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# country report

Länderbüro, Lettland

**KONRAD  
ADENAUER  
STIFTUNG**



Ar autobusiem nosprostotā Smilšu iela. Skats no Bastejkalna. 1991. gada janvāris.  
Fotogrāfs Vitolds Husakovskis (Witold Hussakowski). LNVN krājums.

Photo: Witold Hussakowski. Collection of the Latvian National Museum.

## January 1991

### Barricades in Latvia

#### *Dainis Īvāns*

On 18 November 1918, the People's Council of Latvia, founded by Latvian political parties, declared the Republic of Latvia *de jure*. However, actual independence had to be fought for with weapons and there were casualties. The Latvian War of Independence lasted two long years. On 4 May 1990, the Supreme Council of Latvia, elected in the first free elections of the Latvian SSR, declared restoration of the independence of the Republic of Latvia *de jure*. What followed this time, was nonviolent resistance under the auspices of the newly elected parliament, so as to regain independence *de facto*. We used no weapons, just our bare hands and the power of the nation's spirit. There were casualties. The decisive battle came in January 1991.

The impulse for these events can be traced back, if not to 23 August 1939 when the Hitler-Stalin Pact was signed in Moscow, then definitely to 23 August 1989. On the 50th anniversary of this pact 2 million Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians joined their hands to form a human chain for 640 km - the Baltic Way.

Despite Moscow's denial of the existence of a secret deal between Hitler and Stalin, defining the spheres of influence and claiming that the Baltic states had acceded to the Soviet Union voluntarily, the truth was not to be hidden any longer. Upon request by members of the Estonian Popular Front, the Lithuanian Sajudis and the Latvian Popular Front, a parliamentary enquiry commission

on the Hitler-Stalin Pact was established in the very first session of the Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union in the spring of 1989. In fact, the Baltic Way was purposefully organised with a view to placing the report by the enquiry commission on the agenda of the Congress, thus making the Kremlin declare the Pact criminal and void of its powers since its adaptation date. There were fears that German Chancellor Helmut Kohl could try to trade reunification of Germany against the independence of the Baltic countries. Therefore, the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Commission Mavriks Vulfsons addressed the German government and suggested that they denounce the pact unilaterally. The German foreign minister replied there was no need for annulment of the pact, as it was already *de jure* and *de facto* illegal. Nevertheless, access was granted to a film studio from Latvia to shoot the documents in the German Bundestag archives linked to the pact as well as to interview the last living witnesses to the signing of the pact. However, when representatives of the Baltic Way presented appeals for more sovereignty to the USSR President Michael Gorbachev, his reply was sharp: "You are going nowhere".

Only after the collapse of the Soviet Union was it revealed that he had examined the secret protocols, whose very existence in the Kremlin archives had been continuously denied. Most likely, the first and last President of the USSR sensed that the unintended consequence of revealing the truth about the forced incorporation of Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia and Bessarabia into the communist empire would be to unleash a process that, once started, would become uncontrollable. After the Baltic Way, Gorbachov became more categorical and more confrontational against the national movements of the Baltic Countries. According to memoirs by his assistant Anatoly Chernyayev, Gorbachev concluded after the Baltic Way that the Baltic States could be retained in the USSR only by tanks. Possibly, that was when the KGB and GRU embarked on their plans to safeguard the Soviet empire. Apparently, the order to do so came, directly or indirectly, via the Politburo of the Soviet Union Communist Party announcement in the soviet press on 26 August, openly threatening to stem the "national hysteria" of the Baltics by force. In Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia these threats were met with loathing and disappointment and an even stronger determination to leave the Soviet Union.

Then the Berlin Wall came down few months later. In Czechoslovakia, the Civic Forum led by Vaclav Havel was gaining strength. In January 1990 Ukrainians formed a human chain from Lviv to Kiev inspired by the Baltic Way. A domino effect was underway dismantling the totalitarianism in Eastern Europe. On 24 December 1989 the Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union approved the report by the parliamentary enquiry commission on the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact on the very existence of those secret protocols and declared them void of power from the moment they were adopted. The speeches of Latvian Deputy Mavriks Vulfsons and the Chairman for the Commission Alexander Yakovlev were truly memorable. There were no more arguments left for the Kremlin to justify questioning the Lithuanian Declaration of Independence of 13 March 1990, the Estonian Resolution on Estonian National Status of 30 March 1990, or the Latvian Declaration on the Restoration of the Independence of the Republic of Latvia. Gorbachev's requests for the Baltic countries to "return to the USSR Constitution" and freeze the acts of independence were countered by the official opinion of the Soviet legislators stating that the Baltic countries were incorporated in the USSR based on a criminal deal and thus illegally.

What followed was a bizarre period of two powers. The first power was democratically elected by Latvians, with its Supreme Council, government, courts and municipalities. Even though it remained non-recognised internationally, restoration of the institutions of an independent state and development of its economic and foreign policies were started. The opposing power tried hard to stop the moves to democratisation and independence through an economic blockade by the Kremlin, the Communist Party, the KGB, the Soviet military structures, the contingent of 150 000 troops and the headquarters of the Baltic military in Riga.

On 15 May 1990 a few hundred cadets from the disbanded Soviet Military School in Riga, disguised in civilian cloths, alongside with "protectors of officers rights" feigned a "people's uprising" and attempted to take over the Latvian Parliament by force. At the very same time, an identical incident was staged in Tallinn at Tompea Castle. Pressure mounted throughout the summer of 1990. The special police units, or the OMON, under direct supervision of the USSR Interior Ministry, attacked the newly formed Customs and Border Guard Posts on the Latvian and Lithuanian borders. Explosions were detonated at various buildings and monuments. Opposing the Latvian Popular Front was the Interfront – "The Latvian SSR International Movement of Workers". With the help of the KGB, they founded the "Strike Committee" and the "All-Latvian Public Rescue Committee" in order to take over power. Several municipalities led by local communists declared non-compliance to the laws of the Republic of Latvia and loyalty to the USSR.

Fortunately, the Latvian people's support of Kremlin propaganda and activities was negligible. By the end of 1990, Latvia became the first of the crumbling Soviet Union republics to stop paying taxes to the Centre. Moreover, the Latvian government replied to threats from the Soviet Military with a counter warning to cut off the supply of food, water and electricity to their military forces stationed in Latvia. The Latvian Supreme Council adopted a law releasing young men from previously obligatory Soviet military service. The planned mobilisation for the USSR army in Latvia failed both in the spring and the autumn. The Kremlin was losing its patience. However, it was no longer possible to convict young men for avoiding military service and Latvian courts were now following Latvian laws, not USSR laws.

By the way, this marks a difference between our non-violent fight for democracy and what is now happening in Belarus in the Belarusian people's struggle against the Lukashenko regime. From very early days of the Popular Front movement, the majority of Latvian civil service heads, judges, police, industry and agricultural management had taken the side of the newly created structures. Thus, what appeared on the exterior to be unshakable communist dictatorship was gradually dismantled from within by its "traitors".

A great symbolic affirmation for Latvia was the gift by the city of Berlin and Rainer Hildebrandt, the founder of the Checkpoint Charlie Museum. On 3 October 1990, Hildebrandt brought over a piece of the fallen Berlin Wall. It was placed near the Freedom Monument, during the very epicenter of key events. There, it bore witness to all the paradoxes of the epoch: the last Soviet military parade marking the Bolshevik Revolution of 7 November, which Latvians were no longer observing; restoration of the previously forbidden National Day of 18 November, celebrating Latvia's first proclamation of independence in 1918; as well finally putting Christmas back in the calendar as a holiday, also outlawed for half a century.

Christmas peace was not in the air, though. In rather candid talks with the newly elected leaders of Latvia, the president of the USSR did not shy away from disclosing that hard core communists, the military and the Interfront were persistently demanding "restoration of Soviet rule". Gorbachov offered to sign a new Union Treaty. We refused to even discuss it, as we had never signed the old one. Information was leaked from the Kremlin that a "people's uprising" was to be expected soon in the Baltic states, leading to imposition of direct rule by the President of the USSR. Favorable timing would coincide with a planned US military attack on Saddam Hussein's forces in occupied Kuwait, which would overshadow events in the Baltics.

This was just what happened. In the early days of 1991, Riga OMON units seized the Press House housing editors' offices and the printing facilities of almost every newspaper and journal printed in Latvia at that time. The Interior Ministry managed to intercept a telegram delivering the order by the OMON Commander in Chief to open fire against any armed persons approaching OMON positions, especially if they were Latvian police officers.\* Moreover, Dmitry Yazov, the USSR

Minister of Defence ordered several divisions of airborne troops to Latvia, tasked to implement conscription into the USSR army. The following day, an army division newly transferred from Eastern Germany to the Latvian town of Tukums started pursuing Latvian "army deserters". Apparently, the military command did not trust their locally stationed troops, as they might have caught too much of the Perestroika liberal spirit. For good reason! News reached us of a colonel in Vitebsk refusing to send his troops to Riga. Air Force General Dzokhar Dudayev promised Estonian Prime Minister Edgar Savisaar to not lead airborne troops stationed in Tartu against Estonians. Boris Yeltsin, then Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation, gave a public speech to Russian troops calling on them not to participate in the Kremlin operations against the Baltic peoples.

Latvia's Supreme Council immediately issued a "Communication about the Aggression by the Ministry of Defence of the USSR", calling on international governments to protest against Moscow's attempts to destroy the democratisation and independence processes in Latvia. In addition, extraordinary powers were granted to me as first Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Council to seek support from Western countries and, should it become necessary, to form a government in exile. Similar empowerment was given to the Speaker of the Lithuanian Parliament Bronislovas Kuzmickas, and the Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lennart Meri. About a week later we three met in Stockholm to participate in a weekly meeting organised by Swedish political parties in support of the Baltic peoples. We also opened a Latvian information center funded by the Swedish government. We struck an agreement about our "spheres of influence"; Meri would go to Germany, Kuzmickas and I to North America. What followed was real support. Words became deeds; there were parliamentary resolutions warning Moscow, effective sanctions, as well as visits from official delegations to the Baltic countries.

Lithuania was first to face the storm. On 13 January Soviet tanks attacked the TV tower in Vilnius. Thousands of people gathered to defend media freedom with their bare hands - the freedom they had just fought for. Thirteen people were killed and more than 150 injured. Moscow imposed a curfew and appointed a military commander to govern. The Soviet propaganda machine was spitting out lies that the victims were themselves the culprits who were using tear gas and weapons against working class people. Lithuania did not surrender. The man in charge of this slaughter was a KGB officer, Mikhail Golovatov. In 2011 he was detained in Austria. Unfortunately, the Austrians did not extradite him to Lithuania, but to Russia, thus allowing him to escape punishment. Possibly he could have cast more light on the murders committed by the special forces group "Alpha" in Latvia. The Supreme Council of Latvia received timely reports from citizens observing Soviet militia arriving in Jurmala simultaneously with the aggression in Vilnius.

We had to act faster than the aggressors. On 13 January the Popular Front and the Supreme Council called for people to join a demonstration in Riga. They come in thousands. This was our only chance to prevent Soviet tanks in Riga. At 4:45 AM, I gave a speech on Latvian Radio, broadcasting live both in Latvian and Russian, calling upon everyone who was ready to protect our just obtained freedom to come and gather at the critical institutions: our parliament, government, TV and radio and telecommunication exchange buildings.

Just a few hours later, an endless stream of trucks poured into the capital. Drivers with trailers filled with sand, wood and stones came to block the bridges and roads leading to the city. Fishing boats stretched ropes across the river Daugava to tangle the propellers of Soviet navy ships and thus stop them from entering the Riga port. People constructed barricades surrounding the parliament and government buildings under the guidance of Latvian officers who had served in the Soviet army. These barricades were massive, hard to budge, and designed to minimise the number of casualties. Latvian sculptors donated colossal granite blocks for the barricades, originally

intended for their own sculptures. Innovative barricaders placed tank hedgehogs and constructed barriers in the fields around the TV building and the TV tower to prevent airborne troops from descending. The barricaders refused to be intimidated by Soviet military helicopters circling above the 700 000 people participating in the demonstration on the embankment of the river Daugava. Nor were they deterred by the leaflets dropped by these helicopters, calling on them to stop resistance. On the contrary, people were here to stay. In the night, bonfires were lit up as a powerful symbol of the always open eyes of the nation and of the people's resolve to protect Riga. Countless volunteers spent the following ten days and nights gathered around these bonfires. There was a medical care point set up in the Riga Cathedral. Musicians kept spirits up with live performances. The piece of the fallen Berlin Wall, with its painted Western side angled towards our Freedom Monument, served as a great illustration that there were no fortifications strong enough to hold us back from returning to our native Europe. The spirit of the January Barricades made us overcome the last shadows of doubt, cleared away our fear and strengthened our collective determination. Against this background the attempts of the "All-Latvian Public Rescue Committee" to seize power were simply miserable and ridiculous, despite OMON gunfire, attempts by military machines to batter down the barricades, and the death of the very first victim. The aggressors failed to arouse any support from the people. The thousands of people manning the Barricades definitely succeeded in deterring possible escalation of military attacks. Against all odds, the Barricades demonstrated that joint collective unity and conviction are stronger than military might.

At the end, everyone denied their connection to the aggressions, be it Minister of Defence Yazov, Interior Minister Boriss Pugo, or the president of the USSR. However, the path of provocation continued. In the pre-dawn hours of 20 January, the OMON militia in close coordination with the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Latvia launched an attack on the Latvian Interior Ministry. At that very moment, the Chairman of the Latvian Supreme Council Anatolijs Gorbunovs was having dinner with his Polish counterpart Andrzej Stelmachowski. In the parliament, the leader of the political group, Popular Front, Janis Denevics picked up a phone call from someone calling incognito and demanding in a triumphant tone, "How do you like this?". The caller was Alfreds Rubiks, the last leader of the Communist Party in Latvia.

Bullets were ricocheting around the Freedom Monument and the piece of the Berlin Wall. It still remains unclear who was shooting and for what reason. Possibly, to muddle the waters and give room for speculation later on. It is very likely that "Alpha" group killers were involved. Most likely, it was they who killed the two Latvian cameramen, though these crimes remain unsolved. Cameramen, photographers and journalists may have been the principal targets of KGB and GRU actions both in Riga and Vilnius. The total number of casualties during the Barricades was nine persons.

A free press and the truth were our strongest power alongside the thousands of people on guard at the Barricades. Around 1500 journalists were accredited at the press centre of the Latvian Supreme Council. News bulletins were dispatched hourly about the latest developments. Latvian Radio encouraged foreign language students to join in reporting our events to the world in English, German and Scandinavian languages. Thanks to this shared effort, the news about the US attack on Saddam Hussein's army in Kuwait failed to drown out the news about the heroic spirit manifest in our nonviolent resistance. This fostered support in the Western world for our quest for independence in the Baltic countries. American writer William Safire nailed it spot on with his words describing the night of 20 January in Riga in his New York Times column, using a quote from Thomas Jefferson to affirm that Latvia had refreshed the world tree of liberty.



25 January was declared a day of mourning for the victims of the Barricades. The farewell to those killed transformed into a triumph of nonviolent resistance. Even the Kremlin promised to investigate the crimes and sent USSR public prosecutors investigators, though it seems their real mission was to blur the traces of evidence rather than to disclose those responsible for the tragedy.

Yes, those were tragic days in the Barricades of 1991. However, in modern day Latvia they are commemorated as the victory of our choice to be part of Europe. The Commemorative Medal for Participants of the Barricades in 1991 has been awarded to more than 32 thousand persons. In fact, this medal could be awarded to ten or a thousand more persons both in Latvia and abroad. I would give it also to Rainer Hildebrandt. He brought that piece of the fallen Berlin Wall that became part of our Barricades in Riga in January 1991. When he arrived in Riga himself on 21 August 1991 during the coup staged by the Kremlin, he said, "I am here to prevent them shooting at you". They did not shoot.

On 21 August Latvia became free de facto.

Dainis Īvāns

Chairman of Popular Front of Latvia from 1988 to 1990

Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia from 1990 to 1992.

\* January Chronicles. Press Releases Issued by the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia, Riga, 1991.

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