From Tribe to Nation

A Brief History of Latvia
People of Latvia are very proud of their history. It is a history of the birth and development of the idea of an independent nation, and a consequent struggle to attain it, maintain it, and renew it.

Albeit important, Latvian history is not entirely unique. The changes which swept through the territory of Latvia over the last two dozen centuries were tied to the ever changing map of Europe, and the shifting balance of power. From the Viking conquests and German Crusades, to the recent World Wars, the territory of Latvia, strategically located on the Baltic Sea between the Scandinavian region and Russia, was very much part of these events, and shared their impact especially closely with its Baltic neighbours.

What is unique and also attests to the importance of history in Latvia today, is how the growth and development of a nation, initially as a mere idea, permeated all these events through the centuries up to Latvian independence in 1918.

In this brief history of Latvia you can read how Latvia grew from tribe to nation, how its history intertwined with changes throughout Europe, and how through them, or perhaps despite them, Latvia came to be a country with such a proud and distinct national identity.
3 Incredible Historical Landmarks

The Baltic Way – this was one of the most creative non-violent protest activities in history. On August 23, 1989, approximately two million people joined hands to form a human chain spanning over 600 kilometres across the three Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania – occupied by the Soviet Union at the time. The Baltic Way was arranged on the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact which had led to the occupation of the Baltic States in 1940, and aimed to draw global attention to the unlawful occupation of the countries.

Bermondt-Affair – this was the greatest victory in Latvian military history. 32,000 newly mobilized Latvian troops protected Rīga against an army of 45,000 battle-hardened and better equipped veterans led by general Bermondt. Bermondt was a German-supported Russian imperialist, who led the so-called West Russian Volunteer Army. Latvians succeeded in defending Rīga against the combined German and Russian forces in November 1919, thus safeguarding an independent Latvia. The event, known as Lāčplēša Diena, is commemorated each year by lighting candles on November 11.

Dainas – this is a traditional form of music or poetry, usually consisting of four lines. Dainas are specifically Latvian in their structure, thematic sentiments, and worldview. Dating back well over a thousand years, more than 1.2 million texts and 30,000 melodies have been identified and collected; they were first published between 1894 and 1915.
Latvia as a country appeared on the map of Europe after the First World War. However, predecessors of the Latvian people arrived in the territory long before that – as tribes who settled on the banks of the river Daugava around five thousand years ago. Gradually the settlers formed the Baltic tribes, which became the Latvian people over many centuries. Thus, initially we have to look at the history of the people in the territory known as Latvia today, and the gradual development of national identity, subsequently a nation, and, eventually, a country.

The ancestors of Latvians and Latvian Livs were hunters and gatherers who followed the migration of deer into present day Latvia. As time passed, they became farmers and merchants. First mention of the early Baltic peoples dates back to 98 AD, when Roman historian and geographer Tacitus refers in his travel journal to a tribe living near the Baltic Sea and gathering amber – valued more than gold in many places.
Cradle of Latvian Culture

The strategic location between the East and the West made Latvia a crossroads for trade routes, among them the Amber Road to Rome and the Route between the Vikings and the Greeks. Around 900 AD the ancient Balts began to establish definable tribal realms and cultures: Couronians, Latgallians, Selonians and Semigallians. All spoke Baltic languages that belonged to the Indo-European language family. Only the Livs, a smaller Finno-Ugric tribe were linguistically unique in this otherwise Baltic region. Each tribe had its own strengths: Semigallians and Selonians were known as prosperous farmers, the Latgalians had the most advanced socio-political developments and the Couronians were respected warriors and seafarers.

The beliefs of ancient Latvians were tied close to nature, having deities for different natural occurrences. The gods of thunder (Pērkons), forests, the sea and maternal figures like the goddess of destiny Laima and patroness of mothers Māra were all subject to a heavenly father called Dievs (God). Altogether the names and functions of about 200 Baltic gods and goddesses have been preserved in folklore. But the Balts also had sacred forests, groves and stones, which substituted temples. In many cases churches were later built on these sacred sites.

The Couronians mastered the art of seamanship and became the most feared of the Baltic tribes, earning a reputation of the ‘Baltic Vikings’. Practicing rather fierce relations with Scandinavians overseas, they were frequently at war, raiding and pillaging distant shores. It is believed that modern day Stockholm owes its foundation to the Couronians, who were responsible for the destruction of a former Swedish Viking capital in retaliation for similar acts on Couronian land.

The arrival of German merchants and Christian missionaries to the Baltics. 

- IX – XI c.
- Late XII c.
- 1198
- 1201
- Riga is founded near the site of a Liv village on the confluence of Rīžupe and Daugava rivers.
- Crusades to Christianize the Balts begin, led by German bishops. The proto-Latvian Couronians, Semigallians, Selonians and Latgallians, as well as the Livs, oppose the invaders.

Viking raids and conquests in the Baltic area.

- IX – XI c.
The map of Europe was ever-changing in the 8th - 18th centuries as the importance and might of nations shifted. Empires emerged, collapsed and territories were invaded or fought over, deemed as useful and desirable, whether it be for location, natural resources, trade or other reasons. The territory of Latvia was always part of these changes and power struggles. Each new power subjugated the local tribes and influenced the development of the society. This merger of cultures had a positive effect in terms of absorption of values, knowledge and practices. It also allowed the Baltic region to develop alongside the rest of Europe and be an integral part of it.

By the late 12th century, the territory of Latvia was increasingly visited by merchants from Western Europe. German and Danish traders were bringing missionaries along with them to convert the pagan tribes, now grown into small kingdoms, to Christianity. But the pantheistic Balts resisted the imposition of a foreign religion. Several military campaigns called the Northern Crusades were then launched against the Baltic peoples, ending without significant results at first as the Balts proved to be equal adversaries.

In 1201 the construction of Rīga began, overseen by Bishop Albert who was mandated to Christianize the small Baltic peoples. Soon thereafter Rīga became the largest and most powerful city on the coast of the Baltic Sea, but further expansion was difficult. Still, with evermore support from Western Europe, the Crusaders gradually advanced. As the years passed, the tribal kingdoms were defeated and converted one by one. The resistance was fierce: the Crusaders suffered a major defeat against the combined forces of native Latvian and Lithuanian tribes at the Battle of Saule in 1236 and disbanded. The remaining knights recognized what became known as the Livonian Order. With ongoing support from several popes, the Crusaders gradually subjugated the tribes. Semigallians were the last of the Baltic tribes to succumb to the Western invaders at the end of the 13th century.

The conquered lands were formed into a feudal confederation called Livonia. Livonia quickly westernized and experienced an economic boom; several Livonian cities were included into the German trading organization, the Hanseatic League. In huge strides the region developed best practices and state of the art technologies, which influenced architecture and fostered production of goods. The Baltic people adapted and became part of a common European society. To preserve their pagan traditions, successors of the Baltic tribes integrated them into Christianity. For example, the first Christmas tree is said to have been decorated in Rīga in the beginning of the 16th century – as a continuation of pagan traditions related to Winter Solstice. The tradition quickly spread across German lands and became widely practiced around Europe. Livonia prospered largely unhindered until mid-sixteenth century, but was politically divided between bishops and the knights of the Livonian Order.
Colonial Ambitions Amid Troubled Times

Livia was one of the first to embrace the Renaissance in mid-16th century, thus most Latvians are Lutherans up until today. This also stimulated the consolidation of the Latvian nation and emergence of the written Latvian language – the first books in Latvian were published at that time. Regardless, Livonia never reached the political and military strength of its neighbours. The Livonian Wars which involved the surrounding empires destroyed the Livonian Confederacy by 1583. The territory then entered an era of instability and constant warfare between the kingdoms of Sweden, Prussia, Poland-Lithuania and Russia. At first, Poland-Lithuania took over Latgale and Vidzeme on the right bank of River Daugava, whereas the last Master of the Livonian Order created the Duchy of Courland on the left bank, becoming a vassal to the King of Poland. Later on, Sweden took Vidzeme and Riga in 1629. Riga thus became the largest and most important city in the Swedish Kingdom, but was claimed by Russia a century later.

Incredibly, an ambitious vassal state emerged and prospered amidst all of the political changes - the Duchy of Courland. Its nobility was formed from members of the Livonian Order and the political system remained largely unchanged. Couronians, Latgalians, Selonians, Livs and Semigallians began to take shape. The people, mainly farmers, most of them serfs, started to identify as a culturally unified nation – the Latvians.

In the beginning of the 18th century the Russian Empire slowly conquered the lands abided by Latvians due to geopolitical interests – mainly access to Baltic Sea trade. Vidzeme and Riga were ceded to Russia in 1721. The Division of Poland led to even further absorption – Latgale was annexed in 1772, while Courland or Kurzeme was annexed last in 1795. Although the Great Northern War and then the Seven Year’s War ravaged the land, industry quickly spread in this period, and the population grew formidably. Vidzeme and Kurzeme became Russia’s most developed provinces, Riga – its cultural and economic jewel, but the peasant’s conditions became much worse with Russian rule. A period of Russification ensued. Napoleon’s march on Moscow in 1812 devastated the southern part of Latvia and even resulted in the burning of Riga’s suburbs. However, political preconditions and economic growth caused serfdom to be abolished in Vidzeme (1807) and Kurzeme (1819), and finally in Latgale (1861), ripening the idea of an independent Latvian nation.

Elsewhere in Europe

1700 - 1721
The Great Northern War between the Russian and Swedish Empires
1775 - 1783
The American War of Independence against the United Kingdom
1789 - 1799
The French Revolution

As a result of the Great Northern War, Riga surrenders to Peter. The Great Northern Latvia comes under Russian rule, and peasants become serfs of their German barons.

During the First Partition of Poland, conducted by the Russian Empire, Prussia and Habsburg Austria, eastern Latvia (Latgale) becomes part of the Russian province of Polesie.

During the Third Partition of Poland the Duchy of Courland becomes a Russian province.

Napoleon’s army invades Kurzeme and Zemgale, but fails to reach Riga or take over the besieged city of Daugavpils before Napoleon ordered withdrawal and retreat from Moscow.

1710
1772
1795
1812

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Courland for the Duke of Bartolomeo Rastrelli palace, designed by Bārtoloms Rastrells for the Duke of Courland.

Above: Riga harbour on the Daugava river in 1863
Below: Rundāle – a distinguished baroque palace, designed by Bārtoloms Rastrells for the Duke of Courland.

Troubled Times

Ambitions Amid Colonial

ans proved to be great shipbuilders and seamen, perhaps drawing on the genes of their tribal ancestors. The Duchy reached the peak of its prosperity under Duke Jacob Kettler, descendant of the last Master of the Livonian Order, who ruled from 1642 to 1682. Trade and manufacture flourished, and the profit allowed for Duke Jacob to establish a merchant fleet, trading with England, France, the Netherlands and as far as Portugal. Others took note of Courland’s fine ships and orders came in for the Duchy’s to build fleets for Western kingdoms. This led to a new phase of Renaissance in the region, but the Duchy was even more ambitious. Jacob had close ties in Western courts because his mother was a Prussian princess and he was the godson of King James I of England. The Duke used this to his advantage becoming politically influential – enough to contest the colonial powers over supremacy in distant territories. Two colonies were established one on an island of the Gambia River in Africa and another on Tobago island in the Caribbean. Both were successful ventures until the end of Jacob’s rule, but the Swedish-Polish war, taking place to a large extent within the Duchy, parcelised the state. During this period, the Dutch claimed both colonies, but later returned Tobago. With the death of Jacob and increased warfare in the region, the Duchy’s navy fell apart, but the Couronian place names from this period are still prominent on both former colonies. The Duchy’s prosperity and nearby Riga’s strategic economic and cultural importance stimulated awareness of the Latvian identity. It was in the 17th century when the merger of Couronians, Latgalians, Selonians, Livos and Semgallians began to take shape. The people, mainly farmers, most of them serfs, started to identify as a culturally unified nation – the Latvians.
The First Signs of National Awakening

The 19th century saw the initial development of a distinctly Latvian national identity. Latvian authors published their works for the first time, cities and towns in the territory grew in size and prominence. The abolition of serfdom went hand in hand with the emergence of a Latvian working class, increase in economic empowerment and migration to cities. The level of education also increased and resulted in the formation of cultural and political awareness.

Several crucial cultural and social developments took place and played a key role in the growth of a national identity – such as the first Nationwide Song and Dance Celebration, a tradition which continues to this day; publishing of the vast collection of Latvian folk songs (the Dainas) and of the first Latvian novels, signifying an important and symbolic accomplishment in the formation of the literary Latvian language. It is only natural that a national awakening began to grow simultaneously with these developments.

Elsewhere in the world

1804 Napoleon crowns himself Emperor of France
1808 Britain declares slave trade as illegal
1869 The Suez Canal opens linking the Mediterranean and the Red Sea
1861 The Latvian Society is founded in Riga. Its establishment greatly contributes to further development of education and culture in Latvia.
1868 The Latvian Society is founded in Riga. Its establishment greatly contributes to further development of education and culture in Latvia.
1861 The Riga - Daugavpils railway is opened and links Latvia with the European railroad system.
1861 Serfdom is abolished in Latvia.
1861 Riga Politechnical Institute, the predecessor of modern-day Riga Technical University, is founded.
1862 Serfdom is abolished in Russia.
1868 Chocolate factory “Laima” is founded and operating today.
1894 – 1915 The first Latvian Nationwide Song and Dance Celebration is held in Riga.
In the years before WWI rapid industrialization of Latvia brought about the growth of sea ports, banks and commerce. In central Riga, hundreds of marvelous Art Nouveau style buildings sprung up, bringing Latvian artists and architects to prominence.

Turmoil of the 1905 Revolution in Russia hit the territory of Latvia as well. The workers’ and farmers’ revolution with a strong national accent was led by educated Latvians and the Latvian Social Democratic Workers Party. The Revolution became a training ground for grassroots democracy, and turned against both the Russian Tsar’s government and the landed German gentry. And lastly, a political awakening began to form.

Burning of German barons’ mansions became a wide-spread manifestation of people’s protest against the oppressive regime. The Russian government sent in punishment squads welcomed by the German gentry; hundreds of insurgents were summarily executed; thousands more sent into exile or fled the country. The idea of uniting all Latvian-inhabited regions into an independent state was voiced for the first time and the dream of an independent Latvia started taking shape.
World War I violently swept through Latvia in the spring of 1915. National military units, the Latvian Riflemen Battalions, were founded and commanded by Latvian officers within the Russian army to defend Rīga against the German army. When the Germans took over the country in 1917-18, many Latvian Riflemen left for Russia and joined the Communist revolution led by the Bolsheviks.

At the same time, a strong pro-independence movement developed. The Democratic Bloc and the Latvian Provisional National Council were founded at the end of 1917. On November 17, 1918, both agreed to jointly form a provisional parliament, the Latvian People’s Council, which resolved to found an independent and democratic republic. On the following day, November 18, 1918, the independent Republic of Latvia was proclaimed at a ceremonious meeting at the National Theatre in Rīga. Lawyer Jānis Čakste was elected chairman of the Latvian People’s Council, and agronomist Kārlis Ulmanis became head of the government. Latvia won the War of Independence against the remaining German troops and the Red Army on Latvian soil in 1920. Consequently the Constitutional Assembly was elected and began its work in drafting the constitution of Latvia – the Satversme – which was passed in 1922. The first Latvian parliament or Saeima was elected that year as well.
Elsewhere in Europe

June 28, 1914
Archduke Franz Ferdinand is assassinated in Sarajevo sparking WWI

April 24, 1915
Start of the Armenian Genocide by the Ottoman Empire

June 4, 1917
The first ever Pulitzer Prizes are awarded in New York

The independent Republic of Latvia is proclaimed.
November 18, 1918

A German coup in Liepāja fails to overthrow the Provisional Government, which finds refuge on a boat guarded by Entente warships. A parallel pro-German government is established.
April 16, 1919

German troops seize Riga, expel the Red Army, instigate a killing spree against communists and suspected sympathizers, and move against Estonian and Latvian forces in northern Latvia.
May 23, 1919

An armistice with Soviet Russia takes effect after the Latvian army, with aid from Polish troops, liberates eastern Latvia from Red Army forces. The Communist government is dissolved.
February 1, 1920

A peace treaty is signed with Soviet Russia, in which it recognizes Latvian independence and sovereignty without reservations, renouncing any claims to Latvian sovereignty.
August 11, 1920

A counter-attack by combined German and Latvian forces against the Red Army begins.
March 3, 1919

The independent Republic of Latvia is proclaimed.
November 18, 1918

Riga is taken by Red Army troops. The Provisional Government retreats to Liepāja and, while seeking assistance from Western Powers, is forced to accept help from local German Home Guards.
January 3, 1919

The Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic is declared. The government led by Pēteris Stučka institutes its rule with draconian laws and ruthless terror.
December 17, 1918

A German coup in Liepāja fails to overthrow the Provisional Government, which finds refuge on a boat guarded by Entente warships. A parallel pro-German government is established.
April 16, 1919

The Latvian Provisional Government returns to Riga.
June 23–25, 1919

The smaller Latvian Army liberates Riga from the attacking united German and Russian forces.

The elected Constitutional Assembly begins work as a temporary legislative body with the main task of writing a Constitution.
May 1, 1920

The Constitutional Assembly adopts the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia.
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Latvia is Born

After Latvia gained its long-awaited independence, one of the most important tasks was to revive the economy. The Latvian national monetary unit, the lat, was issued in 1922. The state continued the distribution of state property and land that had once been held by the German landed gentry to former landless peasants and small farmers. Latvian agriculture developed and was fully able to supply the country with food, as well as opening wide possibilities for the export of agricultural products.

Latvian industry rapidly revived and was oriented chiefly towards food production, textile manufacturing and timber processing. The electronics sector developed in the 1930s. Latvia’s largest electronics factory, VEF, manufactured modern radios, photo cameras (e.g. Minox) and even airplanes. In the second half of the 1930s Latvia began to produce automobiles and trucks. With the help of foreign investment, Latvia built a modern high-voltage hydroelectric power plant.

However, the worldwide economic crisis of the early 1930s and the following turmoil of 1940s did not leave Latvia unscathed and the blissful years of democratic Latvia came to a swift end.

Elsewhere in Europe

1926
Mussolini seizes complete control of Italy as its dictator

1927
The first talking movie, “The Jazz Singer”, is made in the US

1929
The Great Depression begins

1933
The Nazis come to power in Germany

Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis organizes a bloodless coup. The Saeima is dismissed and all political parties banned. Latvia becomes an authoritarian state.

May 16, 1934
A political bloc called the Baltic Entente is formed between the Baltic states to promote their mutual diplomatic support.

September 12, 1934
Soviet authorities close down Latvian organizations and organize mass arrests of ethnic Latvians as suspected foreign agents. ~25,000 are arrested, ~16,000 are later executed.

November 30, 1937
Ribbentrop and Molotov (Hitler’s and Stalin’s Foreign Ministers) sign a treaty defining the zones of dominance and enabling Hitler to attack Poland and later – Western Europe.

August 23, 1939

Left: The Embassy of the United Kingdom, Raina boulevard – one of Riga’s central streets, 1930s
On the brink of WWII the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed a treaty of non-aggression, known as the ‘Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact’. It contained a secret protocol dividing Eastern Europe into spheres of influence, envisioning the Baltic countries for the Soviets and Poland for Germany. The consequent German invasion of Poland triggered the start of the war, and in turn gave the Soviet Union the opportunity to occupy the Baltics.

Moscow presented Latvia with an ultimatum, as a result of which Latvia was forced to sign an agreement of “mutual assistance” and tens of thousands of Red Army troops were stationed in Latvia. Soon after Soviet press in Russia began to voice regular accusations against the Baltic countries regarding alleged activities against Moscow, and in June 1940 Moscow issued a memorandum demanding the formation of a new government and the stationing of additional Soviet military units. In an attempt to avoid bloodshed, the Latvian government decided to fulfil Moscow’s demands. As a result, 100 000 Soviet army troops entered Latvia. A puppet government answerable to Moscow was “elected” in single party elections soon after, and voted to make Latvia a part of the USSR.

For the majority of the war Latvia was occupied by Nazi Germany. Tragically, Latvian soldiers were forced to fight on both sides of the front, brothers against brothers, fathers against sons. Most were killed. Latvia’s population perished not only on the battlefield, special Nazi campaigns exterminated 70 000 Jews, 18 000 Latvians and 2 000 Roma. Another 150 000 fled to a life in exile. Additionally, Latvia became the death ground for tens of thousands of Jews brought in from other countries.

Many Latvians were actively involved in a resistance movement against the persecutions of the German occupation regime. For instance, Žanis Lipke risked his life, and the lives of his family members and friends, to save more than 50 Jews – a memorial in his name has recently been opened. He was not the only one, there were numerous people who risked their lives to save, hide, feed or simply keep quiet about the whereabouts of Jews, though it is difficult to know exactly how many. Over 25 people were helping Žanis Lipke alone, many others saved numerous Jews; around 150 Jews were saved in Rīga, and more in the countryside. Exact numbers are not known.

The idea of renewing independence never died. The Central Latvian Council was established underground with that aim, it published a pamphlet as an appeal to the Allied governments to restore a sovereign and democratic Latvian state, and published the resistance newspaper “Brīvā Latvija” (Free Latvia), which was deemed illegal by the authorities.
Claiming a breach of the treaty, the Soviet Union issues an ultimatum, demanding installation of a new government and allowing entry to an unlimited number of Soviet troops. June 16, 1940

Soviet troops occupy Latvia June 17, 1940

More than 15,000 Latvian citizens are deported to remote regions of the Soviet Union. June 14, 1941

The SS instigates an annihilation of Latvia’s Jews, also involving Latvian proxies. Almost 75% perish in the Holocaust. Others executed include communists, Roma, and the mentally ill. July–December 1941

In the battle on the Velikaya river both Latvian Legion divisions, illegally formed by the Nazis, are thrown together against Soviet forces in a bloody battle with huge casualties. March 16, 1944

The Latvian SIS government returns; Soviet troops take over Riga. The German Army retreats to Western Latvia. October 13, 1944

At the Yalta Conference Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin decide post-war arrangements in Europe, conceding to the USSR control of Eastern Europe, but calling for free elections. February 4–11, 1945
The Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic

The end of the Second World War brought half a century of Soviet rule to Latvia. Widespread persecutions started immediately against those who had allegedly cooperated with Nazi forces, participated in or supported the resistance movement, or were simply suspected of being politically unreliable, or free thinking, etc. During Stalin’s rule, around 150,000 people were killed or deported from Latvia to remote areas of the Soviet Union, such as Siberia.

Rural areas were forced into collectivisation, in cities people had to live in communal flats – several families per flat. Private property was nationalized, culture was ideologized, and religion banned. All printed and distributed materials, including, for example, music, as well as broadcast media, were controlled by censorship. As Latvia had well-developed infrastructure and educated specialists, Moscow based some of the Soviet Union’s most advanced manufacturing facilities in Latvia. Soviet workers from all over the Union flooded into the country as part of the Russification campaign. They were granted nationalized property previously owned by deported or punished Latvian citizens.

Among positive consequences of the Soviet Union – the economy in Latvia developed, and a comprehensive system of free education (primary through to university) and health care existed. Important achievements were attained in science – a quarter of all medicines invented in the USSR were developed in Latvia. Latvians were also active in the Soviet Olympic teams, winning numerous medals for the USSR.

Nonetheless, opportunities and rights in the Latvian SSR were limited. The Russian language was imposed in schools and all correspondence; many Latvians suffered from segregation.

The independence movement persevered. The national partisans, 20,000 in total, continued to actively resist Soviet rule long after the war ended, mainly residing in Latvia’s forests, until they were eliminated by Soviet armed forces. Other forms of resistance persisted, mainly through culture, which was crucial in helping people maintain a sense of national identity.
Random facts about life in Soviet Latvia

Music which made it into the country officially included Italian pop, Abba, and jazz and blues from the US.

An underground film and music exchange existed in limited circles, but those caught were punished.

Forbidden “samizdat” (self-published) books were printed underground.

Tuning into Radio Free Europe, BBC, or the Voice of America, despite Soviet efforts to disturb the wavelengths, provided a peephole into world events.

Food shortages, as well as shortages of a wide array of household goods, were a trademark throughout the Soviet times, hence Latvians got very good at queuing, because a queue meant that there was something for sale!

Elsewhere in the world

1945
Start of the Cold War

1952
Princess Elizabeth becomes Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom at age 25

1961
The Berlin Wall is built

1961
The Soviet Union sends the first manned spacecraft into space carrying Yuri Gagarin

1963
Martin Luther King Jr delivers “I have a dream” speech

1980
Ronald Reagan becomes president of the USA

December 8, 1980
John Lennon is assassinated in New York
Latvia’s push towards regaining independence was closely linked to internal changes in the Soviet Union. Mikhail Gorbachev came to power and introduced two key reforms – glasnost, increasing transparency in government institutions; and perestroika, restructuring the political and economic system. These reforms, unintentionally, rocked the entire union as people took advantage of the changes, and ultimately led to the fall of the Soviet Union.

Pro-independence organizations strengthened; protests started breaking out against a wide variety of issues. A nationwide movement, the Popular Front, was founded in Latvia on October 8, 1988. For the first time, parties aside from the Communist party were allowed to stand for election, and elected they were. This enabled the new Supreme Soviet of Latvia to pass a renewal of independence act and begin a period of transition. Despite strong efforts by Moscow to halt the process, the resistance was able to peacefully barricade its way through to independence by August 21, 1991.

Latvia, alongside the other Baltic States, demonstrated to the world that independence can be achieved peacefully; the process in the Baltics became known as the ‘Singing Revolution’. 
Elsewhere in the world
April 26, 1986
Explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine

June 4, 1989
Elections in Poland are resoundingly won by opposition movement Solidarnost, sparking anti-communist revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe and paving the way to the fall of the Soviet Union

November 9, 1989
Berlin wall comes down

November 17 to December 29, 1989
Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia

1989
Tim Berners Lee invents the World Wide Web

1985
Mikhail Gorbachev takes over leadership of the Communist Party.

1986
Human rights group Helsinki-86, the first openly anti-soviet group, is founded in Liepāja. It inspires the formation of other pro-independence groups.

July 10, 1986
Popular protests against building a hydroelectric dam on the Daugava river break out. Later, the plan to build a subway system in Rīga is also halted by popular action.

1987
The International Front of Working People is formed. It becomes an orthodox counter-force which resists the initiatives of the Latvian Popular Front.

January 7-8, 1989
The Baltic Way manifestation is held throughout the Baltic states. 2 million of protesters join hand in hand and form a human chain all the way from Tallinn through Rīga to Vilnius.

August 23, 1989
A special force of the Interior Ministry backed by a Soviet security force unit opens fire in Rīga and seizes the ministry. Several journalists, police officers and a bystander get killed.

January 20, 1991
A coup in Moscow staged by an illegally established State Emergency Committee attempts to overthrow Gorbachev. The Supreme Council of Latvia denounces the anti-governmental actions.

August 19-21, 1991
As the coup fails, the Latvian Supreme Council passes a Constitutional Law declaring Latvia an independent democratic republic in accordance with the 1922 Constitution.

August 21, 1991
Latvia becomes a member of the United Nations.

September 18, 1991
Helsinki-86 organizes an unsanctioned event at the Freedom Monument in Rīga to commemorate the victims of Soviet mass deportations.

April 15, 1988
The Latvian National Independence Movement is founded at a rally in historic Akādijas park in Rīga.

July 10, 1988
The Latvian Popular Front, led by Dainis Ivans, is established and attracts membership of several hundred thousand people. It becomes the guiding force toward the restoration of independence.

October 8-9, 1988
The International Front of Working People is formed. It becomes an orthodox counter-force which resists the initiatives of the Latvian Popular Front.

January 7-8, 1989

May 3, 1990
The Popular Front majority adopts the Declaration of Renewed Independence, a law renouncing the Soviet occupation as illegal and in part reestablishing independence.

May 4, 1990
500,000 come out to demonstrate in Rīga against Soviet special forces attacking Lithuanian institutions. Barricades are built in defense of the legislature around important public buildings.

January 13, 1991

August 23, 1989

May 4, 1990

January 13, 1991

August 19-21, 1991

September 18, 1991

Left: Popular demonstration on May 4, 1990 – the day of the Restoration of National Independence
Latvia Since Independence

Latvia has come a long way since regaining independence in 1991. With the renewal of independence, Latvia moved consistently towards two of its most important foreign policy goals – membership of the NATO and the EU. During the 1990s, all the necessary government bodies were set up, many social, economic and judicial changes were implemented, the process of privatisation of businesses and real estate was implemented in order to transfer the large state-owned enterprises to private ownership, and enable individuals to regain properties taken away from their ancestors, as well as to obtain the properties they were living in. On the whole, an impressive number of changes had to be planned, implemented and experienced on the road to solidifying independence and building a free and democratic republic.

After a short yet demanding negotiation and accession period Latvia became a Member State of NATO and the EU in 2004. Ten years later, in 2014, Latvia joined the Eurozone, thanks to strong economic growth. Since 2011, Latvia has been the EU’s fastest growing economy for three consecutive years; recent EU reports suggest this trend is likely to continue until 2018. Latvia is also on its way to become a member of the OECD. Latvia’s name has also been brought out into the world with hosting high level events such as a NATO summit, the Ice Hockey World Championship and the Eurovision song contest. Riga was the European Capital of Culture throughout 2014. Latvian athletes have won significant prizes in sports ranging from BMX cycling to ice hockey. Latvian opera singers and conductors take leading roles in the world’s most prestigious opera houses and concert halls.

This has been a time of rebirth not only for the country, but for its nation, culture and self-awareness as well. It has been a time for the Latvian people to form their identity, to remember traditions long forgotten and to be proud of who they are. Over three decades later, Latvia is engraved on the map of Europe, with a wide and ever developing network of international ties, and diplomatic relationships, a growing economy and a strong position within the European Union.
After full restitution of the constitution, the Saeima elects the first state President since the restoration of independence – Guntis Ulmanis, who stays in office for two consecutive terms. July 7, 1993

An agreement is reached with Yeltsin’s Russia and armed forces of the Russian Federation leave Latvia. For the first time since 1939 there are no foreign troops on Latvian soil. August 31, 1994

At the Ice Hockey World Championship held in St. Petersburg, the Latvian national ice hockey team defeats the team of the Russian Federation. May 5, 2000

Riga celebrates 800 years since its founding. Summer 2001

Latvia starts a UN-approved peace-keeping mission in Afghanistan, jointly with peace-keepers from several other NATO countries. 2003

Latvia becomes a member of NATO. March 29, 2004

The Ice Hockey World Championship takes place in Riga. May 2006

Latvian Prime Minister Aigars Kalvītis and Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov sign a border treaty between Latvia and Russia, allowing Latvia to join the Schengen treaty. March 27, 2007

President V. Zatlers calls on the Latvian people to disband the 10th Saeima. The referendum supports the Presidential initiative, and extraordinary elections are held soon thereafter. Summer 2011

A referendum on granting Russian as the 2nd official language status is held, the proposal is rejected, but highlights historical tensions and a need for better integration policies. February 12, 2012

At the 2012 Summer Paralympic games A. Apinis wins gold in shot put, and silver in the discus throw. For the first time a public debate ensues about treatment of Paralympic athletes. September 2012

Latvia celebrates the 95th anniversary of its independence. November 18, 2013

The Euro is introduced in Latvia. January 2014

Riga is the European Capital of Culture with the program Forc Ma-jeure, showing that culture can be the inspiration and the instrument for change. 2014

Latvia hosts the presidency of the Council of the European Union. 2015

Eurovision song contest is hosted in Latvia. May 2003

At the 2012 Summer Olympics defending champion M. Strābēns wins Olympic gold in BMX cycling, and beach volleyball duo Pļaviņš and Šmēdiņš bring back bronze medals. August 2012

Youth choir Kamēr... wins first place in its category at the World Choir games in China. Summer 2006

At NATO summit takes place in Riga. November 28-29, 2006

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Rīga celebrates 800 years since its founding. Summer 2001
History still influences the development of modern Latvia. Coming to terms and dealing with the consequences of the turbulent past is an ongoing process, one that is still taking place.

When the independence of Latvia was restored in 1991, the decision was made to affirm the continuity of Latvia’s original body of citizens. Thus, individuals who were citizens of Latvia prior to Soviet occupation were once again recognized as such, whereas those who migrated to Latvia during the Soviet occupation were given an opportunity to apply for citizenship through a naturalization process, as they became stateless with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Those who have not gone through the naturalization process hold limited political rights, namely: the right to elect and be elected. However, the naturalization process has not been as quick and overwhelming as expected. One of the explanations of this is the fact that people do not experience debilitating constraints in economic, social and educational rights and therefore choose not to undertake the bureaucratic procedures. Another is that a section of the society was alienated by requiring to apply for citizenship instead of awarding it automatically, even if they supported the independence, as both Latvians and minorities fought for it. Nevertheless, Latvia is on the way to an integrated society in which historical differences are put aside, and majority and minority representatives all feel at home and equally respected, which is an ongoing process due to our complex history. The historical reasons which caused such a great influx of people from other parts of the Soviet Union have created certain challenges for language policy and the development of a well-knit society in Latvia. Additional efforts have been necessary to ensure that all inhabitants have good command of the Latvian language, enabling them to enjoy higher educational opportunities, and as well ensuring that all inhabitants of Latvia feel at home, regardless of their mother tongue.

Latvia has retained a very generous education system from the interwar period – the state finances educational programmes in eight minority languages, though teaching is also conducted in Latvian, thus ensuring that graduates of minority schools hold language proficiency in numerous languages.

History is also evidently present in architecture. Relics of various eras can be seen around towns and cities in Latvia – from 16th century castles and manors to baroque, Art Nouveau, wooden architecture of the 19th century, modernist buildings and Soviet housing projects. Wooden houses and Art Nouveau are listed as cultural heritage and thus protected under the law. Soviet built factories, most of which ceased production with the fall of the Union, have recently been regenerated, such as the gypsum factory in Ķīpsala which was made into luxury apartments. Others found...
an alternative use, for example the VEF and Tobacco Factories were taken over by artists and are now used for theater, music, and other creative happenings. Most other relics of Soviet architecture still remain as they are, scattered in between beautiful old buildings, and are used for their original purpose; some have been destroyed, others – regenerated (for example, Hotel “Latvija”).

History is also constantly revisited and analysed through the arts, academia, and research. Recently there have been many successful initiatives addressing complex historical topics through theatre (“Grandfather” and “Legionnaires”), film (“Dream Team 1935”), literature (historical accounts by journalist Atis Klimovičs and film critic Valentina Freimane), as well as visual arts.

While for many countries their key historical events took place half a century ago, for Latvia some of the most crucial historical events were just two decades back, and as such they are still fresh in people’s memories and influence their actions. In many ways, Latvia is still living its history, and dealing with its consequences every day. That is why history is so important to Latvians in social and political issues, and will remain an important factor for years to come.

The Latvian Institute promotes positive awareness about Latvia abroad, creating a competitive identity for the state. The Institute works closely with local and foreign dignitaries, diplomats, academics, students and international media in developing an understanding of Latvia, its people and branding.

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