

1919, LATVIA'S FIRST YEAR

The proclamation of the Republic of Latvia on the 18th of November 1918, although significant, it was only the first step on the long road towards a fully functioning state. The task ahead needed to be done on war-ravaged territory, and in constant defence against unrelenting attacks by external enemies. At the outset, the Provisional Government led by Kārlis Ulmanis (1877-1942) was bereft of all the necessities - money, space, experienced specialists and external support. The population was tired of both the long years of World War I and German occupation. Half of Latvia's parishes had been affected by war, almost all the factories had been evacuated to Russia, and Latvia had lost almost half of its population during the war (from 2.51 mill originally, to only 1.3 to 1.4 million remaining). Those who had remained at home lacked food, and epidemics like the Spanish flu raged. However, notwithstanding these difficulties, during this year, all major public administration and cultural institutions were successfully established, a combat-capable army of more than 76,000 soldiers was founded, great diplomatic successes were achieved, and economic life gradually recovered. All these achievements proved the willingness and readiness of the Latvian community to create their own country not only in words and declarations, but also in deeds.

A PERIOD OF THREE GOVERNMENTS

The process of establishing of state institutions was first interrupted by the invasion of Latvia by the Russian Red Army (The Bolsheviks) at the end of 1918. By the 3rd of January 1919, the Bolsheviks had seized Riga, and the Latvian Provisional Government was forced to decamp to Jelgava, and a few days later, to Liepāja. The second blow was inflicted by the Germans, on the 16th of April 1919, with the so-called "Liepāja" or "April" *coup d'état*. As a result, the Andrievs Niedra (1871-1942) government, subordinate to the Germans, was formed in Liepāja, but the Ulmanis government ministries were forced to stop working and members of the government sought shelter on the steamer *Saratov* moored in the Liepāja harbour. The territory of Latvia had shrunk to the environs of a deck on a merchant ship and a few parishes in Northern Vidzeme that had been liberated by the Estonian army after the Estonian and Latvian governments had concluded a mutual military co-operation agreement to fight the Bolsheviks.



Liepāja. The Steamer *Saratov*, (191-). Image from the Latvian National Digital Library's collection *In Search of Lost Latvia*.

At the time, in Latvia there were three governments operating concurrently, with more than ten different military formations on its territory and almost as many different currencies in circulation. Each of the governments tried to create their own administrative infrastructure and cultural institutions. For example, after taking Riga, Andrievs Niedra's government, was trying to rebuild the German Baltic Technical College. The government of Soviet Latvia led by Pēteris Stučka (1865-1932) was even more ambitious. It tried to make its mark on the captured territory not only militarily but also symbolically, renaming streets and squares, building extravagant monuments, and organizing grand celebrations. For example, Alexander Street (nowadays Brīvības Street) was renamed Revolution Street, Nikolay Street (modern Valdemāra Street) as Karl Marx Boulevard, Baznīcas Street as the Third International Avenue. The Esplanade, where the fallen bomber fighters were buried was called the Communist Square and adorned with a 15-meter-tall wooden pyramid, the so-called Symbol of Work, and surrounded with 20 plywood obelisks. The Bolsheviks spent millions of roubles on obscenely extravagant 1st of May celebrations at a time when ordinary people in Riga were dying of hunger and deadly diseases.

The Soviet regime reformed the education system in 5 months and created a whole range of cultural institutions – The Latvian Higher Education Institute, The Art Museum, The Workers' Theatre and others. The emergence of these institutions is still a source of confusion today - perhaps the University of Latvia's birthday should be celebrated in September instead of February? These institutions however had very little in common with the national cultural institutions that were to come later. For example, there was no admission criteria for students to the Soviet School of Higher Education - a student was not even required to be able to write! The curriculum was entirely subject to Bolshevik ideology. The same applied to the repertoire of Soviet theatres and cinemas, books in libraries and museum exhibits.

WAR TIME CREATIVITY

In the beginning of July 1919, after the Cēsis battles and the return of the Provisional Government to Riga, the founders of the state turned to the task of establishing the most important institutions for a third time. They believed that the creation of cultural institutions was just as important as organizing the armed forces and public administration. The idea of Latvians as a cultural nation headed by a government committed to the task of preserving and developing that culture, came to fruition from July to September 1919 - when The Latvian National Museum, the State Library, the National Opera, the National Theatre and The State Archive were all founded.



Valka. A performing ensemble from the temporary National Theatre (May 1918). Image from the Latvian National Digital Library's collection *In Search of Lost Latvia*.

The creation of these new institutions took place in very difficult circumstances. For example, the newspaper *Baltijas Vēstnesis* wrote: "The National Theatre has to start operating under quite difficult conditions. Everything must start from zero. There are no sets or costumes, not even the most basic props. In Riga it is impossible to get fabric for new sets and costumes."

Notwithstanding, with the onset of autumn, the newly commenced labours were curtailed again because Riga was attacked by a new enemy - an army led by Pavel Bermonta-Avalov (1877-1973). The Conservatory of Latvia suspended the admission of students which had started 2 days earlier. The Latvian National Opera House was hit by eight charges from enemy cannons. Desks at the newly founded Latvian School of Higher Education were empty once again - many students and faculty had taken up arms to defend the capital against the new invader.



Riga. The Latvian National Theatre, (193-).
Image from the Latvian National Digital Library's collection *In Search of Lost Latvia*.

FORMATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LATVIA

The University was founded on the 28th of September 1919 in the premises of the former Riga Polytechnic Institute. It became the most important educational and scientific centre of independent Latvia. At its inauguration, The Minister of Education, Kārlis Kasparsons said: "We stand on the ground that is the root of Latvia and its history. There was a time, recently, when thinking about what we have now, was a dream - there were those who said: that time will come to this land when a stone will stand on the water, and a feather will drop to bottom. And yet, here we are, the time has come, it has happened. This event in the life of the Latvian people is like a bright ray of sunshine that shines over us." It was indeed a historic moment. In the second half of the 19th century Atis Kronvalds (1837-1875) was the first to express a seemingly utopian dream of higher education in Latvian (the same idea was also expressed by Juris Alunāns (1832-1864) and Auseklis (1850-1879). For many contemporaries, the founding of the University of Latvia seemed to be the second most important event immediately after the proclamation of independence.

The road to the University of Latvia was a long and winding one. The government of the Czarist Russian empire only allowed the existence of one university in the Baltic province - the University of Terbat (now Tartu), where initially education was conducted only in German, but later, in Russian. In 1862, the first technical university in the Baltics was founded in Riga - the Riga Polytechnic (from 1896, The Riga Polytechnic Institute). It became the "the brain centre" of industrialization in Latvia - where the top specialists were prepared in various sectors of the economy. During World War I, about two thousand students were evacuated to Moscow. The institute resumed its activities at the end of the German occupation period, on the 14th of October 1918, with a new

title - The Baltic School of Technology. It functioned for only two and a half months, because in January 1919, Riga was occupied by the Bolsheviks. They transformed the Baltic School of Technology into a Latvian higher education institution (it operated from mid-February to the 22nd of May). Another attempt to rebuild the Baltic Technical University took place after the battalion was expelled from Riga. The ambitions of the new Latvian state, however, were much greater - it wanted to create a fully-fledged national university rather than converting a Russian or German university. For its creation, a special task force was created, which resulted in a remarkable achievement - taking over the Baltic School of Technology and establishing the University of Latvia ready for its first year of teaching within a few months.



Riga. The University of Latvia, (192-).

Image from the Latvian National Digital Library's collection *In Search of Lost Latvia*.

FROM "LATVJU OPERA" TO THE LATVIAN NATIONAL OPERA

On the 15th of September 1918, during the German occupation of Riga, The Riga Second Theatre (Now the Latvian National Theatre) was the venue for a solemn opening concert of the Latvian Opera. The modern opera house at that time was Riga's First (German) Theatre, and the Latvian



Riga. The Latvian National Opera, (193-).

Image from the Latvian National Digital Library's collection *In Search of Lost Latvia*.



The Latvian National Opera company by the opera house, (September, 1919).
Image from the Latvian National Digital Library's collection *In Search of Lost Latvia*.

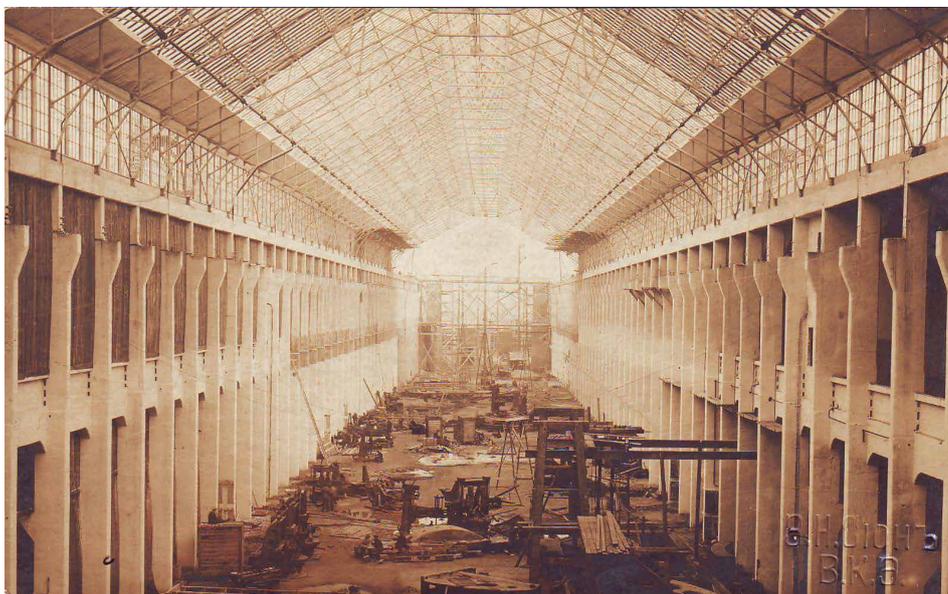
Opera did not have its own permanent space. The opera singers also climbed onto the stage of the Second Theatre for the solemn proclamation of the Republic of Latvia on the 18th of November 1918, repeatedly singing the national anthem. The invasion of the Russian Red Army disrupted the Latvian opera's season. On the 23rd of September 1919, the Provisional Government adopted the statutes for the National Opera. Immediately after the Bermont forces were expelled from Riga at the end of November 1919, the opera resumed its work under the direction of the General Manager Jānis Zālītis (1884 - 1943). The official opening of the Latvian National Opera took place on the 2nd of December 1919 with a performance of Richard Wagner's opera *Tannhäuser*.

Quoting a review of the opening performance by Alfrēds Ozoliņš: "Satisfactory singing from the chorus. The ensemble gave a confident rendition. The orchestra, with the exception of the woodwind section, noted for its tendency for dis-harmony, and some rather striking surprises from the harp that is in the hands of an otherwise competent and well-known musician; "played" their leading role with honour, thanks to the Conductor, Teodors Reiters, who is responsible for the lion's share of this success." (*Latvijas Sargs*, 4th of December 1919)

THE BEGINNINGS OF VEF

The creation of a state was inconceivable without companies and organizations, on whose shoulders lay the restoration work of Latvia when the five-year war was over. Thousands of buildings, hundreds of kilometres of roads and railways, dozens of bridges had to be rebuilt. As during the war, the communications infrastructure, without which a normal state cannot function, was completely destroyed, in 1919, the government established the Directorate of Roads and Buildings, the Latvian Railway Administration and other such entities.

In the 1930s, the largest industrial company in the Baltic States was the State Electrical Engineering Factory (VEF). Founded on the 10th of June 1919, it grew out of a small workshop set up under the auspices of the Latvian Post and Telegraph Administration, using the former mechanical workshops as a base. Initially, there were only four people working in the workshop (mechanics Teodors Šūlbergs and Jānis Šteibelts, carpenter Fricis Liepiņš and warehouse manager Kārlis Kīns) using some worn-out tools under the guidance of an electro-technology enthusiast, Aleksandrs Tīpains (1886-1974). The small company, which first dealt with telegraph and telephone repair, by the late 1930s, grew into a factory with 3,500 workers, which produced an extremely wide range of products. It was known for being able to make everything "from a needle to a plane". The most famous VEF product was the legendary miniature camera Minox.



Riga. The Union Factory (later VEF). Dismantling of equipment, (191-).
Image from the Latvian National Digital Library's collection *In Search of Lost Latvia*.

VEF radio sets also received prestigious awards at international exhibitions. Attempts were made to produce luxury cars and the factory built an aeroplane designed by Kārlis Irbītis. VEF became one of the most prominent symbols of the new country, demonstrating its entrepreneurial spirit, talent and the diligence of its labour force.

ir uztvērēj, kas
 ienes jaunu etapu s.p. uztvērē-
 nēju būvē, jo tas darbojas pil-
 nīgi bez reģenerācijas. Ar to panākta ļoti vienkārša un
 patīkama uztvērēja apkalpe, jo pie uztvērēja nokarā/a-
 nor uz kādu raidītāju, nav vajadzīga svītrāna, kas
 ir normāla parādība uztvērēja ar reģenerāciju.

vefar md/38 ir

Daudzkontūru uztvērēj ar jaru filtri un diodes tairngriezī,
 tā ir īpašība, kas šo uztvērēju nostāda s.p. uztvērēju klāstē
 3 vlnu diapāzonā. Divkārtis mainkondensrators. Modernākās mūldzes
 augstas kvalitātes elektrodinamiskais skaļrunis ar jauna vei-
 da membrānas centrējumu.
 Maināms skaļums. Maināms tonis.
 Iebūvēts ferrokārta filtri (uz pieprasījumu).
 Sliedā, labi pārskatāmā skāla, kurā iebūvēti arī īro vlnu rai-
 dīt. noraukami, iespējams viegli un ātri atrast vēlamo raidītāju.
 Nēdzot vlnu pārvēlēcū, skāla angāirnojums uzrāda
 ierleģto vlnu diapāzonu.
 Arējais iatveidojums ietupēt vienkāršā, modernār linijār,
 akautīkār pparībor apvienojot ar formu tīrību.

Spuldzes EFA, EBL, AZL

VEF

VALSTS ELEKTROTEHNIŠKĀ FABRIKA
 RĪGA, BRĪVIBAS GATVE 19, LETTONIE

Advertisement for a VEF product - Vefar MD/38, (193-).
Image from the Latvian National Digital Library's collection *In Search of Lost Latvia*.

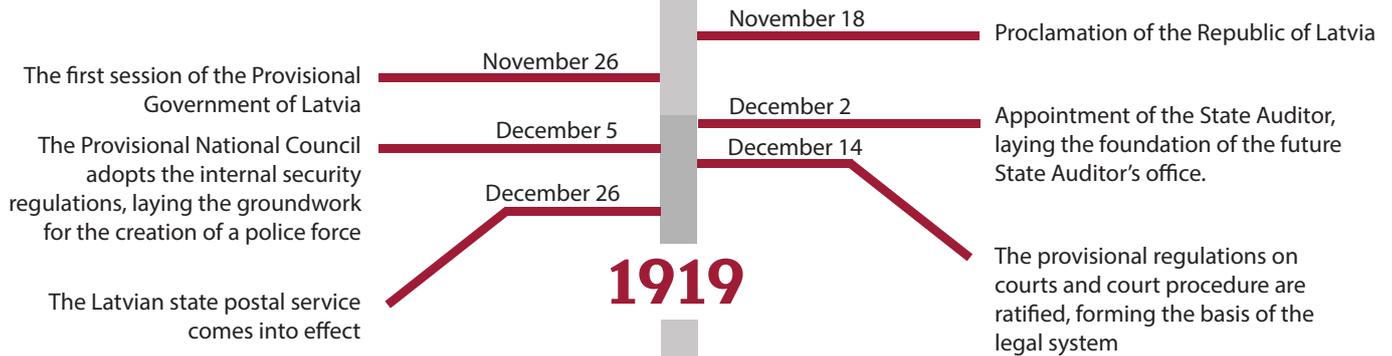
IN SUMMARY

The Republic of Latvia's first year of existence was marked by great achievements - great victories in battlefields over strong opponents and the engagement of even stronger allies; a functioning public administration; significant economic reforms (the most important being the Agrarian reform) and the creation of major cultural institutions (The University of Latvia, The State Library, The State Archives, The National Theatre, The Latvian National Opera, etc.). The national reconstruction programme that had been interrupted by external attacks three times in the space of one year (January, April, and October 1919), continued at the first opportunity with double the energy and vigour.

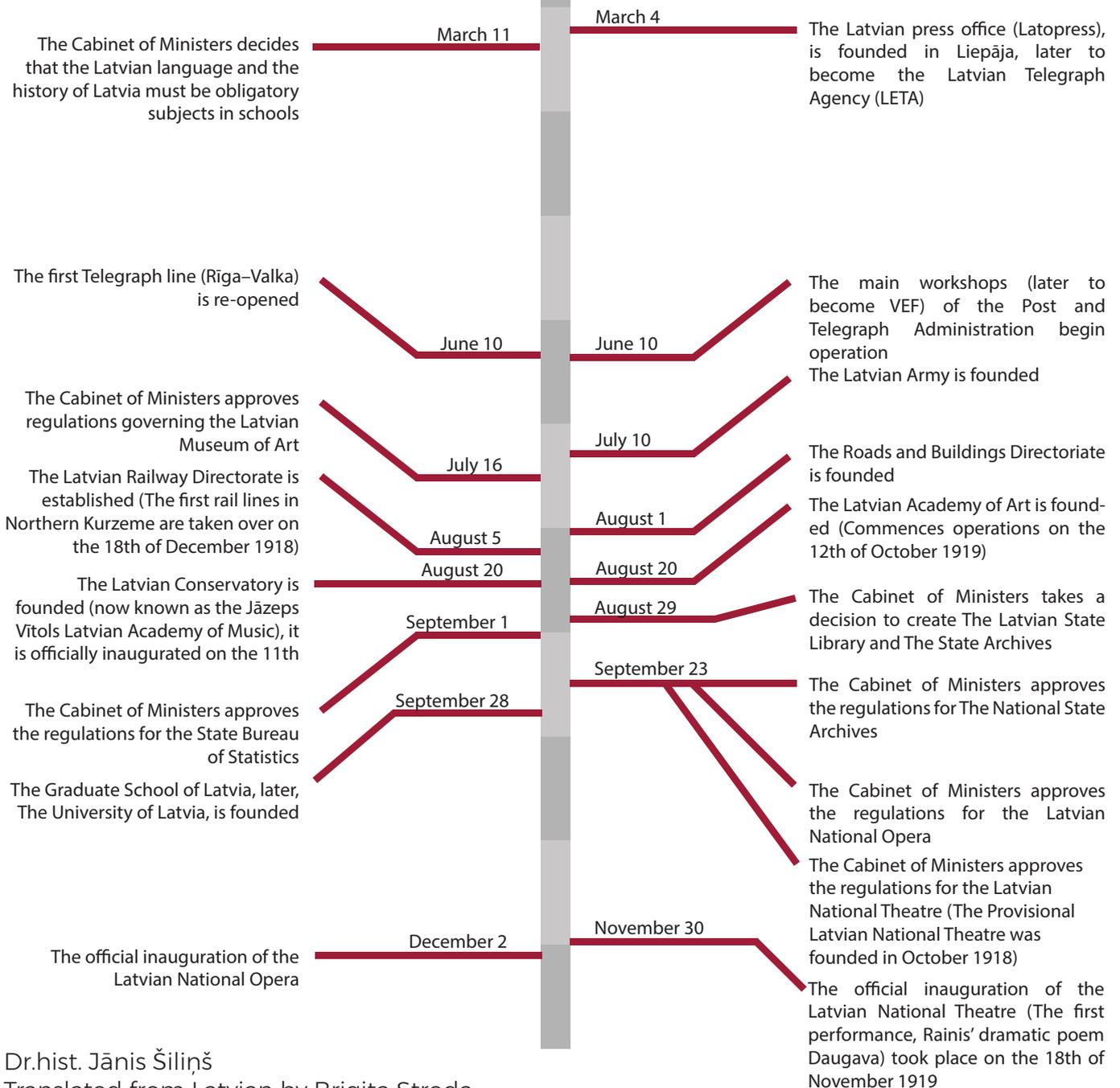
By the end of 1919, it was clear that a great deal had been done, however it was only the first stage in the creation of the country. Latvia needed to be cleared of the remaining Bolshevik forces and the Latvian Independence War brought to a victorious conclusion. There was a Satversme (the constitution) to draft and adopt, and a parliament (Saeima) to elect. The list included: to achieve the international *de iure* recognition of the country, to create a national currency, to restore the Latvian economy, to continue the Agrarian reform and many other important tasks.

TIMELINE

1918



1919



Dr.hist. Jānis Šiliņš

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