CHAPTER 6

Artists in the Service of National Symbolism

Even during their exile in Penza in the early years of the war, the young refugee artists had continued to discuss the future of art in the homeland of their dreams. It was therefore entirely natural for them to now work in the service of the State, the long-awaited concrete incarnation of the nation. Their role was to create a system of symbolism that – once standardized and simplified – would later become that of the future Latvian State. They were active participants in the various competitions organized to design flags, coats of arms, stamps, banknotes, decorations and other insignia. They also had their say in the productions of posters, postcards, periodicals, etc. produced to buttress the national image. While these representations fell within the category of applied arts, they nevertheless did constitute a form of art. They were moreover often the work of recognized artists who acquired their reputation in more ‘noble’ areas of art such as painting or sculpture.

Looking beyond the formal conventions governing state and military symbolism, the attentive observer may discern Latvia’s national spirit or Volksgeist, the topic dealt with in this section. It draws on the symbolic repertoire detailed earlier in this work, in the sections examining ethnographic culture. Civil symbolism by contrast was developed with fewer constraints, and formed a particularly original area of expression. Each of these areas will be examined to reveal its Latvian characteristics.

A The Image of the New State

The final two years of the period dealt with in this section served as a gestation period for the new State, which was proclaimed by the Latvian provisional authorities in November 1918 but only fully established in 1920, after the foreign occupation forces had departed the national territory. During these years, the comprehensive array of elements of identity available to a fully-fledged State was not yet in existence. It was nevertheless seen by the politicians as necessary to provide Latvia with visual representation by all appropriate means. And for a young State, what could be more important than its flag and its coat of arms? What could be more vital than displaying, as a living image of the nascent homeland, its military fighting on the various fronts? What could be more symbolic than the provision – even before the need arose – of the
country’s own currency? The objective was nothing less than the creation of a symbolic system, a veritable ‘arsenal of identity’,1 as required for any new State.

1 **The National Flag**

Of all the symbols of identity, a people’s national flag is generally charged with particular emotional connotations. For Latvians, it represents not only the independence they had so long yearned for and acquired at such cost, but also the unity of the various provinces, finally brought together in a single entity: the homeland.

Subsequent developments may be grouped under the classification of ‘the politics of symbolism’, relating to objects from history that were “as noble, significant and functional as an election, a riot or a strike”.2

Of the States now emerging from the Empires, some had for a long time possessed a flag symbolizing the nation and its longstanding aspiration to statehood. Thus the Hungarians and Poles gathered with ease around national emblems exalted with the glory of historic struggles (1848, 1863, etc.). Others however such as the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croatians and Slovenians (later to become Yugoslavia) or Czechoslovakia – heterogeneous collections of peoples (or nations) with aspirations that did not always converge – had to ‘manufacture’ emblems designed to federate, using the colours of the pan-slavist movement (blue-white-red).

The Latvians fell between these two extremes. The ethnological concept of the Latvian people was widely accepted by 1915 and the State in gestation was a national State (or an ethnic State), and so there was no ambiguity concerning the objectives being pursued. However as a result of the heterogeneous nature of the provinces concerned and the lateness of the national renaissance, there was no single emblem that clearly symbolized the nation. As late as 1918, Oskar de Lubicz Milosz, in his exaltation of Baltic national freedom,3 united Latvians and Lithuanians into a single people.

The origins of the Latvian flag are the subject of several legends, each demonstrating a determination to anchor the flag in ancient history. Deprived of any historical reference to a state of the kind available for example to the Lithuanians,4

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4 The symbols of the Grand Duchy were notorious either the white knight (Vytis), or the pillars of Gediminas, or the episcopal cross with two horizontal white branches.