Finally, I am motivated by the viewpoint of Anthropologist Ravina Aggarwal, who points out that in an attempt to give greater credence to the words of female subjects, women have embraced the life history method since the 1930s. The life-history approach is a qualitative research method utilized as an alternative to empirical methods of documentation. It allows the researcher to explore an individual’s experiences over time and challenges the readers to understand the

---

35 Ibid.
informant’s decisions made at another place and time; how they may have been influenced in their decisions, attitudes and behaviors.\textsuperscript{36}

Theory, Thesis and Methodology

This dissertation utilizes oral testimonies as both \textit{historical source} and \textit{collective memory}. I approach oral testimony first as historical documentation in order to bring to light the political oppression of Latvians during the Second World War and post-war period. Secondly, I build on the descriptive and interpret the nature and significance of the documented, specifically focusing on memory, Latvian ethnicity, and women’s culture. Thirdly, I compare testimonies against other sources, including other participant accounts and archival documents in order to substantiate accuracy.

I endeavor to construct historical records from the combination of oral and written sources and qualitatively read for meaning and context. I have gathered diverse participant experiences of the Second World War utilizing my own interviews and the rich compilation of oral histories collected in Latvia by the University of Latvia in Rīga, Daugavpils University and the Latvian Museum of Occupation. Although each person's memories are unique and are shaped through personal perceptions, understandings and experiences, by putting together many narratives, I attempt to produce a composite historical portrait, constructing a collective memory

that seeks to identify what is considered important by the population. Moreover, by utilizing multiples voices this project builds a chronology that transcends any one of these individual sources. I venture to reconstruct from the present standpoint the way participants provided purpose, foundation, justification and explanation for their past actions in diverse environments and to recreate the atmosphere and emotional setting of historical events. The collection of multiple narratives has made it possible to answer questions that cannot be answered by the examination of archival materials alone.

Oral historian Paul Thompson identifies two general types of theoretical interpretation. On the one hand “there are the big theories of social organization ... the functionalist and other schools of sociology and the historical theory of Marxism.” Other notable “big theories,” utilizing Thompson’s expression, within the interrelated disciplines of sociology and cultural anthropology are: intellectualism, structuralism and especially symbolism. Symbols and their relations, in the words of Victor Turner, “are not only a set of cognitive classifications for ordering the ... universe. They are also, and perhaps as importantly, a set of evocative devices for rousing, channeling, and domesticating powerful emotions, such as hate, fear, affection, and grief.”

While not excluding other layers of theoretical interpretation, my approach focuses on culture and symbolism in Latvian ethnicity and women’s culture. Women in a given culture tend to operate in different spheres from those of men in terms of

---

their everyday lives and in terms of their perceived roles. Latvian women’s narratives reveal cultural attitudes, values, anxieties and worldviews, often expressed symbolically, that can be of considerable importance in interpreting their greater Latvian society of men and women, and women’s roles within it. At the same time, I expect my project to demonstrate that the narrators’ perceptions, understanding and experiences of this historical period are influence by their gender roles, as well as their age, social status and personal individuality. Furthermore, women’s narratives and memories reveal the centrality of gender in the construction of Latvian national identity.

In this qualitative research project, I interpret testimonies from women and men who resided in Latvia before the Second World War. To facilitate my research, I asked my informants a series of question related to the period 1940-50 period in Latvian history. This time, beginning in 1940 marking the first Soviet occupation of Latvia, to 1950 is associated with occupation by both Nazi and Soviet forces, and a regime of terror and totalitarian rule in Latvia. The interviews focused on, but were not limited to, the individuals’ own true experiences of this time. I encouraged interviewees to also include events described by their parents and grandparents. Attesting to the centrality of gender in persons’ narratives and memories, and in the construction of Latvian identity, my informants further classified their own stories into two emic subgenres: (1) stories told to them by their mothers and/or grandmothers (women’s tales of war and migration) and (2) stories told to them by their fathers and male members of the family (men’s versions of war and migration).
In order to obtain descriptions of behavior or beliefs in terms meaningful (consciously or unconsciously) to the actor, I invited informants to speak freely and express their own interpretations of the events or circumstances transmitted by family members, as well as to differentiate the various ways in which each of these individuals relayed their experiences to them. One or more participants have been given a pseudonym in order to protect their identities.

My objective in employing a gendered understanding of memory in the extreme contexts of war, exile and migration has critical implications for both the scholarly record of the twentieth century and today’s struggles to cope with oppression, armed conflict, terror and reconciliation. The factors that drew Latvia into World War II and resulted in a population decrease of more than a third of its inhabitants were not unique to Latvia but were common to many parts of Europe during the period of the Second World War. Latvia’s smallness and its location contributed to the invasions both by Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, and finally its forced incorporation into the Soviet Union. Moreover, the mass violence, torture, and violations of fundamental human rights have not been restricted to these locations nor the past. These dynamics introduce discrete contemporary issues for scholarly examination and debate such as the concept of power, vulnerability and security relating to size and place, and the extensive involvement of civilians into active conflict worldwide. Latvia during the Second World War serves as a case study in which to explore wartime experiences when boundaries between battlefront and home front are fluid, and warfare results in the massive displacement of civilians.
Conclusion

This dissertation probes some of the ways in which gender relations affect ethnicity and culture, and in which they interact with strategies of negotiating identity and coalition. It posits that Latvian personal narratives can contribute to our understanding of war, involuntary migration, and resettlement during and after the Second World War. It investigates the role human experience and memory play when confronted by socially disruptive global events. This study maintains that Latvian women’s and men’s narratives reveal cultural attitudes, values, anxieties, and worldviews, were often expressed symbolically. These outlooks can be of considerable importance in interpreting the greater Latvian society and self-identity and gendered roles of men and women.

This project finds narrators’ memories, perceptions, understanding, and experiences of this historical period influenced by their gender, as well as their age, social status and personal individuality. It determines that Latvian women actively participated in war, but experienced the war differently. Their contributions varied according to age, marital status, and family responsibilities. Women empowered themselves to improve their quality of life during this time and in so doing contributed to preservation of their national identity. The dissertation argues that Latvians viewed their oppression during the war and after as having continuity with their long history of violent invasions and subjugation. It concludes that women’s narratives and memories especially regarding the pressures of war and occupation
reveal the centrality of gender and locality in the basic construct of Latvian national identity.
CHAPTER II

THE FIRST PERIOD OF NATIONHOOD
AND THE SHAPING OF LATVIAN MEMORY

Latvia proclaimed its independence as a nation-state for the first time in 1918, yet Latvian scholars typically begin the history of the Latvian peoples well before the twelfth century. Endeavoring to establish their forefathers in the ancient past and to create a time-honored national culture and history, they trace their origins to successive waves of migrations that occurred from the second half of the first century CE, the second, seventh and eighth and possibly the tenth and eleventh centuries, when Baltic tribes migrated to what is now the territory of Latvia and encountered the previous Finno-Ugric inhabitants. In the twelfth century German Teutonic Knights conquered this region naming it Livonia (for the Finno-Ugric Livs), launched a feudal land-tenure system and endeavored to impose the rituals of Christianity on the territory’s polytheistic inhabitants. A series of wars in the sixteenth century divided Livonia between Polish and Swedish rule. The Protestant Reformation instituted Lutheranism in Swedish-ruled Latvia. Latgale, or the Polish Inflanty Voivodeship, remained Catholic. Imperial Russia acquired the entire territory of present-day Latvia in the eighteenth century.
The Russian government abolished serfdom for the majority of Latvians in the early nineteenth century. However, the regime emancipated the Latvian peasants without giving them land. Instead, this government “allowed” families to purchase their own former properties and homes that had been passed down for generations. A growing national consciousness in the nineteenth century was associated with the notion of land ownership for ethnic Latvians. Former Second World War refugee and scholar Kārlis Kalniņš stresses this historic theme in a 1953 on the economy of Latvia: “One’s own corner, one’s own bit of land” is an old Latvian saying incorporating the longings, hopes and aspirations of the landless Latvian people for private landed property. “Land as a Latvian sees it, is the fulfillment of man’s dreams, and blessings, the most cherished treasure.”

---


Map 1: Baltic States During Interwar Years

Adapted from Latvian Occupation Museum, 2011

- Estonia
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Klaipėda Territory part of Lithuania in 1923
- Poland
- Vilnius Territory annexed to Poland in 1923
- Present Border of Latvia
Nation Building and Land Reform in the Interwar Years

For the Latvian population, discussions of land reforms in the interwar years are invariably connected to national identity and nation building. In 1918, after the First World War and the Russian Revolution, which ravaged the country, ruined the economy and cost thousands of human lives, Latvia officially proclaimed independence from Russia. In one of the state’s first measures as a newly founded sovereign territory, government leaders enacted land reforms and started to implement them, similar to nearly all new nation states in Eastern Europe at the time. “One’s little corner, one’s bit of land” did not remain merely a sentimental slogan, but became a mission for the legislature and a calling for the populace. Agrarian reforms were national in scope. They affected not only those who lived in the countryside, but also urban Latvians, who continued to be tied to the rural parts of the country through parents, grandparents, and other kin and through memory.

The new Latvian government carried out agrarian reforms from 1920 to 1937, nationalizing landed properties above a certain size and redistributing the land to as many Latvians as possible with the goal of creating a “nation of farmers.” The planners endeavored not only to make the population more prosperous, but

---

additionally to boost citizens’ self esteem. Latvia’s founders envisioned a landed peasantry as the best buttress against the threat of neighboring Soviet Bolshevism.\textsuperscript{42}

The Constituent Assembly of Latvia passed a land expropriation act in 1920, the first section of which proclaimed that estates owned by private landlords were to be confiscated without compensation, though the possibility of some reparation in the future was not excluded. This bill allowed former Baltic German landlords, who had for centuries presided over estates occupied by Latvian villagers, a norm of 50 hectares (ha)\textsuperscript{43} of “unseized” land. Baltic agrarian reforms of the nineteenth century, while Latvia was part of the Russian Empire, had left the populace landless, or nearly landless, more so than, for example, the population of European Russia. Whereas in 1905 European Russian landed estates included approximately 26\% of the total land, in Latvia these manor estates made up 48.1\%. An additional impetus for reform was the fact that the estate owners were overwhelmingly German by ethnicity, though by proportion roughly 3.6\% of the population. Only 39.3\% of total land was in the possession of ethnic Latvians, and the majority of that was heavily mortgaged.\textsuperscript{44}

Latvia by and large was a multicultural/multiethnic state; the proportion of ethnic Latvians in 1920 was 72.7\% of the total population. This percentage increased during the interwar years but not by much. In 1930, Latvians constituted the ethnic


\textsuperscript{43} ha = hectare or 1,000 m\textsuperscript{2}. 1 ha = 2.47 acres.

majority of 73% in their country of approximately 1,941,000. The most numerous
ethnic minorities were: Russians 12%; Jews 5%; Germans 3.5%; and Poles 3%.45

The second part of the reform legislation dealt with the distribution of
confiscated land.46 The bill allocated plots to rural citizens who possessed little or no
land, predominantly in the form of viensētas, individual farmsteads situated
separately from other homesteads and villages in a pattern referred to as the scattered
farmstead system.47 Latvian farmsteads consisted of dwelling and farming structures
on several hectares of land, each typically fashioned as a ring of outer buildings
around an inner yard. The eastern province of Latgale differed from Latvia’s three
western provinces in this allocation method. Only 14% of Latgalian farmers opted to
receive viensētas, choosing instead to arrange their homes and farmland into sādžas,
hamlets consisting of several family homes as modeled after the manor estates of
Polish landlords, where land was allocated in the form of ribbons outside of the actual
hamlet.48

Latvian leaders met with great success in their endeavor to create a
landholding population. While in 1897, 61.2% of the rural population was landless,

45 Zigmantas Kiaupa et al, The History of the Baltic Countries, ed Ursula Vent and Indrek Kiverik
(Tallinn Avita, 2008), 146 Plakans, The Latvians A Short History, 132 According to Plakans, the
constitution of 1922 required that the cultural autonomy of national minorities be protected and
subsidized In 1935 about 23 percent of all public schools in Latvia were dedicated to providing
primary and secondary education to children of Russian, German, Jewish, Polish, Lithuanian, and
Estonian citizens of Latvia, 138 Also see John W Hiden and David J Smith, “Looking Beyond the
Nation State: A Baltic Vision for National Minorities between the Wars,” Journal of Contemporary
History, 41/3 (2006), 394
46 Gedummas Vaskela, The Land Reform of 1919-1940 Lithuania and the Countries of East and
Central Europe, vol 1 (Vilnius, Lithuania: Arilha Lithuanian Institute of History, 1996), 116-32
47 Plakans, "Agrarian Reform in Latvia The Historical Context," 14
48 Pēteris Zeile, Latgales Kultūras Vēsture No Akmens Laikmeta Līdz Mūsdienai (Rēzekne Latvijas
Kultūras Centra Izdevniecība, 2006), 329.
by 1936, that percentage was reduced to 18%. These agrarian reforms, perhaps the largest and most sweeping ever undertaken by democratic governments, reshaped expectations, opportunities, and relationships at the personal and community level. The scattered farmstead concept, inherited from the “national awakening” period in the second half of the nineteenth century, linked ancestry with interwar policies and the ideology of nation and nation building. The Latvian interwar government granted farmers credit and promoted agricultural exports. When world prices for agricultural products fell during the worldwide depression and also later, the state guaranteed prices for agricultural produce.

Elenora J. recalls fondly the interwar period, when the future looked bright for the newly established Latvian farmer. It is a source of pride for her that the family worked together to build their new mill together. Elenora’s memory focuses on the leadership of Kārlis Ulmanis, Head of State 1934-41:

During Ulmanis’ times the zemnieks [farmer] was supported, the saimnieks [master of the household] was supported; those who wanted to work were supported. One could take out a bank loan with low interest rates. The forests were divided and distributed to those who wanted to build. Among them was my father. With his own hands along with his children he built our mill.

---

Zemnieks literally means a “man of the soil.” The profession and identity of zemnieks in Latvian culture suggests a landowner and implies a deep connection to the land -- of being one of or with the land, and as explained previously, has a significant tie of historical importance as a builder of the nation. Saimnieks stems from Latvian saime meaning family or household; the terms saimnieks and saimniece refer to the master and mistress respectively of the household.

Kārlis Ulmanis, to whom Elenora J. refers so cordially in her narrative, was a graduate of the University of Nebraska in 1909 in agricultural science. He worked as an agricultural journalist and was instrumental in forming the Agrarian Union political party in Latvia. Ulmanis was the first Prime Minister of Latvia. He also served as Prime Minister in several subsequent administrations during the period of Latvian independence from 1918 to 1940. In 1934, Ulmanis presided over the establishment of an authoritarian regime.

All three Baltic countries during the interwar period initially established democratic governments and in all three authoritarian figures seized control in the name of the purportedly common good. Latvia’s democratic government from its creation suffered from difficulties of political division and governmental instability. Twelve years of parliamentary democracy in Latvia produced fourteen cabinets, and more than 27 political parties were represented between 1925 and 1928. This fractured parliament may have contributed to the people’s fear of governmental instability in the face of a severe worldwide depression. In 1934 Prime Minister

Ulmanis dissolved the Parliament and took power in a bloodless coup. Scholars suggest that Ulmanis interpreted his leadership role as the *saimnieks* of the Latvian nation and was perceived as such by a great many Latvian citizens. The Kārlis Ulmanis government stressed national unity, emphasized the agrarian sector above all others and proclaimed the farmer as the backbone of the country’s national culture.

While citizens in many world countries remember the 1930s and early 1940s as reflected through the lens of the devastating effects of the Great Depression, Latvians generally recollect this brief time as a golden era of Latvian independence.

Dr. Alfrēds Bilmanis, in his role as the Latvian Ambassador to United States, claimed in a 1941 address that by 1939 there was no unemployment problem in Latvia, and the state budget was balanced without a deficit. According to Bilmanis, Latvia purportedly had to import thousands of farm hands annually from neighboring countries. Latvians built good roads, regulated rivers and had some of the finest harbors in that part of the world, including: Rīga, Liepāja and Ventspils. Electric

---

power plants were erected all over the country, and one of them – the Kegums – was the largest in Eastern Europe. Latvians constructed small aircraft of plywood and steel for local transportation needs, and even distributed the morning newspapers utilizing airplanes.58

Terēze D. affirms, “Latvians were farmers, and during Ulmanis times the farmer for a very brief period had a boost up, when he could acquire something for himself: a home, a piece of furniture, a radio and perhaps even a lightning rod.”59

Leonora D.’s earliest childhood memories are of her home on the new farmstead.

Land was just distributed then, and my father received seven hectares. And he [we] moved to the new place on those seven hectares. There he built a small barn and shed and moved our old house there on wheels. I ran beside the cart. Vot that was a moment!60

Latvian farmers progressively increased their agricultural yields and food product consumption. The standard of living significantly rose. Between 1928 and 1938 the grain harvest increased by 50 percent and the potato yield by 100 percent.61

Before the Second World War, Latvia had one of the highest levels of meat and milk product consumption levels per capita in Europe. In a comparison of living standards in Latvia and the Soviet Union from 1934 to 1937: Latvians consumed per capita four

---

60 Leonora Daže, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC:244," (Interviewed by: Irēna Saleniece on June 27, 2005).
61 "Increase in Latvian Butter Exports," in *Latvian Information Bulletin* (Washington, D.C.: Latvian Legation, Washington D.C., 1939, August 3), 1. “Productivity of Latvian dairy industry continues according to schedule in 1939. The increase in exports was 16% higher than during the same month last year. In addition to England and Germany, the principal purchasers of Latvian butter were Belgium and Italy.”
to six times more meat, and three to four times more milk. They produced per capita twice the potatoes and sugar beets as the Soviet Union, and consumed per capita 24kg of sugar as opposed to 15kg.

Within its period of independence, Latvian publishers produced 25,210 books in 62 million copies, of which 85 percent were in the Latvian language. This was an average of 40 books per inhabitant, making Latvia second only to Denmark as the European country with the highest number of books per capita. Latvia had approximately 50 newspapers whose circulation progressively increased during the interwar years. Latvian publishing houses contributed significantly to the cultural development in the country. Working conditions and social benefits, such as modern health care, compulsory schooling, child support and maternity protection were notably good in Latvia and received particular attention from the interwar government. Latvians enjoyed a high level of material comfort even when contrasted with their European neighbors.

From the 1920s to the mid 1930s in Latvia there was a growing rise in prosperity. Pēteris V. remembers his early childhood as severe, but 1935 as a time of abundance. His narrative reflects the historical memories of many Latvians.

I was born in Robeznieki and arrived in Krāslava to an empty plot [in the 1920s]. Father was ill, we were three children.... We could afford a lump of butter the size of a teaspoon per week... we had buttermilk,

---

pickles and potatoes, and that was the way it was.... Going to school was difficult, six kilometers and snow up to a child’s bottom. Footwear -- father’s boots; no money to buy [appropriate shoes]... could only go to school once snow fell, when barnyard animals did not need to be herded... and in the spring when the grass shown green just a little bit, again the animals needed to be herded. Parents were not interested in their children receiving an education because they needed a workforce....But then in 1935, when Ulmanis came, I was just a boy... on the tables of almost every family, who were not lazy, was smoked ham, butter, cheese, white bread and sweets, home baked.... Farmsteads were developed, modern barns built, let’s say progress.”

Pēteris A. recalls these years as a “constant upward climb” in which “each year life went up.... Then in 1940 and 1941, when the Soviet Regime began, everything changed at once, like it did all over Latvia.” Due to the three successive occupations of Latvia by Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany and the devastating fallout of the Second World War, these accomplishments soon took a drastic negative turn. Loss of independence during the Second World War period had far-reaching effects on Latvian self-identity, an identity that went beyond state borders as Latvians fled to the west, and were deported east. Fundamental to this national identity were the notions of land and home.

In August of 1940, the Soviet regime initiated a program of “dividing the land,” nationalizing and redistributing territory to 51,762 landless persons and 23,231 smallholders. Most farms in Latvia, 275,500, or 66 percent, at this point were of

---

medium size from 5 to 50 hectares. Land was expropriated from farmers who owned more than 30 hectares. The Soviet redistribution of land enlarged smallholder agriculture. This process briefly halted with the German occupation, 1941-1945, since Nazi Germany's eventual plan for the Baltic States was a relocation of people to the interior of conquered Russia and a resettlement of the area with German farmers. The Soviet regime regained power over Latvia in 1945 and proceeded to initiate the first stage of their collectivization process, the incorporation of individual farms into kolkhoz and sovkhoz systems. This stage of the process concluded in the early 1950s, but viensētas for the time being continued to be rural residences even after land absorption into collective farms. In 1962 the Soviet Latvian government initiated the second stage of the collectivization effort, declaring scattered farmsteads, which valued privacy and separateness, remnants of an unacceptable past. The second stage of this collectivization process in Latvia endeavored not only to reduce the number of individuals living and working in the countryside, but, notably, to eliminate the traditional Latvian viensēta. This effort undoubtedly affected people's memories of home, nation and land as they recall a lifetime of events.

---

67 Puisans, Unpunished Crimes: Latvia under Three Occupations, 36.
It was particularly beautiful in the summer when the linden trees were blooming. Then there were garlands and branches, and also wreaths strewn with sweet flag leaves. In winter there were chopped up pine needles in the anteroom. I can remember the fragrance of the linden blossoms when we went to the bathhouse.69

Latvians carried with them into the Second World War and its aftermath strongly entrenched cultural traditions, such as the love of solitude and a devotion to one’s home. The ideal location for one’s home in the interwar years was usually thought to be the viensēta, one from where no sign of other human habitation was visible. The principal responsibility for the home, the hearth and the farmstead was the woman’s.

Latvians, like many other Europeans, named their homes in the interwar period. Naming ones house is an old custom reaching at least as far back as the early modern period, which began with the gentry naming their manors, halls, and castles. The custom gradually spread to the masses, and everyday folk began naming their homes as well. Traditionally the house name was based on whom the house was connected to or its geographical location. Both male and female Latvian informants who are formerly from rural areas often initiate their narratives by situating themselves within this time-honored custom of introducing themselves with the name of one’s home. Urban dwellers, in contrast, announce where they were born, such as

Rīga or Liepāja. In early modern Europe almost all houses had names and signs. This provided a means of finding one's way around in times before street names and numbering. A primary purpose was also to mark the individual, family or ethnic identity of the house owner or tenant. Certainly this custom, practiced in prewar rural Latvia and continuing until today, auspiciously reflects the value and esteem Latvians place on their home and land. The long-established custom has a reciprocal impact on individual sense of belonging and identity, which is tied to a place and a name rather than a number.

Latvians who lost their dwellings in the during the Second World War and post-war period identify even today with the place and the name of their former home. Auseklis E. grew up in his family home, Greķeni. Similarly, Alma E. and Marta G. present themselves as from the province of Vidzeme, the district of Jumurda, from their home Smaugēni. Interestingly, the custom of identifying with a place at times even extends to tombstones, as in: "Here rest the saimnieki of Smaugēni Pēteris and Līze Sudrabipš." Some individuals refer to homes in the diminutive, expressing strong emotional ties to what they still consider their family dwelling, even after years of living elsewhere. Spodra G. identifies herself with her home, Ezeriņi. Those individuals named in this paragraph immigrated to the United States.

70 David Garrioch, "House Names, Shop Signs and Social Organization in Western European Cities," Urban History 1, No. 21 (1994).
States after 1950. Likewise, Gaida A. a current resident of Latvia introduces herself as from the region of Madona, Saikala’s district Zūšciece on the banks of the Aiviekste’s river. Gaida lost her family home when it was burned by the retreating German army. Mirdza S., deported in 1949 to Siberia, begins her life history: “I was born in my father’s home Līdumnieki in 1928.” Marija L. was born in 1929 in her home called Ejuši. Typically, each home also has a story of the origins of its naming, and these stories act as links between the generations—between the namer of the house and that person’s decedents. Marija L. explains:

My ancestor who lived in the house was a messenger but did not have a horse, so he went everywhere on foot, and was nicknamed ejošais (from walker or pedestrian) and so the house was named Ejuši.73

Similarly, Elita P. shares the history of how her home was named. She lived with her family in Rīga, but her father built a summer country home in the interwar period in the countryside near a small stream with a rather steep shoreline. Therefore the dwelling was named Straumeni (from straume meaning “stream”). But Elita warns that one should never go back to where one was once happy. Elita returned to look for Straumeni after the war to find only level ground where her beloved home once stood.74

For Marta G. it was a source of pride that her family owned their home, Smaugēni, and their land, even before the land reform, even though it was a modest

73 Lūše, "Oral History Interview, Rīga, Latvia."
parcel. Marta lived in central Latvia before the Second World War, in the district of Jumurda, Vidzeme, together with her parents and two younger sisters, Alma and Rita. Marta describes her home as a vecsaimniecība (old-farmstead) designating an arable farm already established before the First World War. She explains that her grandparents had worked very hard to acquire and cultivate the land on which she grew up. They toiled to secure a future for the coming generations. She and her sisters came into the world as saimniekmeitas [daughters of masters and mistresses of the farmstead], and her grandparents passed away believing that the land would remain in the possession of their family.75

Former rural residents proudly identify themselves as country-dwellers, the children of agrarians. During the interwar period a commonly accepted axiom linked national character to folk values and labor on the land. Agriculture was the chief profession in pre-war Latvia and a key component of the Latvian self-identity, even when a person had other means of income. In the Baltic Sea region, just as the Estonians and Finns often associate historically with seafaring and coastal fishing traditions, Latvians and Lithuanians represent themselves as land-folk and agrarians.76 In 1935, sixty-five percent of all Latvian workers claimed agriculture as their principle employment.77

75 Gulbis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
Latvian women’s traditional roles, even more than men’s, may have been tied to an agrarian culture and lifestyle. In 1923 of all agrarian workers, 56.72 percent were women, and in 1929, 52.5 percent. In 1935 there were 108 women farm-workers to every 100 men. In contrast, the percentage of women who worked in factory labor was much smaller; in 1930 only 33% of all industrial employees were women. Yet oral history testimonies suggest that some statistical data may be misleading regarding women’s employment. Keeping within patriarchal and patrilocal traditions, Latvian pre-war society commonly considered males to be breadwinners and regarded females as usually not working, except as homemakers or appendages to the male in his given profession. In census surveys, males usually listed their own occupations as primary. Females often claimed, as explained by Marija G.: “I was supported by my husband,” when, in fact, women earned wages and their work was essential to the wellbeing of the household.” The women who later endured war, annexation, and exile bore the heritage of cultural roles learned in the early national period, and of professional and economic responsibilities they had held during the interwar era.

A high percentage of working women in Latvia was statistically evident in the interwar years; in Latvia in 1930 approximately 57 percent of the female population was employed, while in Switzerland (1930) by comparison only 28.9 percent, Great Britain (1931) 26.8 percent, Italy (1931) 18.5 percent and the Netherlands (1930) 19.2

78 Spekke, *History of Latvia; an Outline*, 362.
percent. Moreover, women markedly outnumbered men in the overall population of Latvia due to the heavy losses of life as a result of the First World War. In 1920 there was a ratio of 1,211 women to every 1,000 men, and even as late as 1935 there were still 1,139 women to every 1,000 men.\(^8\)

*Table 1: Population of Latvia 1897-1935*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Pop</th>
<th>Urban Pop</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Rural Pop</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>1,929,387</td>
<td>584,039</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>1,345,348</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>946,036</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>983,351</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>1,596,131</td>
<td>403,402</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>1,192,729</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>721,927</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>874,204</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>1,844,805</td>
<td>633,617</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>1,211,188</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>859,957</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>984,848</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>1,900,045</td>
<td>693,902</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>1,206,143</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>886,078</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>1,013,967</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1935</td>
<td>1,905,936</td>
<td>709,321</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>1,196,615</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>890,658</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>1,015,278</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Population by year, gender and urban vs. rural based on national census statistics. Adapted from: Latvijas Statistika\(^2\)

In the rural landowning population of the interwar period women usually worked alongside their husbands in maintaining farms, and they frequently managed the farmsteads in their husbands' absence. Even women living in urban settings often planted kitchen gardens, and at times kept livestock. Ilga L.'s father was an official in the local government of Ezeri Parish. The family lived in an apartment but owned one hectare of land where Ilga's mother kept a cow, two pigs and a vegetable garden.\(^3\)

---


\(^3\) Ilga Lācis-Belitska, "Oral History Interview, Three Rivers, MI," (Interviewed by: Irene Elksnis Geisler on August 10, 2009).
Ina P. describes her mother’s family life on a farm outside of Grobiņa in western Latvia with her grandfather Fricis, grandmother Anna and seven brothers and sisters. Fricis worked as a railroad engineer. He was away from home most of the time, and her grandmother Anna took care of both the children and of the farm.

Grandma was in charge of the farm. My mom said she got up very early in the mornings about five when the sun was coming up and she would go out and weed the garden before the children even got up... because it had to be done, and when you have a half a dozen or eight children running around, you don’t get much done anymore. She worked very hard. There is a lovely picture of her on her engagement day, and she was a round faced, beautiful young lady. And then the next picture that we have is with Grandpa and Grandma and two of the children. And she is quite thin. She has worked very hard, and it shows in her face.\(^4\)

In the absence of men, it was necessary for women to take on tasks traditionally considered within the male domain, such as accumulating materials for home construction. It is evident that the building of homes is an important anchor point in the memories of Latvians. The home secured a family to a piece of land. According to Ina:

My Mom told me that Grandma Anna collected lumber for a number of years and piled it by the farmhouse and barn until there was enough lumber to be dried and seasoned. And finally when there was enough lumber they built a new house. But it had to be collected. You did not just go out and order enough lumber for a house.\(^5\)

The image of family members working together to build their home is, indeed, a microcosm of the larger Latvian society laboring to build their country.

\(^4\) Plaņa, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
\(^5\) Ibid.
Anniņa V. illustrates a typical role that one may expect of Latvian women in pre-war times -- that of a dutiful daughter to be a wife and mother in an aspiring agrarian family. She was sixteen at the onset of the Second World War. Anniņa recalls the pre-war period very fondly. She spent her childhood near Valmiera in northern Latvia and describes herself as a country dweller. Her family owned a herd of cattle and plowed the land with horses. She eventually married her childhood sweetheart who was a neighbor boy. Anniņa insists that if Latvia had not been occupied by the Soviet Union, she and her husband would have remained in Latvia. Instead of loosing their home and property she would most probably have become the mistress of the homestead of her husband’s family farm. As such Anniņa would have been a partner with her husband in the management of the farm, responsible for the garden, the barnyard, the milking and poultry, the food preparation, and procurement of consumer goods as well as organizing the various festivities, such as Jāņi Midsummer’s Eve and Mārtiņi the fall harvest celebration.\(^\text{86}\) Alma E. recalls that she preferred work on the farm and chose this over academic endeavors. She found being productive in the barn and on the fields personally rewarding and took pleasure in all expressions of nature, such as the flowering of fruit trees in the spring and the songs of skylarks in summertime. In her words: “I was young ... and I found joy in

\(^{86}\) Anna Vaseris, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI," (Interviewed by: Irene Elksnis Geisler on July 1, 2009).
everything. I worked in the barn, in the home and on the fields – I plowed and played.”

Additionally, many women had positions in the public sphere and diverse duties in this pre-war period, and they made varied choices in addition to the conventional role of a homemaker, or a farmer’s wife. Biruta A. describes her mother as a professional ballet dancer who gave up her career when she married. However, her aunts, a Baltic philologist and a doctor, continued their respective professions after marriage. Olga S. declares that after she finished school, she absolutely thought, “I will remain with the land,” so she enrolled in Bebrenes two-year agricultural school in hopes of being trained to help manage a large farm. Auseklis E.’s mother Zelma also worked as a teacher before he and his brother were born and continued to substitute teach on occasion, but for most of her life she worked on the family farm. Although educated, Zelma assumed the role of wife and mother and the respected status of a *saimniece* after the birth of her children in order to work towards the prosperity of the family and the household. For many Latvian women language proficiency, expertise in health care and first aid and teaching abilities became survival mechanisms in Latvia and in exile during the war and post-war years. Additionally, these skills, learned outside of the traditional domestic sphere, became

---

87 Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
89 Olga Spüle, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC: 28."
90 Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
indispensable in preserving Latvian traditions and culture to coming generations of Latvians.

Latvia, like many European countries in the twentieth century, grew to value education highly for both boys and girls with a foresight of employing both men and women. Elementary education was free and obligatory for both boys and girls. Fifteen percent of Latvia's national budget was devoted entirely to education. Before the First World War there were approximately 200 public libraries in Latvia. In 1926, this number had already increased to 802, and in 1938 to 912. In 1938 of the 912 institutions, 771 were free, and 141 loaned materials for a small fee. Librarians, of whom 418 were professionals and 1,070 volunteers staffed these facilities. The later were mainly librarians of the foundations maintained by cultural organizations. This tradition of schooling and community service enabled women to seek cultural work and employment out of the home and to pursue professional careers. Informants often testify to pre-war Latvian women working as writers, teachers, nurses and doctors. By 1938 Latvia had 1,566 physicians. Of these 474 were women. In 1940 the Latvian

---


93 Bilmanis, The History of Latvia, 371.
National Guard of 45,000 had approximately 12,000 members in its Women’s Auxiliary Corp.\(^4\)

However, the fact that women, usually as young adults before marriage, frequently worked as professionals could be easily overlooked because of the tendency of informants to focus on the agrarian lifestyle in their reminiscences. Latvian women’s and men’s perceived roles as preservers and transmitters of tradition are reflected in their narratives linked to an agrarian culture, perhaps more strongly because of Latvia’s small size and the possibility of cultural near extinction. Marta G. studied in Madonas Ģimnāzija taking courses in the humanities, including Latin as a required classical language. She fled war-torn Latvia in 1944, eventually settled in America, finished her degree in Biology and had a professional career in the field of pharmacy. However, she describes herself in her narrative as a saimniekmeita [daughter of a saimnieks or the master of the homestead].\(^5\) Austra L. recalls her childhood:

> If I have to say who raised me, then I have to say that it was the beautiful nature and folklore. My mother died when I was three years old. For a short while my grandmother raised me. Grandmother was the one who taught me the folk songs. She said, my dear girl, for every place or every job there is a folk song; and it is really so. I think that is the main educator – the folk song, and nature."\(^6\)


\(^5\) Gulbis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."

Marija L. reminisces about shared traditions:

My mother loved to sing. In the spring we went to “sing in” the springtime. We had another tradition – we shared a bathhouse with our neighbors; it was heated every second week, by either one or the other neighbor. And each of us decorated the anteroom in some way.... In winter there were chopped up pine needles in the anteroom. I can remember the fragrance of the linden blossoms when we went to the bathhouse. Not only the bathhouse smelled nice, but the linden trees as well. Whenever I smell linden blossom now, it seems to me that there should also be the scent of the bathhouse.97

Many individuals remember the period before the war as one of peace and abundance, but this did not necessarily mean ease, especially for women. Alma E.’s testimony includes somewhat darker themes of hardship. Alma does not remember exactly how many farm animals the family had, especially since it varied from time to time, but she does remember the names of her favorite cows: Narce, Salna, Dūda and Adata. She explains that the family did not name the hens, pigs and sheep the family in order to distance themselves emotionally from them because these animals were sold and/or used for food. Her most beloved horses were named: Ansis, Bēris and Irma, and the two dogs were called Krancis and Duksītis (diminutive for Duksis), and she adored Duksītis most of all. She sadly recalls stepping onto the ship in Liepāja and leaving this family pet behind. While she does not like to dwell on misery, she is indeed pragmatic and realistic about life in Latvia before the war. Alma shares a sad story regarding a relative who got pregnant:

Mother’s cousin got pregnant in Latvia...went insane and hung herself. They didn’t find her for an entire winter. Then, when they found her, one day in February... they found the body hanging ....

97 Lūse, "Oral History Interview, Riga, Latvia."
They said that she had committed suicide. Whether she truly went insane, or the situation seemed too shameful...that there was no way out, is unclear.... They brought her to the sauna to thaw her out ... and then they [the family] felt they had to burn down the sauna to preserve the sense of it as being a clean and blessed place.\textsuperscript{98}

Olga R. talks more generally about women’s duties on the farm: “Male farm-hands at least had Sundays to rest, but female workers in fieldwork could never take a break, because on Sundays just as on other days, we still needed to tend to the livestock, milk the cows, process the milk, cook, etc. We did not even have time to look into a book.”\textsuperscript{99}

Marija L. shares a charming story about her sister’s babysitter Trotsky, which reflects serious interwar issues and responsibilities for Latvian women:

My sister’s babysitter was the dog, Trotsky....The dog looked after her, and the dog was told, “Don’t let her go further than here, don’t let her out of the gate, or near the well.” And mum said that nevertheless she worried and ran home from the fields to see, she said: “And there is the girl sitting on the porch with Trotsky. She takes a suck from the bottle, then puts it in Trotsky’s mouth, who also has a suck.” She said, “She gets up, Trotsky takes her by the skirt and doesn’t let her go.”\textsuperscript{100}

Valentina G., of Polish heritage, lived in eastern Latvia and recalls the hardships and suffering of her grandparents growing old and her misfortune at the death of her father:

Grandfather suffered from a hernia and often moaned from pain. And grandmother had rheumatoid arthritis. In the evenings she would spread ointment on her soar joints. But then came the most grievous time in my life. My father worked in forestry and came to be

\textsuperscript{98} Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."


\textsuperscript{100} Lūsc, "Oral History Interview, Riga, Latvia."
underneath a falling tree.... In 1935 my father died at the age of 31. I was four years old. At seven, I worked all of the heavy farm jobs [as the adults] ... stacking hay, threshing grain...rye was cut only [by hand] with a sickle.... And in the evenings I didn’t want to look at a cup of milk. My entire body ached.  

Valērija S. explains that her father was born the son of a landowner. However, he was a middle son and therefore could not inherit his father’s land. He was forced to go out into the world to find his fortune. Her father became a soldier in the Latvian liberation army. He retired in 1931/2 from the army, and the Latvian government granted him a broken down farm named “Mazāvas” to live on with the rights to buy it, which he indeed did. He nicknamed his home “Āvas,” and he spent his last years on this property, energetically farming it. 

Father loved the land immensely; indeed he could not be parted from the land. He immersed himself in all of the grounds keeping and animal husbandry activities, and extremely loved his “Āvas,” and his own land.

Memories of home and folk-life during the interwar years reflect an integral part of Latvian people’s value systems and self-identity. Whereas many Latvians generally hesitate to talk about the war and occupation period, they gladly share their memories of home and home-life during pre-war times. In so doing, they not only share fond recollections but they are communicating larger truths about Latvian history and culture.

---

101 Valentina Gudlievska, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC: 321."
Conclusion

The Latvian people began reconstructing their new sovereign country after a devastating First World War, the Russian Revolution and struggle for independence. The Latvian government, endeavoring to make the population thrive and to enhance citizens’ self esteem, carried out agrarian reforms from 1920 to 1937, nationalizing landed properties above a certain size and redistributing the land to as many inhabitants as possible. Land reforms reshaped expectations, opportunities, and relationships at the personal and community levels. The conscious ideology of the interwar government connected nation building and national character to folk values and labor on the land.

Latvia was fundamentally an agrarian country made up of small and medium size farms. Nearly two-thirds of the inhabitants were farmers who lived from the productivity of the soil, which was a source of pride for residence. Long-established traditions such as the naming of one’s rural home contributed to the people’s sense of belonging and identity, which was tied to a place and a name. Typically, each home had a story of the origins of its naming, and these stories acted as links between the generations. A distinctive feature of Latvian agriculture was the scattered method of farming, different from many other parts of Europe and inherited from the “national awakening” period in the second half of the nineteenth century, which endeavored to preserve the individuality and privacy of the farmer. This so called viensēta system of individual farmsteads situated separately from other homesteads and villages would
prove to affect the Latvians in both positive and negative ways during the war and post-war period discussed in subsequent chapters.

Women played a pivotal position in the identity formation of the Latvian people, due to their social roles and functions in families. The primary responsibility for the home, the hearth and the farmstead was the woman’s. Latvian women’s traditional domestic roles, perhaps even more than men’s, were tied to an agrarian culture and lifestyle. Women outnumbered men in interwar Latvia. In the absence of men, it was necessary for women to take on duties, which may have been conventionally considered within the male domain, such as accumulating materials for home construction. Many women also had positions in the public sphere, and they made varied choices in addition to the conventional role of a homemaker. Though many women were well educated and held professional jobs, many also held on to the constructed culture of women as co-proprietors of the farm. These responsibilities and learned skills both helped and hindered Latvian women’s efforts to survive war, annexation and exile. The roles of women were fundamental in individuals’ experiences and memories about home, and they became increasingly important as the Second World War progressed.
CHAPTER III

THE FIRST SOVIET OCCUPATION:
IDENTITY, POWER AND OPPRESSION

In the interwar years Latvia pursued a policy of strict nonalignment in its foreign policy, and the Latvian government declared neutrality on September 1, 1939, the date of the German invasion of Poland and the beginning of the Second World War. However, the Molotov Ribbentrop Pact between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics signed in Moscow on August 23, 1939, pre-determined Latvia’s involvement in the Second World War both politically and demographically. This contract between the German and Soviet governments pledged non-aggression by either the German or Soviet state if the other were attacked by a third party. The treaty included a covert plan to divide northern and eastern Europe into German and Soviet spheres of influence. Following the signing of this agreement, the two signatory powers invaded their respective sides of Poland, marking the start of the Second World War and dividing the country between them. The Soviet Union annexed part of eastern Finland after a failed occupation of the country and followed

---

by seizing Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and eastern and northern Romania.\textsuperscript{104}

Latvian soldier, Voldemārs V. describes from a present-day perspective this historic event:

The “red” fascists joined hands with the “brown” and in secret from other nations divided Europe amongst themselves. The onset of this most horrendous human tragedy was September 1, 1939, when Germany declared war on Poland.\textsuperscript{105}

At the time, the Latvian population was largely unaware of the Soviet-Nazi pact and the details that led to their entanglement.\textsuperscript{106} The overarching feeling was that they were pulled into a war not their own. Latvians, in remembering these events, collectively identify as neither victors nor losers in this tragic historical episode, but rather as the wounded. As opposed to nation builders, as many Latvians might have seen themselves during their brief time of independence, with this period of Soviet occupation, the Latvian people began to self-identify as a nation of victims.

\textsuperscript{104} Heinrihs Strods, "Septlta Plauja (1940-1949)," in \textit{Via Dolorosa Stālimsma Upuru Liecības}, ed Anda Līce (Rīga Liesma, 1993), 10, Kriaupa et al., \textit{The History of the Baltic Countries}, 165 Angrick and Klein, \textit{The "Final Solution" In Rīga Exploitation and Annihilation, 1941-44}, 20-21 For a detailed account of the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, negotiated between Ribbentrop and Molotov, which gave Hitler the freedom of action in Europe and lead Stalin into a false sense of security, see Anthony Read and David Fisher, \textit{The Deadly Embrace Hitler, Stalin and the Nazi-Soviet Pact 1939-1941} (New York, NY W W Norton & Company, 1988), 221-228

\textsuperscript{105} Voldemārs Veldre, \textit{Mana Dzives Cēļa Līkloči Published Memoir} (Rīga Latvijas Brīvības Cnītāju Palīdzības Fonds, 1998), 4 ‘Sarkanais’ fāsisms sadevas rokas ar ‘brūno’ un slepenā no citām valstīm savstarpēji sadalīja Eiropu Sākums šai visielākai cilvēces tragēdijai bija 1939. g 1 septembris, kad Vācija uzsāka karu pret Poliju.

\textsuperscript{106} Only after the Nuremburg Trial of 1946 was the secret protocol, which was added to the Molotov Ribbentrop pact of 1939, brought to light regarding the boundaries of the respective spheres of influence of Eastern Europe Spekke, \textit{History of Latvia An Outline}, 387, Romuald Misunjas and Rein Taagepera, \textit{The Baltic States, Years of Dependence 1940-1980} (Berkeley University of California Press, 1983), 16 According to Misunjas and Taagepera, published documents indicate that the Latvian government may have only partially been appraised of the secret clauses in the Molotov Ribbentrop pact.
For centuries Latvia had experienced hostile invasions, which caused the people to view themselves as pawns of larger more powerful forces. Respected Latvian historian Heinrihs Strods looks at his nation’s history from the perspective of seven characteristic periods of war, plague and famine. He graphically describes these periods as “human mowings,” in which human beings were manifestly plowed off the face of the earth. A recurring theme prevalent in Baltic history is that of being “hunted” by the authorities of the Balts’ more powerful neighbors. The British minister to the Baltic States in September of 1934 described the Baltic peoples’ reaction to the political changes around them: “There is a ‘lives of the hunted’ element in the attitude of these small states to their great neighbors.”

Memories of this time remain vivid for many who experienced this period personally, as well as for others who learned about events through the accounts of family members. Individuals suffered both human and material losses at the hands of abusive governments and in situations of armed conflict. Latvians often remember minute details of events that had a profound personal impact on their lives even fifty to sixty years in the past. To a large extent the Communist regime contributed to this phenomenon of remembering by attempting to systematically alter history in the public mind. The Soviet system between 1945 and 1991 repeatedly exercised efforts to portray the past according to the socialist sanctioned image of history. Latvian historian Irēna Saleniece points out that: “Archival documents [from this time period

---

in Latvia] reveal our past from a position of power and ignore the peoples’ involvement and experiences in events. Yet, many Latvians, because of the disconnect between official history and experience, perceived “real history” as stored and living on in the memories of the people.

The inhabitants of Latvia were generally shocked and confused at the proceedings of the Soviet takeover of the first year of occupation: the arrests and executions; seizure of land, homes and businesses; reduction of living standards; propaganda; repressions; deportations; and terrors. The war splintered and injured ethnic populations in the Baltic region. The Soviet occupying authorities wielded repressive measures against not only the ethnic Latvians, but also minorities such as the Jews, Poles, Byelorussians and even ethnic Russians. These actions increased self-awareness in ethnic Latvians, changed perceptions and drove wedges between Latvian citizens. Whereas before this period, many ethnic Latvians may have viewed the neighboring Russian people as hardworking fellow peasants, or perhaps based their perceptions on émigrés dedicated to the preservation and creation of Russian culture and historical tradition, they would soon recognize the Soviet Russian from another class and ideology as poles apart from them.

---


110 For an account of the history of the exiled society of Russian intellectuals, professionals, writers and artists from first the R.S.F.S.R. and then the U.S.S.R. to border areas such as the Baltic States and to Germany, France, Poland and Romania, see: Marc Raeff, Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919-1939, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990). The author argues
Women’s accounts, particularly, detail the vulnerability of civilians during these tense times. They observed changes associated with family life and close relations. Women noticed the departure and arrival of German, Jewish and Russian women and men and made judgments based on their behavior and appearance. Children noticed changes in school: the abrupt change in curricula, the appointment of new officials, and particularly other children disappearing from classes. Yet, narratives by men and women share many common characteristics as their stories capture the poignant experiences of encountering with the war and annexation. Latvians recall the general mood of indeterminacy during this period and the transformations of their environment with the entry of soldiers, tanks and military vehicles.

That the Russian émigres of the interwar era largely succeeded in reconstituting and preserving their cultural creativity in the West. The émigres in the border states, such as Latvia, published books and journals, composed music, founded educational institutions, theaters and churches, and were met with much needed moral and material support from their host countries (p. 22, 125).

111 As explained in Chapter 1, during the interwar years, Latvians constituted the ethnic majority at 73%. The most numerous ethnic minorities were Russians 12%, Jews 5%, Germans 3.5% and Poles 3%. Kiaupa et al., The History of the Baltic Countries, 148.
Map 2: Eastern Europe 1939-1940 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact Spheres

Adapted from: Latvian Occupation Museum, 2011.

Border of USSR’s and Nazi Germany’s Sphere of Influence August 23, 1939

Adjusted Border of USSR’s and Nazi Germany’s Sphere of Influence September 28, 1939

- USSR 1939
- Territory under USSR Protectorate 1939-40, annexed to the USSR 1940-41
- Nazi Germany 1939
- Territory annexed to Nazi Germany 1939
- Bohemia and Moravia under German Protectorate
- City of Danzig annexed to Nazi Germany 1939

----- Borders of USSR’s Republics
----- Current Border of Latvia
Waiting for War

While many Latvians before the first Soviet occupation may have said that if they had to choose between two evils—the Germans or the Russians—they would rather have the Russians. Well, after the Russian had arrived, everyone said, 'God help us!'

After September 1, 1939, rumors about imminent war between Germany and the Soviet Union spread among the inhabitants of Latvia. The Latvian government’s pronouncement of neutrality gave certain citizens some false hope that the country would not be forced into this confrontation. Others trusted that Latvia would receive help from western forces in their commitment to neutrality. Following the German invasion of Poland, a particularly tense international incident arose. The Polish submarine Orzel [the Eagle], deployed in the Baltic Sea, was unable to return to Poland because of Nazi occupation. The vessel retreated to the neutral port of Tallinn, Estonia, where the Captain was forced to leave the submarine to undergo hospital treatment. According to international law regarding the rights and duties of neutral powers during naval war, "hostile ships" could enter a neutral port but were forbidden to remain there for more than twenty-four hours. Due to the illness of the Captain, this regulation was breached. At the insistence of Germany, the Estonian military authorities boarded the ship and began to incarcerate the crew, confiscate navigation equipment, and remove weaponry. However, the Orzel proceeded to escape capture with two Estonian guards onboard as hostages.

The Soviet Union utilized this incident to accuse Estonia of violating neutrality and demanded mutual assistance pacts from all three Baltic States and Finland. As part of these pacts, the Soviet Union stipulated that the countries allow Soviet military bases to be implemented on Baltic soil but guaranteed in writing that this agreement did not intend to curtail the sovereignty of the Baltic States and Finland, influence their internal affairs or foreign policy, or interfere with their economic dealings. The Latvian government did not want war. On October 5, 1939, Latvia signed the mutual contract with the Soviet Union, as did Estonia and Lithuania.\(^{113}\)

On October 30 the first Soviet Army units entered Latvia, and between October 1939 and June 1940 the Soviet government stationed 30,000 troops in Latvia.\(^{114}\) When the USSR approached Finland regarding signing a mutual assistance pact as the Baltic States had done, negotiations on border changes and the control of islands in the Gulf of Finland failed. Russia invaded Finland on November 30, 1939. The small Finnish army fiercely resisted the Soviet force, and the war dragged on until March 1940.\(^{115}\) By the completion of the so-called “Winter War,” 19,575 Finnish soldiers had lost their lives.\(^{116}\)

---


News of the events of 1939 initiated the first emigration of Baltic Germans out of Latvia. Approximately 52,583 Baltic Germans repatriated between 1939 and 1941. Historically, despite the cyclic shifts in political authority, Baltic Germans had benefitted from an 800-year presence in the Baltics by maintaining their position as a prime ethnic and economic caste, particularly in the areas of present day Estonia and Latvia. Lithuania had few Germans; the upper orders there were Polish. With the advent of industrialization in the nineteenth century, the establishment of independent Baltic States and land reforms, the economic and political balance changed. Many Baltic Germans retained their places after the land reform and became citizens of their respective countries. Although citizens of the newly formed states, they self-identified with their German heritage, and Latvians frequently continued to associate German minorities with their historic caste of oppressors, the landed elite. Ilmārs M. quotes a common saying describing the attitude of many ethnic-Latvians towards the Germans in 1939: “Better with the devil than with the Germans.” Ilmārs recalls that during the pre-war years an anti-German bias prevailed, and although the Latvian government had declared its neutrality in the impending war, the underlying political

---

An estimated 52,583 Germans were evacuated from Latvia Plakans, *The Latvians: A Short History*, 142.
leanings of the Latvian people in 1939 were predominately anti-German (Nazi), and pro-English and American.\textsuperscript{118}

On October 6, 1939, just one day after Latvia’s signing of the mutual assistance pact with the USSR, Adolf Hitler addressed the Latvian German population encouraging them to emigrate, or in his words “return home to the Reich.”\textsuperscript{119} According to Baltic German Gisela Z., on this day her beautiful childhood ended. Her testimony reveals the anguish and heartache of individuals leaving their family homes and lands that had been their ancestors’ for centuries. Gisela, born in 1924, was 15 years old in 1939. Gisela describes her parents as Latvian citizens of Baltic German heritage. She remembers her parents listening to the radio broadcast on October 6, 1939, in which Hitler gave his speech asking all Germans to come home. “Ins Reich” she quotes, because the Russians were coming. Her parents began making plans to leave their home in the city of Liepāja. “Everyone started packing to ‘return’ to Germany [after 800 years], and the first to leave were the old and sick.”\textsuperscript{120}

Gisela has vivid memories of Russians arriving in Latvia. She describes the newcomers as being of an entirely different culture from “us,” the local inhabitants.

\textsuperscript{118} Ilmārs Mežulis, Life Story Interview, 1941. g. 17. Jūnijis, Mutvārdu Vestures Fragmenti (Rīga, Latvija: Okupācijas Muzeja Biedrība, 2009). Exact quote: “Labāk pie velna nekā pie vāciņa.”

\textsuperscript{119} Kārlis Kangeris, "The 'Repatriation' of the Baltic Germans after the Signing of the Pacts: A New Nazi Policy of the Realization of Former Plan," Crimes Against Humanity (2010), http://vip.latnet.lv/lpra/kangeris.htm., Gilbert, A History of the Twentieth Century, 277. According to Gilbert, Hitler accepted that the homes and livelihoods of the Baltic Germans – a minority whose rights he had championed – would pass under Soviet Communist rule. He went so far as to negotiate a treaty whereby these Baltic Germans could be brought to Germany. Why Baltic Germans were to be uprooted and taken to Germany, when the Sudeten Germans had to remain in Sudetenland and become the beneficiaries of a German annexation, Hitler did not explain.

\textsuperscript{120} Gisela Zimmer, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI." (Interviewed by: Irene Elksnis Geisler on July 1, 2009).
Her father owned a department store. Some Russian women came into her father’s store looking for evening dresses, but not knowing local styles they mistakenly bought nightgowns. She remembers how some local residents laughed at them behind their backs for wearing nightgowns in public. Certainly, many Baltic Germans, just as Gisela, identified culturally with Latvia as suddenly their ethnicity took on a new significance.

Because Gisela’s father was actively involved in assisting others to leave for Germany, her family was on one of the last ships from the port of Liepaja. According to Gisela, on December 6, 1939, they left for Germany, a country that was at that time at war. “It was an entirely new life for us. We went first to Gotenhafen and then by train to Pomerania. We were a family of five, so we had to split up into sleeping quarters…. My sister and I stayed together but apart from my parents and brother…. The bedrooms were not heated, and in the mornings the water was frozen…. From that time on we were hungry.”

\[\text{\textsuperscript{121}}\text{Ibid.}\]
The war divided and victimized ethnic populations in the Baltic region. At the end of the farming season of 1939 approximately 17,000 Polish workers, men and women who came to Latvia each spring to work as farm hands and who returned to Poland in the late fall, were stranded in Latvia unable to go return. The emigration of ethnic Germans from Latvia was seemingly voluntary. Yet, Hitler’s call for German repatriation forced urban, middle-class Latvian citizens of German heritage to abandon their homes and properties in haste, to dispose of their belongings and liquidate their educational, cultural and religious institutions. Their ethnicity, now linked to Nazi Germany, took on a different meaning when these individuals attempted to resettle in what for them was a foreign country during a time of active combat. The lives of ethnic Germans changed forever, just as did those of the ethnic Latvians who fled shortly thereafter. Those Baltic Germans who refused to resettle and stayed in the Baltics fell victim to Soviet deportations or experienced widespread discrimination.

---


In 1941, the group by percent of total population suffering the most deportations by the Soviet regime was the Jews. 1.9% of all Jews living in Latvia were deported, .8% Latvians and .4% Russians. Sindija Dimanta and Indulis Zālīte, "Structural Analysis of the Deportations of the 1940's," in Unpunished Crimes, ed. Tadeuss Puisans (Stockholm, Sweden: Memento, 2003). For a detailed discussion about the mass deportation of Latvian Jews to remote areas of the U.S.S.R. see: Arturs Žvinklis, “Latvijas Valsts darbinieku – ebreju liktenis Otrā pasaules kara laikā,” Noziegums Pret Cilvēci 6. Sējums, "(Rīga, Latvia: LVIA 2002),175-188.


In the memories of Latvians, transitions such as the departure of the Germans and the arrival of the Russians were signs of changes to come. Inese K. remembers “how the Germans repatriated from Mežaparks; how they left in their horse-drawn wagons. They packed their belongings in wagons and automobiles and drove away. And then the Russian ladies appeared.” Few families owned telephones. Radios and newspapers were the most formal forms of communication trusted by Latvian citizens. Justine D., at the time a child of farmers in Latgale, explains that she sensed that changes were about to happen, although her family did not have a radio. She only knew what she heard from other people. She was not afraid, she says, because she did not know what was to come. Thus, often the first and most memorable instances of change were in the people’s social networks, such as women remembering the arrival of Russian ladies as the sign of invasion. Word of mouth is how information was commonly transmitted as political changes developed.

Along with Baltic Germans over 50,000 Latvians, fearing onset of war, fled their country before the Soviet occupation. However, the common Latvian citizen was perhaps naive about the Soviet system and about what was to come. Few were idealistic about Communist rule. Early attitudes towards Soviet penetration into Latvia were largely influenced by the lack of information in 1939 and 1940, a positive image of the Soviet Union created by the Kārlis Ulmanis administration in a

desperate effort to preserve peace and avoid bloodshed, and the exclusion of the
majority of the population from political decision making. Ilmārs M., a youth
during the pre-war period, explains that news was generally sparse at this time.
According to Ilmars, President Ulmanis was very careful with what information he
presented the public and “how it was worded” so as not to be perceived anti-Soviet.
Interestingly it may have been the youth, in this case, who were more politically
aware because they had received education in school regarding Europe, the Soviet
Union and international affairs.

Latvians had lived with Russians, Germans, Poles, Jews and other ethnic
groups for centuries. Historically, under Imperial Russia, the tsarist government
continued to uphold special class privileges and administration rights to Baltic
Germans from the eighteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century.
Conversely, most indigenous inhabitants during this time experienced serfdom, few
rights and little education. The Baltic peoples’ personal encounters with Russian folk,
especially with ethnic Russians living in Latvia during the interwar years, had been
largely amicable. Those who lived outside of cities may have felt an affinity with
them because of being fellow tillers of the land. However, the Soviet Russian, who
was infiltrating Latvia from a different class and with a new ideology, would soon
change the tone of their perceptions.

128 Danute Dura and Ieva Gundare, Occupation Powers and Latvian People: Changes in Popular
Psychological Disposition 1940-941 (Riga, Latvia: Institute of Latvian History, 2009).
129 Mežulis, Life Story Interview, 1941. g. 17. Jūnijs, Mutvārdu Vestures Fragmenti.
Older generations of Latvians had historical relationships with other ethnic groups and cultures such as the Russians, Poles and Jews. The younger generation had formal instruction regarding Soviet Russia but little life experience. Both were confronted with something for which they were unprepared. Ilga L., who as a student had learned about Communism in school, defends her father’s perspective. She does not consider her father to have had a lack intelligence on the matter, but rather she believes that he based his opinions on his previous social encounters rather than political knowledge of the Soviet system: “My father did not understand Communism. He spoke fluent Russian, and he would never have imagined....When he spoke about Russians, he said that they were good and sincere people. He imparted the formula that if a Russian had two shirts and you had none, then the Russian would give you one of his. But my father did not know Communists.”

Many Latvians spoke some Russian. Some were fluent. In cases such as that of Ilga’s father, previous peaceful encounters with ethnic Russians colored people’s ability to recognize the political situation. Born in 1921, Ilga was probably personally less familiar than her father with ethnic Russians but had studied world politics in school. As a young adult, she personally experienced the take-over, but she confesses her initial confusion and lack of understanding of what was happening and the tragedy that was still awaiting her family and country.

In 1940 I was in school in Liepaja, but by the middle of June lessons had ended. I went for a walk with my school friends to the rose gardens, a very lovely place, when I heard this beautiful music coming

---

130 Lāčis-Belitska, "Oral History Interview, Three Rivers, MI."
arrival. Understandably, they had no way to imagine the profound transformation of their own lives that these events would initiate.

Soviet Takeover and Occupation:
The National Song Festival

On June 16, 1940, the day after the Red Army occupied Lithuania, the Soviet government handed an ultimatum to the Latvian Minister to Moscow, Col. Fricis Kociņš, which required an answer within 6 hours. Under threat of air bombardment, the USSR demanded that Latvia grant free passage to Soviet troops in unlimited numbers and consent to form a pro-Soviet government. At the same time hundreds of tanks, with strong artillery and mechanized infantry support, assembled on the Soviet-Latvian border. Latvia was essentially powerless with 30,000 Soviet troops already on her soil; the Red Army had already occupied Lithuania, and Estonia had been served with an identical ultimatum. In order to avoid bloodshed, Latvian officials submitted to Soviet demands. The Latvian Government offered its resignation, but President Kārlis Ulmanis asked the cabinet members to remain in their posts until the formation of a new government. On June 17, 1940, Ulmanis addressed the Latvian people asking the populace to show no resistance to the advancing Soviet Army.

President Kārlis Ulmanis asked the cabinet members to remain in their posts until the formation of a new government. On June 17, 1940, Ulmanis addressed the Latvian people asking the populace to show no resistance to the advancing Soviet Army. Latvians repeatedly quote his infamous statement from his radio speech, "I will remain in my place and you will remain in yours."

The events of June 16 and 17 coincided with the Latvian National Song Festival held in Daugavpils. The Song and Dance Festival tradition had been an important custom in Latvian culture and social life since the period of the nineteenth-century Cultural Awakening, at which time Latvian folksongs were utilized by the intellectuals boost confidence. The festivals helped secure folksongs as an important part of the Latvian identity and are still celebrated today. They have always featured folk song and dance performances in which giant choruses attired in national costumes participate. Additionally, the festivities entail exhibitions of photography, art, and folk craft. Ethnic Latvians gathered together to celebrate their heritage. The festival was a nationwide event in 1940, and those who had the time and means to attend considered it an important part of their social and cultural experience. The first song festival in Latvia, held in 1873, had a choir of 1,003 singers. The festival in Latgale in 1940 had 8,000 voices and an audience of over 50,000 people.

---

133 Zeile, Latgales Kultūras Vēsture: No Akmens Laikmeta Līdz Mūsdienai, 485.
The Latvian song festival in Daugavpils was more than the largest event of Latvian attendance that coincided with the outbreak of the war. Many Latvians remember the song festival as the closing of an era. For many Latvians it became a symbolic end for their short-lived period of freedom. In the collective memories of these people, the festival was the last time ethnic Latvians assembled freely together to celebrate their ethnicity, before being annexed, and before many of them were repressed and scattered throughout the world.

Yes, I remember that moment. It was in 1940, when there was the song festival. I went with father to Daugavpils to the song festival. Father rode his bicycle with me... put me on the back seat and we rode from Līksnas station to Daugavpils along the railroad tracks. People both walked and rode to Daugavpils.... The song festival was beautiful. I remember the songs.... But when it ended, I was small and father was a common farmer, he could not understand what was the confusion.... The high level people and the leaders all were in a hurry to get in their automobiles... everyone hurrying, hurrying to get away.... We rode home on the bicycle peacefully.... Nobody had radios then, only at the school. And father went to listen, and when he came back he reported: “War is coming.” To mother he said, “We will have war, Ulmanis said everyone to remain in their places and he will remain in his. So I will need to get better boots.... And on the second day it started, the tanks started.\footnote{Dāže, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC:244,"}

It was at this festival that a great many Latvian citizens learned about the coming annexation, and it is therefore for many that the festival was a life-changing event.

Many people at the song festival in Latgale expected Kārlis Ulmanis to be present, but he did not arrive.\footnote{Astrida Petasko, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, DU MVC:304," (Interviewed by: Andris Kuznecovs on August 6, 2005). Janina Juzova, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC:392," (Interviewed by: Valerija Juzova on August 2, 2006).} The cultural folk festival full of songs of nature,
seasons and folk customs stands in sharp conflict with the approaching tanks, of military force and the politics of Soviet occupation. These contrasts shape the memories of Latvia narratives:

We were attending the song festival.... I remember this, that we sang "God Bless Latvia" [Latvia’s National Anthem] three times.... I distinctly remember the phrase “to you our cherished fatherland, let our songs sound.” And then we all hurried home, hurried to get home, because we were warned.... In the morning we saw on the road from Zemgales there, along the Grīvas cemetery there...the tanks.\(^{137}\)

On June 17, 1940, the day after the festival, the Soviet Military occupied Latvia. The Red Army started the operation in the early morning. By noon the, Soviet tanks entered Rīga. As is true with many life-changing events in collective cultural memories, many Latvians will always remember where they were and what they were doing on the day of Latvia’s occupation. Elizars R. recalls:

In 1940 Latvia was occupied. On that day I was in Dobele, because my daughter had a market there...suddenly we heard a great noise in the air. Everyone looked up into the sky. Abruptly an airplane appeared. We had never seen one like that. In Latvia we had airplanes, but not this big. That was in the morning. And in the afternoon, there were loud noises on the road – turns out there were tanks going to the military bases.\(^{138}\)

\(^{137}\) Petasko, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC: 304."

\(^{138}\) Elizars Rabinovics, "Oral History Interview, California, Archive No. NMV:803," (Interviewed by: Inara Reine on February 16, 2000).
Figure 1. Daugavpils Song Festival Poster.
Adapted from Zeile *Latgales Kultūras Vēsture*, 505.
Common themes that recur throughout narratives are the images of warfare and conflict breaching the countryside and once peaceful natural setting, such as Russians relocating tanks to the edge of the forest, military equipment traveling through the countryside, armored vehicles crossing rivers. Auseklis E. remembers that two days after the Latgale’s Song Festival multitudes of tanks and heavy trucks traveled on the road from Daugavpils to Rīga all night long, bright headlights shining during the night. “Their heavy machinery was massive. It damaged the road and surroundings along the way, but the Russians did not care about this.” Alma D. reflects on her first memories of the entrance of Russians in 1940: “My father was horrified... how they behaved... the tanks ran out of fuel.... They said: ‘Pour in one bucket, a second, a third,’ and they poured in about a liter, and the rest – splat – into the ditch.” People remember the contrast of nature and everyday life against metal and machines -- instruments of war violating the natural landscape. These images stand in people’s memories as symbols of warfare as forewarnings of the Soviet system of terror to come.

140 Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
The Year of Terror

The first Soviet annexation period from 1940 to 1941 is known by Latvians as the Year of Terror. The term encapsulates the horror experienced during thirteen months of Soviet occupation. Ilga L. succinctly describes the initial events of the invasion of Latvia: “The Russians [Soviet Army] ruptured the borders, murdered Latvian border guards, and advanced into Latvia. They established military bases. On June 17, 1940, the Communists overran Latvia and arrested President Kārlis Ulmanis.”142

The annexation of Latvia was a devastating occurrence for the Latvian people particularly because it was so unexpected. They were distressed at the aggressive manner in which the Soviets entered Latvia, in spite of the fact that Soviet operatives met with no resistance from the Latvian public. In Rīga on the morning of June 17, President Ulmanis, standing upright in his car, slowly drove through the streets telling the populace to keep calm. The Latvian police only encountered a few street fights from Latvian communists who abruptly emerged from the underground. Nevertheless, the next day the Soviet authorities placed the President and the commander-in-chief General Balodis under house arrest, and a few days later

142 Lācis-Belitska, "Oral History Interview, Three Rivers, MI."
transported both men to the Soviet Union. Shortly thereafter, the new Latvian Government issued the following proclamation:

The old Government has fallen. It was not just [fair] towards all; it did not wish to understand the interests of the people, and was unable to ensure the honest execution of the Mutual Assistance Pact signed with the USSR in October 1939.

Latvian onlookers describe their first impressions of the Soviets arriving into Latvia. In contrast to what local inhabitants may have expected of a powerful regime annexing their country, the newcomers seemed dirty and dilapidated. “Although the soldiers behaved quite arrogantly, their clothing was generally tattered; their feet were wrapped in rags and they smelled.”

“There was a parade. The Russian Army marched along the main street in Liepaja. The first row of officials dressed well and wore white gloves. After this first row however, there was nothing to them.”

“I was shocked at the appearance of the workers brought in from Russia [Soviet Union] to build the military airport near my village. They were dirty, dressed in rags, and barely able to walk from hunger and exhaustion.”

A violent incident at the city of Abrene on the USSR border is prominent in the memories of Latvians as the beginning of the year of terror, especially those living in Latgale. The killing of Latvian border guards by occupying forces marks an

---

144 Petersons, "Red Army's Invasion of Latvia in 1944," 58
147 Lidija Klivitska, "Oral History Interview, Preli, Latvia," (Interviewed by Iene Elksnis Geisler on July 6, 2010)
148 Lācis-Belitska, "Oral History Interview, Three Rivers, MI "
149 Gendrikovs, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI "
identifiable event that changed many ethnic-Latvian opinions towards the Russian people as brutal and merciless. In the early morning hours of June 15, the Soviet military attacked three border posts in eastern Latvia. They killed three guards and the wife and son of one guard. The Soviets subsequently arrested ten guards and twenty-seven civilians and transported them to the Soviet Union. While the incident was highly salient, there were not very many details regarding the actual event in the press. The Latvian Sunday papers of June 16 filled their pages with descriptions of the song festival and images of the participants. Only in small print in the Russian paper Segodnia there appeared a short article which read as follows: “This morning at the village of Maslenki on the Soviet-Latvian border a skirmish occurred, and shots were fired. Several Latvian frontier guards have been taken prisoner, as well as a young village shepherd. The incident is being investigated.”

The method of communicating the event was mainly by word of mouth. According to Felicija S.: “News arrived that many border posts were destroyed, burned and the border guards…. I don’t know if their families were taken as well, put in automobiles and taken away.”

Janīna J. describes how the event touched her personally and started off the year of terror: “In 1940 in the summer at Abrene’s station stood three beautiful coffins for our border guards. After that we saw the Russian army by the borders, and

149 Saburova, "The Soviet Occupation of the Baltic States," 39
then the Russians came.”

Stanislava M. recalls her family’s response to the event: “At first we bemoaned Latvia’s independence time. Oh how we grieved... Oh God, Oh God, we thought the entire world might collapse.” The memory of grief suggests that for many people the expectations were bleak.

Soviet Takeover of Administrative Functions and Information Media

Then the arrests started – the village elder, the school principal, the police and others, and especially the national guards. We lived in constant fear that it would be our turn soon.

Within a few days of occupation, the Soviet functionaries arrested several thousand people in Rīga and throughout the country, including members of the government, army officers, heads of government, industrialists, clergy of all denominations, publishers and editors, civil servants and civic leaders. Approximately 65% of the arrested during the initial period of annexation were ethnic Latvians, about 22% were Russians, 4% Jews, 4% Poles, 2% Byelorussians and 3% were from other ethnic groups. Individuals who would be loyal to the Communist cause assumed positions of leadership, though often they were less professionally qualified.

---

151 Juzova, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC:392."
Additionally, the new government implemented an amnesty law for all offenses, including high treason. After releasing the criminals, the regime assigned many of these individuals high posts in administration. For example, the Chiefs of Police for the cities of Liepaja and Daugavpils had been convicted thieves. As Auseklis E. explains, the new command put “reprobates” in charge. They released criminals from prisons and gave them authority. Ilga L. gives a concrete example of the change in administration. Ilga worked in the Saldus courthouse in 1940 and 1941. “The Soviets dismissed the sitting judge, Smilga, educated in jurisprudence, and replaced him with a cobbler, who would be sympathetic to Communist ideals.” According to Ilga, the cobbler could barely write. “The situation was ludicrous.”

Similarly, Anniņa V. recalls that her high school principal, though not removed entirely from duty, no longer had authority. The Soviet regime brought in an “Inspector,” who reported everything the teachers and students did and said. In Annie’s words, “I knew from school the Inspector who was promoted. He was totally stupid, a hooligan.” These sorts of changes raised people’s concerns about the kind of government and municipal leadership they would have, and reflect ethnic Latvians sense of injustice toward their occupiers.

156 Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
157 Lācis-Belitska, "Oral History Interview, Three Rivers, MI."
158 Vaseris, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
Communication lifelines were severed. On October 1, 1940, the newspapers announced that all non-Communist news agencies were closed. The new pro-Soviet government instructed Latvian foreign correspondents that the sole source of foreign information was to be the Soviet News Agency, Tass. All correspondents of foreign papers were ordered to leave Latvia, and all internal communication media, including the cinema and the theater, came under rigid governmental control. Within this new Soviet model, propaganda and restricted or false information became the mainstay. The theater, the opera, and motion pictures came under the same pattern as the press set by Moscow's propaganda agencies.\textsuperscript{159} Resources such as newspapers and radio stations, which had previously been recognized as respected sources of information, lost their reputability in the minds of the Latvian people. From now on the people would have to rely on private forms of communication to send and receive information regarding new developments. But the Latvian populace became distrusting of not only authority figures but also of each other. “People hardly spoke, we became suspicious, and distanced ourselves from each other.”\textsuperscript{160} “People were uncommunicative, laconic... and odd. Because what they wanted to say they could not.”\textsuperscript{161} “We tried to live unobtrusively as not to draw attention to ourselves. The general atmosphere was that of anxiety and uncertainty.”\textsuperscript{162}

\textsuperscript{159}Special Reports of U.S. Congress Select Committee on Communist Aggression, 12. O'Connor, The History of the Baltic States, 118.
\textsuperscript{160}Spule, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC: 28."
\textsuperscript{162}Jānis Gobipīš, "Oral History Interview, Rīga, Latvia," (Interviewed by: Maija Hinkle on November 1, 2003).
Nationalization of Land, Collectivization of Agriculture

Beginning July 22, 1940, only five weeks after the takeover, the regime nationalized all land, forests and bodies of water and ordered Latvian inhabitants to hand over all valuables to the Bank of Latvia, allegedly for safe-keeping. On August 3, not six weeks after occupation, the Soviet administration nationalized 804 of the largest industrial institutions. In October the new government seized and appropriated private homes, dictating how many square meters one was allowed to inhabit. Spodra G. remembers being in class in elementary school and witnessing Russian tanks rolling into her village. She vividly recalls the metallic noise of the tank wheels moving along on the village roads. Her life changed from this point on. Soviet authorities proceeded to station a number of Russian officials into her family home and moved her family into one room of their house. They seizing her elementary school building; classes were scattered between various structures in the village such as the mill and the apothecary. Asja O. attended a private high school in Rīga, the Natālijas Draudziņas school. The Soviet regime appropriated the building, moved the school and changed the name to “Rīga’s 7th Gimnazija.” Asja remarks that no one had known the threat that was coming and no one had warned the students of the coming peril.

---

164 Gendrikovs, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI.”
165 Ozoliņa, "Oral History Interview, Rīga Latvia.”
Latvians were generally fearful to go out during this time; they mainly stayed at home and tried not to venture anywhere if possible. But Auseklis E.’s father was a farmer who sold bacon, and he needed to travel in order to do business. On one of these business trips Auseklis accompanied his father to the Skrīveri train station, where he witnessed a speech by Professor Augusts Kirchenšteins who was appointed to Prime Minister after Soviet annexation. The new leader addressed the crowd, “Comrades, Latvians and Laborers,” with a rather strained voice, as Auseklis remembers. Kirchenšteins talked about land redistribution. According to the new Prime Minister, taking land from wealthy landowners and giving it to the needy was in the Communist agenda, after which Latvia would be “free.” Auseklis recollects disquiet and apprehension in the crowd.

In August 1940, the Soviet Regime did in fact begin to implement an extensive land reform act, making 30 hectares the maximum legal limit for individual holdings. By dividing moderate size farms into small unviable units, the Communist administration conceivably intended to weaken the institution of private landholding so that later collectivization would be welcomed as an efficient alternative. It was planned that the expropriated land be granted to those who had not previously owned land. But little provision was made for the erection of necessary farm buildings and the distribution of farming equipment. The new owners were installed in the buildings

167 Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, M1."
168 O’Connor, The History of the Baltic States, 118.
of the dispossessed owners. The former landowners were simply deprived of part or all of their cattle and farming equipment that were turned over to the families who were to till the expropriated land.  

Alma D. and her family were thrown out of their home and had to move in with relatives. "We were given bread for three months, that is, flour, grain.... I had to tell them how many linens we owned.... We should have cried, but we laughed a bit...they had to set up a horse and machine center.... They established such centers in the district – horse, farm machine centers. For example, now the new farmers – they had neither horses nor machines, nothing. They could go there and borrow some." The new regime prohibited farmers from hiring people to help with agricultural work. Alfrēds M. at the age of 14 was forced to quit school in order to take care of the farm because his family was afraid that the practice of employing farm hands would put them in the category of kulaks. His father worked for the railroad and was forbidden to leave his position, and his mother could not manage the farm alone.

Rumors of collectivized agriculture at this point in time were branded "provocative." Yet, as early as the spring of 1941, the first kolkhoz or collective farm was founded in eastern Latvia. The farmers were asked to join it "voluntarily." In

---

169 Special Reports of U.S. Congress Select Committee on Communist Aggression, 12, O'Connor, The History of the Baltic States, 118
170 Dreimane, "Oral History Interview," 49-50
171 Alfrēds Mīnska, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI" (Interviewed by Irene Elksnis Geisler on August 5, 2009) Kulaks – is a derogatory term extensively used in Soviet political language meaning “fist” in Russian. It refers to supposedly wealthy peasants who owned larger farms and used hired labor
these early stages the new regime did not force families into kolkhozs, but the
Communist government announced that those who accepted the offer would be
granted large subsidies. They did, however, expropriate the largest private farms and
turned them into sovkhozes (state farms). Smaller farms still remained in the hands of
their owners, but by government ruling this land also belonged to the state. Similar
decrees expropriated farming equipment and, instead of being owners of property, the
farmers were only permitted to use what they had once owned.172

Among property redistributed was church land. The persecution of religion
and of the church began in Latvia as soon as the Soviet regime was established on
July 21, 1940. The puppet government issued decrees designed to eliminate public
church worship in Latvia. They forbid the teaching of religion, until then mandatory
in all primary schools. The new regime closed denominational schools and religious
orders and confiscated their property. Theological schools of the University of Latvia
(Lutheran, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholic) were closed. The regime
suppressed all religious publications and transformed many churches into atheistic
museums, motion picture theaters, bowling alleys, Red Army clubs or storage
facilities. The consecrated cemeteries were liquidated, and the Christian symbol, the
cross, was removed.173

172 Balabkins, "The Destruction of Latvia's Economy," 76. Alfred Erich Senn, "The Sovietization of the
Special Reports of U.S. Congress Select Committee on Communist Aggression, 12.
173 Armins Rūsis, "Church and State in Soviet Latvia," in Unpunished Crimes: Latvia under Three
Occupations, ed. Tadeuss Puisans (Stockholm, Sweden: Memento, 2003), 164-5.
There is no joy in the voice of a woman from Latgale, who preferred to remain anonymous in her interview, about the appropriation and distribution of church land, or even the acquisition of a new tractor. Whether or not the community appreciated the new land redistribution, the crude appropriation of sacred land was offensive to the Latgalian woman. This was church land and was an important religious and social space for the community.

In the fall church land was measured and distributed to farmers at Aglona. In the spring many neighboring farmers were seen plowing and seeding the former church grounds. And from the [Soviet] administration they received a tractor, a big one with spikes that made many furrows behind it, far more than what our little horse could manage.  

Valentīna P. remarks that with the Soviet occupation “everything changed. We no longer were taught religion in school… We were forbidden to pray in the mornings…and that is how the war started.”

Reduction of the Standard of Living and Sovietization of the Economy

On July 21, 1940, the fraudulently installed puppet government of Latvia unanimously petitioned to join the Soviet Union. On August 5, the U.S.S.R. granted Latvia’s supposed appeal and incorporated Latvia as the fifteenth Republic of the Soviet Union.  

annexation into the Soviet Union, was the policy to reduce the standard of living of Latvia to bring it into line with that of the U. S. S. R. After a series of dramatic wage increases, the new Latvian government announced that prices had been considerably increased. The Soviet plan was to elevate the wages of the Latvian workers nominally to the level of those in the Soviet Union, while fixing the prices considerably lower than they were in the U. S. S. R. Then prices were to be raised slowly. The currency was to be converted to rubles, and the wages increased again in order to create an illusion of gain. All of this was to conceivably make it difficult for individuals to realize exactly where they stood. The wage and price increases were confusing to the average Latvian. Nevertheless, it did not take them long to discover that in spite of all the promises of economic betterment, the standards of life had actually been greatly lowered.177

Overall, the average wage increase between June and November 1940 was about 150 percent, while price increases amounted to roughly 200 percent. The Soviet Central Planning commission replaced the market economy with the Soviet system according to plan and schedule. Latvian inhabitants earned a regular income of the newly introduced currency, rubles. However, one could not buy what one wanted, when or where one wanted it, and one had to stand in line for everything. Shops quickly emptied of merchandise. The Soviet military families and office workers within weeks of occupation bought up all stocks of commercial goods, such as

watches, radios, shoes, and dress fabrics. Formerly a man’s suit for example of medium quality had cost 50-60 lats (Ls). Now the cheapest suit cost approximately 800-1000 Ls.

Beginning with the first Soviet occupation period women’s roles in Latvia progressively became less clearly defined. Women’s economic responsibilities increased with the arrest and seizure of heads of households in many families, decrees prohibiting the hiring of agricultural workers, the appropriation of produce and the confiscation of the family units’ means of livelihood and homes. Additionally, the Soviets in this period took their first steps in their plan of incorporating women into wage labor. The authorities required households to provide obligatory labor service, such as repairing roads. Theoretically men were no longer considered the sole ‘breadwinners’ of the household. Every Soviet citizen was obligated to work, meaning every inhabitant of Latvia was expected to have a “wage earning” income. As sovietization of the economy progressed in the later phase of occupation, this initially imposed ideological change, along with the goal of increased industrialization, was a brief first step in the eventual transformation of gender roles in Latvia foreshadowing the changes people would experience after 1945 and with it the resulting social implications.

---

179 The lats is the currency of Latvia, abbreviated as Ls. The lats was first introduced in 1922, replacing the Latvian rublis at a rate of 1 lats = 50 rubli. In 1940, after Latvia was incorporated into the U.S.S.R. the lats was replaced by the Soviet ruble at par.
180 Grauze, "Oral History Interview, Riga, Latvia."
Women generally remember a life style decline and scarcity of resources such as shortages in food and clothing. Marija T. from Krāslava refers to the first Soviet occupation period as a time of famine and starvation. She notes the appropriation of milk, meat, livestock, radios and weapons by Soviet authorities. Certain products such as sugar and matches were immediately rationed and only obtainable with allotment cards. The new regime seized businesses, tractors, horses, buildings and homes. Families were forced to give up some of their livestock. “Every egg was registered and taxes levied.” Margarieta S. explains: “They seized my father’s apothecary, but we endured it with humor. It is really not the most important, people are..., and the soul is the most important…. They took our home, nationalized it, and then gave it back. We had land too, father worked hard, he developed a garden center. Helena C. comments on the “thievery” by the Soviet newcomers, which started immediately with 1939. Soviet immigrants would steal valuables, especially watches. She distinctly recalls the awful stench of the Soviet officials, the prisons and even the administrative buildings. Helena now recognizes this smell to be the black laundry soap that they would all be forced to use during future Soviet times. In

---

183 Helena Celmna, "Oral History Interview, Riga, Latvia," (Interviewed by Irene Elksnis Geisler on September 25, 2010)
184 Grauze, "Oral History Interview, Riga, Latvia "
185 Margarita Sidere, "Oral History Interview, Kuldīga, Latvia, Archive No NMV 112," (Interviewed by Māra Zirmīte)
hindsight, Helena remarks that they were all going to smell this way soon, a foreshadowing of the period of Communism 1945-1991.186

The Molding of Latvian Children and Youth

The Soviet Regime implemented profound changes in an attempt to influence culture and values on a deeper level. Progressively, the widespread use of the Russian language was forced upon Latvians.187 “First of all... in school we had to speak Russian... and if you said one word in Latvian you would be punished.... And then other things, like they did not give us books....” “In 1940 we started the new school year with the Russian language. I was in second grade. The teacher was writing letters on the black board – Russian letters ... and I was called to the black board, I was supposed to write something, but I did not know Russian letters, I stood and cried.”188 The Soviet administration mandated obligatory participation in organized events, and required that school children wear red triangles with USSR symbols. They decorated the school with portraits of famous Communist leaders and distributed propaganda literature and newspapers. “On the May 1 celebration in Vabole in 1941, we all stood with red flags. Our school had a band, which played.... And they marched from Zalumi to Kriviāni. And we stood on the side with red flags...and the Russians

---

186 Celmiņa, "Oral History Interview, Rīga, Latvia." For a detailed discussion on the first group of civilians transferred to Latvia, see: Strods, "First Groups of Civilian Occupiers, 1941-46," 63-6.
carried a banner.” Still, the system was flawed and ineffective. Margarita S., a teacher in Kuldiga, expresses her frustrations at the school system.

During the first Russian occupation the schools management was horrible. No books. We could not use any books from before. We were without books, it was awful. There was a directive that the books were to be taken away. The directive was instituted by, I imagine, the Ministry of Education. I just know that I had such a directive, but just the same I wrote on the chalkboard from the same old books. But we read only from what was allowed.

Frequently these profound changes and the forced conformity became counterproductive. Schoolchildren demonstrated their patriotic feeling by initiating protest actions against the Soviet Regime. On November 18, 1940, Latvia’s Independence Day, many children came to school in symbolic clothing and visibly expressed the meaning of this festivity. When children resisted singing the “International” Soviet national anthem and other Soviet songs, Communist Party officials often resorted to threats. In the worst cases, Soviet security arrested and jailed these students, sometimes the entire class.

Students on occasion engaged in mischievous and potentially dangerous activities in reaction to the new regime and the institutional changes. Sometimes they

---

189 Anna Skuke, "Oral History Interview Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No DU MVC 55," (Interviewed by Irena Salemece on June 30, 2003)
190 Sidere, "Oral History Interview, Kuldiga, Latvia, Archive No NMV 112"
poked the eyes out of Stalin’s portrait, Laima L. recalls and wrote: “Down with the Communists!” on blackboards.\footnote{Laima Liedaga. "Oral History Interview, Mežciems, Latvia, Archive No. NMV:95." Interviewed by: Māra Zimīte in 1992.} Elita P. describes her exploits as a youth during this time, and in hindsight she considers these actions as foolish and thanks God everything turned out well. Elita recalls a prank she played with classmates during the “hours of darkness.” With a group of students, she secretly slipped away from their sleeping quarters to place flowers by the memorial of Oskars Kalpaks, going barefoot to ensure silence. Kalpaks (January 6, 1882–March 6, 1919) was a commander and hero in the Latvian War of Independence and organizer of the defense of Vidzeme against Bolshevik attacks. Elita goes on to tell about the mandatory student work crews. After helping to bring in the harvest, the student groups would cover the automobile windows with their coats and sing in their vehicles songs such as “Daugav abas malas, mūžam nesadalas” – Both Sides of the River Daugava Never Part, Let Latvia Never be Divided.\footnote{Purenīna-Beitnere, "Oral History Interview, Asari Jurmala, Latvia."} Youths ripped down Soviet flags on days honoring the October Revolution, Soviet constitution or May 1. Helena C. remembers pulling down Soviet flags that were placed all around the city of Liepāja with her friends during the cover of night. Helena declares that she used to love the color red as a youth, she since then loathes it.\footnote{Celmiņa, "Oral History Interview, Rīga, Latvia." Šilde, "Passive Resistance in Occupied Latvia," 174.}

While town life changed radically, in the countryside the Soviet system moved more slowly. In spite of the land reforms, some Latvians living on small
farmsteads remained isolated and report relatively little change in their economic conditions and lifestyle during this first year of Soviet occupation. Gaida A., who lived near Madona in the region of Saikala on the Aiviekstes river bank reports that, “Russians came in the summer of 1940, but we lived far from any major roads... We lived in the countryside... we read in the newspaper that they were here and we had a small radio. We subscribed to the newspaper Brīvā Zeme [Free Land]. But we did not see them.” She explains that her family farm was rather small, five hectares of pasture and some land was forest. Indeed, due to the system of scattered farmsteads and the resulting lifestyle many farmers remained unaware of the looming danger of repressions and deportations.

Repressions, Deportations and Terror

Two months after the Russians came they arrested father. It was in the early morning at six, when the Chekists came.... I was eleven years old... When they took him I was so horribly scared. I grabbed my coat and I ran over the fields, I ran to my father. I saw them on the road.... It was at six o'clock on a fall morning. This will stay with me all of my life.

The Soviet regime executed or deported approximately 34,000 Latvians between June 1940 and July 1941. In Rīga, Soviet officials usually took the arrested to the former Ministry of the Interior building, which had become the headquarters of the N.K.V.D. Officers often forced prisoners to stand motionless on their feet in a room packed with people for 48 hours before being called in for questioning. They

196 Aizsilniece, "Oral History Interview, Riga, Latvia."
generally did not allow relatives to visit the prisoners. When permission was given, it happened more often than not that the detained had already been removed to unknown destinations. The cellars of the N.K.V.D. contained torture chambers. The one-man cells were so small that their inmates had no room except in a bent position. The officiators of the interrogations kept the temperatures of these cells unbearably hot. There was also one room with soundproof walls, a drain for blood, and special torture equipment. Many corpses mutilated by torture were later found in adjoining woods.\(^{198}\)

After the first wave of arrests swept away prominent or potential leaders, the regime targeted the common people. Among this second set of people, the Soviet officials directed terror at local groups with the aim of stimulating class hatred by persecuting classifications of people as “oppressors and exploiters.” Victims were scheduled for mass reprisals still to come as their names were entered on prepared lists. The first transport of 900 persons left Latvia for deportation in April 1941. The Soviet regime arrested and deported citizens throughout the 1940-41 period. Night after night, the “Black Raven” prisoner truck stopped in front of Latvian homes and carried off victims after a thorough search of the premises.\(^{199}\) Silvija Meija graphically explains that after these experiences, the thought of the “banging black


“boot” in the middle of the night sent chills through the Latvian population. Throughout the thirteen months of occupation, people would just disappear, either carted to Siberia or executed by the secret police. These measures affected not only those individuals and families directly targeted, but also those who witnessed them. In a suburb of Rīga, a special department of the N.K.V.D. operated in charge of torture and executions. Residents of the neighborhood report hearing shots in the night behind strictly guarded fences. Alma E. had a forewarning of the Soviet system of terror in 1939, when the Soviet authorities arrested and deported her neighbor Zilūzis, editor of the Brīvā Zeme newspaper. “We were extremely upset. All of the neighbors were upset. The Chekists came in the night and just took him.” Alma and her family lived in Jumurda, near the city of Madona. Her sister Marta attended Madona’s High School, and the editor’s daughter Ausma Zilūzis was her classmate. Alma and Marta, like Gaida A. mentioned earlier, also lived near Madona on a modest farmstead and reported relatively little change in their economic conditions and lifestyle during this first year of Soviet occupation. However, Alma recalls that this early arrest of a neighbor was for them a warning sign of future peril.

Several informants who were of school age at the time recall their classes becoming progressively smaller, remembering that entire families would seemingly

---

disappear, deported to the Krasnojarskas and Tomskas regions in Siberia. Soviet officials took Anniņa V.'s childhood friend from Anniņa's own bed when the young girl happened to be an overnight visitor on a sleepover.²⁰³ Gunta G. states that she was only four years old during the first Soviet occupation year, but she remembers the events vividly. The Latvian people watched as neighbors and families gradually disappeared. Her family helped hide the village minister and a neighbor. According to Gunta, "the children were not told, but of course we all knew." She adds, "We lived in Limbaži. My ancestors lived there from very ancient times, both my mother's and my father's ancestors."²⁰⁴

Conclusion

It is commonly said that history has been written by the victors. Less often is the losers' story ever told. Yet, in the collective memories of the inhabitants of Latvia, people identify with neither the victors nor the losers in the events of the Second World War. Instead, they self-identify as the wounded, pulled into a war not their own. While many individuals may have seen themselves during the brief time of Latvian independence as nation builders, with this period of Soviet occupation people began to self-identify as the hunted and progressively as a nation of victims. The National Song Festival of 1940, at which many heard news of the coming annexation,

²⁰³ Vaseris, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
Latvians consider in retrospect, the closing event of an independent Latvia and the end of an era. The Soviets’ killing of border guards at Abrene initiated Latvians into the period known as the “Year of Terror.”

The population was generally unaware of the circumstances of their predicament and were left shocked and confused by the brutal events of the Communist takeover. With each month the sense of insecurity increased as the new government nationalized land, seized homes, sovietised the economy and an atmosphere of fear prevailed. Since there was no clear cut standard for the basis for the repressive measures, essentially everyone who had ever worked in a state institution, or had been a member of a legal organization, or was a relation to a state worker or legal organization member, could expect to be detained, questioned and arrested. The Soviet authorities incarcerated individuals who even inadvertently expressed dissatisfaction with the new regime. The terror of these proceedings and the profound personal impact of this period in Latvian history have kept the details of many events vivid in the memories of the people, even sixty years later.

Because of the Soviet propaganda and misinformation system, citizens began to rely on social gossip for news. Communication, arduous due to the scattered settlement style, became increasingly erratic and undependable. Men often rooted their decisions on information they received from co-workers and encounters outside the home. Women more often noticed and made judgments based on the tattered appearance and personal hygiene of the newcomers, and changes at their children’s

---

schools. Many smaller rural homesteads remained to a great extent isolated from town life, uninformed of Soviet repressions and the deportations still to come.

Women’s roles as traditional wives and saimnieces [mistresses of the homestead] from this time forward became increasingly ambiguous. Women’s economic responsibilities increased with the arrest of men, the confiscation of harvest yields and homes, and the seizure of means of livelihood, as well as the brief initiation into the Communist ideology of every Soviet citizen having a “wage earning” income. Nonetheless, male and female narratives of the first year of Soviet occupation share more common characteristics than differences. Both women and men were equally stunned and horror-struck by the repressions and deportations. The Soviet regime arrested, executed or forcibly exiled roughly 34,000 inhabitants of Latvia from 1940 to 1941.

The war divided and victimized ethnic populations living in Latvia such as the Latvians, Baltic Germans, Poles, Lithuanians, Byelorussians and Jews. The Soviet Russians who permeated Latvia during this first year of occupation changed previous perceptions for many ethnic Latvians about their “hard working” Russian neighbours to oppressors. The Communist regime prohibited the use of the Latvian language in schools and issued decrees forbidding public worship. Among those deported in June of 1941, along with other Latvian citizens, were five thousand Jews. Many people of diverse ethnicities fell victim to the repressions and deportations of the Soviet Regime. Thousands of citizens of Latvia were forced to abandon their homes and take

---

206 Plakans, The Latvians: A Short History, 149.
refuge in foreign lands. Many of these people left Latvia where they were born, and for some their ancestors may have called Latvia their homeland for hundreds of years. If the common Latvian citizens had at one time been naive about the Soviet system and unsuspecting and unprepared for what transpired, then after this first year of occupation they now better comprehended their situation.

If in the past folks were open, friendly and sociable, now people hardly spoke, we were suspicious, .... we distanced ourselves from each other. And then soon, we noticed that people began to disappear... one by one during the night, secretly. And that is how it started for us. That was in 1940 and 1941, then we understood what it meant. Then we understood, with missing neighbors and missing friends, and not knowing... Each one of us started to think, what would become of us? Will I see tomorrow?\textsuperscript{207}

\textsuperscript{207} Spule, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC:28."
CHAPTER IV

THE DEPORTATIONS OF JUNE 14, 1941:
THE SEARCH FOR STRENGTH AMID INDIGNITY AND DESPAIR

We were four sisters, the youngest only eight months old.... But then came the year 1941 and we were deported to Siberia on June 14. They took us to Nīcgales station and put us in wagoncars. There were planks covered with nettles [as seats] on many levels, so that there would be room for more people.... Soon they took father away, but they said that he would be just in the next wagoncar, that we would be together later... and I remember that last moment when he was in our wagoncar and mother gave him some clothes...and he left the wagoncar and walked away...I can see in front of my eyes how in an instant he was gone forever.... And my little sister, who was only eight months old [at that time], she died in August.²⁰⁸

Figure 2: Latvians in Siberian resettlement camps. Photos from The Museum of Occupation of Latvia.

²⁰⁸ Lidija Skrinda, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC: 150."
The mass deportation of 1941 in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia took place on the night of June 13 to June 14. The Soviet regime apprehended, with the intent to deport or execute, 15,424 people in Latvia. At the same time the Soviets implemented similar deportations in other territories of the U.S.S.R. On May 22, 1941, security forces deported people from western Ukraine, on the night from June 12 to 13 from Moldavia, and June 19 to 20 from Belorussia. The regime branded the arrested and exiled them as “socially dangerous elements,” who needed to be either executed or banished to settlements to be imprisoned and rehabilitated.\(^{209}\) The deportation of 1941, along with the subsequent deportation of 1949, have become central features of Latvian self-identity. Many Latvian people self-identify themselves as a nation of victims connecting this recent past with a powerful element in Latvian history of oppression under foreign occupation and seven hundred years of serfdom.

The mass deportation of June 14 differed from arrests in the previous months because this time the authorities did not formally seek evidence for guilt. Soviets justified the necessity of this course of action as mainly a preventative measure to permanently remove or isolate elements disloyal to the Soviet cause from the remaining society. The basis for the arrests and banishments were social status, membership in certain political and social organizations, and relationships to persons with such affiliations. The victims usually constituted the elite of Latvian society that had formed in the twenty years of Latvia’s independence.\(^{210}\)

\(^{210}\) Ibid., Angrick and Klein, *The "Final Solution" In Riga: Exploitation and Annihilation, 1941-44*, 64.
Approximately equal numbers of males and females were apprehended. However, the lion’s share of the officially arrested and allegedly tried were men. The regime exiled predominantly women and children, seized without a pretence of a trial. Soviet functionaries for the most part deported women for their relationships to men, such as wives or mothers of alleged enemies of the people. Although some women may have held administrative positions, they were not usually identified by the Soviet Regime as a significant threat, meriting execution.

Arrests, Executions and Expulsions

Figure 3: Cargo train with the deported before departure to Siberia June 1941. Adapted from Latvju enciklopēdija, ed. A. Švābe, Stockholm, 1950. p. 477.
Soviet officials typically seized entire families. They separated men from the women and children, many permanently, and locked them in separate transport wagons. Latvian author, art historian, and political activist Sandra Kalniete conveys her mother’s story, deported at the age of fourteen on this night along with the author’s grandfather and grandmother. Kalniete was born in the village of Togur, in the district of Kolpashevo, Siberia, on 22 December 1952. She illustrates in her personal narrative the way in which women and children were separated from their husbands, brothers, fathers and sons during the deportation never to be seen again.

[T]he cattle car was opened and the women and children were told to get out. Protesting and screaming, the women did not comply. They refused to leave their husbands and sons, their brothers and fathers. Seeing that force would not accomplish anything, the [c]hekists tried cunning. They attempted to calm the deportees by saying that the families would be united at the final destination.211

Kalniete’s grandmother and mother left her grandfather in detention under the Soviet guards, not knowing that they were parting for life. Not until the spring of 1990 was her family able to find closure, receiving a notice from the State Security Committee of the Latvian SSR that her grandfather had died on December 31, 1941, six days before his 33rd birthday.

Mothers usually remained in contact with their children and therefore responsible for them, though not always. Zenta V. described her experience in testimony given before the U.S. Congress Select Committee on Communist Aggression in 1954:

---

We were taken in a truck and carried away. We were put in a train and we were about 7 or 8 days in trains. There were an awful lot of children and women. Some were crying and some were screaming. A mother with two children went insane; some of them were separated from their children and they were separated from their husbands. Then the train stopped and we met some women from the other cars and they were almost losing their minds.212

Operative groups in charge of the deportations transferred the men to so-called Gulag reformatory labor camps where their cases were purportedly investigated. They sentenced these prisoners either to death or to 5-10 years of incarceration in heavy labor camps.213 The House Select Committee to Investigate Communist Aggression quotes Judge Atis Grantkalns, examining Magistrate of the district court at Rīga and head of a special Latvian commission set up in 1941 to investigate the atrocities in Latvia during the years 1940-41:

In Baltezers (a suburb of Rīga) most of the bodies, if not all, that we found had their hands tied up on their backs. Each body had a hole in the back of the head, and when we found some of the bullets in the head, our experts told us that was a bullet from the pistol. So the victims were shot by a pistol. But there is an interesting thing that in each pit that had, say, 10 corpses, 8 had holes in the back of the head and at least 2 had holes of the shots on the top of the heads. And those 2 bodies which had holes on the top of the heads wore always on the very bottom of the pit. So the only explanation we could make was

212 Special Reports of U.S. Congress Select Committee on Communist Aggression, 24. In 1953, the U.S. House Selected Committee on Communist Aggression was established and held public hearings on communist takeover and occupation of the Baltic States and other non-Russian nations of the U.S.S.R. Many former officials and eyewitnesses gave testimony, and many important documents were identified and made public. See Third Interim Report: Washington: GPO, 1954, reprinted as: Kavass and Sprudzs, eds., Baltic States: Study of Their Origin and National Development, Their Seizure and Incorporation into the U.S.S.R.
213 The war between the U.S.S.R. and Germany broke out just one week after the June 14 deportation, and within a two-week period Germany occupied the whole of Latvia. The Nazis endeavored to form new organizations and establish undertakings aimed at channeling Latvian energies in methods useful to the Reich, such as into investigations of the horrors experienced at the hand of the Soviet Regime during the year of terror.
that those 2 were chosen to dig the pit and shot when they had finished their job and were in the pit, and the rest of that transport were shot at the edge of the pit and then thrown into the pit. Some of the bodies had broken jaws, 1 or 2 had broken skulls. Some of them had broken ribs, some had broken legs, but, yes, there were some with no lips or broken noses, even without ears.  

Grantkalns adds that out of hundreds of bodies recovered, none of those victims were former criminals. "They were all most respected persons in our country.... Among the victims were officers, army colonels, laborers, lawyers, doctors, businessmen; even the aide-de-camp of the Latvian Prime Minister, the director of the department of schools, and so on."  

Most of the women who were apprehended were exiled to resettlement camps in remote districts in Siberia or the Kazakh with sentences of twenty years. Often the arrest of a male head of the family served as a basis for the deportation of remaining relatives. Some women were pregnant at time of arrest; seven children were born en route, and 69 during the first nine months after the arrests. Because of the long voyage, poor provisions and premature births, many infants perished. Thirty children including many infants died en route. The majority of those born in 1940 and 1941 perished.

Those women who were not directly banished to resettlement camps were generally arrested for purportedly belonging to counter-revolutionary organizations.

---

214 Special Reports of U S Congress Select Committee on Communist Aggression, 23
215 Ibid
and as perpetrators of actions against the Soviet system. Most of these women were simply wives or mothers of alleged counterrevolutionaries or spies. On occasion, Soviet functionaries arrested women in place of their deceased husbands for former counter-revolutionary work. Of this group, the oldest woman was 79 years old, and the youngest was a three-year-old girl, who was sentenced to a labor camp along with her mother.\(^{218}\)

The Trauma of Deportation

*The entire wagon shakes with grief and pain. So cries this day the entire Latvian nation, but the laments fall on death ears.*\(^{219}\)

The psychological trauma that individuals and families experienced at the hands of the Soviet regime manifested itself on multiple levels, such as anxiety, depression, nightmares, flashbacks, insomnia, anger and hyper vigilance. Not only did those individuals who were deported experienced these effects, but also those who escaped capture or lost family members and love ones. Lidija B. was devastated in 1941 when her betrothed was deported.\(^{220}\) Biruta O. remembers the shock of hearing that her relatives were arrested and taken away in the early morning of June

\(^{218}\) 7,165 females were apprehended Of those 149 women were arrested Five women were condemned to death Most of the remainder received judgments of five to eight years in labor camps, after which they were sentenced to serve terms of 20 years exiled to resettlement camps Forty-six women died between 1942 and 1943 in labor camps, the remainder were banished to Siberian resettlement camps in 1948 Nearly all of these women were from major cities 93 from Riga and 23 from Daugavpils Ibid

\(^{219}\) Janina Strauta, "Baigas Nakts Atmiņas," *Jūrmala (Supplement to Rīgas Balsi)* June 15, 1989

\(^{220}\) Lidija Bālens, "Oral History Interview Latvian National Oral History Project, Archive No NMV 813" (Interview by Dzidra Ziedonis on August 15, 2000, Camp 3x3 Catskills, USA)
14. “My mother’s cousin, in whose home we lived, came running in to my mother and cried ‘my Kārlis was deported with his family!’” Kārlis was her son. He was taken together with his wife and their little boy Ansītis. Valija R., at the time a medical student, recalls how some of her classmates disappeared without a trace.\textsuperscript{221}

Upon hearing that they were targets, some families found temporary refuge with friends. In some cases, they hid in the woodlands in order to escape. Fourteen-year-old Marija G., along with her nineteen-year-old sister Nina, escaped Soviet deportation on June 14 by hiding in a beehive. A close family friend had warned them of their imminent deportation, informing them that they were targeted. Marija’s father was a farmer and beekeeper by profession. In an effort to evade the Chekist guards, he placed his daughters Marija and Nina in one of his boxes fashioned for bee colonies.\textsuperscript{222} Marija’s friend and neighbor Gaida A. hid in the nearby forest. Gaida A.’s father buried her under fir tree branches with her sister Ruta.\textsuperscript{223} Gaida S. along with her family attempted to evade deportation by hiding in the woods near her home during the night of June 14. They were apprehended nonetheless.\textsuperscript{224}

On the day of June 14, Ilga L. witnessed a heavy truck, open in the back, moving along the road. On the outside of the vehicle she saw guards with rifles and in the center sat a family whom she knew: a mother, her son who had just graduated

\textsuperscript{221} Biruta Ozoliņa, "Life Story Interview, Catskills, New York, Archive No. NMV:814;" (Interviewed by: Maija Hinkle and Dzintra Pone on August 19, 2000). Runge, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI, Archive No. NMV:755."
\textsuperscript{222} Grauze, "Oral History Interview, Rīga, Latvia.;" Vaseris, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI.," Aizsilniece, "Oral History Interview, Rīga, Latvia."
\textsuperscript{223} Aizsilniece, "Oral History Interview, Rīga, Latvia."
\textsuperscript{224} Skudre, Gaida. "Life Story Interview, Archive No. NMV:2120." Interviewed by: Gunta Harvey on June 16, 2000
from the academy and her grown daughter with a baby on her lap. Ilga’s own family escaped deportation when someone warned her father. Ilga attributes this warning to her father’s resourceful and helpful temperament. A friend told them not to spend this night at home. So Ilga’s mother came to stay with her in the neighboring village of Saldus and her father had stayed with nearby friends.\footnote{Lācis-Belitska, "Oral History Interview, Three Rivers, MI."}

Remembering this period, women often share nightmares of the looming tragedy. The terror of these events and the profound personal impact of the executions and deportations have left such indelible marks in the memories of these individuals, that they vividly describe their nightmares in detail even sixty years after the incident. On the night of June 14 Elita P.’s mother was haunted by the dream that her family was in a train car. There was a terrible wind, and her godmother and son were in the next car. She tried to get to them but because of the horrible wind she could not. Only later, did they find out that the godmother and son had been deported during the night.\footnote{Purenina-Beitnere, "Oral History Interview, Asari Jurmala, Latvia."} Margarita S. recalls her own nightmare of the war and deportation in which she conflates her 1939 dream with the 1941 events:

I remember in 1939, when the war started, I dreamt that Hitler came in my father’s country home and said that war has started. And in fact, that is how it was—on that day the war started. And I remember how I listened to the radio about how it started... It was terrible how they reported about Hitler, how he went from one country to another. But we did not think how dreadful it would be for us. We thought at worst they would take our apothecary, but that would be all, our souls would be free and would continue... I think even Kārlis Ulmanis did not
understand how horrible it could get... We were deported during the
night of June 14, 1941.\textsuperscript{227}

The Banished

\begin{quote}
Strangers stormed into our apartment, some
armed, some in civilian suits. They ordered my
husband not to move.... We were asked if we
owned weapons. They did not believe us and
searched the entire apartment. They told us that
we were being moved to another dwelling.... I
woke my one year old son and quickly
dressed.\textsuperscript{228}
\end{quote}

Although the extent of political repressions in Latvia were significant (from
July 1940 to May 1941 Soviet authorities had arrested on average 250 people per
month) many Latvians were unaware of the oncoming storm of arrests, executions
and expulsions. The people of Latvia had no historical presage for the deportation of
June 14, 1941.\textsuperscript{229} Some Latvians observed early in 1941 the Russian military
organizing countless railway cars. They had mistakenly deduced that the Russians
were preparing to leave. Velta S., born in 1911 in Rīga, was a wife and mother in
1941. She was arrested along with her husband and children. Velta explains that they
had heard stories about deportations by Communist authorities in Russia but had not
believed them. “How could that be? It could never be so,” she had thought. She only
knew one kind of life, her life in Latvia.\textsuperscript{230}

\textsuperscript{227} Sidere, "Oral History Interview, Kuldīga, Latvia, Archive No. NMV: 112."
\textsuperscript{228} Strauta, "Baigās Naktis Atmiņas."
\textsuperscript{229} Bleriere and Riekstiņš, \textit{The First Mass Deportation of the Inhabitants of Latvia: June 14, 1941}, 8.
\textsuperscript{230} Sjui, Velta. "Life Story Interview, Archive No. NMV:2120." Interviewed by: Māra Zimīte.
Mirdza L. was a student who had just finished her final examination in high school physics the previous day. She had gone out to celebrate with friends. They had joyfully talked, laughed and sung together, and it was very late when she made her way home on Krisjāņa Baron Street in Rīga. She recollects a strange and eerie emptiness in the streets that night. At home in her sleep she heard the pounding of heavy boots and was startled awake by Chekists in blue hats and with guns. The beginning point of Mirdza’s narrative tells something about the emotional experience of the deportation as a life-changing episode for this young student. The contrast between the ordinary routine of school, exams and joyful laughter with friends, and the arrest and terror of the subsequent deportation is prominent in her memory.

Similarly, Ruta U. was a fourteen-year-old girl in 1941. Ruta recalls that all night long on June 13 to 14 she heard trucks, many more than usual, coming and going. After breakfast, she and her mother set out for the market, leaving her two younger sisters at home. The everyday task of shopping stood in stark contrast with the horror of arrests and deportations.

As Ruta and her mother walked, one truck after another passed them, all loaded with people and their belongings: “Women and children were sobbing and whimpering. . . . The trucks proceeded slowly, deliberately; house numbers were checked. The men were looking for a certain address. . . . Suddenly, a truck stopped,

---

right at our front gate.... Totally bewildered, I stood there, unable to move. I began to tremble, feel hot and cold.”

Eight guards stormed Ruta’s home. They arrested Ruta along with her sisters, ages twelve and nine, and her mother and grandmother. They ordered the women to pack a few necessary things and get ready to leave. Soviet authorities generally gave entire families less than one hour to prepare for the journey. Few people realized what was happening to them. “Our sleep was interrupted by powerful banging.... In the early morning hours one’s body is still not awakened.... Not understanding what was happening we all cried – mothers, children. No one answered. Why and where?”

Some were not told that they were being arrested. Typically Soviet guards allowed the deportees to take with them what they could carry, and the state confiscated everything left behind. Many were confused and desperate. They could not collect their thoughts about what to take. There was no time for reflection, and the deportees were no longer in control of their own futures.

According to Ruta, the women filled suitcases and sacks with belongings and stuffed wicker baskets with food. “The Chekists kept rushing us to finish up and get into the truck.” Ināra G., born in 1931, was just a child when she was deported along with her mother and three siblings. Ināra testifies that, if the Latvian agent

---

233 Strauta, "Baigās Naktis Atmiņas."
235 U., Dear God I Wanted to Live, 10.
accompanying the Russian guards had not helped to pack a few things in the chaos and confusion of the circumstances, the family would have left with nothing.

Similarly, Mirdza L. recalls how the Latvian agent threw a blanket on the floor and just tossed clothing and other items into it. She describes their lack of understanding. The agent tossed into the heap of garments her mother’s new coat. But Mirdza did not want it to get wrinkled, so she picked it up and hung it back in the closet. “O, how we later could have used that coat in Siberia,” she exclaims. She did not take her dress because it had a red trim. In hindsight, she is appalled at their lack of understanding: “Imagine my lack of comprehension!”

The persons who performed the arrests very often mislead the people, saying that the family members would meet again at the destination. In hindsight victims lament decisions that they made. They did not know what to take or how to proceed. Gaida S., born in 1931, was nine years old when she was arrested along with her family, including her father. Later her father was separated from his wife and children. Upon separation, her father took their belongings in a gesture of kindness. Her mother had declared that with the three children to look after she could not manage the bags as well. So the mother and children journeyed to Siberia with nothing but the summer clothes upon their backs, never to see her husband again.

---


237 Bleiere and Rickstiņš, The First Mass Deportation of the Inhabitants of Latvia: June 14, 1941, 8.

238 Skudre, "Life Story Interview."
The Soviet authorities simply told Alma D., a mother with a sick child, that she needed to go to Tukums, a city in Latvia, to sign some papers.

Then in comes a man .... He says, ‘You need to go to Tukums – to sign some kind of documents there,’ .... And now... Well, if I must go, then I must go. So we go. He follows behind me, instead of next to me – abiding by all of the rules. [Emphatically] At a neighbor’s house there’s a young man, a classmate of mine – at that moment he’s working, ploughing. We come up to where he’s working, to the roadside. And he says to me, ‘Dear Alma, where are you going?’ I say: ‘I don’t know where I’m being taken. Either they’ll put me in prison or shoot me.’ His hands fall to his sides. And the other guy is mumbling behind my back. But see, as I.... [laughs]. But the main thing was the walk – him following behind me. Yes. I see on the road – a full truck. I’m the last one. So we go inside so that I can get things .... I see that they’ve got small children, too.

*Interviewer - Baiba Bele-Krūmiņa:* In the truck?

*Alma D.:* Yes. Now I ... I don’t understand, I don’t understand ... what to take and what to leave.

*Interviewer:* And if you’re told that you’re only being taken to Tukums to sign some documents, nothing else?

*Alma D.:* Yes. And the Russian is telling me to take all of my belongings, the Russian officer.

*Interviewer:* And what does he say? He doesn’t say that you’re being taken far away?

*Alma D. :[...] Well, he says: ‘Take something.’ I take a pillow, a blanket and one bed sheet. [...] He says, ‘Take all of the bedding.’ [...] You know, I left with only the clothes on my back.239

This thirty-two year old woman left her daughter, stricken by scarlet fever, behind in Latvia with the child’s grandmother. Alma retells all but the last few lines of the events in the present tense as if reliving the incident. In the words of a fellow deportee, Janīna S.:

Many years have passes since June 14, 1941.... It seems like just an evil nightmare.... But it has left deep wounds.... I live as if accepting my fate... but every year when the momentous date comes near I see

---

the events again as if it were a horror film in front of my eyes.... And I relive it today as if it were then.240

The Journey to Siberia

*The heat was smothering.... No one gave us even a drop of water, nor a bite of bread.... The children were crying, we ourselves were crying.... We [women] divided our food amongst ourselves, whatever each one of us had in order to feed the children.*241

Women’s narratives emphasize the value of family and human camaraderie during their attempt to survive the deportations. The procedure for apprehension and transportation of Latvians to Siberia suggests that the Soviet authorities did not consider the deported as normal members of society.242 Vehicles stopped in front of Latvian homes and carried off victims after a thorough search of the property. “All around us we heard gunshots.... We saw many automobiles, and in the automobiles there were families -- husbands, wives, children. We sat still like sheep being taken to the slaughterhouse.”243 The guards herded the prisoners, as if they were animals, into cattle and freight cars, in which they spent several weeks, some even months. They crammed deportees tightly into train cars, and since family members were usually separated from each other, deportees were transported in close proximity of complete strangers. Ruta U. remembers that her railway car was furnished with four bunk beds,

241 Ibid.
two at either end. However, there were more than thirty people in the car when she got on, and all day long new prisoners arrived. Food was not regularly provided. Ināra G. recalls her long train journey as particularly difficult because of constant hunger. The train stopped only once or twice a day at railway stations when the guards distributed some type of porridge with a bit of bread. But this was barely edible and hardly enough nourishment.

Despite the harshness of the conditions, Ruta’s account reveals evidence of human kindness and mutual support of fellow deportees. Her story shows the determination to preserve humanity amongst the unbearable. In these cattle cars, her family often lived from the generosity of the other prisoners, some of them strangers who had thought to bring food along.

Women deportees often recall their anxiety over not knowing the whereabouts of their family during this time. One brief episode, during her arrest, brought Ruta U. hope. She believed her father had escaped.

Before our departure a Chekist came running and stopped outside the car, calling my father’s name. So he had not been found! Our hearts grew easier, for now there was hope that perhaps he would be able to save himself and stay in Latvia - a situation which could very well hasten our return. Shortly after midnight on June 15 we left Rīga, heading for an unknown destination, and an unknown future. The night was dark and full of terror… Such grief and sorrow! It seemed as though tonight the whole Latvian land were trembling with pain and tears.

244 U., Dear God I Wanted to Live, 13.

246 U., Dear God I Wanted to Live, 13.
Like Ruta’s family, Ināra’s mother and her children were banished unaccompanied by the head of the family. Ināra was nine years old when she was deported; her sister was ten and her two brothers were eleven and twelve. Her mother was home alone with the children because her father happened to be hospitalized at the time. Gaida S. attempted to evade deportation by hiding in the woods during the night of June 14. Soldiers had come to arrest her family in their apartment in Rīga, but the family had already left for the country, where her father took refuge in the forest, and she and her sister with relatives. But even in the countryside and forest, provisions needed to be secured and the livestock tended to. When Soviet guards arrived at Gaida’s country farm only her mother was at home in the barn milking the cows. Her mother was afraid to leave her daughters alone, so she gave up their hiding place. And her father voluntarily surrendered in order to stay with his family. Nonetheless Soviet guards separated her father from the family in the train station, and her was never to be heard from again.247

Inese K. suggests that this may have been a blessing for many, to have been spared the incident of families being divided. She, too, was arrested and deported at the age of ten with her mother and younger brother while her father was at work. She shares the emotional event of her grandmother and grandfather, by some miracle omitted from the arrest list, bidding farewell to them in tears at by the gate. And after two nights in the station, the men were moved to another car:

247 Skudre, "Life Story Interview."
What kind of wailing that was, what kind of heartache, I cannot express it! In one sense we had the advantage, that our father wasn’t there; that bitter goblet passed us by.\(^\text{248}\)

Mirdza L. reflects on her family’s situation. They were waiting in the railway station. The wagon cars had not moved for three days. The family members were under the impression that her father, along with the other men, had been moved just to the next car not to another location. However, at one point Mirdza and her brother had gone out to fetch water. “And then we saw him...our father, incarcerated...caged.” They had thought that the family would always be together. They had not even considered the possibility that they would be separated. This was the last time that they saw their father alive.\(^\text{249}\)

Inese reminisces: after the men were taken away from her railway car, who were some of the women and children that remained. Among them was a family with three children; the mother was a doctor, and one of the girls was physically impaired. There was also a pregnant woman, who could have gone into labor at any time, and a mother with an infant child. Inese expresses distress at the feeling of indeterminacy -- of not knowing what was to come: “We had no grasp of what was happening. And that left a great impression on us.”\(^\text{250}\)

The deportees longed for not only some word regarding the circumstances of their families but also news of the current situation in Latvia and the war, but there was seldom a way to get information. They had to rely on the most informal and


\(^{250}\) Krūmiņa, "Life Story Interview."
surreptitious methods. Alma D. remembers an incident in Moscow where her train had briefly stopped for provisions: a man was walking along the echelon in the train station with a newspaper: “Now he takes out a newspaper and shows us. Shows us the newspaper and folds it very small...small enough to put into a pack of cigarettes. He sticks it into the cigarette pack...still pocks around a bit and comes out.... He throws the cigarette pack on the ground.” A woman deportee from Alma’s group after observing the man’s behavior brings a little girl to pee. She carries the child to the pack of cigarettes, holds her and says: “Mārīt, take the little package. You see, there is a little package.” That is how Alma and her group of deportees found out about the German invasion of the USSR on June 22, 1941.251

It may have been this lack of knowledge which triggered striking memories of national unity and pride. Ruta U. recalls:

It was on the eve of Midsummer Day when we spotted a railroad worker leaning against our car. He was reading a newspaper [...] After some pleading, he rolled up the paper and deftly tossed it through the window bars into our car [...] On June 22, war had broken out between Germany and the Soviet Union [...] We talked back and forth, discussing various possibilities [...] Good news spread quickly through all the wagons...Yet the train did not move [turn or change course]. War had been declared, but we were already deep within Russia. 252

Austra L. remembers that for her the most excruciatingly painful moment was when the train car crossed over the border of Latvia into Russia. Then in the distance

252 Ū., Dear God I Wanted to Live.
she heard the familiar sound of Latvian līgo songs. One car started the singing, and soon all the cars were singing. “Singing in protest.” She exclaims, “Imagine! Fifty train railway cars, all in song!” Well, the guards stopped the cars and reprimanded us severely. But as soon as the train started moving again, they exploded into another song.

Ruta U. shares a similar memory from the eve of June 24, the evening of the Latvian time-honoured Midsummer’s eve celebration:

Everywhere people began to celebrate Midsummer Eve with song. Our car too soon filled with the merry sounds of the Latvian līgo songs, traditionally heard only on this one night of the year. We were almost happy, almost convinced that now everything would be all right. We would be saved.

Valērija S. recalls her first impressions of crossing the border into Russia. She associates the event with the Soviet occupation of Latvia:

We crossed the border in tears, it was horrible, a dreary scene opened before us. It was similar to those soldiers, those Red Army soldiers who marched in and had grey, dull, expressionless faces – this is how the entire area looked. Houses, wooden houses that had all become black. An not a flower anywhere, not a bush near any house. Well it was a sad sight, a hard sight.

On the way the Latvians encountered trainloads of prisoners from Lithuania and Estonia. Through the small, austere windows Ruta could only see women and children. As revealed in Ruta’s narrative, she stoically identified with other children

---

253 The eve of June 24 in Latvian tradition is the day of Līgo or midsummer’s eve. Lāce, “Life Story Interview in Rite, Jēkabpils District, Latvia NMV: 1099.”
254 U., Dear God I Wanted to Live, 17-18.
on her journey, usually those smaller and weaker than herself. She recalled that many small children in her car perished along the way. Their little bodies were buried near the railroad tracks. Indeed, many victims died — especially infants, the sick and elderly.\footnote{256}

I remember along the way they let us out of the traincars rarely... One instance I recall, it was a sunny day, there was a grassland, the train had stopped for some reason... a little fresh air to breath but then we continued further on again.\footnote{257}


\footnote{257} Skrinda, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC: 150."
The toilets were nothing more than holes in the floor of the railway cars.

“Twenty days in unsanitary conditions, heat and starvation, many children got
dysentery.”\textsuperscript{259} Women hung sheets to provide a small amount of privacy. Ināra G.
cannot forget the feeling of shame at the age of nine using the facilities with the entire
wagon full of people, and especially boys just older than herself. She was thankful for

\textsuperscript{258} Celmiņa, "Oral History Interview, Rīga, Latvia"
\textsuperscript{259} Strauta, "Bagās Nakts Atmiņas," 6
the sheets as some type of barrier, “Otherwise it would have been horrible, when I had to go so badly and I was ashamed – a full wagon, and there were some older boys there – I just couldn’t.” 260

Valerija S. recalls that she stopped eating. “I didn’t want to live anymore. And then there was that man from the Jewish family, who had noticed that I was not eating and began to talk with me. And he began to convince me. And that helped me. And then I began to eat again.” 261 When the train reached Novosibirsk, the capital of Siberia, the bolts were removed from the doors and the deportees let out. Valērija S. vividly remembers her arrival in Novosibirsk and the sight of her mother:

Our end station was in Novosibirsk. There we were all made to take our belongings and get off the train. I climbed out…. And I was standing there by my things, and all of a sudden Spilva runs up to me and says, “Vallij, your mother is here!” Well, I dropped everything and ran as fast as I could, and noticed a small, pale woman. Well, we fell into each other’s arms and hugged, and then I got this real drive and energy to live. 262

But shortly thereafter, the Soviet guards forced the prisoners onto a boat in order to take them deeper into Siberia. Yet, at long last, after about a month’s traveling by train and boat, the deportees finally reached their destination, their resettlement camp in Siberia—where the harsh, cold winters were long and the summers short; food and provisions scarce, and survival uncertain.

262 Ibid.
The regime originally stationed the deportees in the districts of Krasnoyarsk and Novosibirsk in Kazakhstan. "We were taken to Krasnoyarsk region, the city of Kanskas. Here, like slaves, we were divided between the kolkhozes." Later, Soviet authorities transferred deportees to other places in the far north of Siberia as well, such as Igarka, Dudinka and others. They informed the exiled that they were condemned to these places of settlement for twenty years without right of departure. Beginning in 1948, these individuals received notices that they were confined to these settlements forever. After the war, countless deportees appealed to Soviet authorities for permission to return to Latvia. Most petitions were denied.\footnote{Strauta, "Baigās Naktis Atmiņas," 6.} \footnote{Bleiere and Riekstiņš, The First Mass Deportation of the Inhabitants of Latvia: June 14, 1941, 16.}
Map 3: USSR Territory 1941

Initial settlement of the deportees from Latvia of June 14, 1941. Red triangles designate places of settlement, brown circles prisons and purple squares centers of camp administration.
Prominent in women’s narratives are meticulous images of everyday experiences. They describe in full detail the daily routine of the prisons and resettlement camp and the appearance and character of the people. The women seem to recall calmly and with detachment the tortures and agonies that they had to bear. Hilda Z. was exiled to the Krasnoyarsk Territory with her daughter and mother.

The Krasnoyarsk Region covers 2.34 million sq. km., or 13.6 percent of entire Russia. The Territory spans several climatic zones, from arctic to continental, and has arctic deserts, tundra and tundra forest in the north, the taiga in the central part, and the steppe and forest-steppe in the south. Hilda Z. depicts the struggles of almost 200 people, mostly women and children, who were taken to the fishing village Agapitovo. The deportees set up tents. “We had to go work. Rafts were frozen in the Yenisei, and we had to chop them out and pull large logs ashore…. There were also big vines there. We chopped, then dried them, and then wove braids out of them and sewed something like slippers to wear on our feet. We didn’t have anything, of course, only little shoes. Then we were warm. That’s the way it was.”

Ruta and her family took refuge in a former cattle shed when no other housing could be found. The women fashioned a shelter for themselves, typically the task of

---

265 The following section, now slightly revised, was published in: Irene Elksnis Geisler, "From the Voices of the Deported: Mass Latvian Deportation of June 14, 1941," Oral History Forum/Forum d'histoire orale 29(2009).

266 Please see figure 5.

men in traditional Latvian society. They removed the manure with their hands and built a roof out of birch bark. The women covered the ceiling beams with small branches and topped them with sod and sand. Then they spread clay on the walls using a small flat piece of wood to smooth it out.

The most important task was the building of an oven. But there where could we get bricks? There was no choice but to make bricks from scratch. We got hold of a big trough and mixed clay, white sand and horse manure with water…. After mixing the stuff, we pounded it with our feet, until the mess was smooth enough to use. It was poured into a mould, pressed and dumped out on some planks. In the sun the bricks dried and hardened…. Finally we had enough bricks for an oven.268

According to Hilda Z., the Chekist guards gave her group only flour to eat and directed the women to fish for food, again the customary duty of men in Latvian culture. But there were only a few elderly men at the labour camp and some boys. The women mixed the flour with water and fried it on a barrel like flatbread, and as Hilda recalls, if there were no fish, they often did not eat.

Mrs. Korn and I were sent across the river to fish. There were little fishing huts there. We left the children in the huts and went fishing during the night to the lakes that were further off, so that there would be food to eat. I row the boat; Mrs. Korn throws the net into the river. Then one time we have to go back to our real camp to get bread. Mrs. Korn goes off to get the bread; I stay there all alone with the girls. Mrs. Korn says that she’ll be back tomorrow, but a storm comes up, and, you understand. And she cannot get back, an awful storm, awful waves.269

268 U., Dear God I Wanted to Live, 29.
The conditions in the resettlement camps were brutal. Soviet guards terrorized the deportees. Food rations were meagre and did not replace the calories expended through work. Ruta U. recalls how those who had brought some food reserves could get by, but the remainder lived in misery. The deportees plucked grass, chick-weed, and nettles and made meals of them. But after a while, there were no edible plants available.

I’ll never forget a moment which manifested for me the deepest, saddest hunger. Whenever we received the monthly ration of fish, no one threw the bones away. They were saved, dried in a pan, and consumed. One day my little sister Maya was sitting by the fire alone. In the small frying pan that was placed on two bricks, were some fish bones. With great care she turned them from one side to the other, to quicken their drying. She sat there, with her small hands folded in her lap, ragged, dirty, and impatiently waiting for something to eat. Unable to wait any longer, she picked up the bones one by one and devoured them.

People grew weak and were crippled by diarrhoea, scurvy, malaria, and tuberculosis. Many did not survive the first year. Hilda Z. describes a day in August:

1942 ... in August, they came to get us - we were being taken to go fishing. Vera’s little Jāņītis was ill, he had diphtheria. Minna Rubens was there, Niče.... We were taken to Nosoboyev. We hadn’t gone far, when someone came running after us, shouting that Vera’s Jāņītis had died.... And then another Jewish man had frozen – there by the Yenisei, he had gone to trade things at the other kolkhoz.... When Mrs. Lazdiņš died, I don’t know how she was buried.... I was very ill when she was buried.

---

270 U., *Dear God I Wanted to Live*, 51.
Ruta’s little sister Maya suffered from head ailments where the back of her head was covered with abscesses. Her hair, sticky with pus, was infested with lice. Her eldest sister, Dzidra, grew extremely thin, and her entire body was covered by painful suppurating boils. Ruta’s grandmother died soon after arrival, and her mother in 1943. The younger sisters were sent to an orphanage. Thus, young Ruta was left to fend for herself, not yet an adult but at 16 considered too old to be placed in this institution. Only a small number of those deported in 1941 later returned to Latvia. As described by Hilda:

[W]hole families died off there. Whole families died out. There was a family named Ragailis, there were five of them, and probably all of them died. The Ragailis family. The Voicītis family... almost all of them died, they put the mother and the little boy Andriūtis together in one coffin. Valentina... no, Pauline froze on the river. Mrs. Lazdiņš was from Daugavpils, her son Konrāds died. The Niče’s son Arnolds died. About half of the people died by spring. We were on sort of a shore, and then there was a valley and then another sort of hill. On that hill was a big, big hole, and they took everyone up there and threw them all in that hole – you couldn’t dig anything in the winter – that was considered the North, Agapitovo, that counted as the North. They dragged everybody up there and threw them in that hole – without coffins, without anything, just threw them in there naked. I still see it all right in front of me. Then in the spring they covered the hole. 272

Clearly, experiencing the deaths of so many people was staggering to Hilda. She vividly recalls that not only individuals died, but entire families perished in these horrendous circumstances. So many souls were lost that few living remained to mourn them. While the resettlement camps before the Second World War largely supplied labor for the immense Soviet industrial and agricultural projects, a work

272 Ibid.
force that had to be fed, conversely the wave of repression after the 1940s, including the mass deportation of Latvians, appear to be different from the previous camps. They were characterized by little paid work, little to eat, and very little warmth. The Soviet Union’s practice of evacuation and exile resulted in eradication through mass starvation and exposure rather than mere containment.\(^{273}\)

Coping and Resistance

Although there were major expressions of direct defiance of the deported, including armed escapes, uprisings and strikes, opposition generally took more subtle forms. While overt rebellion may not have been possible or even prudent in the Siberian wilderness, Latvian women developed their own coping techniques and methods of defying authority such as camaraderie through song and the sharing of scarce food. Powerless to contest her forced exile, Valerija S. fought to remain with her family. Valerija and her mother had been herded into separate railway cars. According to this survivor, her advantage was that she spoke perfect Russian. In fact, she had graduated from a Russian language school as a youth. Valerija beseeched a guard in a position of authority: “I do not want to be separated from my mother. What

can I do?” The guard asked her to sign an official document and granted her the request.  

Hilda Z., not able to bear that her dead mother’s body be left without a proper funeral, conducted a burial in disobedience to Chekist orders. Ultimately, the true mode of resistance was often a determination to conserve one’s humanity.

We were at the edge, my mother slept on the right-hand side. I warmed a brick and placed it by her feet – her feet were always very cold. And then one evening – it was already late – I was warming the brick and putting it by those feet of hers, and all of a sudden I felt that she wasn’t moving.... And she had died.... And then I ran over to Mrs. Niče, to my neighbor, for some help. There was a certain tent, a special tent there, where all of the dead were placed. Many people had already died.... Dogs had chewed the heads of those they had not managed to bury yet... of the dead people... those fishermen’s dogs. And so Mrs. Niče helped me. Then I went to the fishermen, arranged for some boards, made a little coffin. Not just out of boards, though, we put sawdust in there and whatnot.... The ground was awfully frozen. And then Mrs. Kom [Korn?] and Maija Lazdiņa and Ksenija Fleiberga ... we all went to chop out the grave. We were shown where the graves were. But of course we couldn’t chop very deeply, we made it shallow, shallow, all of the ground was completely frozen. And then it was early evening when we put her on a sled; it was snowing. And then we buried her there.  

Numerous deported Latvians endured exile by seeking solidarity and friendship from fellow Balts. Common songs were often a form of resistance as well as endurance. Ruta U. recalls a specific episode in her journey to Siberia in the crowded cattle cars, the evening of Midsummer’s Eve. According to Ruta, the

---

deportees commemorated this national Latvian holiday with traditional songs, “Our car too soon filled with the merry sounds of the Latvian līgo songs.” Many Latvians consider song to be one of their distinguishing cultural features, as do numerous Estonians. Latvians often call themselves a nation of singers. Ruta recalls that on the banks of the river Ob, two trainloads of prisoners, one Latvian and the other Estonian, passed the time in song and dance. “I remember a lovely summer evening. So warm, so pleasant. Some youths had brought their fiddles and accordions along. In a jiffy a band was formed. Many young people started dancing. It was a strange and moving experience, these familiar melodies lilting above the vast Russian river.” Latvians and Estonians spoke different languages and must have had different songs. Yet, the two trainloads of prisoners found bonds and forged ties based on their common experiences and identities as deportees.

Over time the songs of the exiled grew increasingly sadder. When Ruta and her family were put on a small boat together with the same people who had been on the railway car, she recalls the sorrow of leaving the rest of her young countrywomen and youths behind. They had been like one large family supporting one another in grief. Now they were blown away like dust across the vastness of Russia. “It was a pleasant, quiet summer night. Our friends ashore were singing a Latvian tune. The sorrowful melody stayed with us for a long, long, time. Then it was gone. Silence.”

276 U., Dear God I Wanted to Live, 17-18.
278 U., Dear God I Wanted to Live, 22.
279 Ibid., 24.
Although the native population left behind in Latvia endeavored to help the deportees, it was usually too difficult. Often the Soviet regime deemed that the exiled women had committed crimes such as thievery. In the winter some had gathered corn left in the fields after the harvest. According to the Soviet criminal code, this was theft of socialist property. Fortunately, due to the initiative and efforts of the personnel of the Orphanage Department of the Latvian Ministry of Education, more than 1,300 children were transferred back to their homeland from Siberia in 1946 after the war’s end. In an attempt to save their children from hunger, cold and possible death, many exiled Latvian women handed their daughters and sons over to children’s homes as orphans. The procedure was not only complicated but also at times dangerous. Velta S. recalls her journey:

We were always under the thumb of the command. Every month they would come and inspect us, and we were not allowed to even travel to the next hamlet, only in secret.... We asked the commander if we could travel to Krasnojarsku, from Krasnojarsku they were collecting the children, Mrs. Lūsis was gathering them, ... and there was another Dravnieks.... But we received a beating for this... So then we proceeded in secret. So, covertly we decided, all of us [women], we could not all leave to take the children, almost every one of us had a child... So, Mrs. Priedite and I took all of the children [from the hamlet].... The next station was Arčinska...but we went by foot through the forest paths, paths we had never taken before and during the night to Tarukinas....When we arrived at the Tarukinas station it was very early, the train had not yet come. We slept on the ground until the station official awakened us, and then we went to the train without tickets, without anything. But they did not let us on the train. The train was full, overfilled. So we stood on the train rungs and steps

---

and hung on. It was sleet ing, wet snow was coming down, and we
were just holding on, and I remember thinking to myself, I hope our
hands do not freeze so that we cannot feel anything, because then we
will fall and the children too.... Later they let some of the children
inside as people left, and then towards the end we all got in the last
train car. And that is how we took the children to be returned [to
Latvia]. We found Mrs. Lūsis, she was there in the town, in a hotel....
And she sent us to a blind-mute school eight kilometers from
Krasnojarska where we left the children. 281

Ināra G. was one of those children who returned to Latvia as part of this process.

Ināra’s most painful memory of Siberia, even more than the hunger and cold, was the
sorrow of having to leave her mother behind in 1946.

It was heartbreaking to leave mamma, awful. I remember that moment,
when they took us from the hamlet. All of the women were sending
their children away.... The auto begins to move, the heavy auto, and
mamma sobbing begins to run behind the auto.... We are sitting and
she is running... She cannot keep up with the auto. And she
disappears.... Clearly it was horrendous for her, because perhaps this
was the last time that she would see her children. 282

Ināra G. goes on to describe her voyage home to Latvia:

It was in September, because we arrived in Rīga October 8.... The
journey back was long and hard. In the wagon car were 120 children.
The wagon had narrow planks in three stories. On each plank slept two
or three children.... Children fell during the night from the planks....
No one really looked after us, we were unkempt, dirty and lice
infected. We were so thirsty. Rarely did they give us something to
drink.... Sometimes they gave us some salted fish and a piece of
bread. And from the fish we wanted to drink. But they gave us nothing
else. Only sometimes at the stations we got some boiled water. That is
how we journeyed. And then, when we were this side of the Urals,
somewhere by Moscow, for three days they did not give us anything.
Everything must have been gone.... We were incredibly fatigued when
we arrived in Rīga. From the train station in Rīga they took us to an
orphanage.... And there we went, those 120 children. I just remember

281 Sjui, "Life Story Interview."
282 Grantiņa, "Life Story Interview."
how people stood watching us, wiping their eyes—how pitiful we
must have looked.\footnote{\textsuperscript{283}}

Among those children who returned to Latvia as orphans were Ruta U. and
her sisters. Ruta ends her memoirs on October 13, 1950, a day when she was nearly
arrested again in her home, having already served five years of hard labor, to be sent
back to the Siberian Gulag.

Should I be lucky enough to stay in Latvia, I hope to live long enough
to see the power of the Communists come to an end. But will I ever be
able to forget that they were responsible for the many innocent lives so
tragically ended in the bleak Siberian taiga? For the death of my
mother and grandmother, for the misery of my sisters, and for the
wasted years of my own youth? Sometimes I find myself trembling
with rage and the desire for revenge. But should I be dragged away
from my homeland once more, I have only one wish left. I hope that
these recollections, these memories of my young years in Siberia, will
be read by many.\footnote{\textsuperscript{284}}

A portion of the mothers of these alleged orphans in subsequent years
attempted to escape and rejoin their children. In 1947 and 1948, 1,187 women found
their way back to Latvia. However, in most cases the Soviet command rearrested the
women as fugitives, and added three years to be served in reformatory labor camps
followed by deportation to their former place of settlement. In this manner, 1,052
women were tried and later returned to their place of internment.\footnote{\textsuperscript{285}} Their court
documents reflect: “The prisoner admits having escaped” and give the explanation: “I
was in search of my children.”\footnote{\textsuperscript{286}}
Conclusion

The terror of the first Soviet occupation cumulated in the mass deportation of 1941 destroying lives, families, relationships and trust. Soviet authorities exiled or executed 15,424 people founding the arrests and banishments on social status, membership in political and social organizations, and relationships to persons with such associations. Soviet functionaries treated women differently from men. As a result, most women experienced this historical phenomenon in a different way than men did. For the most part the Soviets perceived women not as dangerous as men. Authorities separated men from their families and sent them to hard labor camps or executed them. They banished women to resettlement camps. The deported women had the trauma of the loss of their homes and contact with their husbands and fathers, of having to care for their children in a strange land under inhumane conditions, of hunger, humiliation, disease and death of their children and other loved ones. The exiled mourned the loss of their country being forcefully transported across the border and seeing it left behind.

The survivors exhibited remarkable adaptation to their merciless conditions as they clung to life sharing food and scarce resources, by summoning strength by engaging in common song with fellow Latvians along with the exiled of other ethnicities and at times even experienced cheerfulness in the face of tragic human events. Many Latvians admit naïveté and lack of foresight during the deportation of 1941. The greater hardships they endured by being unprepared increased their
hopelessness and made survival more difficult. In retrospect, informants are appalled at not having understood. They did not comprehend the gravity of the Soviets entering their borders; they did not realize the endpoint when they were taken away for questioning; they did not bring reasonable clothing or adequate food. While survivors in hindsight criticize their own deficiencies, this lack of preparation and knowledge speaks to the powerlessness of the political state and of the Latvian populace leading up to and during this period in history.

Women’s narratives communicate the daily routines of the prison camps, the appearance and temperament of the people. Testimonies reveal the value of personal relationships in times of despair. There was human kindness amongst the inhumane conditions of the brutal Siberian frontier. Deportee accounts show how seemingly minor routines and rituals often assumed an important role for people in situations of extreme suffering. Ruta U.’s family fashioned a shelter for themselves out of manure and birch bark. They covered the ceiling beams with small branches and topped them with sod and sand. The most important task for these women was the building of an oven. Hilda Z., not able to bear that her dead mother’s body be left without a proper burial, organized a funeral in disobedience to Chekist orders.

Even the people remaining in the Latvia with an almost dismantled government, powerless to contest the forced exile of Latvian men and women, fought to bring their children home. While most petitions for citizens to return to their homeland were denied, due to the resourcefulness and hard work of the Orphanage Department of the
Latvian Ministry of Education, more than 1,300 children were successfully transferred back to Latvia in 1946.

In the end, the true mode of resistance for the survivors of the harsh Siberian exile and for the people of Latvia may have been their memories and the strength of mind to communicate their poignant life stories. These powerful eyewitness accounts reflect similar women’s experiences. As such, they give coherence to individuals’ shared memories. These testimonies give survivors a sense of belonging as political exiles and represent Latvian history and identity more generally. Women’s narratives emphasize the power of talking about their past and being together with other deportees. They understand the power of revelation of their personal experiences. Though most women eventually died, either on route, by execution, by illness or maltreatment in relocation or work camps, or as a consequence of their time in deportation upon their return, many of their testimonies have survived, recounting the events experienced by deportees as well as playing a worthy role in affecting national cognizance.
CHAPTER V

THE GERMAN OCCUPATION 1941-1945:
POWER HEGEMONIES AND ISSUES OF CULTURE, POWER AND PLACE

In grade school I studied English as a foreign language for six years, but the year under Soviet occupation I had to study Russian.... Then during German occupation I had to study German.... We started out 40 students in my class. Now we were three. 287

The German-Soviet War interrupted the Soviet annexation of Latvia. On June 22, 1941, only one week after the June 14 Soviet deportation of Latvians, Hitler broke the nonaggression pact with Stalin, and German forces advanced through U.S.S.R.’s western border. 288 By July 10, they had occupied all of Latvia’s territory, and Latvia became part of Germany’s Reich Commissariat Ostland. The German authorities set up a puppet government and an administrative board that managed all property that had been held by the Soviet regime. 289

The Latvian “self-government” (Latvian, pašpārvalde, German Landeseigene Verwaltung) officially qualified as the highest authority in the land, but in fact it served as a powerless affiliate of the German command. The Germans required that the Latvian pašpārvalde clear all significant decisions with them, while they issued their own decrees without referring to the wishes of Latvian officials or the populace.

Most of the political elite of the pre-1940 period were gone, either deported or executed by the Soviets. Few of those who remained participated in the new government. The Nazis revived some judicial and administrative organizations and reinstated certain personnel from the pre-Soviet period. However, the work of these persons and institutions ran counter to German plans. Before long a directorate system was introduced. Until mid-1942 the pašpārvalde functioned but was severely limited in its command as the German occupiers endeavored to delineate spheres of authority.290

All policies and personnel were directed towards exploitation for Germany’s benefit and the future German settlement of the conquered land.291 The Nazis implemented a special currency for its occupied territories. The Latvian pašpārvalde, by order of the occupying authorities, decreed that all businesses, organizations, and private persons must continue to pay all taxes imposed by the Soviet regime in the same manner and on the same timetable as before. The German occupiers, like the Soviets before them, exploited Latvia’s economy, draining the country of foodstuffs, raw materials, factory equipment and machines, as well as laborers. Latvian


economists calculate that losses caused by the Soviet occupation (1940 to 1941) and German occupation (1941 to 1945) were $1 billion and $660 million respectively.\(^2\)

Oral testimonies regarding this time challenge binary conceptualizations of a two-way struggle between Allied and Axis forces, one good and one evil, and reveal an erratic border between battlefront and home-front. Like the Soviets, the Nazis were hostile to the Latvian culture and the Latvian people. The command implemented puppet governments and utilized terror, violence, internment and executions as instruments to eliminate opposition. The administration confiscated businesses, homes, land, grain and other goods, and the German occupying powers, like their predecessors, engaged in mass executions.

The Nazis executed an estimated 83,000 Jews during the first year of occupation of the country.\(^2\) Of those, up to 70,000 were Latvian Jews, who had remained in the region at the beginning of German occupation. Approximately 10,000 had fled to Latvia for refuge from Germany, Austria, Bohemia and Hungary, and the remainder from Lithuania and other regions.\(^2\) German occupying forces banned Latvian schoolchildren of Polish and Russian heritage from schools. The command deemed some ethnic Latvians “racially inadequate” for labor conscription to

---


Germany, such as those from the Latgalian region, while forcefully deporting others to serve mandatory labor contracts, of whom most were never able to return home to Latvia.

Ethnic Latvian’s relationships with the Germans and Russians during this period were an extremely complex matter. People often made choices based on the least negative option, because no good alternatives existed. Consequently, individuals put faith in bad or hopeless causes because they were forced to choose between two bad alternatives. Juris K., a former Latvian Legionnaire explains:

We were conscripted forcefully and illegally, that is true. Many did not want to enlist. But … [some] joined because we were Latvians, and we loved Latvia and our nation, and in a large part we wanted revenge [against the Soviets]. That is the wrong word, a foolish word, and one must guard oneself against this. One does not think clearly anymore [under circumstances of occupation and war], and the revenge takes over one’s thinking. But that is how we felt then, especially the young people…. I was almost ready to enlist for the sake of revenge alone. But I did not. I received an official summons and it was final.295

Some Latvians cooperated with the German occupiers. They participated in local administration. Men served as German-supervised military police and as concentration camp guards. Undoubtedly, members of the Latvian auxiliary police brutalized and mistreated Jews.296 The most notorious of executioners were perhaps

Viktors Arājs and Mārtiņš Vagulāns, former members of the *Pērkonkrusts* (Thundercross) movement, and leaders of two killing commandos. During the height of its involvement in the Holocaust, the special units of the Latvian Auxiliary Police had a total of 500 men. *Pērkonkrusts* was a political party in Latvia, which adopted fascist ideology including anti-Semitism. President Ulmanis had banned the party in 1934. After the German occupation, Nazis actively endeavored to recruit former members of the society for service in the auxiliary police force and the killing commandos. However, it is unclear how many members of the association actually joined the killing squads commanded by Arājs and Vagulāns that played a key role in the holocaust in Latvia. German authorities banned the *Pērkonkrusts* organization in 1941.

For the most part, people were given few choices under these extreme conditions of war and occupation. Men enlisted into service under the German insignia for a multitude of reasons, for example, in order to avoid conscription into active combat, to escape deportation to Germany or to become gainfully employed and feed their families. Many served in these units due to their hostile disposition.

against the Soviet rule. Typically, individuals who volunteered for the auxiliary police were not aware of the tasks that they would in fact have to perform. Authorities warned officers and guards in these battalions not to talk about what they witnessed. Many Latvian men and their families attempted to find some means to resist recruitment into the military under the German command. Marija G. testifies families tried to save their sons from conscription by whatever means possible. People attempted to hide in forests to avoid active combat in a war that was not their own. Most who eventually enlisted did not do so voluntarily, she maintains. The occupying forces established iron controls in all towns and parishes. The Nazis created a climate of fear where the general populace was terrorized into compliance.

In general, women and men experienced this occupation differently, and these experiences shaped individual perceptions and expressions in spite of differences in age, class and ethnicity, and despite the traumatized human condition. Collectively and as individuals, Latvians empowered themselves to shape their own lives in many ways, often choosing one bad alternative among several perceived worse ones. Men by and large had more in the way of options than did women, though admittedly few. When men were conscripted they chose to join the Latvian Legion or the Kurelian

300 Swain, Between Stalin and Hitler: Class War and Race War on the Dvina, 1940-46, 60.
301 Grauze, "Oral History Interview, Riga, Latvia."
group, or to serve as guards under Nazi supervision. Many women were drafted into mandatory civilian work and were forced to leave for service to Germany just as men. But unlike men, women did not have the options, though limited and abysmal, of choosing police auxiliary work in Latvia or among several military alternatives.

As a consequence, women involuntarily gained social responsibilities as heads of households and communities and economic duties often becoming sole providers for the family. They were often put into situations where they had to improvise or invent their own course of action. Women taught schoolchildren in barns and private homes. They sheltered refugees in their homes and supported partisans, often relatives and neighbors, with food and provisions. Erna V. contrasts the experiences of men and women: “At least as a soldier, a man could know that he would be with other fellow soldiers... He would be following the orders of a commander, and take action for a cause. But as a woman, I did not know what to do... whether to stay or flee, and what news could be trusted and what was rumor.”

---


Map 4. Ostland Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Byelorussia

Adapted from Latvian Occupation Museum 2011

Germany 1941
Ostland
German Occupied Territory of USSR 1941
On the Front Lines of War

_In the morning we awoke to booming sounds in the distance. But no one knew that it was the war. I said that war has begun, because there was unremitting talk that war is coming, coming, coming.... With that Ribbentrop business and everything, but we did not take it seriously. And then the Germans came and war started._

For many Latvians the beginning of the Second World War is associated with the 1941 German invasion of the USSR, which included the onset of active combat in Latvia. Some Latvians equated the start of war with the building of bomb shelters and excavation of foxholes.

When the war started my father started digging a bunker in the garden where we could hide. There, by the plum trees he dug a family bunker. And there, closer to the home, he dug himself a foxhole. And then the air raids started... bombs.... I could see the airplanes very well. They were not too large, and they flew close to the ground. I could see the pilots with goggles sitting in the cockpits.

In the memories of many civilians who experienced Soviet occupation, German occupation, Soviet reoccupation and their subsequent oppression for nearly fifty years following, the beginning of the war was not marked by the initial occupation of the Soviets in 1940, which is when most scholars conceptually mark the beginning of the Second World War. Rather, in speaking with survivors, the war began when they personally began to experience the onset of the German military

---

305 Spule, _"Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC: 28."_

306 Dalia Leinarte had different results. According to Leinarte, Lithuanian women were not quite sure when Lithuania was incorporated into the Soviet Union. However, all of her interviewees recalled, with near-perfect accuracy, the day the war had begun. Dalia Leinarte, _Adopting and Remembering Soviet Reality: Life Stories of Lithuanian Women, 1945-1970_ (Amsterdam - New York: Rodopi, 2010), 10.

307 Marta Krama, _"Oral History Interview in Krāslava, Latvia, Daugavpils University DU MVC: 668,"_ (Interviewed by: Zane Stapķeviča on July 14, 2009 ).
aggression, when they remember bombs going off around them, when gunfire could be heard from their homes and towns, and, for many women, when they were faced with the reality of their husbands, fathers and brothers joining the military. At the time, Latvians many not have grasped the consequences of the U.S.S.R.’s annexation of Latvia on June 17, 1940. In retrospect, they draw a sharp division between Soviet and Nazi occupation and war, which for them began in 1941, although academically the two are often fused and treated as a single conceptual event.

The war began for Spodra G. with a military battle across her father’s land in Kurzeme. When the German-Soviet front approached, Spodra remembers, her family dug a deep trench in the ground as a refuge against the oncoming warfare because their home did not have a basement. When the German Army advanced and the Soviet Army retreated across her father’s land, Spodra, her sister and both of her parents hid in this ditch in order to avoid being killed in the crossfire between the two battling armies.308

Many associate the arrival of war with the sounds of battle: gun shots, bombs, cannons and even the sound of the German language. “In 1941 when the Russian soldiers retreated they blew up our bridge behind them…. Then, it did not take long, ‘Heil, Hitler!’ There came five Germans [soldiers].”309 Olga S. heard men shouting in an unaccustomed language. Olga’s father ran home and in less than an hour later the shooting started. “And they [the German Army] fought against the Russians, and the

308 Gendrikovs, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
Russian army retreated through the Lithuanian Dubika Hills, and the Germans cut them off through Pabėrzi.... And there it happened [the battle at Pabėrzi]. Many were shot and killed.\textsuperscript{310}

The war started. In my mind it was something horrible and inconceivable. All of the neighbors were extremely upset. One day we saw an air battle above Aglona. I was scared hearing the loud airplane sounds. Russian soldiers drove up to our home in a big heavy car. They piled out of the car and began digging trenches all over our land. They ordered us to leave our home and head towards the lake. In the neighboring forest we spent a restless night. In the morning beyond the forest we heard sounds of a strange language [German]. We headed home. The Rušonas road was full of German motorcycles and soldiers. It was raining. We found our home intact. Just a few sheets had been taken and torn up [for bandages?]. The German soldiers did not bother us. After a few days grandfather came back from the village. He told us that the Russians, while retreating, had killed Mrs. Rūpa and her son Jānis. And in Aglona Mazurs had been shot.\textsuperscript{311}

Formal media sources such as radio networks, newspapers and publishing houses that the people traditionally recognized as communicating reliable information\textsuperscript{312} were gone, depleted or operated by non-professionals receiving little respect. Radio broadcasts wielded propaganda slogans. Just as during the previous


\textsuperscript{311} Teicēja A., "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC: 321. Anonymous Informant ".

\textsuperscript{312} The population of Latvia in 1935 was 1,905,936. "Latvijas Statistika." Accessed on April 13, 2011, \url{http://www.csb.gov.lv}. In 1939, there were 140,099 privately owned radios in Latvia. The radio had assumed a significant part in Latvia's everyday life and the rapid increase in the number of licenses issued to radio owners during the interwar period shows the growing importance of broadcasting as a social factor. In the cities of Rīga, Madona, Kuldīga and Liepāja four state-owned radio stations functioned and some other stations were used for military and maritime purposes. Edgars Andersons, ed. \textit{Cross Road Country: Latvia} (Waverly, Iowa: Latvju Gramata, 1953), 133-4. Edgars Andersons is a Latvian historian and philologist. He is a graduate of the University of Riga in 1944, he was a candidate for a Ph.D. at the Julius Maximilian University in Würzburg, Germany. He is the author of several publications and studies, and faculty at Lake Forest College in Wisconsin in 1953, and became a professor of history at San Jose State College in California.
Soviet occupation period, the Latvian populace perceived most formal news media such as radio transmissions and newspapers as untrustworthy. The restoration of damaged local telephone communication lines required time. During the initial period after the evacuation of Soviet troops and officials and the advance of the German military, the small communities had little to no information about ensuing events. Citizens for the most part relied on word of mouth for news. Rumors spread among the inhabitants of Latvia and contributed to an atmosphere of chaos. Women, more than men, stress the agony of not knowing what was happening, what was to come and what to do.

“When the combat started we thought that something was burning in the distance. But it was the bombing.” Twenty-one year old Erna V. lived with her parents who were nearly sixty and her younger seventeen-year old sister in northern Latvia. Her older, married sisters lived nearby, one with her infant child and the other with a ten-year-old son. In the context of the scattered farmstead system, where few telephones existed, communication was frequently problematical, and people in the countryside often did not know what was happening or what to expect.

Nobody knew what to do, and nobody was so clairvoyant as to know which way to go, how to escape, where there would be water or shelter. Perhaps it was easier for the city-dwellers. They could communicate better. Some would flee to their relatives. But for country-folk it was very difficult.

---

314 There were 76,436 telephones and 294,000 miles of telephone lines in use in Latvia in 1940. Only one in every 29 Latvians had his or her telephone apparatus. Andersons, ed. Cross Road Country: Latvia, 133.
315 Velke, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
Germans as Liberators or Oppressors

Everyone hoped when the Germans arrived that they would help our nation to establish stability. But as it turned out—not so. We found out that they perceived Latvians not as Latvians, but as potential resources for their own army. And then everyone understood that instead they wanted to establish themselves here.\(^{316}\)

Due to the Year of Terror, particularly the June 14 deportation, many Latvians initially perceived the invading German forces as liberators and hoped for the restoration of an independent Latvia. Others believed that under the circumstances, this historic enemy (the Germans) would be an improvement over their other historic enemy (the Russians), whose brief rule had just concluded.\(^{317}\) "While most Latvians were relieved at the arrival of the German troops, certainly no one wanted the Germans here, but nevertheless we thought that the Germans would perhaps save us from Siberia [deportation]."\(^{318}\) Yet, as German forces occupied the region, it became clear that the Nazis had their own plans for the country.

Contrary to the hopes of some Latvians, the German high command had no intention of liberating anybody. Their long-term objective, sometimes referred to as the "General Plan for the East," was to eradicate the Soviet regime and repopulate the

---

\(^{316}\) Irma Laiva, "Life Story Interview, Archive No. NMV:2111," Interviewed by: Māra Zimīte and Māra Lazda on May 1, 2000).

\(^{317}\) Plakans, The Latvians: A Short History, 149; Misiunas and Taagepera, The Baltic States, Years of Dependence 1940-1980, 45.

\(^{318}\) Spule, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Lativa, Archive No. DU MVC: 28."
Baltic “Ostland” with German farmers. Unlike the German plans for the regions of Ukraine and Russia, which the Nazis considered mainly sources of food and slave labor, the German goal for the Baltic territory was to use it as a Lebensraum [living space] for Germans. They planned to eventually annex the Baltic republics to the German Reich. The plot included the “Germanization” of some Latvians but predominately the deportation of large groups of Latvia’s inhabitants to the interior of conquered Russia, much like the Soviet plans.\(^{319}\)

The Latvian population was growing increasingly distrusting of any authority figure and especially a foreign presence. The Soviet Regime, during the previous year of occupation, had targeted government leaders and the educated in society. The Soviets had already executed or deported a huge portion of the Latvia’s leading class, along with their families. Individuals and families who may have worked with the Soviet government or who feared Nazi reprisals, an estimated 40,000 people, fled east along with the retreating Soviet army in June 1941.\(^{320}\) Of those, between 18,000 and 20,000 were likely Jews.\(^{321}\) Many who had cooperated with the Soviets escaped as


\(^{320}\) Plakans, *The Latvians: A Short History*, 149.

well. “And those who could not or did not manage to flee were arrested and shot.”

Approximately 35,000 people, in addition to Jews, were executed during the German occupation period in Latvia, of these 12,000 during the first six months of occupation. The German government proceeded to exploit available natural and human resources, to set up military units and to take over enterprises previously expropriated by the Soviet Regime.

Everyday life in Latvia throughout the Second World War period was consumed by the presence of the military. In particular, women mention the appearance and mannerisms of Soviet and Nazi soldiers who dominated daily existence. Women usually describe Nazi and Soviet forces by finding similarities and differences between the soldiers. Comparisons of the two oppressive regimes must have figured prominently in the minds of citizens who were debating whether to stay or flee their homeland. Many recall the Germans as more polite, organized and in command of their emotions than the Russians. Terēze D. remembers an incident when a couple of German soldiers came into her home, took over her family kitchen and made themselves a meal of the family’s white rooster and root vegetables. Remarkably, Terēze stresses that the soldiers were neat and well kempt: “Upon leaving, they nicely folded the tablecloth and put it back where they had found it.”

Lilija I. recalls: “One of the soldiers was from the Vienna Radio. He played the

---

322 Krama, "Oral History Interview in Krāslava, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC: 668."
324 Plakans, The Latvians: A Short History, 150.
325 Dregisa, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC:475."
accordion perfectly. It was phenomenal. An accomplished musician! When the
Germans retreated he left me his accordion as a gift, and he taught me a few tunes....
I was so happy.... I remember that his name was Norberts.”

Lidija K. remembers that Russian soldiers would boast at how much better life
was in Russia. “Even the bees were bigger in Russia than in Latvia.” But Lidija and
some of the people from her village would laugh at these sad individuals behind their
backs because they were dressed so pitifully and acted so crudely. “How could it be
then that life was so much better in Russia?” On the other hand, “The German
soldiers -- they were solidi (first rate). They often presented candies to small children.
I received candies also.” Erika M. recalls, almost with fondness: “My pockets were
always full of candy. Full of chocolates.” Erika deduces, that “they really loved
children.” Marta K. succinctly explains that the Germans did the exact same things
as the Russians, but the Russians did them more brutally.

The Nazi regime was more skillful than the Soviets in engaging the emotions
of the masses, for example, with parades, flags and patriotic songs, and they had
better means to do so. German soldiers wore sharply tailored uniforms, shiny boots,
fancy insignia and colorful medals with gold braid. Stanislava M. comments on how
attractive the German soldiers were. In contrast, the Red Army under Stalin dressed

326 Irbe, "Life Story Interview, Alūksne, Latvia, Archive No. NMV:2060."
327 Klivitska, "Oral History Interview, Preli, Latvia."
328 Erika Medika, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC: 24,"
(Interviewed by: Raimonds Rēķis on April 16, 2003).
329 Krama, "Oral History Interview in Krāslava, Latvia, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC: 668."
330 Malinovska, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC: 356."
in unattractive, drab, shapeless outfits and often carried dilapidated gear. Soviet soldiers were disheveled in their appearance. They were perceived as callous and dishonorable. German soldiers, in comparison, looked clean and polished. “The German men were handsome... and not pushy. I would say Russians were rather pushy... and they [the German soldiers] were cultured.”

Nazi Rule: 
Takeover, Terror, Repressions and Atrocities

Then came a directive. Poles and Russians were banned from schools. I cried, because I wanted so very much to go to school. The school’s director saved me. I became Latvian for a short while and studied. But for many of my countrymen and for Russians the school doors were closed.

The formation and staffing of local administrative units occurred in two phases during the summer or 1941. For the short term, the Nazis set up regional commands in Latvia, as in the other Baltic States they allowed ethnic Latvians a certain degree of administrative independence. The German authorities reinstated some former heads of districts, towns and rural communities who had held these positions before the occupation of 1940. At least initially, the military authorities desired administrators who could effectively work and understand bureaucratic correspondence rather than people who would support their military and cultural

331 Ibid.
goals. However, the Latvian populace increasingly turned into one of the war conquests of the Wehrmacht.333

In the beginning German authorities were willing to permit the use of Latvian national symbols, cultural activities and self-governing institutions. The intension was to maximize Latvian autonomy for the short term in order to avoid challenges to German authority.334 After the military front had moved east during the months of July and August, the Germans implemented a second phase of control over the ethnic Latvian administrations. The occupying powers sought progressively to maximize power over their annexed territory by instituting new local administrations. Since the Soviet occupation had already disbanded many of the Latvian local governments, the Nazis formed entirely new organizations and selected administrators from the populace whom they felt that they could manipulate or pressure. By September 1941, the Nazi command had in place a new local administrative system firmly under power of Nazi ideologists and the puppet government.335 Hitler explained on July 16, 1941, in a meeting with the Nazi high command how he expected to exploit the newly conquered territories to Germany’s benefit. No rights would be permitted for any remaining ethnic populations, least of all the possibility of bearing arms. All local inhabitants who looked suspect would be shot.336

---

334 Plakans, The Latvians: A Short History, 150.
335 Stepens, "Nazi Germany's Policies of Local Administrations in Occupied Latvia 1941-1945," 85.
Already in the first hours of occupation, the German Regime ordered the populace to hand over all weapons. They threatened those who failed to obey with capital punishment. Ina P.'s grandfather was among those shot by Nazi forces, ironically because he attempted to obey the order:

Grandpa died in 1941.... He died when two German soldiers came into the farmyard. ... Grandpa saw that his son had gone to talk to them.... And so he ran behind the barn. And there was some kind of a big gun, a rifle, hidden behind the barn. He was afraid of the soldiers, so he brought the gun out to hand over to them. He came around the corner of the barn and the soldiers saw this big gun, this rifle in his hands, and they shot him.... So from now on, on the farm were only Grandma and whatever children were there. This was 1941.

Lidija K. describes a general atmosphere of fear. She recalls that the Soviet army had taken her father from their home in Prei to Daugavpils some fifty kilometers south to work as a blacksmith during the first occupation. When the German army advanced into Latvia, her father was injured in the crossfire. The family was afraid that the Nazis would assume he had been injured serving in the Soviet Army rather than conscripted into civilian service as a blacksmith against his will. He walked home from Daugavpils, a fugitive hiding from the Nazi Army. German authorities imprisoned or executed so-called communist sympathizers and anyone supposedly resisting the German administration.

The Nazi Regime proceeded to usurp schools and other state and community buildings in Latvia, as well as private houses, for administrative and military use.

---

337 Feldmanis, "Latvia under the Occupation of National Socialist Germany 1941-1945," 83.
338 Plavina, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
339 Klivitska, "Oral History Interview, Prei, Latvia."
Spodra G. recalls that, just as the Soviets had done in the previous occupation period, the Germans commandeered her family home. Her parents once again made room for their foreign occupiers, this time German soldiers with telegraph equipment.\textsuperscript{340}

Teachers held lessons in various public spaces and private homes. Teicēja A. remembers a big group of Germans arriving at her school in Rušona and ordering the children out of the building. “From then on classes were held in the neighboring farmhouse in two shifts.”\textsuperscript{341} Helēna V. describes students scattered among different buildings in her region during the German occupation. She attended school in the basement of the local hospital.\textsuperscript{342} Marija G. believes that the Nazis were much less concerned with education than the Soviets and more with labor. “Let them work instead” was the German attitude.\textsuperscript{343}

German indoctrination efforts replaced those of the Soviet Union. People often remember them as being similar in nature. Terēze D. recalls that during Nazi the occupation period, school concerts were decisively dispassionate and consisted of inconsequential folk songs. Students were forbidden to sing any patriotic Latvian songs. It was mandatory that every class memorize the words of the German national anthem “Deutschland, Deutschland über alles.”\textsuperscript{344}

The German regime spared most Latvians, with the exception of Latgalians, from the genocidal policies that condemned Jews, Gypsies, Slavs and other so-called

\textsuperscript{340} Gendrikovs, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI"

\textsuperscript{341} Teicēja A., "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No DU MVC 321 Anonymous Informant"

\textsuperscript{342} Vanoskas, "Life Story Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No DU MVC 44"

\textsuperscript{343} Grauze, "Oral History Interview, Rīga, Latvia"

\textsuperscript{344} Dregisa, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No DU MVC 475"
“sub-humans.” These “unsuitable elements” were to be eliminated from the population. Racial evaluations completed by Nazi authorities by summer of 1942 found that Latgali ans were supposedly not fit to be Germanized. As a consequence, this group of Latvians, distinguished by their language or dialect, religion and historically associated with Poland, needed to be separated from other Latvians. Latgali ans were to be removed from their habitats. They were to be used as forced labor and subjected to particular restrictions on personal freedom. Hitler’s original intent for European Russia generally was starvation for the bulk of the urban population as well as for captured Red Army Soldiers.

The German command adopted a policy of terror that gathered momentum over time. In contrast to repressions and executions performed during the previous year under Soviet occupation, which were usually done under concealment, many atrocities performed by Nazi forces were open to the general public. The fact that incidents were in full view contributed to the terror of the people of Latvia. Those who remember the events generally do not seem to know the reasons for executions such as allegations of resistance or Communist collaboration. They simply recall that there were indiscriminant killings.


I studied in Rēzekne from the age of seventeen. In 1942 we had winter recess until January 3, and I was going to school from Dricēni. We had to ride by the Audriņu hamlet. The hamlet was burned down and all of the people gone. The Germans did this. I remember in the month of January, by Rēzekne’s market in the field across from the prison wall 30 people were shot from Audriņu hamlet. And, we from the high school listened to the German officials. We heard everything. They [the German guards] led them [the prisoners] into the field, tied their eyes shut and stood them in front of the wall. Their hands were tied. I saw this myself, how they stood, but then I could not watch as they were shot. Then we fled, we fled down the street towards the bridge, towards the river. We heard the sounds of gunshots. And when we came back after an hour, everyone was gone, there was nothing left.

On January 2, 1942, Nazi soldiers burned down the hamlet of Audriņa. They proceeded to execute the inhabitants, including women, children and elderly, in Ančupānu Forest. Pēteris C. knew neither the ethnicity nor faith of the people executed, nor the purported motivations for the massacre. He only knew that people were being put to death. Pēteris recalls more such events:

It was still January, in the evening. I saw civilians seized – children and women. By the market field they halted the horses and pulled the people out of the sleighs. One or two they hit with their guns. The police took them to the prison. After that they were taken to Ančupāni and shot.

---

347 Rēzekne – City in the region of Latgale in Latvia.
350 Čačka, "Oral History Interview."
Survivor narratives reveal that when atrocities occurred, Latvian onlookers were horrified, and as a result were terrorized into compliancy. Both witnesses and perpetrators recollect that many of those involved with the mass murders fortified themselves with alcohol because of the horrific nature of the work.\textsuperscript{351}

Erika M. recalls an incident between her mother and her neighbor. She saw her young neighbor coming home one day carrying a gun with his head hung low. Erika’s mother asked the young man what had happened. “A terrible tragedy, a horrible thing” he replied. “Today all of the Jews were shot.” And mother asked, “Did you shoot too?” And the neighbor answered, yes, that he had. She exclaimed, “Are you crazy?” But he said, “How could I not? We drove them together, the Germans behind us. And the Germans said, ‘if you do not shoot we will bury you alongside the Jews….’ Whether you wanted to, or not, you had to shoot. I shot, but perhaps I missed. I don’t know.” Then, he informed mother that the family Jakobsons was among those shot. Erika goes on:

They were good friends, that I remember, from the time I was a child. When we went to Eglani we always stopped by the Jakobsons.... And now mother... mother begins to sob and runs out into the yard sobbing.\textsuperscript{352}

Operations that commenced with the invasion of the U.S.S.R. in 1941 represented a deadly turning point in German Jewish policy. Nazi Germany implemented the systematic execution of Jewish people as a “final” plan in the methodical genocide of European Jews, resulting in the direst phase of the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[351] Swain, \textit{Between Stalin and Hitler: Class War and Race War on the Dvina, 1940-46}, 60.
\item[352] Medika, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC: 24."
\end{footnotes}
Before the German occupation approximately 70,000 Jews resided in Latvia. On February 24, 1943, only about 12,964 Jews remained. The fate of Jews at the hands of Nazi Regime was an especially horrendous occurrence in Latvia.

Then came the news: Aglona’s Hebrews have all been shot, the youngest ones were not yet two years old. Grandfather often mentioned them: from one he purchased nails, from another good herring, and still [with] another he discussed the meaning of life. He remembered Hebrews as good and intelligent people.

Statistics are not available regarding the execution of Roma civilians and the mentally ill at the hands of Nazis in Latvia. In August of 1941, the German authorities closed down the Daugavpils Psychiatric Hospital. SS troops transported the patients and staff to Aglona School and shot 445 people, both patients and medical personnel, of Latvian, Russian and Jewish heritage.

All of the psychiatric patients in Daugavpils hospital were shot. The Germans ordered them into the gymnasium’s large hall. They fired their guns all day long, together over 700 people. In the end they shot the Hebrew nurses and aides. This happened on August 23, 1941. At Cauñas by the roadside a prisoner of war camp was established. They transported 300 people there from Rēzekne and placed them in unheated rooms. Almost every day people died there, died of hunger.

---


The German government founded the Latvian Legion, often mistakenly accused of participating in these executions, in February of 1943, a year after the mass murder of Jews in Latvia.


356 Swain, *Between Stalin and Hitler: Class War and Race War on the Dvina, 1940-46*, 56
and froze to death, beat to death with the butts of guns. Those ill-fated, half naked, barefoot people, I saw with my own eyes, the way they were herded across the snow on the Daugavpils-Rezeknes road. Food rations were 150 grams of bread and a sour cabbage soup. The result was in the spring of 1942, only 39 people were left alive, who were then taken towards the direction of Daugavpils. Then later when the Germans retreated, they burned the remains of these prisoners, the psychiatric patients and Hebrews. I saw this.\footnote{357}

In spite of the atrocious conditions and fear among Latvian residents, some civilians took heroic measures against their oppressive authority, often risking their lives in the process. In the city of Daugavpils, Pauls Krūmiņš led the violin section of the Latgale People’s Conservatory and often performed with young pupil Cecilia Gradis of Jewish heritage. Krūmiņš managed to hide Cecilia and her sister and provide them with false papers. He was later arrested, but the girls escaped and survived. Kalistratii Grigoview, a Russian Old Believer, hid a Jewish couple, the husband of which was a veterinarian. Fetinya Ostratova, a pensioner, hid a young woman whom she had known since childhood, along with the woman’s husband. Petrunella Vilmanis saved a girl for whom she had once been a nursemaid. Ignats Matuls, a farmer in Līksnas district of Latgale, rescued a pharmacist and his wife. In Līvāni and Aglona deacons of the Catholic Church were active in saving local members of the Jewish population and suffered terms of imprisonment as a result.\footnote{358}

At the village administration building in the basement many citizens were imprisoned. And a few days later in the pine tree grove by Cirvīša lake they were shot. Many Aglona’s residents were saved from

\footnote{357 Teicēja A., "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC:321. Anonymous Informant ".}

\footnote{358 Swain, Between Stalin and Hitler: Class War and Race War on the Dvina, 1940-46, 70.}
the death sentence by church deacon Aloīzs Broks. But the deacon himself was later executed in a concentration camp.  

Civilian Conscription

Nazi Germany enlisted or deported several million foreign civilians, POWs and concentration camp inmates into the Reich to support its war economy. Only a small fraction of these individuals went voluntarily. In the first years of the war, this practice enabled Germany to refrain from mobilizing German women for factory work. Additionally, the forced laborers worked on farms and replaced German agricultural workers who left for industrial positions. From 1942 on, the forced importation of foreign workers made possible the conscription of additional numbers of German men into the Nazi armed service. In the case of Latvia and the other Baltic states, from late 1941 on Nazi authorities proceeded to implement a general labor conscription for civilian jobs in Germany. Unlike the military conscription, which was limited to males, the civilian enlistment included females. The German Regime recruited Baltic workers for heavy physical labor, some of whom returned home to Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania after their terms of service concluded. However, for many, contracts were extended or not completed. German military officials transported Latvians to industrial plants and work facilities to serve in the

war effort. In 1943 approximately 16,800 Latvians worked as “Ostarbeiterer”
[eastern workers] in Germany.\textsuperscript{362}

In 1942 the German-run Latvian government extended the mandatory labor
service to schoolchildren fourteen years and older. Among the first to be transported
in 1942 were 8,000 Latvians from the region of Latgale considered “racially
inadequate.” Between 1942 and 1943 Nazi Germany enrolled over 6,000 Latvian
youths for war labor. Of those, 30\% were rejected as “racially inadequate” and only
4,576 employed.\textsuperscript{363} Vitauts L., recruited in the spring of 1943, testifies:

Then came the spring of 1943, and I was about to graduate from high
school. Then they [the Nazi German Administration] founded the
Legion and began to implement a draft. But those who signed up for
labor service were pardoned. One [classmate] from our class was
seized already in the spring, but the rest of us, mainly in order to finish
school, we signed up for labor service. Graduation was on Sunday.
And we already had orders of where to report. The first ones went
Monday morning early to Salaspils peat bog to work. The rest of us
did not go there, we went [fled] to the countryside. But then the police
came to our homes. We saw that it would not go well for our parents.
We went to work at the Salaspils peat bog that summer.\textsuperscript{364}

Nazi Germany established the concentration camp at Salaspils at the end of
1941, 18 km southeast of Rīga. Officially, Salaspils was a Police Prison and Work
Education Camp (\textit{Polizeigefängnis und Arbeitserziehungs lager}). About 12,000
prisoners went through the camp during its existence. Approximately 1,000 German
Jews perished there during the initial construction phase. An additional 2,000 to 3000

\textsuperscript{363} Strods, "Septīta Pļauja (1940-1949)," 12-13.
\textsuperscript{364} Lidums, "Life Story Interview, Stockholm, Sweden."
people expired there in later periods, of whom a particularly high number were children and young people. Typhoid fever and bad camp conditions in the separate children's barracks at Salaspils created a situation in which several hundred children died. Vitauts continues his testimony:

Then we were taken to Germany.... That we would need to go to Germany, naturally my parents initially objected. But when they realized that the alternative was the Legion, then they encouraged it. And so in the fall of 1943 from Jūrmala station I left for Germany. All of my relatives saw me off. After that I no longer managed to return to Latvia.  

In several parts of the country civilian recruitment often took the form of mass deportation. Scholars estimate that more than 25,000 people from Latvia were conscripted in this manner. So many people were deported from the Baltics that by the summer of 1942 crops could not be harvested. Irma L. recalls:

People did not have any place to go. They were forced to leave.... A person would go out to the market to buy bread, and would be seized and forcefully deported. People could no longer go out on the streets.

---

365 Heinrihs Strods, "The Concentration Camp at Salaspils October 1941-September 1944," in Subjugation under Soviets and Nazis, ed. Valters Nollendorfs, Rihards Pētersons, and Metju Kotts (Riga, Latvia: The Museum of Occupation of Latvia, 2000), 155. Strods argues here that the Soviets created a myth that Salaspils was the largest death camp in the Baltic region by exaggerating the statistics regarding the number of prisoners and number of deaths to serve their own purposes. Recent surveys of the camp area have found only 3,043 square meters of burial grounds. Thus, if 53,700 to 190,000 people had been killed at Salaspils as claimed by KGB documents, each square meter would contain 18-63 corpses, which is impossible.

366 Lidums, "Life Story Interview, Stockholm, Sweden."


368 Laiva, "Life Story Interview."
Teicēja A. remembers, “many of my neighbors were seized and taken to Salaspils, and after that to Germany. That is how they (the Nazis) deported the Skramanu family from Kristapīni, Gžibovskis’ from Aglona’s station, the Indrikovs from Kamencas, and mother’s cousin of the Lukjanovičs family from Daukšti.”

Spodra G. recalls her own seizure and deportation to eastern Germany on November 28, 1944. Spodra was sixteen years old and her sister Mirdza eighteen. In the very early morning žandarmi [military police] appeared at their home and ordered Spodra and her sister to pack to be transported to Germany. The girls did not want to leave their parents. Spodra’s father protested that they did not have the means to travel such a distance. Their horse had been appropriated and father’s leg was injured. The soldier responded by striking her father in the chest with his rifle and ordering him to keep silent. They proceeded to seize the entire family. Spodra’s family travelled together with other neighbors and relatives assembled by the Nazi army police. They escorted Spodra’s family and the others in a procession the entire distance from their homes to the port of Liepāja. Along the way, the caravan stopped as more families, ordered out of their homes, joined the convoy. Spodra left Latvia in the darkness of December 2, 1944. “As our ship pulled away from the shore we bid farewell to Latvia singing our national anthem God Bless Latvia (Dievs Svēti Latviju)

370 Spodra G. uses the term žandarmi or gendarmes, adapted from French, for military police to refer to Nazi army police.
though with the hope and expectation that we would soon return. In the night Soviet
battleships launched torpedoes at our fleeing vessel but missed."

Military Conscription

In 1943 I was to graduate from high school, but in March I was
conscripted into the Latvian Legion. Everyone my age was
conscripted. We had the choice – we could serve with the German
auxiliary troops, go to Germany in labor service or join the Latvian
Legion. From my high school I believe that only one youth went into
labor service in Germany and the remainder to the Legion. In those
days that was the conviction....If we must go, than we would join a
Latvian unit, nowhere else.

During the period of German occupation approximately 146,000 able-bodied
Latvian men engaged in military service under the German insignia. They did this at
first on a volunteer basis to serve in the police force and various auxiliary units and
later in response to a nation-wide conscription.\(^{371}\) In order to circumvent violation of
international rights making it unlawful to draft Latvians into their armed forces, the
Nazi administration called this practice “voluntary.” Because of the desperate
conditions, Latvian responded to some calls for action with unrealistic visions of the
outcome. The option of joining the German forces to evict the Soviets appealed to
some and seemed preferable to passively waiting for and unknown fate. Some
accepted the call to service for what they understood to be patriotic reasons.

\(^{371}\) Andrievs Ezergailis, "German Occupation of Latvia 1941-1945: Liberation, Volunteerism, Self-
History*, 152.
Voldemārs V., one of the volunteers, recalls the situation he experienced. The international state of affairs had become progressively more threatening. Germany and Russia had destroyed Poland’s independence and secretly prepared for new acquisitions. Each day the world’s politics brought new and more upsetting news that created a state of ignorance about the next day. Going into the Latvian Legion, “all of us as one were ready to fight for our Fatherland’s freedom.” Driven by duty, men such as Voldemārs considered military service with the Latvian Legion, even though under German directive, to be the best way to prevent the horrors of the Soviet year of terror from recurring.

On February 10, 1943, as per direct orders from Adolf Hitler, the German occupying forces established the Latvian Legion. With the German invasion of the U.S.S.R. failing, the Nazis sought additional manpower. Although some Latvians may have entered into this German organized military in order to fight for their homeland, it would be misleading to confuse German efforts at military organization with volunteerism. While individual cases may have varied, author Zenta Mauriņa, like many women who witnessed this event, remembers Latvians having little choice but to serve under the German insignia. Latvian men had the “privilege” of volunteering to serve against the Bolsheviks, the German authorities persecuted those

---

372 Veldre, Mana Dzīves Ceļa Līkloči: Published Memoir, 5.
who did not volunteer. International law forbidding the drafting of citizens of
occupied countries did not deter the invading Nazi forces.\footnote{Zenta Mauriņa, *Dzelzs Aizbidņi Lūst* (Toronto, Canada: Astras Apgāds, 1960), 130.}

Former Latvian Legionnaires explain their motivations for joining. According
to Pēteris C., they had three options. The first option was to join the Latvian National
Guard, the second to join the Kurelieši, and the third the Latvian Legion.

I of course chose the Latvian Legion. It was the correct choice, and the
situation also dictated the Legion. I was drafted into the Legion, into
the artillery regiment.\footnote{Çača, "Oral History Interview."}

Kārlis K. recalls: "I had promised myself—if I stay alive from this hell [the
first Soviet occupation], then I will do everything in my powers so that Latvia would
again be free, so that this massive and horrible occupation would end."\footnote{Kuzulis, "Life Story Interview, Washington DC, Archive No. NMV815."} Ēriks S.
affirms:

I had an absolutely clear conviction that we were fighting to keep the
Russians from getting back into Latvia. For those who were in the
Legion anything different was out of the question. For everyone, who
fought in the Latvian Legion, this was the only thought, the only idea
about why were there...nobody wanted to go through another 1940-
1941.\footnote{Strautins, "Excerpts from Personal Journal Published on Dzīves Stāsts by Māra Zirnīte."}

Interestingly, even though Kārlis and Ēriks had few alternatives, they qualify
their situations or choices with self-empowerment.

The testimonies of Latvian Legionnaires Ālfrēds M. and Auseklis E. are
typical examples of men who do not portray their joining as willing acts. These men

\footnote{http://www.dzivesstasts.lv/lv/frcc.php?id=854}
remember this time with sadness and humility, often downplaying their own exploits and accomplishments. Alfred M., born in 1925, was 19 years old when in 1944 he received a summons from the German operated Latvian Legion. He remembers impressive stamps and insignias on the envelope. The document instructed him to report to the nearby city of Priekule, to sign up for military service. Though written as an invitation, the letter nevertheless stressed that in the event he should fail to report, he would be punished “according to war-time laws.” “Such was the nature of voluntarily enlisting!” Examples of mobilization orders salvaged as archival documents and housed at the Latvian State Historical Archives substantiate Alfreds’ testimony. Documents clarify, that “failure to comply with this order will entail the severest penalties in accordance with martial law.”

Auseklis E. had previously been summoned to enlist during the time of Russian occupation 1940/1. Because he was a student enrolled in a higher learning institution, the Soviet-run administration at the time had given him a temporary reprieve. However, in 1944 he felt no choice but to enlist in the German military service. Already half of his friends and classmates were gone, and he worried for his family and their farm if he refused. It was better comply rather than risk reprisals. Auseklis cannot forget the sorrow in his father’s face when he gave his family the news. His father forlornly sat in his chair and did not say a word. Families, forced

379 Minka, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
380 Puisans, Unpunished Crimes: Latvia under Three Occupations, 272.
381 Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
to choose between unacceptable alternatives, were being torn apart. Ilmārs S. explains his decision to join:

In the spring I received a summons that I was drafted into the army. I talked to [my mentor] Paulovič about joining the Forest Brothers, but he talked me out of it.... I went to the registration site. There was a big room with many such as myself. They called us in one by one. I went inside. There were two big tables. By one sat a German official, by the other a Latvian. They asked me, where do you want to serve? Of course, I went with the Latvians. 382

Individuals who, having been conscripted, evaded the draft often took refuge in the woodlands and formed groups calling themselves Meža Brāļi or Forest Brothers. The Forest Brothers were Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian partisans who waged guerrilla warfare against Nazi and Soviet rule during the occupations of the three Baltic States during, and after the Second World War. The Forest Brothers were similar to anti-Soviet resistance groups who fought against Soviet communist rule in Bulgaria, Poland, Romania and western Ukraine. 383

I was not drafted into the army because I was a bit older. I should have joined the civil conscription, but then there arose the idea to organize a Latvian national brigade [the Kurelieši] ... like during the First World War... to guard Latvia against both the Soviets and the Nazis.... You know, we used to sing the song: We will first strike those flee-bitten ones and then those bluish-grayish ones! Always! Always! Always! 384

The Kurelieši [Kurelian Group] was a Latvian military regiment existing from 1944 to 1945, named for their leader Latvian General Jānis Kurelis. It split off from

---

382 Strautīšs, "Excerpts from Personal Journal Published on Dzīves Stāsts by Māra Zirnīte."
the Latvian Legion to form an independent unit. Jānis Kurelis was a decorated Latvian army general. Kurelis had served in the Russian Imperial forces as a commander of the Latvian rifle regiment *Strelnieki*. After the proclamation of an independent Latvian state, Kurelis joined the Latvian Army as a Colonel in 1919. He was promoted to General in 1925 and officially retired from duty in 1940. After the German occupation in 1941, Kurelis came out of retirement to lead this makeshift military group.\(^3\)

Vilis M. recalls the formation of the Kureliešu movement:

> Everything had to be done with the permission of the German leadership back then. So the organizers proposed to the Nazi high command an auxiliary group in order to guard the Latvian farmers during the war with the purpose of improving agricultural production. In fact, the Kurelieši envisioned themselves as the national Latvian Army battling against both the Nazis and the Soviets.\(^4\)

The German authorities initially authorized General Kurelis to command a group of 1,200 men to defend the river Daugava between Pavīnas and Kegums, to have ready 200 men to send to Rīga, and to organize partisan activities behind Soviet lines in case of German withdrawal. In reality, according to Vilis M., the Kurlieši compared themselves to the Latvian National Army, of the First World War established in order to defend the Baltic territories against both the Germans and the Russians. The Kurelian group’s numbers entailed just a few thousand men. The movement attracted partisans, refugees and draft dodgers and quickly grew to

---


\(^4\) Mīķelsons, "Oral History Interview in Kalamazoo, MI."
approximately 3,000 members. Their significance may have been small practically, but it was huge symbolically.

Vilis M. joined the Kureliešu group with five neighborhood friends and his sixteen-year-old younger brother Valdis. Vilis remembers that Latvia was already in ruins when a Kureliešu branch was organized near his village in the small town of Skrīveri. He recalls his painful parting from home on his way off to war, father burying a rifle in the sauna hut, mother walking along with him and his brother to the edge of the village. Their family home was full of war refugees taken in by his parents. Vilis somberly recollects the words of one ninety-year-old refugee woman upon his leaving. “Whatever winds may blow your way son,” she said, “let them blow over and past you.” Vilis believes that these words may have indeed protected him throughout his life journey.

In September of 1944 with the Germans retreating across Latvian territory and the Soviet front nearing, the Kurelieši made the decision to fall back from the district of Vidzeme and relocate. They journeyed east to Rīga. They then travelled by foot 96 kilometers from Rīga to Talsi in the region of Kurzeme.

The troops began the transport of weapons and supplies on September 19. They arrived in Rīga the night of September 23. Vilis remembers this event as a strange, tragicomic drama. The group’s appearance was motley. “We had no uniforms. My feet were bound with wire to keep my shoes from falling off.” They had no vehicles and only old horses. “The Germans had taken everything else.”

---

they had cows. “Latvian farmers donated fifty to sixty cows and some sheep and goats, because they had nothing else to give. The animals walked along beside us. We would milk the cows and occasionally butcher them for meals.” It was an odd spectacle. “Vidzeme’s cows and old horses walking along the roads with the Kureliešu soldiers. Such was our Latvian National Army.” On September 29 approximately 250 Kureliešu soldiers settled in the small town of Talsi, known as “The Town of Nine Hills” located next to two lakes. In Talsi, the Kureliešu battalion took refuge in an abandoned glass factory. Although the Latvians had originally formed the regiment with the full permission of the Nazi authorities, the Germans arrested the group, seized their provisions and arms, and transported the men to Danzig as prisoners of war.388

Olga considers the most tragic and painful event of her life and that of her family to be her brother’s conscription into the Legion. He did not return. To this day, though she has searched for him, she and her family do not know what happened to him. “He was born in 1924 and was a student in high school. Then one day he announced that it would seem that school would not work out for him because those born in 1924 were being drafted. That was the last year that the Germans took — 1924.... That was perhaps February.... He was not yet 18 years old. His birthday would have been in May.”389

388 Mikelsons, "Oral History Interview in Kalamazoo, MI."
389 Spule, "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC: 28."
In 1944, when the war neared the end, the German administration ordered the Latvian Youth Organization to assist in the mobilization of sixteen- to seventeen-year-olds to serve as German Air Force Aides. During the summer of 1944, approximately 1,000 girls and women also served in the German Air Force Auxiliary. Valenta Lāsmane describes January of 1944: with German troops retreating from Leningrad and the threat of Soviet re-invasion of Latvia growing imminent, the Nazis drafted even sixteen-year-old Latvian boys, born in 1927 and 1928, and sent them to the battle front by the Nazis with almost no training, resulting in heavy losses of life.

391 Uldis Neiburgs, "Formation of the Latvian Legion," in Latviešu Legionāri - Latvian Legionnaires (Toronto, Canada: Daugavas Vanagi, 2008), 17. Uldis Neiburgs is a researcher for the Museum of Occupation of Latvia. He is PhD candidate in History and Philosophy, University of Latvia.
392 Lāsmane, Pāri Jurai 1944./45. g.
Latvians were subjects of overlapping occupations and pawns in the alternating power struggle between Hitler and Stalin. Latvian men were forced to fight on both sides of the Eastern Front. During the first Soviet occupation of Latvia 1940-1941, many Latvian men were drafted into the Red Army. During the German occupation, Latvians were conscribed into the German run Latvian Legion. Thus, Latvians on the German side fought Latvians on the Soviet side, although most felt little loyalty to Germany or the U.S.S.R.

Adapted from Latvian Occupation Museum 2011.
Daily Existence

*Under German occupation the taxes were massive. For most families it was difficult to get sugar, but my family grew our own sugar beets and mother would make sugar syrup. There was a shortage of fuel, and we had no electricity. At home we burned animal fat, but in the schools there was hardly any light for lessons. It was a dark existence for those war years.*

The normality that some Latvians anticipated after the Germans expelled the communist government and the Soviet army never returned. The entire Baltic area flanked the fighting on the Russian-German front. As a consequence of men being conscripted, imprisoned, executed or deported, women gained social responsibilities as heads of households and communities, and they took on economic duties as sole providers for families. Women by and large remember the German occupation, like the Soviet rule, as characterized by a scarcity of resources such as in food and clothing and by the heavy burden of taxation. The Germans implemented a system of ration cards, with which, in theory, a family could purchase what they needed for food and supplies. However, the shortage of provisions was so extensive that the coupons often went unused. "There was nothing to buy... but there was also no income. I remember for our taxes we would pay in flax... and then there were these

---

393 Aizsilniece, "Oral History Interview, Riga, Latvia."
coupons, and with these coupons we could buy things, but there was nothing to buy.” Some rural people believed their situation was far worst than in the cities.

You know, those coupons were plentiful....Well, I heard said that in the cities such as Riga and Daugavpils, well there was more to purchase. In the countryside we had hardly anything, many coupons were left over. Each month we had to obtain new cards with which to purchase milk, butter and sometimes sugar. And bread... perhaps if there was soap... but there was rarely any. Essentially, we did not use up many of the coupons.... Was this forseen? Or did someone abscond with the supplies? We don’t know. In those days one did not ask. We held our mouths.

During the German occupation, the obligatory work service in Latvia usually consisted of agricultural work or road repairs. Latvian women frequently describe the labor requirements implemented by the German regime as *klausas*, a term typically used in reference to labor in medieval or early modern Europe *corvées*, where work was demanded by feudal lords of his vassal. In the memory of many Latvians, they had become serfs under German occupation. “We needed to perform various *klausas* [corvées] such as remove snow from streets and other work. But the Germans took our two horses that grandfather had raised in the past two years.” The abolition of serfdom by the Russian Imperial government in the nineteenth century was recent enough in memory that the concept easily came into mind in the Second World War. Using the historic word of *klausas*, Latvians associated the German Nazis with their historic German caste of landlord oppressors.

---

396 Krama, "Oral History Interview in Krāslava, Latvia, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC: 668."

Taxes assessed to the Latvian inhabitants were huge, just as during the Soviet period. However, during the Nazi occupation many families had already used up any savings that they may have had. The people paid in grain, milk, meat, eggs and wool, just as in the days of serfdom when taxes were rendered in kind. After the dues were paid, there was often not enough grain for the livestock and family. As the war progressed, shortages became life-threatening.

We had a shortage of necessary provisions: sugar, soap and medicine. People, especially children, became infected with lice and scabies. The feeling was horrible.... Typhoid was widespread, a horrid illness with high fever and headaches. We boiled our laundry in ashes for soap. There was a shortage of clothes and shoes. I went to school in vīzes [footwear, a type of slipper fashioned from willow bark and tied with linen cord, worn historically by Latvian peasants in the nineteenth century.] At home grandfather was always worried at how we would manage... Now it seems unbelievable how we lived.398

Conclusion

In 1941, Nazi Germany drove out the detested Communist Regime from Latvian territory. Yet the normal life that some Latvians expected never returned. The German occupiers, like the Soviets before them, set up a marionette government, exploited Latvia’s economy, draining the country of its resources, and terrorized its inhabitants. Latvian inhabitants were unwilling participants in the struggle over their homeland, at times even taking arms to protect their own individual properties, unlikely to win against oppressive German or Soviet troops.

398 Ibid.
After the shock of the first Soviet occupation, the Latvian population remembers the German occupation between 1941 and 1944 as less harsh than the periods of the Soviet rule that both preceded it and followed it. This phenomenon could be shaped by the filter of 45 years of Soviet annexation. Perhaps also the Nazis seemed less oppressive at first due to the Latvian hope that Germany would liberate Latvia. German authorities initially permitted some Latvian cultural activities and to a minute degree, a system of self-governing institutions. Under German rule the populace had some choices, though few and sometime horrendous. Generally, the population was confused about both Soviet and Nazi intentions. Regardless, many Latvians remember the Germans the lesser of two evils.

Despite the initial hopes of the Latvian people, the Nazi occupiers proved to be brutal victimizers just like the Soviets. The Nazis built upon the system of oppression left by the Communist Regime and created a state of fear and terror for the people of Latvia. Under Nazi occupation the country saw first the creation, and later the destruction, of the concentration camp at Salaspils, the persecution of Latvian ethnic groups and the forced recruitment of Latvian men into the Nazi military. While some individuals collaborated seeking revenge against the Soviets, others saw it as a way to fight for the future of Latvia. Furthermore, resistance meant facing severe penalties, torture, perhaps execution and risk to one’s family members. Most who cooperated with the German occupiers did so in order to survive.

Both men and women recall the disruptive impact of the war and Nazi occupation but in a gesture of self-empowerment, they align their conditions with past
historical situations. Men compare their military actions with those of the freedom fighters of previous generations. Latvian men’s memories regarding this period are more frequently expressed in terms of self-sacrifice, courage and a battle for a cause, often the struggle to liberate their homeland. “I had an absolutely clear conviction that we were fighting to keep the Russians from getting back into Latvia.”399 “I had promised myself – if I stay alive from this hell [the first Soviet occupation] – then I will do everything in my powers so that Latvia would again be free.”400 Men generally remember more in the way of choices than do women, although the options were a range of negatives. “They asked me, where do you want to serve? Of course, I went with the Latvians.”401 “I of course chose the Latvian Legion. It was the correct choice, and the situation also dictated the Legion.”402 Former Latvian military men explain their motivations for joining the auxiliary police, the Latvian Legion or the Kurelian Group. “I should have joined the civil conscription, but then there arose the idea to organize a Latvian national brigade [the Kurelieši] … like during the First World War.”403 In their memories, men often identify with the Latvian war of Liberation between 1918 and 1920.

In comparison, women align this period of occupation with another time in history - klaušas serfdom. Women’s subjective construction of the forced labor directives and the domestic struggles remains part of their self-identities. Latvian

---

399 Strautinš, “Excerpts from Personal Journal Published on Dzīves Stāsts by Māra Zirmite.”
400 Kuzulis, "Life Story Interview, Washington, DC, Archive No. NMV:815."
401 Strautinš, "Excerpts from Personal Journal Published on Dzīves Stāsts by Māra Zirmite."
402 Čačka, "Oral History Interview."
403 Miķelsons, "Oral History Interview in Kalamazoo, MI."
women had their situations thrust upon them, and there were few choices to be made. Civilian labor recruitment often took the form of seizure and deportation to Germany. Unlike men, women did not have the option of choosing military service or guard duties in their native country. As a result of men having been executed, conscripted, or constrained to join the partisan movement, women gained social and economic duties and headed households and became solely responsible for their families. However, the identification of oneself to with a serf is not necessarily a sign of self-deprecation. Women saw themselves as like their ancestral counterparts who endured and overcame feudal oppression.

Men’s and women’s narratives document and question the morality of the war’s events. Survivors recall their family dwellings and property being seized and schools commandeered for military use and their institutions closed. Men describe their letters of conscription. Though written as invitations, the documents nevertheless stressed that failure to report would result in punishment “according to war-time laws.” Women testify to dealing with the absurdity of ration cards when there was no food or clothing to purchase with them. They remember poverty, illness, survival and Nazi apprehension, atrocities and massacres.

Whatever their circumstances, Latvian men and women made choices in order to persevere. Common ground among the Latvian inhabitants was namely to outlive the detriments of war and occupation of the Soviets and Nazis. For both men and women, being Latvian during this period was associated with “loss” – of having lost
their homes, their possessions, their homeland, their friends and loved ones. It was a
time of trial and struggle.
On September 28, 1945, we were loaded onto a ship and transported to Germany, to Danzig. At the same time, my family was left behind alone, and looking for a way to leave Latvia. The experience was heartbreaking. In essence, we did not know where we would go or what would happen to us.  

By 1944 and 1945 the German Army, experiencing heavy losses, was retreating south and west across the Baltic territory. The general atmosphere in Latvia was one of fear and chaos. The Nazi military presence, which had dominated everyday life in Latvia for the German occupation period, was diminishing. The return of Soviet power to Latvia seemed imminent to many inhabitants. The country, already wounded by Soviet and Nazi exploitation, was being further ravaged by ongoing conflict. “The feelings that consumed us in autumn of 1944 are indescribable,” Ilga S. recalls. “The Russian army was approaching. That it [Soviet occupation] was inescapable, that all of us with a brain could comprehend. But how it would be – that no one knew. Everyone was as if waiting for a miracle.”  

In lieu of a miracle, the widespread attacks on urban and rural communities caused a mass exodus of people who fled conflict in search of sanctuaries within and outside of the Latvian national border. Between 1944 and 1945, roughly 150,000 people left the region, either voluntarily or by force.  

---

civilian refugees and 25,000 members of the German military forces journeyed westward. Many Latvian residents were terrified of the return of Soviet power. Civilians left their homes and homeland from fear of deportation to Siberia. Some hoped that they would soon be able to return to an independent Latvia. Surely the Western Allied forces would intervene and would not allow Latvia to be occupied. German soldiers compelled numerous others to evacuate by force. German boats left the harbors of Rīga, Ventspils and Liepāja bound for Germany and Germany occupied territories laden with Latvian refugees.

Women and men had different roles and responsibilities during this transition period. Whereas many male survivors of active battle fled as soldiers along with their battalions, a large share of the people escaping to exile by literally walking out of the country were females, children and the elderly. Men and women often made different decisions based on their experiences and social roles. The war separated families. The men had often been either conscripted into the army and were thus absent or they

406 Valters Nollendorfs, "Latvieši Bēgļu Gaitas Un Nometnēs Rietumos 2 Pasaules Kara Un Pēckara Laikā," (2009) Accessed March 8, 2011 URL http://www.dialogi.lv/article_new.php?id=2845 Nollendorfs estimates that from the beginning of the German occupation period to the end of the Second World War, more than 200,000 Latvian residents evacuated or fled the country. Of those approximately 150,000 were civilians, 25,000 members of the German military, 20,000 conscripted civilian labor service and 15,000 political prisoners.

407 Scholars differ on the exact number of Latvians dislocated to the West. Siktars, Kalnins, and Remfelds, "Latvija 2 035 000 Iedzīvotāju," 13 In 1947 an estimated 280,000 Latvian citizens had been relocated to the West including those who were deported to Germany for labor conscription in earlier periods and those that fled during 1944-5 Lumans, Latvia in World War II, pp. 390-1, Plakans, Experiencing Totalitarianism The Invasion and Occupation of Latvia by the USSR And Nazi Germany 1939-1991, p. 92. In 1945 an estimated 250,000 Latvians, more than a tenth of the country's population, were displaced to facilities in Germany, Austria, and other countries. According to Lumans perhaps as many as 80,000 to 100,000 were recaptured by the Soviet Union or sent back by the West. Approximately 120,000 Latvians remained in Western zones and later settled primarily in Germany, England, Sweden, Australia, Canada and the United States.
remained behind in order to take care of the family home and bring in the harvest with the hope or even the expectation that their families would eventually return home. Many men decided the best way for them to care for their country and family was to serve a role not within physical proximity of their loved ones. As a consequence, many Latvian women found themselves in situations in which their husbands could not accompany them. They joined with other groups of women and children and traveled in processions. Women tackled functional challenges. They sought food, shelter and protection for their families in the midst of active battle zone. Wives and daughters frequently made decisions independently of male family members. They sought ways to provide shelter from the fallout of war, and they often decided for the entire family whether to stay or flee from their homes.

The Decision to Flee

It was a beautiful day. The sun was bright, and the sky was very blue and clear. My oldest boy Uģis was sitting on his grandfather's lap. Suddenly, we see a Russian airplane. Father calls out: “Look, look! A parachute jumper or something.” And almost immediately a bomb explodes near our home. Father pulled the children away from the windows, but there had been no time to run for shelter below.

The Nazi administration pressed the Latvian civil population to move westward as the Soviet Army approached Latvia. In July of 1944, the two Latvian

---

Legion divisions in the German Army (the 15th and 19th divisions) faced the Russian front at Velikajas River. After an overwhelming defeat, the Nazis withdrew the 15th division to Germany. The 19th division remained in Latvia in combat with the Soviets. During July and August of 1944 Germany attempted to implement an “organized evacuation” of the Latvian population. In some cases the military ordered civilians to abandon their homes and forcibly pushed refugees towards the west. Initially the Nazis still hoped to retain the territory of Lithuania to resettle evacuated Latvians and Estonians there. However, as their military situation progressively deteriorated, the German authorities chose to permit 1.5 million Estonians and Latvians to enter Germany. This is where most Latvian immigrants eventually found themselves, before moving further into Europe or across the oceans.

The German decision makers had several motives for accepting Baltic refugees into the country. Germany was in critical need of military and labor services. Previously the German administration had imposed regulations and restrictions regarding who could leave for Germany and under what circumstances. For instance, men under the age of 48 were typically not allowed to leave Latvia due to their prospective roles in the German police and military, while specified groups, such as intellectuals, clerics, or skilled workers, were given immediate permission to relocate to Germany. Later, the German authorities feared that refusal to allow entrance to

410 Zače, American Latvians: Politics of a Refugee Community, 28.
refugees might undermine the morale of Baltic soldiers conscripted into the German military. Moreover, they believed that leaving the Baltic citizens behind could potentially reinforce the Soviet position in the Region. Consequently, on September 29, 1944, the Nazis lifted all restrictions, and a large flood of refugees began pouring into Germany. Most who did flee, believed that they would soon return.

And then we came to the ship. The experience, leaving Latvia – it is inconceivable and unexplainable, … of course the singing of the hymn as we left the shore…. At that time we had one strong conviction – not longer than three weeks we would stay away…. We thought, at the most three weeks, and then we would be back, with uniforms or without. But of course, it was a dream.

Latvia in 1944 was in a state of disorder and near lawlessness. The passage to Germany and onwards was perilous from all sides. It was dangerous for Latvian residence to stay in their dwellings and villages and equally perilous to leave. Many families were no longer living in their own homes. Women and children frequently took refuge with neighbors and friends. People sometimes escaped their homes to live in nearby villages under assumed identities; others hid in forests. “My father was a National Guard.” Ilga S. explains “It was horrible, because the deportations affected the National Guards and their families. I remember that … every home was interrogated….When the front was approaching, I went to Sigulda, where no one knew me.” Alma E. recalls that many of her neighbors were dead. Some were deported. One neighbor had stepped on a land mine and was killed. Most who were

411 Ibid., 28-9.
412 Avens,”Oral History Interview, Cleveland, OH.”
413 Skultans, ”Siguldiešu Bēgļu Gaitas 1944.”
alive had fled to neighboring communities. Bandits plundered abandoned homes and robbed farmers of food and supplies. Because Alma’s father Ignats was a National Guardsman, he hid in the woods near their home for fear of reprisals. Her mother had taken refuge with Alma and her two sisters at an elderly neighbor’s residence. She remembers that they had found shelter at a home named Skroderi owned by a neighbor named Eglītīs. Alma vividly recalls one terrifying incident when Russian partisans barged into Skroderi. The armed men proceeded to interrogate and threaten Eglītīs. The band was looking for weapons and other supplies. Alma and her younger, six-year-old sister clung to each other in terror while their host was desperately pleading with the men, shaking with fear as he opened all of his cabinets. He had neither guns nor ammunition.⁴¹⁴

Latvian American author Agate Nesaule describes her memories as a child of seven when the Russian front was advancing. She remembers overhearing stories that people told and retold in Latvia during the Russian occupation.

A Russian soldier had stopped an old woman on the street and had made her give up the overcoat she was wearing. Soldiers did this all the time; we had all seen them point to boots, coats, shoes, anything they wanted, now that no one had any jewelry left. The old woman cried that she was cold; she would freeze to death without it. But the soldier was unmoved. The old woman got down on her knees and kissed the soldier’s hand, then his foot. She begged him to remember his mother and at least exchange coats. The soldier, drunk and impatient, took the old woman’s coat, but in a sentimental gesture he flung his stinking, tattered army jacket on the ground for the old woman. And guess what? The old woman was really very clever. She knew what she was doing. The sleeves and pockets of the filthy jacket were lined with hundreds of gold watches. The greedy soldier had

⁴¹⁴ Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
been too drunk to remember his treasure. The watches would keep the old woman well fed and warmly clothed; she could trade them one by one.\textsuperscript{415}

This probable urban legend illustrates war conditions and the atmosphere of fear and helplessness for individuals living under occupying forces. One invading regime was replacing another in Latvia. The Russian soldier in this legend could easily have been replaced with a German if the context had been different. Often the most helpless members of the populace, such as children and the elderly, were subject to coercion and intimidation. The story introduces an element of hope into a situation of despair by granting agency to the old woman. Though vulnerable, she was capable and resilient, securing food and warm clothing at the expense of the greedy, drunken enemy soldier. The story emphasizes the people’s cleverness as an antidote to recklessness and cruelty of the military invaders. By this time, the people’s view of all foreign soldiers was negative.

Families were frequently forced to separate. “My parents decided that we must leave. The streets were full of refugees. My father somehow got a horse and wagon. We packed. [With] uncertainty and the tears we bid farewell to grandmother.”\textsuperscript{416} Mirdza K., born in 1941, shares her memories from 1944 as a small child. Mirdza lived with her mother and father on a farm in Rūjiena, but in late 1944 she and her mother went to stay in Rīga with an aunt until they could board a ship for Germany. She remembers being on a train car and seeing bombs bursting in the sky.

\textsuperscript{415} Nesaule, \textit{A Woman in Amber}, p. 90.
\textsuperscript{416} Skultans, “Siguldiešu Bēglu Gaitas 1944.”
She sailed for Germany with her mother and two other women family friends. Her father stayed behind to fight with the National Guard.\textsuperscript{417}

In many testimonials, the subjects’ initial impulse is to generalize that fear of deportation to Siberia was the ultimate reason for flight. Narratives vividly describe the terror of the Soviet occupation year and deportations of 1940/41 as a major factor in their resolution. However, details of the actual move reveal triggers and hindrances that are often unique and personal. For instance, the proximity of veritable danger frequently affected the dilemma of whether to leave their homes and communities. Agate Nesaule recalls her family’s perception that if they did not depart their home soon, they could be maimed or killed in the crossfire between Nazis and Soviets. Remembering the Year of Terror in 1940/41, her family, including her grandmother, fled Latvia.\textsuperscript{418} Irēne C. lived in the city of Baldone, approximately 33km from Rīga. She was the mother of three: Aija, age six, Egam, age three, and Uģis, one and a half. Irēne was pregnant with her fourth. In August 1944 Irēne’s husband was drafted into active duty in the Latvian Legion. Regularly during this time Russian warplanes flew over Irēne’s home. The mother and children would run to their basement for shelter. Irēne vividly recalls the air battle on September 14, 1944. “Thank God we were not in the basement. Because of the shaking foundations and falling debris, we surely would have been injured or killed.” The bomb demolished half of the neighbor’s dwelling and broke most of the windows in their own house. This catastrophe, so close to

\textsuperscript{417} Mirdza Rūta Kenigs, "Oral History Interview, Abington, Massachusetts USA," (Interviewed by: Irene Elksnis Geisler on July 31, 2009).
\textsuperscript{418} Nesaule, \textit{A Woman in Amber}, 90.
home, induced Irēne the following day to pack up her children and flee.\(^{419}\)

The flight westward was frequently not safe. Justine D. testifies that in 1944 the Germans were dropping bombs as the Russians were advancing. Many families loaded up their belonging in their horse-drawn wagons. But Justine’s father said that he was not going anywhere. She recalls his declaration: “Let them shoot me down right there at home rather than in exile.” About seven families left together, including Justine and her mother.

We arrived in Kroņauces valley. On Sunday there was a German air raid. Nowhere to hide. Houses burning. I fell down on the roadside. The men ran to the lake and jumped into the water. Mother was injured. She was taken to Tērvetes hospital about 20 km. . . . Only one old doctor for the entire hospital and full of patients. . . . After three weeks mother died of a shrapnel wound in the shoulder.\(^{420}\)

For some families, flight was not even an option, because they lacked the means and opportunity, while others saw departure as the only choice. Alma E. recalls that her father Ignats made the decision for the family to flee. “He had been in the Latvian National Guard. He knew staying was no longer an option. We packed up our wagon and left. We fled because of the approaching Soviet army and fear of deportation.” Alma’s father even invited a close neighbor and friend to come along, but the neighbor had an elderly mother who would not survive the trip and whom he could not abandon.\(^{421}\) Teicēja A. remembers the battlefront coming progressively

\(^{419}\) Celniece, "Life Story Interview, Archive No. NMV:820."
\(^{420}\) Dvariske, "Oral History Interview in Vadakste, Latvia, Archive No. NMV:351."
\(^{421}\) Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
closer. Her family could not go anywhere. The Germans had taken their last horse.

Only a colt was left.

Standing on our hill, we observed the horrific drama production, when across the Rušonas Lake in various places we saw smoke rise like towers. We could hear bombs blasting. Then we heard a blast this side of the lake and felt the explosion towards us. They bombed the Jaunaglona’s women’s convent, the women’s school and the bridges across the rivers.  

As part of the German campaign against the Soviet Union, the Nazi military forces repeatedly utilized a scorched earth policy. Upon their withdrawal they would destroyed anything that was potentially useful to the enemy: crops, dwellings, transportation and communication systems and industrial resources. The German army effectively ruined the homes and food supply of Latvian civilians caught in the area of conflict between the Nazis and Soviets. Gaida A. witnessed the grievous burning of her home, barn, granary and fields. As she relives the trauma, Gaida testifies to feelings of fear, helplessness, confusion and insecurity. On August 4, 1944 at approximately 6:00 am, two Nazi military men arrived at Gaida A.’s home. Gaida, now more than 60 years later, vividly recalls the appearance of these two soldiers dressed in brown uniforms. Their presence was ominous. According to the German officers, the house, farm structures and fields were to be burned. The Nazis ordered the family to quickly gather their belongings and leave the premises.

We were preparing to flee our home due to the combat coming progressively closer. In the distance we could see buildings burning, and we could hear the blasting of cannons. We knew the time had come to leave. We had a wagon stacked with belongings waiting in the shed. And we had buried some valuables in the ground. But when the Germans came in the early morning hours, we were in a panic. We only had the sense to throw some clothing out of our windows. My sister and I managed to free the livestock from the barn. Father bridled our horse. In a few hours the Germans returned with firebombs. They shot into the house. Everything started to burn.

Gaida and her family took refuge in the forest about five kilometers from her home. She remembers sleeping under fir tree branches and wondering if she would ever be able to sleep in a real bed again. After a few days, which seemed like weeks, the Russian front moved past them. The family returned to where their home once stood. Gaida recalls the earth smoldering around her former farmstead. She admits that she and her sister could not bear to look in the direction where their beloved home had once stood. In retelling this emotional episode in her life, Gaida struggles to cope with the immeasurable social injustices of war.424

The events of 1944 affected people’s abilities to uphold family structures and perform expected functions. Erna V. remembers that mainly women were left in her community during the German occupation. Most of the men from her area had been either drafted into service or had been killed.425 Women and men had differing responsibilities because they endured dissimilar circumstances during this period, which influenced their decisions and lives. Voldemārs R. was a musician in the Bandera Orchester in Rīga. In 1944, the Nazis deported his entire orchestra for civil
labor service to the city of Torna, located 5 km southeast of Dresden in Germany. “We were considered Torna’s ditchdiggers.” Alfreds M. and Auseklis E. were drafted into the Latvian Legion. Both were transported to military training in German occupied zones out of Latvia in 1944. The second Soviet occupation and the withdrawal of the German Army in Latvia coincided with the harvest in the fall of 1944. With the Russian front already on Latvian soil, men frequently stayed to plow their fields and collect the harvest, which was necessary if the family would return. Husbands and fathers often sent their wives and children ahead, in hopes of ensuring their safety, while they themselves remained behind to maintain homesteads, plant crops in the spring of 1945 and ensure financial provisions for the family.

Māra L. fled from Latvia in 1944 with her mother and brother; her father followed a year later. Māra’s father arranged refuge for his family with distant relatives in Gotenhafen, near Danzig on the northern coast of Germany at that time. He himself only left Latvia in 1945, and only when he had found work in Western Germany. Irēne fled with her children and her parents. Her father-in-law remained in Rīga and followed later. Mirdza, born in 1941, lived with both parents on a farm in Rūjiena. In late 1944, she and her mother went to stay with an aunt in Rīga until

---

426 Auseklis Zaļinskis, Bez Ienaida Un Baitēm (Rīga, Latvija: ELPA, 2005), 99. From the memoirs of Voldemārs Rakstīgš.
427 Minka, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI.
they could board a ship for Germany. Ruta sailed for Germany with a group of women: her mother and two other female refugees, but Ruta’s father stayed behind to fight with the Latvian National Guard.430

Erna and her younger sister walked four kilometers each day to work at a German-run provisional hospital as nurses-aids. One morning, when Erna and her sister reported to work, they found the building empty; the Germans, along with their patients and staff, had moved on. Although the German guards had invited the two young women to join them some weeks earlier affording opportunity for the two of them to travel to safer grounds, Erna and her sister could not imagine leaving their family behind and had declined the offer. After the women found that the provisional hospital had indeed moved, they also fled as so many of the families around them had already done. However, Erna’s father made the decision that he should stay behind. Erna recalls that there was a rumor that contributed to his decision, which was of course false, that if no one from a family was left in Latvia, the entire family would then be refused reentrance into the country. Consequently, her father remained, along with the family dog in order to ensure that they would be permitted to return after the war. Erna’s tone during the interview implies that it is her belief that the rumor was merely an excuse for her father; he fundamentally did not want to leave his home and homeland.431

430 Kenigs, "Oral History Interview, Abington, MA."
431 Velške, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
Life out in the countryside was the highlight of the year, the greatest joy.... And it was from the farm that we started our journey--into exile.  

The journey west was often a bitter one. Fear and sadness usually dominate survivor memories of flight. Rural residents fled to cities. From there, along with townspeople, they moved toward harbor towns on the Baltic coast, hoping to find shelter and security. Male military members engaged in active battle and fled along with their battalions.

My hometown became empty and quiet. The house my father built, the birch grove by my home, and my childhood, they all disappeared into the distance. During the dark nights mother and I clung to each other and cried. Father did not say much because he understood that due to his patriotism—now for the entire family is an uncertain future.

Many civilians streamed to Rīga, Ventspils and Liepāja on the coast of the Baltic Sea, departure points for Germany. Once more, the scattered farmstead system, characteristic of the Latvian countryside contributed to the problem of communication, already severely compromised because of the war and occupation. Due to the remoteness of the country dwellings, residents often did not know if their friends, neighbors and relatives had fled or were in hiding. Individuals and families lost contact with each other and became separated. On the other hand, the lone houses proved to be a help to some. Refugees frequently took advantage of isolated, abandoned homes as shelters during their flight westward. While strangers occupying

432 Baiba Dumpe, "Oral History Interview, Archive No. NMV:863."
433 Skultans, "Siguldiešu Bēgļu Gaitas 1944."
a home in a hamlet might cause unnecessary attention and alarm to other villagers, the seclusion of the scattered farmsteads allowed concealment and cover.

Survivors repeatedly testify to seeing their homes destroyed behind them as they fled. These circumstances had lasting emotional impact on the refugees of this traumatic episode in Latvian history. The burning of the ancient city of Valmiera lives in the memories of those who fled from that region. The city, located in northern Latvia, has a rich history. Founded in the fourteenth century it had been a member of the Hanseatic League and was influential in trade between Novgorod and Tartu, Estonia. After 1926 the city again bloomed as an educational and cultural center. During the interwar years Valmiera was known for its theatre productions and sports competitions. Annie V. vividly imparts her last memory of home, the city of Valmiera ablaze in the distance. So does Erna V.: “Those who lived north were trapped by the bombing and flames.”

Baiba D. remembers that the family left their farm near Valmiera at the end of August 1944. The city of Valmiera was in a state of war. After her father arrived from Valmiera on his bicycle, the family fled together. Baiba journeyed west with her two sisters Maruta and Ilze, her mother and father and grandfather and grandmother. The farmhouse remained empty and they left the farm animals behind with a Polish couple who were staying on for a while. “We left with two wagons. Valmiera was

---

434 Vaseris, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI." Veļķe, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
burning; the horizon was full of flames.”

Baiba and her father walked the 109 kilometers to Rīga because there was no more room in the wagons. Along the way German soldiers chased them off of the main road. The family had to travel along the sandy seashore. Their horses became overworked and they almost lost a horse, but they eventually reached Rīga. They thought: “We’ll just go to Rīga, and then...after a couple of months the Russians will be driven back, and we will return.” But already by the first night it was clear that they could not stay in the capital city, and they had to make plans to leave the country.

It was September when Baiba’s family boarded the ship in Rīga for Germany. Baiba describes the pain of leaving their horses behind in Latvia. “It was almost like leaving a family member behind.” Many Latvian country dwellers remember parting with pets and farm animals. Erna V. remembers, “It was heart wrenching to leave everything. Where would our little hens go? What would happen to our ducklings?” Alma E.’s family took along on their journey west cows, sheep and the family dog “Duksītis.” Alma sadly recalls that they had two horses, but one was very old. Her father was forced to shoot him just before leaving for their westward journey. The other horse got injured along the way. They left him with a farmer.

---

435 Dumpe, "Oral History Interview, Archive No. NMV:863."
436 Ibid.
437 Velķe, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
438 Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
Alma remembers leaving her home for the last time by way of *Palšu purvs* [Palšu Swamp], a sizeable wetland near her village. The road along the swamp was very bumpy, and all of their dishes and glassware broke soon after they departed. Alma’s father and the two older girls walked while their mother and six-year-old sister sat on the wagon. They first traveled 94 kilometers to Rīga, and then 187 kilometers to Liepāja. Their shoes wore out from walking. The family sold the cows in order to buy suitable shoes. They killed the sheep for food and they left the family dog at the harbor when they boarded the ship. After sixty years in exile, Alma still expresses sorrow at stepping onto the ship in Liepāja and leaving her beloved pet Duksītis behind.

Many women without husbands, fathers or other relations fled in groups with other families. Anniņa V.’s father was deceased. Anniņa fled with her mother from the district of Valmiera on September 23, 1944, in a caravan with 15 or 16 other families. Anna describes the procession as mainly women, children and older men “because the younger men were drafted.” Anna recalls fleeing during active combat, sometimes traveling at night to evade detection while crossing Soviet occupied parts of Latvia and hiding under wagons during air raids. As Erna V. journeyed westward with her family, increasingly more women and children joined their procession. Erna remembers acting as a scout, lookout and pathfinder:

> I rode ahead with my bicycle. I had hidden it from the Nazis in straw. I rode along the street and scouted out how it looked ahead—whether

---

439 Ibid.
440 Vaseris, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
there were tanks ahead or fighting....The children always needed milk. I had a bottle, and I would stop at farmhouses and implore the inhabitant to give us milk for the children. Usually I was lucky, but sometimes the residents were cross and rudely chased me away. 441

The refugees felt lucky when they encountered an abandoned farm along the way. Then they could rest and wash. They often slept along the edge of the forest or a river. Erna remembers waking up with her eyelids frozen shut from the frost.

We had some pots and pans. We labored to find food for everyone, especially the children. It was a struggle to stay healthy in such conditions. And then the airplanes. When they flew overhead we had to run and hide. 442

Nesaule recalls that the family walked guardedly for days from one deserted farm to another. The group slept huddled together in corners of rooms in the abandoned farmhouses furthest away from doors and windows. Nesaule remembers that sleeping was difficult in these days and for months afterwards. She would try to close her eyes but could feel soldiers creeping towards her. As she felt herself drift off to sleep, she would jerk herself awake, afraid that she would not hear the approaching soldiers. 443 Ilga S. is despondent when she recalls those experiences. “I was young, and back then I had hope. But today, when I think about it, I am consumed with despair.”

The journey to Kurzeme took almost a month. I walked with mother nearly the entire route. Fortunately the autumn weather was fair, but rainy. It was a horrible feeling when it rained. You were soaked to the flesh, and no one would welcome you, you had nowhere to take shelter. Along the coast we sometimes spent nights in abandoned

441 Veļķe, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI.
442 Ibid.
443 Nesaule, A Woman in Amber.
vacation homes, but frequently we slept under the naked sky because we did not even have a tent…. All of the roads were full of people just like us, and many even had it worse. They didn’t even have a horse, only what they could carry and what they had on their backs.444

Spodra G. was sixteen when she left her home in Latvia on October 7, 1944. She describes her life as overwhelmed by the struggles to find provisions and shelter. Along the way her family fashioned improvised accommodations. They built small huts from fir tree branches. Their clothing would get soaked from rain and mud. Spodra remembers her mother’s efforts to dry their wet socks under her coat. The opportunity to wash themselves and their clothing was rare. At long last they found shelter, but the family was dismayed that they had contracted lice. As a remedy Spodra’s mother knew to bury their clothes in the ground. Yet, in this atmosphere of misery and indeterminacy, Spodra nevertheless finds comfort in the familiar: her love of nature and living beings, such as barnyard animals and in the security of other Latvians. “We spent the night in a barn, with the cows. It was warm… Chickens and Latvian soldiers also slept there.” Spodra reflects on an incident of a Latvian man from their group. Mr. Blažģis found a honey pot. He hung the honey pot on the back of his wagon. Unfortunately a stray bullet pierced the container, and the honey began to stream out. She remembers how the man stood by the honey pot with a cup attempting to salvage what he could of the precious liquid.445

Family members were often separated in refugee situations. Įna P. explains that her family became divided in the war due to the difficulty in communication:

444 Skultans, "Siguldiešu Bēgļu Gaitas 1944."
445 Gendrikovs, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
“My mother said to me that we took one of the last trains out of Latvia. Because of the chaos and inability to communicate, two of her siblings, Alma and Alfrēds, were left behind in Latvia, but all of the rest of the brothers and sisters and their spouses and their children left Latvia in a group all together.” Nesaule focuses on a single birch tree, an image of deep meaning rooted in Latvian folklore, as she departs from Latvia’s shore.

Then, to our left, the outline of a tree rose out of the gloomy fog surrounding it. It was a white birch, a tree scared to ancient Latvians standing alone on a hillside. It was startling to see it like that, without any other trees nearby, leafless, and this made it look bereft and vulnerable. … I still dream of the tree sometimes and feel the same immense sudden sadness whenever I do, and I am reminded of it whenever I see a solitary birch, which happens more often than one would think.

The Perilous Flight into Exile

The majority of the refugees found themselves in Germany or German controlled regions of Europe. A few thousand journeyed to Sweden. While the path to Germany was “legal,” Sweden with a policy of neutrality was officially closed to most refugees. The people were forced to flee with minimal provisions. The refugees’ plight was often treacherous under adverse circumstances. During the Second World War, both the Axis and Allies bombed cities simply to destroy the people’s will to

---

446 Plaviņa, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
resist. Ina P.’s grandmother Anna died as a result of one such incident, together with two daughters and two granddaughters.

We left Latvia, must be in the very end of 1944. The next date I have is 1945 when Grandma Anna died, February 1945. This is also the same date when Anna’s daughter Lilija, Lilija’s two daughters and Anna’s daughter Lina, who was not married, died. So Anna, her two daughters and two granddaughters all died when a bomb was dropped and half a bunker was killed.... We ended up walking into Germany. In Germany, the Germans put the men to work. So the men had left for the day. And the women and children stayed behind. And Arnolds, my uncle, said that the radio reports had been coming out for an entire week that the Americans were going to bomb a factory, this factory. But the Germans did not warn anyone. They knew it was going to be bombed but they did not tell anyone. So when the bombs came everyone ran for the bunker. The end result was that one half of the bunker was bombed. And Grandma Anna, the two daughters and the two granddaughters died. My mother said that if she had not had me, she would have given up her will to live.  

Not only were many refugees caught between the fire of the two opposing sides while fleeing on land, also at sea, others were in danger as the Soviets tried to sink German ships. Māra L. was six years old in 1944 when she, together with her brother and mother, fled Soviet annexation to Gotenhafen, Germany near Danzig. With time that area, too, was seized by Soviet forces. In 1945 they joined other families fleeing the Soviet occupied zones of Germany and boarded the refugee ship Wilhelm Gustloff bound for Western Germany. Māra’s narrative touches on the types of dangers refugees met during the last months of the Second World War.

---

448 Plaviņa, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
The *Wilhelm Gusloff* had been refitted to transport refugees. My mother, brother and I got tickets to go on the Wilhelm Gusloff. I was six and my brother was ten years old. Because I had just recovered from measles, mom put me on a sled and pulled me to the harbor to board the ship. This was at the end of January 1945. On the ship we found room in a large hall on an upper deck and settled on some mattresses. The ship was loaded with many refugees. It also held Special Reports of U.S. Congress Select Committee on Communist Aggression (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1954), 4.

Elenora J. recalls fondly the interwar period, when theand readied. Mara’s and experiences with information gleaned from news reports and secondary sources. The mother and children departed in the afternoon of January 30, 1945. The ship was not accompanied by the usual security boats, such as torpedo seeking crafts. It was attended by just one little tugboat. Because the ship had nothing to defend it from torpedoes, the crew were said to have considered whether go as fast as possible or to zig-zag to escape torpedoes.

I remember that it was snowing and already very cold in the afternoon. We were on the mattress in the big room. That evening, a couple of hours later, the Russian submarine torpedoed by the ship.… After the torpedoes hit the ship, it very quickly listed to one side. Since we were on one of the upper decks, we were in a very good place, much luckier than those down in the ship. I remember my mom taking my hand and walking, in a crush of people, through a corridor to the upper deck where the lifeboats were. Since the ship was so overloaded with people… there were not enough lifeboats… I remember that we stood amidst a throng of people. The ship had already listed very steeply. Then I remember we lost my brother. My brother was no longer with us. We were just my mom and I. She held my hand. My mother picked me up and handed me to a man who put me in a lifeboat. … I

2002). Also Joseph Vilsmaiers’s 2008 film “Die Gustloff” focuses on the tragic event of the sinking of this German passenger ship carrying wounded soldiers and civilians. On Jan 30, 1945, soon after leaving the harbor off of Danzig, the ship was hit by three torpedoes form a Soviet submarine and sank in less than an hour. More than 6,000 passengers were lost.

Lipacis, “Life Story Interview, Archive No. NMV:786.”
remember that my mom stood there, and that she stayed there. That is the last time I say my mom. I remember big waves and how the boat rode up and down. The next thing I remember is seeing the ship turn and sink in the far distance. 451

Despite the horrific death of Mára’s mother, she was at least fortunate to have had one parent survive. Many refugee children were orphaned and left without any family at all. 452 Mára recalls reuniting with her brother.

I was standing in line several days later. While we were being told that we would be sent to an orphanage my brother passes me…. That is how we found each other. He too was alive and he had our father’s address. My brother was already quite capable and there were aid agencies there, so somehow,… he arranged for us to leave to go to our Papa. But because the war was going and the front line was again approaching, we didn’t get to where our Papa was. My brother wrote to my father. After a while father came for us and took us to be with him. We walked around…. There were ruins everywhere. My father held my hand and we both walked around…. And I felt very safe because I didn’t have to fear anything since my father was there and would protect me from anything that would happen. That is how we met again. Father took us to my mother’s sister. The war had ended by then. We got into a refugee camp. But we never heard anything from my mom again. Mom perished with the ship. 453

For those unable to flee further west by sea, the long journey across Europe had to be undertaken by whatever means of transport available: freight trains often to unknown destinations, cart, coaches and on foot. 454 Many were forced to flee multiple times, especially those arriving in Soviet occupation zones of Germany. Ruta remembers being on a train and seeing bombs bursting in the sky, common in the

451 Ibid.
453 Lipacis, "Life Story Interview, Archive No. NMV:786."
narratives of fleeing refugees. “We traveled to Germany, Czechoslovakia and back to
Germany keeping ahead of the Russians.

In 1945 started the mass retreat. From Dresden we tried to move west staying as far away from the Russians as possible. We headed towards Wittmar, near Hannover. The city was later given to the Russians. I could see that the roads were full of refugees and the Russians were shooting them as they fled.455

Few Latvians wanted to go to Germany; most would rather have fled to
Sweden. However, Sweden during World War II maintained a policy of neutrality.
This route required money and connections that most did not have. Some talked about
stowing away on fishing boats to Sweden. In fact, there was a steady stream of
fishing boats going to Sweden via Gotland from Kurzeme coast carrying refugees,
about 30 to 50 per boat. Approximately 5,000 refugees made it to Sweden, many
crossing the treacherous Baltic Sea in fishing boats. Zenta Mauriņa portrays her flight
to Sweden from Germany with other Latvian refugees. She recalls that it was a sunny
day when she was taken to the harbor. They departed to a strange country whose
language they did not understand and where no one was waiting to welcome them.
“Our fatherland is dear, but freedom is dearer, and even dearer is truth. But without
[brotherly] love we are all only strangers everywhere, like dried leaves in the
wind.”456

The fears of those 250,000 who fled Latvia in 1944-1945 were indeed well
founded. Soviet forces entering Latvia in 1944 continued their policy of arrests and
executions as in the first occupation, and implemented a second mass deportation on

455 Zaļinskis, Bez Ienaida Un Bailēm, 99.
456 Mauriņa, Dzelzs Aizbīdīji Lūst, 373.
Map 6: Latvian Refugee Emigration 1944-1953

Main Latvian refugee route 1944-1945

Main direction to exile 1946-1959

Main emigration regions 1944-1945

Cities in Germany and Austria in or near which were refugee camps where most Latvians were located.

Current Latvian border

Adapted from: Latvian Occupation Museum, 2011.
Conclusion

Life for the citizens in Latvia during the period of 1944 and 1945 had deteriorated to the point that there was violence and danger at every turn. The decision to emigrate was for many no longer a choice. Some either were compelled to leave because the men had participated in patriotic roles or because they had served in the army and were therefore endangering their families. The Germans were enticing or forcing others to leave. For others escape was unfeasible. For many the decision to flee would mean giving up the year’s harvest, thereby making their return difficult. In such cases it was not uncommon for the male head of household to remain at home to bring in the harvest. Frequently women were already on their own, because their husbands had been conscripted into the army, and many of them had perished. Essentially, there were masses of Latvian women and children, at time accompanied by male family members, but more often neighbors, friends or acquaintances, moving in large masses westward to the coast and then south to Germany.

These women’s ordeals echo the stories of hundreds of other women who have survived war and violence. Civilian women made up a huge percentage of the conflict’s victims. Families became separated, and women often made decisions independently of other male family members in this plight to provide shelter from the fallout of war. They often decided for the entire family whether to stay or flee from their homes. Testimonies demonstrate their roles in constructing strategies for family and personal survival. They emphasize the need for female self-help and
commonplace rituals of daily existence under extreme the circumstances of war and occupation. Latvian women confronted life and death challenges. They sought basic survival and safety needs for their families in the midst of a war zone. Mothers struggled to keep their children healthy in destitute situations. Many perished during the evacuations even as they were attempting to save their loved ones.
CHAPTER VII

EXILE IN THE WEST: GOD’S LITTLE BIRDS

Personally I did feel some relief, but at that time I mistrusted soldiers – on any side. Let’s say that I did feel a relief that the war and the bombings were over, but I did not feel any real joy... there was a feeling of insecurity that there were again soldiers around.\footnote{Baiba Dumpe, "Oral History Interview, USA," (Interviewed by Biruta Abula 1999-2001).}

The estimated 250,000 to 280,000 Latvians who were in exile in the immediate post-war period had taken several different paths to reach the Western countries. Many had been sent to Germany or to the occupied countries for forced labor between 1941 and 1944, and they generally remained there after the end of the war.\footnote{Zaļe, American Latvians: Politics of a Refugee Community, 29.} They were mainly younger women and men who were not considered appropriate for active military service. The troops of the Latvian Legion 15th division (over 40,000 men), part of the Waffen SS, who were transported to Nazi Germany to battle against the Soviets, had surrendered to the Western Allies and became prisoners of war. A large group of civilians had begun their journey west under orders from the Germans as the Soviet Army approached Latvia. Many were directly commanded to leave their homes and were more or less forcibly pushed ahead of the advancing Soviet army. Ships from Rīga and Liepāja had transported many refugees to ports in Poland. From there, these individuals had journeyed towards Germany and Austria, often on foot, as the Soviet front moved westward. Approximately 5,000
people had left the Baltic coast region, some from Estonia and Finland, in fishing boats bound for Sweden.\textsuperscript{460} Many more went willingly, unwillingly or due to violent force westward as the Soviet troops approached the region of Latvia seeking ways to provide shelter from the fallout of war. The lion’s share of the civilians who fled Latvia at the end of the war had departed in the western direction from the port city of Liepāja.

In Sweden, refugees could enter civilian society immediately. Once refugees arrived in Germany or Austria local authorities assigned the individuals who were deemed healthy and strong to work camps. Immigration officials sent those who could not work to live in settlement camps. Some of these camps were makeshift tent cities, others old prison camps or army buildings. Some families were placed in private homes, hotels or hostels. Many of the local Germans resented these immigrants seeking shelter and provisions. They themselves were experiencing hardships. Many Germans were broken, disillusioned, starving or homeless. To add to their misery, thousands of people were now swarming to their country, using needed resources and taking jobs.\textsuperscript{461}

The Allied powers who defeated Nazi Germany in the Second World War divided the country west of the Oder-Neisse line into four occupation zones, each administered by one of the four Allied powers: the US, Britain, France and the Soviet


Union. When on July 3, 1945, the Soviet Union assumed control over the eastern parts of Germany, the flood of refugees for the most part ended, and the period of the Displaced Persons (DPs) for Latvian refugees in Europe began. Latvian refugees mockingly began calling themselves *dīpīši* for DPs or *dievputniņi* (God’s little birds). In Germany alone, there were over 600 camps for refugees of various nationalities.\(^{462}\)

The Latvian DP settlements were scattered throughout Germany, Austria, Belgium and other European countries.\(^ {463}\) The largest ones were in Esslingen in southwest Germany on the Neckar River southeast of Stuttgart, Amberg in Bavaria, Geesthacht near Hamburg and Würzburg in Bavaria.\(^ {464}\)

After 1945, approximately 100,000 persons either perished as wartime casualties or repatriated back to old and new territories of the USSR from the Soviet occupation zone of Germany.\(^ {465}\) Most of the Latvian refugees did not want to return to Soviet occupied Latvia. They feared repressions and possible deportation by Stalin’s Regime. Many individuals again fled from the Soviet zone to American and British occupied zones and were placed in various Displaced Persons (DP) camps


after the war. In 1946, Irēne and her family were in the city of Stettin. Since 1945, the city has been part of Poland and has the name Szczecin.

Germans were going to the west, and my family decided that if we were to survive, we had to forget that we were Latvians and had to become Germans. We stood in line for exit forms and noticed that there were many others who were the same kind of “Germans” as we who barely spoke German or spoke with a very heavy accent. Mother told father to act as if he did not speak Russian and sit in the corner, otherwise he might be too conspicuous. Father did as she directed and we got through the checkpoint... On September 10, 1946, we registered in the Displaced Persons Camp in Lübeck. From this point on, we were Latvians again.466

The United Nations (UN) established the Relief and Rehabilitation Organization (UNRRA) as a short-term solution to the refugee problem. Its mandate was to ensure that refugees were repatriated as quickly as possible. The organization was not equipped to deal with people who refused to return to Communist occupied territory. Its funding was exhausted by 1947. Hereafter, the United Nations established the International Refugee Organization (IRO) that functioned much like a huge employment agency. Relief foundations in countries such as the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and Australia offered, under the umbrella of the IRO, to sponsor families, locating jobs and housing for them. Forty percent of the available visas through the IRO went to former residents of the Baltic Nations and Eastern Poland.467

466 Celtniece, “Life Story Interview.”
The subsequent emigration out of Germany lasted from 1947 to approximately 1951. Individuals’ abilities to migrate depended on their gender, family responsibilities, general health, and age. Some of the first people who left Germany were men who arrived to work at the coal mines of Belgium on April 22, 1947. By September of 1947, an estimated 9,000 Latvians had transferred to Great Britain as economic migrants; Britain first recruited women for domestic service and later extended the program to include men. Most of the Displaced Persons went to the USA and Australia. The first ship to Australia cast off on October 30, 1947. The Congress of the USA approved the Displaced Persons Act on June 25, 1948, initiating migration to the USA. Approximately 40,000 refugees migrated the US and 20,000 to Australia.468

Direct and indirect forms of power shaped migrants’ war experiences, politically and economically. Latvians were caught up in a war not their own. Individuals frequently discovered that they were in the precarious position of being neither Allied affiliates nor Nazi. This ambiguous status worked differently for men than for women as they moved from refugee and work camps into Displace Persons facilities and later into exile. Women’s circumstances improved in some situations. Nonetheless, women were frequently subjected to patriarchal and hegemonic power politics. Females were at high risk for rape and sexual assault. Women workers recall

often being scrutinized for their sexual attraction as well as for their physical capacity to labor.\textsuperscript{469}

Latvians found that skills learned in their home country such administrative, secretarial and leadership abilities were valuable in Displace Persons facilities. Teaching and language competence were also aptitudes that helped sustain Displaced Persons. Nonetheless, both women’s and men’s physical capabilities appear to be their main advantage in their passage to freedom.\textsuperscript{470} As Latvians migrated to western nations as imported labor, some looked critically at their prospects. A commentary appearing in a DP newsletter posits: “Brazil asks for workers between twenty and fifty years old, and families no bigger than five…. Then we must naturally ask, what will happen to the old and sick, the single mothers with children, and those who do not have guardians or caretakers?”\textsuperscript{471}

\textsuperscript{469} Diana Kay and Robert Miles, "Refugees or Migrant Workers? The Case of the European Volunteer Workers in Britain 1946-1951," \textit{Journal for Refugee Studies} 1, no 3/4 (1988) 220
\textsuperscript{470} O Siktars, R Kalnušš, and R Remfelds, "Pieprasā Galvenokārt Mājkalpotājas Pirmais Kuģis Uz ASV Azbraucas, Bet Daudzi Palikuši Krastā," \textit{Baltiešu Zīdus Austriā, formerly Latviešu Balsi Austrijā Permitted by UNRRA Team 191} (1948, October 27), 6
\textsuperscript{471} McDowell, \textit{Hard Labour The Forgotten Voices of Latvian Migrant Volunteer Workers}, 55-56
\textsuperscript{471} O Siktars, R Kalnušš, and R Remfelds, "Darba Iespējas," \textit{Latviešu Balsi Austrijā UNRRA 191 Glasenbach Journal} 71/2(1947, March 8) 1-2
Map 7: Occupied Zones in Germany and Austria:
Administratively Territorial Changes in Europe after WWII 1945-1955

Adapted from: Latvian Occupation Museum, 2011.

- French occupied zone
- English occupied zone
- American occupied zone
- Soviet occupied zone
- Cities with occupied sections
- United governed German and Austrian borders
- USSR occupied territory
- Poland
- Polish occupied territories
- Restored Austrian territory border 1955
Sometimes we stayed together with other Latvian families. Food was very scarce. The adults would combine whatever bits of food they had been able to buy during the day for the evening meal. We would also pick dandelion greens and wild arugula greens in the meadows. I remember one time someone had been able to get a pail of pig's blood from a farmer so they made pancakes with it. I also remember waking up in the middle of the night and being hungry.  

A military presence and an atmosphere of danger and insecurity dominated everyday life for the refugees. Upon arriving in Germany, Agate Nesaule recalls, uniformed guards with swastika armbands and guns were everywhere. "[They] kept us waiting on platforms for days and then ordered us into a train which crossed Germany, took us into Poland, and then back into Germany again."  

Baiba D., born in 1930, was a teenager arriving at the refugee camps in Germany. She emphasizes the atmosphere of subjection: "Soldiers again, soldiers again…" Baiba recalls feelings of powerlessness as she explains how her refugee group was taken from one settlement to another until the authorities could decide what to do with them. They were transported some 50 km from Saalfeld by train to Jena, and then to Fischbach. "Finally, in the morning we arrived at Fischbach…. we were shown where we should stay. It had been an army camp. We were put in barracks….We lived there until it was time to go to America."  

---

472 Kenigs, "Oral History Interview, Abington, Massachusetts USA."
473 Nesaule, A Woman in Amber, 42.
The Nazi government intended to eventually Germanize the Baltic refugees. Therefore, the administration was willing to create a welfare agency that found them jobs and took care of their basic needs. In theory, they provided the immigrants with supplies and rations equivalent to those offered to Germans. In practice, refugees scarcely received the same treatment as German citizens.\textsuperscript{475} Agate Nesaule describes the shelter where her family lived for three months upon arriving in Germany. They were taken to a camp for westbound refugees in the town of Lehrte near Hannover in Lower Saxony.

A high barbed-wire fence surrounded the dilapidated great barracks. Iron bars covered the dirty windows, chains and more bars secured the doors. The countryside outside the camp was flat and grey. No trees or houses broke the monotony of the deserted field.\textsuperscript{476}

German officials immediately assigned individuals whom they considered healthy and strong to work camps. They sent those who could not work to live in refugee camps. Many people were unsure of their status. They did not know if they were refugees, prisoners or workers. If the later, they were still uniformed whether their work would be undertaken freely or involuntarily, and whether they would or would not be paid. In reality, their status was ambiguous. They were neither refugees nor forced laborers, neither ally nor enemy, as they moved into the camps, then into Displace Persons facilities and later into exile.\textsuperscript{477} The Nazis may have perceived the great streams of refugees heading west as a useful labor force and a way to bolster the

\textsuperscript{475} Kangeris, "Trimdas Sākumi Un Tālākā Attīstība."; Zaķe, \textit{American Latvians: Politics of a Refugee Community}, 29.
\textsuperscript{476} Nesaule, \textit{A Woman in Amber}, 55.
\textsuperscript{477} McDowell, \textit{Hard Labour: The Forgotten Voices of Latvian Migrant Volunteer Workers}, 64.
faltering German war effort. Through policies of control and depersonalization, Latvian women and men who were moved through the camps, and from German to Allied control, and then dispersed as imported labor to locations in the West, were transformed from individuals with names and histories into units of labor whose bodily strength appeared to be their single advantage in their passage to host countries.\textsuperscript{478} Agate Nesaule recalls that officers issued the Lehrte camp occupants tags with numbers on them sewn to their clothes. From then on, they in the camps they would be referred to by numbers rather than by names.\textsuperscript{479} Nesaule’s family was released from Lehrte when they obtained work orders to go to a facility for the mentally ill, where her mother and aunt worked in the kitchens. Her father and uncle labored in the fields alongside the inmates of the institution.\textsuperscript{480}

Having escaped the air raids and bullets in Latvia, refugees still did not find safety. Novelist Angelika Gailiite captures the historical context well in her novel set in this time period describing how the people of Germany were being perpetually besieged by the sights and sounds of bombings.\textsuperscript{481} Zenta Mauřiņa recounts the story of a Latvian man who had lost his wife and only daughter to an Allied bombing raid on Germany. Because of a great respect and admiration for the Anglo-Saxon culture, he had sent his daughter to an English language high school in Rīga. Having fled the Russians, the family had taken refuge in Dresden and was waiting to travel on to

\textsuperscript{478} Ibid., 55-56.
\textsuperscript{479} Nesaule, \textit{A Woman in Amber}, 43.
\textsuperscript{480} Ibid., 47.
either America or Great Britain until they could again return home to Latvia.

However, the night of February 13, 1945, he returned to the refugee camp from factory work to find his wife’s and daughter’s burned corpses. The man bitterly lamented the fate of his wife and daughter who had never hurt anyone. Why should they have to die in such a manner? “It used to be that witches were burned, but now entire cities of inhabitants are burned. People are treated as if they were pine cones.”

Baiba D. recalls the scarcity of food and provisions. She describes an atmosphere of terror and desperation. People learned to survive under the most extreme conditions. The demand for food and clothing was paramount. “Mother and grandmother were almost in tears. How were we going to manage? All around us were open fields. We were completely exposed.... Everyone thought that we would surely be bombed.” The women felt no choice but to risk their lives in order to provide for their families. Baiba’s mother and grandmother dug for a stray potato or perhaps a beet or anything that the harvesters might have missed in the fields. Then the women found a nearby slaughterhouse. “For some reason the German owner really liked my sister Maruta... And grandmother would then take my sister along, and they would go to the German butcher with a milk can. The German would give them blood and Grandmother would add flour and make blood pancakes. This was

---

our standard meal for a long while. We survived." Irēne C. recalls learning in the refugee camps what it means to be hungry.

The children did get some powdered milk and once in a while something else to eat, but the grownups received coffee that looked like tea, and in the evenings some uncooked barley gruel. The barley was so hard that it could not be eaten.

Spodra G. and her family were seized and transported to Germany as forced laborers in 1944. Once in Germany, they worked in a German cement factory making bricks. One day their refugee group heard that they would be given soup. They all took their little pots and headed for the food distribution site. Indeed, there was good, rich soup, and plenty. But as soon as they started eating, they heard bombs bursting outside. Immediately, the refugees ducked under the tables. Upon emerging, they discovered that the bombing had destroyed all of the surrounding buildings. Even their own building no longer had walls. “But all of us nine were alive without injuries. Only the soup was no longer edible,” she still regrets.

Refugees had to not only cope with the risk of air raids, explosions and shortages but also exposure to other extreme conditions. Pregnancy and childbirth for women were particularly dangerous. Wartime conditions forced women to give birth while in transit to or between camps, without skilled birth attendants, and without access to basic items for a safe and clean delivery. In the midst of the hostility, turmoil and upheaval, it came time for Irēne C. to give birth to her fourth child. Irēne

---

483 Dumpe, "Oral History Interview."
484 Celtniece, "Life Story Interview, Latvian National Oral History Project, Archive No. NMV:820."
485 Gendrikovs, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
was in the Soviet Zone of occupation during this period. Irēne recalls the disorganization and ineffectiveness of the Soviet command. “One soldier would say one thing and the next another. And, they would all call themselves a commander of this or that… It was sometimes quite comical….” As if sent by God, a refugee group arrived from Prussia with a midwife among them. The Prussian midwife immediately offered to help Irēne with the delivery as best she could. Russian soldiers had already seized her medical supplies. On the morning of March 12, 1945, Irēne went into labor. However, following an incident in the courtyard, when Russian soldiers filled the area with shooting and fighting, Irēne’s labor pains stopped. Surrounded by chaos and danger the midwife said comfortingly to Irēne: “Just wait until evening when it becomes quiet. It is the same with chickens….” Hens too prefer to lay eggs in calm and dark nesting places. “Your child will be born this evening,” she promised. The Prussian and Latvian women shared a common agrarian worldview. That night the family made room for the Prussian midwife to sleep next to her patient. The women slept close together on a sheet covering a bed of straw, and in the peacefulness of the night Irēne gave birth to a healthy baby boy.\textsuperscript{486}

The following morning, Russian soldiers ordered all of the refugees to evacuate the premises. Irēne’s mother protested. “Perhaps it must be so, but my daughter cannot.” “Why can she not?” “Because, last night she gave birth to a child.” The Russian soldier responded: “Well that is no reason to lie in bed!” However, to move on in the severe weather of snow and dampness would endanger her child and

\textsuperscript{486} Celtniece, "Life Story Interview, Latvian National Oral History Project, Archive No. NMV:820."
the mother. So, the other refugees left, including the midwife and other German women, but Irēne’s family insisted on staying behind and found themselves in a dangerous position, because now they were alone with the Russian military. A Russian commander arrived, who to Irēne resembled Stalin with a big moustache and a red Kazakh hat. After a few more days, a battalion of tanks drove into the camp. With them came a female medic, a good-natured Uzbek woman. She asked about the health of Irēne and the child. With unwashed hands, this medic proceeded to give Irēne an internal examination. The Uzbek woman stated that she could not find any complications or problems, but advised Irene to rest and heal.\textsuperscript{487}

Female refugees were frequently vulnerable to sexual assault. The extent of wartime rape of Latvian women is difficult to measure. Women’s feelings of shame and dishonor associated with these acts of violence discourage disclosing the assaults. Spodra G. remembers a conversation between herself and two other girls who had been her workmates in the cement plant where she was stationed soon after her arrival in Germany. The women told of their horrific escape from Russian soldiers. Others were not so lucky and were raped.\textsuperscript{488} Some used disguises for protection. They sometimes dressed as boys or crones. Some women describe blackening their teeth and covering their heads with kerchiefs in public. Jelena recalls, “I had my hair cut short and my brother’s clothes on. I spent those nine months dressed as a boy.”\textsuperscript{489}

\textsuperscript{487} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{488} Gendrikovs, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
\textsuperscript{489} McDowell, \textit{Hard Labour: The Forgotten Voices of Latvian Migrant Volunteer Workers}, 53-54. McDowell sites informants Jelena and Diana personally interviewed by the author.
Irene C. remembers living in constant fear in the refugee camps. She stresses the terrible treatment of refugees by the Soviet military. Irene specifically describes the arrival of one group of German women who were presumably refugees from Eastern Europe. It was sleeting when these migrants came, some with many children and baby carriages. The women walked hunched over, exhausted from hunger and exertion, and they took shelter in an empty barn. "The barn was full of Germans. Then the Russian soldiers came and raped the women. I was pregnant, but that did not anything mean to them."490

Rape was widespread. It was often used to disable the population by disgrace, domination, and the disruption of families. German women in the occupied zone 1945-1949 suffered particularly badly. Soviets practiced a sustained campaign of degradation of the civilian population from 1945 onwards, of which a key feature was the rape of women. In East Prussia, for example, it was not unusual for Soviet troops to rape females over the age of 12 or 13, killing many in the process.491 The Red Army felt they had much to avenge when it finally the frontiers of the Reich in January 1945. Hundreds of thousands of women and children died because the Nazi Party chief refused to face the certainty of defeat.492 Nazi propaganda described Russian women as wearing rags and walking barefoot. They were supposedly dirty and lazy, and often portrayed as begging or smuggling. This misinformation made it

seem as if they were available for sex. As in many wartime contexts, society considered women property. Victorious armies perceived women as part of the proceeds. Indeed, wartime rape may be considered the ultimate metaphor for military victory. Latvian women, having found themselves in an ambiguous position as neither ally nor enemy, may have benefitted somewhat from this status. Some recall that their ability to speak Russian may have at times helped them.  "My mother saved me with her confident and stern demeanor. She had lived deep in Russia and she knew how to deal with them. No matter how afraid she may have been, she would yell at the soldiers fiercely. So they did not come near me."

They [Russian soldiers] were like animals.... They were terrible and they raped the German women. Even the girls, 13 and 14. My three sisters, we were hiding in lofts and everywhere where we could, and I think what saved us was that we all could speak Russian.

The uncertain political standing of Latvians may have also shielded women from the worst treatment in the labor camps, unlike Jews and Slavs. Baltic women worked alongside a range of other refugees and captives, such as Poles, Ukrainians and prisoners of war. These workers could all perhaps be classified as a type of "unfree" migrant worker. However, laborers from different backgrounds were treated

---

496 Celniece, "Life Story Interview, Latvian National Oral History Project, Archive No. NMV:820."
differently. Although the lives of the Baltic workers may have been hard, they cannot compare to the lives of, for example, the Jewish population. Many Latvian families were able to stay together. When Nesaule’s family was released from the refugee camp in Lehrte, they obtained work orders to go to a facility for the mentally ill where they were collectively assigned jobs. Nesaule’s mother and aunt worked jointly in the kitchens, and her father and uncle labored side-by-side in the fields. Spodra G., whose family had worked as a group in a German cement factory, recalls that she and her aunt Herta mixed cement with sand and water. Her mother and sister poured the mixture into molds. Spodra presumes the bricks were to be used for barricades against the oncoming Russian front. Women from similar backgrounds were able to draw comfort from their shared experiences. Spodra remembers conversations between herself and other girls who had been her workmates. Although the Prussian midwife and Irène bonded in childbirth, the ambiguous status of Latvians was detrimental. Irène C. recalls that the Germans perceived the Latvian refugees as strange and watched them with hostility. Everyone had to speak German. Her daughter could speak German, but both of her young sons only spoke Latvian. When a German girl asked her daughter what language her brothers were speaking, her daughter answered: “It’s a language we made up!”

---

Refugees and Displaced Persons

The radio reported that World War II had ended. Japan surrendered. In all of the churches, bells rang and all around me people rejoiced. But I was overcome with a profound sadness, because all of my relatives, brothers, sisters, they were all in Latvia.

On May 8, 1945, the war ended with an Allied victory. The period of the Displaced Persons (DPs) began for Latvian refugees in Europe. The flow of people seeking asylum from the east largely stopped, and for many repatriation from Western occupied zones back to the Soviet Union commenced. The lives of most refugees changed drastically over the next months and years. In an effort to bring some degree of organization to the vast population of refugees and stateless people, the Allies grouped the so-called Displaced Persons into “assembly centers.” The DP camps were fundamentally devices of control. They facilitated the segregation of national and ethnic groups, the organization of repatriation or resettlement, and the screening and documenting of refugees. They supervised medical and hygienic programs, control of movement, law enforcement, and schooling. The majority of the Latvia immigrant population found themselves classified as DPs. Many of those Latvians who had been forcibly recruited as foreign workers now qualified for refugee status and thus Displaced Persons. This is the origin of the expression dipīši or dievputnīni [God’s little birds], suggesting that they were in search of a landing.

---

502 Elliott, Pawns of Yalta: Soviet Refugees and America’s Role in Their Repatriation, 82.
place. The people yearned for normalcy, safety, and stability in their private worlds. In these DP communities, Latvian individuals and families were able to establish a greater degree of permanency and security. Children went to school. Some adults resumed their education. Refugees tried to reunite with family members and find work. However, life was still riveted by uncertainty.

Postwar Allies placed refugees in camps, barracks, houses, and flats or provided other such accommodations. The DP "assembly centers" were separate from the native societies. The residents of these camps were free to come, go and mix with the surrounding neighbourhoods. However, the inhabitants typically formed their own cohesive communities based on ethnic origin. Because these communities were organized by nationality, authorities felt they should appoint lower level administrators from among the refugees themselves. Latvians, usually men, assumed management positions within the Displaced Persons communities.\footnote{Auliciema, Zālāns, and Zālāna, \textit{Latvija: Liktena Gaitas 1918-1991}, 192-93.}

Charitable institutions such as the Red Cross provided care packages of medicine and clothing. A Latvian periodical, published by a DP community in Austria, reported receiving clothing from America, sugar and bacon from Sweden, and leather and shoe repair materials from Switzerland. "The Latvian Red Cross in Belgium sends news to the Austrian Latvian Committee that a clothing drive was implemented with promising results specifically taking into consideration that the
In the subsequent issue two additional articles indicated that: “Austria’s Latvian Committee received sugar and bacon donated from Latvians from Sweden. The food was divided between regions taking into consideration children by age: children 0-6 received two portions, and 6-12 one portion. In the near future, the committee expects they will receive a second parcel of the same.”

“In Salzburg, Austria, Latvians received leather from Switzerland, specifically for children’s shoes, and various materials for shoe repair.”

Survivors searched for lost family members by every means possible. They often placed advertisements in newspapers printed in DP camps, for missing relatives. In the inaugural issue of Latviešu Balss Austrijā, on December 2, 1945, seven such announcements appeared. One read as follows: “Alfrēds and Austra Karulis are searching for their brother Laimonis Skuburs. Please respond to Stuttgart, Sillenbuch, Willingstr. 3.” The next issue on December 16, 1945, published 42 such notices. The December 25 issue published 54 of these advertisements and January 13, 1946, listed 74 announcements.

The Allies established a system of food distribution that created distrust between the DPs and the local population. The German inhabitants received an

---

average of 1,700 calories per day, compared with 2,300 for DPs. Yet, even if the refugee population was no longer starving, food, provisions and living situations were poor. On April 5, 1947, a Latvian DP periodical reported news of the critical lack of provisions for refugees. According to Secretary Jenike from the Bavarian Landtag Commission, in a survey of 600 German refugee camps, for every 200 people there was on the average only one table available. Survivors testify to bartering with German farmers for food.

Relief personnel told Irēne to settle her family into any empty German house from which the inhabitants had fled.

“Our” house was completely empty—there were no chairs, no tables, and no beds, not even a cup for coffee. We had to sleep on the bare floor. We found two bricks and some dried twigs and we built our “stove.” From then on, we did our cooking in the garden.

Nesaule recalls that three times a day her family stood in line for food. It consisted of the same gray, tasteless pea soup, served at every meal. The Latvian refugees nicknamed it the “green terror.” Their pale, dry bread was made from corn. Usually multiple families were forced to share living space with other families. Due to the overcrowded conditions, it was often difficult for individuals to retain their privacy. Women hung blankets to attain some semblance of discretion. These living circumstances were perhaps especially difficult for young women, who found it

---

512 Celtniece, "Life Story Interview, Latvian National Oral History Project, Archive No. NMV:820."
humiliating to live in close quarters with non-relatives of all ages, or to have to share a single room with their family members. Biruta was in a camp in Augsburg, in Southwest Bavaria. She attended high school at the DP camp. She recalls being happy because her family was allocated an apartment shared with only one other family. Each family had their own room. They had a common bath and toilet. After they were assigned the apartment, they had food. Every evening her mother would feed her either cream of wheat or oatmeal porridge. Sometimes she found an apple and made applesauce to put on the hot meal. Biruta remembers others complaining about the food, for example, rye bread with catsup on it. “Although it sounds terrible now, we did what we could,” she says. After the trauma and pain of warfare, for the most part, Latvian refugees may have felt a sense of relative well being just because of their abilities to survive.

The DPs attempted to improve their quality of life by whatever means possible. Wage work was rare. Refugees sometimes kept livestock, at times illegally. Some tailored old clothing; others sold crafts and embroidery. The Latvian DPs in Pegnitz, Bavaria, organized a fish processing and smoking facility no doubt using skills from home, although the camp was located quite far from any harbor. Baiba D. remembers some joyful events in her young life at the DP camp, especially anniversaries and celebrations. She recalls that her confirmation dress was fashioned out of a white parachute.

---

515 Abuls, "Oral History Interview, Plainwell, MI."
The highest point was when somebody had a confirmation party. We celebrated namedays also. That was interesting. Namedays or birthdays – whoever was able to prepare something for the festivities. Something as delicious as Spam on rye bread – fabulous! We still talk about it and remember those fantastic birthdays or namedays with the “Spam” sandwiches. You would take one and think, “Wait, do I dare to take another one? Will there be enough for everybody?” But people shared with each other. It was extraordinary. And, of course, the confirmations. Everybody waited for these celebrations, hoping to be invited and to have a good time.517

With time, many refugees, typically, but not exclusively, men, secured employment in the surrounding neighborhoods of the camps, usually as factory workers. However, this was at times disappointing. A Latvian DP periodical, The Voice of Latvians in Austria, reported news on March 1, 1947, from Denmark of a hunger strike involving Latvian refugees. It cites the Danish Newspaper “Jyllands Posten,” as reporting that a hunger strike had broken out in a refugee camp in Kolding, a Danish seaport located in southern Denmark. Approximately 300 Latvian refugees were supposedly involved, of whom an estimated 30 initiated the protest. The cause of the hunger strike was apparently a new ruling effective, February 1, 1947, prohibiting food rations from being distributed to refugees who were employed outside of the DP camps. The newspaper claims that the strikers had already submitted a formal complaint to the Danish Red Cross, but their request had been denied.518

Undoubtedly, the journey across Europe had a severe impact on the health of many men, women and children. Diena F.'s father worked in Amberg's DP camp's distribution center. Diena recalls that their financial situation was rather grave until she herself was old enough to find employment. Diena's mother had polio and could not work. Alma E. and her family found themselves in Augsburg at the end of the war. Her younger sister attended school. Her older sister became ill with diphtheria, and she was hospitalized. Food shortages, lack of sleep and fear of capture affected normal levels of physical development. It delayed or inhibited menstruation in girls and women and affected their skin and teeth.

The DP camps varied in size. The smaller camps closed as their inhabitants transferred to larger ones or as the refugees migrated to host countries. Families with youths and young adults tried to move to facilities where it was possible for them to complete their education. The refugees seldom knew how long they would be in any one place. They needed to be prepared to pack up their belongings and leave at any time. People remember being shuffled from one place to another. Typically, refugee narratives mention living in four to five DP camps within a five-year period before moving on to host countries.

---

519 Diana Francis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI." (Interviewed by: Irene Elksnis Geisler on April 13, 2009).
520 Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
521 McDowell, Hard Labour: The Forgotten Voices of Latvian Migrant Volunteer Workers, 76.
"War Criminals” and “Nazi Collaborators”

The Soviet Union declared that all refugees from occupied territory were war criminals, Nazi collaborators, conspirators, spies, saboteurs, traitors, or common criminals. Soviet law defined treason to include military collaborators and POWs and in many cases as forced laborers. The Kremlin pressed resolutely for the return of all of its citizens abroad, including those who had been conscripted soldiers, laborers and refugees. It maintained that soldiers should have fought to their death. Those who had worked for the enemy or fled their country were traitors. In the period between May and September of 1945, UNRRA sent back over two million Eastern European refugees and former soldiers, including Balts, Ukranians, Poles, Rumanians and Yugoslavs, to the now expanded U.S.S.R. Many of the DPs who had fled from the Soviet Union including its newly acquired territories were forced to return due to repatriation agreements between the U.S.S.R., the United States and Britain signed at the Yalta conference in 1945.523

The Allied negotiations at Yalta had failed to define “Soviet citizenship.” According to the Kremlin, the Balts, who make up about 17% of the Displaced Persons and refugees, were to be considered Soviet citizens since the incorporation of

the Baltic States into the Soviet Union in 1941.\textsuperscript{524} Due to this ruling, many Latvians repatriated back to the U.S.S.R. after 1945. Soviet guards sent prisoners of all ages and sexes to assembly points, where they placed them in trucks and forcibly removed them.\textsuperscript{525} Refugees in western countries later discovered that those who returned were sent directly to Siberia as war criminals or were conscripted into the Russian Army where many perished. When individuals learned that the repatriated Latvians did not actually reach Latvia, they refused to return with increased vehemence.\textsuperscript{526}

The same was true for former soldiers turned over to the Soviet Union by the Allied command for extradition. A Latvian Displaced Persons International newsletter in Havana, Cuba, reports:

On Nov 25 in Zedelghem, Belgium, the British POW camp’s commander informed Colonel Kripens and Captain Lukeris, that they were to be extradited to the Russian military in Brussels for interrogation. Captain Lukeris obeyed the order, but Colonel Kripens attempted to take his own life. Previously, the Colonel had explained that twice in his life, he had fought against the Russians, and that extradition to the Russian command would mean sure death for him. Kripens is currently in critical condition in a military hospital in Brigg under the care of Latvian physicians.\textsuperscript{527}

In December of 1945, Sweden, under a policy of neutrality, handed over 146 Baltic soldiers detained in Swedish prison camps to the Soviet Union. At least seven of the internees committed suicide during the process. The front-page headlines from

\textsuperscript{525} Tolstoy, \textit{The Secret Betrayal}, 336-37.
\textsuperscript{526} Zāķe, \textit{American Latvians: Politics of a Refugee Community}, 30; Elliott, \textit{Pawns of Yalta: Soviet Refugees and America's Role in Their Repatriation}, 103.
\textsuperscript{527} Latviešu komiteja Havanā D.P. International Camp (Latvian Camp) Lamboyster, "Traģisks Notikums ar Mūsu Pulkvedi," \textit{Tēvzeme} (1946, Jan. 6), 1.
the same refugee newspaper in Havana, Cuba, reported the “Latvian Tragedy.” The DP correspondents learned of the Latvian and other Baltic soldiers’ extradition from the Belgian newspaper “Europe Amerique” dated December 20, 1945. The Belgian press showed, among other images, the Eucharist given to the men. The article also included photos of powerful and healthy Swedish police forcing Balts, weak from a hunger strike, onto a Russian ship.528

This phenomenon of forced extradition viewed against the background of war resulted in policy disputes in the General Assembly of the United Nations. UN officials grappled with the difficulty of prosecuting political enemies and at the same time protecting refugees and Displaced Persons from Soviet occupied areas became apparent. Although there seems to have been concurrence between states that war criminals should be extradited and prosecuted, bitter debates indicated disagreement concerning refugees and displaced persons. Moreover, nations from which extradition was sought sometimes claimed that so-called war criminals were often refugees and in fact political asylum seekers who should under no circumstances be extradited to their political enemies.529

Voldemārs R., a former musician deported in 1944 for forced labor service in Germany recalls: “We were optimistic and naïve. We thought the British would be

528 Latviešu komiteja Havana D P International Camp (Latvian Camp) Lamboyster, “Bijušo Baluļpuru Jautājums Zviedriā,” Tēvzeme (1946, Jan 6) 1
benevolent and have good will towards us.” Latvians, especially men, were frequently perceived as Nazi sympathizers, whether they were or not. Allied forces considered former conscripted soldiers and laborers to be hostages and placed them in designated Prisoner of War (POW) camps. They did not define these persons as refugees, but rather called them “fighters on behalf of the German nation,” as per the Allied treaty signed on February 11, 1945, at Yalta. Vilis M. was a member of the Kurelian group who had been taken prisoner by the Nazis in Latvia and brought to Danzig, Germany, as a German POW. After the occupation of Germany by Allied forces, Vilis again found himself detained, this time by the British. Valfrīds S., a Latvian Legionnaire recalls: “Finally we reached our destination. The next morning they opened the train doors and we saw all around us British soldiers with machine guns. In the background was a POW camp tower. We realized that we had arrived as SS soldiers.” Another Latvian Legionnaire, Auseklis E., explains that “[Allied authorities] arrested us as war criminals...even the Lithuanians who were not even mobilized. In time they let the Lithuanians go, and then we were just Estonians and Latvians in the camps.”

The British High Command was battling policy with the Kremlin regarding repatriation of the Latvian division, which was formed in an occupied country and through no choice of its own. How hard a stand could the British take on their behalf?

531 Zaķe, American Latvians: Politics of a Refugee Community, 30.
532 Mīķelsons, "Oral History Interview in Kalamazoo, Michigan USA."
533 Zāļinskis, Bez Ienaïda Un Baillems, 113. From the memoirs of Valfrīds Spuntelis.
534 Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
Apparently, the British authorities took a rather decisive action, at least in one instance, in solving the moral and potentially embarrassing problem of these Latvian soldiers. In late December of 1945, Colonel Osis of the Latvian 15th Division returned from one of his meetings with the British HQ in a state of great excitement. Soon word spread throughout the camp that the 15th Latvian Division must “disappear.” The Latvian soldiers acquired civilian clothes and papers as if “fallen from the linden-trees.” Latvian folk tradition associates lindens with the Laima, goddess of luck. The entire division essentially “melted away.”

Auseklis E. found himself “released” on Christmas day 1947. Nevertheless, the Allied authorities did not give him status as Displaced Persons, due to his problematical participation in the Latvian Legion. Consequently, he had no place to go and no means of support. Not until May 12, 1949, were former soldiers of the Latvian Legion allowed to enter the U.S. as legal immigrants. Only after September of 1950 did the US Displaced Persons Commission declare that the Baltic Waffen SS Units (Latvian and Estonian Legions) were separate and distinct from the German SS in purpose, ideology, activities, and qualifications for membership, and therefore not a movement hostile to the Government of the United States. They thus became eligible for Displaced Persons status.

---

536 Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
Cultural and Political Endeavors

We are the exiled who have lost almost everything that we have ever held precious or sacred. Even to be amongst our own people and to enjoy the quiet peace of our country's snow has been robbed from thousands of us. Should we therefore in hardship and despair evade the ancient traditions and celebrations that we have enjoyed since childhood?\(^538\)

The Displaced Persons, uncertain about their future, took steps to transform the camps into active cultural and social centers. Community directors launched medical and dental facilities utilizing Latvian nurses, dentists, and physicians. Ministers held church services. Cultural workers organized song festivals, concerts, art exhibitions and sports championships.\(^539\)

It was unforgettable when we put on the famous Latvian play “Uguns un nakts” [Fire and Night] staged there on the rocks in the woods, illuminated by bonfires. There was a “Shakespeare night” – we performed “Macbeth.” And the performance of “Hamlet” was so impressive that shivers go down my spine even now. And all the discussions and everything – it has stayed with all of us.\(^540\)

The accomplishments of the Latvians during this time were especially impressive considering the difficult conditions in which these individuals lived and worked. The community founded self-governing legal entities and created schools for children and youths. Baiba D. recalls, “We arrived [at the DP camp in Fischbau] on


\(^{539}\) Meija, Latvians in Michigan, p. 25.

\(^{540}\) Dumpe, "Oral History Interview, Latvian National Oral History Project, Archive No. NMV:863."
the St. John’s Day\textsuperscript{541} in June, and already in July the high school was established.\textsuperscript{542}

Usually Latvian men assumed leadership positions in the camps. Women took on jobs such as secretaries, clerks, translators and teachers. Līzīņa who was seventeen years old in 1945, worked in the kitchens in the Schwerin Camp, then run by Germans. After receiving her DP status, she got a job in the DP camp administrative offices as a translator, due to her fluency in German. Other women also found that skills learned in Latvia became more valuable as they transitioned into DP standing as well.

Dagnija was multilingual. She had briefly worked in a bank in Rīga before leaving Latvia. Because of her familiarity with the English language, Dagnija began work with UNRRA as a secretary. From there, she transferred to the headquarters in Lemgo of the British zone. Elvira had been a teacher in Latvia and worked as a support teacher in the camps.\textsuperscript{543} Alma E. obtained employment in the food center at her DP camp as a distribution clerk.\textsuperscript{544} Many other women were unable to capitalize their expertise or education. They relied on traditional female domestic skills, such as knitting, sewing and cleaning.\textsuperscript{545}

Most organizations were founded by men. A momentous undertaking was the inception of the \textit{Daugavas Vanagi}, Latvian Relief Organization in 1945. Former Latvian Legionnaires founded the association in a POW camp in Cedelgheim, Belgium. Its purpose was to provide assistance and relief to Latvian veterans who

\textsuperscript{541} Traditional Latvian festival held in the night from 23 June to 24 June to celebrate the summer solstice.

\textsuperscript{542} Dumpe, "Oral History Interview, Latvian National Oral History Project, Archive No. NMV:863."

\textsuperscript{543} McDowell, \textit{Hard Labour: The Forgotten Voices of Latvian Migrant Volunteer Workers}, 82.

\textsuperscript{544} Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."

\textsuperscript{545} McDowell, \textit{Hard Labour: The Forgotten Voices of Latvian Migrant Volunteer Workers}, 84.
participated in the Latvian Legion in the Second World War. In 1945, the League of Red Cross Societies decided to recognize Latvia’s occupation by the Soviets. As a result, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration no longer considered the Latvian Red Cross as a welfare association. This left Latvian prisoners of war without any support. In response, the veterans created their own relief organization.\footnote{Kiaupa et al., \textit{The History of the Baltic Countries}, 194-95. Andrejs Plakans, “Daugavas Vanagi (Engl. The Hawks of Daugava).” in \textit{Historical Dictionary of Latvia} (Landham, Md: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 50. Zače, \textit{American Latvians: Politics of a Refugee Community}, 43.} Auseklis E. recalls the initiation of the organization with reference to a speech from his commander, Colonel Vilis Janums: “In order that we soldiers do not go the same path of misery, poverty and starvation as did Latvian soldiers during the First World War, we must unite in a mutual welfare association.”\footnote{Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."} In this initial period, the organization was limited to soldiers and by extension to their families.

In 1945, Latvian DPs created the \textit{Latviešu Centrālā Padome} (Latvian Central Council) in exile. Although the occupation authorities did not recognize the assembly, they did not oppose it nor interfere with it.\footnote{Zače, \textit{American Latvians: Politics of a Refugee Community}, 33.} The Educational Division, of the Central Council was especially successful. It developed a network of schools in the refugee camps. While in the beginning many teachers may have taught from memory, the council created educational materials for teaching in the Latvian language. Often children received an outstanding education from accomplished scientists and university professors who lived in the camps.
We went to school continually – winter and summer, absolutely no vacation. The time to emigrate came before I could finish in 1949. Oh, our school was very, very strict. We received prizes as the best Latvian school of that time. And we had very good teachers. Mr. Ābele, who later became the principal, taught mathematics, physics, astronomy, and cosmography. Our teacher in Latvian was the poet Zinaīda Lazda, also Mr. Kārkliņš. Besides Latvian, we studied Latin, German, and English. The Latin teacher was Mr. Dr aviņš – excellent. And we had a very good math teacher, Ms. Klošīna. Very, very good.... Every teacher seemed good to me. Some were peculiar like our homeroom teacher Mrs. Rutmanis. She taught history. She was so original! ... We had very active Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and singing, and theater. There were groups for sewing, for woodcarving, and for sculpting.... In addition to school, I took part in the chorus, and I was very busy with the Girl Scouts.549

Many Latvian refugees who taught in the schools were well known artists, writers, musicians, lawyers, physicians and other professionals. By some estimates, approximately fifty percent of the Latvian intellectual elites found themselves in DP camps. Displaced writers made a particular contribution to Baltic culture. Between 1946 and 1950, Latvians in exile published some 1,500 new titles in all genres in the Latvian language.550 In a survey of Latvian authors’ fictional literature printed in exile between 1946 and 1950, women’s works accounted for approximately 27 percent of books published.551

A significant event in the memories of the refugees was the first Latvian Song Festival celebrated in exile, which took place at the Fischbach camp in 1949 and

carried into Diaspora the song festival tradition. Baiba D. recalls: “We all sang. We also danced the folk dances. That’s where I made myself the Latvian national costume, before the Song Festival.”

Figure 5: Women dressed in Latvian folk attire, Glasenbach Austria. Women who had taken with them from Latvia their national costumes, or had made them, dressed in their native attire. Picture provided courtesy of Andrew Stabinš, Ontario, Canada. Accessed April 17, 2011, http://www.crommelin.org/history/Biographies/1914Edward/UnrraScrapbook/Glasenbach/Glasenbach.htm

The traditional attire worn at celebratory occasions was standardized with the growth of the National movement. Different regions of Latvia have costumes with characteristic features passed down from generation to generation. While preserving and continuing the customs of a region, each woman traditionally creates a distinctive

---

552 Dumpe, "Oral History Interview, Archive No. NMV 863"
outfit for herself as well as her husband. Baiba fondly remembers sewing her costume:

The material was actually baby diapers – white and very, very soft and light, like feathers. I dyed the fabric black. I was lucky. Just before the Song Festival, I twisted my ankle. I could not walk, so I was allowed to stay home from school. All around Fischbach there was a beautiful pine forest, where I sat, day after day, with my leg put up, and sewed and sewed. Of course, my blouse was not the fanciest. I had started to make it before the Song Festival. The main thing was the rim of the skirt. I did the entire orange rim, sewed on all the designs. Mother finished the vest. Where we got the shiny ribbons, I don’t know, but we had them. Our home economics teacher gave me the white linen fabric for the blouse. She also cut it out for me; I had already made the designs, and they had to be put on the blouse. Mother helped me... And finally, I had my national costume. 553

The DP camps initiated adult education and language courses designed to enhance future job prospects. Ironically, many of the Latvian intelligentsia would need to reeducate themselves with trade-skills for potential employment. According to one newsletter, the DP camp in Spittal in Southern Austria, offered chauffeur courses for Latvians beginning, March 10, 1947. The one-hour classes were taught in two groups: afternoons and late evenings. Unfortunately, instructors lectured only in German. Regardless, according to the article, Latvians showed great enthusiasm and interest in learning this valuable trade. 554 Similarly, in Glasenbach, Austria, the DP camp provided several language courses: three classes in English, one in French and one in Portuguese. The camp also offered courses in industrial and skilled trades,

553 Ibid.
such as electronics, topography and bookbinding.\textsuperscript{555} As might be expected, given the context, most of the classes that were oriented towards the trades and industrial skills seem to be directed mainly towards males as future providers.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable accomplishments of the refugees was the founding of the Baltic University (BU). In 1946, Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians established the BU in Hamburg, located in the British Zone of occupied Germany. In December of 1945, the refugee newspaper “The Voice of Latvians in Austria” announced the inception of the learning institution. Its purpose was two fold: first, to prepare Baltic youth for future work, intellectual undertakings and new lives, and second, to facilitate Latvian scholars and scientists opportunities to continue their work and preserve their knowledge base.\textsuperscript{556} R. Plüme, in the same newspaper, describes the situation and expresses his hopes:

It has been a long month of preparations accomplished by a few generous scholars and a hand full of technical assistants. The time has come for every Latvian to prove his or her trust in this endeavor. Let us hope that the youth’s response will be great and genuine, that the teaching staff will understand that our fate to a large degree is in their hands, and that the vision of our countrymen left behind in our country are turned to them.\textsuperscript{557}

Former student Jēkabs Z. attributes the concept for the Baltic University to Latvian professors Fricis Gulbis and Edgars Dunsdorfs and docent Eižnes Leimanis.

Since the Estonians and Lithuanians were in the same situation as the Latvians, the


\textsuperscript{557} Ibid., pg. 3.
venture became a Baltic endeavor. UNRRA funded the startup of the project. The university struggled with academic certification from the British military and UNRRA officials. The Baltic organizers eventually established the institution as the “DP University Study Center,” where students enrolled in mainly preparatory courses to assist in their transfer to traditional German universities. The German academic community in Hamburg donated valuable educational materials. Each of three rectors represented his respective Baltic State. The faculty was multinational, and the official language of study was German.

Jēkabs recalls his path to academia. After leaving the POW facility in Belgium, Jēkabs took up residence in the Saules (Sun) DP camp in Geestchach, in Northern Germany. He worked as an electrician’s assistant. There he met a young woman with, in his words, “sparkling eyes, eyelashes as long as fans and a smile from one ear to the other.” She was visiting her parents for the summer holidays. “Why waste away here?” she declared, and suggested that he join her and at the Baltic University. With his 1944 diploma from Liepāja State Technikum in hand, he did headed off to study mechanics and electricity at the BU. Jēkabs fondly remembers receiving the Baltic University Student Card number 1106 and the Baltic University, Hamburg, Student record book with his courses, instructors’ names and a place for examination grades.

---

560 Ibid.
The institution initially opened in the Deutscher Ring insurance headquarters, which was also the home of 1,000 refugees. It then moved to the war-damaged History Museum of Hamburg. In 1947, the Baltic University transferred to Pinneberg, 21 km. of Hamburg northwest to a former German aviation school facility. Jēkabs warmly recalls that in Pinneberg the institution had relatively new and well-maintained classrooms, a residence hall, a separate administrative building and an auditorium, the Aula Magna. By this time, the BU had been organized into nine faculties with 53 professors, 50 docents, and 48 lectures. In 1946, the enrollment at BU was 996 and in 1947 as high as 1,052.

The students were often hungry, and the Red Cross found that tuberculosis was common among them. Auseklis E. remembers that his fingers were often stiff from the cold while studying. Nevertheless, Auseklis recalls being very happy to be in school. He took refuge at the institution after leaving the POW camp. “I got up at seven every morning, I went to lectures all day and went to bed at ten. Most of the students there were agricultural students. I studied agriculture too, just as in Latvia.” Elvira, studying to become a teacher, reflects on a sense of freedom outweighing the physical handicaps. According to Jēkabs, already in the first year, the students established the Catholic student association Pax Romana. In 1947, students organized the Fraternitas Imantica, Gersiciana, and Fraternitas Cursica. They

---

563 Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
also established sororities Spīdola and Zinta. Others created discussion clubs, the student union Auseklis, and the Christian Student’s Association.

Women’s sorority Spīdola launched on March 11, 1947, with 30 Latvian women in the basement of BU Aula Magna. One month later the women’s sorority Zinta formed, with five members. After six semesters at BU, Zinta boasted 49 members. Their meeting place was a two-room basement space in a former military club facility. Both sororities held activities such as literary readings, the singing of songs and scholarly debates. A sizable group of Latvians also enrolled at the University of Münster, located in North Rhine-Westphalia. A third women’s sorority “Staburadze” formed in Münster with nine members. In 1949, when many Baltic refugees began immigrating out of Germany to host countries offering employment the BU’s enrollment fell to 468 students. It closed on September 30, 1949. In that year, of the total student body, 73 percent were Latvians.


Work is the foundation of people’s wellbeing. With work, we guarantee our existence and gain all that in life is necessary, as well as peace of mind and happiness. Our situations and work problems are linked with our abilities to emigrate. Gradually, refugees found the means to leave the DP settlement camps of Germany, Austria, Belgium and other host countries in order to start new lives. The International Refugee Organization (IRO) arranged work assignments for the migrants all over the world. Not all individuals had the same prospects for emigration, depending on their gender, family responsibilities, general health and age. Canada, Belgium, United Kingdom, France, Australia, Venezuela and other states had different criteria from one another for selection, varying immigration policies. Labor opportunities varied among the states willing to accept refugees.

Australia would take family units consisting of a husband, wife and unmarried children, not to exceed three. Brazil requested mainly agricultural workers ages 18 to 40 but would not accept children under two years of age. Canada wanted women as cooks, maids, housekeepers, men and women for agricultural work on sugar beet-farms, and men for mining. France offered a family farming plan, with no limit on the number of children. Luxembourg agreed to take single workers with no dependants. The Netherlands had jobs for tailors, weavers and spinners and sought single individuals 18 to 35 years old with no dependants. An editorial in a refugee

newsletter reflects the concerns and viewpoints of many Latvians regarding issues pertaining to emigration:

Many are willing to catch the first ships to Venezuela, which is for now the only country whose immigration laws give us any hope for a civilized life.... We feel as if we are commodities; we are being bought and sold in proceedings where we ourselves do not understand a word. In these situations we are overcome with beadsman humility and helplessness. We know only how to beseech and express gratitude,... but the sense of equality with the remainder of this planet’s inhabitants has left us.569

Families were often forced to make decisions on whether to split up in order to find work in multiple foreign countries. For example; Spodra G. journeyed to the U.S. and her sister Mirdza to Canada. Ilga L. travelled to Venezuela when the remainder of her family got posted to America.570 Relatives were fortunate if they could find placements together in one country. Alma E. received employment in Washington D.C. as an au pair. Her sister Marta G. accepted a position as a domestic servant in West Virginia. Her mother, father and younger sister Rita received sponsorship by a family in New Hampshire.571

Agata Nesaule recalls that when immigration opportunities opened up in England, Canada, Australia and Venezuela her family underwent the meticulous screening processes in order to find a new home for themselves. Before being allowed to immigrate, however, they needed to secure a sponsor who would guarantee a job.

570 Gendrikovs, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI." Lācis-Belitsa, "Oral History Interview, Three Rivers, MI."
571 Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI.", Gulbis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
This was a problem for Omīte [Granny], as she was considered too elderly to work. But how could the family leave her behind now in Germany after having taken her from her home in Latvia? Political background checks followed one after another with repeated mental and physical inspections. Reading and math ability, teeth, eyes, ears, skin and body cavities were examined. A refugee asserted: “We treated our horses with more dignity.” And a dark spot on the lung or partial deafness in one ear condemned the person to the camps. In Nesaule’s, family everyone got tested for tuberculosis, and she alone was called back for more tests. Even as a child, she worried that it would be her fault that her family would not be allowed to leave, and at night she had nightmares that she had been abandoned."

One of the first opportunities came on April 22, 1947, when Latvian men left to work at the coal mine of Belgium. Soon after, the first ship with refugees to Canada with left Germany on July 23, 1947. In the summer of 1947, an immigration office started operations in Brazil. By September 1947, approximately 9,000 Latvians had migrated to the United Kingdom. Britain’s post-war economy was in a severely troubled state, weakened by the war and short of labor at this time. Britain’s search for workers immediately focused almost entirely on the Displaced Persons’ camps. The sectors of the economy that were especially short of labor were heavy industry, such as iron, steel and coal; maintenance and repair; food production; health care; and domestic service. Nevertheless, the decision to recruit foreign workers in the post-war

---

573 Ibid., p. vii.
period was politically sensitive. Women were seen as less controversial, partially due to the perception that females were less competitive with British males for jobs and domiciles. In 1946, approximately 1,000 women were initially engaged in employment, recruited mainly for domestic service. Employers provided accommodations, and thus the new migrants did not compete for housing with the British population, a major concern in the process.

Considering the widespread impressions of Displaced Persons as downtrodden victims, British correspondents who reported on the arrival of the Baltic women seemed to have been somewhat pleasantly surprised by the incomers. The *Evening Standard* on October 5, 1946, described the new domestic workers as “the intelligentsia of the Baltic States.” The *Sunday Chronicle* on October 20, 1946, observed the women arriving wearing their smartest hats and coats of ocelot, muskrat, sealskin and rabbit. The *Manchester Guardian* on October 21, 1946, reported that “a few are elderly but the great majority are young, strong-looking and healthy and just as much interested in their personal appearance as any other girls of their years.”\(^{574}\) It was not long before positive reports of the new hospital matrons appeared in the press. The *Evening Standard* on October 23, 1946 and *The Star* January 28, 1947, expressed the view that the Baltic women were “first-class workers,” as “keen and

---

\(^{574}\) Kay and Miles, "Refugees or Migrant Workers? The Case of the European Volunteer Workers in Britain 1946-1951," 220.
enthusiastic,” and “liking their fresh life in their new homes so much that many want to stay here for good” and marry English men.575

As this initial endeavor proved successful, in January 1947, up to 5,000 more Baltic women headed to Britain for domestic service in hospitals and other institutions. Agencies established strict criteria for employment. Although the British officials were forced to employ women out of a shortage of labor, they still held patriarchal views. Women had to be between 21 and 40 years old, single with no dependants, and in good health. Female workers were sometimes engaged for their sexual attraction as well as for their physical capacity to labor. In 1947, the British government extended the program to include men.576

According to a Latvian DP newsletter, in August of 1947, the job prospects and wages to potential job seekers in Great Britain were separated by gender. The higher level jobs were listed almost entirely for men. In many cases, the ads ran identical jobs under male and female listings but with separate pay scales. Employers offered male agricultural workers 80 shillings per week for men, 60 shillings per week for women; in coal mines, offers were for men only, 90 shillings per week for above-ground workers, 100 shillings per week for underground work. Shoe factories offered 85 shillings for men per week and 65 shillings per week for women. Other

575 Ibid.
jobs included heavy chemical work; men could earn 1 shilling 11 pence per hour, 
women – 1 shilling, 3 pence per hour.\textsuperscript{577}

The process of migration for Latvians to move to the US may have been similar 
to that of Britain. Women may have constituted less controversial recruits.
Considering the long-term goal of American women returning to the domestic sphere, 
refugees created a pool of cheap labor. Most openings for immigrant women were in 
domestic service or agriculture. An individual’s war history and status as a displaced 
person was determinate. Families were acceptable with sponsorship, but former 
soldiers of the Latvian Legion were not allowed to enter the US initially. They were 
permitted only after May 12, 1949.\textsuperscript{578} On October 27, 1948, Austrian DP newsletter 
reported on these matters under the headlines: “Mainly Domestic Workers Wanted: 
First ship leaves for USA but many left behind at the harbor.” According to the 
report, the American transport liner “General Black” left from Bremerhaven, 
Germany, on October 21, 1948, with the first group of Displaced Persons en route to 
America. On board were 813 DPs from 11 nationalities, mostly Jews and Poles. Due 
to a “misunderstanding,” Latvians were not onboard this vessel but would follow in 
the next one. Dedicated laypersons untrained in journalism often staffed the refugee 
newsletters. The citizen correspondent did not explain the misunderstanding in the 
article but stressed that, without sponsors who could guarantee work, no one would 
be accepted in America. Clearly, on the minds of the DPs were the obstacles they

\textsuperscript{578} Ibid.
faced as they struggled to start new lives in host countries. Job offers were almost exclusively from affluent American families who sought domestic servants, grounds keepers, gardeners and agricultural workers. Single individuals or couples with no children were preferred. “Last week there were three opening for single women, 30-40 years old for domestic service.” Government bureaucrats were unsympathetic to childcare and family issues. Women workers were scrutinized not only for their physical capacity to labor but for their sexual attraction as well. The newsletter explained: “Women should not be too young or too old and must have references attesting to high moral character.”

Vilis M. arrived in America in 1951 with his wife Mirdza and two sons, Guntis, three years old and Māris, an infant. Both children had been born in the DP camps in Germany. The family was thrilled because they were eligible to travel on an airplane, due to Māris’ young age. However, upon arrival in Ellis Island, US officials separated Vilis from his wife and sons. They detained and interrogated him on account of his suspicious history as a Kurelian fighter. Mirdza, held separately with her sons, struggled with childcare. In the immigration office lobbies of this foreign land there were no laundry facilities. Food was available through vending machines. There were inadequate sleeping arrangements for the small children. Only after two weeks did the family finally find themselves on a train, released and on

580 After the U.S. entered the war in December 1941, Ellis Island served primarily as a detention center for alien enemies, those considered to be inadmissible and others. By 1946, approximately 7,000 aliens and citizens, with German, Italian, and Japanese people comprising the largest groups, were detained at Ellis Island.
route to Springfield, Illinois, were they would be employed on a cattle ranch. Vilis recalls his amazement upon arrival: “The farm was perhaps 50 times larger than my father’s back in Latvia, more than 200 cattle and 200 pigs.”

Seven-year-old Teicējs, B. recalls his arrival in America. He remembers the great excitement of arriving at Ellis Island alongside his parents and grandparents. They had all gone through the intensive screening process before boarding the ship. However, they were subjected to another examination upon arrival. Their grandfather in his late seventies, after being physically inspected, was led to another room to be questioned by a translator, and U.S. authorities eventually denied him entrance. His mother and grandmother were devastated. The grandfather was returned to Germany and placed in a nursing home. The boy’s mother wrote many letters to officials trying to get information about her father’s condition and obtain permission to bring him to the United States. However, people regarded as invalids and those with alleged medical conditions were unwelcome in America.

Mirdza K. shares her memories of beginning her life in America. She searches for meaning in her disrupted childhood. Mirdza remembers her mother still grieving the loss of home and country, while the little girl saw a warm and welcoming new environment.

In November 1950, we arrived in New York City and traveled by train to a farm in Wisconsin to live with a dairy farmer and his family. My father worked for him as a farm hand. I remember my mother crying because we would never be able to return to Latvia. I on the other hand

581 Mīkelsons, "Oral History Interview in Kalamazoo, MI."
582 Meija, Latvians in Michigan, 3. Anonymous source. S. Meija does not name her informant.
loved Wisconsin and the farm life. I remember it as the most magical year of my childhood. We lived in the farmer’s house and were treated like family, eating our meals with them and going with them to church and to visit their friends and family. Their children taught me English and the other children in the one room schoolhouse also helped me and we became good friends.\textsuperscript{583}

Immigrant numbers grew progressively larger. By 1950, most of the displaced persons had found homes in host countries and the DP camps closed. According to IRO statistics, from July 1, 1947, to June 30, 1951, some 76,909 Latvian citizens found homes world-wide: 35,410 in the USA, 19,365 in Australia, 9353 in Great Britain, 8093 in Canada, approximately 4,800 in Sweden and the remainder in as many as 34 other countries.\textsuperscript{584}

Conclusion

Two years ago, as we assembled in the camps in order to await our destiny, we looked at the world through rather rosy glasses. We mistakenly believed that the victorious nations would understand our unique situation. Now... our disappointment and disillusionment is great.... Years of pointless living, endless screenings, and perpetual apprehension of what the future will bring has had an affect on us. In decisive moments we falter.\textsuperscript{585}

Loss of freedom and nationhood affected individuals’ perceptions of familial and national self-identity. Refugees lived with constant anxiety regarding repatriation to the Soviet Union and the lack of knowledge about the whereabouts of loved ones,

\textsuperscript{583} Mirdza Rūta Kenigs, "Oral History Interview," (Interviewed by: Irene Elksnis Geisler on July 31, 2009, Abington, MA).
such as fathers and brothers who had been conscripted as soldiers. Latvians were outsiders in Germany, Austria, Belgium and other host countries. They frequently perceived antagonism and resentment on the part of the native citizens. Refugees were often forced to communicate in a language they barely understood.

The Displaced Persons empowered themselves to forge new lives in exile while maintaining their Latvian identity. Some organized work facilities such as the fish processing and smoking plant at Pegnitz, Bavaria. Others kept livestock. Women made the most of what they had; they made pigs’ blood pancakes and tea sandwiches from spam for festivities, sewed white confirmation dresses out of old parachutes and fashioned national folk costumes out of diapers. As community groups they organized cultural groups and events. Most Latvian camps had choirs. Artists exhibited their works. Theater troupes performed plays. Filmmakers and journalists produced films and newsreels. Refugees held ballet performances. Others taught and performed folk dancing, published newspapers and founded various sports leagues. They observed and honored folk traditions. Just as the Song and Dance Festival tradition had been an important custom in Latvian culture and social life since the period of the nineteenth-century Cultural Awakening, so was the first Latvian Song Festival celebrated in exile, which took place at the Fischbach DP camp, a significant event in preserving of Latvian identity. Latvians published books. Women authors were relatively well represented for these times. Between 1946 and 1950, women’s works accounted for
approximately 27 percent of the fictional literature published in exile. Women attended university courses, bonded with other women sometimes across ethnic and political boundaries, and formed women’s organizations such as sororities Spīdola and Zinta at the Baltic Institute and Staburadze at the University of Münster. Some women worked as teachers, translators and secretaries, others as domestic servants and food distribution personnel.

Power hegemonies and issues of culture shaped migrants’ war lives politically and economically. Women and men experienced exile differently. Many men who had been conscripted into military or labor service for the Nazis found themselves prisoners of war. Women were frequently subjected to patriarchal power politics. Rape and sexual assault was common. Usually men took leadership positions in community groups and administration such as the Latvian Central Council in exile. Certain self help organizations, for instance the Latvian Welfare Association Daugavas Vanagi, instituted for former soldiers of the Latvian Legion benefited women only by extension to relationships to men. Frequently host countries promised employment to males and females but with separate compensation scales. For example, British employers offered male agricultural workers 80 shillings per week

---

586 Briedis, Hiros, and Ropkalne, "Latviešu Romānu Rādītājs."; Rozītis, Displaced Literature: Images of Time and Space in Latvian Novels Depicting the First Years of the Latvian Postwar Exile., Appendix 2.
for men, 60 shillings per week for women; higher paying jobs such as in coalmines were offered only for men only.587

As Latvians embarked to foreign lands, some worried about what their futures would bring as they found themselves scattered throughout the world, in countries with strange languages and cultures. Though some reeducated themselves with language and trade-skills for employment in host countries, bodily strength and good health appeared to be their principal advantage in their passage to freedom. However, after the ordeals of war, flight and exile, many refugees considered themselves fortunate to have survived, to be on the way to creating new lives for themselves and to be together with family.

And then it was time to emigrate. We were transported from Europe to America on an old army ship – Father, Mother, we three daughters, and Grandmother (my mother’s mother), Father’s two sisters with their families and Father’s mother were all on that same ship....In that respect we were very lucky!588

Zenta Maurina recalls her flight to Sweden from Germany, along with her husband Konstantins Raudive and other Latvian refugees. She remembers that it was a sunny day when she was taken to the harbor. They departed to a strange country where no one was waiting to welcome them. In the closing chapter of her memoirs about this period she writes: “Our fatherland is dear, but freedom is dearer, and even dearer is

588 Dumpe, "Oral History Interview, Archive No. NMV:863."
truth. But without [brotherly] love we are all only strangers everywhere, like dried leaves in the wind."\textsuperscript{589}

\textsuperscript{589} Mauriņa, \textit{Dzelzs Aizbēdēj Lūst}, p. 373.
CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

Latvia proclaimed its sovereignty as a nation-state in 1918. After a brief period of independence, both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union successively occupied Latvia from 1940 to 1945 in three separate invasions, drawing Latvia into the events of the Second World War. By the end of this war, the country had lost close to a third of its inhabitants. This population decrease involved not just the deaths of soldiers in armed resistance to invading forces, but those of women and children, as well as civilian men. Their experiences included extradition, execution, deportation, and direct war casualties, and flight to neighboring countries.

Latvians commonly remember the Soviets’ killing of border guards at Abrene to be the incident which initiated them into the period known as the “Year of Terror.” During the next year, Latvian citizens watched as friends and neighbors gradually disappeared from their midst. Families often helped hide fugitives and refugees. “The children were not told, but of course we all knew.” Many remember the shock of hearing their relatives being arrested and taken away in the early morning of June 14, 1941. Survivors recall: “Women and children were sobbing and whimpering.... The trucks proceeded slowly, deliberately; house numbers were checked.”

“The heat was smothering.... No one gave us even a drop of water, nor a bite of bread.... The children were crying, we ourselves were crying.... We [women] divided our food

---

590 U., Dear God I Wanted to Live, 10.
amongst ourselves, whatever each one of us had in order to feed the children.”

During the subsequent Nazi invasion, many Latvians initially perceived the
German forces as liberators and hoped for the restoration of an independent Latvia. It
soon became clear that the Nazis had their own plans for the country. The people
recall being drawn into the war on the Nazi side, the persecution of the Jewish and
ethnic minorities, and the terrible living conditions. “I was almost ready to enlist for
the sake of revenge alone. But I did not. I received an official summons and it was
final.” “Aglona’s Hebrews have all been shot, the youngest ones were not yet two
years old.” “Typhoid was widespread, a horrid illness with high fever and
headaches. We boiled our laundry in ashes for soap. There was a shortage of clothes
and shoes.”

In anticipation of a Soviet reinvasion of Latvia in 1944-45 roughly 250,000
refugees fled west. Many cannot forget their last memory of their dzimtene
(homeland) as a vivid image in the distance. “Valmiera was burning; the horizon was
full of flames.” “Those who lived north were trapped by the bombing and
flames.”

Then, to our left, the outline of a tree rose out of the gloomy fog
surrounding it. It was a white birch, a tree sacred to ancient Latvians

---

591 Strauta, "Baigās Naktīs Atminās."
592 Juris Klaviņš, "Oral History Interview, Catskills Latvian 3x3 Conference, New York.," (Interviewed
Informant ".
594 Ibid.
595 Dumpe, "Oral History Interview, Archive No. NMV:863."
596 Vaseris, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI." Velke, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo,
Michigan USA."
standing alone on a hillside. It was startling to see it like that, without any other trees nearby, leafless, and this made it look bereft and vulnerable.\(^{597}\)

The fears of those 250,000 who fled Latvia in 1944-45 were indeed well founded. Soviet forces entering Latvia in 1944 continued their policy of arrests and executions as in the first occupation and implemented a second mass deportation on March 25, 1949. The communist command deported over 42,000 people, largely women and children.\(^{598}\)

The Gendered Plight of Terror

In Latvia, women were an integral part of the efforts of a war not their own. Many women were drafted into mandatory civilian work. They were forced to leave Latvia for service to Germany just as men were. Others performed obligatory work in Latvia usually consisting of agricultural work or road repairs. Women’s economic responsibilities increased with the arrest of men, the confiscation of harvest yields and homes, and the seizure of means of livelihood. They paid taxes in the form of grain, milk, meat, eggs and wool. Latvian women experienced the violence of military battles across their own land.

The deportation of 1941 and the second Latvian deportation in 1949 are largely a gendered history. Although approximately equal numbers of males and females were apprehended in the 1941 deportation, most of the individuals officially

\(^{597}\) Nesaule, *A Woman in Amber*, p. 42.

arrested, allegedly tried, and executed were men. In contrast, the regime violently
exiled most of the women and children. Soviet functionaries, for the most part,
deported women for their relationships to men, as wives or mothers of alleged
enemies of the people. In the subsequent deportation of 1949, an estimated 73 percent
of the deportees were women and children.\textsuperscript{599}

Women and men experienced the war differently. In the German occupation,
women did not have the limited and abysmal options that men had of choosing police
auxiliary work in Latvia or among several military alternatives. Women were often
put into situations where they had to improvise or invent their own course of action.
They taught schoolchildren in barns and private homes. They sheltered refugees in
their homes and supported partisans, often relatives and neighbors, with food and
provisions. The occupying powers drafted able-bodied men into forced military
service. A large proportion of the people who escaped by literally walking out of the
country were women with children, often with elderly parents. In the immediate post-
war period Latvian women may have been at times spared the worst treatment in
German labor camps, unlike Jews and Slavs. Some women recall that knowledge of
the Russian language sometimes saved them from rape by Soviet soldiers. At the
same time, Allied forces tended to view males with apprehension. This included
former Legionnaires, Kurelians and even forced labor hostages. Authorities placed

\textsuperscript{599} Valters Nollendorfs and Uldis Neiburgs, “Briefing Papers”, Occupation Museum Foundation.
many Latvian men in designated Prisoner of War (POW) camps and encumbered their abilities to migrate.

Women often experienced traditional patriarchal power politics. Soviet functionaries, for the most part, deported women because their husbands and fathers were alleged enemies of the people. Latvian women often had their circumstances thrust upon them. Civilian labor recruitment frequently took the form of seizure and deportation to Germany. Because of men having been executed, conscripted, or constrained to join the partisan movement, women gained social and economic duties, headed households, and became solely responsible for their families. Employers from host countries commonly viewed migrant women as cheap labor. Female workers were recruited for their sexual attraction as well as for their physical capacity to labor. Women's accounts show how they consciously negotiated their lives.

Women empowered themselves in a multitude of ways to improve their quality of life and preserve their Latvian identity. They sought basic survival and safety needs for their families in the midst of a war zone. Mothers struggled to keep their children healthy in destitute situations. Women made the most of what they had in exile; they made pigs’ blood pancakes and tea sandwiches from spam for festivities, sewed white confirmation dresses out of old parachutes and fashioned national folk costumes out of diapers. As Displaced Persons, they attended university courses, bonded with other women sometimes across ethnic and political boundaries, formed women’s organizations, and published books. Some women worked in the DP communities as teachers, translators, and secretaries, others as domestic servants and
food distribution personnel. Skills learned outside of the traditional domestic sphere enabled refugees to sustain themselves during the interwar period. Their stories demonstrate that they were aware of the contributions they made to the war effort as women. The roles they played varied according to age, marital status and responsibility for dependent children and elderly parents.

Collective Memory and the Search for Identity

It was an extraordinary, unique feeling. I was also lucky to be chosen as one of the attendants when the Latvian flag was brought in during the Song Festival. I thought, ‘Oh, this is the highest summit!’ It was, it was a deeply emotional experience, this Song Festival. So many Latvians together, the singing and everything.600

Latvia as a geographical land and place, as well as an intangible idea, is a vivid and emotional memory for both Latvian men and women. Self-identity is flexible, diverse and changing. It is developed around a common system of symbols, language, culture, ideology and history. It is expanded and reconstructed through everyday life and complicated networks of organizations and activities.601 Peter Burke asks why different cultures have contrasting attitudes to the past. He gives one explanation in terms of cultural roots. “When you have them you can afford to take them for granted but when you lose them you search for them. The Irish and the Poles

600 Dumpe, "Oral History Interview, Archive No. NMV:863." Baiba Dumpe describing the first Latvian Song Festival in exile in a Displaced Person’s Camp in Fischbach, Germany.
601 Bela-Krūmiņa, "Oral History Interview, Riga, Latvia."
have been uprooted, their countries partitioned: it is no wonder they seem obsessed with their past."\textsuperscript{602} This could also be said of the Latvians.

Latvians view themselves as victims of the whims of larger more powerful forces, particularly their neighbor nations. For centuries Latvia has experienced hostile invasions. Latvian historian Heirihs Strods portrays the nation’s history as bearing seven characteristic eras of war, plague and famine. He graphically describes these periods as \textit{plaujas} (mowings), when human beings were manifestly plowed off the face of the earth. Strods describes the events of the early Twentieth century -- the First World War, the Second World War and the post-war period -- as the bloodiest of all. In 1939, Latvian inhabitants numbered close to 2 million. By 1949, Latvia had lost 720,000 souls, including the exiled, a full 36% of the population.\textsuperscript{603}

The collective memory of these \textit{plaujas}, among which prominently stand the Soviet and Nazi occupations during the Second World War, now defines a traumatized collective spirit that has become part of a national identity. Latvia lost more than a third of its inhabitants by the end of the Second World War. The arrests, executions and deportations to Siberia, the escape of an estimated 150,000 Latvians to the West, including many of the country’s cultural elites who became scattered throughout the world, and the annihilation of the nation’s young adults through conscription in the occupation armies have all become central features of Latvian self-identity. Latvians who were driven from their homes identify with a concept of


\textsuperscript{603} Strods, "Septētā Plauja (1940-1949)," 10-15.
the “continuity of oppression” amongst change. This identity manifests both consciously and subconsciously in the language, narratives and memories of the Latvian people.

In differentiating between the Soviet and Nazi occupations, Latvians often refer simply to the “Russians” and “Germans.” In these cases, the terminology stands less for nationality than for tangible representations of power. “The Russians [Soviet Army] ruptured the borders, murdered Latvian border guards, and advanced into Latvia.”604 “I was shocked at the appearance of the workers brought in from Russia [the Soviet Union] to build the military airport near my village. They were dirty, dressed in rags, and barely able to walk from hunger and exhaustion.”605 “In 1941 when the Russian [Soviet] soldiers retreated they blew up our bridge behind them…. Then, it did not take long, ‘Heil, Hitler!’ There came five Germans [Nazi soldiers].”606

Many Latvians remember the Second World War against the backdrop of German conquest of the eastern Baltic littoral, which dates back to the second part of the twelfth century. Peter the Great incorporated much of present-day Latvia into the Russian empire in 1721, but the Germans remained as the landholding nobility. Together the two powers enforced a particularly harsh feudal system.607 At the onset of the Second World War, the two historic enemies joined together in signing the

604 Lācis-Belitska, "Oral History Interview, Three Rivers, MI."
605 Gendrikovs, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
606 Irbe, "Life Story Interview, Alūksne, Latvia, Archive No. NMV:2060."
Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in Moscow on August 23, 1939, which pre-determined Latvia’s involvement in the Second World War, both politically and geographically.

Voldemārs V. may have been thinking historically, when he said:

The “red” fascists joined hands with the “brown” and in secret from other nations divided Europe amongst themselves. The onset of this most horrendous human tragedy was September 1, 1939, when Germany declared war on Poland. 608

Latvian informants generally use the term “Cheka” when referring to the KGB system. They are referring to an agency that changed multiple times since its inception in 1917. Latvian narratives are peppered with the words “Cheka” and “chekists” when describing deportations and arrests. “Seeing that force would not accomplish anything, the [c]hekists tried cunning. They attempted to calm the deportees by saying that the families would be united at the final destination.” 609

“[B]efore our departure a chekist came running and stopped outside the car, calling my father’s name.” 610 “The chekists kept rushing us to finish up and get into the truck.” 611 The use of the term is perhaps a subtle, possibly even a subconscious form of resistance. As explained by author and survivor Helena C., the chekists themselves changed, but as individuals retired or were relieved of duty, others took their place. 612

608 Veldre, Mana Dzīves Cēļa Līkloči: Published Memoir, 4. ‘Sarkanais’ fašisms sadevās rokās ar ‘brūno’ un slepenībā no citām valstīm savstarpēji sadalija Eiropu. Sākums šai visielākai cilvēces traģēdijai bija 1939. g. 1. septembris, kad Vācija uzsāka karu pret Poliju.
610 Ibid., 13.
611 Ibid., 10.
612 Helēna Celmīna, Sievietes Padomju Cietumos (Rīga: Treji Deviņi, 2002). Celmīna, "Oral History Interview, Rīga, Latvia."
While the “checkists” style may have altered, Latvians perceive that their function and purpose remained the same. This is true especially in the narratives of those who experienced the oppression firsthand.

Particularly characteristic in the oral histories of the Baltic peoples is the use of song and singing as a weapon, a protest and a coping mechanism. Deportees commonly recall the use of song in peaceful demonstration: “Then in the distance I heard the familiar sound of Latvian līgo [summer solstice] songs. One car started the singing, and soon all the cars were singing. Singing in protest. Imagine! Fifty train railway cars, all in song! Well, the guards stopped the cars and reprimanded us severely. But as soon as the train started moving again, they exploded into another song.”

Everywhere people began to celebrate Midsummer Eve with song. Our car too soon filled with the merry sounds of the Latvian līgo songs, traditionally heard only on this one night of the year. We were almost happy, almost convinced that now everything would be alright. We would be saved.

Midsummer Festival, Jāņi, which is traditionally celebrated with bonfires, singing of songs and special foods, is one of the most important festivals on the Latvian calendar. Women pick Jāņuzaļes, which are flowers, tree branches and other plants for decoration and healing purposes. Baiba recalls observing the traditions as a refugee:

We were on the train exactly on midsummer night. The train stopped once in a while, so we could take care of our toilet needs, usually in

---

613 Lāce, "Life Story Interview, Jēkabpils, Latvia, Archive No. NMV:1099."
614 U., Dear God I Wanted to Live, 17-18.
the woods. But on that midsummer night when the train stopped, there were meadows on both sides of the tracks. On one side the meadow was especially beautiful, with all kinds of flowers. Of course, all the women jumped into that meadow – we plucked the flowers and sang the special midsummer līgo songs. We came back with armloads of jāņuzāles. And we spent all night on the train with the jāņuzāles. We made wreaths and we sang, and sang and in the morning we arrived at Fischbach.615

The tradition had been an important custom in Latvian culture and social life since the nineteenth-century Cultural Awakening. Intellectuals used folk songs to instill pride in the Latvian heritage. Latvians remember the song festival in Latgale in 1940 as the closing of an era. For many it became a symbolic end of their short-lived period of freedom. The festival was the last time they assembled freely together to celebrate their ethnicity before being annexed, and before many of them were repressed and scattered throughout the world. Many exiled Latvians also remember the first Song Festival outside of their country, which was celebrated in 1949 the Fischbach Displaced Persons’ camp, many would carry the tradition into diaspora.

615 Dumpe, "Oral History Interview, Archive No. NMV:863."
Gender, Nation and Locality

Since I am a woman, my father is Lejiņš and I was born Lejiņa and also married my first husband as Lejiņa. I will tell you why. He was from Vārnava, his last name was Kaļēns, and he was called Kaļiņš, because Kaļēns was the name of another farm. The mother was called Kaļiņene. And when we were married and living together I said, “I will not be Kaļiņene! If you want, then change to Lejiņš.” And he became Lejiņš.... So, the Lejiņi generation goes from my father, even though it is through the women.\(^{616}\)

As Latvian women and men self-reflect on their homeland, they reveal the centrality of gender and locality in the basic construction of Latvian national identity. Latvian narratives of war and displacement are often stories of border crossings. Many who were deported from Latvia to Siberia, or for those who fled to the West, it was the crossing of multiple boundaries. This was not only an intensely physical and lengthy experience, but also an emotional journey into multiple unknowns. In the oral histories of survivors, borders shaped experiences and memories, reinforcing the notion of loss of national belonging. Astra L., former deportee to Siberia, remembers that for her the most excruciatingly painful moment was when the train car crossed over the boundary of Latvia into Russia.\(^{617}\) Valērija S. recalls: “We crossed the border in tears; it was horrible; a dreary scene opened before us.”\(^{618}\) The more borders they crossed, the farther they travelled from their home country.

\(^{617}\) Lāce, "Life Story Interview, Jēkabpils, Latvia, Archive No. NMV:1099."
Maurīņa emphasizes that her mother did not want to leave Latvia when the Russian front approached. If she had to die, she wanted to be buried next to her late husband. However, while the disabled author lay in a hospital bed in Germany, she received a letter from her older sister Magdalena, stating that the sister and mother had indeed fled and found refuge at a camp in Austria. Upon arrival, her mother nonetheless fell ill and died. Maurīņa’s sad words, “sleeps now in a strange land”\textsuperscript{619} reflect a construction of Latvian identity separated from the territory of Latvia, even in death. Latvian-American author Katrina Schwartz points out that this type of reference is a common expression among exiled Latvians as well as among other communities in diaspora.\textsuperscript{620}

Many Latvians in diaspora and former deportees now living in Latvia continue to self-identify as Latvians with origins linked to a distinctive rural Latvian homeland. Accordingly, to lose one’s dzimtene (native place) was analogous to losing one’s personhood. Many residents and émigrés express in their memories loyalty to and self-identity with to the nation, for example, in the practice of introducing oneself by naming one’s birth-home and the use of the diminutive form for natural objects and barnyard animals. There is also a marked presence of nostalgia in their narratives. Spodra G., a former refugee, identifies herself with her home, Ezeriņi.\textsuperscript{621} Gaida A., a current resident of Rīga, introduces herself as originally from the region of Madona.

\textsuperscript{619} Maurīņa, Dzeļez Aizbīden Lūst, p 364
\textsuperscript{620} Schwartz, Nature and National Identity after Communism Globalizing the Ethnoscape, p 3
\textsuperscript{621} Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI ", Gendrikovs, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI ", Gulbis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI ", Elksnis, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI ",
Saikala’s district Zušviece on the banks of the Aiviekste’s river. Gaida lost her family home when it was burned by the retreating German army. Mirdza S., deported in 1949 to Siberia, begins her life history: “I was born in my father’s home Lidumnieki in 1928.”

During the chaos and suffering of the Second World War, Latvian women sought to preserve tradition, social norms, and customs. This is why Astra L.’s mother made a great effort to bring along her folk costume to Siberia. Her mother wished to be buried in it, just as a soldier might want to be laid to rest in his military uniform. Astra reports sadly that in the end they did not bury their mother in the folk dress after all. They were afraid that the grave may be disturbed for the cloth after all was done. Baiba sewed her folk costume in the Displaced Person’s camp in Germany. “All around Fischbach there was a beautiful pine forest, where I sat, day after day… and sewed and sewed…. The main thing was the rim of the skirt. I did the entire orange rim, sewed on all the designs…. Mother helped me… And finally I had my national costume.” These folk costumes were tangible symbols for both of these women in exile who sought to preserve links to their heritage.

The tradition of folk dress as attire for celebrations began during the first era of the Republic of Latvia in the 1920s and 1930s. Ethnographic expeditions and the study of folk traditions were important methods of creating a sense of unity of the

---

622 Aizsilniece, "Oral History Interview, Riga, Latvia." Staltmane -Redzobas, "Life Story Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, DU MVC:216."
623 Lāce, "Life Story Interview, Jēkabpils, Latvia, Archive No. NMV:1099."
624 Dumpe, "Oral History Interview, Archive No. NMV:863."
people. Different regions of Latvia have costumes with distinctive features passed down through generations. Although both males and females wear the colorfully embroidered folk garments, traditionally it is the women who create the attire for themselves, their husbands and children preserving and continuing the customs of a region. These costumes play an especially important role for women.

When recalling the disruptive impact of the war and occupation, Latvians frequently align their conditions with historical situations in their narratives. Women’s subjective construction of the forced labor directives and the domestic struggles reveal part of their self-identities. Women see themselves as like their ancestral counterparts who endured and overcame feudal oppression. “We had to perform various klaušas [corvees] such as removing snow from streets and other work. But the Germans took our two horses that grandfather had raised in the previous two years.”

In comparison, Latvian men’s memories regarding this period are more frequently expressed in terms of self-sacrifice, courage and a battle for a cause. They often associate their military actions with those of the freedom fighters of previous generations. In their memories of the Second World War, men often identify with the Latvian war of Liberation between 1918 and 1920. “I had an absolutely clear conviction that we were fighting to keep the Russians from getting back into

---

Latvia. "I had promised myself – if I stay alive from this hell [the first Soviet occupation] – then I will do everything in my powers so that Latvia would again be free." 

Women’s narratives of the war years embrace emotion and use symbolic images. When describing the refugee experience, Mauriņa returns again and again to the image of a fallen leaf blown by the wind. Nesaule focuses on a single birch tree, an image of deep meaning rooted in Latvian folklore, as she departs from Latvia’s shore. Irēne C. vividly recalls the air battle on September 14, 1944. “It was a beautiful day. The sun was bright, and the sky was very blue and clear.” Her oldest son Uģis was sitting on his grandfather’s lap. Suddenly, they saw a Russian airplane. Irēne’s father called out: “Look, look! A parachute jumper or something.” Almost immediately, a bomb exploded near their home. The bright sun and clear blue sky suggest safety and security, as well as the realm that is known and understandable, as opposed to the unknown darkness, which is to come. This binary opposition may be representational for Spodra as well. Spodra’s testimony is especially moving as she goes from daylight to darkness in her voyage into the exile. Spodra left Latvia in the darkness of December 2, 1944. “As our ship pulled away from the shore, we bid

---

626 Strautins, "Excerpts from Personal Journal Published on Dzīves Stāsts by Māra Zirnīte."
627 Kuzulis, "Life Story Interview, Washington, DC, Archive No. NMV:815."
628 Zenta Maurina, Dzelz Aizbidni Lust (Toronto, Canada: Astras Apgāds, 1960), 373.
629 Nesaule, A Woman in Amber, p. 42.
630 Celtniece, "Life Story Interview, Archive No. NMV:820."
farewell to Latvia singing our national anthem, God Bless Latvia (Dievs Svēti Latviju), though with the hope and expectation that we would soon return."631

---

631 Gendrikovs, "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI."
APPENDIX A

Definition of Terms

**Collective Memory** – Although each person’s memories are unique, collective memory selects what is considered important in a given population. Because collective memory is constructed by many persons not just by a single individual whose preconceptions may be more personal than societal, the stereotypes embedded in collective memories are a reflection of the culture in which they circulate.

**Cultural Memory** - refers to the texts, ceremonies, images, architectures, and monuments designed to memorialize important events. Cultural memories such as museums, monuments, films and other memorials then offer the possibility of transforming the way in which both the past and the present are conceptualized.

**Deportee** – Someone who is expelled from home or country by authority, often by force.

**Displaced Person** – (sometimes abbreviated DP) – Someone who has been forced to leave his or her native place. A phenomenon known as forced migration.

**Economic Emigrant** – Someone who has migrated out of their home country because of living conditions or opportunities for jobs.

**Émigré** – Someone who has migrated out of their home country. The term often carries implication of politico-social self-exile. In this project, the term is used for voluntary and involuntary exile.
**Historical Memory** – Refers to how we as a society remember the past, and in what form.

**Individual Memory** – A single person’s memories of his or her life and experiences give him/her a sense of where he/she has come from and who he/she is, and can guide him/her decisions about the future.

**Life Story Interview** - Gives the interviewer the choice to tell their life story as they please. Where they start their story and how they tell it reveals what immediately strikes them as important. In Latvia the word *liecība* (testimonial) is frequently used for life stories dealing with the deportations to Siberia, and the suffering of the oppressed during Soviet occupation. The word *liecinieks* means to bear witness. The life story interview “lifts testimony out of the individual and brings out the deeper meaning in the individual’s testimonial through his/her creativity and spontaneity” (Māra Zirnīte).

**Oral History Interview** – Interview guided by a series of questions that the interviewer raises. The main ingredients are the events in discussion.

**Refugee** – Someone who seeks refuge in a new country due to political reasons.

**Testimony or Testimonial** – Testifies to and bears witness to an injustice or suffering. Gives voice to people whose experiences have been misrepresented or neglected. Promises to convey a unique authenticity, and truth.
Date: March 23, 2009

To: Marion Gray, Principal Investigator
    Irene Elksnis Geisler, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 09-03-07

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled “The Gendered Plight of Terror: Annexation and Exile in Latvia 1940-1953” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: March 23, 2010
BIBLIOGRAPHY

PRIMARY SOURCES

Archival Collections

NMV: Latvian National Oral History Project, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Latvia, Rīga, Latvia.

DU MVC: Daugavpils University, Oral History Center, Daugavpils, Latvia.

Oral Testimonies


Plaviņa, Īna "Oral History Interview, Kalamazoo, MI." Interviewed by: Irene Elksnis Geisler on June 18, 2009.


Skrinda, Lidija. "Oral History Interview, Daugavpils, Latvia, Archive No. DU MVC: 150."


Published Primary Sources


Stabiņš, Andrew. Glasenbach Austria. Accessed April 17, 2011,


SECONDARY SOURCES


Bruggemann, Karsten. "The Eastern Sea is a Western Sea: Some Reflections on Estonia as a Baltic Sea Country." In *The Baltic as a Multicultural World: Sea,


