

From “Exile” to “Diaspora”: The Shift in Self-Identification Among Refugee Latvians, 1944–2023

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Abstract: The 175,000- Latvians who fled their northeastern European homeland in the final year of World War II (1944–45) eventually resettled in some four continents and twenty different host societies. Their tasks were many, ranging from “freeing” Latvia among the politically minded to building a new life in their host societies. For some ten years after the war, their official status remained uncertain, as did the terms they used to describe themselves. Eventually, the agreed upon frame of reference became *trimda* (Eng. exile). It was the rare social, cultural, and political activity that was not discussed within the exile framework, and an impressive cultural superstructure was built upon it from the 1950s to the 1980s. This framework, however, became anachronistic after 1991 and the collapse of the USSR. Western Latvians could no longer claim to be in exile, but relatively few of them showed a willingness to return to the old homeland. Two decades of discussion about identity eventually led the new Latvian government and social-science researchers in Latvia to propose the term *diaspora* for all Latvians living outside the country’s borders. This term has been generally accepted, even by the still living World War II refugees and their descendants, who now refer to themselves as the *vecā trimda* (Eng. old exile) component of the diaspora.

Keywords: Latvia, refugees, World War II, exile, diaspora, incipient diaspora

Introduction

In contemporary English-language research on populations living outside their homelands, the term “diaspora” has achieved nearly universal scholarly acceptance.¹ Even so, the historical development of these population fragments may differ substantially and thus create the need for theory. Theory, however, is not the intent of the present study. Rather, in the following pages I will examine the connection between the current Latvian diaspora and one of its components that predated it, namely, the approximately

¹ See, for example, the journals: *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* (Vol. 1, 1991) and *Diaspora Studies* (vol. 1, 2007), as well as the books referenced and reviewed therein.

175,000 Latvians who fled westward from their homeland – Latvia, one of the three Baltic states – during the final year of World War II (1944/45) and a half decade later dispersed over several dozen countries and four continents. Initially thinking of themselves as temporary “refugees” (Latv. *bēgļi*) living “in exile” (Latv. *trimdā*),² some seventy-five years later they – the remnants of the original refugee population and their descendants – appear to have accepted the designation “diaspora” (Latv. *diaspora*). Their initial numbers, of course, have been severely diminished, not only by natural mortality, but also comparatively by several waves of later emigrants from Latvia after 1991, the year in which the country regained its independence with the collapse of the USSR.³

In his 2003 pioneering comparative study of the politics of ethno-national diasporas, Gabriel Sheffer introduced the category of “incipient diasporas.”⁴ This phrase referred to populations that in 2003–04 were living outside their original homelands but did not have full-fledged diaspora characteristics. Sheffer’s tables identified thirty such “incipient diasporas,” among them a Latvian diaspora with an estimated 120,000 persons living in such host countries as the US, Canada, and Australia.⁵ This was numerically the smallest on the list, dwarfed by such giants as the Mexican (est. 20 million), the Russian (est. 25 million), and the Korean (est. 3.5 million). Sheffer, however, offered a word of warning about all such numbers: “...It is extremely difficult to obtain anything approaching precise figures on the actual sizes, compositions, and dispersals of ethno-national diasporas.”⁶

Sheffer’s study also made clear that diasporas tend to have different origins, varying levels of consciousness, and highly differentiated ties to the old homeland. Thus, for example, the term “diaspora” itself was totally absent from the Latvian vocabulary of refugee self-identification until the early twenty-first century. For about sixty years Latvians living in western countries after World War II viewed themselves as something else, namely, a collectivity with an identity that had frozen, so to speak, in 1940 – the first year of the Soviet occupation – but still embodied the spirit of the interwar state. As an “imagined community,”⁷ this collectivity was perceived by its members to be more authentically “Latvian” than what the interwar state had become after 1945, namely, the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic.

² The macron over the “ā” in “*trimda*” signifies the appropriate ending of the locative case of the word in Latvian.

³ Andrejs Plakans, *The Reluctant Exiles: Latvians in the West After World War II* (Leiden/Paderborn: Brill/Ferdinand Schöningh, 2021), 587–681.

⁴ Gabriel Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 106.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 104–8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁷ This perception had to be preceded by an act of imagination similar to that for an entire “nation,” as described in Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. Revised and extended* (London: Verso, 1991) (first edition 1983).

The Population in Question

During the final year of World War II (1944–45), approximately 175,000 Latvians fled their homeland.⁸ Many adults among them had experienced the first Soviet occupation from 1940 to 1941, and expected that their short stay as refugees elsewhere would be followed by return after the western democracies turned against their wartime Soviet ally and restored pre-war Latvia to its independent status. This outcome turned out to be illusory, and the post-war geopolitical configuration, described in 1946 by Winston Churchill as involving an "Iron Curtain," intensified the western Latvian feeling of exile during the rest of the 1940s.

The Latvian westward flight initially had carried most of these refugees to two countries: neutral Sweden (around 5000 persons), and Germany and German-occupied territory (around 170,000 persons). Most of those who fled to Sweden remained there. Most of those who arrived in German-controlled territory, however, spent the next 4–5 years there and eventually became part of the millions of so-called "displaced persons" (DPs) whose resettlement after 1945 was supervised by the United Nations (UNNRA) initially and then by the IRO. Refugeehood was followed during the 1948–1951 by the departure of most of this Latvian population – some 60–70% – to some dozen host countries further west, including Canada, the USA, Australia, and South American lands.⁹

By the mid-1950s, the wartime Latvian refugees had created settlements (which they called "colonies") throughout the world, ranging from several thousands in large western cities to handfuls in lesser communities. Several features of this "western" Latvian population continued to remain fixed from this period onward. First, its aggregate number was not replenished by new migration from the old homeland, because Soviet law almost totally forbade out-migration. Second, return migration from the "west" (from Sweden or from DP camps in Germany) to what was now Soviet Latvia remained minimal, possibly no more than two thousand during the decade after the war. Third, the "western" Latvian population was in constant motion initially, because well into the 1960s there was continuous internal re-migration in the host countries, as Latvians sought and found homesites closer to relatives or friends, better working opportunities, and active Latvian communal organizations. Fourth, the proportion of Latvians on the western side of the Iron Curtain thus continued to represent only about 5–6% of all Latvians, the others

⁸ The exactitude of this total remains problematic due to the nature of the primary sources, see: Plakans, *The Reluctant Exiles*, 40–6, especially footnote 75.

⁹ Several decades later, this Latvian departure from Europe was given the sobriquet "the great dispersion" by a prominent refugee poet; see: Valdis Krāslavietis, *Tā lielā izklišana* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ceļinieks, 1973). This metaphor and the image it suggested remained a part of Latvian refugee lore from that point onward.

having chosen to stay or having failed to complete their flight.¹⁰ The total population of the Latvian SSR had lost about one-third of its pre-war size as a result of war and flight, and this deficit was being corrected by Communist Party decisions favoring mostly Slavic-speaking in-migrants from other republics of the USSR. The proportion of Latvians in the population of the Latvian SSR began to inch downward, gradually moving the Russian language to center stage in the Republic and placing further Latvian cultural development into a “Soviet” framework supervised by the Communist Party of the USSR.

Statelessness and Identity

Hurried flight, an uncertain post-war settlement of borders, a hated regime in the old homeland, and the prolongation of their stay in unfamiliar circumstances all had the effect of creating a sense of statelessness among the Latvian refugees.¹¹ This “lost homeland” syndrome was only slightly modified by the policy of “non-recognition” articulated by the post-war western democracies, i.e. their continued refusal to grant legitimacy to the Soviet incorporation of the Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania) into the USSR.¹² Consequently, rejecting repatriation left Latvian refugees at the mercy of the western governmental authorities, who now needed to solve the “refugee problem.” For nearly a decade, therefore, the refugees had to live with a variety of official designations of themselves: as “refugees,” of course, as “displaced persons” (the official designation used by UNRRA and the IRO)¹³, as “exiles,” and as “resident aliens.” These were all terms of civic status, meant to classify the relation of an individual or group in relation to the permanent members of a host society. All these classifications were understood by the Latvian refugees to be temporary, but they were nevertheless frustrating because they seemed to imply that the existence of the national state that provided meaning to their basic identity – i.e., the Latvian state – had become the subject to doubt. For most, the “non-recognition policy” was a poor substitute for the homeland they had left.

¹⁰ Juris Krūmiņš, “Iedzīvotāju skaits,” in *Nacionālā enciklopēdija: Latvija*, ed. Valters Ščerbiniskis (Riga: Latvijas nacionālā bibliotēka, 2018), 496–99.

¹¹ Andrejs Plakans, “Neteritoriālais nacionālisms latviešu trimdas domā pēc II Pasaules kara,” in *Nācijas bronikas: Latvija 2014 debates*, compiled by Pauls Daija, Deniss Hanavs, and Ilze Jansone (Riga: Avens un partneri, 2014), 103–26.

¹² *20.gadsimta Latvijas vēsture*, ed. Daina Bleiere and Kangeris Kārlis (Riga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2022), 223–38.

¹³ UNRRA – United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency; IRO – International Refugee Organization.

Of the cluster of official classifications, several moved to the forefront during the post-war transition period. For a time western Latvians accepted with a resigned realism the notion that they were "refugees" (Latv. *bēgļi*) in the conventional sense of the term. By the late 1940s, however, self-description had begun to shift toward the general acceptance of the term "exiles" (Latv. *trimdnieki*; from Latv. *trimda* – exile).¹⁴ Another term – the "displaced persons" (DPs) mentioned earlier – was introduced into western Latvian discourse by UNRRA and IRO officialdom with the creation of the DP camp system in the American and British zones of occupied Germany.¹⁵ The abbreviation "DPs" was quickly Latvianized and popularized as *dīpīši* (plural of the singular *dīpītis*) and remained a somewhat sarcastic standard component of self-reference as long as the existence of the DP camps. By the end of the 1940s, however, the term *trimda* (Eng. exile) had begun to trump all other designators, because the word appeared to recognize that the absence from the old homeland would be a long one. For the Latvian adults who left Europe in the years 1948–1951 the word best expressed their inner feeling of attachment to a national state that no longer existed on many European maps.

It would be erroneous, however, to claim universality for any of these terms of self-classification. Depending on the subpopulation, there existed considerable variety. The vast majority of Latvians who fled to Sweden, for example, had no "displaced person" phase in their lives, and in Germany, the "DP" designation applied only to those admitted to camps by the authorities. As DPs, such persons were entitled to food, clothing, and shelter: not being a "DP" meant being on one's own. Socio-cultural cleavages were, however, never absolute, because underlying all official designators there existed a unifying ethnic (or national) element that remained a steadfastly influential base of personal and collective identity among refugee adults. This was the Latvian language and the cultural activities expressed in it.

The persistence of this unifying dimension of refugee life was not surprising. The adults who had fled Latvia in 1944–45 had brought along an essentialist view of national identity, which held that there existed a Latvian *tauta* (Ger. *Volk*, Eng. nation, people) into which its members were born. For adults, therefore, national identity was fixed and virtually impossible to abandon.¹⁶ This philosophy of the self-reached back into the nineteenth-century Latvian "national awakening" that had drawn copiously from German

¹⁴ To older refugees, the term *trimda* linked their current situation to an earlier phase of Latvian history when during World War I some half a million refugees fled the Latvian-language Baltic provinces to the interior of Russia to escape the rapid German advance into Russian territory.

¹⁵ The best survey of the "displaced person" camps remains Mark Wyman, *DPs: Europe's Displaced Persons, 1945–1951* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998) (first edition 1989). For DPs as an international problem, see: Kim Salomon, *Refugees in the Cold War* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1991).

¹⁶ An erudite example of Latvian refugee essentialism can be found in all the writings of the Latvian philosopher Pauls Jurēvičs (1891–1981) who emigrated to and settled in Australia; see: Pauls Jurēvičs, *Variācijas par moderno cilvēku* (Stockholm: Daugava, 1956); Pauls Jurēvičs, *Kultūras sejas* (Stockholm: Daugava, 1960).

ideas about nationality and nationhood.¹⁷ The post-WWII decade, the westward flight and subsequent dispersion were too short and evidently too powerless to dislodge this essentialism. For Latvian adult exiles individually and collectively, ethnicity (or nationality) meant loyalty to the national state, founded in 1918, to which Latvians “belonged.” The post-WWII entity now referred to as the “Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic” was for these adults an artificial construct: the “real Latvia” was the land in which they had spent their childhood and in which they had been educated and had founded families.

As a result, these adults now had to juggle three different images of Latvia. The first was the experienced homeland of personal and collective memory. The second involved the increasingly Sovietized and Russianized Latvian SSR, whose officials viewed the western Latvians as “traitors of the Latvian working people” and “Nazi sympathizers” and were viewed in turn by the westerners as a “slavish occupation regime kept in power only with the help of Moscow.” The third grew out of the western “non-recognition policy” and consisted of only a *de jure* reality, symbolized by a vastly reduced number of diplomats stationed in the major western capitals. On the basis of this triad, the Latvian adults who fled in 1944/45 erected a political philosophy of exile that they hoped to pass on to the next generations, even though these had been relocated to and grown up in many foreign lands.

The Externalization of Ethnic Identity

Amidst the millions of refugees in post-WWII western Europe, having one’s Latvian identity recognized and acknowledged was not an easy task. At the individual level, being Latvian carried no distinctive physical traits: physically, refugee Latvians resembled northern Germans and Scandinavians in being moderately tall, white-skinned, with blond, brown, or black hair. Their everyday attire was similar to that of post-war Europe’s impoverished urban masses. This was especially the case of the Latvian DPs in Germany, whose apparel was usually drawn from the used clothing supply depots of the camps administered by UNRRA and the IRO. The visual differences were perhaps somewhat greater in Sweden, where Latvians entered a civilian population less touched by wartime shortages. The differences between the host-country population and the refugees would quickly emerge when official “papers” were produced: those of the Latvians normally

¹⁷ The Latvian “national awakening” is normally dated between 1856 and the 1890s and is referred to as such because of the nationalistic activities of a new generation of young university-educated Latvians; see: Vita Zelče, “The New Latvians,” in *Latvia and Latvians*, vol. 2, ed. Jānis Stradiņš et al. (Riga: Latvian Academy of Sciences, 2018).

included an indication of birthplace (Latvia) and also their (and their children's) status of "resident aliens" or "displaced persons." By the end of the 1940s, further conversations could also reveal major differences in the refugees' future plans. Most of those who had fled to Sweden had started to find acceptable social and occupational niches for themselves, while those in Germany were just starting to ponder emigration to other, more than likely overseas, host countries. In negotiations with UNRRA and the IRO, numerous countries had already passed special "displaced person laws" and thus shown their willingness to give the refugees new homes.

Thus, it would not have been difficult for individual Latvian refugees to fade into the general populations now surrounding them; an accented spoken Swedish and German, even among permanent residents, was not unusual in the post-war years. But for most of the Latvian adults, identity preservation held a deep meaning. There existed a sense of mission, the belief that only the western Latvians were capable of keeping alive the idea of the "true Latvia." Giving free rein within one's family circle and among friends to another language and the culture it had produced seemed somehow to be a betrayal of the old homeland. Moreover, there was a stubbornness in the face of acculturation and assimilation. Fate had dealt unjustly with the old homeland, and giving in now to the process of *pārtautošanos* (Eng. change of nationality) would be to compound life's unfairness.¹⁸ Consequently, most adult refugees in the post-WWII years took every opportunity to express this attitude outwardly.

This externalization of ethnicity (or nationality) correlated with the social makeup of the Latvian refugee population. A very high proportion of it (possibly from 16–20%) consisted of well-educated people (secondary schools and beyond); that is, it consisted of much of the pre-war Latvian intelligentsia – schoolteachers, journalists, academics, publishers, established and novice authors of fiction and non-fiction, literary critics, pre-war and wartime government workers, clergymen, and university professors and students.¹⁹ Believing themselves to be Latvians, they did not hesitate to reject outright a change of their basic identity, even though now they were officially "stateless." Their resistance to merging with the host-country populations commonly took the form, first, of Latvian language usage among themselves and, second, of organizations that remained Latvian linguistically and programmatically and interacted with the UN and Swedish authorities only as much as was strictly necessary. One major result of this organizational effort was a robust cultural superstructure in Sweden and in the German DP camps that buttressed the personal use of the Latvian language and was oriented toward the written

¹⁸ The demographic concerns involved in this, to national activists, negative process are laid out in Edgars Dunsdorfs, *Trešā Latvija* (Melbourne: Kārļa Goppera fonds. 1968).

¹⁹ Calculation based on Konstantīns Ozoliņš, "Mazā Latvija un latviešu dzīve Vācijā," in *Latviešu trimdas desmit gadi*, ed. Heronims Tichovskis (Toronto: Astra, 1954).

word – newspapers and other periodicals, camp newsletters, published books of original Latvian prose and poetry, translations from the literature of other countries, and even literature for children.²⁰ Virtually all the DP camps and the Swedish “colonies” created supplementary Latvian-language elementary schools, and the larger DP camps had enough students for secondary grades as well. The Latvian Evangelical Lutheran Church in Exile made sure that all DP camps and the Swedish “colonies” organized religious congregations, mostly Evangelical Lutheran and Catholic, with clergy who used the Latvian language in services, hymnals, and confirmation classes.²¹ Most “colonies” housed some number of artists and craftsmen willing to organize workshops in their specialties; some of the DP camps had traveling theater troupes; others had in residence soloists of the Latvian National Opera and of pre-war orchestras who were always willing to present individual performances. The larger DP camps, such as Esslingen in the American zone, quickly became centers of Latvian culture in exile, and Stockholm, because of its high concentration of literary intellectuals, was such a center from the immediate post-war years onward.²²

Existing accounts of the Latvian exile population during the half decade after World War II tend to highlight its positive features, particularly its achievements in creating a self-sustaining western Latvian-language cultural world. The existence of this environment meant that those who produced it and their offspring were able, for a time, to remain somewhat apart from their two main host societies, as well as from the changes that were taking place in the Latvian SSR. The cultural activity of the period, when defined inclusively, was substantial enough to exhibit at least the beginnings of the history of a Latvian exile subculture with its own unique institutions, forms of entrepreneurship, literary productivity, and ways of thinking.²³ Yet a close reading of the Latvian-language sources of the period yields worried comments among participants. How an unknown and unpredictable future would affect the cultural efforts of the DP camps and those of the Latvian intelligentsia in Sweden remained in the realm of guesswork, or, to put it differently, the externalization of ethnic (or national) identity not being anchored in a national state, would likely become particularly vulnerable.

²⁰ The variety of Latvian exile writing is covered in detail in *Latviešu trimdas desmit gadi*, 121–236.

²¹ One estimate places the proportion of Lutherans at 90% of the refugee population and Roman Catholics at 10%; see: *ibid.*, 29, 37.

²² After the “great dispersion” and the dissolution of the camp system, Esslingen lost its role as an intellectual center while Stockholm continued its earlier reputation that, however, now took second place behind such “colonies” in North America as New York City and Toronto.

²³ An effort was made by the DP-camp activists to promulgate a kind of “oath of allegiance” to the old homeland, but it remains uncertain how many refugees knew about it: Valters Nollendorfs, “Literatūra trimdā: ievads, vēsturiskais fons, raksturojums,” in *Latviešu literatūras vēsture*, vol. 3, ed. Viktors Hausmanis (Riga: Zvaigzne ABC, 2001), 350–401.

Thus, for example, there was concern about the brute fact of dispersion: activities in western Germany involved some 300 different camps, with this number being entirely beyond the refugees' control. Some commentators worried about the dominance everywhere of the adult generations and pointed out that younger Latvians were already seeking to further their education in German and Swedish universities, with uncertain linguistic consequences. There was also the lure of overseas locations: starting in 1946 from England but growing in size each year came DP labor recruitment by interested governments. Opinion-makers among the DPs preferred Eurocentrism – the old homeland was, after all, a European country, and England, the first country to recruit DPs, was still acceptable. But by 1948, large overseas lands – the US, Canada, Australia – had started to open their doors, creating the possibility that dispersion would become even more entrenched. Some commentators observed that the number of refugees who continued to think of themselves as Latvians was probably shrinking. Some of those who were "disappearing" deliberately disguised their wartime activities with assumed names and sought to live incognito, especially in Germany.²⁴ For others, relocation to Sweden and Germany was the first step toward a new and better life, reflecting the indifference they had already felt toward ethnic identity. In Germany, moreover, still others did not seek to enter the camp system, or were not admitted to it, and thus eventually lost contact with the Latvian atmosphere of the camps. There were also those who felt no animosity toward their Latvian past and simply allowed themselves to drift away for social reasons such as marriage. The total number of such persons remains unresearched, but it is nearly certain that the aggregate number of Latvians who arrived in Sweden and Germany during the last year of the war was appreciably higher than those who participated in the dispersion during the years between 1948 and 1951, when overseas countries were added to the list of hosts.

As it turned out, however, the organizational momentum of the 1945–1950 "European" years proved to be robust, and thus by the early 1950s virtually all of the new host countries – in Europe and overseas – had become sites of local and national Latvian organizations. It is estimated that in the US alone there were already some 300 such local, urban-based groupings before the American Latvian Association (ALA) – the unifying national organization – was founded in 1951.²⁵ This momentum continued with the founding of the World Association of Free Latvians (PBLA) in Washington DC in

²⁴ The most notorious example of this strategy was practiced by the refugee Viktors Arājs, a prominent Holocaust perpetrator in Latvia during the German occupation (1941–1945); see: Richards Plavnieks, *Nazi Collaborators on Trial during the Cold War: Viktors Arājs and the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police* (London: Palgrave/Macmillan 2018).

²⁵ For the early history of the ALA, see: Bruno Albats and Klīve Visvaldis, *ALA: Amerikas latviešu apvienība 1951–1986* (Washington, DC: Amerikas latviešu apvienība, 1986); Andrejs Plakans, "Western Latvian

1956. An attempt to form a government-in-exile having come to naught earlier in the DP camp period, the PBLA now assumed the main leadership role of all Latvians living in the western democracies. In its policy pronouncements, the PBLA took for granted that the views for all western Latvians, regardless of generation, gravitated upward through local organizations, and, having done so, formed a single voice of this fragment of the Latvian *tauta*-in-exile. The PBLA, of course, had no enforcement mechanism to bring about the desired unity, and therefore the social history of the exiles was diverse. There was no disunity, however, on the point that the pre-1940 homeland had been “occupied” by the USSR and that all organizational efforts at all levels should be designed to “free” it. Thus, there was no doubt where western Latvian organizations stood within the context of the Cold War: they were fiercely anti-communist and supportive of all geopolitical efforts to weaken the USSR.

Trimda (Eng. Exile) as Framework

During the poetically described “great dispersion,” the Latvian DPs were largely preoccupied with the identity labels the relocation process created. Officially, as they left Europe, they became transients, then, after landing, contract employees if their host-country “sponsors” required it, then some became internal migrants in search of better opportunities, and finally all stayers became resident aliens waiting for citizenship. Each phase of the transition was accompanied by feelings of impermanence that, by the mid-1950s, reinforced the idea of exile – *trimda*. This was a versatile word that became a companion of the ethnic (national) designator “Latvian” and rapidly replaced the terminology of officialdom, until virtually all aspects of Latvian life in the new host countries were understood to be suffused by the spirit of *trimda*. It was easy to assume that all western Latvians one encountered in the 1950s were exiles – *trimdnieki* – and that all had had similar, if not identical, recent life stories – occupation regimes in the old homeland, flight, DP camps, relocation to new host societies in Europe or overseas by ship, difficult circumstances in the initial years after arrival.²⁶ This imagined collectivity, however, belied the fact that the western Latvian DPs had become more fragmented than ever after dispersion from Europe – about 55,000 in the US, some 19,000 in Canada, about 32,000

exile ‘foreign affairs’: ideas and work,” in *The Centenary of Latvia’s Foreign Affairs*, eds. Diāna Potjomkina, Andris Sprūds, and Valters Ščerbinskis (Riga: Latvijas Ārpolitikas Institūts, 2016), 103–21.

²⁶ An earlier Latvian emigration before World War I had brought some 5000 Latvians, largely political emigrants, to the US, but their interaction with the later DPs remained minimal and took place mostly in the larger “colonies” such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia.

in Australia, with the main European host countries remaining Sweden, the Federal Republic of Germany, and England.²⁷ The main assignment of western Latvian "national" activists now became the maintenance of an "imagined" community consisting of some dozen or more different linguistic and cultural environments of everyday life.

If the 1950s can be considered the decade of re-settlement then the next thirty years of *trimda* life can be designated as a long period of adaptation, during which all successes and failures were viewed by western Latvian opinion-makers as linked to exile. In other words, *Trimda* became the universal framework of explanation of western Latvian life for those who wanted to describe it in its totality.²⁸ Accomplishments were attributed to the "Latvian" ability to overcome all hardships, while imperfect adaptation was rationalized by reference to the omnipotence of the competitive societies in which western Latvian adults were now living. The motivation for staying somewhat apart from the host societies was attributed to, at one extreme, an admirable and persisting loyalty to the old homeland and, at the other, to an unwelcoming attitudes of "natives" toward newcomers. Thus, virtually all adult Latvians learned the language of the host country for employment purposes, but normally spoke it with an accent and with grammatical errors. It was much less stressful to be in the company of other Latvian speakers. Organizers of Latvian-language supplementary schools regretted the "egoism" of Latvian parents who spent their weekends in other, personally more enjoyable, activities. Newspapers and journal reviews of concerts, exhibits of artwork, and theatre performances evaluated them with gratitude for the event *per se* rather than by reference to the highest standards of a particular art form. Political activity remained at the "petitioner" level, with elective offices evidently considered beyond the reach of first-generation immigrants. Many Latvian adults preferred employment below their pre-war education and established skills, believing that a regular paycheck for a niche in a self-perpetuating governmental or corporate hierarchy was preferable to the riskier paths of entrepreneurship.

During the 1950s, all western Latvian organizations grew in size as the membership of "colonies" stabilized, the earnings of adult Latvians increased and therefore also their organizational "tithing" as well, and *trimda* life developed an events calendar at all levels as well as a voluntary elite to implement it. By the early 1960s, however, it became

²⁷ A well-informed comparative table of Latvians in Western countries after World War II can be found in Ilvars Veigners, *Latvieši rietumzemēs un vēl dažās zemēs* (Riga: SIA Drukātava, 2009), 59. His table lists altogether twenty countries to which an appreciable number of Latvians had migrated.

²⁸ Thus, for example, *Latviešu trimdas desmit gadi* (Toronto: Astra, 1954) entitled his survey 'Latviešu trimdas desmit gadi' (Eng. The Latvian *trimda* After Ten Years) and all four volumes of Benjamiņš Jēgers, *Latviešu trimdas izdevumu bibliogrāfija*, vol. 1–4 (Stockholm: Daugava, 1968–1988). Monumental bibliography of exile publications bore the Latvian title "Latviešu trimdas izdevumu bibliogrāfija" (Eng. The Bibliography of Latvian *trimda* Publications).

apparent that all statements about the number of western Latvians needed to be taken with a grain of salt. Even such erudite Latvian publications as *Archīvs*, edited by the historian Edgars Dunsdorfs in Australia, ultimately had to fall back on educated estimates.²⁹ Quantitative difficulties were created by problematic host-country census categories, the absence of reliable local listings of those who continued to think of themselves as “Latvians” (many changed their given names and surnames), the drift away from Latvianness resulting from marriage to host-country partners, and a growing indifference, as noted by activists, toward a strict interpretation of ethnic identity. Many local organizations and supplementary weekend schools reported that their participants represented no more than about 15–20% of the Latvian population round about.³⁰

In other words, the 1960s clearly showed that the processes of acculturation and assimilation were working their way, especially in the host societies (Australia, Canada, the US) with a long history of absorbing newcomers. “Naturalization” of all kinds affected adults as well as younger people. For adults, middle-class aspirations leading to house- and car-ownership, the acquisition of a specialized vocabulary in one’s profession through attendance of adult education courses, and the inescapable learning of the intricacies of local and state laws and regulations – all merged to add to the personalities of recent adult arrivals a component that already existed among native-born resident of the host country.

Younger Latvians, who after arrival were still wholly or partially dependent on their parents for resources, had a much harder time in maintaining the *trimda* framework as the dominant fact of their lives. This age cohort of the exile population had been born toward the end of interwar independence, during the war years and the half-decade following them, and during the first decade in the host societies. Of course, they had been or were growing up in “Latvian families,” which meant the continuous use of Latvian language at home, and, in the larger “colonies,” of weekend supplementary schools and summer camps. At the same time, however, this experientially varied generation seemed to adapt to their host societies relatively easily. Their host-society language became native-like quickly, they had as many friends among host-society peers as they did among Latvians, and their everyday responsibilities, especially in the educational system, transformed a somewhat exotic and threatening world into an increasingly familiar habitat in

²⁹ An annual publication, *Archīvs* issued its first volume in 1960 and its last in 1992. It was devoted entirely to all aspects of exile, with its editor, the historian Edgars Dunsdorfs, recruiting authors from all Latvian “colonies” throughout the world.

³⁰ No exact percentages exist for either organizational membership or supplementary school attendance. The question remained sensitive after the “great dispersal,” with activists supporting higher numbers and statisticians lower ones. On school attendance, see: Edgars Dunsdorfs, “Kā aplēst latviešu bērnu skaitu?,” *Archīvs*, no. 17 (1977), 117–28.

which they felt "at home." Their desire to please their parents by continuing to think of themselves as "exiles" – *trimdnieki* – lessened, even if seldom becoming a complete rejection of Latvianness. Becoming adults in the 1960s, this generation was forced to make choices, and many from it frequently became replacements for the older Latvian activists who had begun to die or retire. Others launched successful professional host-country careers but retained contact with Latvian society by subscriptions to Latvian publications and paying membership dues to Latvian organizations. They had become more acculturated than their parents but less than their own children would be, and therefore their active contact with Latvianness and the *trimda* framework had not been completely severed.³¹ They now constituted a substantial pool of Latvian-language-using talent from which the activist core could draw temporary, usually *pro bono*, assistance, such as preparing a contract for the purchase of a Latvian society building, creating blueprints for a new structure, and serving for limited amounts of time on various committees and subcommittees of Latvian organizations. This type of membership in *trimda* society was now being rendered by persons whose normal waking-hour activities closely resembled those of their host-country peer groups.

These generational shadings did not much hamper the Latvian externalization of ethnic identity, however. Indeed, it is possible to speak about the two decades after 1960 as the cultural flowering of the *trimda* framework.³² This, despite the fact that the parental and pre-dispersion age-groups were both undergoing a type of acculturation that yielded little free time for Latvianness. All "colonies" continued to rely on a core of local activists to assume offices and continue the earlier momentum. The size of religious congregations and secular organizations appeared to have stabilized, though at relatively low levels, and volunteer teaching staffs could always be found to work at weekend supplementary schools and summer camps. The purchase and building of "Latvian centers" continued, relying on the contributions of increasingly well-to-do Latvian middle-class families.³³ Periodic festivals of Latvianness – such as the quadrennial song-and-dance festivals³⁴ – became the apogee of celebratory activities and could be counted on to have attendance numbers in the thousands.

³¹ Though not severed, the contact was often characterized, on the side of those educated in the host countries, by a considerable amount of irony bordering on sarcasm, about topics other adults did not want satirized. Such lack of reverence often led to simmering disputes among adults, see: Valters Nollendorfs, "Tā sauktā *Jaunās Gaitas* lieta," (1959) Part 1, no. 21; Part 2, no. 24. The journal *Jaunā Gaita* was considered especially irreverent by many of its adult readers.

³² Plakans, *The Reluctant Exiles*, Chapter 6.

³³ For a discussion of the monetary value of real estate acquired by western Latvians by the 1970s, see: Edgars Dunsdorfs, "Latviešu sabiedriskā īpašumu vērtība," *Arhīvs*, no. 13 (1973): 115–27.

³⁴ A detailed history of the song festivals from the DP camp period to the mid-1960s is Valentīns Bērzkals, *Latviešu dziesmu svētki trimdā* (New York: Grāmatu Draugs, 1968).

These decades also witnessed the conclusion of a long period of host-country schooling among younger Latvians, their entry into skilled professions, and the slow but steady reduction in the age of organizational leadership. The average age of the activist core of the larger organizations reflected this change, though it was also true that in the smaller “colonies,” due to shortage of candidates, the same cadre was reelected repeatedly, suggesting a growing lack of interest in the still-younger generation.³⁵ In their annual addresses to members, organizational leaders nearly always continued to position their reports within the *trimda* framework, despite the fact that their organization might be having its twenty-fifth or thirtieth anniversary. To younger Latvians who had made peace with the host societies, deference toward the older generation rendered such rhetorical flourishes acceptable, but most probably did not affect the next generation’s composite sense of belonging, in which an equilibrium had been reached between “old homeland concerns” and “host society demands.”

Emergence of a Latvian “Diaspora”

The thirty years after 1980, however, altered this equilibrium and forced the remaining post-war *trimdnieki* and many of their descendants to think of themselves differently. This shift in the terminology of self-reference was the byproduct of two major events, namely, the 1991 renewal of the Latvia’s independence, and the beginning of the outflow of its population.³⁶ The first of these created, or, more precisely, re-created, a national state, rendering the term *trimda* obsolete. The second eventually expanded vastly the number of Latvians living outside the country’s borders and required that analysts find a new designator for all of them, regardless of the date of departure. The new label was the term “diaspora” (Latv. *diaspora*). Picking up momentum after 2004 when Latvia became a member of the European Community, by the end of the decade an ‘incipient diaspora’ (as Sheffer called it in 2003) had become a full-fledged one, with the Latvian government appointing a succession of ministerial-level administrators to deal with this new mix of Latvian “externals.” In this process, the post-WWII Latvians and their descendants lost their status as the most important external Latvian grouping and became

³⁵ The changing nature of western organizational leadership is explored in Plakans, *The Reluctant Exiles*, 398–406.

³⁶ Both these phenomena extended over a number of years: Juris Dreifelds, *Latvia in Transition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Mihails Hazans, “Emigration from Latvia: Brief History and Driving Forces in the 21st Century,” in *The Emigrant Communities of Latvia: National Identity Transnational Belonging, and Diaspora Politics*, eds. Rita Kaša and Inta Mierīņa (New York: Springer, 2019), 6–40.

one of several similar subpopulations that differed primarily with respect to the date of their departure.

As noted earlier, even by the early 1980s opinion-makers among western Latvians were still using the term *trimda* as if all their constituents had in fact been driven out of the old homeland or at least should feel as having been driven out. Now, after 1991, the doors to the ancestral homeland were wide open, and therefore the term *trimda* began to sound dubious. Most western Latvians, in fact, could no longer even justify feeling "stateless." Since the 1950s, most adult Latvians in all "colonies" had established permanent residence and obtained citizenship, and in some of them their offspring had received citizenship as a birthright. The sudden reappearance of the old homeland as a *bona fide* national state created a dilemma, because four decades of life in the host societies could not be easily shrugged off. Consequently, the number of westerners who "returned" (repatriated) after 1991 continued to remain low.³⁷ A handful rearranged their lives so as to spend a part of the year in the old homeland and another part in the host country. Numerous western Latvians applied for and were granted dual citizenship by the renewed Latvian state, even though they kept their host-country residence.³⁸ This contributed to the inching downward of the aggregate population of the renewed Latvia, a phenomenon that was interpreted negatively by those who worried about the labor force, but positively by those for whom the country's "proportion" of Latvians (which inched upward every year because of the departure of Russian-speakers) was of greater concern.

For about a decade after 1991, therefore, the self-description of western Latvians remained under a question mark. Who were they now, if *trimda* no longer existed? An answer to this question was put forward forcefully by government officials and researchers in the old homeland, who increasingly insisted on using the term "diaspora" to refer to those living externally. This usage carried considerable weight for several reasons, though anecdotal evidence suggests that the term was often jarring to western Latvian ears. Yet the westerners were in no position to present a counterargument. The cultural superstructure of the western Latvian "colonies" had been thinning since the early 1980s. One after another, important publications that for decades had been central to western discussions of identity either fell silent or renewed publication in the new Latvia. The number of Latvian-language books and periodicals published in the west fell severely during the 1990s, with their role being superseded by the output of publishing firms in the renewed republic. The principal Latvian-language international periodical, the newspaper *Laiks*, which had circulated from New York City since 1949, moved its base of operations to Riga,

³⁷ Plakans, *The Reluctant Exiles*, 623–44.

³⁸ Because the number of people in these categories depends of accurate self-reporting, precision tends to be rare. For a discussion of the category "dual citizen," see: Dual Citizenship, accessed May 8, 2023, <https://latviansonline.com/dual-citizenship-the-search-for-an-unknown-number-of-potential-latvian-citizens/>.

the capital of the new Latvia, during 2000–2001. The main publication dealing solely with *trimda* matters – the annual *Arhīvs*, published in Australia – issued its last volume in 1992, which meant that western Latvians would now need to turn to old-homeland publications for information about themselves. These old-homeland sources consisted of official data-gathering governmental organizations and the studies of academic researchers specializing in the demographic matters.³⁹ Research and educated guesswork periodically suggested total outflow numbers ranging from 370,000 to 500,000, especially in the decades after 2004 when Europe became the market for Latvian labor.⁴⁰ These large numbers were also due to the fact that, progressively, Latvian governmental definitions of an external Latvian became less strict. Among the 1944/45 refugees the ability to speak Latvian was almost always the minimum criterion of national identity; now, analysts and political leaders were willing to expand the definition to persons with minimal Latvian language abilities, and in some cases to those with none at all, if they were descendants of Latvians or had demonstrated sympathetic attitudes toward the country.

This search for a better self-description did not, however, hinder the work of erst-while *trimda* “national” associations, which by that time were drawing on the second and even third generation of activists for leadership but now became the main contact points. Such persons, understandably, were now coming from host-country “Latvian” populations whose outlook and Latvian language use had been shaped for many decades by personal and collective acculturation. Their activism tended to fall into the “heritage” category: they had no intention of repatriating, were frequently married to host-country partners, and had children or grandchildren who were friendly toward but distant from Latvianness. They were no longer an “exile” population *per se* but one linked to the old homeland by many forms of reverence that translated into financial assistance, material contributions such as books and computers, and *pro bono* hard work.

Conclusion

The Latvian essentialist philosophy of the *tauta* (nation) had predicted that all its members, regardless of residence, would always recognize their spiritual oneness, but this dynamic was not always at work outside the country’s borders in the renewed independence years. There were altogether too many personal and collective differences between

³⁹ Such as, for example, *Latvijas emigrantu kopienas: cerību diaspora*, ed. Inta Mierīņa (Rīga: Filozofijas un socioloģijas institūts, 2015).

⁴⁰ Mihails Hazans, *Diasporas apjoma novērtējums. Pētījuma rezultāti* (Rīga: LU Diasporas un migrācijas pētījumu centrs; 2. papildināta redakcija, 2020).

the descendants of the post-WWII refugees and the more recent so-called "economic migrants" for either to feel completely at ease in each other's company. Anecdotal accounts of interaction carried many different messages. In some "colonies" interaction was fruitful and in others hesitant and in still others never materialized. For many younger westerners Latvian had become a "heritage language," while recent "economic migrants" used it as their primary means of communication. In the western countries where World War II Latvian refugees had been scarce, the new "economic migrants" began to form entirely new "colonies." Unsurprisingly, the internal differentiation of this external Latvian population strengthened the Latvian government and population researchers in Latvia in their collective decision to continue the *diaspora* usage.⁴¹ The term appeared to fit the functions of a general descriptor: it had a neutral, even academic, connotation, and did not imply, as the word *trimda* (exile) had, that the *trimdnieki* had been driven out of their homeland, nor did it highlight the motives of the "economic migrants." Moreover, it was a flexible term, so that it could be used even as the numbers in newer centers of activity such as Europe came to exceed those of the earlier host continents, primarily North America (the US, Canada). And, in addition, it was more useful than any others for international comparisons. Having received the imprimatur of the Latvian government, by the 2020s the term "diaspora" now occupied center stage. All "external Latvians" who have had reasons to refer to themselves had adjusted their vocabularies to the new usage. The term *trimda* and its various derivatives have become "historical" in the full sense, referring to a historically delineated Latvian subpopulation the influence of which still lingers through its descendants but no longer has the same emotional weight. If Latvian researchers now need to refer to the subpopulation of World War II refugees and their descendants in the west, the most frequently used term has become *vecā trimda* (Eng. the old exile).

Even so, it is important to recognize that this "old exile" (in Sheffer's terms, the "incipient diaspora") in its heyday showed itself as robust and wholly capable of creating and sustaining a Latvian-language cultural environment of considerable scope and intensity. From an academic viewpoint, the Latvian "incipient diaspora" has its own unique history – its own "narrative," spanning a half-century – that remains to be fully investigated because it possessed the power to attract the emotions of tens of thousands even before it became a *bona fide* "diaspora."

⁴¹ A decade of discussion about externally-living Latvians eventually led to the passage of the Diaspora Law (Latv. *Diasporas Likums*) of 2019, which intended to formalize the diaspora-homeland relationship; see: Plakans, *The Reluctant Exiles*, 656–7.

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