Occupation of Latvia

Three Occupations: 1940–1991

Soviet and Nazi Take-overs and Their Consequences
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Based on the Museum’s archival holdings, exhibition materials and publications.

This publication is supported by the Parliamentary Group of the Union of Greens and Farmers of Latvia. The historical interpretations are solely those of the compilers.

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ISBN 9984-9613-3-8
THE OCCUPATION OF LATVIA 1940-1991:
THREE OCCUPATIONS AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

“Occupation … 7. the seizure and control of an area by military forces, esp. foreign territory. 8. the term of control of a territory by foreign military forces.”

The Random House Dictionary of the English Language

It is not simply a play on words. Military occupation is both an act of aggression and an extended period of presence and control of a territory not its own.

By the first of these definitions Latvia and its territory was occupied three times between 1940 and 1945:

**June 1940**  
by the military forces of the Soviet Union

**June–July 1941**  
by the military forces of Nazi Germany

**July 1944–May 1945**  
by the military forces of the Soviet Union

According to the second definition Latvia was an occupied country from 1940 to 1991 – by two occupying powers. Although both occupiers installed civilian quasi-governments or administrations, effective control of the country and intimidation of the population were assured by the presence of foreign troops. The Russian Army, the successor of the Soviet Army, left Latvia only in 1994, three years after independence was restored.

The first act of occupation sealed the fate of the sovereign state of Latvia and its neighbours Estonia and Lithuania for the next 51 years. It was an unprovoked occupation, take-over and annexation of a small neighbouring state by a major power. The Latvian government of 1940 had to decide between a hopeless, bloody resistance and acquiescence to an ultimatum under the threat of
overwhelming military force. It chose the latter. The regime change was then directed from Moscow under the guise of legality. Latvia as a sovereign state ceased to exist *de facto* but continued to exist *de jure* because many nations refused to recognise the Soviet take-over.

The second and the third occupations were wartime occupations of Latvian territory. The people of Latvia exercised no sovereign power – power passed from occupier to occupier. While the German military occupation came within a couple of weeks and met little Soviet resistance, the second Soviet occupation took close to a year to be completed. The battles devastated much of the country.

These three successive foreign occupations had a cumulative effect on the people and their psyche. The psychological and actual terror of two totalitarian regimes exacted a heavy human toll – destroyed lives, destroyed relationships, destroyed trust. Social and ethnic structures were mercilessly torn apart. The Soviets practised class warfare; the Nazis – racial cleansing. At the end of World War II in Latvia, about 1/3 of its pre-war population was no longer present: killed in war, executed, murdered in the Holocaust, allowed to die by deprivation in prison camps, deported
to the Soviet Union and Germany, scattered in prisoner-of-war and refugee camps. Under Soviet occupation, terror to force people into submission continued in its most cruel forms until the death of Stalin, but repressions did not end until Latvia regained its independence in 1991.

On these pages we detail only the story of the first occupation of Latvia and its destructive effects. The Soviet-German conspiracy of 1939 had divided Eastern Europe between two totalitarian superpowers. The Soviet invasion, take-over and annexation of Latvia in 1940 are crucial markers for the rest of the occupation period and beyond. Although few in the world disagree with the interpretation provided here, Russia, the successor state of the Soviet Union, still clings to the myth put forth and propagated by Communist ideology. It disregards or distorts facts to claim that there was no occupation, but a popular “socialist revolution” in Latvia and the other Baltic states. The subsequent sovietisation of the states and their incorporation into the Soviet Union are presented as a logical – and legitimate – expression of popular will.

Adherence to this Communist myth and refusal to accept and condemn the illegality of the occupation in 1940 and its consequences by Russia are dangerous signs not only for developing mutual relationships between Russia and the Baltic states but for the future role of Russia in the field of international relations in general. Is Russia ready to forego its past ideology and practice, or must its neighbours and the world fear recurrences and relapses for years to come?

The story of the 1940–41 occupation is instructive for its brutal realepolitik. It is a story of cynical disregard for international laws and agreements. It is a story of betrayal and cruelty. It is a story of crimes against humanity. It is the story that presages the other two occupations, both as acts of aggression and as acts of oppression.

**INDEPENDENT LATVIA (1918–1940) AND ITS INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

Latvia became an independent state after World War I. From 1915 on, the war between the Russian and German empires was fought on Latvian soil. The war caused the exodus of hundreds of thousands of Latvians to Russia and left large areas of the country devastated. Units of Latvian Riflemen fought against the invading Germans and for two years helped to stem their advance. In 1917, the Russian Empire, which had been sovereign over Latvian lands since the eighteenth
and support of Western Allies to survive. As it built up trust among the population, the Latvian Army developed into a capable combat force that successfully fended off renegade Germans and by 1920 freed the country from the Red Army.

Soviet Russia (the predecessor of the Soviet Union) recognised Latvia’s independence in a Peace Treaty signed on **11 August 1920**. In its Article 2 Soviet Russia stated that it “unreservedly recognises the independence and sovereignty of the Latvian State and voluntarily and forever renounces all sovereign rights... to Latvian people and territory.” A Non-Aggression Treaty with the Soviet Union was signed on **5 February 1932**, based on the 11 August 1920 treaty, whose agreements, it said, “inalterably and for all time form the firm basis” of the relationship of the two states.
The independence of Latvia was recognised *de jure* by the Allied Supreme Council (France, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Belgium) on **26 January 1921**. Other states followed suit. On **22 September 1921** Latvia was admitted to membership in the League of Nations and remained a member until the League’s dissolution in 1946.

Latvia had to rebuild its political, social and economic life on the ruins of World War I. A popular and successful agrarian reform divided up large baronial estates and provided the basis of existence for the farming population. By the end of the 1930s, Latvia was successfully competing in world markets with its agricultural products and had also built up a successful small and medium industry that produced food, textiles and electronics. The country excelled in education and culture and had made a good start at consolidating its multifaceted society. Like some other new European countries at that time, it had difficulties maintaining a democratic political basis and in 1934 came under the rule of an authoritarian dictatorship. Though democratic political activities were suspended, society still enjoyed most of its civil rights.

When Nazi Germany attacked Poland on **1 September 1939**, Latvia immediately declared its neutrality. Latvia never was a belligerent country in World War II, but it became one of its victims.

**SOVIET–NAZI COLLABORATION 1939–1941**

For almost two years the Soviet Union aided and abetted Hitler’s aggression in Europe. Its treaties with Nazi Germany allowed Hitler to start a war of annihilation against Poland and to take country after country without fear of a second front in the east. Hitler had to pay a price, but not at Germany’s expense: secret agreements gave Stalin not only a part of Poland, but also a free hand in the three Baltic States, Finland, Bessarabia and Bukovina.

Although these secret documents speak clearly, even now the official Russian position does not recognise them for what they are – a license to expand territories at the expense of sovereign states and to subjugate populations at the expense of their inalienable rights. Before the Nazi attack on 22 June 1941, the Soviet Union was in effect an undeclared ally of Nazi Germany.
MOLOTOV–RIBBENTROP PACT AND SECRET PROTOCOL

The fate of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania for the next 50 years was sealed by treaties and secret agreements between the Communist Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR) and National Socialist Germany in August and September 1939.

On 23 August, the foreign ministers of both totalitarian empires signed a treaty of non-aggression, known as the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact or as the Hitler–Stalin Pact. In a secret protocol attached to the document, both powers agreed to divide Poland between themselves and to designate the northern border of Lithuania as the dividing line between German and Soviet “spheres of influence.” Thus Latvia, Estonia and Finland were recognised as belonging to the Soviet “sphere of influence.”

The pact allowed Hitler to invade Poland on 1 September without fearing Soviet interference. This led to the beginning of World War II, when on 3 September Great Britain and France, which had guaranteed Polish borders against German intervention, declared war on Germany.

On 17 September, USSR invaded Poland from the East. On 28 September, Germany and USSR agreed to a precise division of Poland. Further secret protocols added Lithuania to the Soviet “sphere of influence.”
SOVIET MILITARY BASES IN THE BALTIC

The Soviet Union did not hesitate to establish its hegemony in its “sphere of influence.” It forced the Baltic States to sign treaties which made them military and political dependents of the USSR.

Already on 27 September 1939, Stalin informed Ribbentrop about his plans in Estonia and Latvia, in accord with the agreement of 23 August, to begin a “slow penetration.”

Using the escape of an interned Polish submarine from the harbour of Tallinn as a pretext, the Soviet army concentrated its troops on the Estonian border and blockaded its harbours. On 27 September, the Estonian Foreign Minister Karl Selter was summoned to Moscow to sign a treaty of “mutual assistance,” which allowed establishment of Soviet military bases on Estonian territory. Latvia and Lithuania had to sign similar treaties on 5 and 10 October, respectively.

Finland refused to accept Soviet terms, and on 30 November 1939 the Red army invaded. Despite its heroic defence efforts, Finland had to sign an armistice treaty with the USSR on 13 March 1940. It lost a part of its territory but retained its independence.

The Red Army in Latvia in 1939. The Soviet contingent deployed in Latvia was larger than the Latvian army.
ANATOMY OF THE SOVIET OCCUPATION 1940–1941

“2 SOVIET INVASIONS. Red Army Marches into Latvia and Estonia as They Bow to Claims.”

*Headline in the New York Times 17 June 1940*

“During these past few days the devious processes where-under the political independence and territorial integrity of the three small Baltic republics – Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – were to be deliberately annihilated by one of their more powerful neighbors, have been rapidly drawing to their conclusion.”

*Statement of the United States Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles on 23 July 1940*

“By the summer of 1940, a revolutionary situation had developed in Latvia. Under the leadership of the Communist Party of Latvia, a Socialist Revolution took place. Confronted by the demands of the working class, the bourgeois government stepped down. Democratic elections took place, and the new Saeima, heeding the demands of the working class, established the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic. It became the fifteenth member of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on 5 August 1940.”

*The events of June and July 1940 in Latvia as narrated in Soviet history textbooks*

“There was an occupation in 1940.”

*Soviet-era journalist Mavriks Vulfsons addressing the Latvian Writers’ Union Congress 1 and 2 June 1988, an early harbinger of the “singing revolution” 1988–1991*

The Soviet occupation in 1940 ended Latvia’s sovereignty and began a 51-year period of foreign rule. Soviet authorities had nothing to fear from the Nazis, because the Nazis had secretly assured the Soviet Union a free hand in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. Of the countries that had helped Latvia gain independence none could help. France was defeated. Great Britain had been pushed out of the continent. The United States were still standing aside. The Baltic countries had no friends.
and for 51 years their only hope was the steadfast refusal by many of the Western states to recognise the legality of the Soviet occupation and annexation.

Soviet historiography had every reason to hide the truth and create myths about the occupation of Latvia in 1940. It also had to hide the truth about the secret collaboration with Nazi Germany. The Soviets successfully blocked the use of the Hitler-Stalin Pact as evidence at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trial in 1945. In the Soviet Union the secret amendments were officially denounced as falsifications. Only in 1989 were the “long-lost” secret documents found and acknowledged by Soviet authorities.

Here is what really happened in the summer of 1940 and the entire year of the first Soviet occupation in Latvia.

**SOVIET ATTACK, ULTIMATUM AND INVASION OF LATVIA**

The occupation of Latvia was a brutal act of aggression by a superpower against a numerically small sovereign neighbour.

On the morning of 15 June 1940, Soviet NKVD troops attacked three border posts in Eastern Latvia, killing three border guards and the wife and son of one of the guards. The troops captured 10 border guards and 27 civilians, and took them to the USSR.

On 16 June 1940, the Latvian government received an ultimatum from the USSR, which was to be answered in six hours. Using unfounded accusations, the USSR charged Latvia with violating the mutual assistance pact of 1939 and demanded that Latvia immediately form a new government, as well as let an unlimited number of Soviet troops into the country.

Taking into consideration the size of the Soviet army, the presence
of its military bases in Latvia and the ruthlessness of the attack on the border, as well as the fate of Poland, the government conceded. In hopes of avoiding further violence, the government ordered its troops to cooperate with Soviet forces, and on 17 June 1940 the Red Army occupied Latvia.

MOSCOW ORCHESTRATES THE TAKE-OVER

The goal of the Soviet occupiers was to undermine Latvia’s sovereignty and annex the country to the USSR by force, simultaneously creating the impression that it was done democratically.

Andrei Y. Vishinsky, Deputy Chairman of the Council of the People’s Commissars of the USSR, came from Moscow to guide the establishment of Soviet occupation rule. On 19 June 1940, Vishinsky submitted a list of Moscow approved new Cabinet members to President Kārlis Ulmanis. The list named mainly non-Communists, led by biology Professor Augusts Kirchenšteins, and Ulmanis accepted it. At that time, the Communist Party in Latvia was small, with a membership of about 400, and its influence in the country was negligible.

CREATING A “REVOLUTIONARY SITUATION”

Along with the Soviet Red Army, Communist provocateurs arrived in Latvia. They organised demonstrations to demand that Ulmanis be removed as President and that the Constitution, which he had suspended, be re-instated. Prisoners were released. These were mostly convicted criminals, but also some convicted for illegal political activities. Mass rallies were carefully planned and strictly supervised. The occupation power organised militia units of armed trustworthy citizens, who partly took over police functions.

COMMUNIST-STYLE SINGLE SLATE “ELECTIONS”

Under the guise of restoring democracy and seemingly responding to “people’s demands,” the occupation power announced elections of the Saeima (Parliament), totally ignoring fundamental principles of free democratic elections.

The list of candidates of the Latvian Working People’s Block, approved by the occupation power, was declared as the only one “conforming to all requirements
of the law.” The election of the Saeima took place on 14 and 15 July, under strict supervision of the occupation authorities and the Red Army. Moscow announced the official results for the only possible list: in Latvia, it was 97.6%, in Estonia 92.8% and in Lithuania 99.2%.

Headline of the Communist Party newspaper Cīņa (Struggle) on 13 July 1940: “Tomorrow and the Day after Tomorrow Elections to the Saeima – Everyone for the Latvian Working People’s Block! For Peace, for Bread and for the Nation’s Freedom!” The left columns are headlined: “No Cause to Worry about Property.” On the right are instructions for voting. Instruction 8 reads: “Only the list of the Latvian Working People’s Block, which you will get in the polling station, must be deposited in the ballot box.” Instruction 9: “Candidates’ names on the ballot must not be crossed out nor new ones added. The ballot must be deposited without any changes.”

UNANIMOUS VOTE TO JOIN THE SOVIET UNION

The new Saeima, compliant with the occupation power, held its first meeting on 21 July 1940, where it unanimously and illegally declared Latvia as a “socialistic soviet” republic, and voted to petition the Supreme Council of the USSR for admission of Latvia into the Soviet Union.

This action of the Saeima was illegal because it did not comply with the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia, adopted in 1922. The Constitution states that Latvia is an independent, democratic republic (Article 1), that Latvia’s sovereign power belongs to its people (Article 2) and that these clauses can be amended only by a nationwide plebiscite (Article 77).

ANNEXATION AS INCORPORATION

The annexation of Latvia was the final act of power politics that denied the small nation any remnants of sovereignty and completely subjected it to the ideological and political dictates of Communism.
On 5 August, the Supreme Council of the USSR unanimously admitted Latvia as the 15th Republic of the Soviet Union. On 3 August, the Supreme Council had already accepted Lithuania as the 14th Republic, and on 6 August, Estonia was admitted as the 16th Republic.

The government of the Latvian SSR became the executor of Moscow’s decrees and orders without the authority to act on its own.

**LATVIA CONTINUES TO EXIST IN INTERNATIONAL LAW**

Although Latvia had lost its sovereignty on its own territory, many nations did not acknowledge its annexation, even up until Latvia regained its independence in 1991. Diplomatic representation of independent Latvia continued in Washington, London and elsewhere during the entire period of occupation.

Excerpt from a 23 July 1940 note of US Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles.

Fearing the worst, the Latvian government had granted emergency powers in May 1940 to its Envoy in Great Britain Kārlis Zariņš. Should the government in Riga not be able to carry out its duties, he would have to represent independent Latvia’s interests in the free world.

Excerpt from a note of protest submitted by the Latvian Envoy Kārlis Zariņš to the British Foreign Office on 23 July 1940.

On 23 July 1940, Zariņš protested Latvia’s incorporation into the USSR, describing it as an unconstitutional act. The same day, US Undersecretary of State Sumner Welles condemned the “devious processes” that had “deliberately annihilated” the independence of the Baltic States and had integrated their territories into the Soviet Union.
THE DESTRUCTION OF LATVIA’S ARMED FORCES

The occupation power hurried to neutralise any possible armed resistance and assumed control over all Latvian military and paramilitary organisations and units.

In the first week, the occupation government ordered the disarmament of the Home Guard (*Aizsargi*) organisation. The Guard had existed since 1919 as a voluntary patriotic, paramilitary organisation. On 10 July, President Kārlis Ulmanis was forced to sign the order to abolish the Home Guard.

A new high command was appointed for the Latvian Army. By 8 July, the army was placed under the ideological control of Red Army political commissars. On 11 July, when Latvia was still ostensibly independent, the People’s Defence Commissar of the USSR, Marshal Semion Timoshenko, ordered formation of the Baltic Military District of the USSR. The Latvian Army was renamed the People’s Army, and incorporated into the Red Army as the 24th Territorial Corps.

Latvian officers were replaced by commanders from the Red Army. The most senior Latvian officers were ordered to report for “special courses” in Moscow, where they were either shot or deported to GULAG camps. In the spring of 1941, units of the 24th Territorial Corps were sent for summer training to the former Latvian Army base at Liepāja in north-eastern Latvia. On 14 June 1941, the remaining officers, while on an alleged training mission, were disarmed, arrested and deported to Norilsk, north of the Arctic Circle in Siberia, where they were sentenced to death or long-term imprisonment.

NATIONALISATION OF PROPERTY AND COLLECTIVISATION OF FARMS

Two integral components of Communist ideology were put into effect quickly: the nationalisation of private property, and the collectivisation and “proletarisation” of farming. National economy was subjected to state central planning.

Already on 26 July, before the admission of Latvia into the USSR, the occupation authorities declared all land as “property of the people,” allowing farmers to keep only up to 30 hectares (75 acres) and promising to divide the remainder among those with very little or no land.

Disregarding the pre-election announcement that private property would not be affected, the Latvian SSR government set to work confiscating it within the first
days of annexation. Factories and banks were nationalised first, then large properties such as buildings, private stores and other businesses.

**REPRESSION OF RELIGION AND PERSECUTION OF CHURCHES**

Religion and churches, synagogues and other places of worship were immediately subjected to repression, as they had the potential to be centres of spiritual resistance.

The observance of religious holidays was forbidden, and religion was no longer allowed to be taught as a subject in schools. Atheist propaganda replaced religion. At the University of Latvia, the Lutheran Faculty of Theology and its Roman Catholic counterpart were eliminated, as was the Department of Orthodox Christian Theological Studies.

The clergy was not allowed to perform its civic responsibilities, such as legally recognised weddings and the registration of births and deaths.

**SUBJUGATION OF SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE TO COMMUNISM**

The policy of Sovietisation manifested itself by subordinating all social and cultural activities to Communist ideology and the control of the Communist Party.

Already in the first week of occupation, the new government began to shut down and liquidate independent social and fraternal organisations.

“Creative unions” were formed for writers, musicians and artists. They had to control creative work in accordance with Communist ideology, produce works
that glorified the system, support those faithful to the ideology, while “re-educating” the defiant.

The state took over and controlled printing and distribution of all books. Books that did not correspond to the official Communist ideology were removed from stores and libraries.

All publications were subjected to censorship. The press had to reflect the official views of the government and the Communist Party.

COMMUNIST EDUCATION OF YOUTH

Bringing up the youth in the Communist spirit was one of the fundamentals of Sovietisation. The teachings of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin were interwoven in the educational curricula from pre-school to university. Marxism-Leninism became a mandatory subject, and schoolchildren and students were forced to participate in Communist demonstrations.

Youth organisations that had existed in independent Latvia, such as the Girl Guides, Boy Scouts, Christian groups and student organisations, were all abolished. Young Pioneer and Communist Youth organisations based on USSR models were formed.

NATIONAL RESISTANCE

In the short 20-year period of independence, the people of Latvia had developed a sense of loyalty towards their young country. They had accepted the fundamentals of a civil society, and the forced imposition of Communist ideology was not acceptable for the majority of the people.

One of the best organised resistance groups was called the Officers Union. It set as its task the interpretation of current

Illegal leaflets. Above: “Latvians! Decide between freedom or slavery. You must not vote on 12 January 1941 for slavery, poverty. Latvians, save your strength to fight for a new free Latvia. Down with foreign rule!”
events and the maintenance of patriotic self-confidence. Secondary school students, supported by patriotic teachers, were also active in the resistance movement.

The Cheka intensively combated all resistance organisations, rounding up, sentencing and imprisoning or executing many of the participants.

THE REPRESSIVE TERROR MECHANISMS – ARTICLE 58

The Soviet repressions were carried out by the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD) and the People’s Commissariat for State Security (NKGB), which was created in early 1941. These repressive institutions are still called by the name of their first embodiment Cheka (All-Russian Extraordinary Commission), founded in December 1917 and known in the West by its most recent abbreviation KGB (State Security Committee).

Cheka was to “render harmless” those deemed “anti-Soviet elements.” It used a wide web of informants. To legalise persecution, new laws were given retroactive power.

The Latvian SSR’s People’s Commissar, Minister for State Security Semion Shustin and People’s Commissar for Internal Affairs Alfons Noviks had unlimited, arbitrary power to enforce decisions of the Communist Party. The signature of either was sufficient for a death sentence. Arrests began already on 5 August 1940. According to Article 58 of the 1926 Criminal Code of Soviet Russia, anyone could be accused of “anti-Soviet activities,” “counterrevolutionary” crimes or of being “disloyal to the Soviet regime.”

The basement of the Cheka headquarters in Riga served as torture and execution chambers. In order to obtain false confessions from innocent people, interrogation and torture could last for weeks, a method legal in the USSR. Common sentences were death or long prison terms under inhumane conditions in special GULAG camps.
MASS DEPORTATIONS TO DISTANT REGIONS OF THE USSR:
PRISON CAMPS AND FORCED RESETTLEMENT

Mass deportations to far parts of the USSR were one of the Cheka’s most dreaded instruments of terror. While waves of mass deportations had swept across the USSR during collectivisation and terror campaigns of the 1930s, the first large-scale deportation in Latvia occurred on 14 June 1941.

In the night from 13 to 14 June, about 15 500 Latvian residents (0.8% of the population) – among them 2400 children under ten – were arrested without a court order. Targeted were mainly families who had members in leading positions in state and local governments, economy and culture.

The people were awakened in the night and given less than one hour to prepare for the journey. They could take with them only what they could carry, and everything left behind was confiscated by the state. They were herded into cattle or freight railroad cars. Many died on the way, especially infants, the sick and the elderly. Men, about 8300, were separated from their families, arrested, and sent to hard labour camps. Women and children were taken to so-called “administrative settlements.”

Conditions in the hard labour camps were inhumane. The inmates became numbers and were terrorised by guards and criminal prisoners. Food rations did not replace the calories expended through work. People grew weak and were crippled by diarrhea, scurvy and other illnesses. Winters were unendurably cold, and many did not survive the first one. Only a few of those deported in 1941 and sent to hard labour camps later returned to Latvia.
DEPORTATION AND EXECUTION OF POLITICAL PRISONERS

On 22 June 1941, National Socialist Germany attacked the USSR. That day, the Cheka began to organise the deportation of political prisoners to prisons and labour camps in the heart of the USSR, to continue interrogation, torture and sentencing.

From Latvia, about 3600 prisoners were assembled in special trains that departed by 26 June. Less than 1% of the prisoners were able to return to Latvia.

Those who remained or were arrested later were shot and buried in mass graves. After the Red Army retreated, hastily covered graves were found at the Riga Central Prison, Baltezers, Rēzekne, Ulbroka and other locations.

OCCUPATIONS AS “LIBERATIONS”

The second and the third occupations were called “liberations” by the occupiers. The Nazis “liberated” the country from Communist tyranny. The Soviets “liberated” it from Nazi tyranny. There was a grain of truth in both – indeed relief was felt after one year of Soviet rule, and indeed the second Soviet occupation averted the unrealised Nazi plans of subjugation and Germanisation of the Baltic States. But neither “liberation” brought true liberty to the Baltic States and their peoples.

An appeal an 8 July 1941 to “Latvian soldiers, Home Guardsmen, Policemen and Patriots” to form Self-Defence units. The members are advised to wear Latvian uniforms and an armband in Latvian national colours. Signed “in agreement with the German army command” by the Commander of Self-Defence Colonel Plensners and his Chief of Staff Deglavs.

Order of 11 July by German Field Commander Colonel Petersen forbidding the use of Latvian uniforms by all Latvian units.
In its first year of occupation, 1940–41, the Soviet Communist regime had laid the groundwork for what was resumed during the second occupation – the complete subjugation and Sovietisation of the Latvian people and colonisation of the country. But the brutality of Soviet rule had also inadvertently laid the groundwork for the Nazi occupation by making possible the type of co-operation that the Nazis at first received from the relieved local population. This co-operation later provided the Soviet authorities with unexpected tools of intimidation and oppression.

THE NAZI GERMAN OCCUPATION 1941–1944/45

It is most unlikely that German troops would have received a warm welcome if they had come as the occupiers of independent Latvia. For centuries, Latvians viewed their German barons as oppressors. Latvian Riflemen fought alongside Russian soldiers in World War I, for two years keeping the Wehrmacht out of Riga. And yet after one year of Soviet terror most of the population felt relief when the German army drove the Red Army out of Latvia and there was hope that independence would be restored.

The Nazis used these sentiments to their advantage. They wanted to be perceived as liberators. They wanted Latvians to co-operate and collaborate with them – out of gratitude. Of course, they did not mention that the Soviet occupation had been made possible by their secret collusion with the Soviet Union.

But Nazi manipulation of Latvian sentiments of relief had a more sinister purpose. The German plans for the attack on the Soviet Union included plans for the mass
annihilation of Jews in the conquered territories. It had to look like a spontaneous outburst of the local population’s rage against the hated Jews. However, as was admitted by Walter Stahlecker, the German Sicherheitsdienst (SD) General, who came to Latvia with Operative Group A of 900 men to supervise the annihilation, there was no such rage. There was no tradition of Jewish pogroms in Latvia. But there was rage against Communists, and this was redirected to include Jews by remaking them into Jews-Bolsheviks and holding them responsible for Soviet victims whose graves were being unearthed and bodies placed on display in gruesome detail. Even this did not bring about the desired effect. The population did not spontaneously turn against their fellow citizens, and the Nazis had to find collaborators, form Latvian units and establish a command structure to direct the systematic murder of Latvia’s Jews. That, however, worked all too efficiently, and by the end of 1941 most of Latvia’s Jews, about 65–70 000, were killed, a month before the infamous “final solution” was announced at Wannsee. What worked as well was the deliberate attempt to make it look like a Latvian operation, although the Germans were always the ones issuing the commands. The most recent research clearly reveals the insidious nature of the operation.

The Germans demanded to be celebrated as liberators and they could afford to equivocate about independence to the very end. Thus Latvians were initially willing to volunteer, to co-operate, even collaborate, because the Germans’ enemy was their enemy. But this willingness wore off quickly as
The German policies became more and more coercive and co-operation meant simply following German orders.

As the war continued, Germany needed more soldiers. Late 1941 and 1942, Latvian men were recruited into so-called “police battalions,” most of which became front-line units, but some of which at times were used for suppressive operations behind the lines. By 1943, however, Latvians were not eager to volunteer, and the Germans created a “Latvian SS Volunteer Legion.” That was a sinister device to avoid transgressing the Hague Convention’s rules against conscripting people of occupied countries on the one hand, and to create the impression of a national legion on the other. The Latvian Legion was neither a legion of volunteers, nor an independent Latvian fighting unit, though some Latvian leaders hoped it would become such after the Germans lost the war. About 115,000 Latvian men were enlisted in various German military formations, only about 15% of them as true volunteers.

Although the Legion was a true front-line unit and was engaged only in military operations against Soviet forces, it bore the “SS” designation. After the war, the Western Allies recognised that the Latvian unit was in no way connected to Hitler’s criminal bodyguard, but even today both ignorance and deliberate disinformation about the Latvian Legion abounds, especially as spread by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Even though to many Latvians the Nazi occupation seemed more benign than the Soviet one, it was no less cruel and exploitative, affecting various
population groups. There were Latvians in German concentration camps – several thousand are known to have died there, and there were close to 20,000 Latvian forced labourers in Germany.

When the Red Army reoccupied Latvia in 1944, refugees preceded its advance – people fled in fishing boats across the Baltic Sea to Sweden. Most, however, the Germans evacuated by ship to Germany. Many, especially members of the cultural, political and economic elite, left Latvia fearing the repeat of 1940/41. Few thought that they were leaving for longer than a few months, hoping for a post-war settlement which would restore independence to the Baltic States in the spirit of the Atlantic Charter and the United Nations Declaration. After the end of the war, some 130,000 Latvians remained in the West much longer than they had originally expected.

THE SECOND SOVIET OCCUPATION 1944/45–1991

The second Soviet occupation returned with major battles that devastated much of Latvia and lasted, in Western Latvia, until the last day of the war on 8 May 1945. Men who had escaped or dodged German conscription or had deserted were drafted into the Red Army. More than 60,000 were sent into war, oftentimes against Latvian units on the German side. It is estimated that close to 200,000 Latvians were involved in this foreign “total war,” in which their country was not a belligerent. It is estimated that up to a half were killed in action.

It was now the Soviets’ turn to play the part of “liberator.” Parts of the population that had indeed suffered under the German occupation were relieved, but for most “liberation”
meant the return of 1940/41. Now the Nazi occupation was used as a tool of intimidation and suppression. The term “fascist” was applied indiscriminately to all who were not Communists or fellow travellers, especially the “bourgeois nationalists” who adhered to the ideas of a national state. Soviet operative groups ferreted out and “filtered” all suspected and actual collaborators, including people who had been coerced into performing services for the Germans. Prisoners of war and arrested persons were sent to prison camps in the far north of the Soviet Union. Even now, in 2004, the Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation persists in indiscriminately branding Latvian soldiers, on whom the Nazis pinned the designation “SS,” as war criminals.

That the Soviet return was not “liberation” for large parts of the population is attested by the little known fact that, hoping for Western intervention, a major partisan war erupted after 1945. It was strongest until 1949, but in sporadic fashion it continued until 1956. About 20 000 participated in the guerrilla warfare and they had about 80 000 active supporters among the population. The Soviets engaged major forces in battling the “bandits,” as they called them.

Only a mass deportation in 1949, broke the back of the armed resistance. About 43 000 people (2.4% of the total population), mainly farmers, overwhelmingly ethnic Latvians, were deported to Siberia to be resettled for life. This action not only deprived the partisans of their infrastructure but also resulted in the destruction of Latvia’s agriculture – the backbone of Latvian economy before the war.

A group of partisans in Kurzeme photographed by KGB agent Marģeis Vižoliņš.

Map showing (in gray) areas of partisan activities, 1945–49. Partisan activity decreased significantly after the mass deportation of 1949.
The Soviet Army made much of Latvia into an armed military camp. Riga was the headquarters of the Baltic Military District and large areas were taken over for military purposes: army camps, rocket bases, bombing and artillery ranges, ammunition dumps, airfields, naval installations. Much of the coastal area was turned into a forbidden zone. The army was used to suppress, control and intimidate the local population. It is significant that the Russian Army, successor of the Soviet Army, left Latvia reluctantly three years after the restoration of independence, in 1994, and that some 20 000 retired army personnel stayed as residents in the country whose occupation they had guaranteed.

Partly because of population loss – estimated at 1/3 of the pre-war population of 2 000 000, but also because Latvians had to be subdued, controlled and eventually homogenised into a Russian-speaking homo sovieticus mass, immigration and settlement of migrants from other areas of the Soviet Union became the policy until the very end of Soviet rule. Latvia’s Russian minority, which before the war had been about 10%
of the population, grew into a majority in the largest Latvian cities and reached 34% of total population, while ethnic Latvians by 1989 decreased from 75% to 52%.

The Soviet immigration policy became an issue already in the 1950s, when the so-called Latvian National Communists tried to oppose Sovietisation and Russification. They were quickly purged and their efforts denounced. Latvia had to remain a province without its own leadership. The Latvian Communist Party was heavily financed from Moscow and its membership had only a minority of ethnic Latvians.

The second Soviet occupation is best designated as colonisation, including Sovietisation and Russification. The country was governed from Moscow, with the local Communist Party and state apparatus dutifully fulfilling administrative

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![Census Data Chart](chart.png)

The new Communist leadership in Riga. The presidium of the XVIIIth Congress of the Latvian Communist Party, September 1961. At the rostrum the First Secretary of the LCP Arvīds Pelše.
Heavy industry was built up, raw materials were imported and production exported. Workers were recruited from outside Latvia. Much of Latvia’s research and production served the needs of the Soviet military complex. The entire bureaucratic and managerial apparatus was overwhelmingly Russian, and all official correspondence was conducted in Russian. The Latvian language in its own country became a minority language, since few Russian immigrants chose to learn it — but all Latvians had to learn Russian.

Resistance, though no longer armed, continued. The organised groups, such as the “Independence Movement of Latvia,” were relatively small, but unorganised resistance and dissidence encompassed large numbers of the population, also involving writers, artists and musicians in Soviet-style creative unions, as well as informal folklore, environmental and rock music groups.

functions. Latvia was completely isolated from the world outside the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence. The once flourishing cultural, social, political and economic contacts with the West were disrupted, and the country was forcibly oriented toward the East. Latvia’s economy served the needs of the greater Soviet Union.

Letter of 17 Latvian Communists to foreign Communist Parties smuggled out of Latvia in 1972.

THE LIBERATION 1987–1994

The wide extent of opposition and dissidence became clear in the second half of the 1980s when, in the spirit of glasnost, the regime relaxed its control over society and censorship of the media. Among the first social organizations founded was the human rights group “Helsinki ’86.” It organised the first large demonstration in 1987 to commemorate the mass deportation on 14 June 1941. Such commemorative events gained momentum. On the 70th anniversary of Latvian Independence Day in 1988, a large assembly around the Freedom Monument in Riga demonstrated with Latvian flags under the watchful eyes of riot militia. On the 50th anniversary of the Hitler-Stalin Pact in 1989, some 2 000 000 joined hands across the Baltic from Tallinn through Riga to Vilnius, the Baltic capital cities. On 18 November 1989, about 500 000 demonstrated in Riga.

Human rights demands became political ones. The “Latvian National Independence Movement” (LNNK) was a harbinger in 1988. The “Latvian Popular Front” (LTF), founded with the support of nationally inclined members of the Latvian Communist Party, became a mass movement that involved large segments of the population. Although there were attempts to establish an electorate on the basis of Latvian citizens only, the 1990 elections of a new “Supreme Council of the Latvian SSR” were held under Soviet election law, which allowed participation of all residents. These, however, were the first democratic elections under the Soviet regime, and the LTF gained absolute majority. On 4 May 1990 the Supreme Council followed Lithuania and Estonia by passing a law renewing the Republic of Latvia and

“Helsinki’ 86” demonstration at the Freedom Monument on 14 June 1987 to commemorate the victims of the 1941 deportation. Eva Biteniece and Rolands Silarups proceeding to place flowers.
reinstating its constitution. The USSR tried to suppress the independence movements through decrees and economic boycotts. Bloodshed erupted on 13 January 1991, when Soviet troops attacked important government objects in Vilnius, Lithuania. Expecting the worst, some 100 000 Latvians erected barricades in Riga to protect major government buildings. When a coup in Moscow attempted to re-establish a Communist dictatorship, the Supreme Council of Latvia voted to declare full and complete independence and sovereignty on 21 August 1991. Latvia was soon recognised as a sovereign state by most countries of the world, including the Soviet Union. It was accepted as a member of the United Nations on 18 September 1991, the World Bank on 10 November 1992, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on 31 January 1995. Latvia became a member of NATO on 29 March 2004 and the European Union on 1 May 2004.

All Latvians had wanted all along was independence and freedom. They have it at last.
A mass rally on the banks of Daugava in Riga 18 November 1989.

Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.
CONSEQUENCES OF THE OCCUPATIONS

If the events preceding the renewal of independence are not expression enough of the popular will of Latvia and a clear enough rejection of the three occupations and their regimes, no proof will suffice. But Latvian historians are unearthing long-hidden secret documents that reveal the conspiracies and lies of both the Communist regime of the Soviet Union and the National Socialist regime in Germany. These conspiracies led to Latvia’s losing its independence and the subjection of its people to years of intimidation and terror. The lies kept proclaiming that the victims were happy fellow travellers to a Nazi “New Europe” or a Communist utopia. Nothing was further from the truth.

Latvia was occupied three times by military force. It was kept occupied and oppressed for fifty-one years by foreign powers which did not want the country to be independent and its people to be free. The consequences of the occupation are still present and keep the country from fully realising its new-found independence and freedom.

Consequences in the human and social realm include:

• Damaging demographic changes. Ethnic Latvians, who constituted more than 75% in pre-occupation Latvia, now constitute only about 58%. The traditional German minority has disappeared from Latvia. The Jewish minority has become minuscule. The traditional Russian minority before the war constituted about 10% of the population, located mostly in Eastern Latvia. Now ethnic Russians constitute 29%, most of them Soviet-era immigrants living in the major cities. Belarussian and Ukranian settlers have considerably increased the percentages of their ethnic groups. The presence of a large contingent of ethnic Russian immigrants and the loss of historical minorities has disrupted the traditional social structure of the country.

• Presence of potentially disruptive or disloyal immigrant groups. The large number of settlers from other parts of the former Soviet Union includes a considerable number of retired former Soviet military personnel, former members of the ruling Communist nomenklatura.
and managerial infrastructure who still profess allegiance to their former country. Some of these groups demand a return to the status quo of the occupation: automatic citizenship without naturalisation for all immigrants, recognition of Russian as a second state language.

- Slow recovery of education and research from Soviet-oriented approaches and subject matter. The long isolation from the rest of the world and its main languages has left many branches, especially the humanities and social sciences, behind current developments. The Soviet two-track Latvian and Russian school system still in existence is not conducive to social integration, and its reform has become an ideological battleground.

- Russification of the Latvian language and its relegation to a limited secondary status. These effects are considerable and persistent. The Latvian language is only slowly regaining its primacy, overcoming the effects of its long subjection to Soviet language politics and isolation from other world languages. Acquisition of Latvian, not necessary during the occupation, is still being resisted by many immigrants, who demand recognition of Russian as an official language.

- Mental and moral damage among the indigenous population. Those who suffered directly from Soviet persecution never completely regained their status and place in society. They were officially and unofficially treated as second-class persons. The totalitarian control over society, the pervasive and ubiquitous Soviet propaganda, the Soviet system of promotion by co-optation through the Communist Party, the persistent advancement of Russian interests and the relegation of the indigenous population to second-class social status have left a lasting imprint on the social psyche. Lack of initiative, inability to function effectively in a free democratic society, overdependence on the state as the provider are some of the after-effects of the Soviet command society.
Economic and physical consequences include:

- Slow recovery of Latvian economy from Soviet policies, which had transformed the country’s economy into an appendage of the Soviet Union, particularly of its military needs, and left behind useless and mostly outdated factories, labour-intensive manufacturing practices and Soviet-style managerial skills – useless in a modern economy.

- Lingering effects of long years of forced farm collectivisation, which destroyed traditional farming as such, deprived farmers of their property and farming know-how and disrupted normal economic development of the countryside.

- Lingering effects of Soviet military presence include pollution, discarded live ammunition, decaying infrastructure and rocket silos. It will require decades of effort to eliminate the damage. Areas heavily militarised and placed under special restrictions along the Western coast, including the city of Liepāja, were hampered in their economic development and are now making a delayed recovery.

The damage inflicted on Latvia by the three successive occupations is inestimable. Latvia’s accession to NATO and the European Union are seen as guarantees of its future, but this does not make up for past crimes against humanity and past iniquities committed during fifty-one years of foreign rule. Of the original two conspirators against international law, who conspired to deprive Latvia of its independence and subject its people to lawlessness, one was defeated in World War II, and its successor state, the Federal Republic of Germany, has gone a long way to make amends to those against whom Nazi Germany committed grievous crimes. The successor state of the other conspirator, Russia, has failed to do so. Furthermore, it continues to adhere to Soviet myths and distortions:

- by refusing to acknowledge the present Republic of Latvia as the continuation of the Republic, that declared its independence on 18 November 1918;
• by refusing to acknowledge the Peace Treaty and its provisions of 11 August 1920 between Soviet Russia and Latvia;

• by refusing to acknowledge the true nature of the 1939 agreements between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union;

• by refusing to acknowledge the fact of Latvia’s occupation on 17 June 1940;

• by refusing to acknowledge crimes against humanity committed by the Soviet Union on Latvian soil and against the Latvian people.

These refusals are an important part of present Russian foreign policy. Only thus can Russia continue accusing Latvia in international institutions of violating human rights of a Soviet immigrant population that has no basic claim to the status of a historical minority because it came to Latvia in contravention of Article 49 (Section III) of the 1949 Geneva Convention (IV) to ensure Soviet rule over Latvia. Only thus can Russia continue supporting disloyal Russian immigrant groups in Latvia that make demands on the Latvian state far exceeding rights recognised by other international bodies. And only thus can Russia continue branding victims of occupation as perpetrators.

The least that Latvia can expect from the successor state of the Soviet Union is acknowledgment of Soviet occupation, of the crimes against humanity committed and the damages inflicted during the occupation. This should also be the expectation of the international community and its institutions. International justice and moral integrity demand no less.
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Museum of the Occupation of Latvia

The Museum of the Occupation of Latvia was established in Riga in 1993 by the Occupation Museum Foundation (OMF) to

* show what happened to Latvia, its land and people under two occupying totalitarian regimes from 1940 to 1991;
* remind the world of the crimes committed by foreign powers against the state and people of Latvia;
* remember the victims of the occupation: those who perished, were persecuted, forcefully deported or fled the terror of the occupation regimes.

The Museum exhibits introduce visitors to the 51 years of occupation – first Soviet occupation (1940-1941), the National Socialist German Occupation (1941-1944/45), the second Soviet occupation (1944/45-1991). Historical documents, artefacts and pictures testify to oppression and persecution, but also to defiance and resistance; to inhuman conditions in prisons and Siberian exile, but also to the strength of the human spirit in extreme adversity. Museum texts and explanations are provided in Latvian, English, German and Russian. Of the more than 60 000 annual visitors, most come from abroad.

Museum Archives and Collections gather and preserve artefacts of the occupation period. The Audio-Visual Programme prepares video recordings of eye-witness accounts. The Education Programme presents teacher seminars, conducts student activities in the Museum, develops teaching materials and organises a touring Museum exhibit for schools. The Research Programme prepares the Museum’s scholarly Yearbook. The Museum’s travelling exhibitions have been shown in many cities of Europe, as well as in North America and Australia.

The Museum is maintained and administered by the Occupation Museum Foundation, a public non-profit organization. It is supported largely by donations from Latvians abroad and museum visitors. The Latvian government provides some support for the upkeep of the building and special projects.

The Museum of the Occupation of Latvia

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