

Soviet Disinformation and Latvian Diaspora after World War II

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Abstract. The topicality of the study is determined by the fact that the currently widespread Russian disinformation policy is rooted in the experience amassed during the Soviet period, including the attempts to influence the Latvian diaspora living outside Latvia. Until now, research has highlighted the public political activities of diaspora organizations, neglecting the publications they produced. However, the documents available in the memory institutions of Latvia permit the researchers to reveal in sufficient detail the process of preparation and dissemination of these publications, as well as the frequently contradictory assessment of these publications. The aim of the research is, by using a range of unpublished documents and press publications of Latvians in exile community, which have not previously been included in the scientific circulation, to ascertain the experience of the Latvian exile society in the context of spreading true information about the history of Latvia and the situation in occupied Latvia, as well as evaluating the risks that could be caused by the uncritical use of Soviet publications sent to Latvians in the diaspora. The Latvian National Foundation (LNF, founded in Stockholm in 1947) can be considered the most consistent producer of such publications over a longer period of time. The materials released by LNF include publications that use sources of information available in the free world, as well as texts and images received from Latvia, which are published under cover names. A fair part of LNF's publications was released in foreign languages (English, Swedish, German, etc.), as their target audience was the policy makers of Western countries. Some of the publications of LNF predominantly display the characteristics of representative gifts, but in general they form a significant part of Latvian publishing, – a contribution to maintaining the idea of the continuity of Latvian statehood. Relatively intensive sending of printed materials of occupied Latvia to Latvians in exile, starting from the second half of the 1950s, raises discussions about the value and place of these publications on the bookshelves of Latvians in exile. The findings of the research yield new insights into the role of certain organizations (in this case, the Latvian National Foundation) in Latvian book publishing in exile and the experience of the diaspora in dealing with Soviet disinformation.

Keywords: Latvian National Foundation, publications of Soviet Latvia, Per Olov Enquist, publications regarding the history of Latvia, Latvian society in exile, Uldis Ģermanis

Introduction

The most recent studies dedicated to the activities of the Latvian exile organizations and Latvian diplomats after the World War II mostly analyse various political actions (Beķere 2022, 149–240). Less frequently mentioned are the publications produced during this time in various host countries (Beķere 2022, 109–119), the purpose of which, among other things, was to neutralize the influence of Soviet propaganda and disinformation publications. However, even then, the documents found in Latvian libraries and archives practically have not been used, although they permit for quite a complete restoration of the background, publication process and assessment of these publications. These are the main considerations substantiating the need to ascertain and evaluate the experience regarding the actions of the socially active part of exiled Latvians when dealing with the disinformation policy implemented by the Soviet Union.

Results

The Latvian National Foundation (hereinafter LNF), founded in Stockholm in 1947, operated most consistently and for the longest time in the field of collecting and disseminating correct information. The Foundation's history and resonance of publications in the free world, as well as in Soviet-occupied Latvia, has so far been considered insufficiently. For the purpose of researching the topic, the most important Swedish Latvian press publications ("*Latvju Vārds*", "*Latvju Ziņas*"), newspapers released in several other host countries ("*Laiks*", "*Latvija*", "*Latvija Amerikā*", etc.), as well as the materials of the Latvian National Foundation, which have not entered the scientific circulation, and which can be found in the Academic Library of the University of Latvia, were studied in detail.

For the Latvian National Foundation, the task of collecting and distributing true information about the history of Latvia and the situation in occupied Latvia was a priority. The first publication of the list of people deported by Soviets "These Names Accuse" ("*Šie vārdi apsūdz*") in 1951 became one of the most significant and widely noticed publications of LNF. Its preparation caused an extensive discussion in the press about the necessity and timeliness of such a publication. Representatives of particular Latvian exile organizations had different opinions about it, while there were attempts to prevent publication of the list by anonymous circulars distributed in the exile society, which attest to the diversionary activities of the Soviet security institutions ([S. n.] 1951, 5).

At the end of the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s, the LNF was intensively involved in public discussions about the extradition of Baltic soldiers interned in Sweden to the Soviet Union in January 1946. The novel "The Legionaries" by Per Olov Enquist (1934–2020), published in 1968, which received the Nordic Council Literature Prize (1969) and was translated into several languages, gave a new

impetus to discussions about the events of the recent past and their interpretations. Protesting against the tendentious depiction of Baltic soldiers in the novel, LNF publishes its opinion about it in the Swedish press soon after the novel was published. The book *“De misstolkade legionärerna”* (“The Misunderstood Legionaries”) written by Arturs Landsmanis (1913–1992) and translated by Pāvils Šadurskis (1924–1994) (LNF PG 1962–1974, 77) was intended to refute Enquist’s version and it was published by LNF in 1970. This book was sent by LNF to all members of the Riksdag, to about 1,000 libraries in Sweden and elsewhere in Scandinavia, and distributed to Swedish bookshops (LNF PG 1962–1974, 92).

The depiction of occupied Latvia in the Soviet propaganda publications contrasts noticeably with the reflection of the reality of Latvia, including the degradation of the cultural landscape, as shown in the texts and images received from Latvia, which LNF published under assumed names. These published materials included the poem *“Rusiāde”* (“Russiade”, 1956, published under the pseudonym Ints Baltarājs) by the actor Ēvalds Valters (1894–1994) and the book *“Vēl tā gribējās dzīvot”* (“Did Want to Live So Much Yet”), which described the experiences in Siberia of Rūta Upīte (1927–1957), who was deported on 14 June 1941 in German translation (1978), and the book by the writer Žanis Skudra (1924–1994) *“Okupētās Latvijas dienas grāmata”* (“The Diary of Occupied Latvia”, 1976, 1980, published under the pseudonym J. Dzintars). Ž. Skudra and the Swedish citizen Laimonis Niedra, who took the pictures and manuscripts out of Latvia (LNF PG 1974–1980, 65), were arrested by the Soviet security authorities in Tallinn in June 1978 and convicted in the same year, both accused of espionage on behalf of the LNF leadership.

Soviet disinformation, including the selective use and interpretation of exile publications beneficial to the occupation regime, affected not only the degree of openness in the exile press, but also in publications devoted to the history of Latvia. The publication *“Pa aizputinātām pēdām”* (“Tracing Snow-Covered Tracks”, 1956) prepared by the historian and publicist Uldis Ģērmanis (1915–1997), which was a commentary on the reflection of Colonel Jukums Vācietis (1873–1938) *“Latviešu strēlnieku vēsturiskā nozīme”* (“Historical Significance of the Latvian Riflemen”) caused a wide resonance. It confirmed the diverse ideas of exiled Latvians of different generations and adherents of different political persuasions about the degree of openness of published information (self-censorship), as well as the opportunity to question authorities and discuss controversial topics of Latvia’s recent history. U. Ģērmanis was one of the exile historians who defended a proactive approach to the study of Latvian history, with his publications creating an alternative to the often highly ideological publications on Latvian history that were released in occupied Latvia.

Certain politically active representatives of Latvian society in exile (Baptist pastor Osvalds Blūmītis (1903–1961), Seattle Latvians), especially in

the 1950s–60s tried to reduce the spread of Soviet propaganda publications in the public libraries of host countries (V. L.1956, 6; [S. n.] 1961, 6).

Partly as gratitude for the humanitarian aid packages received from the West, Latvians in exile were sent a relatively extensive range of printed works from occupied Latvia in the second half of the 1950s and in 1960s. In the exile press, it was discussed several times what effect this might have on exile Latvian literature and publishing in general (Jēgens 1957, 38) and whether textbooks published in Soviet Latvia could be used in exile schools (Akmentiņš 1979, 2; Kronlins 1973, 2, 21). This exchange of thoughts attested to different approaches in the attitude of the Latvian exile society towards intellectual values created in occupied Latvia, which resonated with changes in the position regarding the possibility and necessity of visiting the occupied homeland.

Conclusions

The politically active part of Latvian society in exile mostly understood the disinformation policy implemented by the Soviet Union and tried to at least partially reduce its impact by preparing publications about the history of Latvia and the situation in occupied Latvia. Amongst the public organizations in this field, the Latvian National Foundation operated most consistently and successfully. The discussion in the press regarding the place of books originating from the occupied Latvia in the exiled Latvian society sheds light on an aspect of Latvian publishing that thus far has been seldom studied.

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