

Communist history of Latvia

Latvia initially lost its independence in 1939 as World War II began to heat up. The Soviets signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939 with Nazi Germany. This was an agreement to let the Soviet Union station troops in the Baltic states. By 1940, Soviet Union foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov accused the Baltics of conspiring against the Soviet Union. Subsequently, Latvia was invaded and the government was dismantled. The Russians began to deport anti-Soviet elements of the country. Weeks later, Nazi Germany invaded. The Jewish population was either killed or placed in concentration camps. Later in the war, battles took place between the Soviets and the Nazis in Latvian territory. The Germans were defeated in Latvia in 1944 and the country went under communist rule for the next 50 years.

Latvian patriots and nationalists were deported to Siberia after the war. Some Latvians fought a guerrilla war against the Soviets in the forests of the country, but this rebellion was crushed by 1956. Many citizens were sent to the Gulag. Russian influence began to take over the country. Rural areas were forced in collectivisation. An extensive program was started to teach the Russian language, as well as Russian music, literature, and history. The ethnic Latvian population declined as Russians entered the country and Latvians were deported. Since the country had well developed infrastructure, the Soviet Union used it as a location for many manufacturing factories. The Soviet/communist influence of Latvia can still be seen today in art and other forms of media.

The attached picture shows what is now left of the Sloka paper factory. This was a huge factory that was active during the Soviet occupation of Latvia. The factory is now run down and abandoned, showing that while during the Soviet occupation employment was high, now there are not enough blue collar Latvians to run these gigantic factories. The factory was only usable when the Soviets were making the citizens work.

The manufacturing model was distinct to Latvia compared to the other Baltic states. Estonia, bordering to the North, was also occupied by the Soviets. They militarized the country, placing navy bases on Estonia's western coast. Large parts of the country were closed to all except the Soviet military. While the Soviet Union placed some of their most advanced manufacturing plants in Latvia, they put a multitude of armed forces in Estonia. This is an example of how Latvia was run differently under communism than other Soviet states.

By the 1980s, Soviet leaders like Mikhail Gorbachev became more open to the ideas of perestroika and glasnost. The Soviet Union was finally letting some of their states earn some independence. Groups such as the Latvian National Independence Movement began to campaign for a free Latvia. In 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia finally recognized Latvia as an independant country like it was pre-WWII.