

SUPPRESSED MEMORY: DISREGARDING THE HOLOCAUST IN THE SOVIET LATVIA

Ilana Maymind, Ph.D.

(California, U.S.)

Correspondence should be addressed to: ilanalatv@gmail.com

Date submitted: 17 April 2026

Accepted following revisions: 18 September 2026

First published online: 28 September 2026

Abstract

This paper examines the systematic suppression of Holocaust memory in Soviet Latvia. It argues that Soviet authorities possessed detailed knowledge of the targeted extermination of Latvian Jews yet often subsumed that knowledge within a generic narrative of Soviet citizen victimhood. The archival documents translated below, several drawn from Russian state archives and published in 2006, demonstrate that this suppression was not merely an oversight but a sustained political practice.

This paper does not seek to provide a comprehensive history of Soviet antisemitism, Latvian collaboration, or post-Soviet Latvian politics. Rather, it focuses on how Soviet institutions recorded, represented, and commemorated the Holocaust in Latvia. The historical background on interwar Latvia, the Nazi occupation, and the destruction of Latvian Jewry is included only insofar as it is necessary to understand the later Soviet treatment of Holocaust memory.¹

Keywords: Holocaust, Latvia, Latvian Jews, the Nazi occupation of Latvia

¹ For a broader study of Soviet antisemitism, see Benjamin Pinkus, *The Jews of the Soviet Union: The History of a National Minority* (Cambridge University Press, 1989).



I. JEWS IN LATVIA BEFORE THE WAR

The history of Latvian Jews dates to the sixteenth century and nearly came to an end during the Holocaust, which destroyed the overwhelming majority of Latvia's pre-war Jewish population. According to the 1935 census, 93,479 Jews lived in Latvia, constituting approximately 4.8 percent of the population. Jews were Latvia's second-largest ethnic minority, behind only Russians.

Latvia's Jewish population was diverse in language, religious observance, political outlook, and degree of cultural integration. During the interwar Latvian republic, Jews maintained schools, religious institutions, cultural organizations, and political associations. As Lumans contends, many Jews were not considered "true Latvians" by some members of the majority population (Lumans 216).² The separation cannot by itself explain Latvian participation in the Holocaust, but it formed part of the social environment which some Latvians later joined in the persecution of Jews while others remained passive observers.

Latvia's sovereignty was undermined when, on October 5, 1939, the Soviet–Latvian Mutual Assistance Treaty was signed in Moscow by Latvian Foreign Minister Vilhelms Munters and Soviet Foreign Commissar Vyacheslav Molotov. Although it formally promised mutual defense and respect for Latvian sovereignty, it required Latvia to accept the stationing of up to 30,000 Soviet troops and the establishment of Soviet military bases. The treaty was one of the Soviet Union's first practical steps in implementing the geopolitical arrangement created by the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact.

The secret protocol to the August 1939 Nazi–Soviet pact placed Latvia within the Soviet sphere of influence. This agreement freed Moscow to pressure Latvia into accepting Soviet bases and troops two months later. The treaty did not itself annex Latvia, but it provided the Soviet Union with a legal and military foothold.

In the autumn of 1939, Adolf Hitler called on Baltic Germans to "come home into the Reich." Many, though not all, Baltic Germans left Latvia and were resettled in territories controlled by Nazi Germany. On June 15, 1940, Soviet forces attacked Latvian border posts at Masļenki, killing three Latvian border guards and two civilians. On June 16, the Soviet Union issued an ultimatum demanding the formation of a new government and the unrestricted entry of additional Soviet forces. The Red Army occupied Latvia on June 17, 1940. Latvia was formally incorporated into the Soviet Union in August 1940.

The presence of Soviet troops and the destruction of Latvian independence were met with disapproval by many Latvians. Jewish responses were more varied. Some Jews hoped that Soviet rule would protect them from Nazi Germany, while others feared Soviet repression, nationalization, and restrictions on religious, cultural, and economic life.

Soviet occupation lasted only one year, from June 1940 until the German invasion in June 1941, but it profoundly disrupted Latvian society. Soviet authorities nationalized private property, eliminated independent political parties and organizations, and brought Jewish schools and cultural institutions under state control. Jewish religious institutions faced severe restrictions. These policies affected Jews alongside other Latvians, although Jewish economic life had already been weakened under Kārlis Ulmanis's authoritarian regime after 1934. Soviet nationalization further undermined Jewish businesses and communal autonomy.

The deportations of June 14, 1941, were among the most traumatic events of the first Soviet occupation. Jews were among those deported, together with ethnic Latvians, Russians, Poles, political figures, military officers, businesspeople, intellectuals, and their families. These deportations later became central to Latvian memories of Soviet occupation and were exploited by Nazi propaganda, which falsely equated Jews with Soviet rule.

As German forces advanced into Latvia, many Jews sought to flee eastward into Soviet territory. Soviet border controls, the rapid German advance, transportation difficulties, and fear of being treated as enemy agents sharply limited escape. Lumans estimates that approximately 10,000 to 15,000 Jews succeeded in leaving Latvia (Lumans 227). Others remained

² Valdis Lumans, Professor of History at University of South Carolina in his *Latvia in World War II*.



in Latvia because of family obligations or because they did not anticipate the scale of the coming genocide. Some also recalled the comparatively less murderous German occupation during World War I. It is deeply ironic that some Jews deported by the Soviets in 1941 survived precisely because they had been removed from Latvia before the German invasion.

In the meantime, it should be noted that some historians underplay the fact that execution of Latvian Jews started by the local forces before the actual German occupation took place. In fact, evidence demonstrates that Latvian volunteers took an active part in the killings. The most notorious of these was the Arajs Commando, organized by ex-policeman Viktors Arajs in Riga.³ Latvian nationalists' knowledge of who was considered a Jew and where this person lived sped up the process for the Germans, who had scant knowledge of Riga's Jewish community. These Soviet "sympathizers" were tracked through the Soviet system of personal surveillance, which gave the Arajs men an ability to track down assimilated Jews who had not been publicly known to be Jewish. The argument that Latvians were coerced by the Germans to pursue their persecution of Latvian Jews is not supported by evidence. Even before the German arrival in Latvia, some published articles called for persecution of Latvia's Jews. Without Latvian nationalists the first phase of the persecution of Jews would have been much slower and less successful.

II. THE ARRIVAL OF THE GERMANS

On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. German forces reached Daugavpils by June 26, cutting off an important route of escape to the east. By July 1, German forces had entered Riga, and by early July they controlled most of Latvia. For many Latvians, the German invasion initially appeared to bring liberation from Soviet occupation. For Latvia's Jews, however, it marked the beginning of systematic persecution and mass murder.

The first wave of persecution was presented by German occupiers and their collaborators as "the people's righteous anger." Nazi propaganda falsely portrayed Jews as collective supporters of Soviet rule and used antisemitism, anti-Bolshevism, and resentment of the Soviet occupation to mobilize support for persecution.

German occupation authorities, especially Einsatzgruppe A, the Security Police, and the SD, organized and directed the genocide of Latvian Jews. Latvian auxiliaries, police units, and individual collaborators also participated in arrests, forced labor, ghettoization, and mass murder. The most notorious Latvian formation was the Arājs Kommando, organized in Riga in early July 1941 by Viktors Arājs after German forces and German security units had entered the city.

Within months, tens of thousands of Latvian Jews had been murdered. By the end of 1941, Nazi German authorities and their collaborators had killed most of Latvia's local Jewish population. The largest single actions occurred at Rumbula, where approximately 25,000 Jews were murdered on November 30 and December 8, 1941.

The German occupation intensified the separation of Jews from the general population. Jews were subjected to humiliating restrictions, expropriation, forced labor, beatings, arrests, and murder. They were later required to wear identifying badges and were concentrated in ghettos, beginning with the Riga Ghetto. These measures prepared the way for the mass murder of Latvia's Jewish population.

³ After the war Arajs was in British custody as a war criminal but was inexplicably released in 1948 and lived peacefully under a false name in Frankfurt until 1976. He was then recognized, tried and convicted by a German court and sentenced to imprisonment. He died in 1988, 47 years after the crimes he committed. Latvian Jews were stunned by Latvian participation. It might also be interesting to note that on March 16, 2010, 200 former Waffen-SS accompanied by at least 1,000 neo-Nazis and other Latvian sympathizers marched through the streets of Riga feeling proud of Arajs and other German collaborators. See <http://clemensheni.wordpress.com/2010/03/22/riga-viktor-arajs-march-16-the-latvian-legion-and-the-holocaust/> and <https://tv.apple.com/au/episode/the-arajs-kommando/umc.cmc.34zx70o0d6wwvt1r2org518dg?showId=umc.cmc.6fnsbzfbaectlfjzci77gdx10>.



Personal Testimony

For me, the historical record is inseparable from family memory. My mother witnessed anti-Jewish violence in Riga during the German invasion. Her testimony does not establish that all Latvians participated in such violence, nor does it diminish German responsibility for organizing the Holocaust. It does, however, preserve the memory of local violence that occurred alongside the German-directed system of persecution and genocide. Other accounts likewise describe Latvian self-defense groups and local residents arresting, attacking, and murdering Jews soon after German forces entered Riga. My mother had a very clear memory of Arajs Kommando units.

III. THE RIGA GHETTO

Before the establishment of the Riga Ghetto, Jews were often taken to Riga Central Prison and, in many cases, were severely beaten or killed there. The prison served as a holding place for detainees who were later murdered. Detainees other than Jews were often accused of cooperating with Soviet authorities and were considered traitors. Jews, however, were not required to have engaged in any political activity; they had been condemned because of their Jewish identity. As Angrick and Klein write, they “had been condemned to die on the basis of their ‘Jewish nationality’” (Angrick and Klein 71).

The nearby Biķernieki forest became one of the principal sites of mass murder near Riga. During the first months of German occupation, thousands of Jews were murdered there. By late 1941, much of Riga’s Jewish intelligentsia, many able-bodied men, and numerous community leaders had already been killed. Jewish communal life was therefore gravely damaged even before the ghetto was sealed.

When preparing to send Jews to the ghetto, Nazi authorities issued racial guidelines to determine who would be classified as Jewish. The guidelines of August 1941 defined Jews according to ancestry, religious affiliation, and marriage. They followed and, in some respects, extended the racial logic of the 1935 Nuremberg Laws. People of mixed Jewish ancestry and some people married to Jews could also be classified as Jewish. If doubt arose, local German civil authorities had the power to decide who was Jewish (Angrick and Klein, n. 20, 121).

Construction of the Riga Ghetto began on August 23, 1941, in the impoverished so-called Moscow suburb of Riga. Jewish residents were forced to leave their homes and move into the designated area. The ghetto was sealed on October 25, 1941, after the forced concentration of Jews had been completed. It was surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by German and Latvian personnel.

A Jewish council of seven members was established to serve as an intermediary between the Jewish population and the German and Latvian authorities. The council was told that the ghetto would protect Jews from Latvian violence. In reality, the ghetto was an instrument of segregation, expropriation, forced labor, and eventual mass murder. Its members were required to carry out German orders and were held responsible for their implementation (Angrick and Klein 94).

The population of the Riga Ghetto included thousands of children, adults, and elderly people. Conditions were crowded, unsanitary, and increasingly desperate. Jews were compelled to perform forced labor, while food, housing, and medical care were inadequate. The ghetto was not created for the long-term protection of its inhabitants; it was part of the Nazi system of isolating Jews before deportation, forced labor, and murder.

In November 1941, Himmler ordered the “emptying” of the Riga Ghetto. The Rumbula forest, approximately ten kilometers from Riga, was selected as a major execution site. On November 29, 1941, about 5,000 able-bodied Jews were moved into a separate section that became known as the Small Ghetto. The remaining inhabitants of the Large Ghetto were driven toward Rumbula.

On November 30 and December 8, 1941, German forces, assisted by Latvian auxiliaries and police units, murdered approximately 25,000 Jews at Rumbula or on the route from the ghetto to the forest. Most of the victims were Latvian Jews from Riga, although approximately 1,000 Jews deported from Germany were also murdered on November 30. The victims were forced to lie in pits and were shot in successive layers; some were buried while still alive.



After the Rumbula massacres, the Large Ghetto was used to house Jews deported from Germany, Austria, and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. These deportees were often initially told that they were being resettled for labor. In reality, they entered a system of forced labor, hunger, overcrowding, disease, and continued murder. The ghetto was reduced further in 1942 as Jews were transferred to labor sites, murdered at Bikernieki, or sent to other camps.

On June 21, 1943, Himmler ordered the liquidation of ghettos in the East and the transfer of able-bodied Jews to concentration camps. In Riga, prisoners were transferred from the ghetto to the newly established Kaiserwald concentration camp between the summer and autumn of 1943. Kaiserwald, located in the Mežaparks district of Riga, had been established in March 1943 as a concentration camp and forced-labor center.

In November 1943, approximately 2,300 Jewish women, children, elderly people, and others considered unable to work were deported from Riga to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where many were murdered on arrival. As the Red Army approached Riga in 1944, prisoners from Kaiserwald were evacuated to Stutthof near Danzig and subsequently transferred to other camps, including Buchenwald. Many died during the evacuations, transports, and death marches.

The former Kaiserwald camp no longer exists as a physical camp site. The area is now part of the Mežaparks district, known for housing, parks, and recreational facilities. A memorial near the former site commemorates the victims who were imprisoned there.

Personal Testimony

Three of my aunts—my father's sisters—were killed in the Riga Ghetto. My husband's uncle was beaten to death in Riga Central Prison. After the war, the Mežaparks became a recreation park with merry-go-round, slides, carousels, and other entertainment. As a little girl, I often visited it without knowing its history. My parents kept its history to themselves.

IV. THE CAMPS

The German occupation authorities developed a network of prisons, ghettos, labor camps, police prisons, and concentration camps in Latvia. These institutions served different purposes: detention, forced labor, racial persecution, punishment, and murder. The violence within them was not accidental. It formed part of the broader German system of occupation and racial rule.

German officials proposed the establishment of a concentration camp near Riga partly because the ghetto could not indefinitely hold the Jews who had been concentrated there. In a memorandum cited by Angrick and Klein, Rudolf Lange described the Jewish population as a labor force to be exploited while also making clear that the ghetto was viewed only as a temporary arrangement. The Nazi language of labor and "attrition" concealed a system in which hunger, disease, overwork, violence, and murder were expected outcomes (Angrick and Klein 198–99, 261).

The construction of camps and forced-labor sites relied heavily on Jewish forced labor. Jews deported from Germany and other occupied territories were among those compelled to build and maintain installations in the Riga area. The German authorities treated prisoners as disposable laborers, and the distinction between forced labor, imprisonment, and murder was often deliberately blurred.

The Salaspils Camp

Salaspils was located approximately eighteen kilometers southeast of Riga, near the Riga–Daugavpils highway. Construction began in late 1941, and the camp became a major Nazi police prison and forced-labor detention site. It held a varied population that included Latvian political prisoners, labor resisters, Soviet citizens, people deported during German anti-partisan operations, Jews, and others classified as undesirable by the occupation authorities.

Salaspils was a site of severe suffering. Prisoners faced hunger, cold, disease, physical abuse, forced labor, inadequate shelter, and executions. Children were also imprisoned there, including children separated from their families during German anti-partisan operations. Many prisoners died as a result of camp conditions and violence by the guards.



Soviet postwar investigations of Salaspils produced very high casualty estimates and included claims that children had been used as blood donors and subjected to medical experiments. These reports are important evidence of Soviet postwar documentation and memorial politics. Salaspils was not an extermination camp comparable to Bełżec, Sobibór, or Treblinka, but it was a brutal Nazi police prison and forced-labor camp in which many prisoners died through hunger, disease, forced labor, neglect, violence, and execution.

Salaspils also served as a base for Sonderkommando 1005, the German unit assigned to destroy evidence of mass murder by opening graves and burning bodies.⁴ In 1944, the unit operated in the forests around Riga, including sites where Jews and other victims had been murdered.

Other sites around Riga also held Jews and other prisoners under terrible conditions. Jungfernhof, located at the Mazjumprava Manor near Riga, functioned as an improvised labor camp where Jews deported from the German Reich and elsewhere were held in overcrowded and lethal conditions.⁵ Kaiserwald became the largest concentration camp in the Riga area after 1943. Together, these sites formed part of the German occupation system that exploited, deported, and murdered Jews and other prisoners in Latvia.

V. FROM THE SOVIET ARCHIVES

The partial opening of formerly closed Soviet archives in the late 1980s and early 1990s, followed by the publication of some archival collections, made new research on Holocaust memory possible. Access remained uneven, and many politically sensitive collections continued to be restricted. Nevertheless, these materials allow historians to compare what Soviet institutions recorded during and after the war with what later appeared in public commemoration, textbooks, and historical writing.

During Soviet rule, many of these accounts were not freely available to the public. Soviet historical writing generally did not deny that Nazi Germany had committed atrocities in Latvia. Rather, it often subsumed the murder of Jews within a general account of Nazi crimes against “peaceful Soviet citizens.” This approach obscured the specifically anti-Jewish character of the genocide, the destruction of the Riga Ghetto, and the mass murder of Jews at Rumbula and Biķernieki.

The collection *Latvia Under the Nazi Yoke: Collection of Archival Documents*, published in Moscow in 2006, contains documents from Russian state and departmental archives, including the State Archive of the Russian Federation, the Russian State Military Archive, the archives of the Federal Security Service, the Russian State Archive of Social and Political History, and the Central Archive of the Ministry of Defense. The collection is useful because it demonstrates that Soviet officials received reports concerning the persecution and mass murder of Jews in Latvia.

I have translated the following excerpts from the 2006 collection.

Note #1 issued on December 12, 1944 by the medical forensic experts states:

“According to the investigation and the review of the mass graves of Soviet citizens and POWs it is possible to determine a total sum of these corpses exceeds 300,000 and are distributed as follows: Bukernieki 46,000; Rumbula 38,000, Salaspils 101,000, New Jewish cemetery 14,500; Old Jewish cemetery 6,000, 94,500 elsewhere [locations indicated].”

It further states that 58 mass graves were examined and 549 corpses exhumed and maintains that “This fact testifies to systematic annihilation of Soviet POWs and Soviet citizens during the period of three years” (12).

Note #15 states that in Latvia as of February 1, 1942, 35,238 Jews were killed by the SS group A.

⁴ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/biography/RLange.html>

⁵ The Jungfernhof concentration camp was an improvised concentration camp in Latvia, at the Mazjumprava Manor, near the Šīrotava Railway Station about three or four kilometers from Riga.



Note #17 specifically addresses the Salaspils camp. This report was compiled on April 28, 1945 by a team of forensic experts and government representatives. It states that from April 2 to April 14, 1945 exhumation of the children's corpses was undertaken in order to determine the cause of death in general and the means of poisoning in particular as well as to determine the number of victims, their gender, and age. Fifty-four graves were dug up and 632 corpses were uncovered with the largest number (160) of children between ages of 8 and 10. This investigation determined that at least 7,000 children were buried there and most of them had been subjected to blood being drawn from them. According to the forensic experts, about 500 grams of blood was drawn from each child hence the total amount of blood was at least 3,500 liters. In addition it was determined that these children were used for so-called "scientific" experiments. For instance, they were given under-skin injections of human or/and animal urine in various parts of their bodies. This was done for the so-called "scientific verification" of medical data. These experiments were performed under completely unsanitary conditions: children were dressed in rags, covered with fleas, bedbugs and other insects. In many cases, as a result of these experiments, children developed pus which led to various infections and eventual death (108). Children died from other diseases as well, especially since they were held in unheated rooms and were bathed in cold water. They were often sent almost naked to the "quarantine" which also was never heated.

Note #18 is an eyewitness report of a Jewish man, German Hiss, a resident of the Riga Ghetto from September 10, 1941 to January 11, 1942. According to his testimony, the ghetto housed 30,000 Jews including 6,000 to 8,000 children. Hiss's testimony describes the slaughter of 9,000 Jews between September 29th and September 30th which included at least 20% children. These people were brought to Rumbula's forest and to the "Kvadrat" ("Quadrant") factory. To entertain themselves during the march of Jews to these locations, the Germans who led these columns threw some sticks on the ground, causing some people to slip and fall. Those who fell were immediately killed by a direct shot to the back. As a result, the roads to the execution sites were covered with at least 700 to 750 corpses of which at least 1/3 were children of different ages. Hiss was housed in the area of the ghetto reserved for more strong and physically able men and he personally witnessed a scene in which a 10- or 12-year-old boy with a sack on his shoulders tried to leave the column and sneak into Hiss' ghetto area to join his father. The boy, tripping over his sack and being unable to rise fast enough, was immediately shot in his forehead and left dying on the road as the column continued to advance to their final destination of execution.

In January 1942 Hiss was moved to a camp of 630 people. This camp included 10 to 12 children who remained there until April 1944, after which a decree was issued for these children and all other children at all other locations to be executed.

Note #52 was issued in December 1942 and was addressed Jānis Kalnberziņš, First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Latvia. "CK KP" refers to the Central Committee of the Communist Party. The document is important because it records Soviet awareness of the destruction of the Riga Ghetto and the systematic killing of Jews in Latvia. Kalnberziņš was the leading Communist Party official in Soviet Latvia from 1940 to 1959.

This note clearly documents full awareness by the Soviet government of the consistent and targeted extermination of Latvian Jews. It states that in December 1941 the Riga Ghetto included 30,000 Jews; by August 1942 the number was 3,000. During the winter of 1941–1942 Jews were systematically taken by echelons, comprised of Jews from Riga, Austria, Czechoslovakia, France, and other places, to be killed under the pine trees of the wooded area between Rumbula and Salaspils as well as in a nearby heather field. This report states that when one drives by this field, a very long row of burial hills can be seen. A railroad worker is quoted as having counted twenty four echelons that delivered there about 80,000 Jews. Most of these killings, done under the supervision of the Germans, were performed by the Latvians, primarily school age boys and the various police rabble. The report adds: "These killings still continue. Recently about 500 to 700 Jews were taken to Salaspils and killed, accused for conspiring to attain passports from Spain or Russia" (270–271).

This report also provides information about efforts to recruit the local population by spreading propaganda and fabricated information:



"In order to prevent the local population from noticing any occurrence of violence, they spread demagogic lies about the Bolsheviks. They attribute to the Bolsheviks horrendous crimes and publish falsified information in all newspapers and even school textbooks. They even published a book entitled *The Terrible Year* [of occupation] and organized various exhibitions to further disseminate these views. Yet even the supposed 'witnesses' to these crimes cannot corroborate this information. ... In addition, they apply the same revisionist techniques to the history of Latvia at large" (274–275).

In relation to the ethnic question this report states the following:

"In the occupied Latvia, as everywhere else, the Germans transformed the Jews into a 'stumbling block.' The Jews are openly destroyed as a nation (as people) and are blamed for all disasters, misfortunes, and shortages, no matter what these are. But even in treating Jews this way, the Germans have their own delineations: Local [Latvian] Jews are considered to be the lowest, and the Jews brought from Germany and other places, the highest. From among Western Jews the Germans selected the 'valuable' Jews and kept them in better conditions [note that this report is written in 1942; being 'valuable' did not help these Jews in the long run]. This was done to prevent the unification of the Jews regardless of their country of origin, with the intent of reducing their ability to resist. In the meantime, the Latvians are set against the Jews and the Russians are given a derogatory nickname 'Vanka.' Russian POWs are photographed for the press in the most unflattering ways that make them look like idiots and their idiotic look is explained as a result of Bolshevik education" (275).

VI. SOVIET SUPPRESSION OF HOLOCAUST MEMORY IN LATVIA

As Pinkus demonstrates, the status of Jews in the Soviet Union was often precarious. Soviet citizens were assigned a nationality in their internal passports, a category that generally denoted ethnic origin rather than citizenship or religion. For Jews, this category could mark them as "Jewish" regardless of where they lived, the language they spoke, or the degree to which they identified with Jewish religion or culture. This entry became popularly known as the "fifth graph."

The fifth graph did not erase Jewish ethnic identification. Instead, it made Jewish identity visible to state institutions and could facilitate discrimination in education, employment, and public life. The existence of this official category makes the Soviet treatment of Holocaust memory more striking: the state was fully capable of identifying Jews as a distinct nationality, yet official commemoration often avoided identifying Jews as the primary victims of Nazi genocide.

Soviet memorialization did not completely ignore Jewish victims, nor did Soviet authorities deny that Nazis had committed atrocities in Latvia. However, Soviet accounts seldom identified Jews as the principal victims of genocide. The Riga Ghetto, Rumbula, Bikernieki, and Kaiserwald were often absent from public history or represented without emphasis on the Jewish identity of the victims. Jewish activists who sought memorials specifically dedicated to Jewish victims encountered official resistance.

As Steimanis writes, Jewish activists tried for years to establish a monument to Jewish victims at Rumbula. Soviet officials preferred universal language about the murder of "peaceful Soviet citizens," while Jewish nationality was often omitted from monuments and official memorial language (Steimanis 133–34). Lumans likewise observes that Soviet accounts described Nazi atrocities as crimes against all Soviet citizens and only seldom singled out Jews as the primary victims (Lumans 211).

This was not unique to Latvia. Across the Soviet Union, official commemoration frequently emphasized the collective suffering of Soviet citizens and avoided identifying Jews as the principal targets of Nazi genocide. In Latvia, this universalization of suffering had particular consequences because the destruction of Latvian Jewry was so extensive.

Soviet treatment of Holocaust survivors also reflected the broader climate of postwar antisemitism and political suspicion. Some survivors encountered suspicion because they had lived under German occupation. During the late Stalin period, Soviet antisemitic campaigns intensified, affecting Jewish cultural institutions, intellectuals, and political figures across the USSR. Latvia was part of this larger Soviet context.



Soviet accounts also had political reasons to minimize or obscure the participation of some Latvian collaborators in the murder of Jews. Acknowledging ethnic conflict, antisemitism, and local collaboration could challenge the official ideal of Soviet brotherhood.

As Timothy Snyder shows in *Bloodlands*, the Holocaust in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe depended not only on German policies but also, in some places, on the participation of local collaborators and the actions of individuals who persecuted or killed their Jewish neighbors. In some cases, the killings preceded the arrival of the Nazis.

To conclude, the evidence examined in this paper suggests that Soviet universalization of Jewish suffering was not simply the result of incomplete information. Soviet institutions possessed reports describing the targeted murder of Jews, the destruction of the Riga Ghetto, and the role of German and Latvian perpetrators. The suppression of Jewish specificity in public memory was therefore a political and ideological choice. Jewish suffering was subordinated to a universal Soviet wartime narrative that treated Jews as one victimized group among many rather than as the principal targets of a genocidal campaign.

POSTSCRIPT

With the breakup of the Soviet Union, Holocaust memory in Latvia changed, but it also became part of new and contested debates about Latvian national history, Soviet occupation, Nazi occupation, collaboration, and resistance. In 1991, during ceremonies commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Rumbula massacres, Anatolijs Gorbunovs, the chairman of the Latvian parliament, referred to the murder of innocent victims. However, he also suggested that Jews had brought tragedy upon themselves through alleged pro-Soviet sympathies and actions during the Soviet occupation.

To omit or distort historical accounts by overlooking victims and then blaming them for their own victimization risks perpetuating the conditions that make such violence possible. Matti Friedman writes:

“For centuries, stateless Jews played the role of a lightning rod for ill will among the majority population. They were a symbol of things that were wrong. Did you want to make the point that greed was bad? Jews were greedy. Cowardice? Jews were cowardly. Were you a Communist? Jews were capitalists. Were you a capitalist? In that case, Jews were Communists. Moral failure was the essential trait of the Jew.”⁶

As Lumans notes, this was a common but baseless justification for anti-Jewish persecution, also advanced by some Latvian exiles (Lumans 211).

Unofficial commemorations of Latvian Legionnaires continue to take place in Riga on March 16. The Latvian Legion was formed during the Nazi occupation in 1943 and included the 15th and 19th Waffen Grenadier Divisions of the SS. The Legion operated within the Waffen-SS structure. Its history remains controversial: many members were conscripted, but the Legion’s commemoration is inseparable from its service within the German Waffen-SS. The Legion must also be distinguished from earlier Latvian auxiliary police formations and the Arājs Kommando, which participated directly in the destruction of Latvian Jews.

Commemorations of Latvian Legionnaires on March 16 are not official Latvian state ceremonies. The Latvian government does not recognize March 16 as an official Remembrance Day, although private individuals continue to attend memorial services and processions. In 2025, approximately 250 participants marched to the Freedom Monument and laid flowers in memory of Latvian Legionnaires. On March 16, 2026, approximately 200 people took part in a memorial march. Participation appears to be dwindling, in part because fewer former legionnaires remain alive.⁷

⁶ <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/183033/israel-insider-guide?all=1>

⁷ <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/latvians-honor-nazi-allies-wwii>



Personal Conclusion

I want to conclude this paper on a last personal note. I grew up listening to the stories of my parents' escape. My mother recalled being a teenage girl running through the streets of Riga under gunfire from the windows of apparently peaceful Latvian residents. She vividly recalled waking one morning and seeing her apartment complex's superintendent deliriously happy at the news of the soon-to-arrive German forces. In his happiness, he smashed a little Jewish baby girl, who lived in the apartment below my mother, against the wall of the apartment building, shattering her head and splashing blood and brains across the wall. Perhaps this was the day my mother's parents, despite their love of German culture and the German language, decided to flee.

In 1945, my father served on a Soviet Latvian war-crimes investigation team and learned the fate of his own family, including the murder of his two sisters. I strongly resemble his younger sister, Tirtzah. Knowing this, I often wondered what my father thought when he looked at me. Shortly before his death, he gave me Tirtzah's photograph, which I had seen only once or twice before. I no longer resemble her, because she did not live beyond the age of sixteen. I grew up in a conflicted household with parents who both resented and accepted being Jewish.

WORKS CITED

- Angrick, Andrej, and Peter Klein. *The "Final Solution" in Riga: Exploitation and Annihilation, 1941–1944*. Translated by Ray Brandon. New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009.
- Brandeis University. "Saving a Nazi Concentration Camp from Being Forgotten." October 1, 2021.
- European Holocaust Research Infrastructure. "Latvian Central State Historical Archive (Riga) Records."
- Ezergailis, Andrew. *The Holocaust in Latvia, 1941–1944: The Missing Center*. Riga: Historical Institute of Latvia, 1996.
- Friedman, Matti. "An Insider's Guide to the Most Important Story on Earth." *Tablet*, August 26, 2014.
- Latvia Under the Nazi Yoke: Collection of Archival Documents*. Moscow: Europe Publishing, 2006.
- Latvian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Information Concerning 16 March."
- Latvian Public Media. "March 16 Events Pass without Incident." March 16, 2025.
- Lumans, Valdis O. *Latvia in World War II*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006.
- Museum of the Occupation of Latvia. "The Latvian Legion and 16 March."
- Museum of Jewish Heritage. "Rumbula Remembered: 80 Years Since the Mass Executions."
- Pinkus, Benjamin. *The Jews of the Soviet Union: The History of a National Minority*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Snyder, Timothy. *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.
- Steimanis, Josefs. *History of Latvian Jews*. Translated by Helena Belova. Revised and edited by Edward Anders. New York: Columbus University Press, 2002.
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Latvia." *Holocaust Encyclopedia*.
- United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "Riga." *Holocaust Encyclopedia*.