

Baltic States Collections at the Hoover Institution Archives

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Historical Overview

The three Baltic states—Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia—have long languished in semiobscurity, victims of their geographic remoteness vis-à-vis the rest of Europe and of the actions of powerful neighbors who have annexed these countries, invaded them, or simply marched through them with armies. (The list of these conquering foes is too long to cite in full here but includes Germans, Swedes, and Russians.) Often, and mistakenly, lumped together as "the Balts," each country has a distinct, non-Slavic language and culture at its core. Linguistically, only Latvian and Lithuanian are related (even they are separate languages), and Estonian is close to Finnish.

Obviously, as three small countries in a relatively compact region, they have some traits in common, including strong folk traditions, many of which predate the Christianization of the area, which began only in the twelfth century and took centuries to fully accomplish. Estonia and Latvia endured centuries of domination by a Baltic German aristocracy, which enserfed the local peasantry; Lithuania enjoyed a brief period of independent expansion and was later subject to strong Polish influence in matters of both religion and politics. All three peoples would end up as subjects of the Russian Empire under the czars.

A common history was again imposed on all three states by the long period of Soviet domination over the Baltic countries, which came to an end only with the breakup of the USSR in 1991. Since that time, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia have enjoyed independence, emerging into the light such that their individuality is once again discernible. And, although they may never wield great influence in world affairs, the three Baltic countries are about to become a good deal less obscure, at least in terms of Europe.

As of May 2004, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania will all accede to full membership in the European Union, as part of the largest E.U. expansion in recent history. This, combined with their recent acceptance into the NATO alliance, means that the Baltic states will once again play a pivotal role in an area where Central and East Europe, as well as Scandinavia, converge.

The three countries currently seek to position themselves as a kind of northern bridgeway between East and West, and each is undergoing fundamental changes in terms of economic development and political life. Now, as in the past, the Hoover Institution Archives seeks to record the history of these three countries through documents, manuscripts, and artifacts of various kinds. Having collected materials on the Baltic states throughout the vicissitudes of the twentieth century, during which great tragedies befell the region, the archives maintains a continuing interest in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as they currently enter a much brighter period in their respective histories.

1918–1938

Thomas J. Orbison, the chief of the American Relief Administration's (ARA) mission to the Baltics in 1919–20, had a rude, first person encounter with the violence plaguing the region in the wake of World War I and the Russian Revolution. In October 1919, the ARA headquarters building in Riga, the capital of newly independent Latvia, was shelled by the Bermond-Avalov army, a force made up largely of German *freikorps* elements and a few White Russian officers. The ARA was not the target of the Bermond-Avalov army, whose objective at the time was to exert pressure on the Latvian government in Riga. No one was injured, but the shelling received a good deal of local attention; and Orbison recorded the event and its aftermath in his personal diary, now part of the Orbison papers in the Hoover Institution Archives. Latvian president Karlis Ulmanis sent a bouquet of flowers as a gesture of condolence to the mission, which was then feeding many children in the three Baltic states.

Latvians were extremely grateful for the food aid and the medical attention, including dental care, which were provided to their children by the ARA. In recognition of this, Orbison was presented with a number of richly ornamented albums of photographs and testimonials, in which Latvian officials and medical personnel recorded their tributes to the relief activities conducted by Orbison and others in the ARA. These albums are also part of the Orbison collection in the archives, whose ARA records have numerous reports on the food situation in the Baltic region at this time.

The George Herron papers in the archives include documents from as early as 1918 regarding Latvian aspirations for nationhood in the wake of the collapse of the Russian empire. In November 1918, Latvia declared its independence, and along with the other Baltic states it was caught up in a complex equation of forces, involving Bolshevik Russia, Allied intervention against the Bolsheviks, and the Latvian state's own attempts to assert its national sovereignty in an unsettled local environment.

From the materials in the Orbison and other collections in the archives, we learn that the Latvians themselves were grateful for the assistance delivered by the Americans at a time of dire need. Nonetheless, in 1919–20, it does seem that the American government's attitude toward the Baltic states was one of some considerable condescension: the Baltic populations were not viewed by the Americans as being fully capable of self-government, and many in the Wilson administration and in Hoover's ARA thought that the Baltic region should be, and would be, restored to a de-Bolshevized Russian Empire.

Latvians participated in large numbers in the convulsions of the Russian Revolution and ensuing civil war. The area, especially Latvia, had been radicalized by the 1905 revolution and popular resentment of its suppression by tsarist forces, which included sending punitive expeditions against rebels in the Baltic region. After the 1917 revolution, detachments of Latvian riflemen, or *strelnieki*, who had emerged as independent units in the czarist army during the latter part of World War I, became legendary for their exploits, both on behalf of the Bolsheviks and against them in the service of White armies.

Some *strelnieki*, having fought on the side of Admiral Kolchak, ended up in Vladivostok at the end of the Russian civil war, a continent away from the Baltic. There are photographs of these riflemen in the Voldemars Salnais papers in the archives. Other *strelnieki* guarded the walls of the Kremlin in Moscow, where Lenin and his Bolsheviks came to rely on them during emergencies.

By the end of the Russian civil war, many riflemen had returned to Latvia, disillusioned with the increasingly authoritarian character of Bolshevism. These played a part in securing Latvian independence. Those Latvians who continued to support the Bolsheviks remained in Russia; many later lost their lives in the Stalinist purges of the 1930s, including the famous poster artist and former *strelnieks*, Gustavs Klucis, who was shot on Stalin's orders in 1938.

Klucis is referred to incorrectly as a Russian artist in many accounts, including Western ones, which continue to cite his name only in its transliterated form, Klutsis. Ironically, having been committed to the cause of Soviet internationalism, Klucis died as a "national element," i.e., as a Latvian. A number of his posters are in the collection of the Hoover Institution Archives, as are some by another pro-Bolshevik Latvian, Aleksandrs Apsitis, better known by his Russified name, Apsit.

In the 1920s and 1930s, the independent Baltic states were the scene of high drama and espionage, as they provided an important "window" for Western intelligence services interested in communist Russia. Some celebrated figures, such as Sidney Reilly (the so-called Ace of Spies) and Boris Savinkov (an instigator of various conspiracies against the Bolsheviks and a sometime accomplice of Reilly's) spent time in the Baltic region, and Riga was notorious for its spies at this time. The city also hosted the earliest examples of what would become a new breed of policy analyst, the Kremlinologist, with George Kennan, in particular, honing his skills as a diplomat in Riga. Materials in the Bruce Lockhart and Boris Nicolaevsky collections in the archives relate to the activities of Reilly and Savinkov. The Loy Henderson collection contains the memoirs of an American diplomat who was stationed in Riga in the late 1920s; Henderson's autobiography contains his observations on Latvian politics of the time, as well as an account of his reporting from the Baltic region on developments in the Soviet Union. Kennan's activities in the Baltic states are also described in Henderson's memoirs.

The 1920s and 1930s represented what would later be known as the "first independence" of the Baltic states. Contending with the difficulties of the Great Depression, and doing so by means of newly created institutions, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia all experienced political turmoil. In Latvia, the Ulmanis government assumed aspects of a personalistic, authoritarian regime, as political parties and parliamentary rule were suspended. The important Latvian Social Democratic Workers Party suffered as a result; materials in the Boris Nicolavsky collection in the archives contain information about Bruno Kalnins, an important Social Democratic leader in Latvia. There are also collections relating to a number of the politicians and diplomats who were protagonists in this critical phase of Latvian history: Adolfs Blodnieks, Alfreds Berzins, and Felikss Cielens, among others.

The first independence of Latvia was noteworthy in terms of cultural assertions of Latvian identity in the context of the authoritarian, nationalist project of Ulmanis. The Janis Muncis collection in the archives is made up of photographs and other documents relating to mass theater productions, for which Muncis was the designer, in Latvia during the 1930s. This collection came to the archives through the efforts of Gvido Augusts, an artist who has long been active in the Latvian-American community in Northern California. (Muncis himself was later imprisoned by the Nazis for having "pro-American" beliefs. He ended up in the United States after the Second World War.)

1939–1945

Undoubtedly, the most difficult period for Latvia, Estonia, and Lithuania began with 1939 and the consummation of the Hitler-Stalin pact, part of which assigned the Baltic states to a Soviet "sphere of influence," a move that would lead to the outright Soviet annexation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in 1940. Andrei Vishinskii, already notorious for his roles in the Moscow purge trials, was dispatched to Riga to supervise the annexation of Latvia. The massive Soviet propaganda machine worked at full bore to present this to the world as a freely made choice on the part of Latvia's working class. The Stalinist police state was not shown in the newsreels of Soviet troops entering Riga but operated from the beginning of the annexation to ensure that Latvians complied with rule from Moscow.

In the Hoover Institution Archives is the original carbon copy of an appeal, in Russian, made by the Ulmanis government in Latvia to the Soviet authorities just prior to annexation. This appeal, which pledged cooperation while pleading for continued independence for Latvia, fell on deaf ears, and worse was to follow. Karlis Ulmanis was taken into Soviet custody and died a prisoner in Russia in 1942, under circumstances which have never been fully explained, but which were most probably related to the strenuous interrogations he endured at the hands of Soviet security agents. Copies of the records of these interrogations are available in the archives (in the Indulis Ronis collection).

In June 1941, Stalinist repression in the three Baltic states, now "Sovietized," led to the mass deportations of thousands of Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians to the Gulag. The Soviet deportations, which included hundreds of children, were followed in a matter of days by the blitzkrieg of Nazi Germany, as Operation Barbarossa was unleashed against the Soviet Union, which by then included the three newly annexed Baltic states. Nazi Germany, claiming that it came to "liberate" the region from "Jewish Bolshevism," prepared its propaganda carefully to this effect, including different-language versions of the same poster glorifying Hitler. Copies of these posters are in the archives.

The severity of Soviet rule in 1941 meant that many in the Baltic states initially saw the Germans as the lesser of two evils, even though the Nazis never intended to restore independence to Latvia, Estonia, or Lithuania, instead creating by fiat the military district of Ostland, with German rule established over the entire Baltic region. The Nazis

envisioned an eventual "Aryan" colonization of Ostland, with the Baltic peoples being viewed as "inferior" races, only a step above the Slavs in the racist Hitlerian scheme of things.

Of course, for the Jewish populations in Latvia and Lithuania, a collective tragedy began with the Nazi invasion, as the German mobile killing squads, the Einsatzgruppen, began their work of mass murder. This tragedy—and the question of the complicity of a small minority of Latvians, mainly in the Arajs commando, working for the Germans—has been the subject of much recent research, some of it based on materials in the Hoover Institution Archives.

The Latvian American historian Andrew Ezergailis has recently edited a collection of primary materials entitled *Stockholm Documents: The German Occupation of Latvia, 1941-1945: What Did America Know?* Based on reports prepared during the war by Latvian diplomats abroad who had sources in occupied Latvia, these materials parallel collections in the Hoover Institution Archives, involving as they do the reports of Voldemars Salnais, Jules Feldmans, and Alfreds Bilmanis, all of whose collections are in the archives. Their collections shed light on the nature of both the Soviet and the Nazi occupations of Latvia and contain information on issues such as the mass deportations to the Gulag, the Holocaust in Latvia, and American and British knowledge of both events.

Efforts to regain independence preoccupied Latvian politicians and diplomats during and after the Second World War. The Hoover Institution Archives has many documents relating to this struggle, including an appeal made to President Franklin Roosevelt by Latvian diplomats abroad (the document is in the Jules Feldmans papers). All three Baltic states continued to maintain officially accredited diplomatic missions in the United States, and the archives has materials showcasing their joint efforts to press the case for Baltic independence under adverse circumstances. Technically, of course, as the result of Soviet and German occupations, these were stateless diplomats, as the independent countries on whose behalf they spoke had ceased to exist in a formal sense.

Recently, additional materials have come to light pertaining to the Alfreds Bilmanis papers. Bilmanis, who was both historian and diplomat, headed the important Latvian Legation to the United States during and after World War II. These materials provide evidence of the close working relationship among diplomats of the three Baltic states, their ties to émigré organizations, and the efforts of historians such as Bilmanis to record events during yet another troubled time for the region. The Bilmanis materials include his response to news of the Holocaust in Latvia and documentation on Soviet deportations. The collection also contains lists of Latvian refugees being sought by family members after the Second World War.

Also in the archives are materials relating to resistance groups during World War II, including the Swedish-based Latvian Central Council, which opposed both Nazi and Soviet rule, as well as records concerning military units conscripted from the Baltic states by the Germans and Nazi efforts to suppress partisan activity in the Baltic region. There are also documents concerning the important postwar partisan movements, the "forest

brothers," who took to the woods of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in a determined, if unsuccessful, effort to resist the re-Stalinization of the Baltic states.

The forest brothers were most numerous in Lithuania, but an estimated 40,000 partisans existed in Latvia at the time; Latvian historians have only recently begun to provide fuller accounts of this resistance movement and its suppression by Soviet security forces. The role played by British and American intelligence services in support of guerrilla activities in the Baltic states has been the focus of recent books by Western historians; undoubtedly more information on this subject is in the large Radio Free Europe collection in the archives.

After the Second World War, many people from the Baltic countries ended up in displaced persons' (DP) camps in Germany, organized according to nationality, with each community participating in the organization of camp life. Cultural activity centered around national traditions, including the Baltic custom of celebrating the midsummer solstice. A large number of Latvian newspapers produced in the DP camps can be found in both the Latviesu Centrālā Komiteja records and the Alfreds Bilmanis papers. The Latviesu Centrālā Komiteja records also contain photo albums depicting life in the DP camps, including Līgo celebrations and the continuity of traditions in Latvian arts and crafts.

Edgars Andersons (known in the United States as Edgar Anderson), a prominent Latvian-American historian of the Baltic region, spent time in a DP camp, and wrote for a camp newspaper. Andersons was instrumental in bringing collections on Latvia during World War II into the archives, and there is a collection in his name in the archives as well. It includes the manuscript of his book on Baltic history and materials on a number of Latvian subjects, including important documentation of the Latvian national resistance against German and Soviet occupations during the Second World War. A dossier in the Edgars Andersons collection is devoted to the cultural awakening of the Liv minority in Latvia during the 1960s.

1945–1991

Generally speaking, the second period of the Soviet annexation of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia—the nearly fifty year span from 1944 to 1991—is less well documented in the archives than other eras of Baltic history, due to Soviet controls on the dissemination of information, and the difficulties inherent in collecting samizdat materials that circulated in the USSR. Unofficial publications from Latvia, however, are in the collections of the archives. Moreover, Soviet rule was not completely monolithic: splits at times put the local party leaderships at variance with Moscow, and émigré organizations among the large Latvian, Lithuanian, and Estonian diasporas continued to pursue the cause of Baltic independence. Publications and other documents from such groups and from individuals are to be found in the archives.

All through the long cold war, controversy continued over such issues as the Nazi period in Latvia, the fate of Latvian Jews, and the role played by prewar politicians in the loss of

Latvia's independence. These subjects and others generated a good deal of political and historical literature, as did the constant flow of publications and commentary concerning communist rule in Latvia. Then as now, the Hoover Institution Library and Archives has attempted to collect publications and papers from across the entire spectrum of expressed opinion and thus is a leading repository of materials concerning the cold war in general and the second period of Soviet domination in Latvia in particular.

The huge Radio Free Europe collection contains copies of broadcasts in the three Baltic languages, as well as reports on conditions in the three countries. Latvia's specific development within the Soviet Union can be traced through these materials, as can the attitude of the Western powers, including the United States, toward the cause of independence for the Baltic states.

The "national awakenings" that occurred in the Baltic countries in the late 1980s, as the Soviet Union headed toward collapse, received a good deal of attention in the West at the time, especially as regards the movement in Lithuania. Latvia had its own dissidents, and a national movement for independence gathered popular support by the end of the decade. Materials in the Hoover Institution Archives concern the broad-based Latvian People's Front, including the papers of Mavriks Vulfsons, a Latvian journalist and one of the Front's founders. Additional documents pertaining to this important time of transition in Latvia can be found in the Andrejs Eizans papers; Eizans was also a participant in the Latvian awakening of the 1980s and 1990s. There are also Latvian materials in the large Narodno-trudovoi soiuz samizdat collection.

National aspirations, and national symbols, began to reappear openly in Latvia and the other Baltic states in this period, as reflected in the political iconography of the time. Such themes became even more pronounced, of course, as popular momentum developed for full independence for the Baltic countries and their separation from the Soviet Union. In 1991, while much of the world's attention was focused on the Persian Gulf war, the Baltic states were the scene of bloody clashes between Soviet security forces and unarmed demonstrators, leaving twenty protesters dead in Vilnius and Riga. The archives' materials from this time of dramatic conflict and change in Latvia includes striking posters commenting on Soviet rule; in other media can be seen the resurgence of Latvian national identity and the affirmation of a common bond with Estonia and Lithuania known as the "Baltic Way."

1991–2003

With the achievement of Latvian independence in 1991 came new problems, not the least of which was the status of the significant Russian-speaking minority in the country which now found itself outside of the borders of Russia. Debate and dissension over citizenship and language issues roiled Latvian society and politics. Since independence, the meaning of national identity has been renegotiated, both in a legal sense and in a broader, cultural sense. The question of what it means to be "Latvian" has been considered from various angles, with some asserting that solely linguistic and cultural criteria should apply, while

others advocate a more inclusive definition based on national territory, extending citizenship and nationality to Latvian Russians.

Partly as a result of such controversies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) emerged to monitor political extremism and to assist the Latvian state as it prepared to seek admission to the European Union, whose comprehensive and strict criteria for membership require each country's law and practices to conform to EU standards in a process known as "harmonization." The Latvian Center for Human Rights and Ethnic Studies collection in the archives, which documents the activities of this NGO, contains literature on extremist groups in Latvia, ranging from neofascist to "National Bolshevik," including rare, difficult-to-find leaflets, posters, and political literature that circulate in a semiclandestine manner.

Such extremist literature is by no means representative of Latvian politics in general, and the archives also has materials concerning mainstream political parties in the country, including the Latvijas Cels collection of papers and documents from the political party whose name translates as "Latvia's Way" and which played an important role in government in Latvia during the 1990s. The Latvian Oral History Project collection consists of a series of recorded interviews with leading political figures in Latvia. The interviews, conducted in 1999–2000, include one with former state president Guntis Ulmanis and one with the late Ieva Lase, a dissident sent to the Gulag in the 1950s, with additional interviews contemplated as part of an ongoing effort to document Latvian political life.

As part of its important Studies of Nationalities series, the Hoover Press has published *The Latvians: A Short History* by Andrejs Plakans, which tells the story of Latvia from pre-modern times into the mid-1990s. Latvian history, of course, is not finished, and the three Baltic states have survived to add their own individual contributions to the mix known as contemporary Europe. As they do so, the Hoover Institution Archives will continue its long tradition of collecting materials from the Baltic region, including Latvia.

David Jacobs, Hoover Institution Archives, ca. 2003

<http://www.hoover.org/library-archives/collections/latvia>