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**Between Homeland and Exile: Identity Reconstruction and Ideological Formation
among Latvian Refugees During the Second World War and its Aftermath,
1940-1950**

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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Introduction	4
Reconstructing a Collective History	7
A Paradise Lost	9
Cries and Whispers	16
Impossible Decisions	26
Life in Exile	32
Things Said and Unsaid	45
Conclusion	49
Bibliography	52

Abstract

This project seeks to analyze a number of recently-published English language primary sources written by refugees who fled Latvia during the Second World War. These narratives generally depict the author's experiences during the 'war years' (during which the country underwent three periods of military occupation by the Soviet Union and the German Reich) and the subsequent period of displacement that proceeded from it. Despite the deeply personal and individualized nature of these biographical works, certain conclusions can be drawn when they are considered together. In this thesis, I will argue that the Second World War was and remains the central historical event in Latvian national consciousness. The experiences of invasion, occupation, war, and eventual displacement forced Latvians of the war generation to forge a new ideology in their exile by which they could justify their decision to leave their homeland and to explain the situation in which they now found themselves. This ideology can be characterized, at least partially by the following: emphasis on a narrative of national and personal victimhood, the central importance of preserving the Latvian culture and language, and a tendency to downplay the historical agency of Latvians themselves, particularly as it relates to the period of the German occupation. Each of these characteristics is present in these refugee narratives to varying degrees- thus indicating the longevity of this ideological formation that initially emerged in the Displaced Persons camps of postwar Germany.

Introduction

The events of the Second World War continue to cast a long shadow over our world to this day. In his essay *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Karl Marx wrote "The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living."¹ Similarly, in the prologue to his semi-autobiographical work of history *Walking Since Daybreak*, author Modris Ekstein, writing nearly a decade after the end of the Cold War, wrote: "The age of violence, particularly the Second World War, refuses to leave us in peace. Before we can move forward, we must come to some kind of terms with 1945 and what it represents. A start would be the recognition that 1945, with its devastation, displacement, and horror, was the result not just of a few madmen and their befuddled followers, not just of 'others' but of humanity as a whole..."² One could very easily extrapolate this statement to apply to the Second World War more broadly. In many ways, we are still left to muddle through the legacy of World War II over three-quarters of a century later. This project represents just one such attempt to reckon with these events as they played out in the small Baltic nation of Latvia.

The introductory statement in the biography *Biruta's Story: A Memoir of Home, War and Finding Refuge* by Lillita Hardes, is reflective of the sentiments held by many Latvians belonging to the generation that experienced the Second World War firsthand: "I had no say over the time or place in history in which I was born. Likewise, I had no sway over the politics of the world which played out while I was growing up in Latvia. Both realities

¹ Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Marxists Internet Archive, Mar. 1852, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/index.htm>.

² Eksteins, Mordis. *Walking Since Daybreak: A Story of Eastern Europe, World War II, and the Heart of Our Century*. Mariner Books, 2000. pg. 12-13

profoundly influenced who I am and shaped the story of my life.”³ Many Latvians, especially those living in exile, conceive of themselves and their nation as victims of historical circumstances. After a cursory review of Latvian history, especially in the modern period, one would be hard-pressed to argue that they are entirely wrong to think this way. Latvia has never been a great power, capable of projecting strength in its own right. Rather, owing to its geographic location, Latvia has been the object of geopolitical power struggles between the great powers on either side- Germany and Russia, in all their various historical iterations, since time immemorial. In her book *Among the Living and the Dead: A Tale of Exile and Homecoming on the War Roads of Europe*, author Inara Verzemnieks summarizes what she sees as the distinct tragedy of Latvian history: “They (the Latvian people) had fought on behalf of one occupier, against another potential occupier, as had been done for centuries. But no matter the uniform, the outcome is always the same. They always fight only for the right to remain ghosts in their own land.”⁴

In the years since the restoration of Latvian independence, there has been an abundance of primary literature that retells the stories of Latvian civilians during the war years of 1940 to 1944, and the subsequent period of statelessness, which usually lasted from 1945 up to 1950. Although each of these individual stories is unique in its own way, they can reveal much about the experiences of Latvians in this period when considered as a whole. Broadly speaking, these memoirs follow the same narrative arc. Their lives in pre-war Latvia are described in highly romanticized terms due to the traumatic nature

³ Hades, Lilita. *Biruta's Story: A Memoir of Home, War and Finding Refuge*. Hades Press, 2020.pg. 1

⁴ Verzemnieks, Inara. *Among the Living and the Dead: A Tale of Exile and Homecoming on the War Roads of Europe*. W.W. Norton, 2017. pg. 122-123

of the experiences that were to come. With the Soviet invasion in June 1940, the author's idyllic youths are brought to an abrupt end. Friends and family members fall victim to Soviet repression as a new regime is implemented which most Latvians deem intolerable. When the Soviets were run out of the country by the forces of the German Reich a year later, it seemed that life may return to some semblance of normalcy for them. However, as the war dragged on, Germany's fortunes took a turn for the worse. When the frontlines returned to Latvian territory in mid-1944 and Soviet victory seemed all but inevitable, the people who had lived through the first period of Soviet occupation were faced with a difficult decision. In the final months of the war, thousands of Latvians chose to flee their homeland in the wake of the Soviet advance. Arriving in Displaced Persons camps in Germany following the war's conclusion, these exiles from Latvia struggled to make sense of their situation as the victorious allies weighed their fates.

It is no exaggeration to claim that the Second World War was and remains the central historical event in Latvian national consciousness. The experiences and trauma of the war weigh heavy on successive generations and are responsible for defining their national identity. Although this is especially true regarding the period following the conclusion of the war until the country regained its independence in the waning years of the 20th century, this has remained the case to the present day. Furthermore, this statement applies not only to Latvians living in the country itself but also to the sizable community of exiles that formed as a result of the war. For the exiles especially, the invasion, occupation, and displacement experienced during the Second World War worked to create a new national ideology among Latvians- one which emphasized an

identity of victimhood, placed great importance on the preservation of Latvian culture, and downplayed the historical agency of the Latvians themselves, especially as it regards their collaboration with the Germans and their participation in the Holocaust. The memoirs cited in this work not only provide narrative descriptions of the events of the war from a highly personal lens but also can give one insight into how the subjects of these narratives attempted to make sense of the situations in which they found themselves in the post-war world.

Reconstructing a Collective History

Given the highly personal nature of the works utilized in writing this study, it would be proper to give some details regarding the authors as a way of introducing the source base. The majority of the works cited in this study are either autobiographical in the strictest sense of the term, or based on autobiographical notes or recollections. Although nearly all of these memoirs are written in the first person and are narrated from the perspective of the book's central subject, closer examination reveals that a few of these were not written by the people whose experiences are being retold. For instance, the author of *Biruta's Story: A Memoir of Home, War and Finding Refuge*, is actually not the titular Biruta, but rather her daughter. *The Rings of My Tree: A Latvian Woman's Journey* presents a similar case, in that it was written not by the subject of the narrative, Mirdza Labrencis, but by her longtime friend, Jane Cunningham. *Mischka's War: A Story of Survival from War-Torn Europe to New York* by Sheila Fitzpatrick is somewhat similar in this regard in that it was written by the spouse of the narrative's subject.

A couple of the primary sources are unique in that they were not written by the war generation, but rather the generation which proceeded from them. Both such books used for this study, *Among the Living and the Dead* by Inara Verzemnieks and *Skylarks and Rebels* by Rita Laima, center on the author's attempts to make sense of their family's past, relying just as much on what they are told by their relatives about this time as what remains unsaid. Modris Eksteins' book, *Walking Since Daybreak: A Story of Eastern Europe, World War II, and the Heart of Our Century*, is unique in that it presents a broad historical narrative from a personal perspective, making it somewhat of a synthesis of a primary and secondary source.

Levels of education vary between authors. Of the dozen or so authors who are cited in this study, two are professional historians (Fitzpatrick and Eksteins) and two are professors of English (Nesaule and Verzemnieks). As for the rest, their occupations are either not specified anywhere in the books, or are otherwise irrelevant. The memoirs not written by amateur writers such as *Biruta's Story* and *Flight From Latvia: A Six-Year Chronicle* by Dagnija Niemane tend to be written in a more candid style than those written by trained academics, and as such can be more revealing in certain regards.

Broadly speaking, the primary sources cited in this work fall into one of two categories: works written by ethnic Latvians, and works written by Latvian Jews. Although certain themes such as trauma are prominent in both sets of works, these two groups of people

experienced the war years in vastly different ways. The books written by Latvian Jews all center on the persecution they faced, by both Germans and Latvians, during the period of German occupation. To phrase things diplomatically, the Jews of Latvia and their experiences during the war years do not fit neatly into the prevailing narrative put forward by non-Jewish Latvians in their accounts of the same period. Indeed, the version of the story that they tell is often contradictory to the non-Jewish sources. Their inclusion in this study was done in an effort to illuminate some of the darker corners of Latvian history that the Latvians themselves seem anxious to elide over.

A Paradise Lost

In *Among the Living and the Dead*, author Inara Verzemnieks posits that “an exile’s memory of home remains perfectly still, immobile as if encased in a carapace.”⁵ To this point, the authors of these memoirs have a pronounced tendency to romanticize life in Latvia before the war, often describing it as being ‘perfect’ or ‘ideal.’ In *Biruta’s Story*, the author writes: “Surrounded by family, I felt my life was perfect. Never did I imagine that things could be any different.”⁶ Similarly, Jane Cunningham, narrating in the person of her friend, Mirdza Labrencis, (who was a bit older at the time of the events portrayed), writes that “I thought life would open up for me like the lotus blossom we all think about in our youth.”⁷ A few factors likely account for this overly-nostalgic view- the youth of the narrators at the time being described, the trauma of future events, and their physical and temporal distance from the time and place in question. The geopolitical tensions between the Latvian and Soviet governments that would eventually result in the

⁵ Verzemnieks, *Among the Living and the Dead*. pg. 60

⁶ Hades, *Biruta’s Story*. pg. 3

⁷ Cunningham, Jane. *The Rings of My Tree: A Latvian Woman’s Journey*. Llumina Press, 2004. pg. 1

invasion of the former country are nowhere to be found. As are the ethnic tensions between the Jewish and non-Jewish inhabitants of Latvia that would suddenly come to the fore in the period of German occupation. For instance, Latvian Holocaust survivor Max Michelson writes wistfully of the summer of 1939 which he spent at the beachside town of Jurmula: "In 1939, which was to be my last summer at the beach, I joined the Jewish tennis club, Ritek. We played at the club and afterward, we hung out at the local ice cream parlor. We went on bike outings and had impromptu parties. It was a particularly enjoyable summer. Oblivious to the gathering clouds of war, I had a marvelous time."⁸

Indeed, most of the narrators portray themselves as having existed in a certain state of obliviousness during this time- blissfully unaware of the horrors that were to be unleashed in the near future. With the benefit of retrospect, some point to certain clues that foreshadowed the dark turn events of events to come, that they may have noticed had they been older and more observant- news regarding the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, increasing Soviet influence in Latvia, and the outbreak of the Second World War. They describe being capable of sensing the profound feeling of unease that these developments produced among the older generation, even if they were as yet incapable of fully understanding what these things meant in and of themselves. In her memoir *I Survived Rumbuli*, Frida Michelson recalls the words of her mother a few days before the outbreak of the war: "Children, a strange premonition is tormenting me lately, as though somebody is telling me that very bad things are in store for us. Perhaps it is

⁸ Michelson, Max. *City of Life, City of Death: Memories of Riga*. University Press of Colorado, 2001. pg. 69

because your stepfather is constantly reading the papers and predicting war. 'Go,' he says, 'go and see your children, as this may be your last chance.' So here I am, children. May God keep away from us all the bad things and send us peace, prosperity, good health, and contentment."⁹ In *Biruta's Story*, Hades describes listening to conversations regarding these political developments but being incapable of fully understanding their ramifications: "On the late summer night, the adult conversation I overheard but didn't understand was regarding the Russian and German non-aggression treaty of August 1939, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. That summer, the adults worried about what impact it would have on Latvia and the Baltic states. If I could have taken any meaning from those discussions, I might have been better prepared. However, at the tender age of nine, I didn't understand the world very much beyond the circle of my family. Even the adults could not have anticipated the onslaught of changes that were to come."¹⁰ Inara Verzemnieks' *Among the Living and the Dead* provides a more novelistic accounting of these events: "It began with the vague hissing of the radio from inside the farmhouse- Poland and Germany and English naval blockades in the Baltic Sea; letters from her sister in Riga about shop shelves running empty, not a grain of salt in the whole city; the adults discussing rumors that the president is about to send Riga's redundant workers to the countryside to work on the farms to help the country produce more food; the arguments over the meaning of a government announcement that the country has entered into a Mutual-Assistance Treaty with Russia, and will open its borders for the Russians to establish military bases, whether this is, in fact, a free

⁹ Michelson, Frida. *I Survived Rumbuli*. Holocaust Library, 1979. pg. 15

¹⁰ Hades, *Biruta's Story*. pg. 26

choice. All these words are manifesting themselves now in the flea-brown tunic of a Russian soldier, set in silhouette against the June wheat.”¹¹

The Soviet invasion of Latvia in June 1940 is described as having occurred suddenly, quickly, and quietly. In *Mischka's War*, the titular subject is quoted as recalling: “After a few days of confusing newspaper articles, the Russian tanks rolled in, a thousand or more of them; Russian two-motor bombers made of metal flew low over Riga. President Ulmanis said over the radio: ‘You stay in your place, I will stay in mine.’ That was the last anyone heard from him. The planes continued to fly overhead, not only on that first day but now and then for some more days.”¹² Most were not aware of what was happening until it was already too late. Because the Soviet invasion of Latvia coincided with the fall of France to German forces, the attention of the international community was directed elsewhere at that time- this was even true in Latvia itself to a certain extent. Harges describes how, because she and her family were on vacation at the time, they were only vaguely aware of the situation, and had difficulties finding information about it in the local press: “Our family was just a few miles from Riga but cut off from the events in the city. Father picked up a newspaper at a local shop, scanned the front pages, then flipped through the rest, finding nothing about the Soviets. ‘Paris fell to the Nazis three days ago, so the paper is full of articles about the collapse of France. There are no reports of Russian operations in the Baltics.”¹³

¹¹ Verzemnieks, *Among the Living and the Dead*. pg. 133-134

¹² Fitzpatrick, Sheila. *Mischka's War: A Story of Survival from War-Torn Europe to New York*. I.B. Tauris, 2017. pg. 35

¹³ Harges, *Biruta's Story*. pg. 30

Often there is a single moment early in the narrative that shatters the narrator's idyllic existence and forces them to realize that their lives were about to be irrevocably changed. These moments did not always take such an obvious form as the sudden appearance of the soldier on the family farm described above by Verzmnieks. For others, the most visible and immediate sign which portended future events was a parent losing a job or being demoted, as this had immediate detrimental effects on the family's material conditions- for instance, a few describe losing their houses as a result. Harges, for instance, speaks to the resentment she felt at having been evicted from her residence after her father lost his job as a physician: "By evicting our family from Alexander Heights, (a neighborhood in Riga) the Russians were taking away more than just father's livelihood and our family home. They were taking away my childhood."¹⁴ Harges' sentiments expressed here reflect the fact that many of the narrators of these stories were rather young at the time of the events described. As a result, they tend to emphasize the disruptive effects the war had on their lives and speak of their immense desire to return to normalcy.

As the Soviets assumed control over Latvia, they began to implement a new regime that most Latvians seem to have found to be completely intolerable. Indeed, losing one's job or house was often the least of one's worries, as those in white-collar professions were liable to be designated as 'enemies of the state' and could be arrested, imprisoned, tortured, or even executed as such. Cunningham describes how Mirdza saw her father being demoted from his position as the local postmaster as having averted a potentially worse outcome: "The communists, in full control over the government, took charge of

¹⁴ Harges, *Biruta's Story*. pg. 40

our post office, It was in the autumn of 1940 when papa was demoted. Seldom when someone's job rank is lowered does it seem like a blessing, but for Papa and us, going from postmaster to clerk saved us."¹⁵

The worst of the Soviet atrocities took place in June of 1941, when the Soviet government deported thousands of Latvian civilians to Siberia. Among the groups targeted specifically for deportation were members of nationalist political organizations, those with foreign connections, civil servants, the clergy, and members of the nebulously defined "bourgeois class."¹⁶ Verzmneiks claims that there were 20 such categories in total, which were "general enough that they could apply to almost anyone."¹⁷ Exact figures for the number of individuals deported from Latvia (and the other two Baltic states for that matter) are difficult to ascertain, although in Latvia it is believed to have been somewhere between 25,000 and 35,000.¹⁸ With so many people deported, it stands to reason that most authors of these narratives claim to have known at least one person who was targeted by the Soviet authorities at this time, if not multiple people. In *Walking Since Daybreak*, Eksteins retells the story of an uncle of his named Arturs Vajeiks. He describes how Arturs, who was a member of the Aizsargi (an ultranationalist Latvian paramilitary organization) simply disappeared one night in 1941 and was never heard from again: "For the longest time, Arturs Vajeiks wasn't even an official statistic. We did not know where his body lay. His death for the longest time was

¹⁵ Cunningham, *Rings of My Tree*. pg. 9-10

¹⁶ Misiunas, Romuald and Taagepera, Rein. *The Baltic States: The Years of Dependence, 1940-1990*. University of California Press, 1993. pg. 41-42

¹⁷ Verzemnieks, *Among the Living and the Dead*. pg. 141.

¹⁸ Hiden, John and Salmon, Patrick. *The Baltic Nations and Europe: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania in the Twentieth Century*. Longman Inc, 1991. pg. 115

a matter of speculation. To his friends and family, he simply just disappeared.”¹⁹

Eksteins claims that they were eventually able to determine the exact time and location of his death. He had been sent to a prison in Astrakhan, Russia, where he was executed by firing squad on February 11th, 1942.²⁰ It is, of course, worth noting that the story of Arturs Vajeiks as outlined by Eksteins was somewhat of an atypical case.

Not only do most of these authors claim to have known people who were deported, but they also claim to have known, or at the very least believed that their names were on the lists of those to be targeted for deportation. Neimane describes the constant state of fear in which her parents lived after making such a discovery: “Now they knew what their fate would be. The first trucks had left Dzukste, but they would soon be back again. Who knew what awaited them and the others who had fearfully watched the departing trucks? What could we possibly do?”²¹ While the course of historical events was fated to spare Neimane’s family, along with countless others from further Soviet-inflicted horrors, the memory of what nearly all sources refer to as the “Terrible Year,” or the “Year of Terror” would remain in their minds, and these memories would rise to the surface as the course of the war shifted.

Cries and Whispers

Towards the beginning of his memoir *From Hell to Redemption*, Latvian-Jewish Holocaust survivor Boris Kacel describes a conversation he had with an uncle in late June 1941, as German forces advanced on Riga: “Uncle Wulf said, “Living under the

¹⁹ Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak*. pg. 121

²⁰ Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak*. pg. 123

²¹ Neimane, *Flight from Latvia*. pg. 17

Germans will not be rosy, but it will certainly not be as bad as living in Stalin's Siberia. Under the Germans, our way of life will be extremely restricted, but we will still have our freedom and the means for survival."²² While this prediction did not pan out for Kacel, his uncle, and thousands of other Latvian Jews, the attitude expressed here was more or less indicative of the majority of the Latvian populace. For most, the German invasion of the Soviet Union launched on June 22nd, 1941, came as a welcome development. Harges describes the scene when this news reached her household: "Elsa, Hermanis, have you heard?" Opa asked Father and Mother as he returned home from work. "German troops are entering Latvia, and the Soviets are retreating!" "What good news!" Oma exclaimed."²³

The advance of the German army through the Baltics was extremely rapid. Most of those who had some inclination to flee, many Latvian Jews for instance, were unable to make that decision in time, as the country was fully occupied within a month.²⁴ The only route of escape away from the advancing Germans was east into Russia along with the retreating Red Army. However, the maltreatment the Latvian people suffered under the Soviet occupation worked to discourage most from taking such a course of action. Although he would live to regret this decision, Max Michelson writes that he and his family decided to take their chances with the Nazis rather than attempt to uproot their lives in the hopes of escaping. He also clarifies that this decision was not unusual, quoting professor Vladimir Mintz, a Jewish surgeon from Riga as saying: "The Russians

²² Kacel, Boris. *From Hell to Redemption: A Memoir of the Holocaust*. University Press of Colorado, 1998. pg. 4

²³ Harges, *Biruta's Story*. pg. 52

²⁴ Snyder, Timothy. *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*. Basic Books, 2010. pg. 168

have already taken my house and my car. What can I expect from them if I escape to the Soviet Union?"²⁵

The German army's invasion and occupation of the country in the summer of 1941 was a highly exciting event for the people of Latvia, seemingly irrespective of past political affiliation. Even Kacel, a Latvian Jew who was no doubt aware of the Nazi regime's history of anti-semitism, nevertheless was by his own admission quite excited by these events, writing that "I could not suppress my desire to see the victorious German army."²⁶ There are reports of public celebrations as the Germans marched through the country. Eksteins' report on the matter is rather extravagant but telling: "For two days, the streets were quiet. Then on July 1st, German troops entered the Latvian capital. They were greeted as lost friends. Riga rejoiced... After a year of Bolshevik terror, German rule appeared like the return of sweetness and light. The Germans were deemed friends and saviors. People rushed to place flowers at the Liberty Monument in the center of the city."²⁷ Also in Riga at that time, Kacel writes "the Latvians were celebrating independence from communist repression, flying their large red, white and red flags over buildings and waving smaller ones by hand. I saw happy faces everywhere, which I understood since I, too, was glad to see the fall of the Soviet system." Others speak to the profound sense of relief they felt at this moment. In *Among the Living and the Dead*, Inara Verzemnieks describes an incident in the first days of the German occupation wherein a German soldier offered her great aunt Ausma a painkiller for a toothache: "She looks at this soldier who has just shown her this kindness,

²⁵ Michelson, *City of Life, City of Death*. pg. 85

²⁶ Kacel, *From Hell to Redemption* pg. 4

²⁷ Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak*. pg. 131-132

however small. Later, she will hesitate to remember the moment, a grave misreading of right and wrong that she would not have regarded herself capable of, but this is what she thinks, at that moment, in the dark of the woods, the pain momentarily leaving her: maybe life will be better now with the Germans.”²⁸ This sentiment appears to have been quite widespread.

More than anything else, many Latvians believed that the new order ushered in by the German occupation would see a return to some semblance of normalcy, perhaps even a return to the old pre-war status quo and the restoration of their country’s independence. Although their hopes would eventually be dashed, at the time of the invasion, most Latvians viewed Nazi Germany with its fascist ideology as an unknown entity, at least when contrasted to the Soviet’s communist ideology with which they were painfully familiar by that point. In his memoir, Kacel details the understanding of Nazism he possessed at the time, “When the war broke out and the Nazis’ military operations were successful, I thought that they would no longer need a scapegoat for the problems in their country and that their hatred of Jews would subside. I thought that I would be able to live a normal life.”²⁹ The language of ‘liberation’ is prevalent in the accounts of the first days of the German occupation. The Latvians, having suffered greatly during the “Year of Terror” wrought by the Soviet invasion, were generally well-disposed towards the Germans for sparing them further horrors. In *Escape from Latvia: A Six Year Chronicle*, Dagnija Neimane summarizes the attitudes of many Latvians towards the Germans: “Germany had never been historically considered to be Latvia’s friend,

²⁸ Verzemnieks, *Among the Living and the Dead*. pg. 149-150

²⁹ Kacel, *From Hell to Redemption*. pg. 3

however after 1941 when it seemed to have interrupted further Soviet brutalities, the Latvians greeted them almost as liberators.”³⁰ In the memoir of Biruta Zvejnieks, the author explains that, although the Germans did not make the decision to restore Latvian independence immediately upon their takeover of the country, “hopes were high that after the war, the country’s independence would be restored.”³¹ In Max Kaufmann’s autobiographical work *Churbn Lettland: The Destruction of the Jews of Latvia*, the author reports that on July 1st, as the German army entered Riga, the local radio station broadcast the Latvian national anthem, “*Dievs, svētī Latviju!*” (God Bless Latvia) before playing the anthem of the German Reich. This, in addition to the pomp and circumstance with which the German soldiers had marched through the streets, “made a very strong impression on the Latvians, and they were convinced that now a new era of independence would begin.”³²

Not all Latvians reacted to the arrival of the Germans in such a joyous manner. Most Latvian Jews dreaded the prospect of being at the mercy of the anti-semitic Nazi regime. Boris Kacel speaks to the sense of dread that pervaded his majority-Jewish neighborhood in the run-up to the German invasion: “People gathered in groups to discuss the situation. I lived in a neighborhood heavily populated by Jews, who were frightened by Nazi Germany, which they knew was their enemy. They wanted to escape German occupation, which would be difficult as no one had the necessary means of transportation or a truly safe place to go.”³³ Isaak Kleiman, one of the contributors to

³⁰ Neimane, Dagnija. *Flight From Latvia: A Six-Year Chronicle*. Self-Published, 2016. pg. 18

³¹ Hades, *Biruta’s Story*. pg. 58

³² Kaufmann, Max. *Churbn Lettland: The Destruction of the Jews of Latvia*. Hartung-Gorre Publishers, 2010. pg. 36

³³ Kacel, *From Hell To Redemption*. pg. 2

Gertrude Schneider's *The Unfinished Road* summarized the situation quite succinctly: "Riga fell to the Germans on July 1st, 1941. The Latvian population, for the most part, was jubilant; not so the Jews. Their martyrdom had just begun."³⁴ These fears were very quickly proven to be well-founded. Verzemnieks writes that "some Latvians say that it wasn't until after the German troops arrived that the real savagery began, that it was their presence which began to turn something in people."³⁵ Such claims are demonstrated to be false by accounts from Latvian Jews such as Kacel and Michelson. According to them, relations between Jewish and non-Jewish Latvians broke down almost immediately after the Soviet withdrawal- even before the Germans had time to properly establish their occupation of the region. Frida Michelson described what happened when the German army entered the town of Varaklani: "They found no opposition. On the contrary, many local Latvians were leading them around and showing them where Jews lived."³⁶ Kauffman, meanwhile provides a more violent account of the persecution he suffered at the hands of the Latvians at this time: "Armed Latvian youths forced their way into my apartment, plundered whatever they could find, and took me and my son, who was still sick, along with them, along with all the other Jewish tenants of the building. Then they led us all together to the police prefecture. On the way we were joined by more and more Latvians who walked alongside us and beat us mercilessly. They shouted, 'Jews, Bolsheviks!'"³⁷ Kaufmann then describes being subjected to a full day of forced labor and further beatings at the hands of these Latvians, writing: "I felt my strength leaving me and I feared that I would be unable to

³⁴ Schneider, Gertrude. *The Unfinished Road: Jewish Survivors of Latvia Look Back*. Praeger, 1991. pg. 102

³⁵ Verzemnieks, *Among the Living and the Dead*. pg. 156

³⁶ Michelson, *I Survived Rumbuli*. pg. 33

³⁷ Kaufmann, *Churbn Lettland*. pg. 37

further stand the tortures of these Latvian murderers. My greatest sympathy was for my young son, but of course, I was unable to help him. Fortunately, at this moment, my neighbor appeared, accompanied by a German soldier... who requested that my son and I be released so that we could work as decorators at the field commander's headquarters."³⁸

During the period of independence, Latvia was believed to have been a tolerant society—one in which Jews and Latvians lived and worked side by side. The suddenness with which the Latvian people seemed to turn against their Jewish neighbors and the eager viciousness with which they persecuted them had taken Latvian Jews completely by surprise. In *From Hell to Redemption*, Kacel laments the new state of affairs brought about by the German occupation: "The Jews had lived among the Latvians for many years. The two groups had always tolerated each other and had lived together in a friendly, harmonious atmosphere. My maternal grandparents had settled in Riga at the turn of the century, and I had lived my entire life there among Latvians, who now considered me to be their mortal enemy and were prepared to kill me. No one was willing to protect my life."³⁹

Non-Jewish Latvians would also be disappointed to eventually learn that the Nazi leadership at no point gave any serious consideration to the restoration of Latvian independence. Attempts by prominent Nazi ideologue Alfred Rosenberg to secure greater autonomy for the region were simply disregarded.⁴⁰ As Kacel phrased it, "The

³⁸ Kaufmann, *Churbn Lettland*. pg. 37-38

³⁹ Kacel, *From Hell to Redemption*. pg. 6

⁴⁰ Various Authors, *History of Latvia in the 20th Century*. Jumava, 2006. pg. 272-273

Latvians saw themselves as the messengers of the Nazi's evil and began to govern the city (Riga) as though they had received consent from Berlin to do so. They eventually learned that this was not the case; their country was to become no more than one of Germany's pawns."⁴¹ That being said, German policy in the occupied Baltic states was often confused and at times self-contradicting. Although Latvians hoping for the restoration of independent statehood in the event of a German victory would eventually discover that their faith in Berlin was misplaced, there were a number of outward indications that such a scenario might come to pass. When the region came under a new civil administration in July 1941, Michelson writes that this development gave them "reason for hope that our situation would improve."⁴² Hardes writes that, unlike the Soviets, the Germans "allowed Latvians to keep their social, cultural and religious practices along with their national flag and anthem."⁴³

While the occupation of their country by a foreign power was by no means an ideal situation, it appears that many of these authors did view the period of the German occupation from 1940 to 1944 as somewhat of a return to normalcy. Tellingly, most of the narratives do not cover the period of German occupation, which lasted for the better part of three years, in much depth, if they discuss it at all. For instance, Neimane dedicates only a few sentences of her 250+ page memoir to this three-year-long period, writing: "these were the war years, but as much as we were able, we had a pleasant and happy life there. In subsequent years in their exile from Latvia, my parents often

⁴¹ Kacel, *From Hell to Redemption*. pg. 6

⁴² Michelson, *City of Life, City of Death*. pg. 89

⁴³ Hardes, *Biruta's Story*. pg. 58

spoke longingly of Dzukste.”⁴⁴ Some of these accounts even go so far as to omit any retelling of the years of German occupation altogether, with their narratives beginning in mid-1944. The truth of the matter is that for most Latvians, this period may very well have been a relatively uneventful one that does not merit retelling. Indeed, in many of the narratives written by non-Jewish Latvians, the years of 1941-1944 are written about rather glowingly. For instance, Harges writes “Surrounded by family, I felt my life was perfect. Never did I imagine that things could be any different.”⁴⁵ Nowhere in any of these aforementioned books is there any coherent discussion of the concurrent persecution of the country’s Jewish population that is reported in such vivid detail by the likes of Kacel and Michelson.

Insofar as these accounts do speak negatively of the period of German occupation, it is in reference to the material hardships they faced at that time. More often than not, the blame for such material hardships is not directly attributed to the German occupation and its policies, but to the ongoing turmoil caused by the war. Cunningham reports that, on account of the war, “food production was disappearing and rationing was very tight... More Latvian food was going to the Germans rather than to the Latvians themselves and many ordinary people began to starve.”⁴⁶ Interactions between German military personnel and non-Jewish Latvians are often portrayed as being cordial, sometimes even outright friendly. Cunningham speaks of the gratitude that her subject, Mirdza, felt to the Germans: “Their arrival in Priekule, Latvia, had saved my family from the communists. The Germans came in and occupied our town with a conquering

⁴⁴ Neimane, *Escape from Latvia*. pg. 5

⁴⁵ Harges, *Biruta’s Story*. pg. 3

⁴⁶ Cunningham, *Rings of My Tree*. pg. 17

officiousness, but they did not harm us, and the soldiers who worked in the post office were courteous to us.”⁴⁷ She also describes the friendship she formed with an officer named Adolf Kuhmler who worked at her post office. In *Biruta’s Story*, a significant portion of the fourth chapter describes a Latvian family’s time hosting a squad of German soldiers who billeted in their residence in Riga. The author does much to humanize these soldiers, and expresses a great deal of sympathy for their situation: “We learned the three youngest were only 18 and 19 years old. Leaving their homes at such a young age must have been difficult for them, and our family made every effort to make them feel welcome.”⁴⁸ Later on, she describes the sadness she and her family felt as they saw these men off once their squad had received new orders: “As the soldiers left, our family stood on the steps of the empty veranda, waving goodbye. We had let them into our lives, and they had touched each of us. Their special gifts would not be seen or appreciated on the battlefield. Moreover, it was unlikely that our paths would ever cross again. “It’s a shame,” my father sighed, shoving his hands into his pockets. “The war will certainly change those fine young lads.”⁴⁹ This expression of deep sentimentality on behalf of these German soldiers can be contrasted with the decidedly unemotional, matter-of-fact tone in which this same author discusses the fate of Riga’s Jewish population. Upon being told that the Germans were forcibly relocating the psychiatric patients from a nearby hospital complex, (presumably to be herded into a concentration camp or shot) the narrator’s father replies that he is not at all surprised by this development, adding “I’ve heard the Nazis are relocating many Jews and Gypsies. They’re being taken to the area near Riga called Maskavas Forštate Objections to the

⁴⁷ Cunningham, *Rings of My Tree*. pg. 18

⁴⁸ Hades, *Biruta’s Story*. pg. 56

⁴⁹ Hades, *Biruta’s Story*. pg. 56

practice aren't being tolerated. People are forcibly seized without any explanation."⁵⁰ As for herself, the author writes: "We didn't know such things were happening. Years later, we learned that from July 1941 to October 1943, the Nazis had created a ghetto in the Riga suburb of Maskavas Forštate... On November 30th and December 8th, about 24,000 Latvian Jews from the Riga ghetto were killed in the Rumbula forest in Riga."⁵¹

The subject of Germany's Latvian collaborators remains particularly contentious. Practically speaking, nearly every civilian living in Latvia during the war years would have personally known any number of people who either volunteered to assist the German war effort in a number of different capacities, or were press-ganged into German service, especially in the later stages of the war. These were people who were conscripted by the Germans and threatened with severe punishment if they did not comply. As such, they felt they had no choice. In *Among the Living and the Dead*, Verzmnieks attempts to illustrate this lack of choice that faced many at this time: "Not long after my grandfather's (conscription) order arrives, the following appears in one of the city's newspapers, under the words "FINAL WARNING: Unconscious citizens who refrain from fulfilling their responsibility to their nation at this decisive moment and have not heeded their instructions will not be able to live unaffected. Sooner or later they will receive the punishment they deserve."⁵² Verzmnieks does acknowledge that in spite of these threats, other options were always open to those who had the fortitude to take them: "there are men who resist, who take to the forests, who run. But most, like my

⁵⁰ Hades, *Biruta's Story*. pg. 58-59

⁵¹ Hades, *Biruta's Story*. pg. 59

⁵² Verzemnieks, *Among the Living and the Dead*. pg. 161

grandfather, chose to accept their call-up.”⁵³ While about 110,000 men fought for Germany as members of the aforementioned Latvian Legion, which itself was a formation of the Waffen-SS, other Latvians worked for the Germans in civilian capacities, such as laborers in munitions factories, medical personnel, etc.⁵⁴ Neimane states that her uncle, Hermanis Bistevins, was one an example of someone who voluntarily enlisted in the Latvian Legion: “For Hermanis and other Latvians, joining the German forces was still the lesser of two evils. They volunteered for the Waffen-SS hoping that they could help the Germans achieve victory over the Soviet occupiers.”⁵⁵ Some of these memoirs demonstrate a sort of reflexive defensiveness of these men and their actions, especially in the context of the defense of the Courland pocket during the final stages of the war.

Impossible Decisions

Those Latvians who had pinned their aspirations on a German victory would eventually be disappointed, as Germany was not fated to win the war. Max Michelson speaks to a sense among the Jewish community confined within the Riga ghetto that, after the Battle of Stalingrad in early 1943, “there was little doubt about the eventual outcome of the war. The question shifted from if the Germans would be defeated to when.”⁵⁶ As for the broader Latvian population, there remained a great deal of uncertainty even as the German army continued to lose ground and the frontlines encroached on Latvian territory. The constantly shifting battle lines of this phase of the conflict created the

⁵³ Verzemnieks, *Among the Living and the Dead*. pg. 161

⁵⁴ Various Authors, *History of Latvia in the 20th Century*. pg. 293

⁵⁵ Neimane, *Flight from Latvia*. pg. 141

⁵⁶ Michelson, *City of Life, City of Death*. pg. 122

impression that the final outcome of the war still hung in the balance. Cunningham writes that at this time, many in Latvia were paralyzed by indecision: “The problem with making these decisions to stay or to go was that no one knew the way the war was going. We had heard that Riga, the capital, had fallen back into the Russian’s hands, but we had no idea if the Germans were perhaps winning. Maybe the Russians would be forced back into Russia. Maybe life would return to some sort of normalcy again.”⁵⁷

Neimane describes the situation in July 1944 in her hometown of Dzukste, about 50 kilometers west of Jelgava: “At the time, the utter permanence of any decision was still not evident. Circumstances in Dzukste seemed to change day by day, as one day the Germans seemed to have gained the upper hand, and the next day Russian soldiers were seen where the Germans had been.”⁵⁸

As the summer of 1944 dragged on and the fighting in the Baltic increased in intensity, many Latvian civilians were forced to make the fateful decision to stay or leave. This was by no means one to be made lightly, and both choices carried substantial risks. For those inclined to leave, the route out of the country was not an easy one. The final destination was, more often than not, Germany itself. In order to get there, it was necessary first to travel hundreds of miles across an active war zone to a port city on the Baltic coast. (More often than not, the port in question was the city of Liepaja.) From there, a ship would carry them south to the port city of Danzig (modern Gdansk, Poland), assuming that the ship was not sunk by Allied submarines or aerial

⁵⁷ Cunningham, *The Rings of My Tree*. pg. 21

⁵⁸ Neimane, *Escape from Latvia*. pg. 39-40

bombardments, which were very real possibilities. Even after they reached Germany, the refugees faced an uncertain future, as the Reich was on the verge of total collapse.

Obviously, choosing to remain in the country carried its own set of risks. Some of the narratives describe their fear of being caught in the crossfire as the Germans and Soviets fought one another. Verzemnieks explains that her grandmother was faced with two similarly uncertain prospects. Of her decision to leave, she writes that “in the end, my grandmother chooses an uncertainty she hopes, at least for the moment, will deliver her, and the children, from the immediate threat of violence.”⁵⁹ Becoming an unintentional civilian casualty of the ongoing combat between German and Soviet forces a real fear that motivated many to flee. Factoring far more prominently in this decision was the fear of the seemingly inevitable retribution the Soviets would unleash upon the country in the event of their victory. Memories of the first period of Soviet occupation back in 1940-1941 remained prominent in the minds of the Latvian people. Many knew victims of the June Deportations personally, and some even claim to have seen their own names on the deportation lists. They were absolutely certain that the return of the Soviets would result in a repetition of the ‘Horrible Year’ of 1940.

For some Latvians, the decision to leave was made for them. In the penultimate chapter of her memoir, Frida Michelson reports that the retreating German army ordered the inhabitants of Katlakalns, a small village on the outskirts of Riga, to evacuate, including the family with whom she had taken refuge: “The next day the Urkevich family came running over, scared and in a panic... ‘Three of them (German soldiers) came on a

⁵⁹ Verzemnieks, *Among the Living and the Dead*. pg. 170

motorcycle and read a paper to us.’ the old man mumbled. ‘Yes, a paper. A new law, a directive that everybody in the village must move to Germany. They gave us just two hours...’⁶⁰ Reports of “coerced evacuations” (effectively deportations) from Latvia to Germany are corroborated by historian Valdis Lumans in his study of Latvia in World War II. He claims that they were carried out on the order of SS-Obergruppenfuhrer Friedrich Jeckeln: “Jeckeln announced over the radio the evacuation of Latvians from Riga, the first installment of a general evacuation of all Latvians, willingly or not, to the Reich.”⁶¹ Kaufmann reports that Latvian Jews and other prisoners of the Kaiserwald concentration camp were also caught up in this forced evacuation when the camp was liquidated in the wake of the Soviet advance: “Most of the survivors of Kaiserwald were transported to Germany on August 6th, 1944. They were sent together with the prisoners from the Bremerhaven via Danzig to the Sutthoff concentration camp.”⁶²

For those who whose decision was not forced, there was a certain hesitance to flee the country. Moreover, most at the time failed to recognize that their exile would be more or less permanent, as they continued to persist in the belief that the outcome of the war would be the restoration of the pre-1940 status quo. Nesaule writes: “Refugees had been streaming past the house for weeks, but I did not think that we would be gone for very long, certainly not forever.”⁶³ Latvia’s Baltic neighbors, Estonia and Lithuania, had fallen entirely under Soviet control by December 1944. However, fighting on Latvian soil persisted to the bitter end, specifically in the “Courland Pocket” in the extreme western

⁶⁰ Michelson, *I Survived Rumbuli*. pg. 215

⁶¹ Lumans, Valdis. *Latvia in World War II* Fordham University Press, 2006. pg. 347

⁶² Kaufmann, *Churbn Lettland*. pg. 193-194

⁶³ Nesaule, *A Woman in Amber*. pg. 39

portion of the country. There, the last Axis holdouts did not surrender until two days after Germany's official capitulation. The continuation of the combat in Latvia helped maintain the impression many refugees had that the outcome of the war was still uncertain. Laima, quoting from a series of autobiographical notes written by her grandfather, writes: "Before we reached refuge abroad, we were refugees for three months and two weeks within Latvia. This was, in fact, a long farewell to Latvia. There was no hope that Latvia could remain standing, only hope for a miracle. Sustained by this hope, we clung to our country for as long as possible."⁶⁴ More importantly, the resistance of the Axis forces in Courland is considered to have bought those fleeing the country more time in which to escape. Latvian auxiliary forces played a prominent role in these defensive operations, a fact which accounts for the great degree of respect these men are afforded by the Latvian community in exile. One author who speaks about the way these men were remembered by Latvians is Rita Laima. She writes: "The fierce battles over control over the so-called 'Kurzeme Cauldron,' the last bastion of Latvian resistance to Soviet occupation, has survived in Latvian consciousness as truly epic and tragic. More than 100,000 refugees would leave Latvia before it was swallowed by the Red Army."⁶⁵ Verzmnieks also stops just short of lionizing the defenders of the Courland Pocket, writing: "There are some Latvian historians who say that the battle in which my grandfather was wounded was critical in giving tens of thousands of refugees like my grandmother time to flee the final violent tremors of the war as it played out in Latvia. A

⁶⁴ Laima, Rita. *Skylarks and Rebels: A Memoir about the Soviet Russian Occupation of Latvia, Life in a Totalitarian State, and Freedom*. ibidem-Verlag, 2017. pg. 81

⁶⁵ Laima, *Skylarks and Rebels*. pg. 72

sacrifice, they call it. But the word for sacrifice in Latvian can also mean victim or casualty.”⁶⁶

Time, was of course, of the essence in these situations, and factored prominently in the decision-making calculus of the future refugees. While some were able to resolve to flee far enough in advance that they had time enough to pack whatever belongings they could and depart in a semi-orderly fashion, not all had this luxury. Cunningham, for instance, describes having been essentially forced to flee at the last minute, just as her hometown of Priekule, a small town near the border with Lithuania, was subjected to a Soviet air raid: “I can only think that in the first truly cataclysmic terror of my then twenty-four-year-old life, God put me on automatic pilot. German soldiers arrived at the post office just as Russian planes dropping bombs could be heard in the distance. Annie and I grabbed our suitcases and ran outside.”⁶⁷

Although they had just managed to extricate themselves from a highly perilous situation, many describe the mix of conflicting emotions they felt as they boarded the ships that would ferry them across the Baltic Sea. Neimane describes one such scene: “There was a general feeling of relief, but one can imagine the emotions of the refugees as they stood on the deck of the ship, watching the coast gradually turn into a sliver of what had been their Latvian homeland, and then disappear completely as it met the distant morning mist. Standing on the deck, a few voices mournfully sang the Latvian national anthem. It was a sorrowful goodbye. We were not sure where we were going or what

⁶⁶ Verzemnieks, *Among the Living and the Dead*. pg. 164

⁶⁷ Cunningham, *Rings of My Tree*. pg. 24

the future held for us. We only knew that we were leaving Latvia, joining thousands of other refugees without a home or a homeland. We were no longer in charge of our own destinies.”⁶⁸

Life in Exile

The Second World War resulted in the displacement of between 40 to 60 million civilians worldwide, including approximately 200,000 from Latvia.⁶⁹ This was a humanitarian crisis on an entirely unprecedented scale. Hades describes the scene that awaited her and her family at the train station in Berlin: “The Berlin station would have been challenging to manage in quieter times, but this was sheer pandemonium. The six members of our family were just a drop in the sea of humanity converging here. I looked around in amazement, surrounded by a crush of frustrated people with voices clamoring in several different languages. Refugees must have come here from every corner of Europe. Everyone was hustling to make their connections while keeping track of their family members and their belongings.”⁷⁰

In late March 1945, the war in Europe entered its final stages, and Germany itself became a battleground as the Allied powers closed in on Berlin from either side. Even at this late juncture, as many refugees from Latvia were beginning to settle into the first “Displaced Persons” camps in allied-occupied German territory, many still held out hope that their country might yet emerge from the devastation of the war as a fully independent state as it had been before. Neimane writes that many Latvian refugees

⁶⁸Neimane, *Flight from Latvia*. pg. 63

⁶⁹ Kalnins. Mara. *Latvia: A Short History*. C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd, 2015 pg. 152-153

⁷⁰ Hades, *Biruta's Story*. 95-96

looked towards the Western Allies (principally the United States) as the last and best hope for Latvia to regain its independence: “Latvians, besieged and desperate, waited with hope that the Allies would somehow realize their need and come to their aid against the Soviets, but of course, no help came. It was incomprehensible to them that the Americans and the Soviets were both allied forces.”⁷¹ Even with that knowledge in mind, some wished that the Western Allies would turn against the Soviets and simply keep marching eastward until they reached Moscow. Laima writes that her father idolized American general George Patton and believed that he should have been allowed to “finish the job by invading the Soviet Union and defeating Stalin. The deaths of millions, including many Balts, Latvians, and members of our own family would have been spared.”⁷² Needless to say, this scenario failed to materialize.

When the announcement of Germany’s capitulation and the end of the war in Europe reached the Latvian refugees, the news was received somberly and unenthusiastically. Many regarded the war as having been a defeat for their country specifically. Neimane reports that “for the Baltic refugees, the end of the war in Europe had brought no rejoicing. The struggle for the survival of their homelands had been lost.”⁷³ Barring a war of continuation against the Soviet Union such as advocated by General Patton (who died in December 1945,) the diplomatic intervention of the Western Allies seemed to hold some promise. These hopes too were dashed by the results of the Yalta Conference of February 1945, wherein the Western Allies essentially acquiesced to the Soviet annexation of the Baltic states. Just as had happened when the Soviets first

⁷¹ Neimane, *Escape from Latvia*. pg. 56

⁷² Laima, *Skylarks and Rebels*. pg. 79

⁷³ Neimane, *Escape from Latvia*. pg. 98

invaded Latvia in 1940, many felt that the Western Allies had abandoned them. Neimane describes the feelings that many Latvians had towards this particular development: “Unfortunately for us, Roosevelt also conceded that he would not protest if the Soviet Union were to annex the three Baltic states. Henceforth, the Yalta Conference has been regarded by many as Roosevelt’s ‘Western Betrayal.’”⁷⁴ Despite this widespread feeling of betrayal felt by many Latvian refugees, those who found themselves in areas under Soviet control in the final days of the war, principally in eastern Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, went to great lengths to escape these areas for regions under the control of the western Allies. Motivated by their intense fear and hatred of the Soviets, they had reasoned that it was better to fall into the custody of the Americans or the British instead. Laima provides the following account from her mother: “We were able to escape from an area that came under Soviet control. We made it safely to Amberg, a beautiful medieval town in Germany. We heaved an enormous sigh of relief at our first sight of a convoy of American trucks with their white stars. ‘Freedom!’”⁷⁵

As early as the spring of 1945, the Allied powers began to set up makeshift camps in the areas under their control to accommodate the vast number of war refugees while they sought to devise a more permanent solution to the issue that one German official called “the greatest social issue facing the west.”⁷⁶ These camps were known as “Displaced Persons camps” or simply “DP camps.” Neimane reports that many of these camps were local residences that the allied authorities commandeered for the purpose

⁷⁴ Neimane, *Escape from Latvia*. pg. 103

⁷⁵ Laima, *Skylarks and Rebels*. pg. 83

⁷⁶ Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak*. pg. 113

of temporarily housing these refugees- a fact that caused no small degree of resentment on the part of the local German population.⁷⁷ Conditions in the DP camps were notoriously poor, especially in the earliest stages of their existence. Harges describes her shock at the state of the repurposed barracks where she and her family were staying: "As I looked around the area, the barracks wasn't just dirty. It was filthy. A thick coat of grime covered everything. Mouse droppings, dead insects, and food-encrusted plates and utensils littered the floor. People milled about in a daze, wondering what to tackle first in order to make the conditions bearable."⁷⁸ Space was at a premium, and those running the camps were incentivized to fit as many people as they could into the buildings they had requisitioned. Cunningham describes how claustrophobic Mirdza felt during her brief stay in one of the DP camps: "In the camp, there were rows of barracks fixed in mud. Mud was everywhere and it stuck to us like glue. With no special instructions or ordered distribution, the group of us was dispersed. I just followed a small group into a barrack building. Families huddled together in the corners at the rear; a young couple took another corner and I just stood in the middle next to a cot where no one else was and that became my bed. There were about 40 people in this one very small building."⁷⁹ Still, Latvian DPs had little choice but to accept life under such conditions. As Nesaule put it bluntly, "The only hope for staying alive was to be admitted to the camps."⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Neimane, *Flight from Latvia*. pg. 126-127

⁷⁸ Harges, *Biruta's Story*. pg. 140-141.

⁷⁹ Cunningham, *Rings of My Tree*. pg. 30

⁸⁰ Nesaule, *A Woman in Amber*. pg. 101

Where these “displaced persons” were concerned, matters of terminology took on great significance. Eksteins writes that “the term “refugee” was initially reserved by Allied decision-makers specifically for Germans who had fled the Soviet advance or were subsequently driven from their homes in Eastern Europe in the massive expulsions that followed the Potsdam Accords of August 1945.”⁸¹ However, this term did not seem to adequately describe the situation of the thousands of former slave laborers and concentration camp survivors. It was for this purpose that the term ‘displaced person’ (frequently abbreviated as DP) was coined. This neologism had its own shortcomings. Eksteins describes it as a “smooth, diplomatic term which, particularly for the Jews, ridiculously failed to express the utter tragedy it encompassed.”⁸² Moreover, Eksteins considered this distinction between “refugees” and “displaced persons” to be “belabored and inadequate. It led to considerable confusion, then and later.”⁸³ Many who were labeled as displaced persons may have been more accurately classified as refugees, and vice versa. Eksteins posits that “those DPs who did not wish, for political and moral reasons, to return to a Soviet-occupied homeland were more likely to fit the category of ‘refugee’ than the German expellees from the east who were forcibly displaced.”⁸⁴ Ultimately, determining which term is best applied in the context of Latvian civilians is rendered a moot point by the fact that many Latvians who would have been classified either as displaced persons or as refugees disliked the connotations that these terms carried with them, and largely rejected them both. Jane Cunningham, for instance, writes about her intense desire to escape the DP camp she had found herself in and to

⁸¹ Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak*, pg. 112-113

⁸² Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak*. pg. 112-113

⁸³ Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak*. pg. 112-113

⁸⁴ Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak*. pg. 113

“burn the label of “refugee.”⁸⁵ Rather, many began to identify as ‘exiles.’ Nesaule claims that even as some Latvian DPs began to secure passage out of Germany in the years that followed, “no one used the word “emigration.” People spoke only of “continued exile,” which was what going to America meant.”⁸⁶ The word ‘exile’ was thought to imply a temporary state of affairs. In the immediate term, however, with the country remaining under Soviet control, returning to Latvia was simply out of the question for most exiles. After all, they had already fled their home country in order to escape the Soviet advance in the first place. They were certain that returning home was effectively a death sentence.

Albeit for different reasons, returning to Latvia was considered undesirable for Latvian Jews as well, both those who had survived the Holocaust and those who had managed to successfully evacuate to the Soviet Union. For them, the country might as well have simply ceased to exist after the traumatic events of the past few years. Michelson describes initially wishing to return in the days immediately following the war’s conclusion. However, time spent in the hospital led him to reconsider this. “I was certain my parents had been killed. The world I had known in Riga was gone, and Latvia appeared likely to remain under Soviet control. There was nothing for me there.”⁸⁷ In the story of Julia Robinson as found in Schneider’s compilation *The Unfinished Road*, Robinson recounts the story of her parents, who evacuated their home in Riga and resettled during the war years in Frunze, the capital of the Kyrgyz SSR. “After their

⁸⁵ Cunningham, *The Rings of My Tree*. pg. 31

⁸⁶ Nesaule, Agate. *A Woman in Amber: Healing the Trauma of War and Exile*. Penguin Books, 1997. pg. 135

⁸⁷ Michelson, *City of Life, City of Death*. pg. 144-145

miraculous reunion in Frunze, my parents waited for the day they could go home. In October 1944, the Soviet army entered Riga and in January 1945 my parents returned. Although the war was over as far as the territories of the Soviet Union were concerned, the same could not be said about my parents. Even their own city was not the place they had known before the war. Most of their families had been murdered and their property, amassed over many years and generations, was lost forever.”⁸⁸

Throughout this period, the Soviet government engaged in efforts to encourage its former citizens, Latvian exiles among them, to return to their home countries. Initially, at least, these efforts were encouraged by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration- a newly established agency of the UN dedicated to organizing relief efforts in areas devastated by the war, primarily Europe. Eksteins reports that it was through the auspices of the UNRRA and the Soviet government that literature was disseminated throughout the camps encouraging DPs to return to Latvia. He quotes at length from one such brochure that was published in June 1947: “Every honest Latvian has to return home... Think of your children who want to grow up in their homeland and be taught in their native language. The Soviet government guarantees you freedom and invites you home.”⁸⁹ Entreaties such as this were common- the Soviet government hoped to appeal to the DP’s emotional connection to their homeland in order to persuade them to repatriate. Eksteins writes that the Latvian DPs “greeted the Soviet repatriation terms with a blend of fear and outrage.”⁹⁰ For the most part, the refugees’ fear and distrust of the Soviet government outweighed their natural inclination to return

⁸⁸ Schneider, *The Unfinished Road*. pg. 49

⁸⁹ Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak*. pg. 147

⁹⁰ Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak*. pg. 147

home. Having gone to such great lengths to evade the Soviet authorities in the first place, they were anxious to avoid falling into Soviet custody. Nevertheless, Harges reports that a small proportion of refugees did take the Soviets up on their offer, only to discover that they had been deceived: "Homesick, some people did return, hoping to resume their lives. Many who went back were never heard from again. Later, we learned the communist regime in control of the Baltics regarded those who left as traitors. Upon returning, they were given long sentences in Siberian work camps. There they often died of illness, starvation, and mistreatment thousands of miles from their homes."⁹¹ In general, it appears that the Soviet repatriation efforts only backfired, and further strengthened the resolve of the refugees not to return to Latvia as long as the country remained under Soviet control.

Memories of the initial period of Soviet occupation, and especially of the June Deportations continued to weigh heavily on the consciences of the survivors even in exile. Cunningham claims that "Latvians of my generation remember the dates of June 14th and 15th, 1941 the way Americans remember December 7th, 1941."⁹² Nesaule reports that each year in the DP camps, the anniversary of the June Deportations was commemorated with a solemn ceremony- "flags at half-mast, commemorative wreaths, speeches, and solemn music marked the day. Everyone vowed to remember the deported, the tortured, and the executed. We vowed to never forget Latvia, a small defenseless beautiful country of white birches and fragrant pines, which had been invaded, brutalized, oppressed, and lost."⁹³ Latvian independence day was also

⁹¹ Harges, *Biruta's Story*, pg. 153

⁹² Cunningham, *Rings of My Tree*, pg. 11

⁹³ Nesaule, *A Woman in Amber*, pg. 132

celebrated annually, according to Harges: “Even though the country was not currently autonomous, Latvians in the free world still celebrated its independence.”⁹⁴ In spite of their dire circumstances, many maintained hope that Latvia might be freed from the Soviet yoke in the indefinite future. Neimane claims that, along with DPs hailing from Estonia and Lithuania, the Latvian DPs at the camp in Augsburg would occasionally hold demonstrations in the city streets in protest of the ongoing Soviet occupation of the Baltic states: “The countries’ three flags were displayed together in the unity of our plight and in the consolidation of our efforts to regain our national identities... We had no illusion that our demonstrations would bring any results, but marching all together would at least leave a bigger impression on the world’s populace. We also did not dare to abandon hope that our homeland would be free once again.”⁹⁵

These aforementioned efforts to “regain their national identities” assumed great importance in the DP camps. Returning to Latvia may have been considered to be impossible in the immediate term, but many believed that such opportunities may arise in the future. These efforts were undertaken under the belief that the refugees themselves were repositories of pre-war Latvian culture, as yet not despoiled by any undesirable elements that may have been introduced as a consequence of the Soviet presence. Even while the exiles worked tirelessly to secure emigration abroad, they devoted much time and energy to maintaining their language, traditions, and other various aspects of their culture. Verzemnieks summarizes this dynamic as follows: “By day they completed questionnaires and enrolled in English lessons and submitted

⁹⁴ Harges, *Biruta’s Story*. pg. 264

⁹⁵ Neimane, *Escape from Latvia*. pg. 165

themselves to certification tests so that they could prove themselves skilled at something- sewing, typing, or factory work- anything that might convince a potential host nation that they were worthy of sponsorship, ready to contribute in any way needed. At night, they danced in folk collectives, taught their children the words to the old national anthem, and organized choir recitals where the song begging the wind to carry them back to Latvia became the exiles' new unofficial anthem."⁹⁶

The perceived Soviet suppression of Latvian culture was among the principal reasons why living in the Latvian SSR was an unacceptable proposition. In the DP camps, many came under the impression that the Soviet regime posed an existential threat to Latvian culture. Neimane writes that "the Russification of Latvia was ongoing and the Latvian language was demoted to a secondary status."⁹⁷ Believing as they did that their culture was in danger of being extinguished, the task of preserving Latvian culture took on a far greater degree of importance and came to be seen not only as a desirable pursuit but an obligatory one. They were determined to not fall prey to assimilation, even in the event they managed to secure passage to a foreign country. Verzemnieks writes that "life in the indefinite was to leave the adults to meetings where they argued over the preservation of the language, the loosening of grammar, the loss of old words for things that had no equivalent in this new life. They should resist becoming like potatoes with old eyes, one former farmer put it, never to be replanted."⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Verzemnieks, *Among the Living and the Dead*. pg. 206

⁹⁷ Neimane, *Escape from Latvia*. pg. 204

⁹⁸ Verzemnieks, *Among the Living and the Dead*. pg. 205-206

The question of what was to be done with those Latvians who had collaborated with Germany proved to be a particularly contentious issue between the Western Allies and the Latvian community in exile. Eksteins writes that in the period immediately following the war's conclusion, "the West would regard these (Latvian) legionnaires with suspicion. Proto-fascist collaborators, they were often called, were supposedly more interested in killing Jews and Slavs than in national independence."⁹⁹ Neimane claims that the Western Allies' perception of the Latvian Legionnaires had been warped by Soviet propaganda. They had been deceived into believing that these men were fascist war criminals, and "as a result, the Allies looked upon the prisoners with distrust and treated them as if they were the enemy."¹⁰⁰ As many of these former legionnaires sought refuge in areas under allied control, some sort of decision had to be made regarding them. Initially, the IRO adopted the stance that the status of DP would be granted only to "those who were refugees "in good faith."¹⁰¹ That is to say that those who were discovered to have previous fascist affiliations were intentionally excluded. Having the status of a displaced person and therefore being granted admittance to the DP camps was a literal matter of life and death for many refugees in post-war Germany. During that time, Latvian DPs attempted to defend the actions of their countrymen against the accusations leveled against them by the Allied powers. This defensive impulse remains evident in many later works written on the subject. In his semi-autobiographical book *Walking Since Daybreak*, Modris Eksteins writes: "What determined behavior during the war was above all the issue of survival- personal and national. When they donned

⁹⁹ Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak*. pg. 159

¹⁰⁰ Neimane, *Escape from Latvia*. pg. 144

¹⁰¹ Denis, Juliette. "Hitler's Accomplices or Stalin's Victims? Displaced Baltic People in Germany from the End of the War to the Cold War", *Le Mouvement Social*, vol. 244, no. 3, 2013, pg. 81-98.

German uniforms, most Latvians did so to fight against Bolshevik Russia rather than for Nazi Germany.”¹⁰² Eksteins’ statement demonstrates the two lines of argumentation that were (and are still) most typically deployed in defense of Latvian collaborators. The first of these arguments maintains that the Latvian people were innocent victims in the whole affair and that those who had collaborated with the Germans had been compelled to do so against their will, and complied as a matter of survival. The second, less apologetic argument, asserts that the Latvians who had fought alongside the Germans in the war did so not necessarily to advance German interests but to combat the Soviets. In the months immediately following the war’s conclusion, the Western Allies were more sympathetic to the former argument, but as the Cold War began in earnest, they became more amenable to the former as well. In either case, the Latvian DPs were careful to distance themselves from Nazi ideology. In *Escape from Latvia* by Dagnija Niemane, the author makes the remarkable claim that her cousin Hermanis, despite having volunteered as a member of the Latvian Legion, “was not a Nazi, regardless of the SS uniform he wore.”¹⁰³

In writing about their experiences in the DP camps, there is a tendency to emphasize the boredom and monotony of day-to-day life. Nesaule claims to have “spent thousands of hours waiting in line.”¹⁰⁴ Most Latvian DPs did not have the opportunity to emigrate until the Displaced Persons Act was signed into law in the United States in June of 1948. It was very common for these DPs to have spent 4 or more years in the camps. Some writers express frustration at having been in the camps for such an extended

¹⁰² Eksteins, *Walking Since Daybreak*. pg. 159

¹⁰³ Niemane, *Flight From Latvia*. pg. 149

¹⁰⁴ Nesaule, *A Woman in Amber*. pg. 106

period. For instance, Hardes writes: “Our lives had been upended and put on hold. We had no real sense of belonging. This communal camp living wasn’t natural. I hated it and wanted to get on with my life.”¹⁰⁵ The drudgery of life in the DP camps provided the refugees with an opportunity to reflect on their situations. Nesaule speaks to the feelings of frustration that were widespread in the camps: “The men asked, ‘What’s the point of living? Here we are, lawyers, economists, engineers, architects, and politicians with nothing to do. All we can do is wait. Our training is useless. We’re idle ourselves.’” My mother would say bitterly, “Artists without paints and canvas, farmers without land or animals, carpenters without tools and materials, musicians without instruments. How can our lives have any meaning?”¹⁰⁶ DPs who previously held specialized, white-collar occupations (such as physicians, academics, and politicians, for instance) would be disappointed to learn they would for the most part be unable to continue those professions upon emigrating. Potential host countries were willing to accept DPs to fill in the gaps in the workforce left behind by the war. For example, Laima describes her grandfather’s life upon arriving in the United States: “his in-depth knowledge of Latvian, one of Europe’s oldest living languages, had no practical application in his life in exile: he worked as a janitor at a Hahne’s department store in Montclair.”¹⁰⁷

As returning to their native country was seen as impossible under the current circumstances, many Latvian exiles began to seek out other countries in which to seek refuge. Immigration to the United States came to be seen as the most desirable. Barring that, many speak of an intense desire to, at the very least get out of Germany, and

¹⁰⁵ Hardes, *Biruta’s Story*. pg. 149

¹⁰⁶ Nesaule, *A Woman in Amber*. pg. 114

¹⁰⁷ Laima, *Skylarks and Rebels*. pg. 84

Europe altogether if possible. Max Michelson writes that to him, Europe seemed like “a vast cemetery, hardly a place in which to start a new life.”¹⁰⁸ In fact, the idea of America managed to achieve an almost mythological status among the DPs. To them, it represented not only a land of vast economic opportunity but it was also seen as a place entirely free from the trauma of war, where one could begin life anew. While narrating her departure from the DP camps on a ship bound for the United States, Nesuale describes her personal expectations for her new life there: “I thought the war was over, the camps were behind me, and that life in America would be an entirely new beginning. I believed that the past could no longer affect me. The instant I arrived in America, I would forget everything that had happened. The gray film over everything would lift. I would finally be happy, I would finally be free.”¹⁰⁹

Things Said and Unsaid

With the significant exception of those written by Latvian Jews, the works cited in this study are all reflective of the ideology which emerged among communities of Latvian exiles in the DP camps of postwar Germany, and which followed them abroad as they emigrated. In general, these narratives seek to portray Latvians as innocent victims of foreign aggression. However, nearly all of their vitriol is reserved for the Soviets. The German occupation is often ignored or downplayed to a large degree. Take, for instance, a passage in Cunningham’s *Rings of My Tree*: “In July of 1940, Stalin’s sickle, already drenched in Baltic blood, decapitated Latvia’s freedom.”¹¹⁰ Compare this to the way in which the same author describes the German invasion the following year: “When

¹⁰⁸ Michelson, *City of Life, City of Death*. pg. 145

¹⁰⁹ Nesuale, *A Woman in Amber*. pg. 139

¹¹⁰ Cunningham, *Rings of My Tree*. pg. 9

the Germans came into town, it did seem as though they were our saviors because the Russians had been swallowing us whole..."¹¹¹ As such, most of these narratives evince a distinct unwillingness to reckon with the legacy of the Nazi regime, which in Latvia is characterized by the near-total annihilation of the country's Jewish population.

The question of what exactly accounts for the overall lack of attention paid to the Holocaust in the majority of the non-Jewish Latvian narratives is a difficult one to answer. It could have simply been that, in living their idyllic and insular lives, most of the narrators simply had no real inkling of the atrocities being committed by their co-nationals. Rita Laima remarks that she had remained generally ignorant of the Holocaust (especially as it manifested in Latvia) for most of her life. "I began to read about the Holocaust in Latvia while writing this book. Bit by bit, I began to understand the horrific events that had transpired in Latvia during the Nazi occupation."¹¹²

(Elsewhere in the book, she claims to have begun the writing process in her early 50s.)

Laima places the blame for the general ignorance of the Holocaust in Latvia among successive generations of Latvian people on the Soviets, at least partially. She remarks that during her stay in Latvia in the 1980s, she often drove by the forest of Rumbula and never thought anything of it. "During the Soviet occupation, I had no idea that Rumbula was linked to one of Latvia's biggest massacres. How could I?"¹¹³ In the very next sentence, however, the author pushes back against the notion that the Latvian people as a whole bear any collective responsibility for their participation in the Holocaust: Latvians as a nation have sometimes been tragically lumped under the label of

¹¹¹ Cunningham, *Rings of My Tree*. pg. 12

¹¹² Laima, *Skylarks and Rebels*. pg. 275

¹¹³ Laima, *Skylarks and Rebels*. pg. 277

“Jew-killers,” partly due to misinformation, disinformation and years of Soviet propaganda.”¹¹⁴

Interestingly, in his memoir *City of Life, City of Death*, Latvian Holocaust survivor Max Michelson attempts to problematize what he calls the “disingenuous portrayal” of the Latvians as “innocent victims of Russian aggression.”¹¹⁵ To do this, he actually uses a scene from Agate Nesaule’s *A Woman in Amber*. He retells an incident described in chapter 7 of the book, wherein the narrator believes that she and her family are being lined up to be extrajudicially murdered by firing squad by a squad of Red Army soldiers: “Come,” says my mother suddenly. Let’s go up to the front of the line. If they’re going to shoot us, let us be the first ones. Nothing can save us now, and I can’t bear to watch more people die.” Her voice is beyond weariness. “Let’s go past the others.” She starts pulling me by the arms. She wants me to be shot, I think.”¹¹⁶ Although both women survived this ordeal, this is a pivotal scene in Nesaule’s story- it is the moment at which her relationship with her mother is irrevocably broken, never to be repaired: “I could also not speak at that moment about what was severed between my mother and me that morning, and neither could she. The whole universe was motherless during the war and remained that way for me for a long time.”¹¹⁷ Michelson looks past the human tragedy inherent in that moment and claims that the actions of Nesaule’s mother can shed some light on the true attitudes of the Latvians towards the Holocaust: “Like most Latvians, killers and passive bystanders alike, she knew of and understood the heinous crimes

¹¹⁴ Laima, *Skylarks and Rebels*. pg. 277

¹¹⁵ Michelson, *City of Life, City of Death*. pg. 125

¹¹⁶ Nesaule, *A Woman in Amber*. pg. 77

¹¹⁷ Nesaule, *A Woman in Amber*. pg. 82

perpetrated by her countrymen immediately upon the German occupation in the summer of 1941. Latvians had systematically murdered Jewish men, women, and children. Nesaule's mother was convinced the same fate would now befall her and her children. She could not even conceive that the Soviets would treat them differently."¹¹⁸

In only a select few of these narratives is there made an earnest attempt to reckon with the crimes against humanity committed by the Nazi regime and the complicity of many Latvian people in them. In her memoir *A Woman in Amber*, Agate Nesaule describes a conversation she had with a woman whose late husband had enlisted with the Arajs Kommando (a unit of the collaborationist Latvian Auxiliary Police) almost immediately after the German invasion, solely for the purpose of persecuting Jews. Nesaule writes that she did not understand how this could have been, as she had been under the impression that "all Latvians had stood firm against the Nazis."¹¹⁹ She writes that "this conversation, and others like it, would haunt me years later as I studied the photographs of concentration camp victims. Being Latvian did not exempt me from responsibility or guilt."¹²⁰ In *Among the Living and the Dead*, Inara Verzemnieks also attempts to understand the crimes of the war and Latvian's complicity in them- especially her grandfather, who had been conscripted into the Latvian Legion. Verzemnieks reports that her grandfather, who had lost an eye during his service in the legion, had never spoken about his experiences during the war: "Because my grandfather never spoke of the war and his part in it, I had always sensed, even as a child, that it must have been a source of tremendous guilt and shame, suffering so awful that he did not want to think

¹¹⁸ Michelson, *City of Life, City of Death*. pg. 125

¹¹⁹ Nesaule, *A Woman in Amber*. pg. 117

¹²⁰ Nesaule, *A Woman in Amber*, pg. 118

about it.”¹²¹ After having conducted her own research, Verzemnieks is able to conclude that “I have not found evidence that my grandfather was a participant in the atrocities that took place in Riga or the Latvian countryside, or that he condoned them.”¹²² This alone, however, is not sufficient to absolve him completely, she writes. “But there is his silence. It is impossible to imagine that he did not witness what was happening.”¹²³ Indeed, the silence of a great many of these narratives regarding the crimes of the Nazi regime speaks volumes.

Conclusion

When the Soviet Union began to disintegrate in the final years of the 20th century, Latvia and the other Baltic states took the lead in asserting their independence from the collapsing USSR, with the country’s full sovereignty restored on August 21st, 1991. In the years since then, Latvia has become a solid member of the Western bloc, joining the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, (or NATO) in 2004.¹²⁴ Today, Latvia is a prosperous, vibrant country with a high standard of living and which serves as an exemplar of post-Soviet liberal democracy in Eastern Europe. The “normalcy” that so many Latvian exiles expressed their longing for, that is to say, a return to the pre-1940 status quo, has more or less been achieved. Nevertheless, the shadows of war and occupation, and the trauma wrought by these events, endure. These memories endure in the numerous English-language primary sources that have been written on the subject.

¹²¹ Verzemnieks, *Among the Living and the Dead*. pg. 154-155

¹²² Verzemnieks, *Among the Living and the Dead*. pg. 158-159

¹²³ Verzemnieks, *Among the Living and the Dead*. pg. 158-159

¹²⁴ Kalnins, *Latvia: A Short History*. pg. 197

Most of these works follow the same rough narrative arc. They begin with the author's nostalgic reminiscences of their seemingly idyllic youths in pre-war Latvia. Their blissful existences are then brought to an abrupt end by the Soviet invasion in June 1940. All of a sudden, friends and relatives lose their livelihoods and are imprisoned and deported by the new regime. Thus, when the German Reich launched their invasion of the Soviet Union the following year, many Latvians hailed the Germans as liberators- their saviors from continued Soviet oppression. While many Latvians collaborated with the German occupiers, others attempted to continue their old existences against the backdrop of a continent at war. As the frontlines returned to Latvian territory, those Latvians who had lived through the initial period of Soviet occupation were faced with an impossible decision: to flee the country in the wake of the Soviet advance or to remain in their homeland, and risk being targeted in the wave of Soviet retribution they believed to be inevitable. Several thousand took the former option and made the incredibly dangerous journey across war-torn Europe to reach the relative safety of Germany. Once there, these refugees were settled in Displaced Persons camps as the Western Allies deliberated their fates. With the prospects of repatriation seeming increasingly dimmer as time went on, these refugees began to seek permission to immigrate elsewhere. All the while, the ongoing Soviet occupation of their country strengthened their resolve to maintain their cultural identity against perceived Soviet attempts to eradicate it. The Latvian community in exile has long sought to portray themselves as the innocent victims of Soviet aggression. However, such a simplistic narrative elides the very real

factor of their countrymen's collaboration with the German occupiers in their efforts to exterminate Europe's Jewish population.

The experiences of World War II affected all those who lived through it in a multitude of different and complex ways. The Latvians who had fled their country during the final stages of the war were left to pick up the pieces of their shattered lives, in the process creating a new ideological conception of the world that they could use to explain their current situation and to justify their actions. The principal components of this new ideology were an identity of national victimhood, an emphasis on the preservation of Latvian culture, and a tendency to de-emphasize the agency of the Latvians themselves, primarily in regard to their relationship with the German Reich. These characteristics are present in the surprisingly broad corpus of English-language primary source literature which depicts the experiences of Latvian civilians during the Second World War and the period which immediately proceeded from it.

The primary sources cited in this study represent each of their authors' individual attempts to make sense of the Second World War. This singular event was, and remains to this day, the central historical event in Latvian national consciousness. However, Latvia is not unique in this regard. The truly global scale of the conflict means that the legacy of the Second World War is one that people of nearly every country are forced to reckon with. In some regards, we as a civilization may never truly be able to escape the shadows of the war. This project is but one humble attempt to contribute to this endeavor.

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