

# Memory Wars in Latvia

Gordon F. Sander

In Riga, the invasion of Ukraine has revived controversies over Soviet-era monuments and anxieties about Russian expansionism.

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Taisiya Vorontsova/TASS

Latvians laying flowers near the Monument to the Liberators of Soviet Latvia and Riga from the German Fascist Invaders, Riga, May 10, 2022. The government had canceled the Russian-speaking minority's annual 'Victory Celebration' at the site the day before and fenced off the monument.

Riga, with its well-preserved medieval center and art nouveau district, has long been known as the Pearl of the Baltics. Thirty years after the restoration of the Republic of Latvia, its capital is also dotted with architectural and sculptural relics of the “Soviet time”—the occupation from 1944 to 1991. They range from the monotonous rows of five-story gray apartment blocks with which Moscow carpeted the Baltic states to the Latvian Academy of Sciences. Built between 1951 and 1961, this towering edifice, known locally as “Stalin’s birthday cake,” was originally intended as a birthday gift for the dictator, who died in 1953. Latvians once regarded the building, which retains its original decorative hammers and sickles, as an eyesore, as well as an unpleasant reminder of Stalin, who crushed the short-lived Latvian Republic in 1940 and reimposed Soviet rule over the country in 1944 after more than three years of Nazi occupation. But they don’t seem to mind it anymore. The seventeenth-floor balcony offers a panoramic view of the city that is popular with tourists, on whom Riga is dependent.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, however, thrust other architectural legacies of the Soviet occupation into a dramatically different light. Today the most controversial is the Monument to the Liberators of Soviet Latvia and Riga from the German Fascist Invaders, built in 1985, during the twilight of the Soviet empire, to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the Red Army’s victory over Germany. Also known as the Victory Park Memorial, the monument consists of a towering obelisk and two groups of sculptures, one of which is an idealized depiction of three Soviet soldiers. At 260 feet high, it is one of the largest war memorials built by the Soviets outside of Russia and is nearly twice as tall as Riga’s soaring Freedom Monument, known as Milda, built in 1935 to honor the Latvians who died during the country’s war of independence between 1918 and 1920, after more than a century of Russian rule.<sup>1</sup>

The Victory Park Memorial is located in an expansive park on the opposite side of the Daugava River from Milda. For many years ethnic Latvians loathed it as a symbol of Soviet rule. In 1997 the ultranationalist group Perkonkrusts tried to blow up the monument with improvised explosives, but they went off prematurely, causing only superficial damage. Two of the perpetrators died in the blast. The others were arrested, tried, and imprisoned by the Latvian government, in accordance with the agreement it had made with Russia in 1994 to protect, maintain, and care for each other's memorials and war graves, after which the Kremlin belatedly and reluctantly withdrew its remaining forces in the Baltics. Among other things, the agreement also called for the Latvian government to continue paying the pensions of the 22,000 (now 11,000) retired Russian military personnel who chose to remain in Latvia.

Until recently the disputes over the Victory Park Memorial seemed to be dying down as tensions eased between the ethnic Latvian majority and the Russian-speaking minority—approximately a quarter of the country's 1.9 million people. Over the years the memorial also became the site of the Russian minority's raucous annual May 9 "Victory Celebration," as they called it. The government wasn't happy about these celebrations, but it maintained a hands-off attitude toward them.

That was before February 24. Since the Russian invasion the memorial has become a flash point for a rekindled debate about Latvia's historical memory, and the Latvian government is intent on demolishing it. On May 26, after a heated debate, the Saeima, the Latvian parliament, voted overwhelmingly in favor of a sweeping new law, entitled "On the Prohibition of the Display of Objects Glorifying the Soviet and Nazi Regimes and Their



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