

Riga at War: 1914-1920

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1. Discussion of the Dissertation Project

The period of revolution, war and civil war from 1914 to 1920 was one of the most dramatic periods in the history of the city of Riga. The wars brought economic isolation, the evacuation of its industry and monuments, a dramatic loss of population, numerous regime changes and an intensification of ethnic conflict. Despite the interest usually generated by dramatic historical periods and events, there is as yet no monographic work about this period in Riga's history. Publications on the history of the city treat the war only briefly. Histories of Latvia and the war do not focus on urban or even social history as such. The focus is usually military and political history¹. The recent popularity of wartime urban history², the revival of interest in the history of the First World War, and the excellent working conditions available in post-communist Latvia all indicate that the time has come to make a first attempt to provide a wartime history of Riga. This short discussion will review the approach taken and some of the problems encountered during this project. It is not intended to make a thorough presentation of research results to date. I intend to present the finished book as a dissertation at the University of Tübingen.

This project on Riga is not being undertaken in academic isolation. Since January of 1999, an interdisciplinary research project at the University of Tübingen has been investigating the experience of war during the modern age in Europe and the North America (*Sonderforschungsbereich 437: Kriegserfahrung: Krieg und Gesellschaft in der Neuzeit*). The project involves the work of various disciplines and sub-disciplines including history

¹ See for example Andersons, Edgars: *Latvijas Vesture 1914-1920*. Daugava: Stockholm, 1967; Berzins, Valdis: *Latvija Pirma pasaules kara laika*. Zinatne: Riga, 1987; 20. Gadsimta Latvijas Vesture I. *Latvija no gadsimta sakuma līdz neatkarības pasludinasanai 1900-1918*. Latvijas Vestures Instituta Apgads: Riga, 2000; Silde, Adolfs: *Latvijas Vesture 1914-1940*. Daugava: Stockholm, 1976; Krastins, J.: *Riga 1860-1917*. Latvijas PSR Zinatnu Akademija Vestures Instituts. Zinatne: Riga, 1978; Krastins, J.: *Riga Socialisma Laikmeta*. Latvijas PSR Zinatnu Akademija Vestures Instituts. Zinatne: Riga, 1980.

² For example Winter, Jay; Robert, Jean L.: *Capital Cities at War. Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

(modern history, Eastern-European history, art history, early modern history, economic history), empirical cultural science, and theology. The individual projects span the 17th to the 20th centuries and include projects on the Thirty Years War, the Napoleonic Wars, the American Civil War, the War of 1870-1871, the two world wars and the Cold War. There are also projects which have more to do with the memory of war than the wars themselves, such as a project on war museums and a project on centennial anniversary "celebrations" of past wars. The focus of the various projects is very diverse, ranging from individual war experience and perception to mass or group experience and covers pre-war, wartime and postwar experience.

One of the sub-groups of the *Sonderforschungsbereich* includes three projects which focus on group experience in Eastern European cities in the twentieth century: Kiev 1941-1945 by Christian Harde and an ambitious, six-year project on Lvov 1914-1945 by Dr. Christoph Mick. This project on Riga is the third project in that sub-group³.

At the center of all the projects in the *Sonderforschungsbereich* is a definition of war experience that goes beyond the idea of battlefield trauma and memory. It encompasses a dynamic relationship between perception, interpretation and action (*Wahrnehmung, Deutung und Handeln*) over time. All the elements of previous experience shape an historical actor's perceptions and interpretations of war. The actor's actions and the events of war shape his or her (or that group's) future memory and interpretation of the war. The memory of previous conflict also influences war experience⁴.

For the project on the city of Riga (as well as for Kiev and Lvov), the idea is to reconstruct both a general social history of the city during the First World War, Russian Civil War and Latvian War of Independence, as well as to focus on the experience of group actors. Which group actors were to be investigated was, at the beginning of the project, theoretically open to continuous revision. The initial focus on ethnic groups and, to a lesser extent, religious groups, has proven more or less workable and has remained at the center of the

³ These projects originally formed half of a subgroup called "Krieg in der Region" which also included four projects on southwestern German territories during the Thirty Years War. The idea was to approach all seven of these "regions" with a similar catalogue of questions and methods. Cooperation with historians of the early modern period proved very difficult, however.

⁴ For more information about the theoretical underpinnings and the specific projects see <http://www.uni-tuebingen.de/SFB437/>.

investigation⁵. Using a chronology during the period as a framework, the experiences of the various groups during the most dramatic events, regime changes, regime policies and under the changing conditions was to be investigated. The project seeks to uncover the most important *topoi* for perception, interpretation and historical action (*wahrnehmen-deuten-handeln*) - the war experience - for the Germans, the Latvians and the Russians of Riga⁶. The role of inter-group (inter-ethnic and inter-faith) action and relationships is expected to make up a large part of the dynamic of changing urban war experience for all the groups, but most especially for the Germans and Latvians. Some of these expectations have been fulfilled. Others have been subject to some revision as work progresses.

It soon became apparent, for example, that much of the history of the city represented war experiences that were not reducible to ethnic or other group experience in a way that would accurately reflect what was happening. Many of the city elite were German, for example. The ruinous evacuation of the factories in the summer of 1915 would therefore have tended to bankrupt more Germans. But the evacuation had a dramatic effect on everyone in the city - especially the workers who followed the factories to Petrograd, Moscow, Nizhnyy Novgorod or Kharkov. There is some indication that the evacuation was resented and perceived by the Germans *as a group experience*, a measure taken by the Russian government to ruin German-held wealth, but the evacuation as such would appear to be a central element of war experience for Riga's people as a whole. The historian must try to separate group experience from the more general, urban war experience. A similar situation could be presented with regard to the blocking off of the harbor in 1914, the mobilization of reservists in 1914, the hunger, the inflation and general currency confusion, the deplorable sanitary conditions that resulted when house and factory owners were bankrupted but forced to house military units, the plundering of shops by retreating troops (the Jews appear to have been hit especially hard by this), and other events. Many of these events and the survival strategies developed by the population reflect not so much the unique history of Riga, but twentieth century urban history in general.

⁵ Ulrike von Hirschhausen has used ethnic group criteria for discussing developments in pre-war Riga. Hirschhausen, Ulrike von: *Die Wahrnehmung des Wandels: Migration, soziale Mobilität und Mentalitäten in Riga 1867-1914*. *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropaforschung* 48 (1999) H. 4, S. 475-523.

⁶ Other, smaller ethnic groups (Poles, Lithuanians, Estonians) will be taken into account to the extent that they present themselves. They will not be systematically investigated, as their specific sources (memoirs, diaries, etc.) are in languages unreadable by the author and they made up less than 20% of the total population. The Jews were be covered to some extent, but this has proven difficult. No diaries or memoirs have turned up. The protocols and communications of their organizations are in Russian, German and Yiddish.

One intention of the project was also to uncover the role of past experience in shaping the wartime experience of the groups involved. Interpretations and actions in 1914 were to be traced to memories of 1905. The time-dimension of *Erfahrung* would show how the rivalries of the revolutionary period shaped events during the war. A systematic investigation of the pre-war period has not possible, however. Only when the actors themselves reflect on the past or justify action based on pre-war events will that be taken into account. Examples of this are the creation of a German self-defense militia in 1914 and 1915 made up of members of a similar group created in 1905, the trials of people in 1917 and 1919 for crimes committed against the revolutionaries in 1905-1907, and demonstrations by radical workers and youth on important anniversaries.

The source material for this project is as varied as the events in Riga themselves. The dearth of published material on the basic event-chronology of city history has made it necessary to use just about any kind of material that is available⁷. Archives in Riga, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Berlin, Bonn, Stanford and Freiburg have been used. Documents from the *guberniya* leadership and police departments, the city administration and city *duma*, numerous organizations including clubs, schools and religious bodies, the military administration, foreign legations and missions (such as the American Relief Administration), the protocols of the post-war trial of Andrievs Niedra, and unpublished letters are all contributing to various aspects of the history.

The post-war press has not been systematically searched for group interpretations wartime events, but an attempt will be made to do so this summer by checking the reports of various important wartime anniversaries in Latvian, German and Russian newspapers. The daily press for the war period is being used, although it has been somewhat disappointing in revealing explicit group opinions due to wartime censorship. Church periodicals have proven somewhat more useful in that regard. They are revealing about such issues as inter-faith cooperation in setting up hospitals for the wounded and the attempts by the Russian Orthodox Church to use the war to win over Latvian converts from among Lutherans and Baptists, so-called "German religions".

⁷ An exception is of course Hedenström, Alfred v.: *Rigaer Kriegschronik*. Riga, 1922 and Hedenström, Alfred v.: *Rigaer Kommunistenchronik* (published in the newspaper *Rigaer Zeitung* from June to August of 1919). These are very good sources for obscure events and a unique, German perspective on them. It does not cover all the important events in the city, however, and does not cover the period of German occupation in 1917 and 1918 at all.

Published memoirs and diaries have become a very important source for capturing the subjective aspects of war experience, although they are more scarce than was initially expected. There are numerous first hand accounts from the German point of view covering the entire period of the war. But German accounts are especially valuable for the period of Bolshevik rule from January to May of 1919, easily the most traumatic period of the war for the German population in Riga. Latvian memoirs and diaries are also available, but have proven less revealing with regard to specifically urban history. If I may risk a provisional thesis, I would say that the Germans of Riga had a much more intimate relationship with the city of Riga as a cherished "home" (*Heimat*) or "place" (*Ort*) than did the Latvians. This impression is strengthened and perhaps distorted by the massive population shifts which have made it very difficult to find Latvian memoir or diary authors who stayed in the city for very long during the period under investigation. Riga appears to have been less emotionally charged for them than it was for the Germans. Further reading may revise this interpretation, however.

The Russians of Riga are generally silent. Only two memoirs have appeared, one from the governor, the other from the police chief. Neither of them were inhabitants of the city before the war. Neither can be said to be very typical of their nationality. Even the documents in the archives which shed light on ethnic conflict seem to ignore the Russians. They were apparently not part of the problem, despite the fact that so much of the anti-Baltic-German writing in the press was in Russian newspapers, primarily *Novoe Vremya* in Petrograd. The Russian Orthodox church periodical *Rizhskie epikarial'nye vedemosti* has helped give some idea of a specifically Russian *Wahrnehmung*, as has a recent collection of short articles about Russian perspectives on Riga⁸, but much more has been left to the imagination of the historian than for the other groups. I have been disappointed to find virtually nothing on the wartime experience of the Old Believer community in Riga.

An article has been published on the history of mass celebrations in Riga between 1910 and 1920. The visit of Tsar Nikolai II in July of 1910, the Second All-Russian Olympic Games in Riga in the summer of 1914, the visit of Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1917, the birthday celebrations for Wilhelm II in January of 1918, the Mayday celebrations in 1917 and 1919, and the memorial ceremonies for the communists who fell in the battle for the city in January of 1919 - all these events and the symbols used to present them reflect the wartime experience

⁸ Abyzov, Yu. (Sost.): Ot Lifyandii - k Latvii. Pribaltika russkimi glazami. T. 1. Arkayur: Moskva, 1993.

of the city and the differing perspectives of the regimes and the population on past, present and future conflict, while being carried out under varied circumstances on the same urban geography.

An article on the experiences of the Riga Germans appeared in the 2002 edition of the *Jahrbuch des Baltischen Deutschtums*. The war experience of Riga's Germans, especially as reflected in their post-war writings, is that of the victims of the historical developments. The necessity to go to war against Germany, with which many Riga Germans had close family ties, the anti-German measures taken by the Russian government, especially the law against the public use of the German language, the denunciations against Germans by Latvians and Russians, the many deportations, the closing down of German public life, the loss of power and status – reflected both in the loss of positions of power in economic life and within the city administration and, especially in 1917 and 1919, the unraveling of law and order which left the Germans, as the ethnic and class enemy, defenseless against what they perceived as mob rule (*Pöbelherrschaft*) – these are some of the more important elements of German *Kriegserfahrung*.

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April, 2001

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September, 2001

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January, 2004

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Conference: Ethnicity and Confession in Eastern Central and Southeastern Europe,
Freie Universität Berlin Dept. of Religion Studies, Berlin.

July, 2004

Re-mapping Riga: Sudden regime change in war and revolution. (in English)

Conference: Metropolitan Catastrophes, University of London Centre for Metropolitan
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