

Riga 1905–2005: A City with Conflicting Identities

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Although largely forgotten in the West, the history of the Baltic city of Riga appears particularly interesting. Traditionally founded as a German trading counter at the Eastern fringe of the “civilized” world, it turned into a Hanseatic city¹ in the late 13th century, and later into a largely German metropolis with the large *Hinterland* of the Russian Empire, to end up as the overdimensioned capital of a “small” country during the independences.

The most striking characteristic of the Baltic metropolis is that it stood for centuries on the confrontation line between two major cultural imperialisms, the powerful *Deutschtum* and the complex and Russian culture. Between the 15th century and World War I, the whole history of the city can be seen as a fight between East and West taking place in a nutshell. In the late 19th century the wave of national awakening added to this situation the quest for Latvian identity (and later nationhood).²

Due to its strategic geographical position, indeed Riga found itself in the very centre of the turmoil and was the theatre of several chronological confrontations: Latvians versus Germans, then from 1720 till 1905, Germans versus Russians, then, between 1905 and 1935, Latvians versus Germans and, since, Latvians versus Russians, without taking into account the two World Wars, when the city suffered several devastating occupations. It consequently underwent several radical changes. However, the centre of the city, especially the old town, has survived practically unchanged to this day, and thus still shows an unusual stratification of various intermingled influences. Though at the borders of the Russian Empire, Riga was actually never a provincial town. It falls into the category of *capital towns*, where each period, each successive domination, has left its imprint, elaborating a construction facilitating the understanding of history.

¹ Riga joined the *Hansa* in 1280.

² As well as that of other “small” peoples, especially the Jews.

Before 1914: Capital of the Baltic Provinces: Hanseatic town of the Russian Empire

At the end of the Great Northern War (1721), which Peter the Great won over the Swedes, Riga became Russian and soon was to be the most important economic and cultural centre of the North-West region, only superseded by Saint Petersburg at the end of 18th century.

After the reign of Alexander III,³ the city took full advantage of the opportunity of the opening of Russia to foreign investments, thanks to its trade traditions and to its well educated and polyglot population. The dramatic events of the 1905 Revolution burst in a town which flourishes as the prosperous seat of the Russian Empire's Governorate of Livonia (*Guberniya*), and the second harbour of the Empire. With more than 282 000 inhabitants,⁴ it is undergoing the process of a fantastic growth. From an urbanistic point of view, it is then clearly divided into three very distinct and indeed very different entities.

The Old City (*Altstadt* in German, *Vecriga* in Latvian) is considered to have been founded in 1201⁵ and enters written history at that date. The medieval town organised around its Warehouses, Guilds and *Hakelwerke*,⁶ remains practically untouched⁷ at the beginning of the 19th century. In this Hanseatic city, the atmosphere is medieval, with narrow twisted lanes tucked in between medieval city walls, *Backstein Gotik* structures, epitomized by buildings which witnessed the life of the German burghers during several centuries. Of the Middle-Age organisation, when power was at stake between three key players – the Livonian Knights Order in the *Burg* (fortress), the citizens ruling their free town in the *Rathaus* (Town Hall) and organised in guilds such as the ones housed in the *Schwarzhäupter Haus*,⁸ and the Archbishop in the *Domkirche*, the Cathedral –, some remaining influence

³ 1881–1894.

⁴ According to the 1897 Imperial census.

⁵ The presence of a Zemgale urban centre, preexisting before the German city (founded in 1201 by bishop Albert von Buxhoevden) was claimed by historians of the first independence period. Cf for instance Alfred Bilmanis, *La Lettonie d'aujourd'hui*. Riga 1925, p. 11. Similarly in another book written in exile in 1951, *A history of Latvia*, Princeton 1951, the same author writes "Latvia may not have been far from a similar unification in the thirteenth century, when such a ruler as Vissevald of Latgale possessed considerable wealth and authority, and stood forth as a champion against the marauding Russians." (p. 49)

⁶ Association of professional urban handworkers (or craftsmen).

⁷ It has as such been recorded in the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1998.

⁸ The House of the Blackheads (1330) was only one of several guild houses in Riga.

is still perceptible in 1905. The town is still essentially German and merchant, with a powerful *Oberschicht* (upper class) ruling its institutions, in spite of the Russian administrative and political rule.

As for religious life, it was carried out in different places according to social status: Saint George's church (1297), for the Knights and their descendants, Saint Peter's church (1209) for the laymen, and the Cathedral (*Domkirche*, 1204) for the Archbishop. The high spires of these and other churches have remained remarkable in the skyline of the city even though the Reformation brought a drastic change, since Livonia was the first place outside Germany to turn to Lutheranism. The main features of the medieval town remain unaltered at the beginning of the 19th century, since only a few buildings had been added such as the classic Jacob's Barracks (*Jekaba Kazarmas*) in the 18th century, the *Landtag of the Ritterschaft*⁹ house, built in 1867 in Florentine Renaissance style for the provincial Assembly of Livonia and the Great and Small Guilds rebuilt at the end of the 19th century in neo-gothic style. All these institutions were meant for the German nobility or the rich merchants who retained their economical and political power even under the rule of the Russian Empire.

Beyond the parks and boulevards, which replaced the former city walls at the end of the 19th century¹⁰ in accordance with the latest urbanistic fashion, lies the New City (*Neustadt*) organised semi-circularly to follow the official city planning.¹¹ It was a space where the new bourgeoisie had settled – including German, Russian, Jewish and Latvian communities – and where architecture became a tool for cultural assertion. Among the emblematic new buildings of this period, one must mention the German ones, namely the Commercial School, later the Fine Arts Academy, and the *Deutsche Gymnasium*, both built in neo-gothic style; also the German theatre, built in classical style, which later became the Opera.

For the private apartment buildings, *Art Nouveau (Jugendstil)* architecture is flourishing. Nevertheless a close look at some of the elegant, but often too hastily constructed, buildings, along large and planified streets, reveals a Latvian "National Revival" influence, clearly theorised by the prominent architect Eugens Laube.¹² National Revival

⁹ It is the territorial assembly of the nobility.

¹⁰ After 1867.

¹¹ Laid out in the 1860s by the architect Johann Daniel Felsko, who was for 35 years (1844–1879) the chief architect of Riga. See Jānis Krastiņš, *Rīgas arhitektūras meistari* [The masters of architecture in Riga]. Riga 2002, p. 34.

¹² Cf his manifest *Par būvniecības stilus* [About the style of construction], in: Zalkis (1908),

elements are often disclosed through the use of ethnographic decorative motives and of wooden construction in the upper-part of the buildings.

As for national affirmation, the Riga Latvian Society (*Rīgas Latviešu Biedrība, RLB*)¹³ is a particularly significant symbol:¹⁴ Latvians, until then considered as mere peasants, began taking pride in their culture, benefiting from the German and Russian revivals, as well as similar movements in Central Europe. Under the patronage of this Society, the organisation of Song Festivals was carried out as well as the development of the Latvian language and literature and, with the instrumental devotion of Krišjānis Barons, a collect of the *dainas*,¹⁵ the Latvian traditional popular songs. As regards folklore and culture, the ethnographic exhibition held in 1896 in Riga on the occasion of the Pan-Russian Archeological Congress had already been a show-case for revealing the Latvian folklore to the “Latvian nation in the making” and to other nations. Here is the core of the Latvian national awakening, and in that respect the *dainas* deserve a brief development.

Those short poems, usually of four lines, lyrical, satirical, but devoid of any epic character, they convey the traditions of the daily peasant life, its values and celebrations. Rooted in the culture of the ancient Balts before christianisation, they are the depository of Latvian identity as well as the tradition of choral singing organised since the first Song Festival in 1867,¹⁶ followed by many others to this day. It is on the occasion of the Third Festival¹⁷ that *Lāčplēsis*¹⁸, the epic of the Latvian nation, was issued. This „invention“, a romantic literary creation written by Andrejs Pumpurs¹⁹ was meant to grant

no. 4, pp. 145-148: “Our task is to transform in an independent manner all that we have seen and, when implementing, first of all to listen to voices that our Latvian consciousness expresses and that the spirit of the time whispers lightly.”

¹³ Also referred to as *Mamula* (little mother) showing the link with this institution. After the fire (1908) had destroyed the first house of the RLB, built in 1869, the building was reconstructed by Laube in a classic style. About the context of the establishment of the RLB and its activities, see Kristine Wohlfart, *Der Rigaer Letten Verein und die lettische Nationalbewegung von 1868 bis 1905*. Marburg 2006.

¹⁴ Somewhat similar to the *Matica Slovenska* in Slovenia and the *Matica Česka* in Bohemia.

¹⁵ Krišjānis Barons, with other collectors, has elaborated a collection and a classification of around 300 000 *dainas*, stored in a special piece of furniture (*dainu skapis*), that exists to this day, and recorded in the Unesco Cultural Heritage in 2001.

¹⁶ With already 45 choirs and 1 003 singers participating.

¹⁷ June 18–21, 1888. See *Rīgas latviešu biedrība sešos gadu desmitos (1868–1928)* [Rigas Latvian association in the 60s (1868–1928)]. Riga 1928.

¹⁸ The Bearslayer symbolizing the opposition to the enemy (with different interpretations according to the historical periods). Written between 1872 and 1887.

¹⁹ 1841–1902. See Vaira Viķe-Freiberga, Andrejs Pumpurs's *Lāčplēsis*: Latvian national epic

the Latvians with an epos of their own, to compete with that of other nations, like the *Kalevala*²⁰ for the Finns or the *Kalevipoeg*²¹ for the Estonians. Another exhibition played a role in the Latvian assertion of its identity: the International Exhibition,²² organised on the occasion of the Jubilee of the town in 1901 (700th anniversary). Its success provided yet one more opportunity²³ to strengthen Latvian pride.

Other ethnic (or national) groups were at the same time also gaining visibility and created some heavily identity-loaded landmarks. The Alexander I column erected on the *Schlossplatz*, the new orthodox cathedral, built in the middle of the city centre Park, show Russia's will to assert its political power, following the russification of the mid 1880s.

For foreign traders, Riga, the "Western" cosmopolitan city, is an ideal platform to access the Russian Empire, hence its development which benefits all communities. Though the cyrillic characters of the Russian language are present everywhere, it is not unfrequent to see German signs (especially on shops). As for the large Jewish population, though it plays a great role in the working class organisation and politisation, it remains without much physical influence on the urban atmosphere. There are two reasons for this: the yiddish-speaking community lives mostly in the suburbs, while the Jewish upper and middle class is usually germanized (or sometimes russianized) and avoids showing any conspicuous signs of identity.

The 1905 Revolution spreads also in Riga not only because of its high industrialisation, but also because of its large and politically active labour force²⁴ and also because of the rising Social Democratic Latvian party which attracts the new Latvian *intelligentsia*.²⁵ How-

or romantic literary creation, in: National Movements in the Baltic Countries during the 19th Century, ed. by Aleksander Loit. Stockholm 1985 (Studia Baltica Stockholmiensia. 2), pp. 523-537.

²⁰ Written by Elias Lönnrot. First published edition in 1835.

²¹ Written by Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald and published in 1857-1862.

²² See Max Scherwinski, Die Rigäer Jubiläums-Austellung 1901 im Bild und Wort. Riga 1902; and M. Brancis, Jūgendstila izpausmes Rīgas 700 gadu jubilijas Rupniecības un amatniecības izstādē 1901. gadā [Monuments of Jugendstil at Rīgas 700-years-anniversary of industry and trade in 1901], in: Latvijas Zinātņu Akadēmijas Vēstis (1992), no. 10.

²³ Latvian art historians consider that it introduced Art Nouveau in Riga.

²⁴ This working class lives mainly in Maskva, a suburb of Riga, mostly in traditional one or two floor wooden houses where Russian, Yiddish and Latvian are the most frequent vernacular languages.

²⁵ A very interesting and comparative analysis of the social composition of the *intelligentsia*

ever, after two long general strikes, the unrest comes to an end following an agreement between workers and employers, only to spread to the countryside where riots against the German landlords are severe.²⁶ The repression rages brutally from the Russian and the Baltic Germans. Nevertheless, the path towards national affirmation is now open: after the installation of the Imperial Douma²⁷ in Saint Petersburg, the Latvians obtain six seats for their representatives whose claim, it is to be noted, is restricted to autonomy but not yet independence.

Culturally, the ban of the Latvian language (1886) comes to an end after a regulation is passed (1906) which, in the field of education, allows the opening of private schools in Latvia. Since the political field is closed, the cultural arena can be invested by the activists of the national cause. For instance, the first exhibition of Latvian artists, as such, takes place in 1910 in Riga, different Latvian associations are set up, plays in Latvian, depicting mythological Latvian characters or epics,²⁸ are produced, namely *Nakts un Uguns* (Night and Fire) and *Indulis un Arija* (Indulis et Arija), written by Jānis Rainis, a prominent social-democrat writer of the period, and later a statesman – in fact the emblematic person in Latvian culture for several decades.

The next ten years witness a formidable construction boom in Riga to meet both the needs for housing of the rural population flocking into the city and the investment fever of a newly enriched bourgeoisie.

Figures give an idea of the expansion of the population: 282 000 inhabitants in 1897 and 518 000 in 1914,²⁹ amounting to 50% of the total population of Latvia.³⁰ Interestingly there is a decisive change takes place in the proportion of the Latvian population in Riga. In 1867, Germans were the first ethnic group with 42,9% of the population, Latvians being only 23,6%, whereas, in 1913, Latvians represent 39,6% of the population, thus becoming the first ethnic group in the

of smaller nations, including Latvia, is given by Miroslav Hroch, *Social preconditions of national revival in Europe*. New York 1985, pp. 125-154.

²⁶ See Ludis Berziņš, *Latvijas valstiskuma ideja 1905. g. revolūcijā* [The idea of Latvian statehood in the Revolution of 1905], in: *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls* (1992), no. 3, pp. 84-116; and also the AMAE archives, Nantes, Legation, SOFE, no. 16 pass.

²⁷ Representative assemblies established within the frame of a liberalisation of the regime in Russia after the 1905 Revolution.

²⁸ The epos *Lāčplēsis* becomes a reference.

²⁹ Skujenieks, *Publication du Bureau des statistiques*. Riga 1936.

³⁰ Cf Andrejs Plakans, *The Latvians*. Stanford 1995, p. 108.

city,³¹ Germans being only 16, 7%.³² As made clear by these figures, a considerable economic and cultural development takes place in Riga which becomes an “Art Nouveau Metropolis”.³³ Entire streets are erected in the so-called New-Town, with 5-or-floor-apartment houses, built and completed within one year, the time span imposed by the administrative authorities. Comfort is taken into consideration: these houses are well lit, ventilated and have central heating. Young Latvian architects are commissioned, whereas, until then, only German ones were chosen. The creation of an Architecture Department at the Polytechnicum of Riga in 1869 had provided a local alternative to the studies in Saint Petersburg. These talented young architects, educated in Riga,³⁴ find their inspiration in the national vernacular ethnography – mainly in Finland – hence their contribution in the National Renaissance movement sweeping over Northern Europe at that period.

1914–1919: The brutal interlude. A city caught in the war

For Riga, the war marks a decisive stop in its prosperous boom, as it is caught in the centre of the chaos.

In 1914, the German population is seen with hostility by the Russian authorities. Quite a number of *Balten*³⁵ are mobilized in the imperial army and although their loyalty to Russia is considered unquestionable³⁶ at the beginning of the war, nevertheless, the German community’s cultural and political autonomy is practically suppressed. Especially, the important and reputed German school system is abandoned. Within a few days the town is de-germanised: Riga’s street-signs are pulled down and replaced by Russian ones. For the rulers of Saint Petersburg, Riga must be a purely Russian city.

Moreover, less than a year after the beginning of the war (1915), Riga finds itself on the frontline of the struggle. The endangered population is evacuated towards the “interior” of Russia,³⁷ factories are

³¹ As for the other groups: 1867: Russians 25,1%, Jews 4,5%; 1913: Russians 21,2%, Jews 4,5%. Cf *ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Jānis Krastiņš, *Riga, Jugendstilmetropole*. Riga 1996, p. 351.

³⁴ As Eižens Laube (1880–1967), Konstantīns Pēksēns (1859–1928), Ernest Pole (1872–1914).

³⁵ Usual self-designation for Baltic Germans.

³⁶ Cf AMAE Nantes (see note 26), no. 52: Correspondance of the French Consul in Riga, 24.8.1905.

³⁷ There is a consensus for the figure of 800 000 displaced people.

dismantled and trains are loaded with valuable equipments – including some Riga monuments whose metal is precious for war needs – that make their way to the centre of Russia. Riga becomes a “burnt land.”

At the same time, to reinforce the Russian army’s strength, Latvian regiments are created as early as August 1915,³⁸ with Latvian officers, Latvian language, Latvian flags and instructions given in Latvian language. For the first time a visual representation of the nation can be exhibited for the Latvians themselves as well as for the other nations. Thus starts the epic legend of the Latvian Riflemen (*Strelnieki*).³⁹ Their courage and discipline are outstanding and enable them to win heavy battles, and consequently they play a major role in the representation of the Latvian identity and their creation is certainly a decisive step in the Latvian political awakening.⁴⁰ The detestation of Russian forces for Latvian ones⁴¹ certainly enhances the national ideas. Unfortunately these cannot bring out the real victorious liberation of Courland because of the deficient military qualities and organisation of the Russian army. In spite of the heroic resistance of these Latvian soldiers and after heavy losses, Riga falls into German hands in September 1917 while Latvian general opinion has grown estranged from Russia.

The occupation amounts essentially to an oppressive German military presence. The only new structures erected within the city limits during this period are defensive (trenches, forts, etc.). No emblematic construction is erected. Towards the end of the conflict, when Germany realizes it cannot win the war in the West, the German commander Rüdiger von der Goltz imagines the idea of carving out a new protectorate in the Baltics, “*ehemaliges Deutsches Land*”,⁴² in the form of a *Baltikum* Duchy infeodated to Berlin. This, Berlin be-

³⁸ The Latvian battalions are the only ones among the Imperial Russian Army to be “national” hence their crucial importance. See Edgars Andersons, *Latvijas vesture 1914–1920* [History of Latvia 1914–1920]. Stockholm/Daugava 1967, pp. 18 f.

³⁹ Besides the large historiography devoted to this subject, these riflemen have been a source of inspiration in literature as well as in painting.

⁴⁰ In fact the Russian headquarters were reluctant to their creation but it was out of necessity that the decision was made as early as July 13th 1915. An enthusiastic call is published in *Dzimtenes Vestnesis*, 28.07.1915: *Pulcejaties zem latviezsū karogiem* [Get together under the Latvians flags], whose last sentence is highly significant and can be translated thus: Ahead with the flags of the Latvians, for the future of Latvia!

⁴¹ Note Service Historique des Armées de Terre (SHAT), 16 N 3020. Rapport de l’ingénieur Gueneau.

⁴² Former German territory.

lieves, could be seen favourably by the Allies in search of means to contain the westward expansion of the “Red Pest.”

In this state of mind, the occupiers undertake to re-germanize the city as much as possible. German is privileged again in all public inscriptions and a statue to the “heroic” German soldier (nicknamed *Fritz* by the Latvian population) is erected in front of the city theatre. The German *intelligentsia* can then shortly believe that the “good old times” are back. Alas for the Germans, their success was to be short-lived and the armistice of November 11th 1918 puts an end to their dreams.

Then starts a military and political imbroglio set up against the Bolshevik and involving the *Baltische Landeswehr*, the German *Reichswehr* and the Latvian armed forces in formation, composed of those of the Riflemen who had not joined the “Red side.” During the next two years Latvia is torn between a Latvian provisional government proclaimed on November 11th 1918,⁴³ a provisional Soviet government headed by Pēteris Stučka (December 1918 – April 1919) and a counter-government created in mid-april 1919, backed by the Germans. The final reconquest of Riga over the Bolshevik armies takes place only on May 21st 1919, when the forces raised by the provisional Latvian government, backed by the Allies, enter Riga.

1920–1940: Riga to the Latvians

After the evacuation of the last German troops⁴⁴ and the signature of a Peace Treaty with Soviet Russia,⁴⁵ Latvia is at last in the hands of the Latvians. Their leaders immediately undertake to make their home in the “German house” they inherit. The town is devastated by a dramatic loss of population: only 181 000 inhabitants remain in 1920, compared to 518 000 in 1913. Within the district of Riga, 40,5% of the houses have been completely destroyed.⁴⁶ Several long-term goals are at stake, including reconstruction, modernisation, urban planning

⁴³ After the armistice, all Latvian parties, except the Latvian Bolsheviks, proclaimed a Republic of Latvia and a Latvian Provisional government headed by Kārlis Ulmanis. They had to flee to Liepāja (Libau) when the Bolshevik government was imposed in Riga. Cf Plakans, *The Latvians* (see note 30), pp. 118 ff.

⁴⁴ November 1919.

⁴⁵ August 11th 1920.

⁴⁶ Service des Informations du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères de Lettonie: *La Lettonie en 1921*. Paris 1922, p. 29.

and *latvianisation*. But erasing the German heritage is by no means an easy task. Everything in the social, economic and built environment remains German and, furthermore, many *Balten* are still there and intend to stay. As a result of the land reform (launched in 1920)⁴⁷ which has destroyed their estates, the *Junkers*⁴⁸ tend to congregate in Riga to find solace in community solidarity. Meanwhile, members of the Latvian *intelligentsia* who had been compelled to emigrate after the 1905 events, return to their homeland in a remarkable eagerness to build the country.

Once the hated *Fritz* is torn down, the first step taken by the new Latvian city authorities is to change all place-names and to have shop signs modified to Latvian language only (with limited success however). In two highly symbolic moves, the old Teutonic *Burg* becomes the New Presidential Palace and the former *Landtag*⁴⁹ of the *Ritterschaft*⁵⁰ of Livonia becomes the Parliament (*Saeima*) of the new state.

The reconstruction of the town is undertaken under the supervision of a Construction Office which puts a stop to the pre-war freedom in that field. The Latvian taste for a well-kept town can finally express itself. Away with the “Russian” little kiosks scattered along the Dvina (Daugava) embankments or on the Dom square! Parks are planted with care and streets are cleaned. At that time the garden city model is highly praised and Riga wishes to develop its suburbs according to that scheme. Some plans are never achieved, but *Mežaparks*, a western suburb of the town implementing this modern trend, is the best example of this type of urbanisation. After Russian and German influences, Riga is designed to become a Latvian capital.

After the arrival of the authoritarian regime,⁵¹ Kārlis Ulmanis⁵² himself becomes president of the National Committee for Construction (1938). This shows the importance given to architecture and

⁴⁷ The main points of the land reform were the following: Nationalization of properties exceeding 110 hectares, redistribution of the lands under the supervision of a government Land Fund. Law of September 16th 1920. For a detailed analysis see V. Markaus, *Agrārās reformas gaita Latvijā 1919–1922* [Entwicklung der Agrarreformen in Lettland 1919–1922]. Riga 1922.

⁴⁸ German landlords.

⁴⁹ See note 9.

⁵⁰ Nobility.

⁵¹ In 1934.

⁵² Kārlis Ulmanis (1877–1942), the political leader of the Agrarian Union, was obliged to leave his country after 1905, and came back in 1913. Elected at the head of the Provisional Government in 1918, he became Prime Minister of the Independent Republic during several periods and became President of an authoritarian regime in 1934.

urbanism by the regime, in accordance with the spirit of the time. The destruction of the Old Town (*Vecrīga*), regarded by some as too “germanic” and likely to be torn down, is even considered.

A text written in 1937 highlights the regime’s intentions and gives an idea of the atmosphere: “In Old Riga’s narrow dusk, the young Latvian generously pours the light which overflows from his soul. Similarly the great Italian Renaissance gave living strength to the Middle-Age-world dying from old age”.⁵³ The Middle Ages and *Deutschtum* are together discredited! Nevertheless the Germans in Riga and a leftist opposition to the regime didn’t allow this plan to come to fruition.

Another example of the conflicting plans can be found in one of the important political quarrels which in the early thirties raged between the *Deutsche Volksgruppe* in Riga and the Latvian church regarding the ownership of the *Dom*. The Germans viewed this beautiful, huge and conspicuous cathedral as the symbol of their immemorial presence and privileges in the Baltics, while the Latvians wanted to turn it into the Lutheran cathedral of the country. Finally, the Latvian argument won and this victory came as a dreadful shock to the ageing and shrinking German community.

Sculpture is also participating in this *latvianization* with the erection of Latvian monuments. The sculptor Kārlis Zāle is entrusted with the task of building both the national Military Shrine: *Brāļu Kapi*, (Cemetery of the Brothers) and the Monument of Freedom (1934). Erected in the massive and highly symbolic style of the period, these two important monuments immediately became national landmarks. To this day, they still play this role and thus deserve further description.

In the Cemetery of the Brothers (*Brāļu Kapi*), the architecture, sculptures and landscape convey an impression of peace, solemnity, sacredness and, above all, “*latvianness*” which is vivid to this day. Everything is designed to remind us of the antique tribal graves.⁵⁴ As early as 1915, it was intended as a burial-place, first for the riflemen of World War I, then for those who fell in the war of national liberation (a total of 2 100 soldiers were buried there). At different stages of the construction, financed by public funding, several patriotic celebrations were organised until the final inauguration in 1936,

⁵³ Roberts Kroders, *Le théâtre des fêtes lettonnes. Riga 1937*, p. 11.

⁵⁴ An excellent analysis of the monument (this entire cemetery being a monument in itself) and its symbols is given by the architect Vaidelotis Apsītis, in: *Brāļu Kapi* [Brothers’ Cemetery]. Riga 1995.

on November 11th, the anniversary of the proclamation of the Latvian Republic.

The Monument of Freedom, planned in 1922, was also financed by a public subscription, with the same idea of involving the whole Latvian nation (*Latviešu Tauta*) in the construction of patriotic landmarks. Its conception is based on Latvian mythology and namely that of *Lāčplēsis*,⁵⁵ the mythical hero who succeeds in driving the enemy out of the country. With a clear message on its base (*Tēvzemai un Brīvībai*, For Fatherland and for Freedom), the monument consists of a high column (42 meters), with at the top the statue of a standing woman, hands raised, showing three stars symbolizing the three provinces of Courland, Livonia and Latgale. Situated in the focal point of the town – at the very spot where the equestrian statue of the Russian tsar Alexander III once stood, it has always been the symbol of a free Latvia – with a military honour guard around it during the first period of independence and since its restitution.

The process of *latvianization* of the town also intended to adapt and transform some buildings such as the Castle, the former fortress of the Livonian Order.⁵⁶ A new decoration, with fitting furniture, transforms the interior (1920–1930). Thanks to an artist with national inspiration and taste for Latvian ethnography and mythology, Ansis Cirulis, the ceilings and the walls of the reception rooms are ornated with national ornaments. Together with its furniture, largely using geometrical ethnographic elements, it is a fine example of the use of applied arts to emphasize *Latvianness*.

After the Ulmanis Coup d'État (1934), on national celebrations in Riga, the erection, on large squares, of various patriotic wooden structures adorned with national symbols becomes a common occurrence. The political patriotic emphasis of these festivals was meant to stage Ulmanis power and was somehow different in nature from the Song festivals. The Regime attempts to turn the city into a showcase for the entire country, with carefully groomed public spaces. Commemorations are staged according to an elaborate and impressive scenography and take place in the open air with the public playing an important role and becoming a real actor.

It is the case of the 1934 *Renaissance Song Festival*, with 3 500 people participating in front of a public of 200 000! Not to mention the

⁵⁵ See note 18.

⁵⁶ A Tower (named the Three Stars Tower) is added in 1938 to permit the use of the castle as the residence of the President.

regular Song festivals, every fourth year (since 1873). For the last Festival before the war (1938) 100 000 people, dressed in ethnic costumes, participate on Victory Square (*Uzvaras laukums*) in front of President Ulmanis and an array of foreign guests, “an entire nation is singing its unity and its identity in the present as in the past”.⁵⁷ The new Republic, though built from provinces with different historical backgrounds and even different traditions, wishes to lay the emphasis on the construction of the unity of Latvia.

The most ambitious of all the urban projects is certainly this Victory Square, across the Daugava river, in the area facing the Old Town. It comprises a huge complex for cultural and sporting activities, supposed to exceed the largest achievements of the time like the Olympic stadium in Berlin. In 1936, Ulmanis is the promoter of a law for a competition which was opened in 1938. Among 44 architects, Fridrihs Karlis Skujiņš was the winner and, in the autumn of 1939, an exhibition of the project was organised in Riga’s Castle Festival Hall.⁵⁸ One can guess the reason why the realisation of the project was never carried out.

Around Latvia, the world is moving towards the war. An understanding between Germany and the USSR leads to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (23rd August 1939) releasing the war. In June 1940, when the Soviet Union troops invade the Baltic Countries, a new era begins for the city and its inhabitants.

1940–1945: Soviet and German occupations

The peaceful and prosperous years of the last period of the Ulmanis government brutally end in a time of sorrow. In fact, according to the above-mentioned German-Soviet pact, a secret protocol grants the USSR command over Estonia and Latvia. In the meantime, the German population is repatriated in the *Reich*, on Hitler’s order, so that, when the Soviet forces arrive, greeted by a minority of sympathizers and opportunists, the town has lost most of its German population.

Although the first Soviet occupation lasts less than one year, it is nevertheless terrible. Arrests and deportations are massive and all reminders of Latvian “bourgeois” statehood are banished. Due to a lack of time and money, the visual sovietisation is of the “cheap” type and

⁵⁷ J.R. Miedan, Comment on fait un État. La Lettonie 1938, p. 139.

⁵⁸ Lejnīeks, Rīga, kuras nav [Riga, never build]. Rīga 1998, pp. 118-127.

thus has to be all the more obvious. Soviet slogans adorn all public spaces and cherished symbols of the national identity are chosen targets of propaganda specialists. The National Theatre and the Riga Latvian Society are literally covered with portraits of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. This sacrilege is particularly painful to most Latvians.

Within a few months, owing to careless maintenance, the Capital of the Soviet Latvian Republic takes on the characteristic dull and grey look of Soviet cities where the only patches of colour are those offered by propaganda banners and streamers. The former buzzing activity of the commercial town is brought to a dramatic end.

Following operation *Barbarossa*,⁵⁹ while the trains of deportees are still on their journey, on July 1st, Nazi troops enter Riga. At the same time, Soviets with many of their collaborators⁶⁰ flee from the town. At first, the Nazis are greeted as liberators by the population. The joy is however short lived. The illusion of a repeat of 1919 – the reestablishment of a Latvian State – is rapidly dissipated. Within days, the city, “cleaned” of its Soviet emblems, is covered with black and white panels indicating to *Wehrmacht* and other drivers the way to the *Kommandantur* or *Orts Lazarett*. The cruel German *Ordnung* replaces the Soviet totalitarian anarchy. Civil life is under severe control by army forces backed by civil servants coming from Germany. Practically all the nationalisations carried out by the Soviets are kept and all the production is used for war purposes. In 1943, two Latvian Waffen-SS divisions⁶¹ are set up and the city loses its young men.

Latvia, together with Estonia, Lithuania and Belorussia, become one single territory: the *Reichskommissariat Ostland*, with Riga as its capital. But, due to scarce finance, this occupation leaves few lasting marks. All the urbanistic German plans are concentrated on the Old Town while any private construction is forbidden. A ghetto is organised, from where Jews are deported and killed in the nearby camps of Salaspils and Rambula. Before the end of 1941 the 40 000 Jews of Riga are murdered.⁶² Among the victims, one can cite the great historian of Judaism Simon Dubnov.

Once again Riga finds itself in the very centre of the fighting and suffers severe bombings under which the Blackheads House and the

⁵⁹ Invasion of the USSR by the Reich, June 21st 1941.

⁶⁰ 40 000, cf Plakans, *The Latvians* (see note 30), p. 149.

⁶¹ Locally known as the Latvian Legion.

⁶² Among the victims, one can cite Simon Dubnov, the great historian of Judaism.

Town Hall, emblematic of the German presence in Riga, are severely damaged.

After the Nazis' defeat, and the return of the Soviets, as early as the summer of 1944, Riga sees a new wave of departures (120 000 to 150 000 persons)⁶³ towards the West: Germany, Sweden and, later, when some of the DPs⁶⁴ can finally leave the camps where they had temporarily been accommodated, for Australia, Canada and USA. By 1945, the Soviets make their home again in a once more depopulated and to a large extent devastated town. Reconstruction is undertaken as well as a quick repopulation, but this time mostly by non-Latvians coming from the interior of the Soviet-Union, a fact which carries lasting – and to a large extent deliberately planned – consequences.

1945–1991: The Latvian SSR

A period of disorder and violence follows the reoccupation of Riga. War goes on in Courland till May 8th 1945 and many areas in the country are in open uprising led by anti-soviet partisans (Forest Brothers). Under these conditions, during the first few years of the new regime, the city does not change so much at first sight, except for numerous official and political signs in Russian language. The Soviets do not seem to be sure they are here for good! The most striking change is the untidy character of the streets and the absence of maintenance of the buildings.

The most visible evolution takes place after 1949, once the collectivisation and the second mass deportation are completed and the armed anti-soviet resistance (*Forest Brothers*) substantially eradicated. If the official aim is to transform Riga into a major Soviet industrial centre, one of the less publicized intentions is also to “punish” the Latvian for their nationalism and particularly their anti-soviet stance during the war (Latvian Legion, etc.).

It comes as no surprise under these conditions that the first significant move is the discrete destruction of most monuments commemorating the Liberation War (1919–1920). Then come the introduction of bilingual (Latvian and Russian) street signs. Gradually, the Russian language occupies more and more public space, following the growing number of Russian speaking migrants who settle in the city. Within

⁶³ Plakans, *The Latvians* (see note 30), p. 152.

⁶⁴ Displaced Persons, who found refuge in DP camps in Europe after the war.

50 years, this initially very “Latvian” city is to become a mostly (2/3) Russian city.

Soon in the Old centre, remnants of German landmarks (like the *Blackheads House*) are suppressed and the Town Hall is kept as ruins (it shall be destroyed later).

Among the symbolic edifices erected during the Stalinist period, one must mention the very moscovite “cake-like” Academy of Sciences which damaged the traditional skyline of the Old Town, and the massive Hotel Latvija in the centre of the New Town. On the other side of the river, in the suburb of Pardaugava, Victory Park⁶⁵ was re-named the “22nd Soviet Union Congress Park” with a monumental Liberation statue to celebrate the Soviet victory over the Fascists and the “liberation” of the town. During the same period of militant atheism, most churches are closed and the Russian Cathedral itself is turned into a planetarium!

As for the important monuments of the previous period, some “inappropriate” ones are nevertheless maintained to avoid unnecessarily provoking the strong patriotic feelings of the population. The Freedom monument of Kārlis Zāle remains,⁶⁶ but what kind of freedom it celebrates is now unclear!⁶⁷ Some go as far as suggesting that the three stars, on top of the arms of the statue, represent the three Baltic Republics supported by the Soviet Motherland! It is nevertheless forbidden to approach the statue and the traffic now goes around what used to be a “sacred” pedestrian area.⁶⁸ Rainis’s statue remains untouched owing to his “progressive” character.⁶⁹ In spite of his nationalistic stance, he is even turned into a local forerunner of Sovietism!

The National Cemetery of *Brāļu Kapi* is turned into a Soviet monument (by addition of Soviet State symbols after the removal of the Latvian ones) and many Soviet tombs are added, particularly in front of the main entrance.

It must also be kept in mind that Sovietism (particularly in its late versions) although officially internationalistic, was in fact favourable

⁶⁵ *Uzvaras laukums* which recovered its original Latvian name in 1985.

⁶⁶ The authorities probably feared strong reactions from the population besides a group of renowned architects from Moscow regarded it as a valuable work of art!

⁶⁷ On the same square, not far from the Liberty monument, a statue of Lenin looking away from the monument is erected. After 1991, this statue was torn down.

⁶⁸ Of course, the honour guard has been terminated and depositing flowers at certain dates meant immediate arrest.

⁶⁹ Rainis was a social-democrat.

to the visual affirmation of nationalities. Indeed as a heritage of the Stalinist “*korenisatsiya*”⁷⁰ of the pre-war period, the cultures of the differentiated groups were all indeed supposed to be “Soviet in content but national in their form.” The Soviet character being vague and essentially rejected by the people, only the national character remained. In Latvia as well as elsewhere in the USSR, the Soviet years were paradoxically more a time of “nationalization” than the contrary!⁷¹ It is this philosophy which presided over the enlargement of a *Skansen*⁷² created in the 1930s, east of the city and later to the construction of the huge collective singing arena in the vicinity of the capital.⁷³

In the sixties a new square is established where the Town-hall once stood, with a museum, in the purest Soviet style in the middle: the Museum of the Red Latvian Riflemen.

In the suburbs, wooden houses are more and more torn down to make room for the many dull Soviet concrete apartment houses required by the increasing urban population attracted by the heavy industrialization of the Riga area.

In the city proper an inner-party opposition succeeds in saving many of these old charming traditional houses. Fortunately in such a historical city, as elsewhere in the Soviet Union, even though architectural project competitions flourish, constructions are slow to follow. An underground railway is even considered in the eighties, but never realised due to its cost and to protests from part of the population.⁷⁴

From 1987 on, the “Singing Revolution” made possible by the introduction of Gorbachov’s *Perestroika* (1985) and based on the nationalizing trends of the previous era initiates a period of dynamic and cheerful *re-latvianisation*. Symbolically, in the winter of 1988, an exhibition, opened in the Riga castle museum, sporting a staggering array of national state symbols of the Ulmanis times (from the presidential arm-chair to telephones adorned with the coat of arms of the pre-war Republic). An unending line of visitors queues in the cold

⁷⁰ Indigenisation, from the Russian word for roots.

⁷¹ Although this posture is not deprived of ambiguities.

⁷² Ethnographic Park.

⁷³ Collective singing has always been one of the major manifestations of Baltic identity and patriotism.

⁷⁴ It is one of these very protests that started the new national awakening known as the Singing Revolution.

in front of the castle to catch a glimpse of long forbidden images of former Latvia and its economic achievements.

During the years 1987 and 1990, the Latvian population of the city exuberantly manifests its national feelings (pins, flags, emblems...) while the Russian-speaking onlookers watch this evolution with more sympathy than animosity.

Another marking episode of this period is the “Baltic chain” for the commemoration of the Molotov-Ribbentrop-Pact on August 23rd 1989 (50th anniversary) with a long uninterrupted line of people standing hand in hand across the three Baltic countries, from Vilnius to Tallinn. Precisely in Riga, it stretched along the patriotic Freedom monument in the very centre of the town to listen religiously to speeches delivered at the base of the monument. Independence is finally restored on August 21st, 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁷⁵

1991 onwards: Return to Latvia

Among the first steps taken after the restoration of independence, the choice having been made of a *restitutio in integrum* of the pre-war state, is the *re-latvianisation* of all street-names and public signs. This does not take place without much outcry from the Russian-speaking community. All public buildings are, within weeks, adorned with the state symbols, and the long forbidden national flag is widely flown on all occasions. Simultaneously, hammer and sickle emblems disappear from the city and one by one the statues of soviet dignitaries are pulled down. Destroyed monuments to the Liberation War are rebuilt and the churches reopened and given back to their respective communities.

The above mentioned⁷⁶ “strange” cubic black building sitting in the very centre of the medieval city, which had housed the museum of the Red Riflemen, is turned into an Occupations museum (the two Soviet occupations and the German one) and, more surprisingly, the very German House of the Blackheads (*Schwarzhäupter Haus*) and the

⁷⁵ Among the many books devoted to the period leading to the independence recovery, see Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic revolution*. New Haven 1994; David Smith, *Artis Pabriks*, Aldis Purs, Thomas Lane, *The Baltic States, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*. London/New York 2002.

⁷⁶ See above, previous page.

Townhall are reconstructed on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the city.

Owing probably to the importance of the Russian population in the country (49% in 1989) and to the foreseen unavoidable protests of the Kremlin, the Soviet emblematic monuments not directly connected with communism are maintained (although they are not always well kept) as well as Soviet military cemeteries.⁷⁷ The Soviet memorial of Pardaugava remains to this day the meeting point of Russian veterans and pensioners who celebrate the victory (a disputed term in present day Latvia) of May 1945, or of those who simply protest against the nationalizing policy of the Latvian State.

After 14 years of regained independence, although a large percentage of Riga's population remains Russian-speaking, the city centre looks pretty much like what it was at the end of the thirties. The minority groups have each regained symbolic premises; the Jewish community⁷⁸ has its seat again in the New City, where the Jewish theatre once stood, the Baltic-German group (mostly emigrated since 1939) has its own quarter in the Old City in the Mentzendorff House, the Russians have a number of cultural institutions, and, in everyday life, the cohabitation of all these different groups (officially more than 100) takes place smoothly and politely.

More recently, emerging as a token of the peacefulness of inter-community cohabitation, two interesting statues have appeared in the central park of the city. The first one represents President Ulmanis, the long discredited *Vadonis*⁷⁹ of the last inter-war independence years. The second, and more intriguing one, financed by Russian private funds, represents the Napoleon-era Russian imperial army Commander Barclay de Tolly. Both monuments seem to be accepted by the entirety of the population.

What is less accepted (and this is an understatement) by the "Russians" is the yearly parade of surviving veterans of the *Latvian Legion*, which conspicuously marches through the city centre to go and lay flowers at the feet of the Monument of Freedom. On each occasion, Moscow, the local Russians, the Israeli Embassy and the Jewish community join voices to energetically denounce this demonstration as an "insult to the memory of the victims of the Shoah and to the dead of the Great Patriotic War."

⁷⁷ The Soviet tombs in front of *Brāļu Kapi* were nevertheless transferred elsewhere.

⁷⁸ 10 000 members.

⁷⁹ Guide, in Latvian.

Conclusion

In 2001 the magnificent celebration of the 800th anniversary of the foundation of Riga received the support and participation of various communities of the country. All these people singing together conveyed an impression of real determination for a common construction. But what is really the essence of such a construction?

Since May 8th 2004, Riga has been the capital of a European Union State, and this fact should help soothen many scars of the past. In this respect, one must pay tribute to the efforts of Latvia to take a closer look into its recent past. For this purpose, the scientific work of the commission of Latvian historians set up by president V. Vīķe-Freiberga, which has investigated the 20th century history of Latvia, including the Second World War – one of the most sensitive periods in Latvian history – is of great significance.

In this beginning of the 21st century, Riga is widely regarded once again as an essentially Latvian capital. Indeed, its visual outlook bears a strange similarity to that of the pre-war capital. But the relevant question is whether this “reenactment” is not in fact a “Pyrrhus victory” with 70% of Riga’s population being Russian, and a large part of the economy of the country owned by Russian investors. This city is furthermore undergoing such a speedy process of internationalization that the affirmed *Latvianness* seems in fact subject to question. What is Riga: a Latvian capital or a cosmopolitan metropolis?