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A History of Latvia

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Introduction

Latvia, a small yet historically vibrant nation on the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea, stands as a testament to resilience, adaptation, and cultural endurance. Wedged between powerful neighbors and at the crossroads of commerce and conquest for millennia, Latvia's history is a striking mosaic of indigenous traditions, foreign incursions, long struggles for autonomy, and ultimately, the revitalization of national identity. Over the centuries, its people have absorbed and responded to waves of migration, trade, occupation, repression, and, finally, independence—a narrative that mirrors many of the broader currents of European history but is, at the same time, distinctly Latvian.

This book, *A History of Latvia*, offers a comprehensive and chronological exploration of the country's past, from its ancient beginnings in the aftermath of the last Ice Age to its dynamic, independent present. Drawing upon archaeological findings, chronicles, diplomatic correspondence, and cultural records, the chapters illuminate the evolution of the Latvian nation and those peoples who have dwelled along the Daugava, the forests, and the Baltic coast. The story begins with the first human settlers, continues through the rise of the Baltic tribes, and follows their encounter—often violent—with outsiders bearing new religions, technologies, and ambitions.

Central to Latvia's historical journey are the struggles for survival and sovereignty amidst the ambitions of larger powers—whether the German crusaders, Swedish kings, Polish-Lithuanian dukes, Russian tsars, or Soviet commissars. The fortunes of Latvia have been shaped as much by distant empires as by the agricultural rhythms of the land, the perseverance of its language, and the determination of its people to assert their identity against external dominance. Each chapter of this book not only traces these political events but also delves into the economic, social, and cultural transformations that have marked Latvian society across the ages.

The latter part of the book is devoted to the tumultuous 20th century, when Latvia attained independence, lost it to the storms of totalitarianism and war, and then reclaimed sovereignty amid the collapse of the Soviet system. These decades saw dramatic upheaval: occupations by two totalitarian regimes, the near destruction of the Jewish community, mass deportations, Russification, and finally, the peaceful revolution and the challenges of rebuilding democracy. Latvia's integration into the European community and its efforts to reconcile with a complex past represent the most recent chapters in this long narrative.

With a deep appreciation for both the suffering and the achievements woven into Latvia's past, this book aims to provide readers not only with a factual account, but

also with a human story—one of loss and renewal, memory and aspiration. It is a story told through wars, treaties, and migrations just as much as through songs, festivals, and the quiet endurance of ordinary people.

Whether you are a student of Baltic history, a curious visitor, or a Latvian seeking to understand the roots of national identity, *A History of Latvia* offers a detailed and accessible overview. The chapters ahead present a journey through time that is as intricate and layered as the forests and rivers of Latvia itself.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and People: Geography and Ethnic Origins

Latvia, a land situated on the southeastern edge of the Baltic Sea, occupies a crucial position at the crossroads of Northern and Eastern Europe. Its geography has profoundly shaped its history, acting both as a magnet for trade and migration and as a battleground for competing powers. The country is characterized by low-lying plains, gently rolling hills, and a dense network of rivers and lakes, a landscape carved and molded over millennia by glacial activity. Forests cover a significant portion of the territory, historically providing resources, shelter, and natural defenses.

The Baltic Sea coastline stretches for nearly 500 kilometers (about 310 miles), offering numerous bays and inlets, though few natural deep-water harbors beyond the crucial mouth of the Daugava River. This river, the largest in Latvia, flows from Russia and Belarus through Latvia into the Gulf of Riga, serving as an ancient highway connecting the interior with the sea. Its historical importance as a trade route cannot be overstated, facilitating contact between the Baltic tribes and distant lands like Scandinavia, Kievan Rus', and even the Byzantine Empire.

In addition to the Daugava, other rivers such as the Gauja, Venta, and Lielupe crisscross the landscape, providing arteries for communication and settlement. The terrain is predominantly flat or gently undulating, with the highest point, Gaiziņkalns, reaching a modest 311.6 meters (1,022 ft) above sea level. This lack of significant natural barriers meant that while forests and swamps could impede movement, the land itself was relatively open to both internal migration and external penetration.

Latvia's climate is temperate, influenced by its proximity to the Baltic Sea. Winters are cold, with snow cover common, while summers are mild and can be humid. This climate supported agriculture, particularly grains, and allowed for the exploitation of forest resources. The seasonal variations dictated the rhythms of life for early inhabitants, influencing everything from farming practices to trade routes, which were often more accessible when rivers and bogs froze in winter.

The history of human habitation in Latvia stretches back to the very end of the last Ice Age, around 9000 BC. As the massive ice sheets retreated, they left behind the landscape we see today, a mosaic of moraines, eskers, and meltwater lakes. The first people to arrive were likely hunter-gatherers, following the migrating herds and exploiting the rich post-glacial environment. Evidence of their presence has been found in archaeological sites, offering glimpses into their nomadic lifestyles and adaptation to the changing environment.

These early inhabitants gradually transitioned from purely nomadic hunting and gathering to more settled ways of life. During the Neolithic Age, roughly corresponding to the period between 5000 and 1800 BC, significant changes occurred. The development of pottery allowed for better storage and cooking, while the beginnings of animal husbandry and rudimentary agriculture started to alter the relationship between humans and the land. Life was still challenging, but these innovations laid the groundwork for future societal development.

A notable cultural phase during the Middle Neolithic (around 4100–2900 BC) is known as the Narva culture, named after finds first discovered near the Narva River in Estonia. This culture extended into present-day Latvia and is associated with early inhabitants who are believed to have been Finnic peoples. These groups were ethnically and linguistically related to the ancestors of modern Estonians and Finns, suggesting a complex early ethnic mix in the Baltic region long before the later arrival of the Balts.

Around 3000 BC, another significant wave of migration began to arrive on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. These were the Proto-Baltic peoples, considered the direct ancestors of the Latvian and Lithuanian nations. Their origins are traced back to the Pontic-Caspian steppe, a vast grassland region north of the Black and Caspian Seas. Their arrival marked a pivotal moment in the ethnogenesis of the region, introducing new linguistic and cultural elements that would eventually become dominant.

The Late Neolithic period, beginning around 2900 BC, saw the spread of the Corded Ware culture across large parts of Northern Europe. Archaeological evidence, particularly characteristic pottery and battle axes, indicates the presence of this culture in the territory of present-day Latvia. These people, often associated with the dispersal of Indo-European languages, are widely regarded as the immediate forefathers of the Balts, including the groups who would form the ethnic core of modern Latvians. Their lifestyle was initially pastoral, but they gradually adopted and refined agricultural practices, becoming more tied to specific territories.

Over the subsequent millennia, during the Bronze Age (1800 BC – 500 BC) and the lengthy Iron Age (500 BC – 1200 AD), the inhabitants of this region continued to evolve. The blending of earlier populations with the arriving Baltic groups, coupled with adaptation to specific local environments, led to the gradual formation of distinct tribal and regional identities. The interactions between these groups, their increasing mastery of metalworking, and the development of more complex social structures defined life during these periods.

By approximately 900 AD, on the eve of the medieval period and increased external contact, the territory that would become Latvia was inhabited by several prominent tribal groups. These included the Curonians (Kurši) in the west along the Baltic coast,

known for their seafaring and, at times, piratical activities. To their east were the Semigallians (Zemgaļi), occupying the fertile plains south of the Daugava River, a region later known as Zemgale.

Further east, along the central Daugava, were the Selonians (Sēļi), and in the northeast were the Latgalians (Latgaļi), the most numerous and politically organized of the Baltic tribes within this territory. Finally, along the lower reaches of the Daugava and around the Gulf of Riga lived the Livonians (Līvi), a Finnic tribe whose language was related to Estonian and Finnish. These five groups, four Baltic and one Finnic, formed the main ethnic mosaic of the region before the arrival of German crusaders and traders.

Each of these tribes had their own distinct dialects, customs, and social structures, often centered around hill forts (pilskalni) that served as defensive strongholds and centers of local power. While they shared some common cultural traits and a general pagan belief system, they were not politically unified. Interactions between the tribes ranged from trade and alliance to frequent conflict, a dynamic that would unfortunately make them vulnerable to organized external forces.

The land itself, with its navigable rivers and access to the Baltic Sea, ensured that the region would not remain isolated. As early as the beginning of the current era, the territory of Latvia became part of established international trade networks. Amber, found in abundance along the Baltic coast, was a highly prized commodity in the Roman Empire and beyond, establishing early links between the Baltic tribes and distant civilizations.

Ancient chronicles and archaeological findings attest to the existence of important trade routes passing through Latvia. The most famous of these was the "Route from the Varangians to the Greeks," which connected Scandinavia with the Byzantine Empire via rivers like the Daugava and the network of waterways leading to the Black Sea. This route facilitated the exchange of goods such as furs, honey, wax, and slaves from the north for silver, silks, and other luxury items from the south.

Roman historians like Tacitus, in the 1st century AD, mentioned the Aestii, often identified with the predecessors of the Old Prussians and possibly encompassing other Baltic groups, who were involved in the amber trade with the Roman Empire. This early commerce indicates the long-standing connection of the region to wider European networks, bringing with it not just goods but also ideas, technologies, and external interest.

The presence of multiple distinct tribes and a strategically important geographical location meant that the land of Latvia was inherently complex, a patchwork of different peoples and local powers. While these groups shared a common geographical space and interacted with one another, they lacked a unified political entity or a single

overarching identity beyond their individual tribal affiliations. This would become a crucial factor in the coming centuries when external forces began to exert their influence.

The stage was thus set: a land shaped by ice and water, inhabited by diverse groups of people whose lives were intrinsically linked to their environment and increasingly connected to distant worlds through burgeoning trade routes. This foundational layer of geography and early ethnic settlement provides the essential context for understanding the tumultuous history that was soon to unfold on the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea.

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