

New Tools against the Soviet Union in the Political Work of the Latvian Diaspora in the 1970s–1980s: The Case of Human Rights Violations in the Soviet Union

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Abstract: Starting with, and initiated by, the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in the first half of 1970s, the topic of human rights violations in the Soviet Union, and specifically in the Baltic states, became part of the Latvian diaspora's political argumentation when lobbying against the Soviet Union in host countries. Almost unknown before, this topic was very prominent in the political activities of the 1970s and 1980s up until the disintegration of the Soviet Union. The issue of human rights violations in the political argumentation of the Latvian and Baltic diasporas as a whole has always been inextricably linked to the main political goal of these diasporas – the restoration of the right to political self-determination for the Baltic states. Without self-determination, human rights cannot be realized – this is how the basic principle of the diaspora's position could be summarized. The diaspora's rapid focus on human rights violations in particular demonstrates its ability to react quickly to current trends in society and to use issues of current public concern to shape its communication and advance its political cause.

Keywords: Latvian diaspora, anti-communism, Baltic States, USSR, Human Rights violations

Introduction

The Latvian diaspora in places such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and the countries of South America and Western Europe grew immensely after the Second World War, with more than 100,000 refugees leaving German Displaced Persons camps for various countries. This influx changed the entire structure and mood of the diaspora. The Latvian diaspora after the Second World War belonged to a group of diasporas marked by strong anti-communist sentiment, and was also characterized by its activities for the preservation of Latvian identity abroad.

Latvians considered the diaspora period a temporary state of affairs, and their main self-imposed task was to preserve their Latvian identity abroad and to promote the restoration of Latvia's independence. In a broader sense, practically the entire set of activities aimed at the maintenance of Latvian culture and language abroad was for the Latvians an affirmation of the belief that, sooner or later, an independent Latvian state would be restored. In the first post-war decade, the diaspora developed a broad and branched structure of organizations that made it possible to carry out concerted political actions, coordinate educational work, maintain contacts, and effectively disseminate information both within the host society and among Latvians themselves. The diaspora community contributed directly towards their aim of restoring the independence of occupied Latvia through political work. This included informing the host societies about the Baltic states, as well as engaging in direct political lobbying of the host governments, politicians, and international organizations. The Latvian diaspora in the United States was particularly politically active, which was natural in the Cold War context – the United States were the main counterforce to the communist countries as well as the main ally of the diaspora. This political work in the 1950s and even in the 1960s was characterized by first of all settling in the host countries, establishing an organizational network, and at the same time being very active and enthusiastic in any activities that were even partly related to the resistance to the Soviet Union as a political force or to communism as an ideology. The strong anti-communist sentiment in the United States at that time created a fertile ground for such activity. Parallel to the involvement in the U.S. anti-communist policy, this period of activity is characterized by attempts to justify, to some extent, the existence of the diaspora through political activity – to underline its value and to explain its national character with historical arguments. The second half of the 1960s was a period of certain stagnation and searching for new paths in the political activity of the diaspora.¹

The nature of the diaspora's political activity changed markedly in the early 1970s, and the reasons for this change were a combination of external and internal factors. The external factors were events in the international realm, mainly the rapprochement processes between the Soviet Union and the United States, including the Helsinki process, as well as the attempts by several countries to reconsider the policy of legal non-recognition of the incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union (for example, the 1974 decision of Australia to recognize the incorporation). In addition to these external challenges, gradual but very significant internal changes took place within the diaspora around the beginning of the 1970s. It was then that the leadership of political organizations was taken over by the new generation, i.e. those Latvians who had already grown

¹ For a more detailed analysis of the different periods in the political work of the diaspora, see: Kristīne Beķere, *Latvijas labā. Politiskā darbība trimdā 20. gadsimta 40.-80. gados* (Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2022).

up and been educated in the diaspora. These changes were due to both natural factors (ageing of the first generation) and the younger generation's different understanding of the operational strategies to be applied.²

One of the manifestations of the changes during this period was a shift in the arguments and rhetoric used in diaspora political struggles, with a number of new arguments that were much broader than before. While the early political demands of the diaspora were often based on the historical injustices inflicted on the Baltic states – later turning into a struggle against communism in all its forms – at this time the diaspora was becoming increasingly focused on social issues and justifying the need for the restoration of the Baltic states' independence through issues such as environmental protection, world peace, etc. One of these new arguments that was the most visible was the issue of human rights violations in the Baltic states, and the linking of this problem with the issue of political self-determination – an issue characteristic of that period, as emphasized by the diaspora.

The aim of the article is to analyze one of the manifestations of the changes triggered by various factors starting in the 1970s: the emergence and placing of the argumentation on human rights violations in the Soviet Union in the political work of the Latvian diaspora in their host countries.

Previous research on this topic is rather fragmentary. Research on the activities of the Latvian diaspora's political lobby has so far been rather episodic and fragmentary in Latvia. The results of this research have been published in the form of several conference proceedings.³ A valuable collection of interviews and memoirs on the topic of diaspora political activities has also been published.⁴ Of the individual political actions of the diaspora, the most visible have naturally received the most attention. A number of larger and smaller scholarly articles have been devoted to Australia's decision to *de jure* recognize the incorporation of the Baltic states into the USSR,⁵ which can safely be considered the most studied of all political actions. Some articles have also been devoted

² For a brief overview of the generational differences, see: Ieva Zake, "Multiple Fronts of the Cold War: Ethnic Anti-Communism of Latvian Émigrés," in *Anti-Communist Minorities in the U.S.: Political Activism of Ethnic Refugees*, ed. Ieva Zake (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 136–9.

³ *Latvija ārpus Latvijas. Kultūra, vēsture, emigrācija un nacionālā identitāte. Konferenču rakstu krājums* (Rīga: Latvijas Nacionālais arhīvs, 2014); *Konferenču Trimda, kultūra, nacionālā identitāte referātu krājums* (Rīga: Nordik, 2004); *Latviešu trimdas loma Latvijas neatkarības idejas uzturēšanā: Apvienotā Pasaules latviešu zinātnieku III un Letonikas IV kongresa sekcijas materiāli* (Rīga: LZA, 2011).

⁴ *Nyet Nyet Soviet. Stāsti par latviešu politiskajām demonstrācijām trimdā* (Rīga: "Latvieši Pasaulē", 2018).

⁵ Kristīne Beķere, "Latviešu trimdas loma Baltijas valstu okupācijas neatzišanas politikā Austrālijā un Jaunzēlandē," *Latvijas Zinātņu Akadēmijas Vēstis*, no. 1/2 (2011): 30–61. lpp.; Ineta Didrihsone-Tomaševska, "Austrālijas kauja: Austrālija atzīst Baltijas valstu *de jure* iekļaušanu Padomju Savienības sastāvā," *Latvijas Arhīvi*, no. 1 (2012).

to the activities of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE)⁶ or, for example, to the issue of extradition to the Soviet Union of Baltic gold deposited in the United Kingdom⁷ or the participation of the diaspora in events in Latvia in the late 1980s.⁸ The issue of the use of human rights violation arguments in the political work of the Latvian diaspora is very briefly outlined in the author's dissertation and the resulting book,⁹ which is also currently the only comprehensive study of the political activities of the Latvian diaspora. Outside Latvia, the most popular topic has been the place of the Baltic question in U.S. politics¹⁰ or international politics,¹¹ as well as histories of diaspora communities in certain countries.¹² It should be noted that the study of the human rights argument is greatly facilitated by the serious international study of human rights violations in the CSCE process and in the end of the Cold War in general.¹³

The main sources used in this study are the documentation of diaspora organizations (correspondence, minutes of meetings, and activity reports, etc.) in archives in Latvia, Sweden, the United States, and elsewhere. Publications in the major Latvian diaspora press have also been used.

Human Rights Issues in the CSCE and Involvement of the Latvian Diaspora

The main center of anti-communist political activity of the Latvian diaspora was located in the United States. Although the political work of the diaspora did in fact take place

⁶ Jānis Taurēns, "Helsinki process un latviešu trimda 20. gadsimta 70. gadu pirmajā pusē," in *Latvijas Vēsture* 67, no. 3 (2007).

⁷ For example, the series of articles by A. Zunda "The Undying Glitter of Latvia's Gold" in *Latvijas Vēstnesis* in 2005. Zunda has also addressed the Baltic gold issue in several other articles.

⁸ Jānis Taurēns, "Latviešu trimda un Trešā atmoda (1988–1990): starp tradīciju un revolūciju," *Journal of the University of Latvia. History*, no. 13/14 (2022): 101–14.

⁹ Beķere, *Latvijas labā*.

¹⁰ J.H. L'Hommedieu, "Exiles and Constituents: Baltic Refugees and American Cold War Politics, 1948–1960" (PhD diss., University of Turku, 2011).

¹¹ John Hiden, Vahur Made V., and David J. Smith, eds., *The Baltic Question during the Cold War* (London: New York: Routledge, 2008).

¹² Ieva Zake, *American Latvians. Politics of a Refugee Community* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2010).

¹³ For example: Aryeh Neier, *The International Human Rights Movement. A history* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020); Sarah B. Snyder, *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Nicholas Badalassi and Sarah B. Snyder, *The CSCE and the End of the Cold War. Diplomacy, Societies and Human Rights, 1972–1990* (Berghahn books, 2019); Sarah B. Snyder, *From Selma to Moscow. How Human Rights Activists Transformed US Foreign Policy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

in other locations (Western Europe, Canada, Australia, and even South America¹⁴), the United States were undoubtedly central to the diaspora's understanding of its political tasks and spheres of work. In the minds of the Latvian diaspora, the United States were its biggest and most important ally – the only force that could even theoretically oppose the diaspora's main enemy, the Soviet Union. The central importance of the United States is evidenced by the fact that the central political organization of the Latvian diaspora, the World Federation of Free Latvians, was based in the United States, and that the American Latvian Association played a key role in its activities¹⁵ and, accordingly, in diaspora political activities throughout the world to a certain extent as well.

Therefore, the domestic political mood and trends in U.S. domestic politics were of importance in terms of the possibilities for political lobbying in favor of the restoration of the independence of the Baltic states. Various human rights issues had been on the agenda in the United States since the mid-1950s, but the U.S. government's interest in human rights largely did not extend beyond the borders of its own country until the early 1970s. After the events in Chile in 1973, the United States adopted a resolution that, for the first time, directly addressed human rights violations in another country. It called for the denial of any economic or military assistance other than humanitarian aid until the government of Chile protected the human rights of all individuals.¹⁶ At the same time as these events, the European Security and Cooperation Conference in Helsinki was taking place, and the U.S. society was becoming increasingly interested and concerned about human rights abuses in the Soviet Union, particularly with regard to the Jewish exodus from the Soviet Union that was being prevented.¹⁷

In parallel to the developments in U.S. politics, the Helsinki process gave incomparably more attention than ever before to human rights in interstate negotiations. This is evidenced by the fact that in the Helsinki Final Act, principle 7 of the “Declaration on Principles Guiding Relations between Participating States” referred to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and thus the principle of respect for human rights was considered as important as the principles of national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the like.¹⁸ Some scholars have even suggested that the Helsinki process and the related

¹⁴ Kristīne Beķere, “Latvieši Dienvidamerikā 1945–1991: darbība Latvijas neatkarības idejas saglabāšanai,” *Journal of the University of Latvia. History*, no. 4 (2017): 141–58.

¹⁵ The first WFFL President from a Latvian organization from a country other than the United States was Linards Lukss (Latvian National Association of Canada), who was in office from 1988 to 1989.

¹⁶ Neier, *The International Human Rights Movement*, 161–5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 165.

¹⁸ Final Act of Helsinki; Arie Bloed, ed., *The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. Analysis and Basic Documents, 1972–1993* (Dordrecht: Kluwer International publishers, 1993), 146.

human rights advocacy activities were among the important factors leading to the end of the Cold War.¹⁹

The Helsinki process attracted worldwide attention, and the Baltic diaspora was no exception. As the CSCE process negotiations in Helsinki and Geneva progressed, diaspora organizations also developed their own political action plans and strategies for the Conference. As early as 1972, while the CSCE preparatory negotiations were still in progress, the WFFL drew up its own list of key political activities for the CSCE. This included preparing memoranda with political and legal arguments; visiting delegations of anti-communist CSCE member states, heads of state, and foreign ministers; being present during the Conference and organizing both press conferences and public demonstrations; and coordinating with the Lithuanians and Estonians.²⁰ The funds for these activities were to be raised through a global fundraising campaign among Latvian diaspora members in all continents and countries. That campaign was launched in the spring of 1973.²¹

In cooperation with the other Baltic global organizations, establishment of the Baltic World Council (also called the Baltic World Conference) was achieved. Although most political actions were carried out on behalf of all Balts, the Baltic World Council was established and functioned largely thanks to the initiative and perseverance of Latvians living in the United States. This was especially true in terms of funding: the Latvian Freedom Fund enabled the Latvian diaspora to finance political actions, while the Estonians and Lithuanians had no such funds.²² The Latvian Freedom Fund was founded in 1973, at the Congress of the American Latvian Association in Cleveland. The contributions from its members formed an untouchable capital fund, the interest from which was used for financing the political and informational activities of the WFFL, as well as covering the administrative expenses of the Fund. In total, more than 3,000 individuals, families, and diaspora organizations contributed to the Fund. The Fund's untouchable capital reached one million U.S. dollars in 1983, and further grew to two million U.S. dollars in 1989.²³ The Freedom Fund continues to operate today.

In accordance with the WFFL's previously developed action plan, the central organizations in the diaspora prepared extensive information on the Baltic states in preparation

¹⁹ Snyder, *Human Rights Activism*, 2–4.

²⁰ Priorities for the preparatory work of the PBLA Security Conference. 14 November 1972 – ALA Archives, Rockville Office, PBLA Collection, folder: European Security Conference; file: 1972.

²¹ PBLA information for compatriots on EDSA activities – Swedish National Archives, Lettiska Centralradet, folder “PBLA Board 1972, 1973”.

²² Ilgvars Spilners, *Mēsuzvarējam!* (Rīga: autora izdevums, 1998), 34.

²³ Jānis Lucs, “Latvijas Brīvības fonds – ieguldījums Latvijas neatkarības atjaunošanā,” in *Pasaules Brīvo latviešu apvienības ieguldījums Latvijas neatkarības atgūšanā un tās stiprināšanā* (Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2017), 88–91.

for their political lobbying work at the Conference. On behalf of the WFFL, the well-known lawyer Dietrich Andreas Loeber drafted a memorandum on the legal aspects of the CSCE. In it, he stressed that security in Europe could only be achieved once the consequences of the Second World War, which had been perpetrated by methods and means incompatible with the principles of international law, including the occupation of the Baltic states, were eliminated. The Memorandum demanded that the Conference declare the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 null and void with respect to the Baltic states from the moment of its conclusion, and that the Conference find a political solution to the situation of the Baltic states in accordance with international law and the principle of self-determination.²⁴ The Baltic states sent the memorandums and informational material to the governments and ministers of the various countries,²⁵ and distributed them to the delegations of the member states. During the CSCE process and before the signing of the Helsinki Final Act, diaspora activists also met with various heads of state and foreign ministers to urge them to defend the interests of the Baltic states and not to abandon the existing policy of non-recognition. For example, the Baltic delegation was received very favorably at the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.²⁶

During the opening of the Helsinki Conference and during the negotiations in Geneva, there were also representatives of the Latvian diaspora present. As it was neither possible from the point of view of resources, nor expedient to be active at all times, the WFFL representatives were in Geneva on several separate occasions, with intervals of time that allowed them to adapt to the course of the negotiations. The work tasks of the WFFL delegations in Geneva followed a standard pattern: to meet with representatives of the CSCE member states in various committees and provide them with written Baltic recommendations and prepared materials; to meet with international media journalists; and to organize a demonstration or similar public political action to “remind the Soviets that they have not been forgotten.”²⁷

During the long negotiations in Geneva, three separate WFFL delegations were active. The work of the delegations was carefully planned, including the responsibilities

²⁴ Memorandum by D.A. Loeber on the Legal Aspects of the European Security and Cooperation Consultation, see: *4. maijs: Rakstu, atmiņu un dokumentu krājums par Neatkarības deklarāciju*, ed. Tālavš Jundzis (Riga: LU žurnāla “Latvijasvēsture” fonds, 2000), 386–90.

²⁵ For example, the Foreign Minister of the Federal Republic of Germany. See letter of U. Gravas to V. Schell, 17 May 1973 – LNA LVA, 2176.f., 1v. Apr., 154, p. 4.

²⁶ Letter from T. Kronberg, President of the Baltic Federation of Canada, to A. McEachen, Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs, 10 February 1975 – HIA, Janis Lejins Collection, Box 1, folder “European Security Conference 1972-77”.

²⁷ Spilners, *Mēsuzvarējām!*, 26–7.

among the delegation members, handouts and negotiating arguments, etc.²⁸ The first delegation – Imants Freimanis, Pauls Reinhardts, and Adolfs Šilde – stayed in Geneva for a week in early December 1973, and visited the heads of the German, Dutch, Vatican, Luxembourg, Austrian, British, American, Canadian, Belgian, French, Swiss, and Italian delegations, and also held a joint meeting with representatives of the Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, and Icelandic delegations.²⁹ The WFFL delegation distributed its organization's memoranda to delegations and press agencies, more than 70 in English, 45 in French, and the same number in German.³⁰ The second delegation – consisting of Pauls Reinhardts and Ilgvars Spilners, as well as Arnold Joonsson of the Estonian World Council – was in Geneva during February 18–22, 1974, and visited 12 Western delegations and diplomats. The third delegation consisted of Augusts Abakuks and Pauls Reinhardts, who were in Geneva at the end of April 1974.³¹

The issue of human rights violations was directly present in these diaspora activities. The memoranda and compilations of information submitted to the delegations inevitably contained the most important legal information concerning the unlawful incorporation of each of the respective Baltic states into the Soviet Union, the treaties and international documents violated by the Soviet Union, etc. However, a large part of these compilations was devoted to specific human rights violations in the Baltic states. The documents explained with precise examples how any statements made against the Soviet Union's methods of management in the Baltic states (such as exaggerated industrialization, russification, discrimination against the Latvian language, etc.) were punishable under criminal law as anti-Soviet agitation, with sentences of up to seven years in a forced labor camp. Also addressed was the lack of freedom of movement, characterized by the impossibility for citizens to leave the Baltic states or for foreigners to enter freely; the issue of family reunification was also linked to this.³² A memorandum on the problem of political prisoners and other human rights violations was handed over to all delegations of the member states at the end of the Conference, either in person or by post.

The Memorandum addressed such issues as: the right to leave the Soviet Union freely; the need to give scientists the right to participate in international conferences of their choice; and the right of artists and writers to perform abroad of their own free choice, regardless of the Committee on Cultural Relations with Compatriots Abroad; allowing

²⁸ PBLA circular – plan of action for the Geneva Stage 1 delegation – LNA LVVA, 293.f., 1.apr., 1208.p., 35–36.

²⁹ Spilners, *Mēsuzvarējām!*, 24.

³⁰ Report of I. Freimanis on the work of the PBLA delegation in Geneva from 2–8 December 1973 – LNA LVVA, 293.f., 1.apr., 1208.p., 3–4.

³¹ Spilners, *Mēsuzvarējām!*, 30–4.

³² Eva Liepiņa, *Latviešu trimdas darbība Baltijas jautājuma aktualizācijā EDSA konferencēs 1975–1983* (master's thesis, Latvijas Universitāte, Rīga, 2022), 43–6.

foreigners to enter the Soviet Union freely and to meet the local population; lifting restrictions on the freedom of movement of foreign journalists, allowing them to visit the Baltic states; abolishing or at least reducing the high customs duty on aid packages sent from abroad; lifting the ban on sending high-value medicines and medical aid from the West to the Soviet Union; removing restrictions on the import and export of books, newspapers, magazines, sound records, tapes, and microfilms; ending interference with radio broadcasts, including Radio Liberty and Radio Free Europe; and requiring that no political prisoner be deported to serve his sentence outside Latvia.³³

From the coverage in the diaspora press, the WFFL delegations were positive about their opportunity to make a positive impact through this informational material. The delegates noted that the demands of this so-called “humanitarian memorandum” had been given serious consideration by Western CSCE delegates and acknowledged that at least some of them had a chance of being won, as they differed little from the baseline of demands they had set out.³⁴

The most worrying point for the diaspora in the context of the CSCE was the paragraph of the final negotiating text, which declared the inviolability of borders and the territorial integrity of states as a fundamental principle, and thus essentially provided for the recognition of the existing national borders in Europe. With the declaration of such a principle, there was a risk that the Western countries would abandon their policy of non-recognition of the annexation of the Baltic states, which they had maintained until then, and internationally confirm the Baltic states’ belonging to the Soviet Union. Recognition of the borders would strengthen the Soviet Union’s claim to the Baltic states and make the diaspora’s goal of restoring the independence of the Baltic states much more difficult. Thus, it is understandable that the WFFL and other organizations paid a great deal of attention to the CSCE.

When it became clear that the text of the document to be signed could not be changed, it was important for the diaspora to at least get the United States to publicly state that the fact of the signing of the Helsinki Final Act would not change the United States’ attitude towards the occupation of the Baltic states. On July 25, 1975, U.S. President Gerald Ford met with representatives of several Eastern European ethnic groups shortly before flying to Helsinki to sign the Final Act. This meeting was attended not only by Balts, but also by representatives of Ukrainian, Polish, Hungarian, Czech, Slovak, Armenian, and Belarusian organizations. The Latvians were represented by WFFL President Uldis Grava.³⁵ In his statement on the meeting, President Ford stressed that the

³³ Ādolfs Šilde, “Kustības brīvību Baltijas valstīs,” *Latvija Amerikā*, December 22, 1973.

³⁴ “Latviešu delegāti Ženēvā,” *Austrālijas latvietis*, December 21, 1973.

³⁵ Minutes of a meeting with Americans of Eastern European origin, July 25, 1975; *Foreign Relations of United States, 1969–1976*, vol. XXXIX, document 322, p. 926.

outcome of the CSCE would not affect the official U.S. policy of non-recognition of the incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union.³⁶ During the meeting, several participants, including Lithuanian representative Pauls Dargis on behalf of the Balts, requested that the President make a public declaration in Helsinki on the continuation of the policy of non-recognition of the United States, regardless of the Final Act. President Ford promised to consider this suggestion, but no public statement was made in Helsinki. During the meeting, the President also stressed that the statement he had made was public and could be safely disseminated, including to countries behind the Iron Curtain via Voice of America or Radio Free Europe, and therefore, in his view, no further public statements were necessary.³⁷

After the signing of the Final Act, it became even more important for the Baltic diaspora to achieve a public, official statement at the highest level possible of the United States' continuation of the policy of non-recognition, either by Congress or Senate resolution. Diaspora organizations continued active political lobbying in the U.S. Congress to get a resolution passed, both by demonstrating and by visiting members of Congress to try to persuade them to support such a resolution.³⁸ Finally, on December 2, 1975, the U.S. Congress passed House Resolution 864, in which the U.S. Congress declared that the signing of the Helsinki Final Act had in no way altered the existing U.S. policy of non-recognition of the incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union.³⁹ A similar resolution was passed by the Senate on May 5, 1976, which underlined the existence of the U.S. policy of non-recognition despite the signing of the Helsinki Final Act.⁴⁰ The huge efforts made by the diaspora to achieve the adoption of these two resolutions demonstrates the extreme importance that this issue had for the Baltic diaspora.

As with the Helsinki Conference, the Baltic diaspora saw it as its duty to remind the great powers of the Baltic issue and to call on them to address it at the subsequent Review Conferences (Belgrade 1977–1978, Madrid 1980–1983, Vienna 1986–1989). Following the example set in Helsinki, for each of the Review Conferences the diaspora organizations prepared a compilation of documents and other materials detailing the situation in the Baltic states in the context of the issues discussed at the conference, including

³⁶ U.S. President George W. Ford's statement on his meeting with Americans of Eastern European origin, July 25, 1975; *J. Ford Presidential Library Archives*, Box 12, "7/25/75 – Presidential Remarks, Meeting with Americans of Eastern European Background".

³⁷ Minutes of a meeting with Americans of Eastern European origin, July 25, 1975; *Foreign Relations of United States*, 1969–1976, vol. XXXIX, document 322, pp. 926–30.

³⁸ "Svarīgsbijakatsdeputāts," *Laiks*, January 24, 1976, 1.

³⁹ "H.Res.864 – 94th Congress (1975–1976)," *Congress.gov*, accessed December 27, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/94th-congress/house-resolution/864>.

⁴⁰ U.S. Senate Resolution Nr. 406, *Documents on Disarmament 1976* (Washington: United States Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, 1978), 285–7.

human rights violations. Diaspora activists were also on the ground at crucial moments during the conferences, visiting member state delegations and, where possible, holding various public demonstrations to attract attention.

The memorandum drafted by diaspora organizations in the context of the Belgrade Conference was composed of several parts, each of which referred to one of the “baskets” of the Helsinki Final Act, which could be circulated together or separately. The memorandum and other informational materials were distributed not only to the delegations of the Conference member states, but also to the foreign ministries. In 1977, for example, a report on the conditions in occupied Latvia and a memorandum on the Belgrade Conference were prepared and submitted to the British Foreign Office by members of the British Latvian National Council in cooperation with other nationalities within the European Liaison Group.⁴¹ In addition, various submissions and requests to the Belgrade Conference were made not only by Baltic organizations, but also in cooperation with diaspora organizations of other Eastern and Central European nations. For example, in June 1977, a joint appeal to the societies and governments of the free world and to international organizations in Stockholm to demand that the Soviet Union respect human rights in the Baltic states was signed by Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian, Polish, and Hungarian organizations in Sweden, as well as by the head of the Assembly of Captive European Nations delegation in Sweden and the chairman of the Baltic Committee.⁴²

The diaspora action in Belgrade was the first time that activists tried to carry out political activities directly in a non-democratic, Eastern bloc country. Shortly before the opening of the Conference, a WFFL delegation arrived in Belgrade: Oļģerts Pavlovskis, head of the American Latvian Association External Information Office, and Mudīte Krasta, board member of the Swedish Latvian Central Council. On October 5, the two Latvians visited the Swedish CSCE delegation and handed over a compilation of material on human rights violations in the Baltic states. After this visit, they were arrested, all the informational material they had brought was confiscated, and both were expelled from the territory of Yugoslavia. The arrest and expulsion attracted considerable media attention, and also caused a diplomatic scandal, with the U.S. delegation protesting against the expulsion of a U.S. citizen.⁴³ To a large extent, this scandal ensured that at later conferences, and later delegations of representatives of Baltic organizations in Belgrade, could visit the delegations of member states unhindered. It was recognized that organizations had the right to visit delegations

⁴¹ Report by J. Andrup, Head of the Information Branch of the LNPL, on the work of the Branch in 1977. *British Latvian Documentation Centre “Straumēni”*, LNPL collection, folder “5-1 LNPL external information”.

⁴² Appeal for Human rights in the Baltic States. June 1977. *LNA LVVA*, 293 f., 1 Apr., p. 1218, 41–2.

⁴³ Oļģerts Pavlovskis, *Pasaules Brīvo latviešu apvienības darbība Eiropas Drošības un sadarbības organizācijas ietvaros. Pasaules Brīvo latviešu apvienības ieguldījums Latvijas neatkarības atgūšanā un tās stiprināšanā. PBLA 60. gadskārtas konferences referātu krājums* (Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2017), 74–5.

and to lobby on the issues and topics raised in the Helsinki Final Act or on the agenda of the Review Conferences, including human rights. Accordingly, further Baltic delegations in Belgrade could act without hindrance.⁴⁴

The human rights issue had come to light with the Helsinki Final Act and the subsequent Review Conferences, and since the situation in the Baltic states was bad enough, the human rights issue was a good argument to use in the political struggle of the diaspora. Despite the fact that the primary concern of the diaspora was the recognition of the borders (i.e. the legal confirmation of the Baltic states' belonging to the Soviet Union), the members of the diaspora delegations themselves recognized already on the spot at the Helsinki Conference that it was the human rights and humanitarian issues in general that were most suited to the atmosphere and attention of the Conference.⁴⁵ Diaspora organizations did not hesitate to capitalize on this insight, both in Helsinki and at later meetings.

Latvian Diaspora Activities at the Ottawa Expert Meeting

In addition to the general Review Conferences, the Helsinki process also included meetings devoted to specific issues, including human rights. The most important meeting on human rights was held in Canada: the Ottawa Meeting on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, from May 7 to June 17, 1985. This meeting was characterized by completely opposing views on the subject of the Western and Eastern bloc countries. The Western countries expressed their concern about human rights violations in certain Eastern European countries, including the suppression of religious freedom, the abuse of psychiatric institutions for political purposes, and the violation of minority rights, including the violation of the right of individuals to freedom of movement, etc. The Eastern bloc countries, on the other hand, were reluctant to address such issues and put Western problems, such as mass unemployment, on the agenda. The meeting of experts ended without any results. The opinions of the member states, even on the issues to be discussed at the meeting in general, were so different that no joint outcome document could be drawn up.⁴⁶

The international urgency of the human rights issue created a new set of arguments with which the exiles tried to convince the West that the Baltic states needed to exercise

⁴⁴ Celle O. Trimdas latviešu devums Latvijas neatkarības atjaunošanā. Blūzma V., Celle O. u.c. *Latvijas valsts atjaunošana 1986–1993* (Rīga: Latvijas Zinātņu akadēmijas Baltijas stratēģisko pētījumu centrs, 1998), 422.

⁴⁵ "15 minūšu protests pie 10. Zālesdurvīm," *Laiks*, December 15, 1973, 1.

⁴⁶ Bloed, *The Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe*, 89.

their right to self-determination. Improving that the Soviet authorities mismanaged the Baltic states and failed to respect human rights, the exiles stressed that the situation could be changed by allowing Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians to freely choose their own democratic form of government.

During this period, organizations specifically addressing the issue of respect for human rights in the Baltic states were founded and operated. One such organization was the Canadian Committee for Human Rights in Latvia, chaired by Pēteris Vasariņš and vice-chaired by Elma Miniāte. P. Vasariņš was also the head of the external information branch of the Canadian diaspora organizations *Daugavas Vanagi* Board,⁴⁷ and the Canadian *Daugavas Vanagi* External Information Working Group, which operated under this name in principle.⁴⁸ The purpose of the Committee was to inform the Canadian public, press, and politicians about violations of human, religious, and national rights in Soviet-occupied Latvia.⁴⁹ To achieve this goal, the organization wrote letters to politicians, and published press releases and information leaflets.⁵⁰

The Canadian Committee on Human Rights in Latvia was active in the context of the Ottawa Expert Meeting on Human Rights in the CSCE countries. Prior to the start of the meeting, the Committee published a report on the human rights situation in occupied Latvia, entitled “Report on continued violation of the Helsinki Final Act in Soviet occupied Latvia since the convention of the Madrid Review Conference in 1980.” The report illustrated Soviet efforts to russify Latvia, as well as to deny freedom of communication and suppress religion. All interested persons could obtain the leaflets from the publishers.⁵¹ They were also sent to the Canadian CSCE delegation, and all Canadian MPs and senators.⁵² Derek Fraser, Head of the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe Division of the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, in his reply to Pēteris Vasariņš, pointed out that Canada had always reprimanded the Soviet Union for human rights violations on its territory and would continue to do so at the Ottawa Conference. He thanked the Committee for sending the leaflet, and assured that it would be presented to the Canadian delegation at the Ottawa meeting.⁵³ For his part, the head of the delegation, Harry Jay, thanked P. Vasariņš for his participation in the consultation event organized by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as for the many written materials he had sent,

⁴⁷ “Aicinājums atbalstīt darbu brīvībai,” *Laiks*, June 6, 1985, 1.

⁴⁸ “Demonstrācija par cilvēkattiecībām Toronto,” *Turpat*, December 12, 1984, 5.

⁴⁹ Similar groups emerged in other diasporas as well, for example, the Polish Committee in Support of Solidarity, created in New York in 1981, and others.

⁵⁰ P. Vasarins letter to N. Graber, 15.01.1985. *LNA LVA*, 2451. f., 1.v apr., p. 4, p. 26.

⁵¹ Canadian Committee for Human Rights in Latvia News report, April 30, 1985. *LNA LVA*, 2451. f., 1.v apr., 4. l., p. 45–6.

⁵² Cover letter of P. Vasarins to Senators, 30.04.1985. *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵³ Letter from D. Fraser to P. Vasarins, 29.05.1985. *Ibid.*, 49–50.

the information contained in which had enabled the delegation to better prepare for the meeting of experts.⁵⁴

These and several other letters sent by Foreign Ministry officials and members of the delegation went well beyond formal letters of thanks and explained in sufficient detail the attitude of the writers towards the human rights issue in the Baltic states and the Soviet Union. For example, after the Ottawa conference and in preparation for the next meeting of CSCE experts in Bern, which was devoted to human contacts, the Canadian CSCE coordinator wrote a four-page letter to P. Vasariņš outlining the position of the Canadian delegation. In the letter, he also asked for the views of the Canadian Committee on Human Rights in Latvia on the situation in this area, and for information on the restrictions it was aware of that Canadian citizens had to face when dealing with the Soviet bloc countries in the course of family reunification, or when making private, religious, or professional contacts with people in the Eastern bloc countries.⁵⁵ Unlike the brief and formal letters of thanks often written over the decades by the offices of various state institutions or officials, these letters, by their content, confirm that the materials sent to the recipients were indeed useful or at least interesting in some way, and that the work of the Committee headed by P. Vasariņš was noticed and positively appreciated by both the Canadian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the members and administration of the Canadian CSCE delegation.

On June 17, 1985, the Canadian Committee for Human Rights in Latvia, in cooperation with Lithuanians and Estonians, also organized a protest demonstration in Ottawa's Confederation Square at the end of the Ottawa experts' meeting to "remind the world that this June marks 45 years since Soviet soldiers destroyed the independence of the Baltic states" and to ask "when the right to self-determination proclaimed in the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act will be extended to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania."⁵⁶ Buses were organized to transport the demonstrators from Toronto (where most Latvians were residing) to Ottawa.⁵⁷ Around 100 Latvians took part in the demonstration, leaflets were distributed, and interviews were given to the press and television. A report on the demonstration and an interview with P. Vasariņš were shown on the Ottawa CTV station.⁵⁸ The human rights issue in the context of the Ottawa expert meeting, which concluded with a demonstration on the final day, was a successful argument to attract public attention.

⁵⁴ Letter from H. Jay to P. Vasarins, 27.03.1985. Ibid., 94.

⁵⁵ Letter from V. Bauer to P. Vasarins, 15.01.1986. Ibid., 100–3.

⁵⁶ Canadian Committee for Human Rights in Latvia News release, June 13, 1985. *LNA LVA*, 2451. f., 1.v apr., 4. l., p. 58–9.

⁵⁷ "Aicinājums 17. Jūnijā braukt uz demonstrāciju Otavā," *Laiks*, June 12, 1985, 1.

⁵⁸ "Izcils informācijas darbs," *Turpat*, July 3, 1985, 1.

The Canadian Committee for Human Rights in Latvia is just one example of the work of one organization, which illustrates the importance of the issue of human rights in the political arguments of the diaspora at that time. Of course, in the context of the Ottawa expert meeting, various political actions were also carried out by other diaspora organizations, including the WFFL: the Information Office was active, a total of five demonstrations were held during the short duration of the meeting, as were press conferences and meetings with delegations from various countries.⁵⁹

The Human Rights Factor in Diaspora Public Political Actions

Human rights and human rights violations in the Baltic states also appeared in the themes of public political actions organized by the diaspora, i.e. actions aimed at attracting as much public attention as possible, such as marches, demonstrations, theatrical street performances, etc. In the diaspora, it was very common to mark various festivals and commemorations with political events or documents such as petitions or resolutions.

A typical example in the context of human rights is the celebration of Human Rights Day on December 10. Human Rights Day was established on this date in 1950, by a resolution of the UN General Assembly commemorating the adoption on this date of the most important human rights instrument, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in 1948. However, despite the existence of this day since 1950, there are only a few references to it or calls for its observance among the Latvian diaspora in the 1950s and 1960s, most of which occurred in the second half of the 1960s. For example, in 1967, there were only very brief announcements in the Latvian diaspora press that the Assembly of Captive European Nations would organize the day with a public demonstration and the adoption of a resolution protesting against the denial of human rights and fundamental freedoms to the people of Central and Eastern Europe.⁶⁰ The Latvian diaspora delegation was, of course, present at the Assembly and took part in the following events. However, it was not really the Latvian diaspora organizations that were involved in any special events to mark the day, just as the issue itself or day of human rights does not appear in the diaspora's internal debates on the tasks and directions of its political action in the 1960s.

The situation regarding Human Rights Day was different in the second half of the 1970s. On this day in 1976, diaspora youth staged a demonstration in Stockholm against forced labor in the Soviet Union, calling for the cancellation of the 1980 Olympics in

⁵⁹ "Mēs prasām savas tiesības," *Turpat*, May 15, 1985, 1.

⁶⁰ "ACEN atzīmēs cilvēka tiesību dienu," *Laiks*, December 2, 1967.

Moscow if the Soviet Union did not release political prisoners by then.⁶¹ In 1977, the *Daugavas Vanagi* organization in Canada used the symbolic significance of the day to present a commemorative tribute (made by a Latvian woodworker) to former Canadian Prime Minister John Diefenbaker in gratitude for his support for the right of self-determination of the Baltic states. The presentation was also covered by the local press.⁶² In 1975, Latvians in Canada took part in a large demonstration in Toronto that was organized by various ethnic groups, the largest being Ukrainians and Poles.⁶³ Press conferences were also held.⁶⁴ In 1978, around 100–150 Latvians took part in the International Human Rights Day demonstration in Bonn, Germany, where more than 10,000 people gathered.⁶⁵ Similar events such as demonstrations and resolutions, to name a few, happened in other years, too.

Diaspora organizations also held events in other seasons to highlight human rights issues. For example, on September 24, 1977, Baltic diaspora youth organizations, on the initiative of the Lithuanian Youth World Council, organized the Baltic Human Rights Rally at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. The aim was to draw the attention of the world press to the human rights defenders and fighters of the Baltic states – not only in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, but outside them, as well: in Soviet prisons, in exile, etc. – and to demand the restoration of the right to self-determination for the Baltic states. This event had an unusually large budget for diaspora activities, amounting to USD 15,000.⁶⁶ Around 4,000 Balts participated in the event. It was preceded by a press conference. The rally itself was addressed by State Department spokesman Mark Sneyder, several U.S. Senators and Congressmen, several Russian dissidents, and various written congratulations were also read out. A proclamation addressed to President Carter was also adopted during the demonstration. The official part of the speeches was followed by a cultural program with performances by a Lithuanian traditional dance ensemble and a concert.⁶⁷

This event is in line with another specific thematic strand of political activity in the diaspora that flourishes in the period under review: the support for the so-called prisoners of conscience and dissidents in the Soviet Union, i.e. people who were imprisoned for initiatives focused on the preservation of national culture, fair dealings in the court system, or freedom of religion or expression (for examples, see the cases of Jānis Rožkalns

⁶¹ “Starptautiskajā cilvēka tiesību dienā...,” *Laiks*, January 1, 1977.

⁶² “Pateicības velte par drosmīgu vārdu,” *Laiks*, December 28, 1977.

⁶³ “Nākotnes fondā 23000 dol.,” *Laiks*, November 1, 1975.

⁶⁴ “Parlamentāriešiem jādod konkrēti fakti,” *Laiks*, December 17, 1975.

⁶⁵ *Nyet Nyet Soviet*, 103.

⁶⁶ “Baltiešu cilvēka tiesību un pašnoteikšanās sanākme,” *Laiks*, June 8, 1977.

⁶⁷ “Demonstrācija,” *AKKA Raksts*, December 1, 1977.

and others below). The support given to certain Soviet dissident scientists, or the question of the right of Jews to emigrate from the Soviet Union, if desired – these were human rights violations that in the late 1960s and early 1970s had acquired a permanent place in the political lobbying scene of the U.S. Congress.⁶⁸ But the interest of the Latvian diaspora was specific. While there was also general support for Soviet dissidents, diaspora events focused more on expressing support for political prisoners of Latvian origin, emphasizing the need to provide the Baltic states with the rights these people had demanded – freedom of expression and political self-determination.

The year 1985, which marked the 10th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, was particularly notable for a number of diaspora political actions in support of political prisoners. In Sweden, three Latvian youths staged a protest on August 1 by chaining themselves to the fence of the Soviet Embassy in Stockholm. The young people symbolically embodied three Latvian political prisoners – Jānis Rožkalns⁶⁹, Ints Cālītis,⁷⁰ and Gunārs Astra⁷¹ – by writing their names on their clothes. On white T-shirts, they wrote the name of the political prisoner and the sentence, for example “Jānis Rožkalns – 5 years hard labour.” The press was informed, informational handouts were prepared, and

⁶⁸ See: Snyder, *From Selma to Moscow*.

⁶⁹ J. Rožkalns was active in the underground Latvian Independence Movement, reproduced and distributed leaflets with anti-Soviet content, secretly flew the then banned red-white-red flags of the independent Republic of Latvia in public places, and was one of the publishers of the *Latvian Independence Movement Bulletin*. In 1983, he was arrested and sentenced to five years' imprisonment in the Perm regional correctional labor camp. He was released in 1987, and upon his return to Latvia became involved in the work of the Riga branch of the human rights group Helsinki 86.

⁷⁰ I. Cālītis headed a youth underground organization at Riga City High School No.1 in 1947. In 1948, he was arrested for distributing proclamations and sentenced to 25 years' imprisonment in the GULAG penal camp. After Stalin's death in 1956, he was allowed to return to Riga. In 1958, he was arrested for anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda and sentenced to 6 years imprisonment in the Mordovia labor camps, returning to Riga in 1964. In 1979, as one of 45 Baltic citizens, he signed a protest document, also known as the “Baltic Memorandum” or “Baltic Charter.” In 1983, he was arrested for the third time and sentenced to 6 years' imprisonment, from which he was released in 1986.

⁷¹ G. Astra is the best known of the Latvian dissidents. In February 1961, he was arrested and accused of anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda, and later of treason and espionage, because in 1958, he had met two U.S. embassy employees and corresponded with Gaida Prieditis, a Latvian living in the United States. He was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment (with confiscation of property) in the labor camps of the Mordovia and Perm regions. He returned to Latvia in 1968, where he continued to maintain contacts with like-minded people who were trying to maintain Latvian national self-confidence or were in some way working against the Soviet Union occupation regime. He was arrested in 1983, and tried for possession, reproduction, and distribution of “anti-Soviet” literature (including George Orwell's *1984* and others). The court found Astra to be a particularly dangerous recidivist and sentenced him to seven years' imprisonment in a special regime colony and five years in a labor camp. As a result of an international campaign, he was amnestied in 1988, and released from detention on February 1. He died in Leningrad in March of the same year after a sudden illness under suspicious circumstances.

other diaspora activists took photographs of the event. The protest was featured in several major daily newspapers in Sweden.⁷² In 1985, Latvian youth also carried out similar protests in the United States in Washington, as well as in Brussels, London, Paris, and Italy, chaining themselves to the gates or fences of Soviet embassies to draw attention to Latvian political prisoners and the denial of freedom of expression.⁷³

A visually impressive street theatre in support of political prisoners was performed by members of the American Latvian Youth Association in Washington on November 29, 1985. A gallows was erected in the park, where three Latvian youths were symbolically hanged, each representing a particular Latvian political prisoner. The hanging scene was very well prepared technically. Mountain climbing equipment was fastened around the young people's shoulders, and they were actually hanging in special harnesses that were successfully concealed under their clothes – it appeared as though they were really hanging by ropes around their necks. The hanging scene was therefore very realistic and attracted a lot of attention. Alongside the action, leaflets on human rights violations in the Baltic states and the fate of political prisoners were distributed.⁷⁴

Typically, many if not most of the various human rights-related events were organized and implemented by diaspora youth or youth organizations. “Adult” or traditional diaspora central organizations were often involved in the events but were not the main organizers. In the various audiovisual materials that have been produced in recent years on the history of the Latvian diaspora, one of the most prominent themes remembered by former activists in the diaspora, at that time young people, is precisely the activities in support of dissidents.⁷⁵

Conclusions

The emergence of the issue of human rights violations in the Soviet Union into the political argumentation of the Latvian diaspora can be linked to a number of broader developments in international politics and opinions, as well as to the development of the internal dynamics of the community itself. The emergence of this new argument coincides with a marked shift in attitudes towards human rights violations in the world and in the United States. Although the change in attitudes towards human rights during this period was a broad phenomenon and spanned many countries, what was particularly

⁷² *Nyet Nyet Soviet*, 171–3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 181.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 183–5.

⁷⁵ For example, the documentary “Valiant. A Journey to a Free Latvia.”

important in terms of the political views and actions of the Latvian diaspora was the fact that in U.S. policy, respect for human rights in other countries began to be linked to the U.S. foreign policy of the time and became a criterion for guiding attitudes towards one country or another.

The issue of human rights violations entered into the negotiations between the two opposing camps of the Cold War, i.e. the United States and the Soviet Union, with the Conference on Cooperation and Security in Europe, and is prominently reflected in the final document of that Conference, signed in 1975. It is safe to conclude that it was these external influences that primarily caused the Latvian diaspora to address this issue and raise it in their political demands and arguments.

Raising awareness of human rights violations in the Soviet Union and offering evidence of such violations to Western countries entered the diaspora's argumentation with the Helsinki process. It very quickly became a significant and important part of the range of issues addressed by the diaspora. The role of information broker, passing on information (often obtained illegally from the point of view of Soviet authorities) from the Baltic states to the home governments and CSCE delegations for use in negotiations with the Soviet Union, became a stable and integral part of the political work of the diaspora. At the same time, the arguments of human rights violations were also widely used in the public political actions of the diaspora, as evidenced by various events, including the celebration of Human Rights Day, events in support of dissidents and prisoners of conscience, etc. However, the issue of human rights violations in the political argumentation of the Latvian and Baltic diasporas as a whole has always been inextricably linked to the main political goal of these diasporas: the demand for the restoration of the right to political self-determination for the Baltic states. Without self-determination, human rights cannot be realized – this is how the basic principle of the diaspora's position could be summarized.

Overall, the diaspora's rapid focus on documenting human rights violations and incorporating these issues into its rhetoric demonstrates its ability to react quickly to current trends in society, and to use issues that are relevant to society at the time to shape its communication and advance its political cause. It demonstrates the ability of Latvian diaspora organizations, especially youth organizations, to respond flexibly to events and to take advantage of opportunities presented by external developments to effectively address host governments on issues of interest to them.

At the present stage of research, it seems reasonable to assume that this flexibility is related to the entry of a new, already diaspora-educated generation into the political leadership of the Latvian diaspora in the early 1970s, as well as to a certain accumulation of experience in political work in diaspora organizations. However, further detailed research would be needed to understand more clearly not only the role of external factors,

but also the role of internal factors –in particular, generational change – in the clearly visible changes in the Latvian diaspora political activity from the 1970s onwards.

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