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THE LATVIANS AND THEIR NEIGHBORS

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In one sense the question of the relationships between Latvians and their neighbors has to be answered with the entirety of Latvian history because, on first glance, it seems that little in that history was not shaped by influences from the outside or by outsiders. The fact is that because of size and geographic location Latvians have never had absolute freedom to choose whether or not to have relations with neighboring peoples, and there have been very few areas of Latvian territory that have not experienced, for longer or shorter periods, the presence of non-Latvians and the cultural influences they brought with them. Conversely, Latvians have never been reluctant to leave the area of their primary settlement when permitted to do so. The short distances between them and the lands of the Lithuanians, Estonians, Germans, Russians, Swedes, and Poles always meant brisk economic relationships, carrying Latvians to neighboring lands, sometimes for permanent settlement, and these neighbors in turn to Latvian territories. Their location and their relatively small size have also meant that Latvians have always been highly vulnerable to invasion and conquest, so that for most of recorded history non-Latvians have filled the upper ranks of the population of the Latvian-speaking territory. These in-and-out movements, virtually uninterrupted over the centuries, left many if not most Latvians for different stretches of time in close proximity to non-Latvian cultural influences, which Latvians had to resist or absorb or otherwise deal with. Unlike numerically large peoples, substantial proportions of which could live for generations untroubled by and even unaware of persons not of their own kind, Latvians have always had to cope with and adapt to being among "strangers" or having them in their midst. The following survey, in no sense definitive and certainly not exhaustive, is meant to be an introduction to a theme in Latvian history which deserves a longer and more detailed treatment.

Demographic patterns

The structure of the population that resided on the territory Latvians eventually came to consider theirs can serve as the starting point for our discussion. Accurate measurements of the changing demographic patterns in the Latvian lands — that is, the rates at which people were born, died, married, and moved — are hard to come by for the period before the nineteenth century. Much more accesible are statistics of the structure of the population at certain moments in the past, and estimates of the proportion of that population belonging to different nationalities. Here every calculation as far back as the sixteenth century — when calculations in the strict sense first become possible — shows that the Latvian-speaking population was always in the majority, but other nationality groups always an important minority, ranging from some 10-15% in the sixteenth to about 50% in the late twentieth century.[1] The minorities were not evenly dispersed. Towns and cities always had a greater concentration of non-Latvians than the countryside, but it is important not to make the urban/rural division absolute. If there were some way to measure the historic distribution of the various nationality groups, the statistics would confirm the impression that there were very few rural districts that had no non-Latvians at all. Though in some localities the Latvian majority could run as high as 98-99%, it was the rare district that did not have at least a German (Baltic German) presence among the artisans and owners of rural estates and, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jewish families working at non-agricultural occupations. The further east one moves on the map, the greater the nationality mix in the towns and in the countryside, and the late eighteenth-century estate registers from the eastern districts of Courland (Kurzeme) province show virtually no Latvian names at all.[2]

Population history unambiguously supports the proposition that Latvians, whether they chose or not, were almost always required to deal with non-Latvians in their midst. In districts where the non-Latvian presence was very low, "strangers"

might have been treated as individuals; but in most cases, judging by the testimony of the oral tradition, the more common experience was to think in terms of group stereotypes. However, attitudizing was hardly re-served for non-Latvians, since throughout the long history we are exploring Latvian-speakers drew sharp and frequently no less negative distinctions among themselves.[3]

The part of population history that deals with migration also makes clear that Latvians did not hesitate to move when circumstances permitted or required. Throughout the centuries when serfdom limited movement severely, outflow numbers are estimated to have been small in the aggregate, except in those cases when Latvians participated in organized external adventures for military purposes or exploration. After serfdom was abolished in the early nineteenth century and migration restrictions eased, population statistics show a steady increase in the number of Latvians who left their primary territory for the purposes of settlement elsewhere. At times this movement was associated with specific events such as the "movement to the warm lands" in the 1850s, but in the second half of the nineteenth century migration had become regular and grew with every decade. By the end of the century, it has been estimated that some 10% of the total Latvian-speaking population in the Russian Empire lived outside Latvian territory, mostly in the interior of Russia.[4] This pattern continued during the period of World War I, when tens of thousands of refugees fled to the interior of Russia to escape advancing German armies or to express their preference for living in the Soviet Union instead of the newly formed Latvian Republic. An almost equally large absolute number emigrated in anticipation of the return of Soviet authority in the concluding months of World War II. Their direction, however, was a westward one. These outmigrations were not irreversible, but return migration, which has not been studied systematically, is difficult to estimate in terms of relative size. What is important to observe is that the "mental map" of many Latvians — and not necessarily only the intelligentsia — even in earlier centuries could include, frequently from personal experience, reference points lying in neighboring lands as well as in countries far removed from Latvian territory.[5]

Cultural contacts

During the interwar period of independence a number of Latvian intellectuals argued that authentic Latvianness should be rooted in those elements of past Latvian culture that had not been corrupted by "seven hundred years" of enforced contact with other cultures.[6] This was an argument not so much against the acceptance of foreign influences as such, but specifically against those influences introduced into Latvian territories by force. Among the chief culprits were, of course, the western Christianity that had been brought to the Baltic by the German crusading orders; and the more recent Russian influences that had become widespread with the start of the Imperial government's russification policy at the end of the nineteenth century.[7] Though this point of view found relatively few followers in the Latvian intelligentsia, it represented the manifestation of one kind of extreme reaction — rejection — of foreign influences. The other extreme is harder to identify by reference to a single phenomenon. Perhaps its most expressive symbols are the stock figures of Latvian fiction who are portrayed as seeking upward social mobility through complete assimilation to the language and behavior of the non-Latvian cultures of the Baltic governing classes. Between these extremes lies the rest of Latvian culture whose history has been characterized less by the rejection of cultural influences from its neighbors than by the absorption of those influences and their transformation.

The history of these cultural contacts has to be discussed in terms of two distinct periods: before the mid-nineteenth century when there did not exist Latvian-speaking cultural elites; and after the mid-century point when such elites developed rapidly in terms of both numbers and diversity. The research that has been conducted on the popular culture of the pre-nineteenth-century era suggests the presence of layering. Western Christianity penetrated deeply into the folkways of Latvian peasants but never to the point of completely eliminating the memory of certain pre-Christian beliefs, myths, and customs. Thus, for example, that aspect of the Christian belief system which awarded humankind total control of the world of nature appears to have been in continuous conflict with the reverence for natural things exhibited in Latvian folklore, especially the *dainas.* Similarly, secular cultural influences flowed from the decorative art possessed by the German-speaking upper orders into Latvian folk art; but, once received, such influences were transformed to fit the artistic purposes of peasant craftsmen. At the end of the eighteenth century, of course, German intellectuals such as Johann Gottfried Herder sought to reverse traditional attitudes toward "peasant culture" by arguing that the most authentic and therefore most valuable expressions of the spirit of a people *{Volksgeist)* were to be found precisely in the songs, beliefs, and arts of the peasantry. But this argument, though heartening to the Latvian nationalists of the early period of "national awakening", failed to undermine the nationalists' simultaneous championing of the kind of intellectual development that would transform Latvians into a culture-nation *(Kulturnation).* Intellectual development would come from learning, and learning, it was believed, would introduce Latvians to what was best in the cultures of other lands. The very terms in which these matters were argued — the rhetoric of small-nation nationalism with concepts borrowed from Herder and Fichte — themselves revealed that by the second half of the nineteenth century the rapidly expanding Latvian intelligentsia was wide open to foreign influences of the most varied kind. But this openness had as its premise the existence of a strong sense of Latvian identity that would no longer be threatened by such influences.

The history of Latvian mainstream culture after the "national awakening" period is one of complete acceptance of the idea that Latvian national culture would be enhanced by cultural influences from all directions. But because of their

geographical location, Latvian cultural elites were likely to be influenced more by some cultures than by others. German-language cultural influences remained dominant until the russification period of the 1880s, when Russian cultural pressures began to challenge German hegemony.8 It is interesting to note that Latvian political and cultural opinion during these decades spoke with two different voices. There was no dearth of Latvian readership for German- and Russian-language literatures (indeed there was a steady increase), but, at the very same time, Baltic German and Russian political control came to be viewed increasingly more as the most serious obstacle to the realization of Latvian national aspirations. When the political questions were resolved with the declaration of independence in 1918, the pre-war trend of expanding cultural receptivity continued, as witnessed by the continuously growing numbers of translations from the literatures of all the major European countries.9 Only after the incorporation of Latvia into the Soviet Union did these free-wheeling cultural contacts cease for a while. Later, when official restrictions against foreign (i.e. Western) influences relaxed, internationalism tended to manifest itself primarily in contacts with the cultures represented in the Soviet Union and the socialist states of Eastern Europe.

Activist attitudes

In talking about centuries before the nineteenth all characterizations of Latvian attitudes have to be based more on the logic of the situation than on direct evidence — a common problem in dealing with peasant societies. The problem continues into the nineteenth century, of course, because it is not until the early 1880s that we have the first direct evidence — the surveys accompanying the Manasein revision — of what large numbers of Latvians thought about public affairs.10 But the decades after the 1830s do see the emergence and rapid expansion of a Latvian intelligentsia, and one wing of it — the nationalist activists — had very decided attitudes toward neighboring peoples on Latvian territory or adjacent to it.

Among the assignments the Latvian activists of the "national awakening" period set for themselves was to create an historical consciousness in those who read their writings.11 This consciousness was to be constructed from several components: the existing attitudes — whatever they were — in the population; research producing both academic and popular histories; and interpretations of the contemporary situation that was to be seen as the inevitable outcome of the past. The dominant theme of this consciousness Was to be the "seven hundred years of oppression" the Latvian people had suffered after the coming to the Baltic area of the German crusading orders. The intervening centuries between the twelfth and the nineteenth were to be pictured as an uninterrupted story of oppressions and depredations by the Germans throughout and by Swedes, Poles, and Russians for shorter periods. Latvians, in this view, had been kept for centuries from enjoying their "freedom" by predatory neighbors and only in the second half of the nineteenth century did the "nation" finally "awaken" to the situation and ask for the rights they had been denied for so long.

This form of conceptualizing the national past was, of course, a standard component of the nationalisms that manifested themselves among the smaller countries of Europe during the nineteenth century. One might go further and say that it may in fact be a standard mode of historical mythmaking among intellectuals who take on the difficult task of mobilizing large numbers of people for a common effort. Its internal logic produced other intellectual propositions. Thus, for example, if the past had been what the nationalists said, then it followed that Latvians — rather that Baltic Germans, Russians, or others — should be the primary describers of the Latvian past; until that became the case, history about Latvians written by others was likely to contain many misunderstandings if not actual falsehoods. Furthermore, if Latvians during "seven hundred years of oppression" had been able to preserve their language and customs then it followed that they had been actively *resisting* (at least culturally) the twin threats of absorption and assimilation to the larger cultures that surrounded and at times enveloped them. In all of these propositions, Latvians were urged to look at non-Latvians — especially their neighbors — in a new light. Their cultures were to be held at arm's length until a mature Latvian culture was created. All Latvian-speakers had to recognize themselves as participants in a collective identity that had sustained the test of time. The cultural isolation that had been imposed on Latvians in the past had had the effect of allowing them to survive, and now, in the second half of the nineteenth century, only a similar guardedness against non-Latvian influences would give Latvians the time they needed to develop and assume their rightful place in the community of nations.

What the activists were trying to launch was a general public philosophy that would turn Latvian-speakers into Latvians and reformulate mere development into an embattled effort at nation-building. In this effort they were certainly helped by the general political situation in the northeast corner of the Russian Empire, what with Baltic German claims about their own superiority being sharpened by pressures from the Crown and with russification policies after the mid-1880s creating anti-Russian feelings in numerous practical circumstances. The extent to which the sense of embattledness diffused throughout the Latvian population is hard to gauge, but it certainly pervaded the Latvian intelligentsia. By the turn of the century, even the socialistically inclined wing of the Latvian activists had incorporated into its thinking the idea that Latvians had to champion at least their cultural autonomy if not their political independence.12 The other side of that coin was suspicion toward those who in any way opposed such goals.

State policy

The arrival of independence in 1918 finally enabled Latvians to embody their attitudes toward their neighbors in state policies, both foreign and domestic. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, however, there is very little evidence for saying that those policies were based on anything else than the same calculations of self-interest that other states practiced. Foreign policy had at its center the realization that Latvia was a small country for which neutrality, safeguarded by membership in the League of Nations, was the safest stance.[13] The foreign policy "tilt" toward the West had less to do with the fact that Russians had a commanding presence in the workings of the new Soviet state than with the totalitarian nature of that state. Similarly, policy in the 1930s toward the Third Reich was decidedly standoffish, again not so much because Hitler's Germany was a German state but because of the nature of its institutions and leadership. On the commercial front, Latvian state policy was designed to promote trade with whatever countries wished to become trading partners, and it is difficult to detect any partiality due to past resentments in the growing trade statistics in the interwar period. With respect to its immediate Baltic neighbors, foreign policy was characterized by fitful and inclusive cooperationism but perhaps even more by a decided lack of interest.[14] All in all, what Latvian foreign policy in the interwar years sought was international respect, and that, it believed, could be obtained most readily by steering clear of the disputes between neighboring countries — such as Poland and Lithuania, for example — and by stressing its own non-expansionist character.

Domestically, state policy was based on the principle that Latvia was a multi-national state and that its national minorities had the right to have its cultural life protected and subsidized in various ways by the government. In most of the interwar budgets, funds were earmarked for schools, religious institutions, and other needs of the minority nationalities and this policy remained in effect until the beginning of World War II.[15] Although the Ulmanis regime suspended parliamentary government and introduced personal rule, minority policy did not change except that under Ulmanis the minorities (and everyone else) were denied representation in the making of laws. In the interwar period, Latvian society as a whole manifested a mixture of nativism and cosmopolitanism, with each attitude finding ready supporters in different sectors of society. Up to 1934, for example, the University of Latvia, recognizing staff shortages, permitted the professoriate to lecture in both Russian and German as well as Latvian, and the ever-expanding book publishing industry expected profits from translations into Latvian of literary works of virtually-every Western literature.

After Latvia was incorporated into the Soviet Union, policy-making at the republic level was subordinated to the center, both with respect to Latvia's neighbors outside the USSR and her neighbors within it. For nearly a half-century the Soviet state discouraged relations with the outside (particularly with non-sodalist states), while following a labor-force policy that resulted in the settlement of large numbers of non-Latvians, primarily Russians, on Latvian territory and especially in urban areas. A state-sponsored and state-encouraged policy of "friendship" between the peoples of the USSR overrode whatever natural inclinations Latvian might have had and led to the reorientation of cultural activities from the westerly direction to the east. A great influx of non-Latvians into the Latvian republic resulted in a population structure that by 1990 showed Latvians to be around 50% of the total population and substantially less than that — about 30% — in Riga, the republic's capital. Western influences on Latvian-language culture, however, could not now disappear entirely because of the large number of Latvians — an estimated 100,000 — who had relocated to Western countries at the end of World War II. Taking up permanent residence in Germany, Sweden, England, Canada, the United States, and Australia, these Latvians on the whole maintained both their ethnic identity as well as, especially after the mid-1970s, relatively active ties with their homeland. During the forty-five years from 1945 to 1990, therefore, Latvians expanded and deepened their connections with non-Latvian cultures and societies, admittedly not because they chose to do so but because they found themselves in circumstances in which this result was inevitable. Though these pressures created, no small amount of pain and resentment, they have also heightened a cosmopolitanism that should remain a hallmark of Latvian culture from this period of history onward.

Conclusions

The foregoing is really an inventory of the areas which need much further research before the subject of Latvians and their neighbors is described adequately. But even a survey makes abundantly clear that isolation was not a hallmark of the Latvians at any point of their recorded history. Their territory had always housed non-Latvians — as governing and owning classes before the twentieth century and as fellow citizens later — and their mental maps, even under serfdom, were very frequently larger than the locality or province of their immediate residence. Using the evidence of their ears, Latvians had become used to differentiating themselves from others by reference to linguistic criteria; but by the end of the nineteenth century, this consciousness of linguistic differences had been reformulated as *national* differences. Suspicion toward coresident nationality groups had become quite sharp by the early decades of the twentieth century, but statehood and the responsibilities of governing after 1918 did not permit the easy translation of the earlier antagonisms into state policy. Loss of sovereignty after World War II transferred ultimate policy-making power out of the republic, drove some ten percent of the Latvian population into exile, and subjected the rest to a centralized planning apparatus. Relationships with neighbors were required to be skewed in an easterly direction and the dominant "neighbors" — the Russians — migrated to the

Latvian territory in unprecedently large numbers. Nationalistic sentiments — now residual and until recently supressed by the authorities — were fed by a dictated fraternalism that seemed to be a threatening continuation of the late nineteenth-century state policy of deliberate russification. As before, whatever natural inclinations Latvians might have in relationships with neighbors have been overridden, occasioning both the fear of impending cultural doom and the predictable response to such fear.

1 E. Dunsdorfs and A. Spekke, *Latvijas vesture 7500-7600* (Stockholm, 1964), pp. 221-227; E. Dunsdorfs, *Latvijas vesture 1600-1710* (Uppsala, 1962), pp. 181-188; E. Dunsdorfs, *Latvijas Vesture 7770-7800* (Sundbyberg, 1973), pp. 292-307; Arveds Svabe, *Latvijas vesture 1800-1914* (Uppsala, 1958), pp. 546-549; Georg von Rauch, *The Baltic States: The Years of Independence 1917-1940* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1974), pp. 81-86; Romuald Misiūnas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence 1940-1980* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983), pp. 272-273.
2 These documents have not been systematically analyzed for nationality or linguistic structure. The generalization is based on a visual survey of the 1797 "soul revision" of Courland, especially for the Dunaburg Kirchspiel. The revisions are part of the Baltic microfilm collection, Johann Gottfried Herder Institute, Marburg, Germany.
3 A systematic study of the attitudes Latvians in one region held toward those in another and how those attitudes changed remains to be written, but a good model for such a history would be Eugen Weber, *Peasants Into Frenchmen: the Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford, California: 1976), especially Chapter 6. Andrejs Johansons, *Latvijas kulturas vesture 1710-1800* (Stockholm, 1975), pp. 7-12, discusses regional differentiation among Latvians in the eighteenth century and notes that such differentiation existed as well among the Baltic German upper orders (p. 8).
4 Andrejs Plakans, "The Latvians," in E.C. Thaden, ed. *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914* (Princeton, 1981), pp. 269-270.
5 How "provincial" pre-nineteenth century Latvians were in terms of such "mental maps" remains to be investigated. A good start in such studies of mentalité is E. Dunsdorfs, *Divas gudras latviesu galvas: Muizu clibinasana zviedru Vidzeme [Two Clever Latvian Peasants: Foundation of Manors in the Latvian Part of Swedish Livonia 1638-1688}* (Stockholm, 1986).
6 Reference here is to the *dievturiba* movement: see *Latvju enciklopedija* (Stockholm, 1950-1951), I, p. 491.
7 The Imperial government's policy is described in Edward Thaden, "The Russian Government," in E. Thaden, ed. *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914* (Princeton, 1981), pp. 15-108.
8 Plakans, "The Latvians," pp. 227-247.
9 A. Silde, *Latvijas vesture, 1920-7940* (Stockholm, 1976), pp. 508-512. *Latvju enciklopedija* (Stockholm, 1950-1951), I, p. 706 estimates that in the interwar years the number of translated books exceeded the number of original works by Latvian authors.
10 Plakans, "The Latvians," pp. 228-231.
11 Andrejs Plakans, "Peasants, Intellectuals, and Nationalism in the Russian Baltic Provinces, 1820-1890," *Journal of Modern History,* xlvi (1974), pp. 445-475; Aleksander Loit, "Die nationalen Bewegungen im Baltikum während des 19. Jahrhunderts in vergleichender Perspective," in Aleksander Loit, ed. *National Movements in the Baltic Countries during the 19th Century* (Stockholm, 1985).
12 Valdemars Bastjanis, *Demokratiska Latvija* (Stockholm, 1966).
13 E. Andersons, *Latvijas vesture 1920-1940: Arpolitika,* I (Stockholm, 1982), II (Stockholm, 1984).
14 Andersons, *Latvijas vesture 1920-1940: Arpolitika,* I, pp. 1318-158.
15 Silde, *Latvijas vesture 1920-1940,* pp. 474-507, 638-665.