

LATVIA: THE COUNTRY AND ITS PEOPLE

Foreword

Many internet home pages provide basic information and statistics about present-day Latvia. Their extent and renewal date can guide the reader as to their completeness and reliability. But few, if any of them, deal with Latvia from the point of view of its twentieth-century past as an occupied country, whose 51-year long dependency has left an imprint on its present. Leaving out the past and its legacy, however, can lead the uninformed reader to misinterpret certain facts. Such is, for example, the question about the country's ethnic composition, how it came about and why Latvia has such difficulties integrating the population.

My, admittedly impressionistic and subjective, survey attempts to look at Latvia today through the eyes of a repatriate from the United States, who spent much of his life teaching German language, civilization and literature at the University of Wisconsin–Madison and now has become a public historian at the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia in Rīga. My survey may not be complete in its coverage or provide the newest reference numbers, but, I hope, it will give an insight into some of the visible and invisible legacies of the past that still shape the country and its people.

Early History

As a nation, Latvia is relatively young. As a state, it is even younger, celebrating the 90th anniversary of its founding in 2008. As a people, however, Latvians and their ancestors have lived on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea for several thousand years. Latvians and Lithuanians, the closest surviving ethnic and linguistic relatives, speak Baltic languages. They share and have shared the area with the Finno-Ugrian-speaking ancestors of present-day Livs and Estonians, who had arrived in the area before the Balts.

Because of its strategic location, the area became a prize possession of various foreign invaders. In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries German merchants, clergymen and crusaders conquered the small native principalities in present-day Latvia and Estonia. Lithuanians to the south succeeded in uniting under their kings in the thirteenth century and resisting the German advance. During the succeeding centuries, all or parts of Latvia and Estonia were conquered and ruled over by Danish, Polish, Swedish kings and, from the eighteenth century on, by the Russian czars. However, until World War I, landed German gentry remained the ruling class in the countryside. Latvian peasants gradually became dependent serfs and were emancipated only in the nineteenth century. German bourgeoisie governed in the major cities. German rule was resented, but German culture played an important role in shaping modern Latvian culture.

Latvians Becoming a Nation

The self-realization of the Latvians as a nation began in the nineteenth century as part of emancipation, modernization and national renaissance all over Europe. As the twentieth century dawned, the Latvians had for the most part freed themselves from the cultural paternalism and in part also from the economic and social control of the ruling Germans. They had modernized their language, developed the seeds of modern literature, gained a considerable amount of economic independence and made strides in becoming politically engaged. The 1905 Revolution turned both against the German

gentry and the czar's government in Latvia. It was brutally suppressed but became a precursor of independence thirteen years later.

World War I was fought in Latvia from 1915 to 1918. It resulted in widespread destruction, displacement and loss of life. About a third of the population left the country as refugees. Many never returned. Latvian soldiers fought in the Russian army. National units, the Latvian Riflemen's battalions, later regiments, were formed to defend Rīga against the advancing German troops. When the Germans took Rīga in 1917, many units of the riflemen joined Lenin's revolution, trusting his promise of independence.

Latvian Statehood

Independent democratic Latvia was proclaimed on 18 November 1918, a week after the end of World War I, while the territory was still under German occupation. The Red Army, including the Latvian Riflemen, was poised to attack, and a Soviet Latvian government was formed. With very few forces of its own, the democratic provisional government had to seek help from German irregulars and the local German Home Guard, who had an agenda of their own. Thus, in 1919, all of Latvia became a battleground again, with national Latvian, pro-Soviet, pro-German and even pro-Czarist forces trying to gain upper hand. The national government prevailed, however, and on 11 August 1920 signed a peace treaty with Soviet Russia, which forever renounced any sovereign Russian claims to Latvia.

In 1920 the country could establish its democratic institutions and rebuild. A Constitutional Assembly was elected. A momentous agricultural reform law was passed. It confiscated the land of the German barons and redistributed it to landless farmers. In 1921, Latvia was recognized *de iure* by many countries and joined the League of Nations. The Constitution was approved and the first parliament, the Saeima, was elected in 1922. Despite widespread destruction and loss of population, Latvia succeeded in reviving its economy so that the country could support itself and even export. Its main achievements, however, were in the area of nation-building, education and culture. Ethnic minorities were granted extensive rights; education became a driving force for development; and Latvian culture flourished free of foreign constraints. Latvia became a leader in numbers of university students and books published.

In 1934, like several other European countries, Latvia became a dictatorship. Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis dissolved the Saeima and prohibited political parties, including his own. The government assumed both legislative and executive functions. The dictatorship was relatively benign, but it suppressed dissent, encouraged conformism and consolidated economic power in state hands by buying up private enterprises.

The Occupation of Latvia

As war in Europe broke out on 1 September 1939, Latvia declared neutrality. Taking advantage of the "spheres of influence" agreed on in the secret protocols of the Hitler–Stalin Pact, however, the Soviet Union forced Latvia and the other Baltic states to sign mutual assistance treaties in October 1939. They provided for stationing Soviet troops along the Baltic Sea. By claiming breaches of the treaties, the Soviet Union occupied the countries by massive force in June 1940, just as Germany was celebrating victories in France. In a month and a half the countries became republics of the Soviet Union. Many Western countries never recognized the annexation, and the countries continued to exist *de iure* in international law.

For over fifty years, despite collaborative native governments and administrations, Latvia was ruled by two foreign totalitarian regimes bent on destroying Latvian independence. They exercised control by intimidating military presence and

unfettered secret police activities. The first Soviet occupation ended with mass arrests, deportation, imprisonment and executions of more than one percent of the population: 20–25,000.

Nazi Germans, who occupied the country in late June–early July 1941, seemed at first like liberators to most Latvians, but their actions were no less brutal. Independence was never restored, but Latvian collaboration was induced by coercive methods and fear of returning Soviet occupation. About 70,000, or 75%, of Latvia's Jews were murdered within the first six months, involving Latvian collaborators. Forced laborers were sent to Germany; resisters put in concentration camps; men were drafted into "volunteer" military units. When war returned in 1944, more men were drafted into the Red Army. Some 200,000 were forced to fight on both sides in an annihilation war. Some 150,000 Latvians were evacuated to Germany as refugees. About a third of the population was no longer in Latvia when the war ended in 1945. Some 120,000 remained in the West.

Ostensibly liberating one of their republics, Soviet forces and authorities, abetted by their collaborators, treated Latvia as enemy territory and Latvians as fascist collaborators. Men were sent to "filtration" camps, arrests were an everyday occurrence. A war-after-the-war was fought by the "forest brethren" until 1956. A huge deportation in 1949 of over 44,000 (ca. 3% of the post-war population), mainly Latvian farm families and partisan supporters, destroyed Latvian agriculture and further emptied the country for immigrants from other parts of the Soviet Union. Soviet colonization policies included large-scale industrialization with an imported labor force, resisted even by some local communists. By 1989, the share of Latvians had sunk almost to 50% from 75% before the war. Russian language had become the means of communication in many public spheres of life: government, commerce, industry, inter-ethnic social interaction.

Latvia Sovereign Again

The Singing Revolution in the late 1980s came none too late for Latvia. It demonstrated, above all, that the hope for a democratic state and the end of a coercive foreign regime had remained alive. In 1991 sovereignty was restored, and Latvia became a full-fledged member of the world community again. In 2004, its political and economic reintegration was capped by ascension to both NATO and the European Union.

However, the road back was difficult. Latvia in 1991 was no longer the country it would have been fifty years earlier. The physical scars of oppressive foreign rule are still visible to the observant eye. The mental scars are more difficult to see, but they still shape Latvian political, economic and social life as well.

The Land

Latvia is a gentle country. Its landscape was created by the glacier that retreated only some 12,000 years ago and its melt waters. It is dominated by rolling hills and broad valleys, rivers, lakes, swamps and bogs. Large forests of pine and spruce cover much of the land, interspersed with groves of birch, oak, linden, aspen, and elder. An alluvial plain in the middle of the country is a fertile agricultural area. Sandy beaches and dunes stretch along most of its extensive seacoast. Large areas are set aside as nature parks and preserves. The large forests and swamps give refuge and provide sustenance to a great variety of wild birds and animals. Storks thrive in the summer and are considered sacred birds by the Latvians. Bees swarm around the multitudes of flowers in the meadows.

The largest river, Daugava (*Düna* in German, *Dvina* in Russian), is considered their River of Destiny by the Latvians. It originates in Russia and traverses Belarus

before it enters Latvia in the southeast corner and traverses it diagonally to the capital city of Rīga and empties into the Gulf of Rīga. Until recently it was an important trade route and could connect via the Dnepr to the Black Sea. In World War I it became the front line for two years 1915–1917. Three other major rivers, Gauja, Lielupe and Venta, are no less imbedded in Latvian history and lore.

The weather is reasonably moderate, depending on the season, especially considering that Latvia straddles the 57th northern parallel. It is not directly exposed to the strong storms coming from the Atlantic and to the immediate effects of the warm Gulf Stream in the winter. The Baltic Sea exerts its benign moderating influence on Latvian climate.

The cultural landscape of Latvia reveals objects that antedate recorded history: castle hills of the ancestors, whose wooden log castles could not withstand the onslaught of the armored knights. These hills yield a rich lore of artifacts about the life of the ancestors. Some of these hills and other strategic places display the ruins of the stone castles of the German knights and rulers and tell stories of both their conquests and demise. The landed German gentry's visible legacy is numerous manor houses and estate centers in various states of repair or disrepair, as well as the surrounding parks in various stages of care or neglect. Some have become hotels; some house schools, some served as kolkhoz living quarters during the Soviet era; some have simply been allowed to decay. Some ruins witness the sudden end of the recent Soviet period and its economic experiments: empty kolkhoz cattle and machinery barns; rusting production facilities; abandoned or re-functioned factory blocks.

Latvia has been described as Rīga with its surrounding area. To get from place to place by public transport, one almost cannot avoid going through Rīga. Rīga is also an important business and traffic center of the Baltic states. Rīga and its immediate environs is the home of about half of Latvia's population of some 2,300,000. Its history, from 1201 on, is at the same the miniature history of Latvia from the days of German merchants, clergymen and knights in the thirteenth century to Polish, Swedish and Russian rule capped by its precipitous, exuberant growth as a modern city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The construction boom before World War I has left perhaps the largest concentration of ornate *Jugendstil* buildings in Europe. However, Rīga still reveals its German past as a major Hansa city, a trading and merchandizing center. Much of it is still there in modern form: the Port of Rīga, the banking houses and other businesses and brand stores attesting to its international connections. After Latvia became a member in NATO and EU, the tempo of Rīga's growth as a modern city has been amazing.

The other cities are trying hard to keep up with Rīga's dominant role. Ventspils, built up as a major export port during the Soviet era thrives on export of oil, fertilizer, grain and other products. Liepāja, a major naval base already in czarist Russia and a closed city during the Soviet era, is trying to extricate itself from its enforced isolation to become a major port and industrial city. Daugavpils, in the southeast, a former military base already in imperial Russia, too, is struggling to establish a modern industrial base. Valmiera in northern Latvia has succeeded perhaps better than most to develop modern industries. Cēsis, Rēzekne, Jelgava and Kuldīga all are significant centers with a rich past and thriving present.

The People

Latvia has a declining population. Its birth rate is among the lowest in the world, and the death rate is approximately double. Compared to about 2,000,000 in pre-war Latvia, the population now numbers about 2,300,000, but much of the increase has been mechanical and achieved by large-scale ethnic engineering.

Thus it is just short of amazing that there are still enough Latvians left to make Latvia Latvia. World War II and the ruthlessly inhuman population policies of the occupying regimes endowed newly-independent Latvia with a society that would never have evolved naturally. The proportion of Latvians in the statistic is slowly inching up to 60%, but it is still far below the 75%-plus mark at the end of the first independence period. In major cities, the Latvians constitute a minority. Rīga is only 40% Latvian.

Nazi policies of displacement and annihilation are responsible for the loss of ethnic Germans, who made up a small but economically and culturally important part of 3%, and the wholesale murder of Latvia's Jews. There are only some 5000 indigenous Jews left. Large-scale Soviet population engineering with its aim of creating a Russian-speaking homogenized Soviet society resulted in further shifts – by deportation of natives and immigration of non-natives. The ethnic Russian population has grown from the pre-war 10% to about 30%, most of them Soviet-era immigrants, including retired officers, former government functionaries, managers and other members of the Soviet ruling elite. As immigrants during occupation, they and their descendants are not granted automatic citizenship, but Latvian law allows them to become naturalized citizens by passing a Latvian language, history and constitution test. The rate has been slow, however, and social integration has been even slower, resisted both by the immigrants themselves and to some extent by the Latvians. Though Latvian is the official state language, Russian is still a *de facto* second language. The last major demonstrations broke out around 2004 when ethnic Russian schools, a relic from the Soviet era, were ordered to start teaching 60% of the subject matter in Latvian. Officially unrecognized Soviet memorial days are still publicly celebrated by considerable numbers. However, despite ultra-national groups on both sides, there have been few major confrontations between the sides. It seems that invisible lines have been drawn that neither side is ready to cross. Other immigrant ethnic groups have been more willing to become part of Latvian civil society than the large Russian contingent.

The Soviet legacy still weighs heavily on the development of civil society. For one, the Soviets endowed the future with a society that was divided ethnically and by privilege, with some groups, to use George Orwell's term, still considering themselves more equal than others. For another, the society was organized and financed from above. Social initiatives of other kinds were frowned upon and in many cases suppressed. Thus the post-Soviet development of non-governmental social organizations as volunteer, self-financing institutions has been slow. Many organizations rise and fall depending on external financing. Politically engaged organizations are frequently looked upon and criticized as quasi-political groups that interfere in the due process of national government. It may take another generation or two for a fully functioning and self-assured civil society to come about.

If there is one area in which most parts of the diverse population form a kind of consensus, it is sports, to some extent in its present form still a Soviet inheritance. Latvia's favorite team sports are hockey, basketball and soccer. It is proud of successes in bobsleigh, javelin throwing, marathon running, weight-lifting and, lately, BMX bicycle racing. Successes are cheered regardless of the ethnic origin of the athletes, and athletes are proud to wear Latvian colors.

Culture

The arts and other forms of culture have always played a prominent role in Latvian life. The term "Singing Revolution" to describe the national revival was not just a metaphor. Political change was indeed accompanied and inspired by singing and other forms of artistic and cultural self-expression that had helped the nation maintain its identity through the occupation years. In turn, the Singing Revolution opened the gates that had kept Latvian culture in ideological constraints and isolation from the rest of the world.

If during the occupation Latvian culture had turned inward as a form of national self-preservation, it now opened up to the long-forbidden and suppressed culture of the West. A rich, diversified and unfettered cultural life characterizes Latvia today.

The full bookstores attest to an avid interest in both Latvian and foreign literature, including Russian. Books long banned are translated and so are the newest bestsellers. Latvian publishers and authors exhibit and participate in international book fairs, and Latvian writers are slowly gaining recognition abroad. A new generation of writers is becoming more and more prominent as it establishes a signature of its own: no longer forced into defensive inwardness, but still Latvian and at the same time in tune with the world.

The theater, another national refuge during the occupation is making a strong comeback with a wide-open repertoire and exciting crop of young directors willing to engage in experimentation, both in established houses in Rīga, Liepāja and Valmiera and in various alternative locales. Jaunais (both new and young) Rīgas teātris under its daring innovative artistic director Alvis Hermanis, has become a European phenomenon. The National Opera, likewise, is modernizing its repertoire, and its outstanding ballet corps keeps dancing on. The Russian Drama theater in Rīga is getting modern renovated facilities. Latvian filmmaking has had a more difficult time because of the costs involved. Its best successes internationally have been achieved in the genre of short documentaries.

Music life, always part of Latvian culture, is thriving at all levels – ethnographic folk music, choir music, popular and rock music, sacral, classical avant-garde music, opera. Rīga has become a hub of both Latvian and cosmopolitan musical culture where local and foreign musicians and groups perform regularly. It seems that no month passes by without an international music festival. Liepāja, with its symphony orchestra has established its own distinct musical niche. World-class Latvian musicians and opera singers are known and are performing in prestigious concert halls and operas outside Latvia. Latvian composers, among them the renowned Pēteris Vasks, are prolific and multiplying fast. Latvian choirs earn first prizes in many competitions. Huge song-and-dance-festivals gathering tens of thousands of a cappella choir singers and thousands of folk-dancers take place at least every five years. Ethnic song and dance ensembles, which performed important functions of identity-building toward the end of the Soviet era, have multiplied and are exploring ethnic musical lore and experimenting with new forms of expression. Rock and popular music became popular protest forms in the 1980s. The interest, especially among the young, continues unabated. Major internationally-acclaimed groups perform regularly to full houses and stadiums.

The visual arts, too, freed of ideological constraints, are developing new and sometimes very *avant garde* forms of expression. Photography, which was one of the visual arts that was considered avant-garde even in Soviet days, thrives on. There is no dearth of art galleries in Rīga, and museums bulge with art collections. Applied arts, such as pottery, weaving, woodcutting, embroidery, jewelry design exist both at the artistic and artisan level.

Government

By reinstating the Constitution of 1922 in 1990, Latvia reaffirmed its democratic roots. It also reaffirmed itself as a continuation state whose *de facto* existence was interrupted by 51 years of occupation.

Latvia is a parliamentary republic with a 100-member parliament called Saeima, a cabinet of ministers and an independent court system. The President's office is largely representative, though the President has the power, with the acquiescence of the Saeima, to appoint the prime minister and diplomatic representatives, to initiate legislation and, ultimately, to dismiss the Saeima.

There is a multitude of political parties, of whom usually about half a dozen is represented in the Saeima, thus coalition governments are inevitable and change frequently. There have been 14 governments since the re-establishment of independence. Elections are held regularly and are considered fair, though the electorate displays its frustrations with those elected by changing its allegiances from election to election. Political parties are voted out of power and new ones emerge, but for the most part the political elites are simply recycled and are waiting for a new generation of politicians to emerge.

Fifty plus years of occupation by dictatorial regimes and six years of autocratic rule that preceded it had atrophied the democratic capabilities of both governing and being governed when Latvia regained freedom. Democracy in the renewed state was for most an idealized notion of what communist dictatorship with its quasi-democracy was not, but for others it became a convenient cover for achieving instant economic and political power by using gaping loopholes in privatization and other laws. Although the situation has improved, laws are still passed that are either intentionally or inadvertently flawed in favor of certain benefactors at the expense of others. Regulatory rules are even worse, creating a maze of sometimes Byzantine bureaucratic obstacles and pitfalls to the uninitiated. Although Soviet-era laws have been replaced by new codices, the judicial and court system is to some extent still staffed with judges and lawyers with Soviet-era mindsets whose fairness and independence is questionable.

The Latvian bureaucracy, which is charged with instituting and overseeing the laws and regulations has distinguished itself by its inefficiency on the one and its smug self-sufficiency on the other hand. It has inherited some of the worst habits of control-prone Soviet bureaucracy, and, in effect, to a great extent was at first the old Soviet bureaucracy under a new guise. It has metastasized into numerous departments and agencies and taken care of its own financial well being. Favor- and influence-peddling common in the Soviet era are still rather widespread. Despite genuine efforts to cut down on bribery and graft as common forms of corruption at all levels, they still persist even among those who are charged with combating them.

Nevertheless, for all of its faults, shortcomings and inefficiencies the new democracy has made remarkable progress in many areas, especially in foreign relations and re-integration in Western structures. The most notable achievements, among many others, are Latvia's ascension to international memberships, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU). Latvian parliamentarians and bureaucrats are now working and simultaneously learning in Brussels. Latvia's diplomats are representing the country in many capitals of the world. International governmental, non-governmental and business partnerships have opened up new opportunities especially for younger people with appropriate language capabilities. Few other countries have so many people in their twenties and thirties in leading positions. They are the real hope for rejuvenating the government system as well.

Economy

Transition from Soviet command economy to competitive market economy has been difficult, but nevertheless for the most part successful. Many branches of industry, especially ones geared to military or heavy production for the needs of the Soviet Union, atrophied. New ones have developed and are competing in the international, especially European, markets helped by the influx of foreign and EU capital and the introduction of the newest production technologies. Especially after Latvia's ascension to the EU, the rate of economic growth has been the envy of many EU countries -- surpassing 10% for several years. It was unfortunately accompanied by equally unenviable rates of inflation, reaching as high as 17% in mid-2008. Both are being

taxed by the world-wide economic crisis of 2008. The inflation is dropping fast, the GNP even faster. The government, slow in developing long-range economic policies and balancing the budget, is forced into emergency measures as the crisis deepens.

Agriculture, the traditional economic mainstay of Latvia and the most Latvian part of the country is basically a depressed area still undergoing painful and slow transformation from collective to large-scale individual farming. The hopes that the redistribution of land to its former owners would result in a revival of traditional agriculture as had happened during the first independence were dashed by the realities of large-scale modern agriculture and built-in subsidies in the rest of the world and Europe. Thus especially young people are leaving for the cities, and many people without adequate employment and income seek their fortunes abroad, especially in Ireland and Great Britain. Gradually, modern farms with large expanses of fields and herds of milking and meat animals, not infrequently owned by foreigners, are being developed. However, large areas still lie fallow and small family farms eke out an existence at best. The venturesome try out new approaches for Latvia, including ostrich farming and raising deer. Growing organic crops and animals is a promising venue that gives traditional farming a future outlook. With the help of EU structural funds, rural and eco-tourism is becoming a new and promising branch.

As during the first period of independence, Latvian forests became a source for "green gold" during the 1990s. Raw lumber, a low added value product, became a major. Gradually, though, the Latvian lumber industry is providing high quality finished lumber and Latvian manufacturers are producing furniture and other wood products.

Consumer goods, during the Soviet era in short supply, have flooded Latvia's stores. Especially Rīga has attracted supermarkets and shopping centers, as well as exclusive brand outlets. Unfortunately, Latvian appetite for foreign goods has exceeded its ability to produce export goods and services. Latvia has a considerable negative trade balance.

The desire to live better has produced some negative side-effects. Not all branches of the economy have been able to provide the population with sufficient income. The pensions, partly because the state inherited no pension funds from the defunct Soviet Union, are very low. Professions underpaid in the Soviet Union, such as teachers and medical personnel, are still underpaid. Governmental employees, especially with political connections, and people in the private sector are comparatively better off. Best off are people who, not infrequently taking advantage of witting or unwitting gaps in legislation, engage in speculative ventures, especially real estate deals. Latvia may have relatively more millionaires than many established countries in the world. One only needs to look at the cars in Rīga's streets to see the deep divide in incomes: the concentration of highest-end luxury cars is almost unbelievable. On the other end, many people drive cars older than 10 years. At the same time, the easy availability of consumer and mortgage credit has made the traditionally cautious Latvians into debtors who borrow against their future hopes.

The Latvian currency, the *Lats* has been stable and is now pegged to the Euro at a stable ratio. Because of high inflation, however, the anticipated introduction of the Euro has been pushed forward to 2012. The Bank of Latvia has shown itself to be a reliable and far-sighted central banker. After the crash of several speculative financial schemes and failures of banks in the early to mid-nineties, the banking system has stabilized. Many of Latvia's banks belong to foreign, especially Scandinavian financial institutions.

Education

Latvian national revival in the nineteenth century was carried by the recognition that education was the way out of dependency. Schools became centers of social, cultural and political activity. Education was also a top priority during the first independence period. During the long Soviet occupation, schools and universities became institutions for ideological indoctrination and training grounds for specialized trades and professions in planned economy. A parallel Latvian and Russian language school system was established and still persists, though ostensibly following the same basic programs and the Russian system being forced to increase the share of courses taught in Latvian. At the same time, a number of schools for other ethnic groups have been established.

Despite the high priority in all governmental declarations, education has been allowed to drift – underfunded and without forward-looking leadership. By 2008, 14 ministers had headed the Ministry of Education and Research, with the longest tenure three years. Education laws have changed several times. Reforms have come piecemeal without an overall plan and broad consensus, sometimes, in name only. The education system is administered more by rule and decree than by agreement. Local administrations are responsible for the upkeep of schools but not for their programs.

And yet, education is by no means a lost cause, to a great extent because of pressure from below. The population demands it and is willing to pay for it. There are excellent public schools that cannot fend off applicants at registration time. Some newly-founded regional universities are developing new programs and attracting younger, foreign-educated staff. State universities, are augmenting meager state allocations by instituting tuition fees, and students are willing to pay them, taking out loans or depending on their parents for help. Private higher schools have sprung up, some with excellent programs and staffing, some clearly taking advantage of current demand of subject matter and competition for study places. Increasing numbers of students are studying in other EU universities.

Latvian scientists were among the leaders in the Soviet Union, oftentimes doing basic research for the benefit of the Soviet military-industrial complex. The collapse of the Soviet Union deprived many of them of their research programs and laboratories. Though inadequately funded by the state, the better scientific programs, however, have been able not only to survive but find international contacts and funding in the West.

Defense

The Ministry of Defense administers the Latvian Armed Forces, which are staffed by professionals. They are small but reasonably well trained and complemented by professionally-led volunteer Home Guard. From early on, the formation and training of the Armed Force was aided by advice and equipment provided by NATO countries. Latvia cooperated closely with the armed forces of the other Baltic countries, Estonia and Lithuania. Even before joining the NATO in 2004, the Latvian Army assumed responsibilities outside its own borders. Latvian soldiers have served in international units in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Iraq. They are still serving in Kosovo and Afghanistan. Besides being part of the NATO alliance, the small Latvian Navy also performs the duties of Coast Guard to control and defend the 500 km Latvian seacoast.

As Latvia became a member of the EU, and even more after it joined the visa-free Schengen Treaty in 2007, Latvia also assumed responsibility for controlling the external border of the EU. The Border Guard is a unit of the Ministry of the Interior.

Transportation

It has been said that Latvia is safe from foreign invasion because of its bad roads. Indeed, especially the secondary and tertiary roads, are in dismal shape and sometimes

become impassable during spring thaws. The main interstate roads are kept up reasonably well, and some stretches are being rebuilt with the help of EU structural funds.

Public transportation is still in demand by those unable to afford private car, no matter how old. Rīga has to a great extent modernized its bus, trolleybus parks and is trying to do the same for the street cars. Intercity busses are privately owned and provide reasonable service on the main routes. Nevertheless a personal car is still a dream by many, and traffic congestion, especially in and around Rīga attests to the fact that now almost every second Latvian is a car owner.

As elsewhere, the railroad story has two different tales. Passenger train service needs subsidizing and is in dire need of modernizing to relieve Rīga's streets and provide connections between the major cities. Freight service is booming. Latvia's location and its excellent port facilities have made it into a major transit corridor between the East and the West. The major ports are Ventspils, Rīga and Liepāja.

If during the Soviet period Rīga was a regional airport, it has now become the major airline hub in the Baltic states with direct connections to most major cities in Europe. This connectivity is helping Rīga become a major international business center. Low-cost airlines have also helped make Rīga a major tourist attraction.

In 1971, I noticed a travel brochure from then Soviet Latvia in Berlin. Censorship apparently had missed the subtle hint that the text writer had slipped in about Latvia's true place in geographic contexts. The question how to get to Rīga was answered: "Rīga has no direct connections to other European capitals." The visitor was instructed to fly through Moscow (obviously *not* a European capital) or Leningrad instead. Today, you can fly directly from many European capitals to Rīga and back again without even passing through passport controls. You can also fly from Rīga to Moscow, but you'd better bring your passport and visa along. The times have changed.

Last edited: 20 February 2009