

VITA ZELČE

## LATVIAN WOMEN AFTER WORLD WAR II

This paper offers a review of the history of Latvian women after World War II, with references to the war-situation and the restoration of the Soviet regime. Latvia, a country in the Baltic region bordered to the north by Estonia and to the south by Lithuania, had a territory of 65.79 km<sup>2</sup> with 1.995.000 inhabitants in 1938. Latvia's destiny was determined on August 23, 1939, when Nazi Germany and the Communist USSR signed the so-called Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with a number of secret protocols. These placed Latvia into the Soviet sphere of influence. Soviet military bases were installed in Latvia during the last months of 1939. During the summer of 1940, the USSR completely occupied Latvia and absorbed it into the Soviet Union. Latvia's independent statehood was no more. Latvia was incorporated into the Soviet Union on August 5, 1940 as the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Only one year later German troops occupied the territory which became a part of *Reichskommissariat Ostland*. Two years later the Soviet army came back and the Soviet system was reestablished. The war between the USSR and Germany ended in 1945, but the partisan war against the Soviet occupation continued in Latvia. The Soviet military and the country's repressive structures were turned against local residents. These attacks and the related repressions only ended when Stalin died, but they did create a deep cultural trauma which left long-lasting effects on the society.

The main focus in this paper is on the relations between the Soviet regime and women as a social group – a situation for which there was a special social contract. The paper describes the post-war demographic situation, reviews collaboration between women and the regime, analyses the reasons for and results of that collaboration, and looks briefly at women who were involved in the national resistance movement. The conclusion is that as social actors, women in post-war Latvia are hard to characterize, but research into this area would help to find answers to many historical questions which, for the time being, hinder people's ability to fully understand this complicated period.

**Literary Role Models:** The Latvian writer Anna Sakse received the Stalin Prize in Literature in 1949 for her novel “Uphill.”<sup>1</sup> Sakse was 44 years old and had two teenage daughters and a husband and brother, both of whom were incurably ill. She would later say that she wrote the novel in the evening and at night.<sup>2</sup> The Stalin Prize catapulted Sakse into the pantheon of Soviet culture, and to a certain extent this protected her against Stalinist repressions and guaranteed certain social and material privileges. Sakse became a symbol of the achievements and vast opportunities of Soviet women in Soviet Latvia, throughout the USSR, and also abroad.<sup>3</sup>

The novel “Uphill” is about Latvia between 1944 and 1946 – after World War II when the country had become a constituent republic of the USSR. The tale is set in a rural parish (*pagasts*), and starts with the arrival of the Soviet army and ends with the establishment of the first *kolkhoz*. The main character in the book is a young woman called Mirdza Ozola. She is courageous, independent, eager, always happy, able to take quick decisions, and capable of organizing everyone in the parish to work together and participate in public and cultural events. Later Sakse would write:

“In ‘Uphill’, my beloved character was Mirdza – this brilliant and unspoiled girl so full of life and hard work – initially somewhat naive, but always fundamentally fair toward herself and others. Just not just toward her enemies, but also her friends and her lover Ēriks.”<sup>4</sup>

Mirdza herself says in the book:

---

<sup>1</sup> Anna Sakse received the third-level Stalin Prize, which involved a cash award of 25.000 Soviet roubles. She was the only female prose writer to receive the prize. Among the other recipients of the Prize that year was another woman, the playwright Valentina Lyubimova. She received the prize for her play “Little Snow”.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Sakse, *Kopoti raksti* [Selected Writings], 6 vols. (Rīga: Latvijas Valsts izdevniecība, 1964), 181. Thereafter Sakse, *Kopoti*.

<sup>3</sup> For a biography of Anna Sakse, see Ingrīda Behmane, ‘Anna Sakse’, in Ēvalds Sokols, ed., *Apcerējumi pat latviešu padomju literatūras vēsturi* [A Study of the History of Latvian Soviet Literature] (Rīga: LPSR ZA izdevniecība, 1955), 295-322; Voldemārs Melnis, ‘Anna Sakse dzīves un daiļrades ceļos’ [‘Anna Sakse’s life and writings’], in Anna Sakse, *Kopoti raksti* [Selected Writings], 6 vols., 2nd edn (Rīga: Latvijas Valsts izdevniecība, 1965), 453-607. Thereafter Sakse, *Kopoti*. Ingrīda Kiršentāle, *Annas Sakses dzīve un personība* [The life and personality of Anna Sakse] (Rīga: Liesma, 1979); Inguna Daukste-Silasproģe, ‘Anna Sakse (1905-1981)’, in Benita Smilktiņa, ed., *Latviešu rakstnieku portreti. Laikmeta krustpunktos* [Portraits of Latvian Writers at the Crossroads of an Era] (Rīga: Zinātne, 2001), 148-91.

<sup>4</sup> Sakse, *Kopoti*, 182.

“I want to be everywhere, I want to see everything for myself. If only I could, I would work for all of the brigades and the executive committee, I would bring structure to the school.”<sup>5</sup>

Mirdza is one of the first young people in the parish to join the Komsomol. She always subordinates her private interests (both in emotional and material terms) to the interests of the collective. Mirdza sees her future only within the Soviet system and believes that her purpose in life must be to work on its behalf. This is an image which, for readers of that era, was the image of a superhero. In Soviet literature, the main heroic characters were usually men. Sakse's novel is an exception, and it contains a message about women's emancipation in terms of the right of women to be actors in the public arena. Mirdza rejects her first love because he can picture her only in his own private sphere and as part of the traditional and patriarchal family. Her internal monologues denounce this lifestyle:

“Except for his home, he cared nothing about the world. [...] Let her make his bed and clean his house, let her reject the path which constantly leads toward the mountaintop that can't be reached by hand or by eye. What right does he have to try to keep her from this path? What right to pull her down into the peaceful valley, where the air is dusty and she would choke?”<sup>6</sup>

For Mirdza Ozola, a prerequisite for love is shared political beliefs and the freedom to be an active builder of Soviet life.

“Uphill” represents the writing style of socialist realism that was characteristic of the Stalinist period. This style demanded not just the depiction of reality, but also the presentation of socialist ideals and how they were to be embodied in life. Works produced in this style had to be optimistic, full of revolutionary romanticism and contain positive heroes who could build a new society and be leaders of the masses. Recognition had to be given to literature's grounding in the doctrines of the Communist Party. Socialist realism was meant to depict life as having a ‘brilliant future’ – life as it should be, not as it really is. The basic formula for Soviet literature written in this manner was fully in place by the 1930s. Katerina Clark has argued that Soviet literature was similar to medieval iconography, because there was a canonical style that was simply copied. Writers were expected to make use of a specific system of meanings and signs, employ concrete epithets, basic phraseology, images, etc., and make sure that the narrative syntax of their work was in line with examples that had already been set for the presentation of events. Accordingly, Soviet literature was quite homo-

---

<sup>5</sup> Anna Sakse, ‘Pret kalnu’ [‘Uphill’], in Sakse, *Kopotī raksti*, 2nd vol, 138. Thereafter Sakse, *Kopotī 2*.

<sup>6</sup> Sakse, *Kopotī 2*, 443.

geneous.<sup>7</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko argues that socialist realism was a fundamental component of the political and aesthetic project that was the Soviet Union, because it served as “a mechanism for transforming Soviet reality into Socialism.”<sup>8</sup>

The thing that really was lacking in socialist realism was, ironically, realism. “Uphill” presented an image of rural life and human relations under the Soviet regime that had nothing much to do with reality. Sakse was simply successful in writing a novel that satisfied Soviet requirements about how the lives of Latvians should be depicted, and she used the examples of Soviet literature that were available to her. The author’s success also rests on an accurate understanding of the political requirements of her age. There was great demand for literature that could be used as an instrument of sovietization and collectivization. A history of Soviet Latvian literature published in the 1960s assessed the main character in “Uphill” in the following way:

“Mirdza’s brilliant image embodies all of the typical characteristics of the generation of Komsomol members who grew up after the war and became the best helping hands of the Communist Party from the very first days of liberation. Mirdza Ozola is the younger sister of Pavel Korchagin and Zoya Kosmodemyanska, and in post-war Latvia, she continued the battle that her older comrades launched in pursuit of Communism.”<sup>9</sup>

“Uphill” was first serialized in the literary magazine *Karogs* (The Flag) in 1947. It was published as a book in 1948, and then translated into Russian. Eventually, “Uphill” would be translated into more than 20 languages – nearly all of those of the Soviet republics, as well as those of Soviet protectorates. The book appeared in Hungary, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, East Germany, and China.<sup>10</sup>

In Latvia, “Uphill” had a wide readership for two main reasons. First, there were very few books published in Latvia during the 1940s because a large number of established authors had fled or emigrated during the war. Each book published in Latvian, therefore, attracted a great deal of interest. Second, “Uphill” is a relatively interesting book when seen against the backdrop of general Soviet literature. Sakse did not present cookie-cutter

---

<sup>7</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel. History as Ritual*, 3rd edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 4-15.

<sup>8</sup> Evgeny Dobrenko, *Politekonomikiya sotsrealizma* [Political Economy of Socialist Realism] (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obezrenie, 2007), 25-29.

<sup>9</sup> Ēvalds Sokols ed., *Latviešu literatūras vēsture* [History of Latvian Literature], 6 vols., (Rīga: LPSR ZA izdevniecība, 1962), 652.

<sup>10</sup> Ingrida Kiršentāle, ‘Komentāri’ [‘Commentaries’], in Sakse, *Kopoti 2*, 521-22.

images of the Soviet type, and she allowed her characters to have their own individuality. She devoted a comparatively large amount of the book to love and personal experiences, which means that the novel can also be seen as popular literature. “Uphill” was used as a teaching tool in schools, and that remained true until the collapse of the USSR. This means that everyone who finished school in the Latvian SSR had read the book at some point.

“Uphill” was also of great ideological importance for the successful implementation of sovietization. Anna Sakse offered to young women a model for behaviour and for life itself, promising that living in the USSR would provide them with a good and active future. Later many women who held senior positions in Soviet institutions, companies, and collective farms would say that they were encouraged to take on such public roles specifically because of Sakse’s novel. Thus, for instance, Komsomol activist and journalist Olga Vēja-Solovjeva wrote that she had read “Uphill” as a high school student in 1948:

“I feel certain in saying that ‘Uphill’ gave me my first assist in finding the right path – the most powerful and influential one. I wanted to get busy right away without waiting or looking around. I wanted to be like Mirdza Ozola. I thought that I could see the girl with my own eyes, that I had met her and talked to her. That’s how close she seemed to me.”<sup>11</sup>

Vēja-Solovjeva said that she had joined the Komsomol, through which she would become its school and then district Secretary, directly because of the novel.

The point is that Sakse set an example with her life and her book about how women could collaborate with the Soviet regime and become involved in public activities.

### “A New Woman”

Anna Sakse’s novel also incorporated a task related to gender policy in the Soviet Union – creating “the new Soviet woman”. Lynne Attwood has written that the concept of “the new woman” cannot be understood as an unchanging category, because it was reconstructed and redefined as the situation in the USSR changed.<sup>12</sup> The initial purpose of the concept, when

---

<sup>11</sup> Olga Solovjeva, ‘Galvu augšā!’ [‘To keep one’s chin up!’], in Pēteris Bauģis, ed., *Atmiņas par Annu Saksi* [Memories about Anna Sakse] (Rīga: Liesma, 1989), 126-27.

<sup>12</sup> Lynne Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Women: Women’s Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity, 1922-55* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 168.

Soviet society was in its infancy, was to create a contrast with women in czarist Russia and capitalist countries. Barbara Alpern Engel has argued that despite the fact that the 1920s in the Soviet Union were a time of enormous fluidity and flux, it was also a period in which lower-class women found unprecedented opportunities in gaining a voice in public debates and in organizations.<sup>13</sup> During the forced modernization of the USSR, labor was urgently needed and the ordinary woman became a “heroine of labor” in the public arena. There was a feverish construction of nurseries and kindergartens in many cities so that women could have jobs and children at the same time. In ideology, the mass media, and in public rituals, the image of the woman was transformed completely. She was now a hero who was conquering areas of work which had been the province of men. This new and modern woman was a Stakhanovite, a tractor driver or an aviator, and since her achievements came thanks to the Soviet state she was expected to express public dependency on the state, along with fulsome thanks to Stalin.<sup>14</sup>

As totalitarianism took root in the Soviet Union, the regime began to implement a stable policy of patriarchal families and conservative values. Abortion was banned in 1936, divorce procedures became more complicated, there were stronger support systems for mothers with many children, the authority of parents was strengthened, and irresponsible men and fathers were denounced.<sup>15</sup> External femininity also became a public value, and many women found that outer beauty was more important than pretending to be a heroine of labour.<sup>16</sup>

Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina have argued that the long-term relationship between the Soviet regime and the country’s women as an inclusive social group can be called a contract between the regime and working mothers. The government saw women as a special social group which required particular concern. Its status could be regulated with normative documents, ideological campaigns, mechanisms of social control,

---

<sup>13</sup> Barbara A. Engel, *Women in Russia, 1700–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 164–65. Thereafter Engel, *Women*.

<sup>14</sup> Choi Chatterjee, *Celebrating Women: Gender, Festival Culture and Bolshevik Ideology, 1910–1939* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), 135–40.

<sup>15</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 30s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 142.

<sup>16</sup> Engel, *Women*, 184; Sofie Chuikina, “Byt neotdelim ot politiki”: Ofitsial’nye i neofitsial’nye normy “polovoi” morali v sovetskom obshchestve 1930–1980-x godov” [“Life can not be separated from politics”: the formal and informal norms “of sexual” morality in Soviet society 1930–1980-s’], in Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina, eds., *V poiskah seksual’nosti [In Search of Sexuality]* (Sankt-Peterburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 2002), 99–127, here 104–5.

and the mass media. The paternal nature of the Soviet regime could be seen in social guarantees and the relief that was given to women who worked while giving birth to and raising their children. This state support meant that women were a social group that was dependent on the favors of the system of power, and that meant that they were expected to be loyal to it. Zdravomiskova and Temkina add that during the period of Stalinism, when the regime used repression as one of its key elements, strict control mechanisms were brought together with social guarantees to strengthen the contract.<sup>17</sup> Under Stalinist reality, women were thus completely reduced to subordinate status and second-classness in all areas of life. The government kept proclaiming gender equality officially, but it was all a smokescreen.

World War II saw no major change in the basic elements of the gender model or in the policies of the Soviet regime toward women. The work of women and their care for families became even more necessary, however, and the boundary between ‘men’s work’ and ‘women’s work’ quickly disappeared as the war progressed. At the same time, the presentation of the genders in media, art, cinema, and propaganda kept men and women apart even more than had been the case before the war. Engel has argued that the work of women was depicted as a personal obligation toward men who were on the front lines.<sup>18</sup>

War was depicted by the Soviet media mostly as a man’s business. The public emphasis on the femininity of women could be quite emphatic, and it was also embodied in the sense that men who were risking their lives at war were doing so because of their homes and their families.<sup>19</sup> Official propaganda still presented the image of the heroic woman, however, but now she was, in most cases, a partisan or a field medic. Heroines of this type occasionally appeared in the gallery of male heroes. Olga Nikonova has written that these heroines were not part of the common nature of the front lines, they did not at all represent the true attitudes of war, nor did they speak to the emotions and true everyday heroism of most women. The iconography of war presented women on posters, in films, literature, songs, and the press, but mostly as embodiments of the Motherland or as

---

<sup>17</sup> Elena Zdravomyslova and Anna Temkina, ‘Sovetskii etakraticeskii gendernii poryadok’ [‘Soviet state gender order’], in Natalia Pushareva, ed., *Sotsial’naya istoriya. Ezhegodnik, 2003. Zhenskaya i gendernaya istoriya* [Social History. Yearbook, 2003. Women and Gender History] (Moskva: Rossiiskaya politicheskaya entsiklopediya, 2003), 436-42.

<sup>18</sup> Engel, *Women*, 220.

<sup>19</sup> Engel, *Women*, 221.

feminine women waiting for their men to come home from the front lines.<sup>20</sup> Those women who were on the front lines had very different, albeit extreme, experiences, but these became unnecessary in the post-war Soviet state, because such memories hindered the ability of the regime to create new peacetime normality and to reinstate the traditional system of gender roles. According to Nikonova, in official memorial culture, heroic women of the front lines disappeared almost entirely for several decades.<sup>21</sup>

During the post-war period, women were represented as wives and mothers in most cases. Maternity was positioned in public discourse as a woman's national duty.<sup>22</sup> It was also her obligation to reconstruct the 'home' which had been destroyed by war. Engel has written that the basic job of the woman was to heal the 'scars' of her menfolk after they came home from war and that the traumas and needs of women themselves were therefore perceived as non-existent. In comparison to the pre-war era, the content of literature, the cinema, and the mass media was focused to a far greater extent on the subject of love. Magazines encouraged women to neaten their homes, to prepare tasty and filling foods, to take care of their own appearance, to do some gardening, etc. Femininity dominated fashion pages – high-heeled shoes, complicated coiffures, cosmetics.<sup>23</sup> Greta Bucher has written ironically about this:

"The ideal postwar woman was an outstanding worker and dedicated party or union member, who had a spotlessly clean home, sewed, cooked, and spent a lot of time with her children. In her spare time, she read classic literature – 'And Quiet Flows the Don' was a favorite – went to the theater, shopped for the family, and exercised. Women had two primary responsibilities – to work and raise children."<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Olga Nikonova, 'Zhenshchiny, voina i "figuryi umolchaniya"' ['Women, War and the "Figure of Silence"'], in Mikhail Gabovich, ed., *Pamyat' o voine 60 let spustya. Rossiya, Germaniya, Evropa* [The Memory of the War 60 Years later. Russia, Germany, Europe] (Moskva, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2005), available at <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2005/2/ni32.html> (last visited 1 August 2012). Thereafter Nikonova, 'Zhenshchinyi'.

<sup>21</sup> Nikonova, 'Zhenshchinyi', 571.

<sup>22</sup> Vineta Sprugaine, 'Padomju sievietes pienākums pret valsti: Sievietes reproduktīvās veselības diskurss jaunās valsts pirmajā piecgadē izdotajās informatīvajās brošūrās' ['The Duty of Women in the Soviet State: The Discourse of Reproductive Health in the First Five Years of Soviet Latvia, as Presented in Informational Brochures'], in Vita Zelče, ed., *Agora. 3. sēj.: Pēckara Latvijas cilvēklaitelpa ≠ staļinisms* [Agora. 3 vols., The Post-War Time and Space of Latvia's People ≠ Stalinism] (Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2005), 294.

<sup>23</sup> Engel, *Women*, 224-229. See Anna Krylova, "Healers of wounded souls": The crisis of private life in Soviet literature, 1944-1946', *The Journal of Modern History*, 73, 2 (2001), 311-19.

<sup>24</sup> Greta Bucher, 'Struggling to survive: Soviet women in the postwar years', *Journal of Women's History*, 12, 1 (2000), 152.



The post-war reality was very different. It was dominated by poverty, shortages, insufficient food, and Stalinist repressions.

The Anna Sakse novel “Uphill” was about a new Soviet woman who was unlike the Soviet woman represented after the war. She was more similar to an activist of the late 1920s and early 1930s – a woman who gained satisfaction from participation in public affairs, not in her family. Mirdza did not possess the elements of femininity that were key to post-war Stalinist women. On the contrary, she did not use cosmetics, and she did not curl her hair. The reasons for this contrast with the public image of Soviet women can be explained by the situation in which Latvia found itself at that time – Sovietisation, the demographic catastrophe caused by the war, and the need to involve women in the labor force.

### A Look Back: Latvia During the War

A traditional gender model existed in pre-war Latvia, where an authoritarian political regime had been in place since 1934. Men dominated the public space, even though there were certainly some women who were active participants in the area of economic and cultural issues. The 1935 census in Latvia showed a population of 1.950.502 people – 912.051 men (46.75 %) and 1.038.451 women (53.25 %). 68.6 % of men had jobs, and so did 54.6 % of women.<sup>25</sup> Some women worked as homemakers and were not, therefore, listed on employment rolls. The public believed that married women from the middle or upper classes who had paid jobs were destroying the social prestige of their families.

Once the Soviet regime was instituted in 1940, by contrast, there was much propaganda in support of the idea that women should be involved in work. Press articles at that time insisted that the identity of women must be based on a combination of work outside of the home and the social role of a mother. Sadly, there have been no studies of the social history of Latvia between 1940 and 1945, which means that it is rather difficult to describe gender model transformations during that period of time. There have, however, been studies of individual aspects of the history of women during the Nazi and Soviet occupation.

Thus, for instance, historian Iveta Šķinķe has studied women who were arrested by the Communist authorities and deported to various locations in Siberia and other remote regions of the Soviet Union on June 14, 1941. This round of deportations particularly focused on Latvia's social elite.

---

<sup>25</sup> M. Skujenieks, ed., *Ceturtais tautas skaitīšana Latvijā [Forth census in Latvia]* (Rīga: Valsts statistikas pārvaldes), 26, 449.

Men were separated from their families and sent to different places of incarceration. Šķiņķe argues that the deportation “placed women in a socially unnatural situation – their families were violently torn asunder, and women had to perform roles that were created by extreme conditions and were socially unaccustomed.”<sup>26</sup> Under such extreme situations, women had to take full responsibility for children and elderly family members who were deported in the same echelons. They also had to deal with the fact that their husbands quite often perished in prisons, labor camps, or settlements and that their children frequently died as well. There was also the fact that women faced moral humiliation by being seen as criminals and deportees. This was a status which replaced their former status as members of the social elite or the middle class.

In June 1941, Hitler’s Germany invaded the Soviet Union, forcing Soviet authorities to abandon Latvia temporarily and creating a three-year long German occupation of the country. Historian Iveta Dreimane has studied collaboration between women and the repressive institutions of the Nazi regime. She argues that this did not happen frequently and that in those cases where collaboration was seen, it was almost always a forcible process. Women who declined to collaborate almost always ended up in prison or were executed, and their relatives also faced repressions. Yet, some women did volunteer to collaborate with the repressive structures of the Nazi regime. In most cases that was because they wanted to take revenge against the earlier year-long Communist system and its supporters. In other cases, personal reasons or pure greed were the motivation. In some cases, women collaborated because they fell in love with German soldiers or civilians stationed in Latvia and wanted to confirm it.<sup>27</sup> Holocaust researcher Andrievs Ezergailis has noted that the names of women are seldom seen on lists of people who propagandized anti-Semitism during

---

<sup>26</sup> Iveta Šķiņķe, ‘1941.gada 14.jūnija deportācijā arestētās un izsūtītās sievietes. Ieskats problēmā’ [‘The women arrested and exiled during the deportation of 14 June 1941. An insight into the problem’], in Māra Brencē and Dzintars Ērglis, eds., *Latvijas Vēsturnieku komisijas raksti. 6. sēj.: 1941.gada 14.jūnija deportācija – noziegums pret cilvēci. Starptautiskās konferences materiāli 2001. gada 12.-13. jūnijs, Rīga* [Symposium of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia. Deportation of 14 June 1941: Crime against humanity. Materials of an International conference 12-13 June 2001, Riga], 6 vols. (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūts, 2002), 331. Thereafter Šķiņķe, ‘1941’.

<sup>27</sup> Inese Dreimane, ‘Sieviešu sadarbība ar nacistu represīvajām struktūrām Latvijā 1941.-1944.gadā’ [‘Women’s Collaboration with Nazi Repressive Structures in Latvia from 1941 to 1944’], in Dzintars Ērglis, ed., *Latvijas Vēsturnieku komisijas raksti. 16. sēj.: Okupētā Latvija 20.gadsimta 40.gados* [Symposium of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia. 16 vols., *Occupied Latvia in 20<sup>th</sup> Century (1940-s)*] (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūts, 2005), 319-68.

the Nazi occupation. Indeed, there are quite a few known cases in which women helped to save Jews from the Nazis.<sup>28</sup>

During the war, women were involved in the armed forces of the USSR and Nazi Germany alike. There were several hundred women in the 201<sup>st</sup> Latvian Division of the Red Army (later the 43<sup>rd</sup> guard) – a brigade that was entirely made up of Latvians. They served as medics, snipers, radar operators, laundresses, kitchen workers, barbers, secretaries, etc. There is no precise information about exactly how many women served in the Latvian military units during the war, largely because the Soviet system was very careless when it came to human statistics. Most war veterans today say that there were more women in Latvian units than in other Red Army structures. Fiction and newspaper articles published during the Soviet period spoke of the invaluable role of women in the Latvian division. The first movie to be produced in post-war Latvia, “Homeward With Victory” (1947), was about the Latvians who fought on the Soviet side during the war, and a woman was one of the central characters in that film.<sup>29</sup> During the last years of the war, some Latvian women served in the Nazi German forces – some 1.000 women aged 13 to 33 were drafted as assistants to the German Air Force.<sup>30</sup>

Most women, however, spent the war as civilians, doing their work, taking care of their families and homes, and paying the taxes which the occupant regimes collected. Fear was a key element in these lives – concerns about one’s own destiny and that of one’s loved ones during the war, as well as about what kind of lives people would have after the war. Changes in the Baltic States during the 1940s are unfathomable from the present-day perspective. Many people at that time had a very hard time in comprehending the realities of life, the biography researcher Aili Aarelaid-Tarta has argued. The fact is that over the course of just four years, Latvia was occupied by the Soviet Union, then by Nazi Germany, and then again by the USSR. The social order in the country had to shift from a western-oriented to a Soviet mode of life far more quickly than people could accept in the new situation. What is more, that happened under circumstances of war, when people were terrified about their lives and when many Soviet and Nazi forces murdered people and destroyed cities and villages. The

---

<sup>28</sup> Andrievs Ezergailis, *Holokausts vācu okupētājā Latvijā. 1941-1944* [*Holocaust in Latvia Occupied by Germans. 1941-1944*] (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 1999), 116.

<sup>29</sup> Daina Eglitis and Vita Zelče, ‘Unruly Actors: Historical Remembrance and Forgetting of Latvian Women of the Red Army in World War II’, unpublished paper.

<sup>30</sup> Daina Bleiere, ed., *Latvija Otrajā pasaules karā (1939-1945)* [*Latvia in the Second World War (1939-1945)*] (Rīga: Jumava, 2008), 373.

war itself, of course, represented a socio-psychological crisis, because people's lives and plans collapsed. There was no sense of peace at all and people permitted themselves the use of behavior they would have frowned upon in normal times. The land was wearied from battles during the war and afterward, and many people simply tried to avoid the realities of life. Others made incorrect choices and/or decisions, and in many cases they ended up having to regret that fact.<sup>31</sup> When the war ended in 1944 and 1945, that did not at all mean that it ended in Latvia as well.

### Post-war Latvia

Latvia lost a substantial part of its population because of World War II, Soviet and Nazi repressions, and the flight of refugees from the country at the end of the war. The loss amounted to approximately one-third of the population. Demographers maintain that post-war Latvia had only some 1.4 million residents. In 1946, when some refugees and soldiers had returned, the size of the population had increased to 1.6 million.<sup>32</sup> The totality of events, however, had changed the people who had survived and remained alive. The damage to the minds, spirit, and destinies of human beings cannot be identified as precisely as the number of destroyed factories, power stations, bridges, buildings, railroads, and highways. People had learned to live under extreme conditions. They suffered traumas, pain, and a yearning for security and refuge in their own homes. For most of those who survived, politics were far less important than satisfying a yearning for welfare, fundamental comforts (home, heat, food), and the capacity to establish or restore a family.<sup>33</sup> Historian Mark Mazower has written that in

---

<sup>31</sup> Aili Aareleid-Tart, 'The theory of cultural trauma as applied to the investigation of the mind-set of Estonians under Soviet rule (Based on the Biographical Method)', in Baiba Metuzāle-Kangere, ed., *Inheriting the 1990s. The Baltic Countries* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet), 50-51.

<sup>32</sup> Pārsla Eglīte and Ilmārs Mežs, 'Latvijas kolonizācija un etniskā sastāva izmaiņu cēloņi 1944.-1990. Gadā' ['The colonization of Latvia and changes in ethnic composition of its population (1944-1990)'], in Irēne Šneidere, ed., *Latvijas Vēsturnieku komisijas raksti. 7. sēj.: Okupācijas režīmi Latvijā 1940.-1956. gadā: Latvijas Vēsturnieku komisijas 2001. gada pētījumi* [Symposium of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia. Vol. 7: Occupation Regimes in Latvia in 1940-1956. Research of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia in 2001] (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūts, 2002), 414-15.

<sup>33</sup> Vita Zelče, 'Par dažām (iz)dzīvošanas praksēm pēckara Latvijā' ['Strategies of life and survival in post-war Latvia'], in Vita Zelče, ed., *Agora. 3. sēj.: Pēckara Latvijas cilvēklaikelpa ≠ stalinisms* [Agora. Vol. 3: The Post-War Time and Space of Latvia's People ≠ Stalinism] (Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2005), 15. Thereafter Zelče, 'Par dažām'.

the lands that were consumed by war, what was of value was human warmth, intimacy, attention and love, along with a secure and stable private world in which everyday living conditions would obtain.<sup>34</sup>

Table 1: War generation in 1946<sup>35</sup>

Year	Men		Women	
	Total	%	Total	%
1906	10.671	41.42	15.089	58.58
1907	10.856	41.33	15.408	58.67
1908	9.459	38.06	15.395	61.94
1909	9.579	38.87	15.067	61.13
1910	9.317	37.40	15.593	62.60
1911	9.208	37.13	15.198	62.87
1912	9.656	37.15	16.334	62.85
1913	8750	37.52	14.572	62.48
1914	8.611	37.11	14.591	62.89
1915	7.022	37.11	11.898	62.89
1916	5.200	33.99	10.098	66.01
1917	4.495	33.23	9.030	66.77
1918	5.622	32.65	11.598	67.35
1919	5.056	31.57	10.959	68.43
1920	5.177	29.50	12.372	70.50
1921	5.514	28.93	13.545	71.07
1922	5.463	25.99	15.559	74.01
1923	5.155	24.03	16.300	75.97
1924	5.153	24.29	16.063	75.71
1925	5.855	27.92	15.119	72.08
1926	5.825	26.62	16.060	73.38
1927	10.300	40.01	15.446	59.99

<sup>34</sup> Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 221-25.

<sup>35</sup> Source: National Archives of Latvia, State Archives of Latvia, 277/ 14/5: 47.

One consequence of World War II was a distinct gender imbalance in the structure of Latvia's population. Late in the autumn of 1944, when the USSR controlled only one part of Latvia's territory, a survey of rural residents found that 58.47 % of them were women, and only 41.53 % of them were men.<sup>36</sup> The greatest proportional difference was found among younger men and women. Early in 1946, in preparation for a Soviet Supreme Council election, a census was taken of the adults in the Latvian SSR, and this showed that among legal residents who had reached the age of 18, there were 424.573 men (37.20 %) and 716.602 women (62.80 %). The greatest imbalance was found in those age groups from which men were mobilized into the military – particularly the generation of young men who had been born between 1916 and 1926. In early 1946, for instance, there were 5.153 men in Latvia who were born in 1924 (24.29 %), as against 16.063 women born that year (71.71 %).<sup>37</sup> In 1945, when the war ended in Latvia, women thus constituted the majority of civilians in the country. Of particular importance is the fact that they also constituted a majority of those who were able to work. Men were in the Soviet or the German armies and in filtration camps, and some took part in armed opposition movements while others were in an illegal situation while they waited for events to develop.

The gender imbalance caused by the war remained in place long after the conflict was over. Data from the 1959 census allow us to draw certain conclusions about the situation that prevailed. In 1959 there were 919.008 men (43.90 %) and 1.174.450 women (56.10 %) in the Latvian population. The proportion of women was slightly higher in urban areas than in the countryside. Among urban residents, women represented 56.66 % of the population, while in rural areas, they represented 55.39 %. The largest proportion of women was found in those age groups in which the men had been subject to wartime mobilization. In the 35 to 39 age group (20-24 in 1945), for instance, there were 385 men and 615 women per 1.000 residents. In the age group from 40 to 44 years (25-29 in 1945), there were 405 men and 595 women per 1.000 residents.<sup>38</sup>

After the war, there was increased violence in the country – robberies, unjustified arrests and executions, as well as other types of violence against women which became a part of life at that time. There are no statistics to show how many women fell victim to the violence of the Red Army and

---

<sup>36</sup> National Archives of Latvia, State Archives of Latvia, 277/14/2, 53.

<sup>37</sup> National Archives of Latvia, State Archives of Latvia, 277/14/2, 5: 47.

<sup>38</sup> Komitet po statistike [Committee on Statistics], ed., *Itogi Vsesoyuznoi perepiski naseleniya 1959 goda [Results of the All-Union census in 1959]* (Moskva: Gossizdat TsSU SSSR, 1962), 19-20.

the rest of the Soviet occupation regime. The fact that violence caused by Soviet military officials was a serious problem, however, is seen in confidential correspondence between the government of the Latvian SSR and the commanders of the Leningrad frontline military, asking that the violence be brought to an end. The letters mention many cases in which military officials robbed homes, stole livestock, and raped women.<sup>39</sup>

Women did play another major role in post-war Latvia – they were participants in or supporters of the national resistance movement. These women remained unnoticed by the public's eye, but it is known that approximately 10 % of the rebels in the larger resistance units of the post-war years were women. Historian Zigmārs Turčinskis has collected data about female partisans in Northern Vidzeme, and he has written that the majority joined the movement before fierce repressions carried out by the occupying regime: the mass arrests in January and February 1945, as well as the deportations of March 25, 1945. The proportion of women in the resistance probably was between 6 and 8 %. Many of them were killed. Their most important roles were as deliverers of food, clothing, and medical supplies to the partisans, as well as messengers.<sup>40</sup> After the reinstatement of Soviet rule in Latvia, many resistance groups were organized by students and other young people, with girls representing one-half or one-third of all these participants. Nearly all of these groups were destroyed, and the young people ended up incarcerated. Among those students who were convicted of resistance efforts in the early 1950s, 16 % were female.<sup>41</sup>

The comparatively few published memoirs from women who took part in the resistance movement have been rather skimpy on emotions. These women tell relatively little about their involvement in resistance battles, their duties as signallers and providers of food, their conflicts with KGB agents or military units, or the partisans who fell in battle. They are even

---

<sup>39</sup> Irēne Šneidere, ed., *Latvija padomju režīma varā, 1945-1986. Dokumentu krājums* [Latvia in Power of Soviet Regime, 1945-1986. Collection of Documents] (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2001), 36-37.

<sup>40</sup> Zigmārs Turčinskis, *Ziemeļvidzemes mežabrāļi. Latvijas nacionālo partizāņu cīņas Valkas apriņķī un Alūksnes apriņķa rietumu daļā. 1944.-1953.gads* [The Forest Brethren of North Vidzeme. The Battles of the Latvian National Partisans in the Valka District and in the Western Part of Alūksne District. 1944-1953] (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2011), 301.

<sup>41</sup> Heinrihs Strods, 'Latvijas skolu jaunatnes nacionālā pretošanās kustība (1944.gads-50.gadu vidus)' ['The national resistance movement among Latvian schoolchildren (1944-Mid-50s)'], in Irēne Šneidere, ed., *Latvijas Vēsturnieku komisijas raksti. 3. sēj.: Totalitārie režīmi un to represijas Latvijā 1940.-1956. gadā* [Symposium of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia. Vol. 3: Totalitarian Regimes and Their Repressions Carried Out in Latvia in 1940-1956] (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūta apgāds, 2001), 636.

less likely to talk about interrogations, beatings, and other violations at the hands of the KGB or in prison.<sup>42</sup>

It also has to be noted that women made up the majority of those who were deported from Latvia on March 25, 1949 – 16.869 men (40 %) and 25.256 women (60 %).<sup>43</sup> Historian Iveta Šķiņķe has argued that deportation is a more difficult process for women than for men, because their primordial links to their native land are closer, and cultural re-adaptation is more difficult:

“Separation from the accustomed society is difficult, and the things that are new initially repel them. Eventually, women make do with their lives in the new situation, start gardening, and find work that is more in line with their education. And yet they dream, and most of them return to Latvia, even though that, too, brings a new experience. They cannot return to their own homes. Much has changed in the women and in those who are around them.”<sup>44</sup>

The replacement of one occupant regime by another in 1944 and 1945 created a threshold situation in which antagonistic principles clashed and the world was turned upside-down. Borders create battles, efforts are made to maintain disappearing benefits as long as possible, there is a lot of waiting, a battle between good and evil forces is renewed, and sometimes there is hope that even in the worst circumstances things will get better and that threats and uncertainties will someday be gone. People waited, watched, and were cautious. This watchful waiting was facilitated by the ethno-psychological nature of Latvians created by the sum total of their historical experiences over the centuries.<sup>45</sup> The ethno-sociologist Ilga Apine places Latvians among cultures that are individualistic. They want to maintain a certain amount of autonomy and want to be personally responsible for finding a legitimate path in life. Apine argues that Latvians love order and settled questions. They hate chaos, and they are sensible, thoughtful, and hard working. In relations with strangers, they tend to close themselves

---

<sup>42</sup> Antoņina Brasla was a resistance member as a student and suffered a very bitter fate, and when she was asked in 2005 what role the movement played in her subsequent life, she replied: “Do I regret it? No, we had no other choice, that is how we were raised. [...] I see no reason to feel evil in my heart in terms of those who betrayed me. The only thing, however, is that I cannot forget. We must never forget the things which the red plague did to Latvia and to other nations.” See: Anna Rancāne, ‘Sakarniece’ [‘Signaller’], *Diena*, 7-13 May 2005, 35.

<sup>43</sup> Jānis Riekstiņš, ‘The deportation of March 25, 1949 in Latvia’, in Iveta Šķiņķe, ed., *Aizvestie. 1949.gada 25.marts [Deported. March 25, 1949]* (Rīga: Latvijas Valsts arhīvs; Nordik, 2007), 48.

<sup>44</sup> Šķiņķe, ‘1941’, 337.

<sup>45</sup> Zelče, ‘Par dažām’, 18.



off. Apine insists that the central axis of the Latvian nation –around which all other characteristics circle – is stoicism. Stoicism is their reaction to difficulties in life and to negative and unexpected changes. Latvian identity also includes the capacity adapt in order to survive.<sup>46</sup>

After the war, everyday life did not allow people to assume a position of waiting for years and decades. Instead, people became more insistent in wanting to know what would happen next and what they should do. People were forced to learn about the forms of Soviet society and to integrate themselves with the Soviet way of life.

### On Social Contracts

The semiotician Yuri Lotman has argued that in any community, the cultural behaviour of individuals is organised by two contradictory elements: 1) That which is ordinary, of an everyday nature, and seen by members of the community as being natural, the only possible one, and the normal one; 2) All celebrations, as well as state, cultural and ceremonial rituals, which are perceived as carriers of culture and have an independent meaning. The first type of organizing behaviour is learned by members of a specific cultural community just as they learn their native language. They do not even notice when, where, and from whom they learn to work with the existing system and its order. Knowledge of it seems so natural that there is no point in asking from where it came. The second form of behaviour, however, is learned as if it were a foreign language with its own laws and grammar. Norms are learned first, and then they are used to shape the correct ‘texts of behaviour’. The first form of behaviour is learned automatically, the second is learned purposefully and with the help of teachers; it is a dedication and a wish.<sup>47</sup> In post-war Latvia, people had to learn the ‘foreign language’ of the Soviet way of life. This necessity was dictated by the wish to survive, by memories about what had been seen and experienced in 1940 and 1941, and by the recollection of the scope of repressions and of the reasons why the occupant regimes punished people in their particular way.

Repairing wartime damage and bringing the economy and social organization of Latvia in line with the ideology of the Soviet regime required

---

<sup>46</sup> Ilga Apine, ‘Latvieši. Psiholoģiskā portretējuma mēģinājums’ [‘Latvians. An Attempt at Psychological Portrayal’], *Latvijas Zinātņu Akadēmijas Vēstis*, 56, 4/5/6 (2002), 66-68.

<sup>47</sup> Yurii Lotman, *Stat'i po semiotike i iskusstva* [Articles on Semiotics and Art] (Sankt-Peterburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2002), 485-6.

many more women to become involved in work and in political and social activities. The regime needed women for their working abilities, their capacity for raising new citizens, and for their loyalty and co-operation (in every sense of the word). Women were expected to adapt to and make their peace with the new circumstances.

The first (and last) Congress of Soviet Latvian Women was convened in Rīga on March 30 and 31, 1945. One thousand one hundred women took part in what was one of the grandest public exhibitions of those years. Its purpose was to demonstrate that the regime, on the one hand, and women as an inclusive social group, on the other, supported each other and worked together. All of the elements of Soviet rituals were present at the Congress. The event was reported on extensively in the press and on the radio. The speeches and documents of the Congress were published in a compendium. Representatives of the Soviet regime delivered addresses containing pointed demands on and warnings to women: 1) Do not support or work with those who represented the former governments, do not believe them, do not partner with Nazi (collaborators?), and understand that if you obey these rules, you will not face the threat of arrest and deportation to Siberia; 2) Do not give your support to the movement of armed rebels; 3) Obey the state by delivering to it the required grain and forest products, go to work in factories, on the railroad, and elsewhere; 4) Support the Soviet army; 5) Help to remove the ruins of destroyed buildings in urban areas; 6) Handle the spring harvest; 7) Become involved in public life and cultural activities.<sup>48</sup>

The central focus of these speeches, however, was on labour mobilization. Delegates testified to their support for the Soviet regime and vowed to work as hard as they could to renew the economy and ensure the flourishing of the Soviet state, as well as to make themselves more like the women in the older Soviet republics. Speakers vied with one another to deliver thanks to the Soviet regime, and the speeches were dominated by the discourse of 'happy' co-operation. Milda Runce, mother of nine, observed:

"Because men have taken part in defeating our enemy, women have had to take their place, and the work of women is by no means of lesser importance. The all-providing and omniscient Soviet government has not forgotten the woman, the mother and the child. Here the Soviet woman can go to work and into battle against the enemy without any concern."<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Vita Zelče, 'The First Contract Between the Stalin's Regime and Latvian Women: 1945', *Ennen ja nyt*, 3-4 (2006), 11-17. Thereafter Zelče, 'First Contract'.

<sup>49</sup> Ansis Rudevics, ed., *Sieviešu uzdevumi vācu okupācijas seku likvidēšanā: Latvijas PSR sieviešu pirmais kongress, 1945* [*The Duties of Women in Reversing the Consequences*

Milda Brauna, a worker at a paper factory, joined in:

“Women were not appreciated, and our work was not recognised in the past. It is due to the Soviet government that now the work of a woman is respected, and women can take the place of men.”<sup>50</sup>

The speeches at the Congress were clearly meant to demonstrate the loyalty of a social group and to display overwhelming support for the occupant regime. The texts were rooted in everyday reality only to a limited extent. As was the case elsewhere in the Soviet Union, an imaginary reality was conjured up – one that was the cornerstone of the legitimacy of the Soviet state. Women praised Socialism even though Socialism did not exist then or ever.<sup>51</sup>

Another element in the Soviet-era social contract was the social guarantees for women who were mothers. The press published extensive information about Soviet benefits for pregnant women. Starting with the fourth month of pregnancy, they could not be required to work overtime, and beginning with the sixth month and during the breastfeeding period after childbirth, they could not be required to work at night. Working women received 35 days before and 42 days after childbirth as vacation time. Pregnant women and young mothers received more and better food allocations. Single mothers and mothers with many children were also paid state subsidies. Women with more than five children received state awards. Women with ten children were known as “Mother Heroes”.<sup>52</sup> The first awards of this kind to mothers in Latvia were granted as early as March 8, 1945.<sup>53</sup>

### Sovietisation and Collaboration

When the Soviet Army returned to Latvia in the summer of 1944 and reoccupied it, the Soviet structure of governance – the Communist Party and its system of *soviets* (councils) – was also reinstituted. The Soviet Latvian government devoted serious attention to governance. The administration of the republic was organized long before the territory itself re-

---

of the German Occupation: The first Congress of Women of the Latvian SSR, 1945] (Rīga: VAPP grāmatu apgāds, 1945), 163. Thereafter Rudevics, *Sieviešu*.

<sup>50</sup> Rudevics, *Sieviešu*, 175.

<sup>51</sup> Zelče, ‘First Contract’, 11-17.

<sup>52</sup> *Kalendārs 1947. gadam* [Calendar 1947] (Rīga: Latvijas Valsts izdevniecība, 1946), 121-22.

<sup>53</sup> *Cīņa* [Struggle], 4 and 8 March 1945, 1.

turned to Soviet control. There was active preparation in 1943 of local-level soviets that would implement sovietisation and organize lower and medium-level jobs. Reports indicate that in 1943, 300 war invalids and more than 2.000 Latvians who had been removed to Soviet Russia during the war were trained for this purpose at special courses.<sup>54</sup> At a time when countless men were mobilised, many of the graduates of these courses were women. Once they completed their training, they received assignment as *part-orgs* (Secretaries [leaders] of party organization) in economic enterprises, institutions, schools, parishes, and machine- and tractor-stations.

When the war was over, the Soviet authorities faced a distinct shortage of persons who wanted to become involved in this new system of governance. Most people were afraid of the return of Soviet authority, and Communist ideology was alien to them. The supposedly natural supporters of Communism – landless people and working people – were very reserved about the whole situation, and they were by no means eager to join local government organs or, for that matter, the Communist Party itself. The number of Party members increased slowly, and for a long time, the majority of members in Soviet Latvia were people from other Soviet republics. Data show that at the beginning of 1947, only 10 % of the members of the Soviet Latvian Communist Party were ethnic Latvians who had lived in Latvia before 1940.<sup>55</sup> The historian Daina Bleiere has written that those residents of Latvia who chose to co-operate actively with the Soviet regime can be divided into three groups: 1) Those who accepted the ideology; 2) Those who were careerists; and, 3) Those who were realists. Each of these

---

<sup>54</sup> Gatis Krūmiņš, 'Teritorijas pārvaldes organizēšana un vadošo darbinieku atlases politika Latvijā 1944.-1947. gadā' ['The organisation of territorial administration and the policy of selection of its leaders in Latvia 1944-1947'], in Dzintars Ērglis, ed., *Latvijas Vēsturnieku komisijas raksti. 25. sēj.: Okupācijas režīmi Baltijas valstīs. 1940-1991. Latvijas Vēsturnieku komisijas 2008. gada pētījumi un starptautiskās konferences "Okupācijas režīmi Baltijas valstīs (1940-1990): izpētes rezultāti un problēmas" materiāli, 2008. gada 30.-31. oktobris, Rīga* [Symposium of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia. Vol. 25: Occupation Regimes in the Baltic States. 1940-1991. Research of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia, 2008 and Proceedings of the International Conference "Occupation Regimes in the Baltic States (1940-1990): Research Results and problems," 30-31 October 2008, Riga] (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūts, 2009), 641-64, here 642. Thereafter Krūmiņš, 'Teritorijas'.

<sup>55</sup> Krūmiņš, 'Teritorijas', 680; Daina Bleiere, 'Latvijas Komunistiskās partijas organizācijas skaitliskais, nacionālais un sociālais sastāvs 1944.-1949.gadā' ['Membership, ethnic and social composition of the Latvian Communist Party organization in 1944-1949'], in Rudīte Vīksne, ed., *Latvijas Vēsturnieku komisijas raksti. 21. sēj.: Latvijas vēsture 20. gadsimta 40.-90.gados: Latvijas Vēsturnieku komisijas 2006. gada pētījumi* [Symposium of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia. Vol. 21: History of Latvia of the 1940s-1990s. Research of the Commission of the Historians of Latvia in 2006] (Rīga: Latvijas vēstures institūts, 2007), 368-71.

groups had its own unique motivation for becoming a part of the apparatus of the Sovietisation of the Latvian economy and society – true belief, ambition, career-building, material benefits, and/or pragmatism.<sup>56</sup>

During the first decade after the war, the percentage of women in the Soviet Latvian Communist Party did not increase above 30 %.

Figure 2: Members of Communist Party of Latvia (1946-1956)<sup>57</sup>

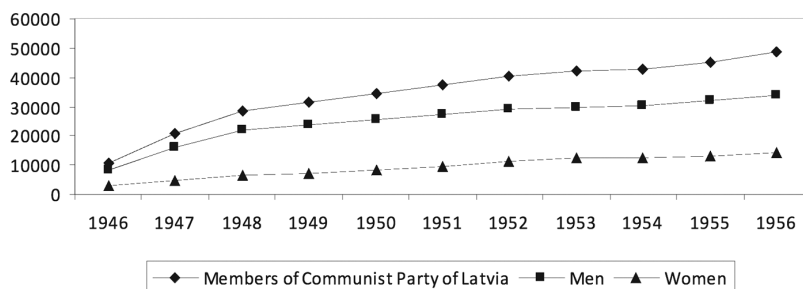


Figure 3: Secretaries of Communist Party of Latvia's organizations<sup>58</sup>



The percentage of women in positions of leadership in Party organisations was even lower. Few women were at the top in the Party's organizational structures, but they were more visible at the medium level – first and

<sup>56</sup> Daina Bleiere, Ilgvars Butulis, Inesis Feldmanis, Aivars Stranga, and Antonijs Zunda, *A History of Latvia: The 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (Rīga: Jumava, 2006), 331-32. Thereafter Bleiere et al., *Latvia*.

<sup>57</sup> Source: *Kommunisticheskaya partiya Latvii v tsifrah (1904-1971 gg.)*, ed. Lubova Zile (Rīga: Liesma, 1972), 43-100.

<sup>58</sup> Source: *Kommunisticheskaya partiya Latvii v tsifrah (1904-1971 gg.)*, ed. Lubova Zile (Rīga: Liesma, 1972), 43-100.

second Secretaries of Party organizations at the regional level. At the lowest level, and particularly during the first post-war years when many men were still gone or were missing, there were a great many women.

The *partorgs* at the parish level held very complicated and risky jobs after the war. They were intermediaries between the new regime and the local community, while, at the same time, overseeing local society and having the task of initiating punishment of those who transgressed against the new rules. There were party Secretaries in Latvia who defended the people of their parishes successfully and did not get swept up in the drive for Sovietisation. There were just as many, however, who were cruel and stupid, ready to do whatever the regime wanted them to do. They caused serious damage and destroyed countless people. The *partorgs* at the parish level were expected, among other things, to help organize the deportations on March 25, 1949. During the latter half of the 1940s, there was still an active and determined armed guerrilla movement bent on opposing the Soviet regime. The resistance of these national partisans included the murder of Soviet officials and representatives. Several women who as *partorgs* had been involved in repressions against local residents and national partisans lost their lives in these confrontations.<sup>59</sup>

Women *partorgs* at the parish level were quite often characters in the post-war Latvian literature that now had to be written within the framework of socialist realism. Most of these characters were young women who had spent the wartime in the Soviet Union, either on the front lines or behind the lines. As party Secretaries, they were portrayed as the souls of their communities, handing down just punishments to the enemies of the Soviet regime and making sure that good people had a good life. Enemies of the Soviet regime were usually portrayed as unsuccessful assassins who did no more than seek to injure the party Secretary. Authors also chose to reward their party Secretary characters with finding true love because they had such positive attributes.<sup>60</sup>

In texts about distinguished Soviet personalities, however, post-war party Secretaries were usually depicted as bitter, silent, humble and secretive women. In 1973, an article appeared about the legendary party Secretary Nora Melnalksne, who had been injured during the war and carried a bullet in her leg for the rest of her life. The author quoted her:

“Oh, so you want to know about my post-war career? You know what? All kinds of things have happened to me. A couple of times I was offered top jobs

---

<sup>59</sup> Bleiere et al., *Latvia*, 344-45.

<sup>60</sup> For example, see Vilis Lācis, *Vētra [The Storm]* (1946-1948), and *Uz jauno krastu [To the New Shores]* (1955); Anna Brodele, *Ar sirdi un asinīm [With Heart and Blood]* (1956).

in Rīga, but I don't like those top jobs or Rīga itself. I'm a country woman, I'm used to the countryside and the forest. People in the countryside are closer to me. I mostly did political work in several districts. Sometimes life was good, sometimes it was difficult. I have been a personal pensioner now for several years. The Soviet government takes care of me. I have not been forgotten. I am lacking nothing."<sup>61</sup>

Another position that women occupied fairly often was that of chairwoman of the executive committee of parishes or villages. In 1947, women chaired 19 parish executive committees (3.73 %) and 78 village executive committees (5.73 %) in Soviet Latvia.<sup>62</sup>

Women's Sections – a type of Party organization that had been present in the Soviet Union from the 1920s – were also established in Soviet Latvia. Their assignment was to involve women in work and to train them in political terms. There were lectures, political activities, and organized women's brigades that harvested potatoes and did forestry work. The truth is, however, that the Women's Sections were largely a formality, and they did little to truly involve women in public events.<sup>63</sup>

More effective in involving women in work and in bringing about collaboration with the Soviet regime were the economic situation and everyday needs. The regime destroyed Latvian agriculture through collectivization. Hoping to protect their farms from destruction, many farmers fulfilled excessive norms for the delivery of food, taxes, and forest products, but in the process ruined their health through overwork and drove themselves into poverty. There were no men on many farms during the first years after the war, and so all of the work had to be done by women. Many country women recalled how hard life was then. In an autobiographic novel, the teacher Daina Zupa recalled:

"There was always so much work that it was hard to do all of it. During the autumn, digging of potatoes was particularly heavy work. There was no more group work, because there was no money to pay. There was a horse-drawn machine which brought the potatoes up from the ground. You spent hours on the field, bending down to pick the potatoes. Your back hurt so badly that it was hard to stand up straight. Perhaps the work would not have seemed as difficult and hopeless if it had not been absolutely clear that nearly all of the harvest would be taken, for hardly any money at all, by the Soviet regime. [...] Load after load of grain and potatoes were taken to the government's collecting facilities. The threshing barn was swept clean. [...] The cattle barn was also

---

<sup>61</sup> Daina Avotiņa and Jānis Peters, *Baltijas toverī sāļti...* [*Salt in Baltic Tub...*] (Rīga: Liesma, 1973), 75.

<sup>62</sup> *Padomju Latvijas Boļševiks* [*Bolshevik of Soviet Latvia*], 4 (1947), 48.

<sup>63</sup> State Archives of Latvia, PA-126/7/92: 10-13, 15, 42.

emptied thoroughly. [...] Marija felt distraught, and she quietly wept at the fruit of her labor – fruit that disappeared like dust in the harsh wind. Why did she have to suffer so? She had worked so hard every day that she had lost her strength and her health.”<sup>64</sup>

The destruction of the traditional life of the countryside encouraged more women to find jobs in factories and government institutions. In 1947, women comprised 41.2% of all working people in Soviet Latvia.<sup>65</sup> Work in the Soviet Union was portrayed as heroism deserving honor and praise. The media spent much time constructing images of the heroes of labor. During the first years after the war, six farm workers in Latvia received the highest title of all – Hero of Socialist Labor. Among them was one woman – a milkmaid called Milda Lazdiņa-Judina.<sup>66</sup> In the media, she was described as an exemplary Soviet woman who owed all of her successes to the Soviet regime. In the magazine published for collective farmers, she is portrayed in the following way:

“The most typical characteristics of Milda Lazdiņa are relentlessness in pursuit of her goal, great inborn shyness, simplicity, and an effort to constantly move forward and not to rest on her laurels. [...] As a young member of the party of Lenin-Stalin, Milda Lazdiņa is continuing to study the short course in Communist (Bolshevik) Party history in depth, and she is carefully monitoring international events. She is also doing serious work in training young milkmaids for the Soviet farm. None of that keeps her from being a careful mother who is raising a two-year-old son Arvids and a baby Anniņa.”<sup>67</sup>

The image of Milda Lazdiņa-Judina embodied the model for an emancipated Soviet woman – women were involved in work and public activities, but that did not mean that they were freed from their housework or their duties as mothers.

Vera Dunham has argued that after the Soviet victory in the war, there was a latent conflict between the upper elite of the Soviet Union and the country's residents. What is more, the potential of opposition in the social base tended to expand. In order to maintain and preserve the existing system of political and social privileges and to gain greater support for the regime, Stalin and his team prepared an unspoken concordat with the

---

<sup>64</sup> Daina Zupa, *Skolotāj, partija jā-klausa! [Teacher, Party must Follow!]* (Rīga: A. Mellupes SIA BO “Liktenstāsti”, 2002), 119-21.

<sup>65</sup> *Padomju Latvijas Boļševiks [Bolshevik of Soviet Latvia]*, 4 (1947), 48.

<sup>66</sup> Jānis Buholcs, ‘Pirmie Latvijas sociālistiskā darba varoņi’ [‘The first heroes of socialist labour in Latvia’], in Vita Zelče, ed., *Agora. 3. sēj.: Pēckara Latvijas cilvēklaiktelpa ≠ staļinisms [Agora. Vol. 3: The Post-War Time and Space of Latvia's People ≠ Stalinism]* (Rīga: LU Akadēmiskais apgāds, 2005), 256.

<sup>67</sup> *Padomju Latvijas Kolhoznieks [Collective Farmer of Soviet Latvia]*, 10 (1950), 22.



middle class, strengthening its social status and value system while also giving it certain privileges. Dunham has described this internal contractual alliance in post-war Soviet society as the “big deal.”<sup>68</sup> Orlando Figes, for his part, has argued that in order to avoid public demands for political reforms and to ensure the loyalty of the community, the regime had to “cater to people’s bourgeois aspirations.”<sup>69</sup>

The regime in post-war Latvia, too, needed the support of the middle ranks of the social system and of the intelligentsia, and therefore a certain agreement had to be reached with them. The regime could offer its partners not only the opportunity just to survive but also social privileges and comparative wealth (larger and better flats, access to scarce food items and other products, etc.), as well as various state honours (orders, medals, bonuses, honorary titles, praise in the media, etc.). The regime ‘lifted’ its most trustworthy and valuable allies into the pantheon of the social elite.

Women were also used in the public arena to represent the Soviet elite. The women who entered this elite world were usually actresses, opera singers, ballet dancers, authors, poets and scientists. In the media, they were presented as beautiful and elegant, well-dressed and well-coiffed. The first illustrated magazines in Soviet Latvia, *Padomju Latvijas Sieviete* (Soviet Latvian Woman) and *Zvaigzne* (Star), often published photos and descriptions of these women, thus popularising the values of the Soviet bourgeoisie under Stalin’s rule.

Soviet press publications and official documents claimed that women’s lives in the Soviet Union were better than at any time in the past. The ability of women to achieve things in the workplace, in management, and in Communist governance was presented as a great advantage. In truth, however, most women in Soviet Latvia spent the first years after the war in heavy labor, poverty and insecurity, not least because violence and repressions continued throughout those years.

## Conclusion

The Soviet Latvian public arena and the media spoke of a “new Soviet woman.” The regime insisted that women accept the Soviet way of life and the role of women therein. It also wanted women to conclude a social contract with the regime. The war, the losses which occurred during the

---

<sup>68</sup> Vera S. Dunham, *In Stalin’s Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction*, 2nd edn. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 3-23.

<sup>69</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers. Private Life in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 471.

war, the violence and the repressions, or simply the threat of violence and repressions led many women to accept the Sovietization that was occurring and to make peace with it in their lives. That was the price for survival. Life and survival under a totalitarian regime dictated the need for women to find strategies that would allow them to adapt to the system actively or passively, engage in manipulations with the regime and its instructions, engage in passive resistance, etc. Women represented the distinct majority of Latvia's population after the war, and the recovery of society after the war and during the period when lives were normalised depended on their ability to adapt to the Soviet regime and to accept, at least externally, the role of "new women" that had been assigned to them.

As noted, the post-war history of Latvia is complicated. It cannot be described in black-and-white colors, and that is also true when discussing the role of women in public and private affairs or their collaboration with and/or resistance to the occupying regime. Anna Sakse's novel "Uphill" remained just a fairytale about the life of Latvian women in the Soviet state. In general terms, Latvian women made peace with the existing situation, hoping to secure their own survival and welfare, as well as those of their families. They accepted life under the regime in terms of the social contract that had been offered to them.

Women who survived the occupation period have largely been silent: the experience has cut a deep and traumatizing gash in their social memory. Research into the history of women in Latvia after the war offers a very important key to an understanding of this difficult period of violence, fear, instability and change. This means that analysis of Latvia's history from the gender perspective is work that must be continued.