Remaining Loyal: Latvian Historians
in Exile 1945–1991

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In theory, it was precisely in the history profession that [émigré] Latvians could remain loyal to the study of Latvian and Baltic history, but they soon discovered that this was not opportune.\(^1\)

Introduction

Neither the perception of being “exiled” nor intellectual activities during “exile” was an unusual aspect of the history of Latvians during the twentieth century. Indeed, the outflow of university-educated Latvians from the Latvian-populated Russian western borderlands—the Baltic provinces of Livonia and Courland (Livland and Kurland) and from the Latvian districts of the adjoining province of Vitebsk—began in the last decades of the nineteenth century and continued until the founding of the first Latvian republic in 1918, at levels that led one contemporary demographer to estimate that at the turn of the twentieth century some ten percent of all Latvian-speakers were living, studying, and working outside the Latvian-language territory, mostly in other regions of the Russian Empire.\(^2\) This percentage included many professionals such as engineers and post office managers but also a handful of academic specialists such as Jānis Krodznieks, the first ethnic Latvian with a university degree (Moscow University) in the historical discipline.\(^3\) The 1905 Revolution increased that outflow, with social democrats and others sympathetic to radical changes fleeing to western countries, some with the intention of returning and others, as it turned out, finding more permanent refuge there. Kārlis Ulmanis, probably the most prominent and controversial Latvian political leader of the interwar years, spent seven years (1906–1913) in the United States, and the Latvian canonic poet and playwright Jānis Rainis (pseud. for Jānis Pliekšāns) and his equally gifted wife, the poet and playwright Aspāzija (pseud. for Elza Rozenberga), lived in Switzerland for about thirteen years, during which time Rainis wrote some of his best and most inspiring literary creations. A double exodus took place during the First World War: in 1915–1916 an estimated 750,000

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1 Andersons, 1981, 68.
2 Skujeneeks, 1922, 290–91.
3 Nazarova, 2012.
refugees left Courland and southern Livonia, fleeing from the rapidly advancing German army into the Russian interior; and after 1918–1919 and the founding of the Latvian state, an estimated 250,000 Latvians left for and remained in the new Soviet Union, having sympathy toward the Bolshevik cause or being unable to return when they changed their minds. Thousands of refugees of all kinds returned to Latvia in the early 1920s, but other thousands did not, so that the first Latvian national census of 1920 showed that the Latvian territories had lost, seemingly permanently, about third of their pre-war population. The University of Latvia, founded in the 1919, had to issue a call to Latvians with academic training, wherever they were, to return to their homeland to help form a teaching faculty for this brand new national “castle of light.”

Another wave of refugees/exiles—an estimated 250,000—fled Latvia during the 1944–45 months as the Soviet Army returned, bringing with it the determination to continue the job of sovietization that had been started in 1940–41 but had been interrupted by the German occupation of the country from 1941 to 1945.

Each of these waves of departure was unique in its internal history and duration, of course, but they were all links in a longer chain of outward movement that made the words “exile” (Latv. trimda), “exiles” (Latv. trimdnieki), and “refugees” (Latv. bēgli) seem almost normal components of the politico-socio-cultural vocabulary of Latvian history since the 1890s. In the present survey of Latvian history-writing in exile, however, it is the World War II flight that will be the focus, and, within it, the handful of intellectuals who were already recognized historians before they left or became historians later in life after their settlement in such new homelands as the United States, Germany, Sweden, Canada, and Australia. The composition of this World War II refugee population was heavily weighted toward the intelligentsia—professionals of all kinds, government employees, artists, journalists, and writers—who had already experienced Soviet life during 1940–41 and had no wish to repeat the experience. Virtually all these professionals, the historians among them, initially found themselves—as refugees—without institutional moorings and had to adapt to uncertain conditions, some in Sweden and others in post-war Germany. The historians left behind former colleagues, who in the post-1945 decades resumed their work in history-focused academic and research institutions monitored by the Latvian Communist Party and, in the larger framework, by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. For the Party, history was a supremely important discipline since its practitioners had the task of explaining the “historical inevitability” of Soviet dominance, thus legitimizing Party control over virtually all aspects of society at large.