

# THE STATE, ITS DESTRUCTION, AND RESURRECTION: THE NEW PERMANENT EXHIBITION OF THE MUSEUM OF THE OCCUPATION OF LATVIA

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Museum of the Occupation of Latvia

The Museum of the Occupation of Latvia is celebrating its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year. Its mission is remembrance and commemoration, and -- reminding the world of the crimes committed against the Latvian land, state and nation during two Soviet and one Nazi German occupation 1941—1944/45. The Museum is acclaimed as the Latvian nation's major memory institution and will welcome its two millionth visitor this year. Among those have been both royalty and many heads of state.

The celebration coincides with ground breaking for a complete remodeling and expansion of the Museum's building, first envisioned in 2001 and hampered by numerous obstacles until now. I will not dwell on them, but rather on the new building and permanent exhibition and the story they unfold about Latvia's destiny during its first hundred years 1918-2018.

Originally the building housed the Museum of the Latvian Red Riflemen, who in 1917 sided with the Bolsheviks and Lenin's takeover of the Russian empire. The facade was symbolic copper red in 1970 when it was opened on Lenin's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. By 1993, when the Museum of the Occupation started using it, it had turned black. The "ugly black box" was its popular nickname. [1]

In 2001, the renowned Latvian-American architect Gunnar Birkerts, author of the new Latvian National Library, presented his vision that proposed building a white addition, to the existing "black box" and closing it with a glass wall. [2] "From the dark past, to the bright present to the shining future," he explained his metaphor. Eventually, it acquired a name – *Nākotnes Nams*, Building for the Future, in both senses of the word.

The new exposition – like the building in development since 2006 – is intimately connected with Birkerts' metaphor. It is a lesson about the difficulties in dealing with the ghosts of the Communist era that still haunt the present-day Latvian society. Birkerts was bent on transforming the past. His design made a static, ceremonial Soviet exhibition hall into a working museum. His visual design accented a dynamic development. In that sense he duplicated – horizontally – the vertical dynamic of his Latvian National Library, the Castle of Light, as it is generally referred to and acknowledged as the most significant monument symbolizing the renewed state.

This dynamic redesign of the museum's building led to a rethinking of the permanent exhibition's design as well. But how do you change the original exposition that addressed mainly the worst of the occupation period into an exposition that also offers redemption and hope? And wouldn't such a shift simultaneously dilute the original message? How to make sure the darkness of the past is not lost in the light of the future? Or, vice versa – that the darkness does not depress the present and prevent a future?

The answer was actually contained *in nuce* in the original exhibition, which was a historical narrative starting with the Hitler–Stalin Pact of 1939 and ending with the renewal of the Latvian state in 1991. The narrative was emotionally enhanced by the illustrative material and numerous personal artifacts and their stories. The emotional narrative emphasized spiritual, mental and physical survival and resistance during the dark period. It ended with the uplifting events in the late 1980s and early 90s that led to the renewal of independence.

The new exhibition retains many of the elements of the old but expands and enhances it in significant ways. The new exposition adds two important book-ends – the independent Latvian state that existed before it was occupied and the Latvian state that was restored in 1991. The occupations and subjugations by the Soviet Union and the National-Socialist Germany are thus presented in terms of international law as illegal acts that *de facto* interrupted but *de jure* did not abrogate the Latvian state.

The historical narrative thus follows a simple three-part outline: INDEPENDENCE–OCCUPATION–INDEPENDENCE. This is basically the narrative of a well-established universal literary archetype: the positive hero, the Latvian nation-state, undergoes life-threatening experiences but prevails in the end. If the original narrative of the exposition mainly emphasized suffering and survival, the new narrative emphasizes endurance and revival.

This underlying literary archetype allows visitors from any country to identify themselves with the fate of Latvia emotionally and intellectually. Identification with this archetype simultaneously allows the creators of the exposition to strengthen circumspectly the disturbing or traumatic aspects of the exposition and yet lead the visitor to an emotionally uplifting catharsis. [3]

The new exposition guides its visitors up the stairs whose walls are lined with KGB case file binders. It is a little foreboding, but anticipates the exhibition as a revelation of the secrets held in these files. In the upper vestibule the visitors encounter a display of the first 20 years of Latvian independence. [4] It is a time of building a democratic nation-state and establishing its economic, political and cultural life on the ruins of World War I despite the authoritarian turn toward the end of the first independence period. National symbols that continue playing a significant role in national resistance throughout the occupation dominate the emotional scene – the national flag and the Freedom Monument.

Entering the exhibition hall – the shock of the Hitler–Stalin Pact and its secret protocols: [5] two totalitarian powers conspiring to trample the established international order, to destroy and subjugate independent states. Borders are willfully changed, states destroyed, populations prostrated. Latvia's declared neutrality and its non-aggression treaties with the Soviet Union and Nazi-Germany offer no protection. The stationing of Soviet troops in the Baltic States in 1939 determines their fate. Any possible help from the West is sealed off. For nearly two years Hitler and Stalin act as brotherly allies in aggression.

As Hitler is carrying on his *Blitzkrieg* against Western Europe in the spring of 1940, Stalin takes over the Baltic States – by overwhelming military strength and ultimatums as instruments of intimidation and enforcement. The Baltic governments surrender. Soviet tanks roll in. Moscow's operatives direct the takeover. [6] The narrative is carried by major iconic objects: a broken border-post, denoting the broken treaties and the beginning of the deconstruction of the state; a picture of the Latvian Embassy in Washington D.C. with a Latvian flag denoting the non-recognition policy of the USA and much of the Western world. The deconstruction and destruction of the state proceeds with deliberate speed under the guise of a quasi-democratic processes. The leading elites are either co-opted, or, for the most part, incapacitated, dismissed, persecuted and eliminated. The replica of a prison cell with authentic wall scratchings left by prisoners in 1941 and projections of their mug shots reflect the ruthless political persecution; the replica of a freight waggon with hastily written notes to next-of-kin fluttering through the barred windows dramatizes the mass deportation of over 15,000 on 14 June 1941. In one year's time the nation is paralyzed without salvation in sight.

Suddenly – war! Hitler attacks his former ally a week after the mass deportation from the Baltic States. A respite? War comes unexpectedly, but it turns out to be a false salvation. The centuries-old enemy – the German – suddenly has turned "liberator." The events unfold

precipitously and force the people into spur-of-the-moment existential choices. The moral fabric of the nation is unravelling under the stress. The hastily fleeing Soviet secret police deport and execute thousands of their prisoners. Mass graves are opened. Nazi propaganda instrumentalizes the dead into victims of "Jewish Bolsheviks," and a special German operational commando unleashes the Holocaust by recruiting and involving local collaborators as executioners. [7] In half a year some 70,000 of just over 90,000 Jews of Latvia are killed, followed by 20,000 Jews brought in from Germany and its annexed areas. An installation representing an execution pit with projections from an actual execution site is the emotional representation of the mass murder.

Latvia is treated as occupied Soviet territory subject to willful exploitation. Thousands are locked in German concentration camps as Communist sympathizers; thousands are sent to Germany as laborers. Any hopes for and attempts at the renewal of Latvian sovereignty or even self-rule are met with arrogance and disdain. Latvians are relegated to the status of proxies. [8] Over 100,000 Latvian men are drawn into Hitler's war, most of them illegally conscripted. At the same time Stalin organizes his own Latvian fighting units. Father against son – brother against brother in a foreign war. Any resistance is wiped out. As the war returns to Latvian territory, treks of frantic refugees move westward and on to Germany or, in small fishing boats, to Sweden. By war's end Latvia has lost a third of its population.

For the remaining, peace comes with terror and suppression. Victory over Nazi-Germany is no liberation for the Latvian nation. [9] Desperately hoping for Western intervention, some 15,000 men and women head into forests, live in bunkers and carry on partisan raids. An all but unknown war after the war continues all over the Baltic supported by large segments of the population, especially in the countryside. The countermeasures are brutal. Thousands of resisters are arrested and sent to Soviet prisons and Gulag camps. Finally, on 25 March 1949 over 40,000, mostly farmers and their families are deported to Siberia – for life. A way of life in Latvia is wiped out, though resistance persists well into the 1950s.

The dreaded Gulag. [10] Archetypally this is a descent into hell. A frozen hell. It culminates as the visitors are met by a cold breeze of Siberian air upon entering the replica of a Gulag barracks. In the Gulag "zone," a sinister guard tower looms over the dreary scene as they wade through the mud. A replica of the gate in a Vorkuta prison camp proclaims: "Work in the USSR is Proof of Honor, Glory, Bravery and Heroism," *Arbeit macht frei* Soviet style. Hundreds of artefacts, each with a human story, fill the display cases illustrating the inhumanity experienced but also the indomitable will to survive, persevere and preserve human dignity.

The way out of this archetypal hell is slow, treacherous and uncertain. Once out the gates of the Gulag, the visitors experience the brief respite after Stalin's death: the relaxation of the harshest oppressive measures; the gradual repatriation of deportees from the Gulag; the hope for changes in the regime; and the attempts in the Latvian Communist Party to assert some national self-control. However, Moscow clamps down on "bourgeois nationalism," condemning any expression of patriotism or hint of independence. Moscow's oppressive and exploitative omnipresence and control is reasserted. Latvia is still a militarized camp; it becomes an industrial complex that supplies the Soviet Union and its military needs. Labor force and raw materials are imported; masses of Russian-speaking immigrants dilute the Latvian-speaking population. [11] Latvian language and culture, now carried by the younger post-war generation, clings to its ethnic roots challenging censorship and control. Even adaptation becomes a form of resistance, which persists like grass between the oppressive heel and the Latvian soil. The outside world is forbidden. It is closed off by the Iron Curtain; the oppressive apparatus, the KGB, is still in place and human rights are still trampled upon.

Change comes slowly and haltingly, through cracks in the Iron Curtain. [12] and through resistance movements elsewhere – in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, in Poland. Latvian exiles, who all this time have been keeping the hope for the Latvian nation-state alive, are able to visit their home country under the vigilant eyes of the KGB. Letters squeeze through censorship. However – no one can get out except the chosen and trusted few. There is a crack and a glimpse through it – the Latvian envoy's flag over the Latvian embassy in Washington – but no opening.

And then it happens – both unexpectedly and suddenly – through the Soviet Union's own weakness. The Communist state needs reform to survive. But reform contradicts the Communist ideology's claim to historical predestination. Maybe just a tiny little change? The attempt is disastrous: already in 1986 Gorbachev's *perestroika* opens the door to *glasnost*, but *glasnost* opens the flood gates to long-suppressed opinions that contravene the ideology. Poster art and film become forms of open criticism and opposition. The long-oppressed Latvian nation and its Baltic neighbors lose their fear and use every opportunity to exploit the frailties of the regime to reassert themselves in a multitude of non-violent ways, including ever-growing mass demonstrations, first against Soviet megaprojects and widespread pollution of the environment. Then, in 1987, they turn political, long before Central European freedom movements. They sing. Songs and music become a defiant unifying spiritual force. How do you oppose song? The Singing Revolution overwhelms the regime's ability to respond. Events now move as fast as during the occupation's first five years, but this time in reverse – the nation is awakened. The nation rises. [13] The visitor is carried up the steps to the balcony along the singing Baltic Way from Tallinn through Riga to Vilnius on 23 August 1989, the 50th anniversary of the Hitler–Stalin Pact. It demands the renunciation of the Pact and leads to the re-declarations of Baltic independence in 1990.

But the Soviet state is not yet ready to give up its ways. The Communist establishment is still in power; the army is still present. The tanks only need to be started up, and communist history's predestined path will be restored. A last push and shove: the visitors have to squeeze through barricades erected to fend off the last attempts by the regime to stifle the rising nation.

And then – free at last! The way forward is clear, but a view down from the balcony serves as a reminder of the occupation's crimes against humanity and human rights. The ever-watchful eye of the guard on the Gulag guard tower serves as a stern warning of what was and can be again. On the balcony – an accounting of the burdensome legacy of the occupation but simultaneously the important stations of the restored state's difficult road from the dark past to the bright present and toward future.

As the visitors leave the new exposition, we hope, they will be both enlightened and emotionally touched. Going down the stairs whence they came, they will be able to close the KGB files that they had opened and step into present Latvian reality with better understanding of the external and internal forces that shaped it.

In the vestibule the visitors will be able to view a short history of the building and the Latvian Red Riflemen, who were its first inhabitants. Latvian history still struggles with their legacy. But the building is no longer theirs, and their ghosts no longer haunt it. The Building for the Future belongs to a nation that has exorcized its past and moves to the future. Future visitors will also see a red wall perpendicular to the white extension of the building – the Memorial Commemorating the Victims of the Soviet Occupation. Red to remember, to commemorate and to remind. Or perhaps – to warn.