

**Janis Cakars**  
**Predoctoral Candidate**  
**Indiana University, School of Journalism**  
**IARO 2003-2004**  
**Riga, Latvia**

## **The Liberation of Latvia: Media and Nonviolence**

### **Topic of Research:**

The use and capabilities of the tools of war have been long and thoroughly studied. The mechanics of nonviolent action have been less so. Latvia's liberation came without war, but the change that brought it about was no less cataclysmic. Media were at the center of those dramatic changes and an analysis of mass communication in this period helps us understand how Latvia managed this feat, how it contributed to the end of the Soviet Union as well as contributes to the development of theory about the role of media in nonviolent movements. Media plays a prominent role in all modern social and political movements, but this role, tactically speaking, is especially enhanced in nonviolent movements.

### **Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions:**

Following are some preliminary conclusions about the functions of media in the Latvian independence movement based on research conducted over a six-month period supported by an IREX Individual Advanced Research Opportunities grant.

Protest. Underground and overground media were used for protests and many of the early milestones of the movement were media events or instances of public communication. Dissidence spiked in the early Gorbachev era with underground publications like *Auseklis* and *Staburags*. Protest also made its way into mainstream press. For instance, opposition to Moscow's plans for a hydroelectric dam on the Daugava River and a subway in Riga are concrete examples of protest. A new style of adversarial journalism emerged and reporters started speaking clearly and openly. People other than officials also entered the story, what Dainis Ivāns, a journalist and chair of the Latvian Popular Front, called "oral journalism." Like the oral history that began to be popular at the same time, this technique sought to bring everyday voices into the press and make everyday views heard. These views often conflicted with the official line.

In the United States, people protest all the time. It is not new and it rarely leads to change or effects policy, but Soviet Latvia was a very different place. The tradition of public opposition to any aspect of the regime, its policies and ideology, was weak. Insurrection efforts in the late 1940s failed. Work for change within the system in the late 1950s failed and by the 1980s only isolated acts of dissidence rather than any coordinated activity was evident. The system was functioning and if not well, smoothly, because of the acquiescence of the people. Power ultimately depends on such outward acceptance, especially in a system harnessed to an all-explanatory ideology that leaves no room for political pluralism. So, to protest under such circumstances takes considerably more courage than in the United States, of course, but it also undermines and challenges the system to a greater degree. Vaclav Havel used the famous example of a greengrocer who refuses one day to put up a sign imploring the workers of the world to unite. He has

attacked the power structure at its foundations. This is also why the regime had worked so hard to stifle such action.

In 1985 came Gorbachev. He made it easier for grocers to take down signs and put up other ones, for journalists too, but he misunderstood what that would mean for his regime. The public protest took a conversation about Latvia's fate out of the kitchen and into the newspapers and streets and in the process made a mass movement possible. It broke the silence that hung like a pall over society. At first, alternative views made their appearance in the press in isolated incidents. The newspaper *Literatura un Maksla* carried the Daugava hydroelectric station story on October 16, 1986 and the discussion was not echoed in *Cīņa* or *Padomju Jaunatne*. Covering the Chautauqua Conference of September that same year, *Padomju Jaunatne* carried news (not without criticism, but explosive nonetheless) of the US policy of not recognizing Baltic incorporation into the USSR. *Cīņa* and the state news agency made no mention of this, but did note US representative Jack Matlock's hostility. These early cracks in the wall of social communication opened space for more and soon the pressing issues of the day came to dominate the whole of mass media in step with a growing mass movement.

The Soviet system was built on lies. This is not necessarily unique, but it was part of its undoing. All Soviet citizens lived with this tension between official interpretation and personal and second hand experience. In Latvia, the story of its incorporation was the biggest lie of all and all history was suspect. The press played a major role in the reevaluation of history starting from the dueling articles between Elita Veidemane and Jānis Dzintars in the pages of *Padomju Jaunatne* and *Cīņa*, before there was a Latvian Popular Front or a mass movement. Later, the Popular Front newspaper, *Atmoda*, made much of Latvia's illegal incorporation into the USSR by reprinting the peace treaty between Latvia and the Soviet Union that forever renounced the latter's claims to Latvian territory. But it was not just history that was being reevaluated. It was culture too. The front page of the March 9, 1989 edition of the newspaper *Atmoda* shouted, "We will celebrate Mother's Day in May!" as a substitute for the communist promoted International Women's Day. This was part of creating an alternative reality outside of official interpretation.

Media was the place for a great conversation on the meaning of society's values and principles and of the definition of Latvia. In the process of this conversation a new independent society was created unbound by the strictures of regime or ideology and contrary to the aims of building socialism in the Soviet Union.

There were no political parties, save one, and no place for independent organization except for the press in the early glasnost era. Therefore, it was natural that many proponents of change came from that sector and so the ranks and leadership of the movement became filled by journalists and other "creative workers." These same people sought to take their work from the page to more organized and systematic action. This came most importantly in the form of the Latvian Popular Front, founded in October 1988 following similar developments in Estonia and Lithuania.

The road to the front's formation was not just for its organizers. A few people wishing to create their own political force did not plot it. The process was a public act and thousands participated in it through media and in the street. Media carried all the meetings and proceedings leading up to the founding of the group with CSPAN-like thoroughness. A mark of the Popular Front's work was its openness and public nature,

which was intentionally in contrast to the Soviet style of doing things behind closed doors.

Media gave people a way of participation beyond joining in the street for demonstrations. It also showed unity. In the words of Sarmīte Ēlerte, director of the Popular Front and Supreme Soviet press centers and then editor of the newspaper *Diena*, the press showed “that we were many.”

The press also reconstituted on the page what was in some ways a fractured movement. In reality there were many movements and groups: the Popular Front, LNNK, the Citizens Congress, the Women’s League, religious movements, environmental movements, etc., but there was unity on the page. In the newspaper they were all together united by the single ultimate aim of independence.

Media served the organizational aims of the Popular Front in numerous ways. It provided a means to keep the very many sections and support groups informed and there was a special publication for internal communication called *LTF Vestnesis* that was used for this purpose in addition to mass media and the front controlled *Atmoda*.

Media was also necessary for the mass and many demonstrations that were held in Riga. Every demonstration was coordinated by the Popular Front and mass media. First the front decided on the theme, speakers, date, time, and itinerary. Then the front got permission from the appropriate authorities and rented amplification equipment from Latvian State Television and Radio. But more importantly, letters had to be sent to media, especially radio and television asking for publicity and coverage, which were always received. In fact, radio and television became the most loyal patrons of the front, even more so than its own newspaper at times. For complicated demonstrations like the “Baltic Way” human chain that linked two million people in a chain from Tallinn to Riga to Vilnius, radio was indispensable for getting people to their places.

Media was also crucial in times of crisis such as January 1990 after the Soviet attacks in Vilnius and through the attacks in Riga. The barricades were erected with instructions broadcast through media, but media were also key points of defense. During the crackdown media were also prime sites of defense. It was crucial to defend the radio, television, and telephone transmission points. The main press building was already lost, but alternative printing venues were found. *Atmoda* was printed in Lithuania and trucked up north to Latvia, for example. Daily leaflets were printed as well to inform, instruct, and quell rumors. People armed only with radios, newspapers, and a spirit of defiance guarded the barricades. We often think of media as a place for people to experience that which they cannot experience first hand, but it is also a place where people experience events that they are actually involved in directly.

In January 1990 especially, but throughout the late 1980s as well, foreign journalism was also important to the movement. The press can help find allies, and as Gadi Wolfsfeld has argued, weaker powers in political struggles rely on and seek media coverage for their cause. Their success is also commensurate with the success of their struggle. Latvians put in a great deal of effort and had a great deal of success in this endeavor. But Western news coverage only came when there were people in the streets; when things were happening. Ojars Kalniņš, a public relations professional working in Washington, DC on behalf of the Popular Front, found his job very difficult before he could start producing actual people and events. American media, at least, were not interested in plain arguments about ongoing injustices. Nevertheless, the Western press

was perceived as crucial to the success of the movement because de facto independence was viewed as impossible without Western support. Aleksandrs Mirlins, head of the Latvian Supreme Soviet press office during the crackdown, recalls that their primary efforts were placed to that end. It was not just CNN diplomacy, but a CNN defense against real attacks on the ground.

Events changed so rapidly in the late 1980s that the press was necessary for residents to even know what the laws were. What was permissible and what wasn't was constantly changing. In 1990, the government—now dominated by the Popular Front—founded its own newspaper to keep people up to date of all the laws and decrees being passed in this quickly transforming society. At the same time, they wanted a new kind of journalism for a new society. The model was *The New York Times* and the result was *Diena*. Outside of the government announcement page, this was to be a new kind of paper with all the news fit to print, separation of fact and opinion, timeliness, and the conventions of Western journalism. Its privatization was written into its charter and it was immediately popular.

The founding of this paper points to goals of the time with different consequences for journalism: democracy and independence. When push came to shove, the latter was most important, but the former was never neglected. Thus journalists strove for journalistic as well as national independence and introduced new reporting conventions while consciously serving the aim of liberation.

In summary, media's contribution to the independence movement were to inform, educate, unite, inspire, organize, persuade, find allies, and protest. Media served the movement, but in the front ranks. Rather than saying that media lead or followed, caused or reflected, it is better to consider media as simply in the center as the name implies.

### **Policy Recommendations**

The Latvian case is remarkable for its success. Before August 1991 almost nobody predicted that Latvia would really regain its freedom and the Soviet Union would cease to exist. The Latvian transition since then has also been remarkable. It has achieved its two major security and foreign policy goals—membership in NATO and the European Union—and taken a solid start on the road of economic development after some initial stumbles. Also, despite a difficult demographic situation there has been no interethnic violence or discrimination as has sometimes happened elsewhere in the former communist world. Democracy is on a sound footing and has been running smoothly, despite an Italian style tendency towards falling parliamentary coalitions.

The experience of Latvia suggests that regime change works best when instituted by those who live under the regime. Latvia was not granted its independence by the Soviet Union and it was not wrested from the Soviet Union by the United States. Latvia won it by its own efforts by exploiting favorable circumstances and the USSR recognized Latvian independence in advance of its own demise.

This does not mean that the United States had no role to play. The US policy of non-recognition, passed every year by Congress, was important. It was a legal, but significant point that most countries did not recognize Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia's incorporation into the USSR. When Jack Matlock emphasized this point publicly at the historic Chautauqua conference in Latvia in 1986 it sent shock waves of inspiration

through the country. Dainis Īvāns, chairman of the Latvian Popular Front, once said that this conference is where independence-seekers got their start.

The Voice of America and Radio Free Europe were also important. People listened to these broadcasts and trusted them as a source of alternative information, often truer than that in the state controlled media. These radio broadcasts also helped amplify the voices of dissident Latvians who otherwise were restricted to small-scale samizdat. These broadcasts also helped inform people of early demonstrations, such as the Helsinki-86 organized meeting at the Freedom Monument in June 1987. Soviet authorities blamed the whole event on foreign radio and described Helsinki-86 as their henchmen, but in fact it was the other way around. American radio was aiding a homegrown Latvian group. In the absence of free media, America's broadcasts grew in importance. Later as media opened up, these broadcasts decreased in importance.

Every diplomatic contact between US officials and Latvian representatives was important because it bolstered the legitimacy of Latvian self-rule and increased publicity and prestige for the movement. For the elections to the Latvian Supreme Council in 1990, the Latvian Popular Front proudly proclaimed endorsements from several US senators and Representatives.

Nongovernmental assistance was also important and put pressure on US government policy as well. Latvia and the Baltic states were news in the West at this time and the news was mostly sympathetic. Conservative writers in particular, like William Safire, were very much in the Baltic corner and put pressure on the Republican administration in the White House. US media also helped put the Baltic question on the public agenda and internationalize the problem of Baltic independence. Western media coverage was taken very seriously in Latvia itself and the Popular Front, and later Supreme Council, devoted great attention to securing it.

Lastly, Americans (mostly of Latvian ethnicity) personally assisted the Latvian independence movement materially and with their labor. These efforts were primarily in the realms of diplomacy and publicity.

The United States was important to Latvia's independence movement. However, the movement was ultimately successful because it was indigenous. The peaceful character of the movement has also helped ensure that peace prevails today. This one particular case—the case of a small nation under the domination of a superpower—suggests that US policy does matter.