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The Restoration of the Old Republic: The End of Communism in Latvia

Abstract: Three factors that contributed to the fall of the Latvian SSR were Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies, the ethnonationalist movements that arose in response to decades of Russification, and the failure of the USSR to respond to the independence movements in Latvia. Gorbachev's reforms accelerated a discontent among the Latvian people that had been growing for years, and the response of force by the USSR to largely nonviolent protests gained the protesters notoriety and sympathy in the West. Had the Latvian SSR not been as lenient with their policies on free expression, it likely would have taken longer for these protests to gain traction, and if the USSR had not taken a strong approach to Russification in Latvia, the ethnonationalist movements might not have been as successful among the Latvian population. All this contributed to Latvia successfully declaring independence in 1991 after a coup in the USSR failed to remove Gorbachev from power.

Keywords: *Latvian ethnonationalism, glasnost, Russification, Latvijas Tautas Fronte.*

Beginning around the time of 1988 – 1989, many of the various Soviet Socialist Republics began to push for independence from the USSR. The ways in which this change came about differed from country to country; some attempted to achieve this end peacefully, while others overthrew their governments through more violent means. The dissatisfaction in Latvia with the communist regime began long before 1988, but it accelerated around that time in part because of Mikhail Gorbachev's *glasnost* and *perestroika* policies. Latvia declared its independence in 1990 and they achieved this end mostly through nonviolent demonstrations. They were officially recognized as an independent country by the Soviet Union and by the western nations in 1991¹. There were three major factors that contributed to the downfall of communism in Latvia: Gorbachev's implementation of policies relaxing economic restrictions and restrictions on the press in the Soviet Union, the ethnonationalist movement that arose to reestablish the Republic of Latvia, and the failure of the Soviets to respond to the dissatisfaction of the Latvian people.

One of the biggest factors in the downfall of communism in Latvia was Mikhail Gorbachev's incorporation of the *perestroika* and *glasnost* reforms. Latvia, along with the other Baltic states, had already been given a degree of autonomy by the Kremlin some time ago, and

¹ "Remarks to Representatives of the Baltic States September 11, 1991," *American Reference Library – Primary Source Documents*, January 2001, 1.

therefore things were not as bad there as in the other Soviet socialist republics². By the mid-1980s, Latvia was facing an economic crisis and a growing number of people were becoming dissatisfied with Soviet rule³. There had been several small protests against the regime, all of which had been swiftly put down⁴. Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy relaxed some of the restrictions on speech and the press, and the result of this in Latvia was the formation of several movements for change in Latvia. The two biggest groups advocating for change during this time was the group known as Helsinki-86 which formed in 1986 as the first openly anti-communist organization, and the Popular Front of Latvia, or *Latvijas Tautas Fronte* (LTF), an ethnonationalist group that formed two years later⁵. Members of these groups were initially allowed to voice their concerns to the government of the Latvian SSR, and were allowed to demand some small, mainly symbolic, reforms, such as recognizing the mass deportation of Latvians under Stalin⁶. But after the formation of the LTF, the opposition began to be bolder in their demands for change in Latvia, and it was these movements that would help to bring about the end of the Latvian SSR in 1990⁷. Given that there was already widespread dissatisfaction, it is likely that this ending was unavoidable and would have eventually caused the end of the Latvian SSR without the *glasnost* policies in place. But it is almost certain that Gorbachev's policies accelerated this end. Allowing organizations like the LTF and Helsinki-86 to voice opposition and demand some small changes emboldened them to eventually make bigger demands as well, and it was their demand for the restoration of the old Republic of Latvia that would eventually bring about the downfall of communism in Latvia.

A second big factor in Latvia was the ethnonationalist movement itself. As already mentioned, the LTF was formed as a nationalist movement to return Latvia to a country free of the Soviet Union and ruled by ethnic Latvians⁸. The ethnic population of Latvia had noticeably declined due to the Soviet Union forcing people, mainly from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine, to move into Latvia⁹. Before the Second World War, Latvians had made up 80% of the population; by 1989 that number was 52%¹⁰. The Soviet's "Russification" policy meant that schools in Latvian taught Russian, articles and literary works were very rarely published in Latvian, and because of this the Latvian people felt that they were on the edge of a cultural extinction¹¹. There was strict control over everything in the culture, even music produced in the country had to be approved and adhere to Soviet guidelines, although foreign music was not outright forbidden, and there was an unofficial market that existed for it in the Baltic states¹². There was also the factor of the Soviets'

² Viola Olga King, "Latvia's Unique Path Toward Independence: The Challenges Associated with the Transition from a Soviet Republic to an Independent State" in *International Social Science Review* 87, no. 3/4 (January 1, 2012), 132.

³ Andrejs Gusachenko and Vineta Kleinberga, "The Emergence and Restoration of the State: Latvia in 1918 and 1990" in *Taltech Journal of European Studies* 11, no. 1 (May 1, 2021), 66.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 13.

⁶ E.E. Urazbaev and E.N. Yamalova, "The Ethnopolitical Movement as a Vehicle for Nationalism Institutionalisation in Modern Latvia" in *Baltic Region* 12, no. 2 (June 1, 2020), 57.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Andrejs Gusachenko and Vineta Kleinberga, "The Emergence and Restoration of the State: Latvia in 1918 and 1990" in *Taltech Journal of European Studies* 11, no. 1 (May 1, 2021), 67.

⁹ Ibid., 71.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Pekka Gronow and Janis Daugavietis, "Pie laika... Now Is the Time. The Singing Revolution on Latvian Radio and Television" in *Popular Music* 39, no. 2 (May 2020), 273.

harsher stance toward Latvia than the other Baltic states; laws against religion were more strictly enforced, and the party leadership in Latvia was almost entirely composed of ethnic Russians¹³. This was not the case in the neighboring states of Estonia and Lithuania, where there was significantly more representation in the Soviet power structures¹⁴. It is these things which led to the rise of the LTF, and although their initial demands were rather small, by the 1990s their demands had become much bigger. When the Republic of Latvia was restored in 1991, the decision was made to grant citizenship rights only to those who could trace their citizenship back to the old Republic of Latvia established in 1918¹⁵. This was a controversial decision which remains so to this day, as many of the non-Latvians had supported independence from the Soviet Union and were now being left out; although their rights were respected, they were not recognized as citizens of the new Republic of Latvia, which meant they could not vote or own property¹⁶.

Finally, the response of force by the Soviet Union to largely nonviolent movements put the final nail in the coffin for communism in Latvia by turning the sympathies of the Western countries toward them. A nonviolent demonstration, that would later be known as the “Singing Revolution” was organized as being a televised competition that was then turned into a demonstration for the LTF¹⁷. One of the things that they did, for instance, was display the Latvian flag on the logo, which had not yet been legalized¹⁸, and perform songs expressing patriotism and the desire to be free¹⁹. The initial stance of the LTF had been to establish a government that would largely adhere to communist ideals, but would be composed of ethnic Latvians and would allow for the development of Latvian culture²⁰. This was why the Latvian SSR was initially more lenient with them. But when their demands became more for an autonomous republic that would embrace more of the ideals of the old 1918 republic, then the Kremlin responded. The movements of the LTF, as well as the other cultural pushback occurring, was largely nonviolent, so when the Soviet Union responded with force, it shocked the Western countries²¹. The Soviet Union had always taken a slightly harsher stance toward Latvia than the other Baltic republics, and part of the reason for this was that there were several hundred Russian military installations in Latvia housing nearly 56,000 Soviet troops²². In January of 1991, the Soviets forcefully took a television station in Vilnius in Lithuania, resulting in several dead and defensive reactions in the surrounding countries to prepare for similar retaliation from the Kremlin²³. Shootings in Riga shortly after caused the West,

¹³ Viola Olga King, “Latvia’s Unique Path Toward Independence: The Challenges Associated with the Transition from a Soviet Republic to an Independent State” in *International Social Science Review* 87, no. 3/4 (January 1, 2012), 133.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Andrejs Gusachenko and Vineta Kleinberga, “The Emergence and Restoration of the State: Latvia in 1918 and 1990” in *Taltech Journal of European Studies* 11, no. 1 (May 1, 2021), 67.

¹⁶ Ibid., 70-71.

¹⁷ Pekka Gronow and Janis Daugavietis, “Pie laika... Now Is the Time. The Singing Revolution on Latvian Radio and Television” in *Popular Music* 39, no. 2 (May 2020), 284.

¹⁸ Ibid., 283.

¹⁹ Ibid., 283-284.

²⁰ E.E. Urazbaev and E.N. Yamalova, “The Ethnopolitical Movement as a Vehicle for Nationalism Institutionalisation in Modern Latvia” in *Baltic Region* 12, no. 2 (June 1, 2020), 57-58.

²¹ Una Bergmane, “Is This the End of Perestroika? International Reactions to the Soviet Use of Force in the Baltic Republics in January 1991” in *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2020), 26.

²² Ibid., 133.

²³ Ibid., 32.

particularly the U.S., to respond by putting pressure on the Kremlin to back off in the Baltics²⁴. Una Bergmane writes that “news outlets...compared the events to the Soviet interventions of 1956 and 1968 in Hungary and Czechoslovakia”²⁵. U.S. President George Bush stated his admiration for the people’s peaceful demonstrations and voiced concerns about the Soviet Union’s actions in the Baltic region:

[I]n the face of violence and intimidation, the Baltic peoples and their freely elected leaders have steadfastly refused to answer violence with violence, preferring the path of peace and principle...there’s much reason to be concerned about recent Soviet actions against customs posts in Lithuania and Latvia and the ongoing Soviet occupation of broadcast facilities in Vilnius – acts that are incompatible with the process of peaceful change²⁶.

With the support of the West, the Latvian SSR became the Republic of Latvia after a failed coup against Gorbachev by the hardliners in August 1991 weakened the Soviet Union’s ability to properly respond²⁷. Had the Soviets not responded with force to the peaceful demonstrations in the Baltic region, it is possible that it would have taken longer for communism to fall and for the Soviet Union and the rest of the world to recognize Latvia as an independent republic.

The fall of communism in Latvia had a few contributing factors: the policies of *glasnost* and *perestroika* implemented by Mikhail Gorbachev in the Soviet Union, the ethnonationalist movement in Latvia that arose because of Soviet Russification policy, and the response of the Soviet Union to nonviolent reform movements by use of force that gained sympathy for Latvia among the Western states. Had the Soviet Union and the Latvian SSR not put in place policies that allowed for reform, movements like the LTF would likely not have gained as much support as they did. If it were not for the Russification policy dating back to Joseph Stalin, the people may not have been as adamant for change and as eager to join the movement for independence. And finally, Latvia would probably not have gained as much widespread support in the West if Gorbachev had not responded with force in the Baltic region to nonviolent demonstrations. Previous policy combined with Gorbachev’s attempt to keep the USSR intact culminated in the opposite result: the departure of Latvia and the other Baltic states from communism and the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union altogether.

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²⁴ Ibid., 50-51.

²⁵ Ibid., 27.

²⁶ “Remarks on Signing the Baltic Freedom Day Proclamation June 13, 1991”. 2001.

²⁷ Una Bergmane, “Is This the End of Perestroika?’ International Reactions to the Soviet Use of Force in the Baltic Republics in January 1991” in *Journal of Cold War Studies* 22, no. 2 (Spring 2020), 55-56.

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