From Tribe to Nation
A Brief History of Latvia
People of Latvia are very proud of their history. It is a history of the birth and development of an idea of an independent nation, and a consequent struggle to attain it, maintain it, and renew it.

Albeit important, Latvian history is not entirely unique. The changes which swept through the territory of Latvia over the last two dozen centuries were tied to the ever changing map of Europe, and the shifting balance of power. From the Viking conquests and German Crusades, to the recent World Wars, the territory of Latvia, strategically located on the Baltic Sea between the Scandinavian region and Russia, was very much part of these events, and shared their impact especially closely with its Baltic neighbours.

What is unique and also attests to the importance of history in Latvia today, is how the growth and development of a nation, initially as a mere idea, permeated all these events through the centuries up to Latvian independence in 1918.

In this brief history of Latvia you can read how Latvia grew from tribe to nation, how its history intertwined with the changes throughout Europe, and how through them, or perhaps despite them, Latvia came to be a country with such a proud and distinct national identity.
3 Incredible Historical Landmarks

The Baltic Way – this was one of the most creative non-violent protest activities in history. On August 23, 1989, approximately two million people joined hands to form a human chain spanning over 600 kilometres across the three Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania – occupied by the Soviet Union at the time. The Baltic Way was arranged on the 50th anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact which led to the occupation of the Baltic States in 1940, and aimed to draw global attention to the unlawful occupation of the countries.

Bermondt-Affair – this was the greatest victory in Latvian military history. 32 000 newly mobilized Latvian troops protected Rīga against an army of 45 000 battle-hardened and better equipped veterans led by general Bermondt. Bermondt was a German-supported Russian imperialist, who led the so-called West Russian Volunteer Army. Latvians succeeded in defending Rīga against the combined German and Russian forces in November 1919, thus safeguarding an independent Latvia. The event, known as Lāčplēša Diena, is commemorated each year by lighting candles on November 11.

Dainas – this is a traditional form of music or poetry, usually consisting of four lines in quatrain form. Dainas are specifically Latvian in their structure, thematic sentiments, and worldview. Dating back well over a thousand years, more than 1.2 million texts and 30,000 melodies have been identified and collected; they were first published between 1894 and 1915.
Not Quite Latvian yet

Latvia as a country appeared on the map of Europe after the First World War. However, predecessors of the Latvian people arrived in the territory long before that – as tribes who settled on the banks of the river Daugava, hunting for deer after the Ice Age was over. As time passed, they became merchants who built trade routes from north to south, and west to east, using the geographical advantage of the Gulf of Riga to access distant markets. Gradually the settlers and merchants formed the Baltic tribes, which became the Latvian people over many centuries.

Instead of the history of Latvia, initially we can look at the history of the people in the territory known as Latvia today, and the gradual development of a national identity, subsequently a nation, and, eventually, a country.

Elsewhere in the world
5000BC
Ancient Greeks attempt to expand eastwards, but are met with resistance from Persia, starting the Greco-Persian Wars
44BC – 1453 AD
The Roman Empire
541AD
The Justinian Plague breaks out and kills 50% of Europe’s inhabitants
790-1066AD
The Viking Age

Finno-Ugric peoples, ancestors of present-day Finns and Estonians arrive.
~ 3000 B.C.

Baltic peoples, ancestors of present-day Lithuanians and Latvians, arrive.
~ 2000 B.C.

Early Livonian people move to coastal areas around the Gulf of Riga.
~ 1800 B.C.

Amber trade flourishes in the region, and is sold as far away as Ancient Rome.
~ 100 A.D.

Gradually four individual Baltic tribal cultures develop: Couronians, Latgallians, Selonians, Semigallians. Each tribe is headed by a tribal leader.
900 A.D. onwards

The Couronian tribe grows in strength, and becomes a feared opponent to invading forces.
900 A.D. onwards

Left: Āraiši lake dwelling site with original and reconstructed remnants of Latgalian (proto-Latvian) settlements from 9th-10th century
The Current Territory of Latvia in Ever Changing Europe

The map of Europe was ever-changing in the 8th-18th centuries as the importance and might of nations shifted. Empires emerged, collapsed and territories were invaded or fought over, deemed as useful and desirable, whether it be for location, natural resources, trade or other reasons. The territory of Latvia, located strategically between Western and Eastern Europe, was always part of these changes and power struggles.

Over the centuries the territory which is known today as Latvia experienced the rule of the Crusaders, Poles and Lithuanians, Swedes, Russians, and Germans. Each new ruler of the territory subjugated the local tribes, but also brought something new to the area and influenced the development of culture and trade, and, by lesser or greater form of oppression, sparked the formation of the idea of an independent Latvian nation.

Above: Riga harbour on the Daugava river in 1863

Below: Rundāle – a distinguished baroque palace, designed by Bartolomeo Rastrelli for the Duke of Courland
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Year(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Viking raids and conquests in the Baltic area.</td>
<td>IX – XI c.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riga becomes an important trading post and joins the Hanseatic League.</td>
<td>XIII c. 1282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livonia is established in today’s territory of Latvia and Estonia.</td>
<td>XIII – XIV c.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riga is conquered by the Kingdom of Sweden, who reduce German baron privileges. The period becomes known as the &quot;good Swedish times&quot;. Eastern Latvia remains under Polish rule.</td>
<td>1561-1583</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riga is founded near the site of a Liv village on the confluence of the Daugava and Rīdzene rivers.</td>
<td>1201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crusades to Christianize the Baltics begin, led by German bishops.</td>
<td>1198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia attempts to conquer the territory. The Livonian army jointly with a force of local conscripts staves off the forces of Tsar Ivan III.</td>
<td>1501-1503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrivals of German merchants and Christian missionaries to the Baltics.</td>
<td>Late XII c.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most Latvians join the Lutheran church, with the exception of Latgale where Catholicism prevails to this day.</td>
<td>XVI c.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The written form of Latvian is developed by German priests, culminating in a translation of the Bible by Father Ernst Glück of the Alūksne Lutheran parish.</td>
<td>XVII c. 1685</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a result of the Great Northern War, Riga surrenders to Peter the Great. Northern Latvia comes under Russian rule, and peasants become serfs of their German barons.</td>
<td>1710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During the First Partition of Poland, conducted by the Russian Empire, Prussia and Habsburg Austria, eastern Latvia (Latgale) becomes part of the Russian province of Polotsk.</td>
<td>1651-1654</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During the Third Partition of Poland the Duchy of Courland becomes a Russian province.</td>
<td>1795</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Elsewhere in Europe
1700 - 1721
The Great Northern War between the Russian and Swedish Empires
1775 - 1783
The American War of Independence against the United Kingdom
1789 - 1799
The French Revolution
Die Welt ist Voll von Gnaden,
Die Liebe ist Reich und Reichtum.

Aus der Ewigkeit, von Gottes vätern,
Kommt ein Lied und eine Melodie.

Laßt uns singen von denen, die das Licht gebracht haben,
Und von jenen, die die Liebe in uns gelegt haben.

Es ist ein Geschenk von Gottes vätern,
Ein Lied von Liebe und Freundschaft.
The 19th century saw the initial development of a distinctly Latvian national identity. Latvian authors published their works for the first time, cities and towns in the territory grew in size and prominence. The abolition of serfdom went hand in hand with the emergence of a Latvian working class, increase in economic empowerment and migration to cities. The level of education also increased and resulted in the formation of cultural and political awareness.

Several crucial cultural and social developments took place and played a key role in the growth of a national identity – such as the first Nationwide Song and Dance Celebration, a tradition which continues to this day; publishing of the vast collection of Latvian folk songs (the Dainas) and of the first Latvian novels, signifying an important and symbolic accomplishment in the formation of the literary Latvian language. It is only natural that a national awakening began to grow simultaneously with these developments.

Serfdom is abolished in the provinces of Courland and Livonia. Latvian peasants gain personal freedom but lose their land and become, in effect, indentured servants.

1817-1819

The Rīga - Daugavpils railway is opened and links Latvia with the European railroad system.

1861

Serfdom is abolished in Latgale and throughout the rest of the Russian Empire.

1861

The Latvian Society is founded in Riga. Its establishment greatly contributes to further development of education and culture in Latvia.

1869

Riga Politechnical Institute, the predecessor of modern-day Riga Technical University, is founded.

1862

Chocolate factory “Laima” is founded, still operating today.

1870

The first Latvian Nationwide Song and Dance Celebration is held in Riga.

1873

A vast collection of oral Latvian folklore (“Dainas”) is published in eight volumes. It becomes one of the largest publications of versified folk heritage in the world.

1894 – 1915
In the years before WWI rapid industrialization of Latvia brought about the growth of sea ports, banks and commerce. In central Rīga, hundreds of marvelous Art Nouveau style buildings sprang up, bringing Latvian artists and architects to prominence.

Turmoil of the 1905 Revolution in Russia hit the territory of Latvia as well. The workers’ and farmers’ revolution with a strong national accent was led by educated Latvians and the Latvian Social Democratic Workers Party. The Revolution became a training ground for grassroots democracy, and turned against both the Russian Tsar’s government and the landed German gentry. And lastly, a political awakening began to form.

Burning of German barons’ mansions became a wide-spread manifestation of people’s protest against the oppressive regime. The Russian government sent in punishment squads welcomed by the German gentry, hundreds of insurgents were summarily executed; thousands more sent into exile or fled the country. The idea of uniting all Latvian-inhabited regions into an independent state was voiced for the first time and the dream of an independent Latvia started taking shape.
World War I violently swept through Latvia in the spring of 1915. National military units, the Latvian Riflemen Battalions, were founded and commanded by Latvian officers within the Russian army to defend Rīga against the German army. When the Germans took over the country in 1917-18, many Latvian Riflemen left for Russia and joined the Communist revolution led by the Bolsheviks.

At the same time, a strong pro-independence movement developed. The Democratic Bloc and the Latvian Provisional National Council were founded at the end of 1917. On November 17, 1918, both agreed to jointly form a provisional parliament, the Latvian People's Council, which resolved to found an independent and democratic republic. On the following day, November 18, 1918, the independent Republic of Latvia was proclaimed at a ceremonious meeting at the National Theatre in Rīga. Lawyer Jānis Čakste was elected chairman of the Latvian People's Council, and agronomist Kārlis Ulmanis became head of the government. Latvia won the War of Independence against the remaining German troops and the Red Army on Latvian soil in 1920. Consequently the Constitutional Assembly was elected and began its work in drafting the constitution of Latvia – the Satversme – which was passed in 1922. The first Latvian parliament or Saeima was elected that year as well.
Elsewhere in Europe
June 28, 1914
Archduke Franz Ferdinan is assassinated in Sarajevo sparking WWI
April 24, 1915
Start of the Armenian Genocide by the Ottoman Empire
June 4, 1917
The first ever Pulitzer Prizes are awarded in four categories in New York

The independent Republic of Latvia is proclaimed.
November 18, 1918

A German coup in Liepāja fails to overthrow the Provisional Government, which finds refuge on a boat guarded by Entente warships. A parallel pro-German government is established.
April 16, 1919

State colleges, theaters, National Opera and the Latvian Conservatory of Music are founded. Later in the year the University of Latvia opens its doors.
1919

Latvian independence is recognized by the Allied Supreme Council, soon followed by other states.
January 26, 1921

Riga is taken by Red Army troopers. The Provisional Government retreats to Liepāja and, while seeking assistance from Western Powers, is forced to accept help from local German Home Guards.
January 3, 1919

German troops seize Riga, expel the Red Army, instigate a killing spree against communists and suspected sympathizers, and move against Estonian and Latvian forces in northern Latvia.
May 22, 1919

Germans are defeated by Estonian and Latvian forces near Cēsis. The Latvian Provisional Government returns to Riga.
June 22-23, 1919

An armistice with Soviet Russia takes effect after the Latvian army, with aid from Polish troops, liberates eastern Latvia from Red Army forces. The Communist government is dissolved.
February 1, 1920

The elected Constitutional Assembly begins work as a temporary legislative body with the main task of writing a Constitution.
May 1, 1920

Latvia joins the League of Nations.
September 22, 1921

A peace treaty is signed with Soviet Russia, in which it recognizes Latvian independence and sovereignty without reservations, renouncing any claims to Latvian sovereignty.
August 11, 1920

The Constitutional Assembly adopts the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia.
February 22, 1922

A counter-attack by combined German and Latvian forces against the Red Army begins.
March 3, 1919

The smaller Latvian Army liberates Riga from the attacking united German and Russian forces.
German forces are then pushed back until completely leaving Latvian territory on December 1.
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February 22, 1922
Latvia is Born

After Latvia gained its long awaited independence, one of the most important tasks was to revive the economy. The Latvian national monetary unit, the lat, was issued in 1922. The state continued the distribution of state property and land that had once been held by the German landed gentry to former landless peasants and small farmers. Latvian agriculture developed and was fully able to supply the country with food, as well as opening wide possibilities for the export of agricultural products.

Latvian industry rapidly revived and was oriented chiefly towards food production, textile manufacturing and timber processing. The electronics sector developed in the 1930s. Latvia's largest electronics factory, VEF, manufactured modern radios, photo cameras (e.g. Minox) and even aeroplanes. In the second half of the 1930s Latvia began to produce automobiles and trucks. With the help of foreign investment, Latvia built a modern high-voltage hydroelectric power plant.

However, the worldwide economic crisis of the early 1930s and the following turmoil of 1940s did not leave Latvia unscathed and the blissful years of democratic Latvia came to a swift end.
On the brink of WWII the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany signed a treaty of non-aggression, known as the ‘Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact’. It contained a secret protocol dividing Eastern Europe into spheres of influence, envisioning the Baltic countries for the Soviets and Poland for Germany. The consequent German invasion of Poland triggered the start of the war, and in turn gave the Soviet Union the opportunity to occupy the Baltics.

Moscow presented Latvia with an ultimatum, as a result of which Latvia was forced to sign an agreement of “mutual assistance” and tens of thousands of Red Army troops were stationed in Latvia. Soon after Soviet press in Russia began to voice regular accusations against the Baltic countries regarding alleged activities against Moscow, and in June 1940 Moscow issued a memorandum demanding the formation of a new government and the stationing of additional Soviet military units. In an attempt to avoid bloodshed, the Latvian government decided to fulfil Moscow’s demands. As a result, 100 000 Soviet army troops entered Latvia. A puppet government answerable to Moscow was “elected” in single party elections soon after, and voted to make Latvia a part of the USSR.

For the majority of the war Latvia was occupied by Nazi Germany. Tragically, Latvian soldiers were forced to fight on both sides of the front, brothers against brothers, fathers against sons. Most were killed. Latvia’s population perished not only on the battlefield; special Nazi campaigns exterminated 70 000 Jews, 18 000 Latvians and 2 000 Roma. Another 150,000 fled to a life in exile. Additionally, Latvia became the death ground for tens of thousands of Jews brought in from other countries.

Many Latvians were actively involved in a resistance movement against the persecutions of the German occupation regime. For instance, Žanis Lipke risked his life, and the lives of his family members and friends, to save more than 50 Jews – a memorial in his name has recently been opened. He was not the only one, there were numerous people who risked their lives to save, hide, feed or simply keep quiet about the whereabouts of Jews, though it is difficult to know exactly how many. Over 25 people were helping Žanis Lipke alone; many others saved numerous Jews; around 150 Jews were saved in Rīga, and more in the countryside. Exact numbers are not known.

The idea of renewing independence never died. The Central Latvian Council was established underground with that aim, it published a pamphlet as an appeal to the Allied governments to restore a sovereign and democratic Latvian state, and published the resistance newspaper “Brīvā Latvija” (Free Latvia), which was deemed illegal by the authorities.
Claiming a breach of the treaty, the Soviet Union issues an ultimatum, demanding installation of a new government and allowing entry to an unlimited number of Soviet troops.

Under military threat, Latvia is forced to sign a Mutual Assistance Treaty with the Soviet Union.

October 5, 1939

Soviet troops occupy Latvia.

June 16, 1940

Nazi Germany attacks the USSR. The Red Army retreats in disarray, Riga is occupied by German forces on July 1.

June 17, 1940

All of Latvia’s territory is in Nazi German hands, greeted at first as liberators from Soviet terror.

July 7, 1941

More than 15,000 Latvian citizens are deported to remote regions of the Soviet Union.

June 14, 1941

The SS instigates an annihilation of Latvia’s Jews, also involving Latvian proxies. Almost 75% perish in the Holocaust. Others executed include communists, Roma, and the mentally ill.

July-December 1941

Adolf Hitler issues a standing order to form a “voluntary” Latvian SS Legion.

January 23, 1943

In Riga, the Latvian National Resistance Committee, called the Central Latvian Council, is formed underground. Konstantīns Čakste becomes its chairman.

August 13, 1943

At the Yalta Conference Roosevelt, Churchill, and Soviet leader J. Stalin meet in Tehran. Stalin negotiates the right to freely operate in Eastern Europe after the war.

November 28, 1943

The People’s Saeima, “elected” in a near-unanimous one-party election, declares Latvia to be a Soviet state, and asks for admission to the Soviet Union.

July 21, 1940

A special ministry is formed in Berlin to oversee the occupied territories in the East, or “Ostland”. Riga becomes its administrative center.

July 17, 1941


November 28, 1943

Nazi Germany capitulates. Three occupations, mass deportations, the Holocaust and war have taken 500,000 lives in Latvia. 120,000 Latvians stay in the West. Settlers from the USSR start arriving due to large-scale industrialization.

May 1945

In the battle on the Velikaya river both Latvian Legion divisions fight against Soviet forces together for the first time.

March 16, 1944

The Latvian SSR government returns; Soviet troops take over Riga. The German Army retreats to Western Latvia.

October 13, 1944

At the Yalta Conference Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin decide post-war arrangements in Europe, conceding to the USSR control of Eastern Europe, but calling for free elections.

February 4-11, 1945

The helicopter is invented

1939

The siege of Leningrad begins

1941

United Nations is founded

1945

Elsewhere in Europe

WW2 has taken a total of 50-80 million lives, including about 6 million Jews, making it the deadliest war in history

1937

“Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”, the first full-length animated cartoon, is made by Walt Disney

1939

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May 1945
Under Soviet Rule

The end of the Second World War brought half a century of Soviet rule to Latvia. Widespread persecutions started immediately against those who had allegedly cooperated with Nazi forces, participated in or supported the resistance movement, or were simply suspected of being politically unreliable, or free thinking, etc. During Stalin’s rule, around 150,000 people were killed or deported from Latvia to remote areas of the Soviet Union, such as Siberia.

Rural areas were forced into collectivisation, in cities people had to live in communal flats – several families per flat. Private property was nationalized, culture was ideologized, and religion banned. All printed and distributed materials, including, for example, music, as well as broadcast media, were controlled by censorship. As Latvia had well-developed infrastructure and educated specialists, Moscow based some of the Soviet Union’s most advanced manufacturing facilities in Latvia. Soviet workers from all over the Union flooded into the country as part of the Russification campaign. They were granted nationalized property previously owned by deported or punished Latvian citizens.

Among positive consequences of the Soviet Union – the economy in Latvia developed, and a comprehensive system of free education (primary through to university) and health care existed. Important achievements were attained in science – a quarter of all medicines invented in the USSR were developed in Latvia. Latvians were also active in the Soviet Olympic teams, winning numerous medals for the USSR.

Nonetheless, opportunities and rights in the Latvian SSR were limited. The Russian language was imposed in schools and all correspondence; many Latvians suffered from segregation.

The independence movement persevered. The national partisans, 20 000 in total, continued to actively resist Soviet rule long after the war ended, mainly residing in Latvia’s forests, until they were eliminated by Soviet armed forces. Other forms of resistance persisted, mainly through culture, which was crucial in helping people maintain a sense of national identity.
Random facts about life in Soviet Latvia

Music which made it into the country officially included Italian pop, Abba, and jazz and blues from the US. An underground film and music exchange existed in limited circles, but those caught were punished. Forbidden “samizdat” (self published) books were printed underground.

Tuning into Radio Free Europe, BBC, or the Voice of America, despite Soviet efforts to disturb the wavelengths, provided a peephole into world events.

Food shortages, as well as shortages of a wide array of household goods, were a trademark throughout the Soviet times, hence Latvians got very good at queuing, because a queue meant that there was something for sale!
Latvia’s push towards regaining independence was closely linked to internal changes in the Soviet Union. Mikhail Gorbachev came to power and introduced two key reforms – glasnost, increasing transparency in government institutions; and perestroika, restructuring the political and economic system. These reforms, unintentionally, rocked the entire union as people took advantage of the changes, and ultimately led to the fall of the Soviet Union.

Pro–independence organizations strengthened; protests started breaking out against a wide variety of issues. A nationwide movement, the Popular Front, was founded in Latvia on October 8, 1988. For the first time, parties aside from the Communist party were allowed to stand for election, and elected they were. This enabled the new Supreme Soviet of Latvia to pass a renewal of independence act and begin a period of transition. Despite strong efforts by Moscow to halt the process, the resistance was able to peacefully barricade its way through to independence by August 21, 1991.

Latvia, alongside the other Baltic States, demonstrated to the world that independence can be achieved peacefully; the process in the Baltics became known as the ‘Singing Revolution’.
Elsewhere in the world
April 26, 1986
Explosion at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine
June 4, 1989
Elections in Poland are resoundingly won by opposition movement Solidarnost, sparking anti-communist revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe and paving the way to the fall of the Soviet Union
November 9, 1989
Berlin wall comes down to December 29, 1989
Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia
1989
Tim Berners Lee invents the World Wide Web

Mikhail Gorbachev takes over leadership of the Communist Party.
1985

Human rights group Helsinki-86, the first openly anti-soviet group, is founded in Liepāja. It inspires the formation of other pro-independence groups.
July 10, 1986

Popular protests against building a hydroelectric dam on the Daugava river break out. Later, the plan to build a subway system in Riga is also halted by popular action.
1986

The Latvian Soviet government allows the Ligo holiday – the biggest celebration of the year – to be celebrated officially. Prior to this it was celebrated in secret at the risk of being persecuted.
April 15, 1988

The Latvian National Independence Movement is founded at a rally in historic Arkādija park in Riga.
July 10, 1988

The Popular Front gains a 2/3 majority in the Supreme Council at the first bipartisan elections. Anatolij Gorbunov is elected Chairman of the Council, Ivars Godmanis – Prime Minister.
May 3, 1990

The Baltic Way manifestation is held throughout the Baltic states. 2 million of protesters join hand in hand and form a human chain all the way from Tallinn through Riga to Vilnius.
August 23, 1989

The Popular Front majority adopts the Declaration of Renewed Independence, a law renouncing the Soviet occupation as illegal and in part reestablishing independence.
May 4, 1990

A special force of the Interior Ministry backed by a Soviet security force unit opens fire in Riga and seizes the ministry. Several journalists, police officers and a bystander get killed.
January 20, 1991

A coup in Moscow staged by an illegally established State Emergency Committee attempts to overthrow Gorbachev. The Supreme Council of Latvia denounces the anti-governmental actions.
August 19-21, 1991

As the coup fails, the Latvian Supreme Council passes a Constitutional Law declaring Latvia an independent democratic republic in accordance with the 1922 Constitution.
August 21, 1991

Helsinki-86 organizes an unsanctioned event at the Freedom Monument in Riga to commemorate the victims of Soviet mass deportations.
1987

The International Front of Working People is formed. It becomes an orthodox counter-force which resists the initiatives of the Latvian Popular Front.
January 7-8, 1989

500,000 come out to demonstrate in Riga against Soviet special forces attacking Lithuanian institutions. Barricades are built in defense of the legislator around important public buildings.
January 13, 1991

Latvia becomes a member of the United Nations.
September 18, 1991
Latvia has come a long way since regaining independence in 1991. With the renewal of independence, Latvia moved consistently towards two of its most important foreign policy goals – membership of the NATO and the EU. During the 1990s, all the necessary government bodies were set up, many social, economic and judicial changes were implemented, the process of privatisation of businesses and real estate was implemented in order to transfer the large state-owned enterprises to private ownership, and enable individuals to regain properties taken away from their ancestors, as well as to obtain the properties they were living in. On the whole, an impressive number of changes had to be planned, implemented and experienced on the road to solidifying independence and building a free and democratic republic.

After a short yet demanding negotiation and accession period Latvia became a Member State of NATO and the EU in 2004. Ten years later, in 2014, Latvia joined the Eurozone, thanks to strong economic growth. Since 2011, Latvia has been the EU’s fastest growing economy for three consecutive years; recent EU reports suggest this trend will continue at least until 2018. Latvia is also on its way to become a member of the OECD. Latvia’s name has also been brought out into the world with hosting high level events such as a NATO summit, the Ice Hockey World Championship and the Eurovision song contest; Riga was the European Capital of Culture throughout 2014; Latvian athletes have won significant prizes in sports ranging from BMX cycling to ice hockey; Latvian opera singers and conductors take leading roles in the world’s most prestigious opera houses and concert halls.

This has been a time of rebirth not only for the country, but for its nation, culture and self-awareness as well. It has been a time for the Latvian people to form their identity, to remember traditions long forgotten and to be proud of who they are. Over three decades later, Latvia is engraved on the map of Europe, with a wide and ever developing network of international ties, and diplomatic relationships, a growing economy and a strong position within the European Union.
Latvia starts a UN-approved peace-keeping mission in Afghanistan, jointly with peace-keepers from several other NATO countries. 2003

Latvia becomes a member of NATO. March 29, 2004

Latvia becomes a Member State of the European Union. May 4, 2004

Latvian Prime Minister Aigars Kalvītis and Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov sign a border treaty between Latvia and Russia, allowing Latvia to join the Schengen treaty. March 27, 2007

President V. Zatlers calls on the Latvian people to disband the 10th Saeima. The referendum supports the Presidential initiative, and extraordinary elections are held soon thereafter. Summer 2011

A referendum on granting Russian as the 2nd official language status is held; the proposal is rejected, but highlights historical tensions and a need for better integration policies. February 12, 2012

Riga celebrates 800 years since its founding. Summer 2001

At the Ice Hockey World Championship held in St. Petersburg, the Latvian national ice hockey team defeats the team of the Russian Federation. May 5, 2000

Riga celebrates 800 years since its founding. Summer 2001

At the Ice Hockey World Championship takes place in Riga. May 2006

Youth choir Kamēr... wins first place in its category at the World Choir games in China. Summer 2006

At the 2012 Summer Olympics defending champion M. Štrombergs wins Olympic gold in BMX cycling, and beach volleyball duo Plaviņš and Šmēdiņš bring back bronze medals. August 2012

Latvia celebrates the 95th anniversary of its independence. November 18, 2013

The Euro is introduced in Latvia. January 2014

Riga is the European Capital of Culture with the program Force Ma\-jeure, showing that culture can be the inspiration and the instrument for change.

Latvia hosts the Presidency of the Council of the European Union. 2014
History – an Ever Present Force

Left: “Legionnaires” – an award-winning theater performance (dir: Valters Sīlis), addressing the dispute between Sweden and the Soviet Union on extraditing Latvian soldiers who are to be tried for cooperation – often forced – with the Nazi army.

History still influences the development of modern Latvia. Coming to terms and dealing with the consequences of the turbulent past is an on-going process, one that is still taking place.

When the independence of Latvia was restored in 1991, the decision was made to affirm the continuity of Latvia’s original body of citizens. Thus, individuals who were citizens of Latvia prior to Soviet occupation were once again recognized as such, whereas those who migrated to Latvia during the Soviet occupation were given an opportunity to apply for citizenship through a naturalization process, as they became stateless with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Those who have not gone through the naturalization process hold limited political rights, namely: the right to elect and be elected. However, the naturalization process has not been as quick and overwhelming as expected. One of the explanations of this is the fact that people do not experience debilitating constraints in economic, social and educational rights and therefore choose not to undertake the bureaucratic procedures. Another is that a section of the society was alienated by requiring to apply for citizenship instead of awarding it automatically, even if they supported the independence, as both Latvians and minorities fought for it. Nevertheless, Latvia is on the way to an integrated society in which historical differences are put aside, and majority and minority representatives all feel at home and equally respected, which is an on-going process due to our complex history. The historical reasons which caused such a great influx of people from other parts of the Soviet Union have created certain challenges for language policy and the development of a well-knit society in Latvia. Additional efforts have been necessary to ensure that all inhabitants have good command of the Latvian language, enabling them to enjoy higher education and employment, as well as ensuring that all inhabitants of Latvia feel at home, regardless of their mother tongue.

Latvia has retained a very generous education system from the interwar period – the state finances educational programmes in eight minority languages, though teaching is also conducted in Latvian, thus ensuring that graduates of minority schools hold language proficiency in numerous languages.

History is also evidently present in architecture. Relics of various eras can be seen around towns and cities in Latvia – from 16th century castles and manors to baroque, Art Nouveau, wooden architecture of the 19th century, modernist buildings and Soviet housing projects. Wooden houses and Art Nouveau are listed as cultural heritage and thus protected under the law. Soviet built factories, most of which ceased production with the fall of the Union, have recently been regenerated, such as the gypsum factory in Kipsala which was made into luxury apartments. Others found
an alternative use, for example the VEF and Tobacco Factories were taken over by artists and are now used for theater, music, and other creative happenings. Most other relics of Soviet architecture still remain as they are, scattered in between beautiful old buildings, and are used for their original purpose; some have been destroyed, others – regenerated (for example, Hotel “Latvija”).

History is also constantly revisited and analysed through the arts, academia, and research. Recently there have been many successful initiatives addressing complex historical topics through theatre (“Grandfather” and “Legionnaires”), film (“Dream Team 1935”), literature (historical accounts by journalist Atis Klimovičs and film critic Valentina Freimane), as well as visual arts.

While for many countries their key historical events took place half a century ago, for Latvia some of the most crucial historical events were just two decades back, and as such they are still ripe in people’s memories and actions. In many ways, Latvia is still living its history, and dealing with its consequences every day. That is why history is so important to Latvians in social and political issues, and will remain an important factor for years to come.
The Latvian Institute promotes positive awareness about Latvia abroad, creating a competitive identity for the state. The Institute works closely with local and foreign dignitaries, diplomats, academics, students and international media in developing an understanding of Latvia, its people and branding.

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