The Idea of Latvian National History in Exile: Continuity and Discontinuity

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The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the most influential models of Latvian history in exile, including those which are often represented in media, in history books, in scientific and popular historical studies and reviews in exile, especially those devoted to the issues of recent Latvian history, Latvianness (Latv. latviskums)¹ and Latvian culture.² Several matters have to be kept in mind. First, the Latvian constructors of national identity from the middle of the nineteenth century onward were not all historians but belonged to broader circles of intellectuals and middle-class writers, artists, philosophers and theologians. Beginning with the second quarter of the twentieth century influential politicians can also be found among them. During the 1920s, writing the history of the nation played a particularly important role in legitimizing the re-emergence of an independent Latvian state in 1918. Second, the concept of exile can never be free of religious overtones and connotations. What is to be understood by religious connotations in history writing? It is hardly possible to discuss this very complicated problem here, since it deserves to be analyzed separately. Still less should an understanding of religion be placed in opposition to the secular understanding of western society and history.³ Two short remarks should suffice here for our purposes. One must distinguish between ‘religious’ and ‘theological’ components in history writing. The first stem from the under-determination of historical knowledge in general⁴ and its need for narrative structures which are often borrowed from religiously-laden stories⁵ in order to build a consistently, scientific-objective knowledge; and,

¹ ‘Latvianness’ (latviskums, latvietība)—a term of objectifying the Latvian order of life (Latvian life world), Latvian culture and the existing Latvian mentality despite sovietization, globalization and threats of assimilation.


³ Secularism is one of the most discussed problems in religious studies today. It is not possible to recapitulate these issues here. For a controversy study, see Tschannen, 1992.


⁵ “History, in this view, is no science but an art, intimately related to the arts of poetry, fiction, and drama, insofar as they all narrate a succession of human acts and sufferings. As Toynbee
from its political interests, to legitimate a certain national and political order. So 'exile,' which is a temporary state, may follow “the Golden Age”, the commencement of which has to be interpreted and the end of which can be predicted and even hastened. In the western world the notion of exile can hardly escape the Christian and Biblical theologoumena. Exile is in this sense confronted with the issues of freedom and responsibility, as well as the idea of guilt. It can involve such theologoumena as salvation, awakening and rebirth, some of them being hospitable to pagan imagery as well. Although Christian and Jewish outlooks on the issues of exile and diaspora, as reflected in the contemporary discourse of social, cultural and literature studies (diaspora studies), seem diametrically opposed to each other, they always hold some sense of the religious dimension in common: alienation from the land, alienation of people from each others, etc., the loss of homeland and political freedom. In our use of the word ‘history’ we shall henceforth distinguish between history (scientific meta-language) and ‘history’ (personified object-language). We will try to demonstrate how the former has been affected by the latter in Latvian historical thinking in exile.

The Negation of ‘History’ in the Late 1980s

The political events during the 1980s, culminating in the rebirth of the Latvian state in 1991, put an end to Latvian exile, at least in the political sense. This period preceding 1991, frequently referred to as ‘Awakening’ (Latv. atmoda) deserves special attention. Two leading theories of ‘history’ made an appearance at the beginning of the Awakening in Latvia. Before analysing the idea of history in exile, a characterization of both of them is in order. Both theories postulated the existence of a deadly threat to the physical, ethnic, and cultural survival of the Latvian people, in the western and Soviet worlds, and both theories offered their own solutions to the problem which, having catastrophic overtones, can be aptly described as ‘ways of salvation.’ The first one, which could be called ethnocentric and traditionalistic, strictly juxtaposed “one’s own” and “foreign,” the two excluding each other. The modern ‘history’ of Latvia was postulated to be a field of triumph of the “foreign,” which was

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6 This issue cannot be discussed here. See the introductory articles for Jewish exile: Eisen 1987; Mendes-Flohr, 1987. On the relationship between Latvian and Jewish historiographical theories and their references to Biblical modes of thought, see Leitane, forthcoming b.