

# Latvians the heart of latvia history essay



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What is today Latvia is the heartland of the Latvian population whose area of settlement was much more widespread in the past. As a consequence of emigration in the nineteenth century and during the Soviet era many Latvian communities are scattered throughout western Europe, North America and Australia. The recent economic crisis of 2008 has hit Latvia hard, and there is a marked trend of brain-drain, that is of a loss of people with academic education (i. e. medical doctors, school teachers) who leave the country for other regions of the European Union in search of work opportunities.

The Latvians in Latvia (1. 4 million) make up only 53 per cent of the total population. More than 40 per cent of Latvia's population are Slavic groups, above all Russians, and also Belorussians, Ukrainians and Poles. The younger generation of the minority groups have learned Latvian to the extent that the percentage of those people who speak Latvian amounts to 62 per cent. This means that the speech community of those who speak Latvian, the official language of the country, is larger than the number of Latvians.

More than 0. 15 million Latvians live outside Latvia, some 36, 000 in neighboring countries (i. e. Russia, Lithuania and Estonia), 22, 000 in western Europe (i. e. Germany, Great Britain, Sweden) and 90, 000 overseas (i. e. USA, Canada and Australia).

Latvian is a Baltic language, the other living language of this branch of the Indo-European family of languages being Lithuanian. Latvian was used for writing first in the sixteenth century and the oldest records are translations of German religious texts. Written Latvian lived a revival during the era of national awakening in the nineteenth century when the literary production

increased with the works of the so-called Young Latvians, among them K. Valdemars, J. Alunans, K. Barons, A. Kronvalds, the brothers R. and M. Kaudzite and others. During this period of cultural self-awareness, Latvian literature branched out into two main trajectories. One was literature in the sense of belles-lettres, the other was the collection in writing of the rich Latvian folklore. Latvian folk traditions evolved in three domains: folk songs (dainas), narrative prose such as fairy-tales, stories, anecdotes (nostasti), riddles and sayings. Works of the oral tradition had already been collected to some extent in the seventeenth century. In the nineteenth century such collection was carried out on a large scale, and the most voluminous work of the time is the compilation by K. Barons and H. Wissendorffs that was published between 1894 and 1915. Arguably, the literary work with the greatest symbolic value for Latvian identity is the national epic, "Lacplesis" ('Bearslayer'), composed by Andrejs Pumpurs and published in 1888. This epic has been highlighted as a literary work that "played a major role in the Latvian way from a class of downtrodden peasants in the Baltic province of the Tsar's empire to an independent nation and state" (Vike-Freiberga 2007: 301).

Latvian art produced an icon that became world-famous through the channel of the movement of the Art Nouveau (known as "Jugend style" in Germany and Scandinavia and as "modern style" in England). In the years before World War I, a young Latvian artist, Sigismunds Vidbergs (1890-1970), drew pictures (in black and white) of his wife Lina - in flowing romantic style - which served as illustrations of many books in the spirit of Art Nouveau. The

luscious young woman with her mysterious gaze has remained a preferred motif in popular artistic imagery (e. g. in deco posters) up to the present.

Baltic tribes already settled in the area of what was to become Latvia in the second millennium b. c. e. Latvian ethnicity originated from fusion processes of various local cultures since the seventh century c. e. During the expansion of Latvian populations between 1000 and 1550 several local Baltic groups assimilated into the Latvian ethnic stock. The distribution of Latvian local groups in the Middle Ages still shows in the geography of modern cultural areas: Latgale in the East, Vidzeme around the Gulf of Riga, Zemgale in the South and Kurzeme (Courland) in the West. Since the early Baltic presence in the region, Baltic settlers and later Latvian groups were in contact with populations of Fennic and, later, of Germanic stock. During the Viking Age, the river Dvina (called Daugava in Latvian) formed part of the trade route by which the Baltic Sea was connected with the Black Sea. The longest contacts of the Latvians have been those with the (—>) Livonians in Courland who have adopted Latvian culture and have experienced a shift to Latvian as their first language.

German missionaries brought Christianity to Latvia where the bishop Albert founded the town of Riga in 1201 and established the German state of Livonia. Since that time and into the twentieth century, Latvia was under foreign rule in the following chronological order: Livonia, Poland, Sweden, Russia. Between 1660 and 1709, Latvia was politically divided between Poland that held Latgale and Sweden that occupied Livonia. Russian authority was established at the beginning of the eighteenth century, after the Russian tsar Peter the Great had won victory over Sweden in the

Northern War (1700-1721). Russian serfdom was introduced in Latvia and abolished as late as 1861. By the end of the eighteenth century, the great majority of the Latvian population was at the service of the gentry, of German and Russian descent. The Germans of Latvia (and of Estonia) belonged to the regional group of Baltic Germans, and they remained in the Baltic countries until they were ousted by the Soviets in the 1940s.

German influence in Latvia shows controversial features. On the one hand, the German gentry exploited the Latvians economically. On the other hand, it was German pastors who spread the teachings of Martin Luther among the Latvians and cultivated the Latvian language. The beginnings of the literary tradition of Latvian as a written language lie with the Protestant movement. The oldest texts are translations of the Lutheran Catechism. The earliest grammatical treatises about the Latvian language were written by German clergymen (i. e. I. G. Reichhusen 1644 and H. Adolf 1685). The ideas of the Enlightenment were made popular in Latvia by German pastors in the eighteenth century, and it is to these intellectual resources that the Latvian national movement of the nineteenth century owes much of its impetus.

The political pressure of tsarist rule was accompanied by a campaign of Russification that gained in momentum toward the end of the nineteenth century. The desperate situation drove many Latvians into emigration. By the beginning of the twentieth century about 14 per cent of the Latvian population had left the country. Latvia was drawn into the turmoil of World War I and occupied by German forces in September 1914. After the Bolshevik coup d'état in October 1917 the Latvians fought their own civil war, with brigades fighting with the Red Army and others fighting against the

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red revolutionaries in the White Army in Siberia. Latvia's first independence lasted from 1918 to 1940 when the country was annexed into the Soviet state. Between 1941 and 1944 Latvia was German-occupied territory and later re-occupied by Soviet forces. The second independence, starting in 1990, has had a stabilizing effect on national identity among the Latvians. The membership in the European Union (since 2004) triggered a speedy economic boom which, however, turned into its reverse caused by the recent global economic crisis. It has to be seen how Latvia and the Latvians overcome the current recession.

The Latvians are the only people in the Baltic area who are in danger to become an ethnic minority in their own country. The percentage of the Russian population in Latvia has remained high and birthrates among Latvians are low. In view of the current trend of emigration from Latvia the demographic conditions of the Latvian population vis-à-vis the minority groups may tilt for a new situation to develop which would be the formation of a non-Latvian majority in the country.

### **Further Reading**

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