

**FOR FATHERLAND, FREEDOM AND MOTHER RUSSIA**

**The Riga Freedom Monument as Site and**

**Symbol of Resistance in Soviet Latvia**

By

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Submitted to  
Central European University  
History Department

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Budapest, Hungary

2012

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## Abstract

Built by the independent Republic of Latvia in the 1930s, the Freedom Monument (Latvian *Brīvības Pieminēklis*) in Riga is one of Latvia's most recognizable landmarks and national symbols. The monument was representative of the nationalist movement that began in the nineteenth century and a nationalist sentiment that remained strong in the republic throughout the interwar period.

The monument was a unique case in the Soviet Union. Most of the republics belonged to the Soviet Union from the beginning. The Baltic States of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia achieved independence from Russia in 1918 and had a successful period of independence between the wars, during which the Soviet Union signed treaties with the countries recognizing their sovereignty and “forever” relinquishing all claims to the territory. During the Second World War, the Soviets used forced peace treaties and the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact with Nazi Germany to justify occupying the three countries. The monument thus became a testament to freedom in an unfree state. Lithuania and Estonia lacked similar monuments.

As an obvious symbol of the independent republic, known as “bourgeois Latvia” in Soviet-speak, it is curious that the monument survived the Soviet occupation of Latvia for fifty years. The monument remained a beacon for the Latvian community, who came to lay flowers in silent protest, protest by self-immolation, and, by the 1980s, to protest in large, vocal groups. Though resistance activity was mainly individual until the glasnost era, in the 1980s it grew under new Soviet policies and with expansion of the movement for Latvian independence.

This thesis explores how the monument was built as a national symbol in an era of high patriotism, how it grew in importance as a Latvian symbol for both Latvians in Latvia and the diaspora exiled abroad during the Second World War, the resistance activity that occurred there, and why and how it was preserved.

## Acknowledgments

Thank you to the following people for their assistance with research, suggestions, accommodations and other support:  
Anna Ķeniņa, George Ķeniņš, Inga Jēruma, Jana Jēruma-Grīnberga, Janis Grīnbergs, Laila and Anna Grīnberga, and David Schilter.  
Paldies!

Thank you to Professor Rieber for his assistance, insights, and interest in my obscure discoveries.

Thank you to the staff at the Open Society Archives, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Latvijas Valsts Vēstures Archīvs, and the “Letonika” department of the Latvian National Library for their patience and assistance in tracking down obscure documents.

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## Introduction

Towering over the square that divides the old town and the newer parts of the city in Riga, the Latvian Freedom Monument (Latvian *Brīvības Pieminēklis*), at a height of 41 metres, is an unmistakable landmark for visitors and residents of the city alike.

Constructed in the independent republic of Latvia between the two world wars, nationalist ideology was bound up in the monument from the earliest stages of planning. From the time of its completion in 1935, the monument has decorated postcards, calendars, books about various aspects of Latvian history and identity, tourist brochures and more. Despite its position as such an obvious landmark and nationalist symbol, the monument managed to survive the Soviet occupation between 1940 and 1991, even while serving as a site for protests and less vocal forms of resistance like laying flowers at the monument, an activity forbidden under the Soviet government.<sup>1</sup> Why did the monument become such a strong national symbol for Latvians, and how did it escape destruction by Soviet authorities? The ideas of Latvian unity and freedom were built into the monument, both in its physical structure and the process of its construction; some of the same elements that led it to become a gathering point for Latvian nationalists also helped it survive. Its survival through the Soviet regime is best explained by a fortuitous combination of factors.

Latvia's history prior to the First World War was a chronicle of domination by various foreign powers. The Teutonic knights arrived early in the thirteenth century, beginning the creation of a German landowning class that ruled the country for several

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<sup>1</sup> Daina Stukuls Eglitis, *Imagining the Nation: History, Modernity, and Revolution in Latvia* (University Park, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 129.

centuries and remained the most powerful class up until the later nineteenth century. In the sixteenth century, the rule of Latvia was contested between Sweden and Poland-Lithuania, becoming part of the Polish-Lithuania Commonwealth in the late sixteenth century before falling to Sweden in the early seventeenth century. In 1721, Russia won control of the majority of present-day Latvia in the Great Northern War. With the partitions of Poland in the eighteenth century, all of Latvia's territory became part of the Russian Empire. Latvia's nationalist movement began to emerge in the 1840s, and by the 1890s, it was a strong political force. When Latvia declared its independence from Russia at the close of the First World War in 1918, the country's nationalist elite formed the government and were able to put their ideas into practice. The interwar years were characterized by strong nationalism in politics and culture, and it was in this climate that the Freedom Monument was built.

The monument was initially proposed as a memorial to fallen war heroes in 1921, from the First World War and the subsequent struggle against Russian forces between 1918 and 1920. The name of "Brīvības piemineklis," the freedom monument, quickly took hold in early discussions. Originally proposed by an architecture professor, the planning for the monument was taken over by a committee including government representatives, artists, architects and other intellectuals.<sup>2</sup> Due to the shortages of federal money in the years following the war, it was decided to fund the monument by private donations from Latvian citizens. The campaign framed the monument as "the peoples' monument,"<sup>3</sup> suggesting the monument's construction would be possible with just a small donation from each family; donations of little more than a few cents were also collected from schoolchildren. This

<sup>2</sup> "Iesniegums Ministru Kabinētam" [Appeal to the Cabinet Ministry], April 21, 1923, 1307.1.989, p. 18, Latvijas Valsts Vēstures Arhīvs, Rīga.

<sup>3</sup> Brīvības pieminekļa komiteja, "Brīvības piemineklis—tautas piemineklis" [Freedom Monument—the peoples' monument], n.d. (early 1930s), 2575.7.1430, p. 86, Latvijas Valsts Vēstures Arhīvs, Rīga.

campaign helped to create a perception of the monument as everyone's project and concern. Nationalist sentiment was strong in the interwar period, built into the culture and the education system; at the same time, Latvia experienced economic growth and improvements in living standards, helping to construct the idea of the interwar republic as a great era in Latvian history. This era remains romanticized in Latvian culture, and the monument stood as an obvious marker of the republic at this time. Between the geographic location and this symbolism, the monument became an obvious choice for protests against the Soviet government and demonstrations during the nationalist 'awakening' in the 1980s that preceded the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Latvian identity changed during the course of the Second World War as the population was divided by historical circumstances. Invasion by the Soviet army in 1940, followed by the invasion of the Nazis in 1941, followed by reinvasion by the Soviets in 1944, led to the loss of approximately a third of Latvia's population,<sup>4</sup> some to forced labour in Germany, some to death at the hands of the Soviets or Nazis (including most of Latvia's Jewish population), some to death fighting in the Red Army or Nazi forces, some to escaping the country. The surviving population now lived either in exile or in a country changed through the imposition of Soviet rule. Over the course of the war, the bulk of Latvian nationalists were either deported to Siberia by the Soviets, or escaped to the west, where they formed a strong network of exiles primarily in the United States, Canada, England, Sweden and Australia. Nationalism became the pursuit of the exile communities for many years, who advocated for independence, for recognition of the Soviet takeover of the Baltic States as an occupation, and for knowledge of Latvia. For Latvians living in the

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<sup>4</sup> Andrejs Plakans, *The Latvians: A Short History* (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1995), 152.

west, the monument also served as a symbol, whether it was one they remembered from their own lives or knew from a picture their parents kept on the wall. Older members of the exile community were especially likely to romanticize the interwar period, as many had belonged to families of the interwar intelligentsia.

Within Latvia, Soviet policy towards the republics was a complex and mutable thing. Nativization policy, or *korenizatsiia*, had been the official policy in the republics in the 1920s and 1930s, promoting a culture that was “national in form, Soviet in content,” privileging local elites in government and giving local languages and arts status in schools and culture. Soviet authorities helped non-Russians to develop national epics and operas, print media in the local language, and literacy. By the 1940s, the policies had more or less been dispensed with in the existing Soviet republics; however, as new arrivals to the Soviet Union, policy in the Baltic States reflected elements of the earlier policies.<sup>5</sup> This reflected the same need to build local support of the Soviet government that nativization policy had originally been pursued with: especially necessary in the Baltic States, where much of the population regarded Soviet rule as illicit.

In the post-Soviet era, complex questions of what to do with monuments arise: whether to keep or tear down communist monuments, what to do with dozens of displaced Lenin and socialist realist monuments, what to build to replace them, and how to commemorate independence from Soviet rule. The issue of what was done with monuments of independence under Soviet rule seldom appeared: most of the Soviet republics went straight from being part of tsarist Russia to republics of the USSR. Latvia’s

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<sup>5</sup> Olaf Mertelsmann, ed., *The Sovietization of the Baltic States 1940-1956* (Tartu: Kleio, 2003), 116-7.

neighbours Estonia and Lithuania lacked similar monuments. In Lithuania, the historical capital of Vilnius did not become part of the independent republic in 1918 and the city of Kaunas instead became a temporary capital until the 1940s; the issue of the capital and constructing new national architecture in Kaunas had remained a contentious issue throughout the interwar. In Estonia, plans were underway to build a similar monument to independence, but it had not been completed when the Soviet army invaded in 1940, and the bank accounts for the monument were liquidated, the committee members deported or executed; the Soviets did destroy many rural and urban war memorials built in the interwar period.<sup>6</sup> In recent years, Estonia provides a case study of the opposite situation: in the early 2000s, the so-called “War of Monuments” broke out, where Estonian initiatives to destroy or relocate Soviet monuments, reconstruct pre-war statues, and build new monuments commemorating struggles against the USSR led to an exacerbation of tensions between the country’s Estonian and Russian communities.

Despite the symbolism of the Latvian monument, there is little information that brings together its history in the Soviet era. Over the past decades, the study of memory and accompanying interest in monuments has become popular. Pierre Nora’s *Les Lieux de Mémoire* is the key text on the study of monuments and memory. Using Maurice Halbwach’s *On Collective Memory* as a framework, Nora takes the idea of monuments as a repository of collective memory, serving to remind us of the now-forgotten, or at risk of being forgotten, memories of history. Though Nora’s work is built of case studies on places

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<sup>6</sup> See Marie Alice L’Heureux, “Representing Ideology, Designing Memory,” in Olaf Mertelmann, ed., *The Sovietization of the Baltic States 1940-1956* (Tartu: Kleio, 2003), for more information on this monument and early Soviet monuments in Estonia.

of memory in France, similar logic can be applied to the Latvian case, especially when Nora writes of the destruction of memory in twentieth-century France:<sup>7</sup> in a different way, this idea is certainly applicable to Soviet Latvia. Svetlana Boym's writings on nostalgia also look at collective longing for an earlier time, as the Freedom Monument served as a reminder of the interwar period for Latvians in the Soviet Union.

In Latvian, several works have been published on the monument, studying mainly the historical background of the monument's construction and symbolism of the sculpture. The earliest of these, Jānis Siliņš' 1935 *Brīvības Piemineklis* [The Freedom Monument] was a booklet printed by the monument committee looking at the construction and meaning of the monument. Vaidelotis Apsītis' 1993 *Brīvības Piemineklis* similarly looks at the construction, ideology and sculptor's and architect's biographies, while scarcely mentioning the monument's history under the Soviets. Māra Caune's 2002 work, *Brīvības Piemineklis: tautas celts un aprūpēts* [The Freedom Monument: The Peoples' Construction and Responsibility], published by the monument's restoration committee, uses some of Apsītis' work, while looking more at the two restorations of the monument in the early 1980s and the late 1990s, and giving an overview of some of the protests and demonstrations at the monument during the independence movement of the 1980s. Viesturs Kairiņš' 2006 documentary *Piemineklis* [The Monument] investigates the interpretation of Riga's Soviet Second World War memorial in the post-Soviet era; at the end, a newlywed Russian and Latvian lay flowers at both the Soviet monument and the Brīvības Piemineklis after their wedding.<sup>8</sup> My research aims to consolidate historical background from these Latvian-

<sup>7</sup> Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory, Volume I* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>8</sup> The film was produced jointly by a Latvian studio and a German television program where directors from ten new EU countries made films about monuments.

language sources, information on resistance activity from secondary sources, as well as primary research on the ideology of the monument from historical documents on the construction at the Latvian National Archives, more detailed information on protests at the monument in the archives of Radio Free Europe at the Open Society Archives, and references to the ideology of the monument in domestic and diaspora press between 1940 and 1991.

Functioning as a repository of the collective memory of independent Latvia, the statue performed double duties between 1940 and 1991, acting as both a symbol of the romanticized interwar period and as a co-opted Soviet symbol, which remained a source of contention for Soviet authorities. Ironically, Soviet authorities changed the name of the avenue that begins at the end of the square where the monument sits from Brīvības iela, Freedom Street, to Ļeņiņa iela, Lenin Street, in June 1950 (also the year that Riga's Lenin statue was erected on the same street, two blocks away from the Freedom Monument), by suggesting that the name was “old and inappropriate,”<sup>9</sup> though the name of the monument remained unchanged. The name was not, in fact, particularly old: in the tsarist era, it was Aleksandra iela, or Alexander Street, for the tsar, before becoming Brīvības iela in 1923, and Adolf-Hitler-Strasse under the Nazis. Caught between the “old and inappropriate” idea of Latvian freedom, and, metaphorically and physically, Lenin's watchful eye, this thesis aims to show how these competing ideologies played out in the monument.

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<sup>9</sup> Stukuls Eglitis, *Imagining the Nation*, 135.

## I. Theoretical Framework: Nationalism and Collective Memory of the Freedom Monument

The Freedom Monument can be investigated through frameworks of nationalism and collective memory. The roles of the monument in Soviet-era Latvia are grounded in both these concepts: as a nationalist icon, and as a site of collective memory. Both serve interconnected roles: as a site of memory, the monument came to hold the memory of a strong nationalism and strongly nationalistic era, then condemned as “bourgeois” by the ruling powers. In regards to nationalism, I will look at the work of Benedict Anderson and Miroslav Hroch. Anderson posits that nationalism is an “imagined community”: this can be seen too as a form of collective memory. Miroslav Hroch describes it as a several-stage social process of modernism. Ieva Zake has written on the subject of Latvian nationalism, its development, success in the interwar Latvian republic and continuation in the west after the Second World War. Maurice Halbwachs’ *On Collective Memory* is the definitive text on collective memory, and Pierre Nora applies this theory to the study of monuments in *Les Lieux de Mémoire*; arguing that places of memory replaced memory as lived experience in twentieth-century France as the nation ceased defining collective consciousness. This idea can also be applied, coming from a quite different history, to Latvia. Svetlana Boym also uses Halbwachs’ and Nora’s work in her writing on nostalgia, concentrating on the importance of memory to Eastern Europe in the Soviet and post-Soviet contexts. Together, these works can help to explain how the monument’s memory developed and changed from its creation to the late Soviet period.

Today, Latvian tourism guides list the Freedom Monument alongside oak trees and the Daugava river as a national symbol. Both the nationalist sentiment of the monument and its function as a site of memory of that nationalism's zenith played an important part in its role in Soviet Latvia. Two competing symbolisms acted in the monument in the Soviet Union: the version propagated by Soviet authorities, and the original nationalist meaning, which took on new shape and importance after 1940. Under glasnost, the original symbolism again returned to the forefront, albeit accompanied by police clashes and activist deportations.

Miroslav Hroch, studying the emergence of nationalism in eastern Europe, suggests a three-stage process to nationalism. These begin with a stage of developing national consciousness among intellectuals, then spreading that consciousness to new activists, and finally the majority population responding by accepting the demands of the nationalist movement. Hroch lists nationalism's goals as creating a national community, achieving national self-administration or territorial independence, and establishing a national high culture based on the local language.<sup>10</sup> Nationalism is, for Hroch, a social process, a transformation characteristic of modernity. More so than any inherent characteristic of a national group, Hroch sees this as simply a social feature. "One must not determine the objective character of the nation with a fixed collection of features and attributes given once and for all, just as it is not possible to view the nation as an everlasting category, standing outside concrete social relations."<sup>11</sup> Hroch defines the nation as a large social

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<sup>10</sup> Miroslav Hroch, *Comparative Studies in Modern European History: Nation, Nationalism, Social Change* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007), 68.

<sup>11</sup> Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 3.

group; nationalism is then the growth of certain sentiments within this group. They share several sorts of relationships, including geographic, economic, religious, linguistic, and cultural.<sup>12</sup> Hroch's use of the term "cultural" is problematic here, however, as the term is not clearly defined, and suggests a sort of amorphous, intrinsic characteristic, one that tends to form the base of development of Hroch's first stage of nationalism; this also neglects the idea of ethnicity.

Nationalism differs in small nations; oppression become structural in nations controlled for a long time by another power. Consequently, nationalist movements also had to demand structural reforms. This differed in different nations; in Latvia and Estonia, nationalists were able to use structural reforms to their advantage as tsarist reforms in the late nineteenth century aimed to push Baltic Germans out of power and instead privilege the Latvians or Estonians in local government. However, a national movement had already begun developing decades earlier in both countries. Hroch characterizes the Latvian national movement as having a short 'phase A' of cultural development;<sup>13</sup> the movement involved the development of a regional identity and an affirmation of the Latvians' separation from the Germans and the Slavs.

The nationalist movement begins in the intelligentsia, distinguished from the countryside; Hroch separates this intelligentsia into three groups, the first being the elites and ruling class, the second professionals such as artists, journalists and lawyers, the third the largest group including teachers, students and office labourers. However, in Latvia, the intelligentsia was not greatly separated from the peasantry; migration of Latvians into the cities and integration into professional spheres had happened quite recently, with most

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<sup>12</sup> Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival*, 178.

members having grown up in rural areas or being only a generation removed from it. Hroch considers the nationalist movements of the Baltic states as comparatively ‘belated’, not developing until the 1850s and 1860s, and in a way that was largely facilitated by the development of education and through teachers in village and urban schools. Hroch notes the difference between nations where the upper class and lower class were of the same ethnicity and those where they were different; in one, the development of a nationalist movement led to the breakdown of barriers in education between classes; in others, it led to an increase in representation of the oppressed nationality among the upper classes.<sup>14</sup>

Benedict Anderson instead sees nationalism as the creation of an “imagined community” between a group of people bearing certain similarities, but whose nation is a group largely ‘imagined’ by its members—the majority never come into contact, but instead imagine their connections to a group across a region, based on shared factors of economy, territory, language, and so on. Nationalist ideas, as Anderson theorizes, were a product of various forces of modernism and could be translated into a variety of contexts; from the nineteenth century up until the present day, “old nations” found themselves “challenged by ‘sub’-nationalisms within their borders.”<sup>15</sup> Latvia was among the nations challenging the nationalism of the ‘old nation’ of Russia within the Russian Empire. The community is a “deep, horizontal comradeship”<sup>16</sup> that people are willing to struggle and die for.

Anderson considers nationality to be a sort of “cultural artefact.”<sup>17</sup> Traditional forms of community, such as religious community, kingdoms (which, historically, had

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<sup>14</sup> Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival*, 189.

<sup>15</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 4.

indistinct and uncontrolled borders), and especially linguistic, developed over the modern era to define a nation. Both spoken language and print literature were used to define the national community, creating a feeling of solidarity and familiarity through sharing the experience of communicating in the same language, reading the same newspaper as many others. Publishers of materials in a language new to print were both advocates of the development of their nation, and entrepreneurs satisfying a pre-existing consumer demand.<sup>18</sup> Policies of “official nationalism” as pursued by empires in the nineteenth century were a reaction to nationalist movements already emerging; however, Anderson does not fully explore the complexity of the issues within the Russian Empire and the tsars’ continuing struggles over governing such a large and multiethnic state.

The nationalist movement began in the 1840s in Latvia, developing more determinedly by the 1860s and becoming a powerful political movement by the late nineteenth century. Latvia was then a part of the Russian Empire, where the development of Russian nationalism was occurring through the Slavophiles. The Slavophiles’ emphasis on the heritage of the Russian peasant culture was one important influence on the Latvian nationalists. As well, the existence of a German bourgeoisie in Latvia since the thirteenth century meant that young Latvian intellectuals learned German and often studied in German universities; consequently, German nationalism and its emphasis on the *volk* served as a model as well. The tsarist policy of Russification from the 1880s, in seeking to restrict cultural and religious freedoms of Baltic citizens of the Russian Empire, served to

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<sup>18</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 75.

bring the Latvian nationalist movement closer together;<sup>19</sup> growth of education also helped bring young Latvians into the movement.

Benedict Anderson points out that Russification developed “*after, and in reaction to, the popular national movements proliferating in Europe since the 1820s.*”<sup>20</sup> Nationalists were inspired by national movements in other countries; language was an essential element, to create a national print literature in which nationalist ideas could be circulated. Official tsarist policy of Russification began only in the 1880s,<sup>21</sup> after nationalist movements had been developing for decades in the Baltics, Ukraine, Georgia and elsewhere. The first Russifying measures were made in the Baltic areas, aiming to combat the supremacy of the Baltic Germans; Russian became the mandatory language of instruction in state schools.<sup>22</sup> The revolutions of 1905-1907, so celebrated by Soviet authorities for their demonstrations of the growth of Marxist consciousness in the republics, helped galvanize nationalist movements in Latvia and other Russian territories.

Russification, as a deliberate measure, dated back to Catherine the Great, aimed at a gradual introduction of Russian administration, institutions and language.<sup>23</sup> By the 1850s, Russification measures often aimed to support Latvians and Estonians in education and government over the traditional German mobility. Russification measures were seen by some Russian authorities as a way to stop Germanization of the Baltic populations, as well as supporting greater unity of Russia, but other critics saw no need to promote Russian over the population’s native languages. After 1865, an administrator to the region, Petr Shuvalov,

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<sup>19</sup> Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2001), 382-4.

<sup>20</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 2006), 86.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 87.

<sup>22</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 87.

<sup>23</sup> Edward C. Thaden, *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 9.

aimed for a process that included the use of Russian in teaching and government.<sup>24</sup> Later compromises left German high schools and universities, but mandated the building of new Russian high schools and expansion of Russian language teaching in the German, Latvian and Estonian schools.

Andrejs Plakans notes the existence of several generations of Latvian nationalists, from the nineteenth century through the 1905 revolution and up until 1918. By the time cultural Russification began “in earnest” in the 1880s, the population had significantly developed socially and intellectually.<sup>25</sup> The “Young Latvians” became the first group of Latvian nation-builders in the mid-nineteenth century, including Krišjānis Valdemārs, Juris Alunāns, Krišjānis Barons and Atis Kronvalds. Valdemārs founded a pro-Latvian newspaper, the *Pēterburga Avīze* (St. Petersburg Gazette), for Latvians living in St. Petersburg (mainly students) which mocked the Baltic Germans.<sup>26</sup> Barons and Alunāns also wrote articles for this newspaper. Alunāns worked on researching Latvian history and developing the language; Kronvalds and Barons had worked as teachers.

The early nationalists were expected to be able to assimilate into Russian or Baltic German communities by virtue of their educations at Russian and German universities, and resented this implication.<sup>27</sup> Prior to this, Latvians who had achieved an education had integrated into the German or Russian mobility; those integrating with the Germans often took on German names and lost their earlier identity, while those integrating with the Russian population often did so through joining the army.<sup>28</sup> Both German ideas of national

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<sup>24</sup> Thaden, *Russification*, 36.

<sup>25</sup> Thaden, *Russification*, 209.

<sup>26</sup> Andrejs Plakans, *The Latvians: A Short History* (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1995), 90.

<sup>27</sup> Ieva Zake, *Nineteenth-Century Nationalism and Twentieth-Century Anti-Democratic Ideals: The Case of Latvia, 1840s to 1980s*, (Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), 34.

<sup>28</sup> Thaden, *Russification*, 214.

spirit and the Slavophiles' ideas of the simple peasant and importance of religion (in the Latvian case, Lutheranism rather than Orthodoxy) took root in Latvian nationalism. The Slavophile ideas also proved useful to claim independence from the Baltic Germans.<sup>29</sup> However, the issue was complex: Latvian nationalists continued to benefit from educations at Russian or German universities, spent time in cities like St. Petersburg and Moscow, and those in power were often sympathetic to the Latvian movement—Russian authorities from a desire to unseat the Baltic Germans, and the Germans out of a liberal-minded support.<sup>30</sup>

Early Latvian nationalist movements were based in culture, focussing on the growth of Latvian education, art and journalism. The education system was already well-developed by the time of the Russian revolution, with 75% of the population literate.<sup>31</sup> Creating the history of Latvia, in many cases, more of a mythology, was a “crucial element” of developing nationalism in the late nineteenth century, as Ieva Zake remarks, “researching—or rather—inventing the history of Latvians as an ethnic group.”<sup>32</sup> Since Latvians had not been considered as a separate, self-identified group earlier, there was no historical precedent; Zake calls the writing of Latvian history “an intellectual adventure filled with as much unique historical evidence as falsifications.”<sup>33</sup> The leaders of the interwar state used the work of these authors to build nationalism, promoting their works culturally, excerpting texts in schoolbooks, naming streets after them, and so on. Juris Alunāns suggested Latvian civilization would have reached the achievements of ancient Greece if Latvians had not been enslaved by Germans for centuries.<sup>34</sup> As well, the highly popular epic tale of *Lāčplēsis*,

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<sup>29</sup> Zake, *Nationalism*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Plakans, *The Latvians*, 92.

<sup>31</sup> Indulis Ķeniņš, *Latvijas Vēsture* [History of Latvia] (Riga: Zvaigznes, 1993), 176.

<sup>32</sup> Zake, *Nationalism*, 42.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Zake, *Nationalism*, 43.

written by Andrejs Pumpurs and first published in 1888, mythologized the idea of the Latvian hero and the foundation of Riga, inspired by other countries' similar efforts.

The independence achieved in November 1918 was a consequence both of external political events and the nationalist movement that had been building in the country since the 1840s. Latvian nationalist intellectuals comprised the majority of the new government and were able to turn their nationalist ideas into government policies, especially manifest in culture, education and language. Latvia's independence lasted only 21 years, and the positive image the republic held for Latvians was tarnished by the 1934 coup by prime minister Kārlis Ulmanis, who declared all political parties illegal, his own included, and instituted himself as dictator. Ulmanis's dictatorship, though not exactly friendly to his detractors, did not use any tactics of terror to control its citizens. The interwar state served as a model of the ideal Latvian state through the Soviet and Nazi occupations, characterized by the strong nationalism of ethnic Latvians, to the detriment of minorities. Despite the prejudices and the problematic Ulmanis regime, the interwar period began to represent a myth of the idealized Latvian state, used as a framework for national identity through the Soviet period and after.

Nationalist policies in education and the development of a nationalist history helped to create an exaggerated version of the past, a sense of national superiority, and a narrative of past victimization. The Ulmanis government supported historical research to develop tales of the great Latvian kings of the past and medieval Latvia.<sup>35</sup> These nationalist

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<sup>35</sup> Gaston Lacombe, "Nationalism and Education in Latvia, 1918-1940," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 28.4 (1997), 323.

ideas carried on in the generations that grew up in the independent republic and in the communities of Latvians exiled to the west during the Second World War, which contained a disproportionate number of nationalists. This myth of the interwar period became a collective memory of the Latvian citizenry, fragmented during the war years into a group living under Soviet rule in a country increasingly populated by foreign-born Russians and other Soviet peoples brought in as workers, and a diaspora settling predominantly in the United States, Canada, England, Sweden and Australia.

Maurice Halbwachs looks at collective memory as a socially constructed idea of a shared memory, shared by a group such as the nation. National celebrations, in tangible or intangible forms (a monument, a festival), reinforce the shared memory. Events are not always remembered directly, but shared within a common consciousness. Halbwachs notes collective memory as a source of stability and normality in times of change. Collective memory is a sort of mutual support and assistance; not an individual memory, but the *predominant* memory of the past, what is used to construct the present.<sup>36</sup> Individual memories are continually reproduced, perpetuating a sense of identity.<sup>37</sup> Shared memories are likewise reproduced, creating this predominant memory of the past. We are free to choose which memories we want to focus on and neglect others that are “inconvenient or burden us,”<sup>38</sup> instead focusing on better times. The past is preserved through social memory. Recollections are created through landmarks, mental or physical.<sup>39</sup> Consequently, the memory of independent Latvian was not remembered directly by Latvians born in the

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<sup>36</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 40.

<sup>37</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 47.

<sup>38</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 50.

<sup>39</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 175.

Soviet Union or the west, but was contained in a social framework passed to them through families and other routes, such as Latvian language schools in the west, or the sight of the monument in Riga.

Pierre Nora applies Halbwachs' theory to the study of monuments in *Realms of Memory*. Monuments represent a sort of symbolic history, a focus on "collective heritage" in an age where the idea of nationalism has changed.<sup>40</sup> "Lieux de mémoire exist because there are no longer any milieux de mémoire, settings in which memory is a real part of everyday experience," he states.<sup>41</sup> Places of memory signify an uprooting; they would not be needed if a population still had these memories. Writing of twentieth-century France, Nora notes that the nation is no longer the unifying framework that defines the collective consciousness;<sup>42</sup> in Latvia after 1940, the nation as it was known was no longer a unifying framework.

Nora posits that places of memory need to be created because of a belief we will no longer remember it from within. The monument's construction falls into this context: the construction of memorials and the performance of ceremonies at them out of a fear the original events will be forgotten. These places sit somewhere between memory and history. "The less memory is experienced from within, the greater its need for external props and tangible reminders of that which no longer exists except qua memory."<sup>43</sup> As the memory of the pre-Soviet freedom became farther and farther away, the monument continued to serve as a reminder of history.

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<sup>40</sup> Pierre Nora, *Realms of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), Vol. I, xxiii.

<sup>41</sup> Nora, *Realms of Memory*, Vol. I, 1.

<sup>42</sup> Nora, *Realms of Memory*, Vol. I, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Nora, *Realms of Memory*, Vol. I, 7.

In her writing on nostalgia, Svetlana Boym also considers collective memory. *The Future of Nostalgia* investigates the development of nostalgia in the communist and post-communist era in Eastern Europe. Boym notes that “national awareness comes from outside the community rather than from within.”<sup>44</sup> In the case of Latvia, national awareness gained new strength after the war, when both Latvians inside and outside the country’s borders remained outside the nation that had been. Boym considers the etymology of equivalents for the word “homesickness” in various languages. In Latvian, *ilgoties pēc dzimtenes*, to long for homeland, is the term, implying, as in Boym’s other examples, a particularly Latvian grief, being forever torn from the land. This could be used both by nationalists in and outside Latvia in the Soviet era. Nostalgia is romantic, based on an idealized notion of the past. Homesickness, too, she notes, does not need to apply to those who left their homelands, but also people who “lived through major historical upheavals and transitions.”<sup>45</sup> In the monument, time could stand still, reflecting the memory of the “perfect Latvianness” of the interwar republic.<sup>46</sup>

Boym describes the nineteenth-century drive to build museums and memorials as the institutionalization of nostalgia.<sup>47</sup> Nora’s work can be read as a nostalgia for the time memory was a part of everyday life, she argues, but this is paradoxical: “the stronger the loss, the more it is overcompensated with commemorations...the more it is prone to idealizations.”<sup>48</sup> In this way, one can read the monument as a memorial for two losses: in

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<sup>44</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 12.

<sup>45</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 256.

<sup>46</sup> Zake, *Nationalism*, 60: Latvia after 1918 was to be “a perfect realization of Latvianness, and it was to be an instrument of the nation’s interests.”

<sup>47</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 15

<sup>48</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 17.

1935, as a memorial for those lost in the war, and by the time of the independence movement in the 1980s, as a memorial for independent Latvia.

Boym paraphrases historians Jean Starobinski and Michael Roth as concluding that twentieth-century nostalgia was privatized;<sup>49</sup> in the Soviet regime, this was certainly the case, as open nostalgia would be prosecuted. Instead, “countermemory” developed, passed between family and close friends, an “alternative vision of the past, present and future.”<sup>50</sup> Perestroika and the subsequent re-opening of the past led to a “memory boom,”<sup>51</sup> which she attributes as a major cause for the collapse of the Soviet Union, as Baltic protests and projects like the Soviet oral history initiative Memorial brought out previously hidden memories.

“Memorial places in the city have to be seen in the process of continuous transformation. A monument is not necessarily something petrified and stable,” Boym argues.<sup>52</sup> New monuments were erected by the Soviet Union;<sup>53</sup> these monuments were the first victims of the new order in the post-Soviet era (or earlier, considering the case of Stalin statues).

Monuments are “messengers of power, and as such, frequently became scapegoats onto which anxieties and anger were projected.”<sup>54</sup> In Estonia, the so-called “War of Monuments” between 2004 and 2007 again showed this power of monuments, as Estonia

<sup>49</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 53.

<sup>50</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 61.

<sup>51</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 63.

<sup>52</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 70.

<sup>53</sup> In Riga, the Soviet monument commemorating the Second World War, the ‘Great Patriotic War’, known as the Victory Monument, was a concrete monstrosity built near Soviet apartment complexes in a new suburb. In recent years, attacks on the monument by Latvian groups and celebrations of Russian pride by Russian groups have brought out tensions between the communities, explored by Viesturs Kairiņš in his 2006 documentary *Monument*.

<sup>54</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 89.

tried to remove or relocate Soviet-era monuments in several municipalities in the wake of vandalism towards these monuments, and an attempt to erase the Soviet past. The removals aggravated pre-existing tensions between ethnic Estonians and Russians, reaching a height in April 2007 when a statue known as the “Bronze Soldier” in Tallinn, erected as a monument to the Soviet ‘liberators’ in the early days of Soviet power, was moved from a location in the centre of the city to a military cemetery on the outskirts of the city. The statue was a popular gathering place for the Russian community and its removal culminated in vandalism, cyber attacks by Russian hackers and rioting in Tallinn.<sup>55</sup> These protests and the Latvian protests of the 1980s both show the statues as nationalist battleground, showing that the monuments of the Baltic States in the twentieth century attained a power and role far beyond what their sculptors imagined.

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<sup>55</sup> See Stuart Burch and David J. Smith, “Empty Spaces and the Value of Symbols: Estonia’s ‘War of Monuments’ From Another Angle,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 59 (2007), Martin Ehala, “The Bronze Soldier: Identity Threat and Maintenance in Estonia,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 40.1 (2009), Marko Lehti, “Never-Ending World War,” *Journal of Baltic Studies* 39.4 (2008).

## II. Construction of the Freedom Monument in the Interwar Republic

Shortly after Latvia gained independence and civil war ended, plans for a monument to commemorate the fallen in both the First World War and the war for independence began to be discussed. The fighting ended in 1920, and the monument was already being discussed in 1921. Though the original monument was suggested as a war memorial, it quickly took on grander ambitions. The architect Eižens Laube, a well-known architect who had designed many of Riga's Jugendstil buildings, petitioned the Latvian government in the early 1920s to build a memorial. Initial government documents describe the monument as "Professor Laube's fallen soldier memorial project ('Brīvības piemineklis' project)", and Laube was offered a small amount of money to begin work on the project. It was suggested that the monument could stand at the route of soldiers liberating Latvia, where a space for a statue already stood.<sup>56</sup>

Prior to the Brīvības Piemineklis, a statue of Peter the Great stood in the same place. The bronze equestrian statue was constructed by tsarist authorities in 1910 to commemorate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Peter conquering the region of Vidzeme. The statue stood for only five years, however: as the front moved closer to Riga during the war, the statue was removed in 1915.<sup>57</sup> The plinth remaining from the Peter statue was to be pulled

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<sup>56</sup> Letter from the cabinet ministry, July 27, 1922, "Profesora Laubes kritušo kara vīru pieminekļa projekts ('Brīvības pieminekļa' projekts)" fonds, 1307.1.989, p. 13, Latvijas Valsts Vēstures Arhīvs, Rīga. All translations from Latvian are my own unless otherwise noted.

<sup>57</sup> Laila Bremša, Aija Brasliņa, Dainis Bruģis, Stella Pelše and Inta Pujāte. *Latvijas Mākslas Vēsture*. [History of Latvian Art.] Rīga: Petergailis, c. 2002, 243.

In an attempt to evacuate the statue to Russia via the Baltic Sea, it fell in the ocean and was not pulled out until twenty years later. It was stored in fragments until a restoration in 2001 and currently stands in a parking lot north of the city centre. (See "Vai zināt, kur Rīgā atrodas Pēterā I piemineklis?" [Do you know where in Riga

down. Laube's project suggested a 27-metre high obelisk in the place of the Peter I statue with quotations and portraits of the writers Krišjānis Barons and Atis Kronvaldis.

In April 1923, a committee of Latvian artists, writers, politicians, actors and other intellectuals (including painter Ansis Cirulis, poet Kārlis Skalbe, composer and ethnomusicologist Emīls Melngailis and others), submitted a petition to the government requesting that other artists, specializing in sculpture, should be chosen as the designers of such an important monument. They also considered Laube's proposed 27-metre obelisk artistically uninteresting. This petition suggested the importance of a national ideology being encoded in the sculpture:

...This monument must be a specific artwork that realizes the spirit of our people and our era. It should be a collective effort by our best artists-sculptors. This project is not like others, like the usual cemetery monuments that no one takes notice of, which are scattered around the graveyards of European cities. This monument cannot give evidence to our future generations, or foreigners, that strangers have described our heroes' past struggles.<sup>58</sup>

The committee suggested names of several artists who should be included, Emīls Melderis, Burhards Dzenis, Teodors Zaļkalns, and Kārlis Zāle. Though it is not mentioned in the petition, Laube's Baltic German heritage may also have been a source of contention for those who signed it. Following the petition, the government decided to create a contest for the sculptor of the monument, open to any Latvian citizen, which was advertised in newspapers and at Riga's universities and art school. The jury for this initial contest could not agree on a design, and a second contest was held in 1929, for which Zāle's design (which differed substantially from the one he submitted in 1923), completed together with

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the Peter I monument is?], *Delfi*, September 30, 2011, [aculiecinieks.delfi.lv/news/riga/vai-zinat-kur-riga-atrodas-petera-i-piemineklis.d?id=40908719](http://aculiecinieks.delfi.lv/news/riga/vai-zinat-kur-riga-atrodas-petera-i-piemineklis.d?id=40908719)).

<sup>58</sup> "Iesniegums Ministru Kabinetam" [Petition to the Cabinet Ministry], April 21, 1923, 1307.1.989, p. 18, Latvijas Valsts Vēstures Arhīvs, Riga.

architect Ernests Štalbergs, was ultimately selected. Construction on the monument began in 1931.<sup>59</sup>

Nationalist feeling in Latvia was strong in the years between 1918 and 1940. The sentiments of the nationalists in the pre-war era now manifested in policies in government, education and culture. Andrejs Plakans notes that it is difficult to ascertain, either from Latvian or other sources, to what extent the Latvian population before 1917 held shared views: Latvians had had little influence over the majority elites or interest in their shifts in power, and the most widely heard views of Latvians were not necessarily those of the majority.<sup>60</sup> (The political disagreements of the Latvian government between 1918 and the Ulmanis's 1934 coup may suggest that opinions varied widely.) The new government had to inaugurate the new nation through establishing institutions like theatres, archives and universities, as well as public sculpture.

The monument followed a tradition of monumental sculpture built to establish a nation's authority. Acting not only as a memorial to fallen soldiers and signifier of Latvian 'freedom', the monument also served an important role of nation-building in the newly independent Latvia. Laurajane Smith notes the links between monuments and nation-building in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: "The sense of the new Modern Europe was to be expressed in the monuments that were to be protected and managed for the edification of the public, and as physical representations of national identity and European taste and achievement."<sup>61</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Vaidelotis Apsītis, *Brīvības Pieminēklis* (Riga: Zinatne, 1993), 76.

<sup>60</sup> Thaden, *Russification*, 208.

<sup>61</sup> Laurajane Smith, *The Uses of Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 18.

In 1918, as a nation whose majority ethnic group had been almost entirely peasants until relatively recently, Latvia lacked the history that other nations had glorified in their monuments and needed to construct a sense of national history and tradition. Cultural institutions like museums and theatres were quickly established in the years following the war. Smith notes that monuments imply a continuous heritage: “The duty of the present is to receive and revere what has been passed on and in turn pass the inheritance, untouched, to future generations.”<sup>62</sup> The Brīvības Pieminekļis was part of the construction a new Latvian heritage to pass on to the people.

Latvia’s nationalism movement was similar to other nations of Eastern Europe, where nationalism movements developed without a state through the nineteenth century and after. Though works published in Latvian, Latvian schooling, cultural traditions and a notable differentiation from the ruling classes had existed for centuries, they belonged to a people subjugated within larger states and empires. While other nations within European empires achieved greater autonomy earlier—such as Finland within the Russian empire, which had its own parliament from 1809—Latvia did not have its own government; the provincial administration that did exist was dominated by Baltic Germans. Consequently, there was no tradition of statehood to look back on. The new nation in the interwar had to create its own traditions and draw on the history of the nationalist movement that had existed, led by intellectuals and grounded in culture.

Consequently, the sculpture of the monument used the imagery of the history of this movement, symbols from peasant culture, and the early history of the nascent nation. There were few events for Latvians to remember as a nation. The events and figures

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<sup>62</sup> Smith, *The Uses of Heritage*, 19.

depicted on the monument existed in the living memory of Latvians in the 1920s and 1930s: the 1905 revolution, the 1919 battle against the Bermontian army; the epic of Lačplēsis had been published just forty years earlier, with characters reappearing in more recent works from the early twentieth century. Most of the people seeing the monument in its first years directly remembered the events depicted; this made it part of an actual collective memory, rather than simply an abstract idea. The allusions to the peasantry were also important; most Latvians were not more than a generation or two removed from peasant farmers in the early twentieth century, and figures like the peasant farmer and ‘Mother Latvia’ dressed in peasant costume. The Latvian word *tauta*, folk or people, carried similar romantic allusions to the German *volk*.<sup>63</sup>

Alternate locations for a monument were discussed in the years between the initial proposal and the conclusion of the second design competition in 1929. As Riga’s main street, however, and a historic square dividing the medieval and modern parts of the city, the location at the beginning of Brīvības iela was ultimately agreed upon. Different suggestions of national symbols were discussed by the monument committee, including a bronze sun (*saulīte*), three stars (for Latvia’s three historic districts of Kurzeme, Vidzeme and Latgale) and texts including “God bless Latvia” (*Dievs, svēti Latviju*), the first line of the national anthem, and quotations from nationalist writers Krišjānis Barons and Atis Kronvaldis.<sup>64</sup>

Due to financial shortages in the years after the war, the monument was to be financed principally by donations from Latvian citizens. The donation campaign was

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<sup>63</sup> Plakans, *The Latvians*, 90.

<sup>64</sup> “Profesora Laubes kritušo kara vīru pieminēkļa projekts (‘Brīvības pieminēkļa’ projekts)” fonds, 1307.1.989, p. 16, 18, Latvijas Valsts Vēstures Arhīvs, Rīga.

advertised around Latvia from 1929 by advertisements in newspapers and by committees set up in towns across the country. Vouchers were issued for donations in amounts ranging from large to small, including donations of just a few cents from schoolchildren; certificates were printed with “Let’s build the Freedom Monument!”<sup>65</sup> People were encouraged to donate whatever they could.

Nationalist rhetoric and the idea of working together was strong in the donation campaign. Advertisements from the 1930s referred to the monument as “the peoples’ monument” and “our Freedom monument.”<sup>66</sup> Emphasis was placed on everyone’s duty to contribute and to honour those who died in the First World War and struggle for independence. “Freedom was not given to us—this hard work came from the sacrifices of our sons who donated with their lives,”<sup>67</sup> read one advertisement. Posters on the streets, newspaper advertisements and interviews with the monument’s creators were among the techniques used by the committee. The statue was to serve as “a voice that would not fall silent, that we and future generations will be reminded of our arrival at our shared freedom, that will show us what route we take so that we do not lose this freedom.”<sup>68</sup> The idea of working together was also important: “Everyone must come to work together on this collective work,” stated an advertisement,<sup>69</sup> calling the monument a *talka*, an ancient Latvian word for a gathering for collective work.

<sup>65</sup> “Celsim Brīvības Pieminekļim!” Mara Caune, *Brīvības Piemineklis: tautas celts un aprūpēts* [The Freedom Monument: The Peoples’ Construction and Responsibility] (Riga: Brīvības Pieminekļa Atjaunošanas Fonds, 2002), 11.

<sup>66</sup> Brīvības Piemineklis committee, “Kā veidojas mūsu Brīvības piemineklis” and “Brīvības piemineklis—tautas piemineklis,” 1933, Profesora Laubes kritušo kara vīru pieminekļa projekts (‘Brīvības pieminekļa’ projekts) fonds, 2575.7.1430, p. 84 and 86, Latvijas Valsts Vēstures Arhīvs, Riga.

<sup>67</sup> “Brīvības piemineklis—tautas piemineklis,” 2575.7.1430, p. 86, Latvijas Valsts Vēstures Arhīvs, Riga.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> “Kā veidojas mūsu Brīvības piemineklis,” 2575.7.1430, p. 84, Latvijas Valsts Vēstures Arhīvs, Riga.

The donation campaign was shared not only in the country, but with Latvians living abroad, including in France, Germany, Italy, Finland, Czechoslovakia and other countries. Though the campaign was run through Latvian embassies and consulates and aimed to target Latvians abroad, documents detailing donations in France list both French and Latvian names, and foreign officials often donated money as well.<sup>70</sup> (Zāle’s work also gained publicity in France through a 1935 article in the magazine *Beaux-arts* on Latvian art, calling Zāle “surely one of the most interesting sculptors of contemporary art in general.”)<sup>71</sup> Even the former ambassador to China formed a monument committee for Latvians in Asia to contribute, writing, “I then also warmly invite EVERY Latvian living abroad to take an active role, to remember their homeland country in their hearts and feel love for their people.”<sup>72</sup> The campaign successfully raised both money and awareness, and thousands of people turned out for the official unveiling on November 18, 1935. The site thus entered into memory as a collective enterprise of the entire nation.

Sculptor Kārlis Zāle was born to a Latvian family in 1888 in a town in present-day Lithuania, close to the Latvian border. Zāle studied at art schools in Kazan and Moscow, later moving to St. Petersburg in 1915. Zāle was interested in realism and the human form during his student years,<sup>73</sup> though he also studied other trends in art in the world and had the chance to meet with artists like Vladimir Mayakovsky. The Riga-born Russian sculptor Vera Mukhina was among his peers in St. Petersburg. Returning to Latvia after the country became independent, Zāle was frustrated with life and the art scene in Riga and travelled to

<sup>70</sup> “Latvijas diplomātiskās un konsulārās pārstāvniecības ārzemēs” fonds, Brīvības Piemineklis committee in France, 2575.7.1430, Latvijas Valsts Vēstures Arhīvs, Rīga.

<sup>71</sup> “L’Art à L’Étranger—En Lettonie,” *Beaux-Arts*, February 15, 1935.

<sup>72</sup> Ed. Silgalvis, “Visiem Kina, Japana, un Citas Zemes Dzivojsiem Latvjiem” [To all Latvians Living in China, Japan and Other Countries], Canton, August 1934, 3281.1.63, p. 42, Latvijas Valsts Vēstures Arhīvs, Rīga.

<sup>73</sup> Apsītis, *Brīvības Piemineklis*, 42.

Berlin in 1922 for seven months, studying constructivism, architecture theory, the work of the Bauhaus school and the Dutch movement De Stijl, living among German artists as well as Russian and other émigrés.<sup>74</sup> Zāle was interested in geometric forms and had developed an interest in monumental sculpture as public art during his years in Russia. While in Riga in 1923 to work on his proposal for the Brīvības Piemineklis, Zāle was also selected to work on the Brothers' Cemetery (*Brāļu kapi*, also sometimes translated as Cemetery of the Brethren or Warriors' Cemetery), where fallen soldiers from the war were laid to rest, and returned to Latvia. The sculpture of the Brothers' Cemetery (begun in 1924 and completed in 1936) is similar in style and used some of the same imagery as the Brīvības Piemineklis.

Architect Ernests Štalbergs was born in Liepāja, in the west of Latvia, in 1883. He also studied at the art school in Kazan, continuing his studies in architecture in St. Petersburg. He worked as an architect and taught architecture history after completing his education in 1914, and returned to Latvia in 1922 when offered a position in the architecture faculty at the University of Latvia. Štalbergs also had an interest in Italian architecture. In pre-war Russia, he had worked on buildings including the Russian pavilion for a 1911 world's fair in Rome, banks and train stations in various cities in Russia. After the revolution, Štalbergs was briefly a member of the sculptural division of the Soviet Narkompros culture agency and he was among artists mentioned in an article by Mayakovsky in the first issue of the Soviet art journal *Communal Art*.<sup>75</sup> Štalbergs' other projects in Latvia in the 1920s included rooms at the University of Latvia, sanatoriums and other functional buildings.

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<sup>74</sup> Apsītis, *Brīvības Piemineklis*, 43-4

<sup>75</sup> M. Pavila, Ernests Štalbergs file summary, 95.1 apraksts, p. 10, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Rīga.

Latvian culture in the interwar republic drew heavily on the works of the preceding generations of Latvian nation-builders. This heritage was embodied in the sculpture of Zāle's final design for the Freedom Monument. Though the symbolism was Latvian and the committees emphasized the Latvianness of the monument, the designers had studied at Russian schools and Zāle was influenced by German and Russian art. The inscription on the monument referred to a concept of historical "fatherland," but Pauls Daija suggests this concept was not as ancient as nationalists would suggest: Latvian patriotism was cultural and lacked much idea of either connection to or distancing from the Germans or Russians up until the emancipation of the Baltic serfs in 1816:

Latvian civilisation, culture and education was tied to German elements, while the question of statehood and belonging was tied to Russia; at the same time there was never any question of the Latvian ever having been Russified or being Germanised at the time before the abolishment of serfdom.<sup>76</sup>

The early idea of 'fatherland' was indistinct, but not tied to Russia. The ambiguous heritage of some of this national iconography meant it could later be exploited by two occupying regimes.

Zāle's and Štalbergs' studies and work in Russia were notable and clearly important for their positioning in Soviet texts; though both were obviously influenced by their time and educations in Russia, it is unclear whether either artist ever sympathized with the Soviet regime. The generations of artists in the Soviet Union who followed the constructivists of the 1910s and 1920s were limited to the Soviet program of socialist realism; however, most artists trained in the same institutions and many were taught by or with the leaders of the earlier avant-garde. The sharp angles of constructivist work can be found in many later

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<sup>76</sup> Pauls Daija, "A Genesis of the Concept of Statehood and Perception of Patriotism," in Ausma Cimdiņa and Deniss Hanovs, eds., *Latvia and Latvians: A People and a State in Ideas, Images and Symbols* (Riga: Zinatne, 2010), 25.

sculptures and images, including Zāle's work for the Brīvības Pieminekļis and Brothers' Cemetery.

Art historian Boris Groys notes that in 1917, "a majority of avant-garde artists and writers immediately declared their full support for the new Bolshevik state."<sup>77</sup> As a group also interested in revolution and innovation, the support of artists in 1917 is not altogether surprising; later events and repressions would cause many to change their minds. Seen from this angle, however, an early idealistic support of the regime is not altogether incompatible with a later dismissal of it and return to their home country. Artistic developments in the Soviet Union and elsewhere in Europe in the interwar were also not completely divorced from each other. "Like the 1930s in Europe, Stalinist culture rediscovered human subjectivity and a new romanticism," Groys points out.<sup>78</sup> This romanticism is apparent in Zāle's work: strong, streamlined human figures conjuring up ideas of a romanticized past and future.

Obtaining a broad education would have been difficult for Zāle and Štalbergs in pre-war Latvia, as the country had only a polytechnic school, and artists have commonly travelled to other countries to study and work. Latvian nation-builders of differing generations had resented the need to obtain an education in the institutions of the dominated by Germans and Russians. Pre-war Latvians resented tsarist Russification measures; they also resented, more historically, the dominance of the German bourgeoisie. Though Latvia's independence was declared on November 18, 1918, it took until January 26, 1920, to liberate the country from foreign troops. With wide support for an independent

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<sup>77</sup> Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), 20.

<sup>78</sup> Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 58.

country following the 1905 revolutions in Latvia and exhaustion following years of war, Latvia's eagerness to commemorate its new freedom was understandable.

The statue was built from granite, bronze and travertine. The sculpture of the monument used national and allegorical symbols to represent the ideas of Latvian freedom. The figure at the top of the obelisk represented freedom, using a similar symbolism to that of the French republic following the French Revolution, embodying freedom in the form of a young woman. The top portion of the sculpture was described in a 1933 campaign advertisement as “a slim obelisk...with a sublime figure at the end: a bronze statue of a Freedom goddess, who holds in her hands three stars—symbols of Kurzeme, Vidzeme and Latgale.”<sup>79</sup> The woman was nicknamed “Milda,” a common girls' name at the time. Sculptor Marta Skulme may have served as the model, her daughter, artist Džemma Skulme, suggested.<sup>80</sup> This section was cast in bronze. The idea of districts as stars also appears elsewhere, mentioned in a poem by nineteenth-century nationalist poet and icon Jānis Rainis, and they were adopted officially as a national symbol in 1921.<sup>81</sup> A fourth star for Latvia's fourth region, Zemgale, was discussed,<sup>82</sup> but ultimately not added. The symbolism of the ‘three stars’ also became Latvia's national award, the Order of the Three Stars, created in 1924.

The text “Tēvzemei un brīvībai,” for fatherland and freedom, is engraved at the base of the obelisk. Four sculptures encircling the base represent Latvian history and mythology. ‘Mother Latvia’, dressed in traditional Latvian clothing, holding a sword and a

<sup>79</sup> “Kā veidojas mūsu Brīvības piemineklis,” 2575.7.1430, p. 84, Latvijas Valsts Vēstures Arhīvs, Rīga.

<sup>80</sup> Caune, *Brīvības Piemineklis*, 43.

<sup>81</sup> Apsītis, *Brīvības Piemineklis*, 110-1.

<sup>82</sup> Ernests Štalbergs fonds, 95.1.8, p. 2, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Rīga.

shield decorated with a sun design, protects the country at the base of the ‘freedom’ figure. Around the back, the ‘chain-breakers’ (*važu rāvēji*) represented a national awakening, breaking free from the chains of slavery. Another sculpture represented the epic *Lāčplēsis*, an epic poem by Andrejs Pumpurs first published in 1888. Literally “the bear-slayer,” *Lāčplēsis* was vaguely defined in Latvian folklore and became a national hero in Pumpurs’ epic, able to kill a bear with his bare hands and fighting the Black Knight, a metaphor for the German barons. *Lāčplēsis* reappeared in Rainis’s famous play *Uguns un Nakts* (Fire and Night), written in 1905 but only performed in 1911, where he also embodied the struggle between the Latvians and the ruling powers during the 1905 revolution. The battle was unresolved in the play, unlike the poem, symbolizing an unending struggle of the Latvian people.<sup>83</sup> *Lāčplēsis* was elevated to the status of national icon in the new republic, with the celebration of *Lāčplēsis* Day annually, and the *Lāčplēsis* Order given for bravery in the war of independence, becoming another icon of Latvian collective memory.

Vaidelotis, a pagan priest associated with ancient Latvia, holds a *kokle*, a traditional Latvian zither, in his hand. Vaidelotis appears symbolically in folk songs as a sort of Orpheus-figure.<sup>84</sup> Vaidelotis appeared in the *Lāčplēsis* epic as well, giving a message of awakening: “After centuries the nation will awaken, and regain its freedom/ Remembering the famous work of its grandfathers.”<sup>85</sup> Together, the figures showed that “the way to the future lies in the wisdom of the past.”<sup>86</sup>

Below, smaller figures at the corners are the ‘fatherland guards’ (*tēvzeme sargi*), two modern Latvian soldiers together with a medieval soldier with sword; ‘work’, showing

<sup>83</sup> Plakans, *The Latvians*, 107.

<sup>84</sup> Apsītis, *Brīvības Piemineklis*, 136.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Apsītis, *Brīvības Piemineklis*, 135.

<sup>86</sup> Daina Stukuls Eglitis, *Imagining the Nation: History, Modernity, and Revolution in Latvia* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 63.

three men in traditional occupations—a farmer, fisherman and labourer; ‘intellectuals’ (*gara darbnieki*), a scientist and a writer; and ‘family’, a mother, the ‘guardian of the family’: “the Latvian mother who blesses our sons and daughters”<sup>87</sup> (a symbol echoing the central figure in the Brothers’ Cemetery sculpture ensemble), together with two sons.

At the bottom of the obelisk, two reliefs showed important struggles in recent years: one depicting the ‘battle against the Bermontians,’ a pivotal battle between the Latvians and the Bermontians, or West Russian Volunteer Army, a German-supported and -directed army, led by general Pavel Bermont and made up of many Baltic Germans. The defeat of the Bermontians in October 1919 on a train bridge across the Daugava River helped to unify Latvian forces and drive Soviet forces out of Latvia. The second relief represented the 1905 worker uprising against the tsarist authorities. The 1905 revolutions hit Latvia hard, with strikes commencing several days after Bloody Sunday in St. Petersburg, throughout Riga and other cities in Latvia. Besides the strikes, which an estimated 316,000 people participated in, many manors of the Baltic Germans were burnt in Livonia and Kurzeme (Courland). The tsarist authorities responded by instituting martial law and subsequently executing, exiling or imprisoning thousands of Latvians.<sup>88</sup> Latvians, from socialists to liberals to centrists, were infuriated by Russia’s actions, and support grew for the idea of an independent state. These two struggles against historic enemies were enemies later shared by the Soviets.

Around the base of the monument, reliefs on either side showed two other elements of Latvian history. Both depicted a group of figures walking, one a group of Latvian soldiers returning home after the war (the First World War and war of independence), *karavīru*

<sup>87</sup> “Brīvības piemineklis—tautas piemineklis,” 2575.7.1430, Latvijas Valsts Vēstures Arhīvs, Riga.

<sup>88</sup> Plakans, *The Latvians*, 105.

*atgriešanas*, the other showing a procession to the Latvian song festival, a major semi-annual festival founded in the nineteenth century where choirs and dancers perform traditional folk songs, a tradition which is shared with Estonia and Lithuania.

The 1935 unveiling of the monument was a major event. Planned for the national independence day of November 18, people began arriving at the monument from the early hours of the morning, some travelling from across the country. The monument had been covered by scaffolding, also used as an advertising space, during the years of its construction, and was veiled with a fabric covering before the opening. Processions of soldiers, schoolchildren, and national dignitaries wound down Riga's streets towards the monument, with prime minister Kārlis Ulmanis arriving at ten o'clock in the morning to make a speech about Latvian freedom. Zāle and Štalbergs were honoured, other speeches were made, and folk songs and the national anthem were sung. Ulmanis' reign had used other public displays of pomp and circumstance: a July 1934 performance in the same square, a nationalistic production called *Song of Renewal* glorified Ulmanis' coup of May 15, 1934, decorating Riga for several days and organized for an audience of 50,000, with echoes of other contemporary government-directed mass spectacles in Europe, including the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany.<sup>89</sup>

Latvians were immediately proud of their new monument. Travel guides of the 1930s showed the monument prominently, defining it as “symbolical of the age-old longing

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<sup>89</sup> See Silvija Radzobe, “Song of Renewal—And the Tradition of Political Mystery,” in Ausma Cimdiņa and Deniss Hanovs, eds., *Latvia and Latvians: A People and a State in Ideas, Images and Symbols* (Riga: Zinatne, 2010), 95.

of the people for freedom.”<sup>90</sup> Zāle stated, “I want the monument to be one which is understood by everyone and in every age.”<sup>91</sup> With only a few years of life in a free Latvia, the monument quickly became an important symbol for the country, recalling the collective work, history, mythology and patriotism of the interwar era, as well as Ulmanis’ pompous but relatively benign dictatorship. Though nationalism tends these days to be associated more with fascism and extremism, the nationalism of the monument was a positive symbol: “constructed as a symbol of Latvia’s freedom, witness to all the peoples’ struggle and love for their fatherland and its freedom.”<sup>92</sup> The nationalist symbolism of the monument was clearly an important part of the construction. However, the events to follow were also to prove important in inaugurating the monument as a symbol of Latvian identity.

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<sup>90</sup> *Riga Capital of Latvia* (Riga: Galvas Pilsētas Rīgas Valdes Izdevums, 1938), 21.

<sup>91</sup> Caune, *Brīvības Piemineklis*, 214.

<sup>92</sup> Apsītis, *Brīvības Piemineklis*, 9.

### III. Symbolism of the Brīvības Piemineklis, 1940-1991

The idea of “freedom” was clearly a problematic one for Soviet authorities after they occupied Latvia in 1940, and again in 1944 following the Nazi invasion of 1941. Vaidelotis Apsītis notes the irony that, in 1944, the procession of the Soviet ‘liberators’ of Latvia went past the monument.<sup>93</sup> In a country that was no longer free, a monument to freedom took on new significance for its residents, its exiles and its occupiers. In July 1941, when the Nazis invaded Latvia barely a year after Soviet forces occupied the country, many Latvians believed the Nazis would ultimately restore Latvian independence and greeted them as liberators. Mountains of flowers were placed at the Brīvības Piemineklis and many people gathered around it as the German army marched past.<sup>94</sup> However, it quickly became apparent this would not be the case. Though the Nazi authorities did not seem to take any particular interest in the monument itself,<sup>95</sup> the Soviets recognized its potential as a nationalist symbol.

From the earliest days of the Soviet regime, laying flowers at the monument was prohibited. The Soviet newspaper *Cīņa* issued an order on July 1, 1940, just two weeks after the army arrived, that “actions at the Brīvības Piemineklis must stop.” The article noted that the laying of flowers and supporting the old regime had to end. “The time is over for these ‘flower demonstrations’ and good-for-nothing actions.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Apsītis, *Brīvības Piemineklis*, 10.

<sup>94</sup> Jānis Straume, *Latvija Otrajā Pasaules Karā* [Latvia in the Second World War] (Riga: Nacionālais Apgāds, 2007), 23.

<sup>95</sup> A 1985 article in the New York-based immigrant newspaper *Laiks* refers to schoolgirls jailed in 1943 for leaving flowers at the monument; however, this event does not seem to be referenced anywhere else. See “Tēvzemei un brīvībai,” *Laiks*, November 16, 1985, 4.

<sup>96</sup> “Aktīšanas pie Brīvības pieminekļa jabeidz,” *Cīņa*, July 1, 1940, 1.

The so-called ‘flower demonstrations’ continued after 1940, but with consequences for the demonstrators. Flowers laid at the monument were taken away, with those left in the night apparently sometimes reappearing in the morning at the nearby Lenin monument,<sup>97</sup> after its 1950 construction. Those approaching the monument with flowers were taken in by the KGB for questioning.<sup>98</sup> In search of a memory of better times, people were drawn to the site, in spite of the risk. “Much like a church, in search of comfort, people came to the altar,” Vaidelotis Apsītis wrote of the monument in occupied Latvia.<sup>99</sup>

Latvians did not forget that the statue was to serve as “a voice that would not fall silent, that we and future generations will be reminded of our arrival at our shared freedom, that will show us what route we take so that we do not lose this freedom.”<sup>100</sup> The statue served as a constant reminder of this freedom that had been, freedom people hoped would return again. To the Soviets, the idea of freedom was both an ideal and troublesome. The monument became instead a monument to Soviet liberation from imperialism and capitalism, and retained its title of “Freedom Monument.” Yet the name of the boulevard beginning at the end of the square was changed in 1950 from Brīvības iela, Freedom Street, to Ļeņiņa iela, Lenin Street, suggesting in the official order that the previous name was “old and inappropriate,”<sup>101</sup> though the name of the monument and square remained unchanged. The street name was not very old, either; it had been Aleksandra iela, or Alexander Street,

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<sup>97</sup> Stukuls Eglitis, *Imagining the Nation*, 241.

<sup>98</sup> Caune, *Brīvības Piemineklis*, 217.

<sup>99</sup> In Caune, *Brīvības Piemineklis*, 63.

<sup>100</sup> Brīvības Piemineklis committee, “Brīvības piemineklis—tautas piemineklis,” 2575.7.1430, p. 86, Latvijas Valsts Vēstures Arhīvs, Rīga.

<sup>101</sup> Stukuls Eglitis, *Imagining the Nation*, 135.

for the tsar, in the tsarist era, before becoming Brīvības iela in 1923. Under the Nazis between 1941 and 1944, it had been Adolf-Hitler-Strasse.

The Soviet authorities reinvented an ideology for the monument. The sculpture lacked explicitly anti-Soviet elements and could thus be re-imagined as a Latvian-Soviet artwork. One relief depicted the worker uprising of 1905. Though this event had actually led to a increase in Latvian nationalism and call for independence, it could also be interpreted solely in the context of the Russian 1905-1907 revolution and movement for an end to tsarism. The relief of the ‘battle against the Bermontians,’ a German-supported volunteer army formed to fight the Bolsheviks in the territory of the Baltics and comprised of Baltic and other Germans, could also be seen in the context of a Bolshevik struggle and victory. The freedom figure became Mother Russia. Sculptures of ‘the family’ and ‘workers’ were sufficiently in line with Soviet ideology. Elements from Latvian folk culture, including the epic hero Lāčplēsis and singers walking to the Latvian song festival were sufficiently neutral.

The statue became a symbol of the ‘liberation’ from what Soviet books referred to as “bourgeois Latvia” (the interwar republic), Latvia’s supposedly consensual decision to allow a Soviet takeover in 1940, and the subsequent rigged elections that cemented Soviet power. The three stars were described by guides from Intourist, the Soviet travel agency, as representing the “three Soviet Baltic republics.”<sup>102</sup> Despite these changes by the Soviets, the monument retained the original meaning for Latvian people, discussed domestically and privately, and “Ļeņiņa iela” remained “Brīvības iela” in common parlance among Latvians. Nonetheless, authorities remained apprehensive about its power as a symbol of

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<sup>102</sup> Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. See “Brīvības piemineklis—baltiešiem ideāliem?” *Laiks*, July 19, 1975, 2.

independence. Vaidelotis Apsītis notes that it is difficult to ascertain Soviet attitudes towards the monument. Few Soviet documents are preserved or available today. Arvīds Pelše, party secretary of the Latvian communist party between 1959 and 1966, expressed his regret that the monument had not been destroyed during the war.<sup>103</sup> Soviet attitudes were contradictory, a combination of prosecuting celebration of the monument, spreading their own disinformation about it, and planning Soviet events there—why, for instance, Apsītis asks, was the 47<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Soviet Latvia celebrated at the monument?<sup>104</sup>

Some evidence of other activity at the monument also exists. In a welcome address to the 1973 Latvian song festival in Cleveland, Ilgvars Spilners, a journalist and worker with the World Association of Free Latvians, mentioned a “spontaneous nationalist demonstration through folk songs” at the 1973 Riga song festival (the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Latvian song festival) by young people gathering at the Brīvības Piemineklis singing folk songs, noting that the Lāčplēsis sculpture was “still wearing an oak crown the next day.”<sup>105</sup> Spilners’ address and other documents make no mention of negative repercussions after this; the song festival was an official celebration, though it lasted only two days instead of the traditionally longer festival, and Soviet-era festivals had to include Soviet songs in their repertoire.

For Latvians in Riga, the monument held dual meanings of freedom under an independent state and a Soviet-propagated story of freedom that prosecuted carrying flowers. For those outside Latvia, either exiled to the west or sent to Siberia, the statue

<sup>103</sup> Caune, *Brīvības Piemineklis*, 67.

<sup>104</sup> In Caune, *Brīvības Piemineklis*, 68-9.

<sup>105</sup> A traditional wreath of oak leaves worn during the summer solstice and other celebrations. Ilgvars Spilners, Welcome address to 1973 Cleveland Song Festival, 2219.1v.67, p. 138, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga.

carried the meanings of a memory of a free and independent Latvia, as well as a symbol of Latvia's future freedom that they were struggling for. A collection of letters from Siberia in the 1950s, now held in the collection of the Occupation Museum in Riga, shows postcards and greeting cards with drawings or photographs of the monument.<sup>106</sup>

The image of the monument was a potent and prolific symbol for the diaspora, known in Latvian as *trimdinieki*, literally 'exiles.' An estimated 200-240,000 Latvians escaped to the west between 1940 and 1944.<sup>107</sup> Postcards, calendars, framed pictures or other items depicting the monument could often be found displayed in Latvian immigrants' homes. The image of the monument was at once both a picture of a common site at "home" (whether it was the actual homeland of older immigrants, or the abstract imagined "home" of their children), and a symbol of the independent state they had left in an actual and symbolic sense. For many of the Latvian exiles, the continued existence of the monument was, in itself, a sign of the strength of the Latvian people and their continued struggle against the Soviet occupation. In November 1945, Latvian exile Jānis Juškēvics had a miniature replica of the monument, at a height of two metres, built in a refugee camp in Zedelgem, Belgium, for the November 18 independence day.<sup>108</sup>

The Latvian exile communities around the world often used images of the monument, and the exile press reported on the condition of the monument. Exile organizations actively worked from the west for Latvian independence, keeping Latvian culture alive, publicizing issues in Latvia and petitioning their own governments to take a

<sup>106</sup> Caune, *Brīvības Pieminēklis*, 70-1.

<sup>107</sup> Ieva Zake, *American Latvians* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2010), 28.

<sup>108</sup> Caune, *Brīvības Pieminēklis*, 66

stance against the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states. Immediately after the Second World War, organizations petitioned governments and the United Nations for assistance in obtaining freedom for the Baltics, though these early attempts were met with ambivalence in the cold war. The World Association of Free Latvians (Pasaules Brīvo Latviešu Apvienība, or PBLA), an umbrella organization composed of the Latvian associations of areas of major immigration, including the United States, Canada, Australia, South America and Europe (where England, Sweden and West Germany had the largest communities) was the largest of these organizations. The Daugavas Vanagi Latvian Welfare Fund (Hawks of the Daugava, originally formed in 1945 as a support organization for former Latvian soldiers in refugee camps), with chapters in several countries, was also important. Exile newspapers and newsletters worked to provide Latvians abroad with Latvian-language information about their homeland. As a symbol of the shared past of the exiles, a space of memory of a place that was now inaccessible, the monument often appeared in the publications of these media and organizations, as a cover image for information leaflets, a photograph or illustration marking the celebration of national holidays, or as a logo. Ilgvars Spilners, later an editor of the New York-based immigrant newspaper *Laiks*, hosted a radio show based out of Madrid called “Tēvzemei un Brīvībai,” echoing the inscription on the Brīvības Piemineklis.

The immigrant press made sure people were kept up to date on the monument and its changing symbolism. A 1950 article in the North American newspaper *Laiks* asked “What has happened with the Brīvības Piemineklis in Riga?” Rumours had emerged in Germany that the monument no longer stood in its place, and the Soviet newspaper *Cīņa* had published an edited image of the statue, removed from the base, without the

inscription “For Fatherland and Freedom,” and holding a single Soviet star instead of the three gold stars. The *Laiks* article reassured Latvians the monument was in fact untouched.<sup>109</sup> Another 1975 article reported that a Swedish journalist visiting had been told the three stars represented the “dream” of the Baltic peoples to “voluntarily” join the Soviet Union.<sup>110</sup> In 1985, celebrating the monument’s fiftieth anniversary, *Laiks* mocked the fictions propagated by the Soviets and reported that Soviet authorities still discussed tearing down this symbol of an “unfree time.”<sup>111</sup> A 1980 report from the World Association of Free Latvians mentioned that “fraudulently recorded Latvian history [of the interwar] is complemented by a planned destruction of physical historical witness—monuments, memorials, historical sites, signs, painting, books, cemeteries [sic] and churches.”<sup>112</sup>

Other articles reproduced images and quotations on the monument from Latvian writers and politicians in the 1930s, and lamented exiles’ lack of a freedom monument commemorating their struggles; one obituary from the 1950s described a man as “the commander of the last change of the guard at the Brīvības Pieminēklis.”<sup>113</sup> Articles about the monument in the exile press and activity at the monument in Riga (coupled with heightened security by Soviet police) both proliferated around important dates like the former independence day and anniversaries of deportations, showing that the monument’s symbolism remained similarly important to both groups of Latvians, spread out across the globe.

<sup>109</sup> “Kas Noticis ar Brīvības Pieminēkli Rīgā?” *Laiks*, May 13, 1950, 6.

<sup>110</sup> “Brīvības Pieminēklis—‘Baltiešu ideāliem’” [Brīvības Pieminēklis—‘For Baltic ideals’], *Laiks*, July 19, 1975, 2.

<sup>111</sup> “Tēvzemei un Brīvībai” [For Fatherland and Freedom], *Laiks*, November 16, 1985, 4.

<sup>112</sup> PBLA, “Soviet Union’s Compliance with Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe,” n.d. (c. 1980), 2197.1.14, p. 89-90, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga.

<sup>113</sup> “Miris virsnieks, kas komandēja pēdējo sardzes maiņu pie Brīvības Pieminēkļa,” *Laiks*, February 22, 1956, 6.

Restoration of the monument was also a topic of interest for the Latvian exiles. The first restoration of the monument was undertaken by the Soviet culture ministry in 1980-1. The statue was suffering from structural damage and water damage, as well as needing cleaning from dirt and pigeon droppings. Correspondence in the early 1980s between two members of the World Association of Free Latvians, Aristīds Lambergis and Jūlijs Kadels, in enthusiastically examined documents obtained from the Soviet Union about the restoration. However, the documents left the PBLA's main question unanswered: *why* was the restoration of this monument undertaken by the Soviet Union? Lambergis inquired whether it was possible to obtain more documents describing this, though it was evidently not.<sup>114</sup> Articles in the exile press also described the restoration process.

In the post-Soviet era, exiles returning to Latvia remembered the power of the monument's imagery as they grew up elsewhere. Former president Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, who spent her adolescence and adult life in Canada until returning to Latvia in 1998, spoke at length about the monument's symbolism for Latvians at the celebration of the 2001 restoration, noting that, through all changes of occupiers and citizenry, "the monument stayed."<sup>115</sup> Engineer Raimonds Bulte, who had lived in exile and returned to Latvia in the 1990s, headed the committee and fundraising for the 2001 restoration because he "saw the symbols of the independent Latvian state as talismans during his decades in exile."<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Letter from Aristīds Lambergis to Jūlijs Kadels, PBLA president, May 4, 1981, 2917.1.40, p. 138, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Rīga.

<sup>115</sup> Caune, *Brīvības Piemineklis*, 181.

<sup>116</sup> Caune, *Brīvības Piemineklis*, 217.

After travel to Latvia became possible for those living in the west, seeing the monument became (and remains) an important marker for immigrants on their first visit to Latvia. Though nationalist ideology was prolific both in the members of the diaspora and the institutions they established to teach the Latvian language, history, songs and folk dancing to their children and grandchildren, as a small and distant place, the country often seemed an abstract notion to younger generations; seeing the monument in person showed that the Latvia of family stories was a genuine place, the movement for freedom a real thing. Two Latvian-Canadian women recalled their first impressions of the monument:

I remember...coming out of Hotel Riga where I was staying...I suddenly looked over those trees and saw Mother Latvia's statue, the 'Freedom Monument.' And I thought: My God, this is real, you know, this is really real and it's better than I thought it would be....And that really changed my life, so that now I became devoted to the cause, ultimately, the cause of freedom and independence.

Another said, "I found it difficult to express how meaningful it was...to actually be in the special places that I had only heard about, such as Brīvības Pieminekļis."<sup>117</sup>

Exiles saw the monument and its survival as a definitive symbol that Soviet repressions could not crush the spirit of the Latvians. "Needless to say, the occupying Soviet government takes little comfort in this defiant symbol of national independence. Yet the monument still stands—a mute reminder of the continued hope and courage of the Latvian people," wrote one exile-published book on Latvia in the 1980s.<sup>118</sup>

By the late 1980s, the Latvian Soviet press had also become open enough to publish information about the monument, printing articles in 1987 and 1988 about the monument's

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<sup>117</sup> Ilze Arielle Matiss, "Revisiting Second-Generation Latvian-Canadian Women's Stories About Lives in Changing Contexts," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 36.1 (2005), 111-2.

<sup>118</sup> Vito Vitauts Šīmanis, ed., *Latvia* (St. Charles, Illinois: The Book Latvia Inc., 1984), 44.

construction and Kārlis Zāle's work (particularly surrounding the 1988 100<sup>th</sup> jubilee of Zāle's birth). These articles no longer reproduced the earlier Soviet fictions about the monument, but tended to stick to blander historical and artistic details and avoid any nationalistic associations or explanation of the reason for the monument's construction, focussing on Zāle's body of work and his interest in "Lenin's monumental propaganda plan." Latvians remaining in Latvia also worried about the condition of the monument in the late 1980s, as the earlier restoration had not been extensive and damage to the monument continued after 1981, particularly from traffic and the adjacent tram stop.<sup>119</sup>

The Latvian and Soviet symbolism thus managed to, conflictingly, coexist. However, in itself, spreading disinformation about the monument, renaming the street and telling lies to tourists does not seem to fully explain why the Soviets let the monument survive.

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<sup>119</sup> Georgs Baumanis, "Kā Nosargāt Brīvības Pieminekli?" [How to protect the Brīvības Pieminekli?], *Rīgas Balss*, August 3, 1989.

## IV. Why was the Monument Preserved?

Judging from Soviet-era sources, the main Soviet policy on the Freedom Monument appears to have been ignoring it. The monument's omission from encyclopedias, travel guides and other works about Latvia is striking, given its physical prominence and prominence in these types of materials in the interwar period. Soviet-era books often included a photograph of the monument without explanation; for example, in one 1960s book of photographs of Latvia, a picture of the monument sits next to a picture of the Lenin statue with the caption "Riga's main street bears Lenin's great name."<sup>120</sup> Despite the lack of information, and despite the laws essentially prohibiting visits to the monument, it still survived the years between 1940 and 1991.<sup>121</sup> Why did this happen?

I propose that the reasons for preservation were fourfold. Firstly, there is the role of the Latvian people themselves and Soviet policy towards the republics: official policy did encourage some amount of 'national' culture, and policy towards the Baltic republics varied somewhat from the rest of the union. Latvians were fond of the monument, and support for the Soviet regime was already weak in the 1940s; officials in the Latvian SSR were not only Russians but also Latvians. Secondly, there was a rewriting of history, propagated by authorities and tourist guides, that gave quite different roles and meanings to the elements of the monument. Thirdly, the monument's creators Kārlis Zāle and Ernests Štalbergs were 'rehabilitated' for the Soviet system by rewriting their biographies to emphasize Soviet ideology, and through Štalbergs' work on Soviet architecture projects in the 1950s, most

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<sup>120</sup> *Dzintarzeme Latvija* [Latvia, Land of Amber] (Riga: Latvijas Valsts Izdevniecība, 1960), 8-9.

<sup>121</sup> As a contemporary tourist brochure notes, "largely unscathed, the only exceptions being a stray artillery grenade...during the Second World War and bullets fired during the Barricade Days in 1991." ("The Freedom Monument." Live Rīga/ Rīgas Pieminekļu aģentūra, n.d.)

notably Riga's Lenin monument. Finally, there is the role of Riga-born Soviet sculptor Vera Mukhina, popularly credited in Latvian history for 'saving' the monument, who told Soviet authorities the monument should not be pulled down.

Soviet policy towards the Baltic states differed from the policy towards the other republics of the USSR. By 1940, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia had experienced successful periods of independence and two generations had grown up in the independent countries, unlike in the other republics that were original members of the Soviet Union. When the Soviet army forcibly invaded the countries in 1940, the regime had few supporters. Due to both history and geography, the Baltics were regarded as more 'western' and 'European' than the rest of the union. Official policies were contradictory: in some areas the countries were allowed more freedom, while in others repressions tried to compensate for a lack of popular support for the regime; for instance, deportations in the 1940s were widespread and harsh, while in the cultural sphere, Baltic film studios and theatres had a reputation for being freer than other Soviet cultural institutions. However, much of this cultural reputation came from material produced in, or youth subcultures of, the 1960s and later, notably only some time after Stalin's death in 1953. The administration of the Latvian SSR included both ethnic Russians and Latvians; Soviet officials attempted to have administrators sent from Moscow, but entirely replacing the pre-Soviet administration was impossible, and loyal Latvian communists with Latvian language skills who had fled during or after the First World War had mostly disappeared in Stalin's purges of the 1930s.<sup>122</sup>

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet policy of *korenizatsiia*, or nativization, sought to endear the regime to the non-Russian populations by delivering a message "national in

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<sup>122</sup> Plakans, *The Latvians*, 145.

form, socialist in content.” This included creating propaganda in the native languages of the republics, developing native-language education where Russian was taught as a second language, printing newspapers and journals in the local languages, incorporating the local elites into government, and developments in the cultural sphere. The latter included the development of national film studios, operas, literature and epics; themes were normally Soviet-friendly versions of national tales. By the 1940s, Soviet policies across the union had changed, but policies in the Baltics, facing the same problem of the 1920s of garnering support from an apprehensive populace, retained some features of the earlier nativization policy.<sup>123</sup>

Terry Martin describes the Soviet Union under nativization as an “affirmative action empire,” using the term used by the American civil rights movement, where the majority ethnicity accepts an unequal position in order to compensate for past wrongs. The early Soviet policy represented an attempt to compensate for the oppression of tsarism by giving equal or elevated status to minority cultural and linguistic groups, but these ideas had often proved idealistic and impractical to implement. Nationalism was a “masking ideology,” a way of deceiving the population into supporting the Soviets; in practice, the authorities remained suspicious of nationalism.<sup>124</sup> It was a strategy to avoid the idea of empire:<sup>125</sup> Russian ‘chauvinism’ was seen as greater threat than Kirghiz nationalism. Nativization was full of both extremes and contradictions; Roland Grigor Suny notes the process of ‘cultural development’ assistance for ‘backwards’ peoples as a distinctly imperial

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<sup>123</sup> Mertelsmann, *The Sovietization of the Baltic States*, 116-7.

<sup>124</sup> Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 4.

<sup>125</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 80.

one.<sup>126</sup> Francine Hirsch argues that European ideas of “nation” and “empire” changed form in the Soviet Union; ethnographic information was collected by the Soviets but this was used to remove oppression, not validate it.<sup>127</sup>

However, despite differences in the Baltics, postwar policy across the USSR reflected Russian patriotism after the war and a focus on Russian as the dominant language. In Latvia, the Soviets did not face the immense challenge of educating and indoctrinating a widespread, primarily illiterate population speaking languages that had never been codified, as they had in other republics in the 1920s. They inherited well-developed educational systems in the Baltics, and the key problem was creating support in an unsympathetic population, rather than more basic modernization. Consequently, elements of Latvian culture were retained, while Russification occurred in schools and in the language of everyday life. Soviet authorities were fond of cultural festivals and other elements reflecting the multiethnic union and that which could display “achievements of socialism and national pride at the same time,” like song festivals or monumental sculpture.<sup>128</sup> The Baltics were known throughout the union, as well as outside, for being more ‘western’, and had greater access to western culture—both due to geographical proximity and to a lack of attention paid by the authorities in Moscow. Romuald Misiunas and Rein Taagepera note:

Greater cultural latitude prevailed in the Baltic republics than in Russia, due partly to a lack of scrutiny by the world press....The lack of knowledge of the Baltic languages, both by the Moscow bureaucrats and the Western newsmen, and the infrequent visits by the latter to the Baltic republics insulated these cultures from scrutiny and thus lessened their politicization.<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Suny and Martin, *A State of Nations*, 10-11.

<sup>127</sup> Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 4.

<sup>128</sup> Mertelsmann, *The Sovietization of the Baltic States*, 14.

<sup>129</sup> Romuald Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence 1940-1990* (London: Hurst and Company, 1993), 179.

The cultural traditions of the Baltics were well-developed, and new developments in Latvia were limited to the creation of a national film studio soon after the installation of Soviet power, changes to the education systems changing schools to Russian- and mixed Latvian-Russian schools and the promotion of Russian language teaching and adaptation of curricula to fit Soviet ideology. Most of the cultural institutions established in other republics in the early years of the Soviet Union already existed in Latvia. Soviet cultural agencies in the 1920s were interested in creating or promoting national epics, but Latvia had a national epic already, the popular *Lāčplēsis*.

The original text of Andrejs Pumpurs' *Lāčplēsis* was an allegory for the struggle between the Latvian peasants and the Baltic Germans. As the Baltic Germans were representative of the bourgeois imperial order, this depiction was unproblematic for the Soviets. A Soviet-era version of the epic, in which the Latvians find freedom through socialism, was written by Jānis Sudrabkalns and published in 1947, making the epic another casualty of Soviet reinterpretation. As in the interwar period, several Soviet-era businesses and institutions were also named after *Lāčplēsis*, most notably one of Latvia's most successful kolkhozes, founded in 1948 near Lielvārde, southeast of Riga. The *Lāčplēsis* tale was thus co-opted by the regime and its prominence in the monument's imagery was sufficiently Soviet-friendly.<sup>130</sup>

Besides the cultural policy, support of the Soviet regime was already very weak after the war, when Latvian resistance movements continued and large numbers of the so-called 'Forest Brothers', nationalist guerrilla fighters from Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, were still

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<sup>130</sup> Ausma Cimdiņa, "The Genesis and Perception of a National Hero: Andrejs Pumpurs and *Lāčplēsis*," in Cimdiņa and Hanovs, *Latvia and Latvians*, 45-8.

active and in hiding in the forests of all three countries. The destruction of a favoured local landmark would not have been popular. Though harsher repressions than the destruction of a monument occurred, maintaining the monument could have been seen as a relatively benign concession to Latvians; the potential reaction that destroying the monument could cause may not have been worth it in the 1940s and 1950s.

Spreading misinformation about the monument was another story, however. None of the sculptural elements were explicitly anti-Soviet. The imagery used drew chiefly on Latvian mythology and struggles against tsarist or German enemies. The 1905 workers' uprising was a suitably Soviet topic, and the 'battle against the Bermontians' was a struggle against an army that was supported by Germany and aimed to defeat the Bolsheviks. Figures from Latvian mythology and cultural traditions, like the Lāčplēsis figure, Vaidelotis and the song festival, were in line with the Soviet policy of allowing certain elements of national traditions. The characters from Latvian folklore and history also represented the elevation of peasant culture that had been the goal of earlier generations of Latvian nation-builders; as the heritage of the peasantry rather than the bourgeoisie, this imagery was also acceptably Soviet.

Many of the sculptures were ambiguous enough that they could satisfy multiple sources. 'Work' and 'family' were satisfactory subjects for Soviet art, agreeably showing different types of labourers and a mother raising her sons for the country. The 'Chain-breakers' might have been breaking free from any system. Even the relief of the return of soldiers after the First World War could be interpreted in a pro-Soviet sense, as the Latvian riflemen (*strēlnieki*), originally formed as an independent unit of Latvian soldiers under the tsar during the war, were important to the Bolshevik victory. The female figures of 'Mother

Latvia' and 'Freedom' were neutral enough to be given new meanings, of which there seem to have been several.

Various versions of falsified history of the monument appear to have existed, and not all of these were consistent with what was actually depicted on the monument. Some versions suggested the monument was erected after the war in appreciation of the Soviet 'liberation' of the Baltic states. The 'Freedom' figure was described as 'Mother Russia', and said to be holding stars for the 'three Baltic Soviet republics.'<sup>131</sup> Guides from the Soviet Intourist agency seem to have given assorted definitions of the monument's meaning, particularly ones representing a Baltic solidarity and in line with the official history that the Baltic states opted to voluntarily and unanimously join the Soviet Union. Daina Stukuls Eglitis notes a story that some Intourist guides told tourists that the 'Freedom' figure was Valentina Tereshkova, the first Soviet woman in space.<sup>132</sup> The idea of freedom and the Latvian peoples' ancient longing for freedom were repeated in official narratives, but this freedom was now achieved through Soviet power.<sup>133</sup> An official Intourist stance on the monument was not found, though annual guides suggested answers to give to tourists asking unsavoury questions; for instance, one tourist asking about "occupation" was told of "Soviet revolutions" in Latvia in 1905, 1917, 1919 and 1940.<sup>134</sup>

If a more or less correct version of the history was given, the monument was then condemned as a relic of "bourgeois Latvia," the Soviet name for the interwar republic. A 1965 Riga guidebook printed in German notes that Ļeniņa iela was the "beautiful linden

<sup>131</sup> Apsītis, *Brīvības Piemineklis*, 12.

<sup>132</sup> Stukuls Eglitis, *Imagining the Nation*, 186.

<sup>133</sup> "Brīvības Piemineklis—'Baltiešu ideāliem'" [Brīvības Piemineklis—'for Baltic ideals'], *Laiks*, July 19, 1975, 2.

<sup>134</sup> "Report of Information-Propaganda Work Department, 1963," 222.1.13, p. 41, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Rīga.

avenue of the Lenin monument” and showed a photograph with the monument in the distance, without mentioning it in the text. The history section of the guidebook also noted that Riga became Soviet in January 1919,<sup>135</sup> before the “national bourgeois” took over less than a year later.<sup>136</sup> Earlier works published in the monument were in closed files in archives and libraries.<sup>137</sup>

The Soviets also, unsurprisingly, ignored the reverence with which the Latvian government had treated it. A trolleybus route around the monument had been discussed in the original plans but was discarded, and the surrounding area was a pedestrian zone. However, the Soviets had no such reservations and constructed a route around the monument that operated between 1950 and 1990.<sup>138</sup> This traffic would later be the cause of structural damage to the monument; a tram stop was located next to the monument, and other vehicle traffic was heavy, given the street’s position as a central thoroughfare. The traffic route had a double role of causing damage and complicating access to the monument for individuals and especially larger groups.

As noted earlier, a partial restoration of the monument was conducted by the Soviet culture ministry in 1980-1981, but the exact reasons for the restoration remain unclear; it appears the orders had come from Moscow.<sup>139</sup> Experts consulted for the restoration warned that vibrations from the trams and other traffic would continue to cause damage and the adjacent tram stop should be moved; however, this advice was not taken and rerouting transit did not occur until 1990. This restoration was also incomplete: further work had been

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<sup>135</sup> In 1919, a short-lived and failed Soviet government, led by Pēteris Stučka, celebrated as a hero in the Soviet era, was among several political parties competing for control of the country during the war of independence.

<sup>136</sup> *Rīga* (Riga: Liesma, 1965), 2.

<sup>137</sup> Apsītis, *Brīvības Pieminekļis*, 11.

<sup>138</sup> Caune, *Brīvības Pieminekļis*, 18.

<sup>139</sup> Caune, *Brīvības Pieminekļis*, 117.

planned for 1982, but never occurred. The immigrant newspaper *Laiks* suggested that in 1982 there was still discussion of tearing down the monument.<sup>140</sup> However, in 1983, the monument was accepted into a Soviet registry of important monuments eligible for state protection.<sup>141</sup>

The monument's creators were reimagined along with the monument itself. Kārlis Zāle was noted either for his more neutral works, or for his monumental sculpture as a sign of his participation in Soviet monumental propaganda even while Latvia was independent. An encyclopedia of 1970 does not list the monument, but does mention it among a list of Kārlis Zāle's constructions in an entry for him, noting more importantly that Zāle was "already participating in realizing Lenin's *monumental propaganda plan* in his student years in Petrograd."<sup>142</sup> Zāle passed away during the war, but Ernests Štalbergs' biography followed an interesting route during and after the war years up until his death in 1958.

Details of Štalbergs' biography during the war years are minimal. A 1966 Soviet-era summary of Štalbergs' work in his archival file at the Latvian State Archives (Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs) stresses his studies in Russia and mentions the Brīvības Piemineklis in a list of works like a sanatorium and a student cloakroom. A 1992 Latvian version notes that many documents were not shown in the archives in the Soviet era.<sup>143</sup> It is unclear what happened to Štalbergs between 1941 and 1945. A letter from a student in 1941 shows that he considered emigrating: after a visit, the student was disturbed by Štalbergs' depression and thoughts of

<sup>140</sup> "Tēvzemei un Brīvībai" [For Fatherland and Freedom], *Laiks*, November 16, 1985, 4.

<sup>141</sup> Apsītis, *Brīvības Piemineklis*, 16. The monument also gained UNESCO protection in 1991.

<sup>142</sup> "Zāle, Kārlis," *Latvijas PSR Mazā Enciklopēdija*, vol. 3 (Rīga, Zinatne, 1970), 722.

<sup>143</sup> M. Pavila, Ernests Štalbergs fonds summary, 1992, 95.1, p. 1, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Rīga.

leaving, and wrote that Latvians should stay and work together.<sup>144</sup> Nonetheless, few documents of his are preserved from this time (in an otherwise large archival file).

Štalbergs taught in Petrograd for several years following the Russian Revolution before he returned to Latvia, and continued corresponding with architect colleagues in Russia after leaving. Between 1944 and 1946 he was the dean of the architecture faculty at the University of Latvia; between 1946 and 1951, he was the director of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic Academy of Sciences Construction and Architecture institute. He wrote several articles over this time and made statements condemning “constructivism” and the “cultivation of bourgeois methods in students’ work” at the university,<sup>145</sup> and promoting Soviet methods in architecture in an October 1947 article in the journal *Literatūra un Māksla* (Literature and Art) on the thirtieth anniversary of the October revolution.

In 1949-1950, Štalbergs served as the architect for a competing statue built one block up the street: Riga’s Lenin statue. Discussions on the fate of the Freedom Monument in the late 1940s had considered replacing the monument with a statue of Stalin as well, though this idea was discarded.<sup>146</sup> Štalbergs’ designs for housing projects in the late 1940s were never built; work on the Lenin statue may have been an opportunity for him to rehabilitate his image. The Lenin statue resembled the thousands of others across the eastern bloc, though a frieze around the base recalled traditional Latvian folk motifs, and Lenin’s name was engraved in the Latvian spelling (*Leņiņš*). The immigrant newspaper

<sup>144</sup> Letter from A. Borbala to E. Štalbergs, August 28, 1941, 95.1.364, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga.

<sup>145</sup> M. Pavila, Ernests Štalbergs fond summary, 15.

<sup>146</sup> Caune, *Brīvības Pieminekļis*, 216.

*Laiks* noted the positioning of the Freedom Monument and Lenin with their backs to each other. “What can we take from this?” the article asked. “This is also a symbol!”<sup>147</sup>

Sculptor Vera Mukhina (Latvian *Muhina*) has been credited in Latvian history with saving the monument. Mukhina was the creator of the famous *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* sculpture exhibited at the Soviet pavilion at the 1937 World’s Fair in Paris. Thirty-five metres tall, the iconic sculpture was later used as the logo for Mosfilm, the Soviet film agency.<sup>148</sup> Mukhina travelled through Riga in 1937 on her way to install this work and would have had the opportunity to see the Freedom Monument, but Vaidelotis Apsītis notes it is unlikely it attracted special attention for her at the time.<sup>149</sup> As the creator of one of the most recognizable Soviet artworks, Mukhina’s opinion would have carried weight with the Soviet authorities in the 1940s.

Mukhina was born to a merchant family in Riga in 1889, but did not spend much of her life there. Her mother died before she was two, and the family relocated shortly after to Kiev. She studied in Moscow, travelling to Paris and Italy before the war to complete her education, and returning to Russia to work as a sculptor. She and sculptor Kārlis Zāle were acquainted in St. Petersburg earlier and both had an interest in monumental sculpture. Mukhina was interested in portraiture and the human form. Mukhina’s early works used recognizable imagery, rejecting cubist and futurist influences; earlier works used the depiction of peasants as a “heroic type.”<sup>150</sup> She was a member of the Soviet sculptors’ organization, and in 1936, won a competition to work on the sculpture for the Soviet

<sup>147</sup> “Tēvzemei un Brīvībai” [For Fatherland and Freedom], *Laiks*, November 16, 1985, 4.

<sup>148</sup> See appendix, page 91.

<sup>149</sup> Caune, *Brīvības Pieminekļis*, 68.

<sup>150</sup> M. N. Yablonskaya, ed., *Women Artists of Russia’s New Age* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 232-3.

pavilion at the 1937 fair. Mukhina's works, realistically depicting people and workers in various jobs, were a perfect example of the socialist realism of the 1930s, and Mukhina appears to have been a regime-favoured artist throughout her career. However, none of her other works came close to rivalling the *Worker and Kolkhoz Woman* in fame.

Mukhina was sent to Latvia by the Soviet Union to make contacts with Latvian artists; Viktors Grečovs notes this as taking place in 1945, after the war, in a work on Mukhina,<sup>151</sup> while Vaidelotis Apsītis believes it was approximately October or November of 1944, following the second Soviet occupation.<sup>152</sup> She had known Zāle already, and met other Latvian artists on this trip, including Teodors Zaļkalns, one of the other artists who had been invited to submit a design for the Freedom Monument. She appreciated Zāle's style and the Freedom Monument. Soviet discussion on the monument's fate was ongoing at the time, and Mukhina explained that the monument did not show German imagery, but ancient Latvian symbols, created before the installation of Ulmanis' dictatorship, and that the monument was an important work that should not be destroyed. Mukhina was later given a summer house in Jurmala, outside Riga, by Vilis Lācis, a participant in the meetings and government worker, in appreciation for her efforts.<sup>153</sup> Vaidelotis Apsītis notes, speaking with Mukhina's son Vsevolod Zamkov, who accompanied her to Riga, that it is hard to tell how much of an impact Mukhina had on the decision; conversations were unofficial, but seem to have taken place with several Soviet officials; the people making decisions about the monument were not specialists in art or architecture and took

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<sup>151</sup> Viktors Grečovs, *Vera Muhina 1889-1953* (Riga: Vera Muhinas Fonds, 2004), 14.

<sup>152</sup> Caune, *Brīvības Pieminēklis*, 68.

<sup>153</sup> Grečovs, *Vera Muhina*, 15.

Mukhina's opinion as that of a specialist in the field. Unfortunately, the official wartime-era documents were not preserved.<sup>154</sup>

Similar themes in the work of both Zāle and Mukhina are visible. Though he created the monument in an independent Latvia, Zāle's Soviet-era inclusion in the canon of socialist realism would not have seemed unconvincing based purely on visual evidence, and Zāle obviously would have been in contact with Russia and other Soviet artists working in related styles during his years in Russia. It is impossible to say what his own opinion on the matter would have been; Zāle died in 1942 in Inčukalns, outside Riga, aged 53, apparently of natural causes, and was buried at the Brothers' Cemetery.<sup>155</sup>

The Freedom Monument was not the only sculpture of Zāle's that fell victim to Soviet historiography. The Brothers' Cemetery, on the outskirts of Riga, was also a gathering place for nationalists, especially on holidays like the Day of the Dead and the Latvian independence day. A 1964 document referred to the cemetery as a place attracting "aspiring nationalistic elements" where people laid flowers and candles at the graves of Latvian nationalists, and the site of several "reckless nationalistic escapades," including throwing acid to burn a red panel that was apparently placed over the "statue of the so-called 'mourning Mother Latvia.'"<sup>156</sup> The cemetery may have been an easier gathering place in earlier years, being more difficult to police in its size and location far from the city centre. Vaidelotis Apsītis also notes several adaptations the Soviets made to the cemetery,

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<sup>154</sup> Caune, *Brīvības Pieminēklis*, 68.

<sup>155</sup> Details of Zāle's death are not available, but given the location, burial place and timing during the Nazi occupation (which took a minimal interest in the monument), and lack of any evidence or speculation to the contrary, it was presumably not suspicious.

<sup>156</sup> "To the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Latvia comrade A. Voss: On the Warriors' Cemetery in Riga," July 27, 1964, in State Archives of Latvia, eds., *Policy of Occupation Powers in Latvia 1939-1991* (Riga: Nordik, 1999), 504.

including changing the text “1915-1920” to “1915-1945” (thereby changing the dedication to the First World War and independence war to the two world wars), describing the cemetery as dedicated to the Soviet-supporting Latvian riflemen, including discussing an official name change, though it was decided “brothers” (*brāļi*) was sufficiently neutral; and “Mother Latvia” was to be called “Homeland Mother” (*Māte Dzimtene*), “with ‘homeland’ understood as the Soviet Union.”<sup>157</sup> At the cemetery as well as at other national memorial sites, Soviet officials installed “artificial barriers” like bushes and garbage dumps around the graves of prominent Latvian nationalists; surveillance at all these sites was increased around national holidays.<sup>158</sup>

The idea of nationalism as a masking ideology can help explain some of the eccentricities of Soviet policy towards the Latvian monument: while it met some of the requirements of a Soviet national cultural symbol, the authorities remained suspicious of it. Avoidance or rewriting history only managed to get Soviet officials so far, however. Despite their best efforts, the monument still stood 41 metres tall at the centre of the city, the interwar years and the construction campaign not forgotten by the older generations, and, ultimately, some Latvians would choose to remember it.

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<sup>157</sup> Vaidelotis Apsītis, *Brāļu Kapi* (Riga: Zinatne, 1995), 14-15.

<sup>158</sup> PBLA, “Report on the Implementation of the Helsinki Final Act of August 1, 1975 in Soviet Occupied Latvia,” Rockville, Maryland, 1980, 300.5.170, box 58, folder 1, p. 43, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

## V. Resistance Activity at the Monument

The first public protest at the monument happened just days into the Soviet invasion. On June 27, 1940, ten days after Soviet troops arrived in Riga, Jānis Gailis, an official of the Ministry of the Interior Political Police for Latvia and a member of the resistance movement against the Soviets, shot himself at the monument in protest against the occupation.<sup>159</sup> Such acts, however, were not common; the next known similar occurrence was in 1969. A 1979 article on dissent mentions non-violent public protests occurring (and increasing since the end of Nikita Khrushchev's rule), with consequences ranging from detainment to imprisonment to deportation, but does not refer to specific locations.<sup>160</sup> Though the monument was a magnet for Latvian nationalists, any other attempted gatherings were likely quickly broken up by authorities. Most of the activity directed against the Soviet regime up until the 1980s was individual, the less conspicuous act of laying flowers at the monument as a symbol of solidarity with the independent republic. Evidence of protests at the monument throughout the Soviet era exists, but it was only with the latitude of glasnost that the monument was allowed to re-enter public discourse and again become a space of public assembly.

The larger-scale Latvian resistance movement started during the war had the goal of attaining independence again, and, by the end of the war, consisted mainly of various youth organizations and the 'forest brothers' organization of guerrilla fighters. This movement, which mainly opposed the Soviet occupation through spreading anti-Soviet propaganda and

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<sup>159</sup> Ciganovs, Juris. "The Resistance Movement Against the Soviet Regime in Latvia Between 1940 and 1941." In Arvydas Anusauskas, ed., *The Anti-Soviet Resistance in the Baltic States*, Vilnius: Du Ka, 2000), 123.

<sup>160</sup> David Kowalewski, "Dissent in the Baltic Republics: Characteristics and Consequences," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 10.4 (1979): 309-19. Other documents also reference various sorts of earlier protests without noting their locations.

armed resistance, essentially died out with repressions, deportations and fear in the 1950s. Active non-violent resistance, however, remained common between the 1940s and 1980s, through refusing to join Soviet activities and organizations, including youth organizations, refusing to speak or learn Russian, singing traditional Latvian songs and celebrating Christian holidays or the traditional summer solstice festival, *Jāņi*, displaying the flag of independent Latvia and destroying Soviet iconography.<sup>161</sup>

Protests occurred across the eastern bloc in 1968 and 1969 following the Soviet intervention in Prague. In April 1969, Ilja Rips, a twenty-year-old student at the University of Latvia, went to the foot of the monument with a placard reading “I PROTEST AGAINST THE OCCUPATION OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA” and set his clothes, which had been soaked in gasoline, on fire. Rips’ action followed the death by self-immolation of Czech student Jan Palach in January, as well as two other Czech students who burned themselves to death afterwards. Rips was a star mathematics student, the holder of a Lenin scholarship and had already received a prestigious position at the Academy of Sciences before the incident. Sailors walking past the monument put out the flames and Rips survived. Charged under the section of “anti-Soviet propaganda and agitation,” the official inquiry did not find evidence of guilt, as Rips acted alone and was protesting only one aspect of Soviet policy; he was instead declared insane and put in a psychiatric hospital, from which he was released in May 1971.<sup>162</sup> He was permitted to emigrate to Israel that year. Information on Rips is difficult to find and the files at the Latvian State Archives

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<sup>161</sup> Olgerts Eglitis, *Nonviolent Action in the Liberation of Latvia* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Albert Einstein Institution, 1993), 5.

<sup>162</sup> Peter Reddaway, *Uncensored Russia* (New York: American Heritage Press, 1972), 243-4.

remain closed; it seems likely that authorities did not want to inspire further protests by publicizing the case.

In the pre-glasnost era, another individual protest occurred by the monument in 1982, when Rihards Ūsāns, a Latvian high school student, was arrested for reading passages of the Bible out loud. This occurred on November 15, three days before the Latvian independence day, when people would commonly attempt to gather by symbolic places, including the monument and the Brothers' Cemetery. Jūlijs Kadēlis, president of the exile organization World Association of Free Latvians, reported that a fence had been constructed around the monument before November 18 in order to prevent demonstrations, and several others had been arrested in advance of the day in 1982, as well as during and after.<sup>163</sup> Ūsāns was interned at a psychiatric clinic as well, following his arrest.

Widespread non-violent and passive resistance, and activities of the independence movement in the diaspora, helped reinforce a sense of national identity in the Latvian community: a “combined effect” of creating the “living ideal of an independent nation-state, a sense of culturally belonging to Europe, well-preserved national culture and traditions.”<sup>164</sup> Anecdotal evidence and the 1940 *Cīņa* article calling for an end to the “flower protests”<sup>165</sup> suggests that protesting through leaving flowers at the monument was quite common. Though the activity was not entirely risk-free, the act seems to have mainly resulted in the removal of the flowers or, at worst, being taken in for a discussion by the KGB, at least after the Stalinist era. More vocal or visible protests would likely have larger

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<sup>163</sup> “One Dead and Several Arrested During House Searches in Latvia,” April 12, 1983, Subject Files of Dzintra Bungas, 300.5.170, box 39, folder 6, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

<sup>164</sup> Eglitis, *Nonviolent Action in the Liberation of Latvia*, 7.

<sup>165</sup> “Aktišanas pie Brīvības pieminekļa jābeidz,” *Cīņa*, July 1, 1940, 1.

repercussions. Soviet security around the monument was increased at symbolic times, especially the November 18 independence day. Permitted or not, the symbolism of the monument remained. Daina Stukuls Eglitis notes the importance of the monument's symbolism for protestors due to its connection to the interwar republic and the idea of freedom (a symbolism which was also noted by Soviet leaders and journalists in their responses to demonstrations): "The monument, then, was not a neutral location, but rather an active purveyor of meaning that infused demonstrations with national content, even when the overt issues of the demonstration were, for example, environmental."<sup>166</sup>

It was not until the second half of the 1980s that the monument became a centre of large-scale, well-publicized resistance activity. Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of glasnost, introduced in 1985, called for a greater openness to Soviet society, with the effect of both allowing citizens to go beyond previously-defined limits on what could be said, published, reported, and so on, as well as exposing Soviet crimes of the past. Speaking more freely about both the present and the past became integral for Baltic dissidents and the independence movement. Tensions between the Soviets and the Latvian population were high in the 1980s. Latvian concerns were cultural, political and environmental.

Though it was not openly discussed for many years, Russification was again a major concern of Latvians by the 1980s. The amount of Latvians in the total population in 1935 was 75.5 percent; by 1993, it was 52.5 percent, due to Soviet immigration of non-Latvians.<sup>167</sup> New immigrants seldom learned Latvian, and it became necessary for Latvians to learn Russian to conduct everyday life. Though these concerns were present from the early years

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<sup>166</sup> Stukuls Eglitis, *Imagining the Nation*, 130.

<sup>167</sup> Andrejs Plakans, *The Latvians: A Short History* (Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, 1995), xv.

of the Soviet occupation, they were rising by the 1980s and exacerbated by both new changes and the normalization of Russification policies over time. Latvians, especially activists in the diaspora, feared the Soviet policy of immigration, coupled with the mass deportations of Latvians that had occurred in the 1940s, was a gradual attempt at ethnic cleansing. Latvians would eventually become a pronounced minority if immigration rates continued, and activists argued that immigrants received the best housing, while Latvians had to wait years, living in conditions that were cramped or in disrepair, thereby leading to a decrease in Latvian birth rates over the past decades; non-Latvians were favoured for jobs and especially government positions.<sup>168</sup> Though these suspicions may or may not have been founded, the immigration rates and tensions between Russians and Latvians were certainly real. Latvians were often taunted by Russians for speaking in Latvian, and violent interactions between the two groups, particularly among young people, were not unknown.<sup>169</sup>

Environmental concerns were an issue in many communities throughout the Soviet Union, after decades of rushed, massive development with little concern for nature. In Latvia, these concerns in the 1980s centred around several issues: pollution in the Baltic Sea and Bay of Riga, birth defects in industrial areas, and the planned development of a hydroelectric power station in Daugavpils, the country's second-largest city. The Daugava River, running across the country, was a powerful national symbol, prominent in Latvian folk songs and stories, and activists called up this symbolism in their campaigns.<sup>170</sup> As well, there were concerns following the Chernobyl disaster. A planned metro system for Riga was

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<sup>168</sup> "Charter Document of Group 'Helsinki-86," translated by World Federation of Free Latvians (PBLA), August 1986, 300.5.170, box 59, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

<sup>169</sup> See Stukuls Eglitis, *Imagining the Nation*, 30-2.

<sup>170</sup> Stukuls Eglitis, *Imagining the Nation*, 35.

also attacked as unnecessarily duplicating existing transit lines, potentially causing environmental damage to the Daugava, and putting the city's historical buildings at risk during construction; another fear was the influx of migrant workers the system's construction would inevitably bring.<sup>171</sup>

Other concerns included unnecessarily harsh treatment of activists and those accused of political crimes, of which there were several well-publicized cases through the first half of the 1980s (including the Soviet treatment of dissident Gunārs Astra and several youths accused of damaging a train's interior following a rock concert in the town of Ogre in 1985). Many Latvians were also angry about the drafting of young men into the Soviet Army to fight in Afghanistan, widely felt to be a useless war.

Resistance activity in general remained underground in Latvia until the 1980s. One reporter noted that the human rights movement had been strongest in Lithuania due to links with the Catholic church. Lacking the same unifying force, and with larger Russian populations than Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia had a more difficult time organizing, and protests were more easily suppressed by authorities.<sup>172</sup>

In the wake of glasnost, many activist organizations appeared. The one of these that utilized the Brīvības Pieminekļis most prominently was Helsinki-86, named for the Helsinki human rights accords signed in 1975. Though the name implied the group was one of several human-rights monitoring groups formed in the Soviet Union after the signing of these

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<sup>171</sup> Stukuls Eglitis, *Imagining the Nation*, 42. Though the Latvian concerns may seem to border on xenophobic, it is worth noting that few countries would accept another government determining the nation's immigration policy.

<sup>172</sup> Marta Sapiak, "The Baltic States," April 1985, 300.5.170, box 40, folder 1, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

accords, the group's actual goals were more closely related to Latvian national concerns. The group was founded by three workers, Raimonds Bitenieks, Martiņš Bariss and Linards Gratiņš, in 1986 in the city of Liepāja. It began its activities by distributing propaganda, including the group's manifesto, which focused on issues of Russification in Latvia, including through immigration policies, favouring Russians and linguistic Russification. Helsinki-86's manifesto called into question the clause of the Soviet Union's constitution that gave republics the right to secede from the union, and asked how Latvia could exercise this right. In 1986, several members were interrogated by authorities for their involvement in distributing propaganda, though Helsinki-86 would not stage large-scale protests until the next year.

Though the major protests occurring at the monument took place from summer 1987, several smaller protests seem to have occurred in 1986 and early 1987. The participants were primarily youths, and demonstrations seem to have been more or less spontaneous. On December 27, 1986, a reported 300 young people demonstrated against the Soviet Union, marching past the monument up Brīvības iela (Ļeņiņa iela) towards the Lenin monument (a distance of a few hundred metres). The youths shouted "Down with Soviet Russia! Freedom for a free Latvia!" It was believed that four or more people were arrested; the crowd dispersed after they reached the Lenin statue.<sup>173</sup> On Easter Sunday of 1987, April 19, 500 young people marched through the streets "singing patriotic songs and chanting nationalist slogans." The official response to the Easter Sunday protest in the Soviet journal *Literatūra un Māksla* on May 1 reported that the demonstrators were wielding knives and

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<sup>173</sup> Vija Freimanis, American Latvian Association, "Three Hundred Latvian Youths Hold Anti-Soviet Protest," January 15, 1987, 2197.1.87, p. 219, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Rīga.

clubs and starting fights with Russian youths.”<sup>174</sup> Another report from June 1987 mentioned that “there have been several spontaneous nationalist demonstrations at the Freedom Monument in the last six months.”<sup>175</sup> Helsinki-86 may have taken some inspiration from these earlier gatherings; more likely, the group was drawn to the monument as a central location and symbol of independence, like many other protestors and flower-layers had been previously.

In June 1987, resistance activity at the monument reached a scale that was difficult to ignore. Helsinki-86 planned a protest for June 14, the anniversary of mass deportations of Latvians (as well as Lithuanians and Estonians) to Siberia in 1941. Officials arrived at homes during the night and arrested entire families; the numbers of people who were deported were unknown. Due to the deportations (a reported 16,000 Latvians were deported that night,<sup>176</sup> along with deportees in Estonia and Lithuania) and other Soviet terror, followed by the invasion of the Nazis at the end of June, 1941 became known among Latvians as *baigais gads*, the year of horror. Testing the openness of glasnost, Helsinki-86 decided to commemorate this event. The announcement of the protest was made public two weeks ahead of time, not through official sources, but circulated widely through word of mouth and foreign news sources like Radio Free Europe.

The manifesto of Helsinki-86 asked, “Why...have, until this day, the innumerable human victims [of the deportations and Stalinist terror] not been given even the smallest

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<sup>174</sup> Olgerts Pavlovskis, PBLA, June 9, 1987, “Opening Statement to the Press on Helsinki-86,” 2197.1.87, p. 277, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga.

<sup>175</sup> PBLA, “3000 People Join Latvian Human Rights Leaders for Nationalist Demonstration in Riga,” June 15, 1987, 2197.1.87, p. 261, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga.

<sup>176</sup> Ciganovs, “The Resistance Movement,” 127.

memorial stone, where we could place flowers?”<sup>177</sup> Calling for an official recognition of the 1941 deportations, the group sent public letters to people and organizations including general secretary Gorbachev, Pope John Paul II, foreign governments and Latvian exile organizations. In summoning Latvians to the monument for June 14, Helsinki-86 wrote, “We invite all Latvians who are not indifferent to the fate of our people to honor the memory of the innocent victims with a minute of silence and the laying of flowers at the Freedom Monument in Riga on June 14.”<sup>178</sup>

Initial response abroad to the planned protests was supportive. Following the receipt of a letter from Helsinki-86, the American senate sent a letter to Gorbachev in support of Helsinki-86.

We understand the Helsinki '86 monitoring group has announced its intention to hold a legal and peaceful demonstration in Riga on June 14, 1987, to honor the Latvian victims of the massive deportations which occurred during and after World War II....Permitting this ceremony to take place will demonstrate an appreciation of the great emotional significance which the events of 1941 hold for the Baltic people.<sup>179</sup>

The senators' letter also called for the release of several Baltic political prisoners.

International newspapers commented on the planned protests. Other Latvian organizations abroad planned events and protests outside Soviet embassies in commemoration of the 1941 deportations.

The Soviet response to the planned protests did not aim to stop them outright, but made them difficult. Authorities hurriedly organized a children's festival on the square in the days after Helsinki-86 announced its intentions. The protest was thus delayed until the

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<sup>177</sup> “Charter Document of Group ‘Helsinki-86,” translated by World Federation of Free Latvians (PBLA), August 1986, 300.5.170, box 59, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

<sup>178</sup> Untitled document, Helsinki-86, trans. Dzintra Bungš?, 300.5.170, box 59, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

<sup>179</sup> “Text of Senators’ Letter to Gorbachev on Latvia,” June 11, 1987, 300.5.170, box 59, folder 3, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

early evening. People began to gather in Bastejkalns park, off of the same square, around four o'clock in the afternoon. The group of several hundred included Latvian nationalists, as well as Lithuanians and Estonians who had come in solidarity, former political prisoners, and the members of Helsinki-86, with two members dressed in traditional Latvian folk costumes. At 6:30, the crowd began a procession to the monument, now numbering around a thousand people.

People in the streets applauded, and more joined the crowd along the way and at the monument, eventually totalling around 3,000. The children's festival was ending, but organizers turned up loudspeakers set up for the festival to blare loud music and drown out the protestors. In turn, protestors began to loudly sing "Pūt, vējiņi" (Blow, Little Wind), an ancient folk song that became popular in the early twentieth century, as well as becoming a 1912 play by the nationalist writer Rainis.<sup>180</sup> Protestors carried flowers and signs reading "In memory of the victims of June 14," "For fatherland and freedom," and "God Save Latvia" (the last two being the text on the monument and the first line of the national anthem, respectively); the same slogans were spoken out loud. Other national symbols, like maroon and white ribbons, representing the flag of independent Latvia, wound around flowers, were displayed. Edmunds Cirvilis, a former Stalinist-era political prisoner, noted in a speech that people could lay flowers at monuments to the victims of fascism, therefore why not to victims of "eastern invaders"?<sup>181</sup> The gathering lasted into the evening, dispersing around midnight.

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<sup>180</sup> PBLA, "3000 People Join Latvian Human Rights Leaders for Nationalist Demonstration in Riga," June 15, 1987, 2197.1.87, p. 261, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga.

<sup>181</sup> Juris Ziemelis (?), "Latvijas 86 Helsinku Grupa," June 14, 1987, 300.5.170, box 59, folder 4, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

The monument's nationalist symbolism lay sleeping for many years; the June 14 demonstration marked the movement known as the "third awakening" (*trešā atmoda*)<sup>182</sup> that led to independence. After the prominence of this peaceful protest, the monument re-entered the public collective memory. The Soviet government found it difficult to ignore a protest of thousands in the centre of the city, though responses in the official press were relegated to interior pages and published days later. Helsinki-86 noted the selection of the Brīvības Pieminekļis as a surrogate location; a letter to the Soviet newspapers *Cīņa* and *Padomju Jaunatne* explained that the monument was chosen because no monument existed for the victims of Stalinist terror, which had not taken place at one specific location, but everywhere.<sup>183</sup>

Soviet critics placed the blame on Helsinki-86 and other sources. A report in the Soviet newspaper for high school and elementary school students, *Skolotāju Avīze*, suggested that the protests were a result of Latvian youth groups being "infiltrated" by Latvian-American youths who visited in the summer of 1986.<sup>184</sup> The article also condemned the 1941 deportations, as many writers began to do in the Soviet press afterwards, reflecting an inability to take a firm position on the protests: discussion of the issues at hand was permissible, yet peacefully gathering and laying flowers in remembrance of them was not.

The event was not without consequences for Helsinki-86. Founder Linards Grantiņš was sentenced to six months in jail after the protest, ostensibly for refusing to complete his military service, though he had previously been exempted. Rolands Silarups, already a

<sup>182</sup> The first and second were the nineteenth-century movement by the group of intellectuals known as the Young Latvians, and the movement beginning with independence in 1918.

<sup>183</sup> Helsinki-86, "Laikrakstiem 'Cīņa' un 'Padomju Jaunatne'" [To the newspapers "Cīņa" and "Padomju Jaunatne"], June 19, 1987, 300.5.170, box 59, folder 1, Open Society Archives, Budapest. The letter was not published by either newspaper.

<sup>184</sup> M. Birznieks, "Tas mums jāiegaumē" [This must be fixed in our minds], *Skolotāju Avīze*, June 20, 1987, 14.

veteran activist at age 21, was forced to emigrate and put on a flight to Vienna. Silarups noted in an interview from Vienna that Helsinki-86 was against Soviet “chauvinism,” not Russians, and that Russians had participated in the June demonstrations as well.<sup>185</sup>

This demonstration was to be the first of several large and prominent demonstrations. In August, Helsinki-86 planned a second demonstration to mark the anniversary of the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. Helsinki-86 member Jānis Barkans invited people to the Brīvības Pieminekļis “to commemorate this day as a day of mourning for Latvians.”<sup>186</sup> The invitation was issued to the Latvian *tautieši*, or folk, recalling again the romantic idea of the peasantry and ancient Latvian peoples. The group’s invitation noted that the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact resulted in the splitting of the Latvian nation into two parts, those at home and those living abroad. They noted that the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, giving the Baltic states to the Soviet Union, was the only Nazi treaty that still stood in 1987. Helsinki-86 also called for the construction of a monument to the victims of Stalinism. Latvian party secretary Boriss Pugo responded to this demand saying that the idea was being seriously considered and that he supported it, but that demonstrations did not help the union’s national problems.<sup>187</sup>

According to a Helsinki-86 member’s report, members of the group were prevented from travelling to Riga for the August protests, but managed to reach the city anyway; they were then confined to an apartment in Riga on the street behind the monument, where

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<sup>185</sup> Juris Kaza, “Latvian Republic Closed to Gorbachev’s Openness,” *International Herald Tribune*, August 4, 1987, 300.5.170, box 59, folder 2, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

<sup>186</sup> Juris Kaza, “Latvian Rally will Test Soviet Policy of Glasnost,” *The Guardian*, August 10, 1987, 300.5.170, box 59, folder 1, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

<sup>187</sup> Radio Free Europe A-Wire, “Dissidents Set Ceremonies in Vilnius and Riga,” August 11, 1987, 300.5.170, box 59, folder 1, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

phone contact was cut off. They then displayed a sign in the window reading “HELSINKI GROUP INCARCERATED HERE.” At this, authorities broke into the apartment, ransacked it and took in members for questioning. Several were injured, including a child.<sup>188</sup>

Despite preventing Helsinki-86 from attending, thousands of people showed up at the monument beginning at eleven o’clock in the morning. The demonstration had been announced on Voice of America and Latvian print and television journalists also showed up to the protest. The number was estimated at 5,000 people.<sup>189</sup> International press again took notice of the protests, and events also occurred in Tallinn and Vilnius (where the protests took place at a statue of Linda, a figure in Estonian mythology, and a statue of a Lithuanian-Polish poet). Though events in Estonia and Lithuania were peaceful, the crowd in Riga became violent when police attempted to push them back; official reports noted that 86 people were arrested, though Helsinki-86 estimated the actual numbers were double that.<sup>190</sup>

Though the first protest had attracted less attention both in the Soviet Union and internationally, the force of the two protests made authorities take more careful notice. Soviet press denounced the protest in articles by officials and university professors. A report from the Soviet Latvian news agency Latinform noted that Latvians had “distorted” the concepts of fatherland and freedom<sup>191</sup> and the meaning of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, supposedly signed by the Soviet Union out of concern for “preserving international peace.”

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<sup>188</sup> Jānis Barkans, trans. PBLA, “To the Governments of the Signatory Nations to the Helsinki Conference on Cooperation and Security in Europe Final Act,” August 24, 1987, 2197.1.87, p. 331, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga.

<sup>189</sup> Caune, *Brīvības Pieminekļis*, 86.

<sup>190</sup> “Mass Demonstrations Across the Baltic,” *Brīvība (Periodical of the Latvian Social Democrat Party)*, issue 6, p. 1, 1987, 300.5.170, box 58, folder 2, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

<sup>191</sup> Translated here as “homeland and liberty.” Latinform, “In accordance with an alien scenario” excerpts, trans. Dzintra Bungas, September 2, 1987, 300.5.170, box 59, folder 4, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

The report called Helsinki-86 “hooligans” and chastised them for a poor knowledge of history. Another report in the Russian press, “West Seen Behind Riga Demonstrations,” noted the ideology of the monument. The Soviet press reports seemed to place blame on the Soviet system and press for not effectively propagandizing about the monument and teaching history to young people. Moscow Komsomolskaya asked:

Why at the Monument of Freedom? Simply because it was erected in 1935, during the bourgeois period in Latvian, and the monument could be used as some sort of symbol. This, incidentally, was exactly what the organizers of the flower-laying ceremony did, taking advantage of the fact that, for a long time, even city guides did not contain any information about the monument.<sup>192</sup>

The Komsomolskaya report also reiterated the meaning of the monument, including sculptures of labour, science and family, and noting sculptor Kārlis Zāle as “one of the first to join in the implementation of Lenin’s plan for monumental propaganda.”

If the official response to the two protests in the summer was milder than might have been expected, the authorities seem to have realized the symbolic power of the monument after them and worked harder to prevent demonstrations later. The popularity and profile of the summer demonstrations led them to launch a campaign against demonstrations at the monument on the Latvian independence day of November 18. School trips were organized to ensure that children would be out of the city on the day, while students or their parents were forced to sign papers saying that they would not

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<sup>192</sup> “West Seen Behind Riga Demonstrations,” from Moscow Komsomolskaya, August 26, in Radio Free Europe Daily Report, August 31, 1987, 300.5.170, box 58, folder 2, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

demonstrate on November 18, under threat of being expelled; workers received warnings that they would be punished or lose their jobs if they were absent.<sup>193</sup>

Police worked to ensure Helsinki-86 would not be present. Linards Grantiņš was already in jail and Rolands Silarups exiled to the west. Two more members, Jānis Barkans and Raimonds Bitenieks, also had their Soviet citizenship revoked and were sent to the west, before November 18.<sup>194</sup> Bitenieks was forced to leave without his nineteen-year-old daughter, Eva Biteniece, also a member of the group. Bitenieks and Barkans reported that, by this time, five members of the group had had their citizenship revoked, with one more threatened with the same.

Public announcements and articles also warned against protesting. Latvian party secretary Anatolijs Gorbunovs noted in a speech on the holiday given in October 1987, “If someone today wants to associate Latvia’s first statehood with November 18, then he either does not know Latvia’s history or deliberately aligns himself with the supporters of Ulmanistic pseudohistory.”<sup>195</sup> Gorbunovs also wrote in an article in the magazine *Dzimtenes Balss*, “Let only those who are against our socialist system go to the monument of freedom.”<sup>196</sup> Gorbunov’s position on the monument was obviously unsettled: in a *Cīņa* article following the August protest, he condemned the protest while claiming that flowers at the monument should never wilt.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>193</sup> American Latvian Association, “Soviets Launch Campaign to Prevent November 18 Demonstration,” November 6, 1987, 2197.1.14, p. 282, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga.

<sup>194</sup> Radio Free Europe, A-Wire, December 2, 1987, 300.5.170, box 59, folder 4, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

<sup>195</sup> Anatolijs Gorbunovs’ speech on 26 October 1987, translation Radio Free Europe, 300.5.170, box 59, folder 4, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

<sup>196</sup> Quoted in American Latvian Association, “Soviets Launch Campaign to Prevent November 18 Demonstration,” November 6, 1987, 2197.1.14, p. 282, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga.

<sup>197</sup> Quoted in 2197.1.87, p. 346, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga.

Rumours also spread that an ‘official counterdemonstration’ might be arranged at the monument. Anticipating a possible violent recourse by Soviet forces, press and Baltic organizations elsewhere in Europe set up a monitoring group in Stockholm on November 18; Helsinki-86 feared wider police violence.<sup>198</sup>

People gathered instead at the Brothers’ Cemetery; some attempted to travel from the Brothers’ Cemetery to the monument, but authorities ensured major routes were blocked. Major routes into the city were also blocked by military. Members of Helsinki-86 were placed under house arrest and threatened. The monitoring agency set up in Stockholm also found that they were unable to reach their contacts in Riga by phone. People attempted to break through the military blockade at the monument, but were unsuccessful.<sup>199</sup> Police also reacted to protests arranged in surrogate locations. Few people were arrested or injured over the day, however, as the security measures proved quite effective at deterring protestors. Mērija Vītola, a young woman involved with Helsinki-86, was fined for shouting “Let Latvia live free!” on November 18 in one of the parks surrounding the monument.<sup>200</sup>

Helsinki-86 had claimed that celebration of the holiday should be permitted, and that this did not necessarily mark an anti-Soviet ideology. Ints Cailitis, a well-known Latvian dissident, noted the contradictions of the Soviet stance on Latvian history in a comment to the press on November 18: “This holiday should be celebrated but the

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<sup>198</sup> Juris Kaza, Baltic Helsinki Group (Stockholm), “Latvian Demonstrations Monitoring,” November 1987, 2197.1.87, p. 197, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga.

<sup>199</sup> PBLA, “Events of November 18, 1987 in Soviet Occupied Latvia,” 2197.1.87, p. 1, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga.

<sup>200</sup> “Lai dzīvo brīvu Latviju!” Mērija Vītola, “Iesniegums” [An Appeal], December 31, 1987, 300.5.170, box 59, folder 4, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

authorities don't know how to accept that. They're not prepared for a dialogue so they resort to the old methods."<sup>201</sup>

A report by Juris Kaza, an exile Latvian journalist, noted that despite official rhetoric against demonstration, they were working.

“The Baltic demonstrations have had an unprecedented impact on the discussion of history both in the Baltic and all-union Soviet press. Behind all the vituperative criticism of Helsinki 86, the west, Baltic exiles, etc. the official press has been forced to make extensive concessions, admitting the possible, even likely existence of secret provisions to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact.”<sup>202</sup>

Helsinki-86 encouraged Latvians to lay flowers at the monument on March 25, 1988, to commemorate another set of massive deportations on March 25, 1949. On March 25, the Soviet Latvian newspaper *Cīņa* published the number of victims of deportation as 43,231.<sup>203</sup>

The Latvian Red Cross estimated the actual number as closer to 70,000.<sup>204</sup>

Stalinist terror was now condemned in the official press, articles in Soviet periodicals called for the rehabilitation of victims, but the planned protest remained prohibited. However, another protest was planned by representatives of Soviet creative unions (artists, writers, and others) at the Brothers' Cemetery, and this protest was then officially sanctioned,<sup>205</sup> suggesting that the problem was with the dissident associations of Helsinki-86 and their choice of location, rather than with the act of commemorating the deportations in itself.

Police tried to block the monument, also blocking routes between the Brothers' Cemetery

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<sup>201</sup> Radio Free Europe A-Wire, November 19, 1987, 300.5.170, box 59, folder 4, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

<sup>202</sup> Juris Kaza, Baltic Helsinki Group (Stockholm), “Latvian Demonstrations Monitoring,” November 1987, 2197.1.87, p. 204, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga.

<sup>203</sup> PBLA, “Helsinki-86 Urges Latvians to Commemorate March 25 Deportation Victims,” March 10, 1988, 2197.1.90, p. 11, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga.

<sup>204</sup> PBLA, “Informācija par 1949 martā deportācijām okupētajā Latvijā” [Information on the March 1949 deportations in occupied Latvia], March 25,

<sup>205</sup> Juris Dreifelds, *Latvia in Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 57.

and Brīvības Piemineklis, but protestors broke through and left candles at the monument. The national anthem of independent Latvia was sung, for what was believed to be the first time in public since 1940. The militia appeared at 6:30 PM, when Helsinki-86 was due to arrive; members placed flowers at the monument and were “immediately taken into custody by the police.”<sup>206</sup> Between fourteen and twenty people were taken in for questioning. Helsinki-86 members were able to return home, but had their phone lines cut and were watched by militia for two days.

Between March and June of 1988, repressions against protests all but disappeared as support for the regime was eroding. The national movement gained more and more followers during this time; journalists and newspaper editors began to touch on more and more prohibited topics. In April, two events elsewhere in Riga turned out thousands of protestors: one a funeral for Gunārs Astra, an important Latvian dissident who died after years of mistreatment in Soviet prisons and camps; the other a protest against the construction of a Riga metro, to which ten thousand people came. In the first days of June, a conference of the Latvian unions of various branches of the arts (artists, writers, scholars, and others) took place. Olgerts Eglitis credits this event as a “real breakthrough in people’s minds,” during which many people spoke freely about national issues, social, environmental and economic concerns in Latvia.<sup>207</sup>

After this, demonstrations became more frequent and open. The independence movement in Latvia continued to grow, and the republic was allowed greater autonomy. Over the course of 1988, the Latvian flag was readopted as the national flag and Latvian

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<sup>206</sup> Ojars Kalniņš, PBLA, “Report on March 25 1988 Demonstrations in Riga, Latvia,” 2197.7.90, p. 31, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Riga.

<sup>207</sup> Eglitis, *Nonviolent Action in the Liberation of Latvia*, 13.

became the official language of the Latvian SSR. Nineteen eighty-eight also marked the centennial of Kārlis Zāle's birth, which was celebrated by an exhibition at the State Museum of Arts and articles about his work, adding to a greater discussion about the monument overall.

A second demonstration in memory of the June 14 deportations occurred with little official resistance. Ten thousand people were in attendance.<sup>208</sup> Flags and signs were displayed at the event and “nationalistic speeches” were made.<sup>209</sup> The events were covered extensively on Latvian television, but the television coverage did not show the flags and posters. Patriotic speeches were heavily edited and the coverage called it a demonstration in support of glasnost. The 1988 demonstration saw no military intervention. Protests against the deportations also occurred in Estonia in 1988.

On July 21, a peaceful demonstration asking for the flag of the interwar republic to be restored met at a square in Vecrīga, the old town, and the crowd dispersed to the Brothers' Cemetery and the Brīvības Pieminekļis.<sup>210</sup> Another demonstration against the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact occurred in August; estimates suggested 30,000 people showed up.<sup>211</sup> This number again included guests from other Soviet countries, as well as many non-Latvian residents of the country. The gatherings at the monument to mark important historical dates had “already become a tradition.”<sup>212</sup>

The end of October 1988 marked a large-scale celebration of the centennial of Kārlis Zāle's birth, an officially sanctioned event with choir performances and journal

<sup>208</sup> Eglitis, *Nonviolent Action in the Liberation of Latvia*, 14.

<sup>209</sup> PBLA, “Preliminary Summary of Events in Riga, Latvia—June 14, 1988,” June 15, 1988, 2197.1.14, p. 222, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Rīga.

<sup>210</sup> PBLA, “Thousands Demonstrate in Riga, Latvia; Call for Reestablishment of National Flag,” July 21, 1988, 2197.1.14, p. 217, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Rīga.

<sup>211</sup> Caune, *Brīvības Pieminekļis*, 88.

<sup>212</sup> Caune, *Brīvības Pieminekļis*, 90.

articles. Though Soviet authorities heightened security at the monument in November 1988, they did not prevent protests. Even the newspaper *Padomju Jaunatne* reported a list of events taking place on the holiday, including a meeting at the Freedom Monument, though without noting a reason for celebration: the text above the listings read only “Today, November 18.”<sup>213</sup>

Large-scale protests became common throughout Latvia and the Baltics in the last years of the Soviet Union before independence was attained. National movements continued to grow and attract wide sympathy, not only from Latvians but from non-Latvian residents of the country and people elsewhere in the Soviet Union and abroad. Though resistance activity at the monument after 1988 was less publicized and lacked the earlier repressions or arrests, the Brīvības Pieminēklis and surrounding area remained an important site of resistance activity. People continued to gather in the area on important anniversary days and to lay flowers at the monument. In February 1989, people gathered at the monument for a daily picket to protest the heavy traffic that was causing structural damage; one person was injured during these protests when a taxi drove into the group of protestors.<sup>214</sup>

The peaceful pan-Baltic “Baltic Way” protest in 1989, on August 23, anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, was a human chain formed by over a million people from the three Baltic states holding hands and stretching from Lithuania through Latvia to Estonia. The chain through Latvia wound past the monument, where mountains of flowers stretched metres up the street leading to the monument. The Supreme Soviet of the

<sup>213</sup> “Šodien, 18. novembrī,” *Padomju Jaunatne*, November 18, 1988, 1.

<sup>214</sup> “Baltic Appeal to United Nations,” PBLA fonds, 2197.1.14, p. 357, Latvijas Valsts Arhīvs, Rīga.

Latvian SSR declared independence and the renewal of the Republic of Latvia on May 8, 1990, though the implementation of independence did not occur immediately.<sup>215</sup> In January 1991, an attempted coup by Soviet forces resulted in the deaths of two Latvian cameramen in Bastejkalns park, just off the monument's square, where Helsinki-86 had first gathered protestors in June 1987. Though Soviet forces staged another coup in August of 1991, this was unsuccessful and the Soviet Union finally recognized the independence of the Republic of Latvia. The monument once again became a symbol for freedom in an independent state, the idea of freedom gaining new meaning after a fifty-year struggle for it.

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<sup>215</sup> Taagepera and Misiunas, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence*, 335.

## Conclusion

The monument existed in a tenuous double life for many years under the Soviets. As a national symbol, it held onto its meaning for the Latvian community, while simultaneously being ascribed new meanings by Soviet officials and guides, who would seemingly have preferred it had not been there at all. The monument remained in the peculiar position of being both one of the most obvious sites in the city, due to its physical presence and its location, and being invisible to Soviet eyes, omitted from books and history lessons, ignored as much as possible by the regime. Its continued survival was never guaranteed: aside from official discussions about replacing the monument, gradual destruction, both physical and psychological, occurred through the nearby placement of Lenin's statue, the trolleybus stop and other heavy traffic, and a lack of maintenance, as well as through reprimanding people who lingered by the monument, daring to acknowledge its existence.

The survival of the monument in Soviet Latvia is perplexing, especially given Soviet enthusiasm in destroying monuments to the First World War in neighbouring Estonia. In itself, the simple explanation found in some Latvian works that Vera Mukhina saved the monument seems insufficient. Mukhina died in 1953, and discussion on the monument continued long after. The exile explanation that the monument's continued existence was a symbol of the indefatigable spirit of the Latvians holds some weight: peculiarities of Soviet policy towards the Baltic states were, in part, a result of a perceived 'westernness' to the countries (perceived by both Soviet and Baltic sides), and a result of the difficulty of building loyalty to the Soviet state in countries that regarded Soviet rule as illicit. More

precisely, the reasons for the monument's survival, aside from Mukhina's intervention, seem due to a lucky combination of factors: an acceptance of certain elements of nationalism in the Soviet republics, a retelling of the story and the imagery of the monument, and the 'rehabilitation' of the monument's creators through Štalbergs' work in Soviet Latvia and emphasizing the 'Soviet' affiliations in Zāle's biography, coupled with physical debilitation of the monument.

The monument managed to remain a symbol that united the Latvian population that was split apart by the events of the Second World War, as seen in the affinity of younger generations of Latvian exiles for the monument, even before ever seeing it in person. The site marked a sort of theoretical homecoming for these Latvians. The importance of the monument as a unifying symbol was in part a result of the monument's creation in the interwar, the nationalist ideology built into the monument through the construction campaign and ceremonies, and the strong nationalism of this period. However, it was also a result of the events that followed the interwar. The division of the Latvian population during the 1940s strengthened the importance of a monument symbolizing the freedom and unity of the Latvian people; without this experience of trauma that was also shared among the wartime population, and carried down, in various ways and places, to younger generations, the monument may have been just another old statue by the end of the twentieth century.

In the new atmosphere of glasnost, the collective memory of the Brīvības Pieminekļis in the interwar was able to rise to the forefront. This memory did not remain

completely hidden during the entirety of the Soviet era, but made occasional reappearances throughout this time, in individual protests, in the increased police presence on the Latvian independence day, and in the laying of flowers. The memory also remained alive visually, as deportees, individuals and exile organizations used the image of the monument on correspondence, posters and other paraphernalia. In Latvia, demonstrations at the monument in the 1980s marked the beginning of the so-called ‘third awakening’ that preceded the Soviet collapse. The monument was a part of this awakening: both it and the people lay metaphorically sleeping, while ceremonies at the monument woke up both the statue and the thousands of citizens who filled the streets in protest against the regime.

The monument’s importance as a symbol in Latvia continues today. Foreign dignitaries make a point of visiting the monument; in the immediate post-Soviet years, it was visited by American president Bill Clinton and NATO general secretary Manfred Werner; Clinton spoke of the importance of the monument as a symbol of freedom. Further restoration to the monument in 2000-2001, completing the incomplete restoration begun in the early 1980s, was again funded by a collective effort, to which many Latvians abroad contributed along with Latvians at home. It remains a symbol of Latvian identity for young Latvians, appearing in a 2010 webcomic, “Mildas laiks” (Milda’s times) where the statue fell victim to the financial crisis and Milda found herself out of work,<sup>216</sup> and an unidentified guerrilla artist placed a maquette of the statue in the Daugava River in Riga in the fall of 2011.

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<sup>216</sup> By Aivars Baranovs and Andrejs Kļaviņš, mildaslaiks.lv.

The experience of the Second World War and the Soviet occupation brought new meaning to a symbol of freedom. The events and works of literature displayed in the statuary of the monument were within living memory when the monument was first built; by 1991, these generations were gone. Rather than becoming simply a monument depicting events no longer in anyone's living memory, the monument became a site of new collective memories. The older generations remembered the construction of the monument or passing by it in independent Latvia, whether or not they still lived there; younger generations, both domestically and abroad, created a new collective memory. Latvians in the diaspora saw it as a symbol of a virtual homeland, while those who grew up in Soviet Latvia instilled it with new collective memories as the monument became a site of protests that would precede the collapse of the Soviet system and achievement of the fought-for freedom. In this way, it remained a key national symbol and site of memory, symbolizing a national freedom that was fought for initially from 1918 to 1920, and would not be taken for granted after that freedom disappeared for fifty years, during which the monument itself became a battleground for the struggle for freedom.

## Appendix: Images



Fig. 1: The monument in Riga.



Fig. 2: Mother Latvia (left) and Vaidelotis (right) sculptures



Fig. 3: The chain-breakers (left) and Lāčplēsis (far right)



Fig. 4: Workers



Fig. 5: The soldiers' return



Fig. 6: Fatherland guards (left) and the battle against the Bermontians (right)



Fig. 7: The 1905 revolution

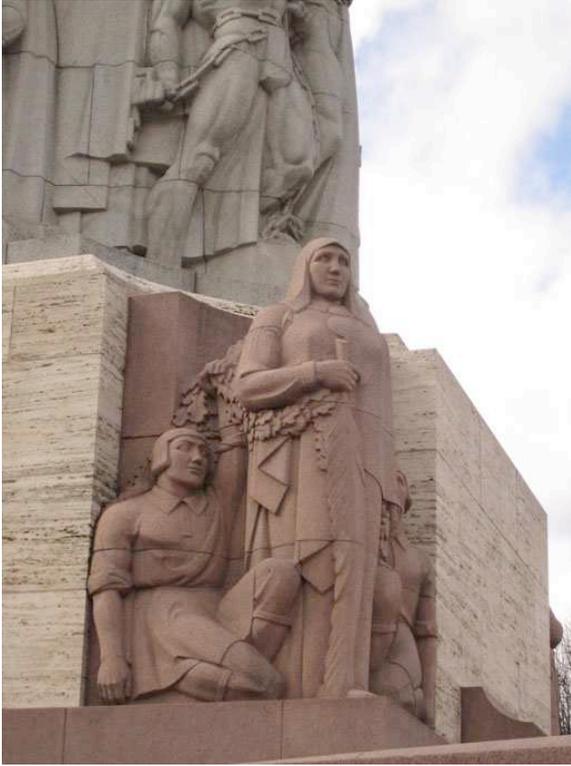


Fig. 8: Family



Fig. 9: Freedom



Fig. 10: Vera Mukhina's "Worker and Kolkhoz Woman" statue (public domain)



Fig. 8: Demonstration on August 23, 1987. Photograph *Brīvība: Periodical of the Latvian Social Democratic Party* 6 (1987), Stockholm, from 300.5.170, box 59, folder 2, Open Society Archives, Budapest.

All images my own unless otherwise noted.

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