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## Ethnographic Ensembles in Latvia: From Village to Stage

### Etnogrāfiskie ansambļi Latvijā: no ciema līdz skatuvei

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#### Atslēgvārdi:

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## Summary

Currently, 24 folklore performer groups, known as 'ethnographic ensembles', are active in Latvia. The term 'ethnographic ensembles' was introduced in Latvia during the first Soviet occupation in 1941, and the phenomenon became more widespread in the mid-20th century. However, performers of village- and community-based musical traditions were already present in the interwar period and even earlier. On the one hand, the preservation of tradition-based content and forms in the ensembles' performances and repertoire during the Soviet period positioned them as knowledge keepers and preservers of national heritage. On the other hand, ethnographic ensembles also served as instruments for expressing, promoting, and maintaining Soviet ideology and stage aesthetics. In the 1980s, their performances became an integral part of the folklore revival movement, confirming the uniqueness and richness of national culture and strengthening national identity.

This article provides a historical overview of the staging of folk music traditions, traces the origins and conditions for the existence of ethnographic ensembles in the Soviet period, and analyzes their role in the folklore revival movement during the Third Awakening. The study is based on archival research, historical press publications, analysis of audiovisual sources, and interviews with participants of the folklore revival movement.

## Kopsavilkums

Šobrīd Latvijā darbojas 24 etnogrāfiskie ansambļi. Lai gan termins "etnogrāfiskie ansambļi" Latvijā tika ieviests pirmās padomju okupācijas laikā 1941. gadā un šis fenomens kļuva plašāk izplatīts 20. gadsimta vidū, tomēr ciemu un lokālo kopienu muzikālo tradīciju izpildītāji bija zināmi jau starpkaru periodā un pat agrāk. No vienas puses, tradīcijās balstīta satura un formu saglabāšana ansambļu uzvedumos un repertuārā padomju gados tos pozicionēja kā zināšanu un nacionālā mantojuma glabātājus; no otras puses, etnogrāfiskie ansambļi darbojās arī kā instruments padomju ideoloģijas un skatuves estētikas izpaušmei, popularizēšanai un uzturēšanai. 20. gs. 80. gados to uzvedumi bija neatņemama folkloras kustības sastāvdaļa, apliecinot tradicionālās kultūras unikalitāti un bagātību un stiprinot nacionālo identitāti.

Šis raksts sniedz vēsturisku pārskatu par tautas mūzikas tradīciju iestudēšanu un izrādīšanu uz skatuves, izseko etnogrāfisko ansambļu izcelsmi un pastāvēšanas apstākļiem padomju periodā, kā arī analizē to lomu folkloras kustībā Trešās atmodas laikā. Pētījums balstās arhīvu materiālu, vēsturisku preses publikāciju un audiovizuālo avotu izpētē, kā arī folkloras kustības dalībnieku interviju analīzē.

## Introduction

The title of this article is a paraphrase of Jennifer R. Cash's book *Villages on Stage: Folklore and Nationalism in the Republic of Moldova*, which explores how folk traditions are brought to the stage and become tools for shaping national identity and political discourse in the post-Soviet space (Cash 2011). Yet, the display of folk traditions on stage has a much longer history, which differs in each country, although visible commonalities exist across post-socialist countries.

In Latvia, folk music and traditions have primarily been associated with rural settings. However, not all rural people have lived in villages – many resided in home-steads. In the 18th and 19th centuries, cultural exchange also took place in manor houses, churches, and annual fairs, while the growth of manufacturing increased the importance of cities. Their significance in the transmission of folklore, however, has not yet been fully evaluated. Today, Latvian folklore and folk music are largely perceived as tied to the rural environment and peasant culture of the past (Lielbārdis 2024: 253–256). In this publication, the 'village' is used symbolically to denote an imagined, natural, or even romantic rural environment of the past, where folk traditions – including folk music – function and are transmitted in an idealized way.

The term 'ethnographic ensembles' appeared in Latvia during the first Soviet occupation in 1941 and began to spread during the second occupation in the mid-20th century. The combination of 'ethnographic' with 'ensemble' was derived from the ethnographic folklore ensembles and ethnographic choirs that existed in the Soviet Union in the 1930s, which served both as vehicles for folk music and dance performances and as instruments of Soviet propaganda, concealed under a Leninist slogan "art belongs to the people."

Although the term and phenomenon of 'ethnographic ensemble' originated during the Soviet period, they still hold a significant place in the Latvian folk music scene. They differ from other folk music performers and folk groups (usually called *kopa*) in their staging style and content, as they adhere more closely to the dialect and folk music traditions of a particular region. From the mid-1950s until the late 1970s, ethnographic ensembles were the only performers of folk musical traditions on the stage, until the first folk music group, *Skandinieki*, was formed in 1976. Alongside folk ensembles and folk groups, professional instrumental orchestras also developed during the Soviet period, usually performing folk music as accompaniment for folk dancers. These orchestras typically played folk music arrangements in a style consistent with the official cultural policy of the Soviet Union and its prescribed guidelines for music and stage aesthetics.

During the Soviet period, ethnographic ensembles, on the one hand, served to express, promote, and maintain Soviet ideology and stage aesthetics in society; on the other hand, the preservation of traditional content and forms in their

performances and repertoire, along with that of individual folklore performers, gave them the role of idealized figures who safeguarded the national heritage during the years of Soviet occupation.

The article provides a historical overview and analysis of specific periods in the representation and staging of folk music traditions in Latvia, reveals the origins and conditions for the existence of ethnographic ensembles during the Soviet period, and contextualizes their role in the folklore revival movement. The publication is based on archival studies, analysis of historical press publications and audiovisual sources, as well as in-depth interviews conducted in recent years with participants of the folklore revival movement.<sup>1</sup> These interviews are not directly incorporated into the text but serve as an additional resource for a broader and deeper understanding of the spirit of the times.

The objectives of the article are addressed in two interrelated parts: the first part characterizes the political and social contexts of staged folk music, while the second part analyzes the role of ethnographic ensembles during the Soviet period, focusing on ideological and aesthetic issues, with only a brief review of the current situation.

## From Village to Stage

Looking back, Latvian folk music traditions are rooted in the collective and individual musical practices of local people – singing, performing, or providing musical entertainment at various calendar festivals and family celebrations – as well as in the transmission of these traditions across generations and centuries. Over time, as the environments of performance and ways of life have changed, so too have the circumstances and purposes of traditional singing and music-making.

Contemporary Latvian traditional music largely reflects folk music traditions of the 19th century and earlier (Brambats 1983; Boiko 2003). The golden treasures of musical folklore are the ethnographic<sup>2</sup> and folklore collections compiled from the second half of the 19th century onward by Andrejs Jurjāns (Jurjāns 1894, 1903, 1907,

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1 See the digital exhibition *The Folklore Movement in Latvia*. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/revival-exhibition> (project *Folklore Revival in Latvia: Resources, Ideologies and Practices*, Latvian Council of Science, No. lzp-2021/1-0243, 2022–2024); collection of interviews with participants of the folklore movement (LFK Fkk 1), <https://tinyurl.com/folklore-movement-interviews> (Accessed 27.06.2025.)

2 Until the establishment of the independent state of Latvia and the founding of the national scientific institution, the study of traditions in Latvia was framed within the ethnographic concept of Tsarist Russia (and later also during the Soviet occupation) (Hirsch 2005: 10; Zemtsovsky, Kunanbaeva 1997: 19).

1912, 1921, 1926),<sup>3</sup> Emilis Melngailis (Melngailis 1951, 1952, 1953),<sup>4</sup> Jēkabs Vītoliņš (Vītoliņš 1958, 1968, 1971, 1973, 1986),<sup>5</sup> later researchers (Boiko et al. 2008), and others. These collections are now preserved in research and cultural memory institutions such as the Archives of Latvian Folklore (ALF)<sup>6</sup> and the Latvian National Museum of History.<sup>7</sup>

With the loss of what is considered the traditional or agrarian way of life for the majority of society, the contextual basis and functionality of entire genres and layers of folk music – such as those connected to individual and collective work (called *talkas*), everyday events, or family celebrations – have also been partly lost or discontinued. These musical traditions might have disappeared more rapidly, or even wholly, from public use – remaining known only to a narrow circle of researchers or enthusiasts – had they not been given additional roles and functions beyond music. In any case, the landscape of folk music today would be very different if these traditions had not been actualized, consciously maintained, and even revived for use not only in individual and community life, but also for national, state, political, and ideological purposes in different historical contexts.

Traditional music, and folklore more broadly, provide rich soil for the formation and maintenance of national identity. Swedish musicologist Göran Folkestad has pointed out that music serves two primary functions in expressing and communicating national identity: an “inside-looking-in” or in-group perspective, and an “outside-looking-in” or out-of-group perspective. The first uses music to strengthen bonds within the group, making its members feel that they belong to one another. The second aims for recognition by outsiders, presenting the music as typical of a particular nation or group and enabling those outside the group to identify its members accordingly (Folkestad 2002: 156).

Folkestad also draws on Anders Hammarlund’s terms “catalytic” and

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3 Jurjāns folklore collection at the Archives of Latvian Folklore (ALF): <https://tinyurl.com/Jurjanu-Andrejs> [Accessed 27.06.2025.].

4 Melngailis folklore collection at the ALF: <https://tinyurl.com/Emilis-Melngailis> [Accessed 27.06.2025.].

5 Vītoliņš folklore collection at the ALF: <https://tinyurl.com/Vitolins> [Accessed 27.06.2025.].

6 Archives of Latvian Folklore, founded in 1924. Digital Archives of Latvian Folklore: <https://www.garamantas.lv/?lang=en>

7 Latvian National Museum of History, Museum Storage: <https://lnvm.gov.lv/en/museum-storage/> [Accessed 27.06.2025.].

“emblematic”. “Emblematic” music is outward-directed and carries national symbolic meanings; it is performed in contexts where the primary purpose is to play for others or to impress national ideas upon the home group. In this way, music is raised as an emblem – a kind of cultural flag. The “catalytic” function, by contrast, fosters feelings of belonging within the group itself (Folkestad 2002: 156).

In Latvia, traditional music moved from the village to the stage, becoming a key element in demonstrating traditions and emphasizing national aspects. The staging and performance of musical traditions in Latvia over time has been intended: (1) to preserve them as vanishing values, (2) to introduce them to others, and (3) to enable those involved – directly or indirectly in the performance – to affirm their regional and national belonging and worldview (Weaver et al. 2023: 50).

Ethnographic ensembles are among the key actors in realizing these principles, and their roles remain significant today. Five periods in the history of staging Latvian folklore traditions can be distinguished. The periodization is determined either by the presence of a particular political system or by active social processes that subsequently triggered changes in the political situation. In each period, folk music and musical traditions have played an essential role in expressing national identity, official position, or political ideology. In some cases, the aims of individuals and society at large coincided with those of the state and nation, as in the years of Latvian independence during the interwar period or in the years leading up to the restoration of independence in the 1980s. In other cases, however, they clashed with the goals of the colonial government, as under Tsarist Russia or during the Soviet occupation.

Thus, the historical timeframes of the staging of musical folklore can be outlined as follows:

- 1) The First National Awakening and National Romanticism under Tsarist rule (1896–1918);
- 2) Latvian Independence, the interwar period (1918–1940);
- 3) The Sovietization of traditions, performance, and stage culture during the Soviet occupation (1940–1941; 1944–1978);
- 4) The folklore revival movement and the Third National Awakening during the Soviet occupation (1978–1991);
- 5) The contemporary period, after Latvia regained independence (1991– ).

## **The Period of the First National Awakening**

The documented history of the purposeful staging of Latvian folklore and musical traditions is closely tied to the ideas of the first Latvian National Awakening in the second half of the 19th century (Plakans 1971; Bunkse 1979; O'Connor 2003: 46). This development

was influenced by Enlightenment thought and by Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803), whose ideas had spread across Europe (Morgenstern 2018: 12; Pettan 2010: 129) and shaped the perception of Latvian culture (Bula 2000). The formation of national identity was further strengthened by the rise of national romanticism, the growing awareness of culture as a value among Latvians, and the interest in Latvian culture within European humanities scholarship in the mid- and late 19th century. Alongside language and ethnicity, tangible and intangible cultural heritage – especially folklore and oral traditions rooted in the rural environment – became the foundation of Latvian national identity (Plakans 2011: 226). Heritage connected to folk poetry and music, including song folklore and calendar customs, served during the First Awakening, and still serves today, as a crucial affirmation of national belonging and a platform for self-awareness. Over time, these traditions have spread through art and culture, taking on representation in diverse genres and forms.

The first ideologically motivated staging of traditions in Latvian cultural history took place during the 10th All-Russian Congress of Archaeology, held in Riga from 1 to 15 August 1896. For Latvian intellectuals and the emerging intelligentsia, then in the active process of formation, the congress served as a display of Latvian culture and traditions, set in juxtaposition with those of other European nations, including Russians and Germans, who had historically expressed colonial policies and cultural supremacy in the 19th century and earlier. Although the congress was organized within the framework of Tsarist Russian research policy, the Latvian ethnographic exhibition was arranged by the Riga Latvian Society Committee for Science.<sup>8</sup> It featured a large open-air ethnographic exhibition on Latvian traditional culture and history, including architectural, ethnographic, and artistic objects and artefacts, as well as their models. Among them were newly built examples of Latvian rural houses, erected in the center of Riga (Plutte 1896). Beginning in 1894, the Riga Latvian Society organized eleven expeditions to different regions of Latvia to collect ethnographic objects for the exhibition (Stinkule 2016; Stinkule 2015; Vanaga 1996; Grosvalds 1895).

During the exhibition, theatrical musical performances of Latvian traditions were staged, including scenes of housework, the night-watch of horses, St George's Day celebrations, herding songs, a Latvian wedding performance, and various folk games (Unknown 1896b). The director of the performances was Pēteris Ozoliņš (1864–1938), while the musical arrangement and selection of folk songs were prepared by Andrejs Jurjāns (1856–1922), a renowned expert on Latvian folk music

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8 *Rīgas Latviešu biedrība* (Riga Latvian Society), founded in 1868.

(Klotiņš 2024). More than 100 singers took part, with actresses and singers Dace Akmentiņa and Maija Brigādere invited as principal soloists. At the same time, folk dances were performed by ballet dancers from the Riga Latvian Theatre (Unknown 1896c). Although the details of the performers are relatively scarce, a press advertisement published a month before the opening of the exhibition invited “ladies and gentlemen with good voices” to participate as singers in the “folk performances” (Unknown 1896a). Thus, the participants may have come from both Riga and the Latvian provinces, bringing different musical and traditional backgrounds, unified and adapted to the performance scenario and musical preferences. In this production, the singers’ affiliation with a particular geographical location was not emphasized, nor was it significant whether the tradition was inherited or learned. These aspects became critical criteria for folk music performance groups.

The exhibition was dedicated to “Latvian” traditions that promoted unity and national identity, while boosting self-confidence by placing Latvian cultural heritage side by side with that of the dominant colonial languages and cultures of the time. By including ethnographic and folklore performances, the exhibition became a key event in fostering awareness of Latvians as a nation, elevating their language and traditional culture to the top of the value scale.

## Interwar Period

Performances of musical traditions became popular in Latvia during the interwar period, after the First World War and the establishment of the independent Republic of Latvia in 1918. In these years, it was less important to seek a basis and justification for national unity than to focus on regional cultural particularities and, in the performance of traditions, to emphasize their antiquity and uniqueness. One of the regions that received special attention was the western part of Latvia, with performers of musical traditions from villages and hamlets such as Alsunga, Bārta, Nīca, and Rucava.

In 1924, the folk singer and *kokle* player Pēteris Korāts (1871–1957),<sup>9</sup> invited by the linguist Ludis Bērziņš (1879–1965), performed Alsunga music at the University of Latvia, before visiting the folklore collector and composer Emīlis Melngailis (1874–1954) at the Latvian Conservatory (Melngailis 1924). A year later, in 1925, musicians from Alsunga – referred to as “the original Suiti orchestra and choir” – together with their founder and leader Nikolajs Heņķis, performed a Suiti wedding play at the Latvian Conservatoire, with the participation of Korāts (Unknown 1925; Cīrulis 1925).

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9 *Kokle* player Pēteris Korāts, an unidentified monochord (*vienstīdzis*) player, and a group of singers from Alsunga. Available: <https://www.redzidzirdilativju.lv/lv/search/178981?q=Alsunga> [Accessed 27.06.2025].



In these years, musicians such as Heņķis and Korāts, along with other people from the Kurzeme region (western Latvia),<sup>10</sup> became frequent guests in Riga, demonstrating folk traditions and music individually, with family members, or in village performance groups at schools, universities, societies, and on the radio.

The traditions and originality of folk music from these regions served as the basis for the first Latvian ethnographic films – *Latvian Wedding in Nīca* (*Latviešu kāzas Nīcā*,<sup>11</sup> 1931, dir. Kristaps Linde (1881–1948) and Aleksandrs Rusteiķis (1892–1958)) and *The Homeland is Calling* (*Dzimtene sauc*) or *Wedding in Alsunga* (*Kāzas Alsungā*,<sup>12</sup> 1935, dir. Aleksandrs Rusteiķis). In both films, folklorist Kārlis Straubergs (1890–1962), head of the Archives of Latvian Folklore (ALF), participated as a consultant and scriptwriter.

In *Latvian Wedding in Nīca*, the leading roles were performed by professional actors, whereas minor roles and group scenes were entrusted to local people of the Nīca area. The film depicts traditional work, clothing, room furnishings, bridal dowries, and other ethnographic objects and practices performed and used by local people. The sound of the film has been lost, but wedding songs and dances from the neighboring village of Bārta can be seen in a short surviving video fragment from 1934.<sup>13</sup>

*Wedding in Alsunga* illustrates the ethnographic environment and traditions of the Suiti region – mummery, folk games, and the distinctive Suiti recited-style singing with vocal drone. Alongside professional actors, local people from the parishes of Alsunga, Basi, Jūrkalne, and Gudenieki also took part (Daugule 1994).

In the 1930s, organized groups of folk music performers also appeared in other regions of Latvia, including Latgale (the eastern part of the country). In 1930, folk-singers from Barkava, and in 1931 from Aglona, performed in Riga at the invitation of Ludis Bērziņš (Bērziņš 1930; Bērziņš 1931). In 1936, the “folk singers and players”<sup>14</sup> of the village Taudejāņi in the Rēzekne region, led by the teacher Stepons Seiļs

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10 See also Bērziņš 1923; Bērziņš 1924; Bērziņš 1926.

11 Recording available:  
<https://tinyurl.com/kazas-Nica> [Accessed 27.06.2025.].

12 Recording available:  
<https://tinyurl.com/dzimtene-sauc> [Accessed 27.06.2025.].

13 Bārta village wedding fragment. Available:  
<https://tinyurl.com/Barta-wedding> [Accessed 27.06.2025.].

14 Also referred to as “folk ensemble” in earlier sources (Unknown, 1939a).



Figure 1. Latvian participants at the 3rd International Congress of Dancers in Stockholm. In the foreground are bagpiper Andrejs Pētersons and *kokle* player Jānis Porīkis; behind them are folk dancers and singers from Alsunga. Riga, 1939. Photographer unknown, LFK 2203.

(1909–1979),<sup>15</sup> took part in the All-Latvian Harvest Festival concert in Rēzekne (Rēzeknietis 1939a).

The Taudejāņi ensemble performed widely across Latvia. Its members included twelve women singers and two *kokle* players (Ozoliņš 1939). According to the Radiophone program, the ensemble was also recorded and broadcast on 9 June 1940 (Unknown 1940).

During the interwar period, traditional lifestyles, folklore, and musical traditions were appreciated not only nationally but also gained international recognition. In 1939, Suits or Alsunga and Rucava folk musicians, singers, and dancers participated in the 3rd International Congress of Dancers in Stockholm (see Figure 1), where they won the first prize (Unknown 1939b). The festival gathered “some 1,500 folk dancers from peasant countries of Scandinavia and Europe” (including Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Holland, Norway, Switzerland, Belgium, Hungary, and Scotland) to “demonstrate their folk heritage in dance and song” (Freeman 1939).

15 Biography of Stepons Seīls. Profile available: <https://www.literatura.lv/en/persons/stepons-seils> [Accessed 27.06.2025.].

## The Period of Sovietization

The third period began in 1940 with the first Soviet occupation of Latvia, which was soon replaced by the Nazi German occupation regime (1941–1945) as Soviet troops retreated during the Second World War. In 1945, Latvia was annexed again by the Soviets and incorporated into the family of “friendly republics”. This meant that Soviet ideology, cultural administration, and repressive practices were transferred to Latvia in full. The perception and content of traditional culture, as well as the study of folklore, were shaped by the initiatives and cultural policy ideas of Maxim Gorky (1868–1936), Nikolay Marr (1864–1934), Andrei Zhdanov (1896–1948), and other Soviet cultural and ideological functionaries. Their directives were implemented through decrees and administrative decisions across the Soviet Union. Gorky’s assertion that folklore is not created by society as a whole but only by the “labouring masses” resonated with Lenin’s dictum that “art belongs to people”, which defined folklore as expression of the interests, thoughts, and aspirations of the working class. In the early years of Soviet occupation, the Zhdanov Doctrine (so-called *Zhdanovism*, 1946) brought about the persecution of writers, composers, and researchers (Zemtsovsky, Kunanbaeva 1997: 5), framing intellectual and cultural life across the Soviet Union until Stalin’s death in 1953.

Folklore researchers, folklore itself, and folklore performers became simultaneously instruments and mouthpieces of Soviet ideology, serving as propaganda tools (Kunej, Pisk 2023: 9). The activities of amateur art, known as *samodejatel’nost’* and *narodnost’*, which before the Second World War in Soviet Russia had demonstrated the achievements of socialism and workers’ culture, were transplanted to the newly occupied territories after 1945. Only material that was carefully selected and approved by Soviet officials could be promoted. The strictest censorship was applied to all published and performed works, down to “every sound”, even though such activities were officially presented as the free creativity of the people (Zemtsovsky, Kunanbaeva 1997: 5).

In the early years of Soviet occupation, major changes were introduced into Latvian cultural life and scholarship under Stalin’s slogan “socialistic in content and national in form” (Kencis 2019; Boldāne-Zeļenkova 2019). Although folklore singers actively participated in these measures for a short period, their involvement largely ended with Stalin’s death in 1953. The slogan framed the creation of new Soviet folklore that glorified Stalin’s cult of personality and the “great achievements” of the Soviet Union in every sphere of life (Miller 2015; Kalkun, Oras 2018; Seljamaa 2017). In Latvia, this often meant embedding propaganda content within the forms of classic Latvian folk songs, adapting traditional meter and poetic principles to Soviet ideological purposes.



Figure 2. Folk singers performing at the concert of the Baltic Soviet Folklorists' Conference, Riga, 1951. Photographer unknown. Archives of Latvian Folklore, LFK 2203, n000146.

The realization of this slogan culminated in 1951, when the first Baltic Soviet folklorists' conference was held in Riga (Jansons 1951). At the conference, alongside traditional folk songs and those addressing the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, performers also presented newly created Soviet folklore (Unknown 1951). These works were likely acquired under the supervision of researchers at the Folklore Institute (formerly the Archives of Latvian Folklore) of the Latvian SSR Academy of Sciences, who were responsible for guiding and overseeing the ideological orientation of singers. In 1950,<sup>16</sup> a folklore expedition was conducted in the Sigulda region, during which local folk singers were identified and subsequently invited to perform Latvian folklore at the conference concert (see Figure 2).

In 1952, Soviet folklore was published by two Folklore Institute researchers, Alma Ancelāne and Vilma Greble (Greble, Ancelāne 1952). As both the authors and their colleagues later recalled, such songs were not known or performed by people; nevertheless, to meet the ideological demands from "above" and to validate the existence of "new folklore" among the folk, these texts had to be produced. One evening, as they admitted, they "took a bottle of wine" and composed songs that

16 Garamantas collection entry: <https://garamantas.lv/en/collection/886539> [Accessed 27.06.2025].



Figure 3. Alsunga ethnographic ensemble, 1951. Photographer unknown, LFK 19510036.

conformed to the slogan “socialistic in content and national in form”, attributing them fictitiously to folk performers.

Since the surge in founding ethnographic ensembles came only after 1953, such ensembles were not directly involved in the performance of newly created Soviet folklore. However, specific textual modifications – glorifying Soviet life and condemning the bourgeois past – did appear in ensemble repertoires and often persisted. For example, the Alsunga ethnographic ensemble (see Figure 3), recorded in 1951 before its formal establishment under Soviet conditions, included in its repertoire the song *Kolhoznieka rudzi auga*<sup>17</sup> (The Kolkhozman’s Rye Grew), where the word “kolhoznieks” replaced the word “bandenieks” (the ethnographic name for a land tenant). Traditionally, the song lyrics read “Bandenieka rudzi auga”<sup>18</sup> (The Bandenieks’s Rye Grew). Such textual substitutions were widespread and recognizable, though they did not fundamentally alter the content in the way fabricated Soviet folklore did – a practice initiated by researchers themselves.

17 *Kolhoznieka rudzi auga* (The Kolkhozman’s Rye Grew). Recording available: <https://garamantas.lv/lv/record/366839/Kolhoznieka-rudzi-auga> [Accessed 27.06.2025.].

18 *Bandenieka rudzi auga* (The Bandenieks’s Rye Grew). Recording available: <https://garamantas.lv/lv/record/366173/Bandenieka-rudzi-auga> [Accessed 27.06.2025.].



After the Second World War and the annexation of Latvia by the Soviet Union, the country – like the other Baltic republics – was separated from Western and Northern Europe by the ‘Iron Curtain’. Slovenian scholar Svanibor Pettan has noted that while interest in folk music was present in both “eastern” and “western” contexts, the approaches, aims, and results differed significantly. The dominant “eastern” model was based on state-supported folklore ensembles with heavily choreographed performances in folk costumes, adapted for a staged show (Pettan 2010: 130). Similarly, Slovenian researcher Rebeka Kunej observes that the majority of folklore groups in Slovenia were established under socialism, when cultural-artistic societies emerged in both urban and rural areas, most commonly comprising theatre ensembles and choirs. Within this framework, staged performances of music and dance folklore became one of the most popular instruments for shaping national identity and the public image of socialist countries (Kunej 2018: 259; Kunej, Pisk 2023: 9; Herzog 2010; Kencis 2024).

In Soviet times, the principle of *narodnost*’ was applied across all spheres or genres of folk art, transforming it into not only an artistic expression but also a political weapon. As Jennifer Cash pointed out, folk art served to represent the culture of local working people, to acquaint the public with folk traditions, and as a political and diplomatic weapon to establish communication paths with the “brotherly” Soviet peoples (Cash 2011: 58).

Soon after the annexation of Latvia in 1940, preparations began for the *Decade of Latvian Art and Literature* (DLAL) in Moscow, originally planned for autumn 1941. The closing concert was intended to feature an “ethnographic Midsummer Eve play” (V. G. 1941). However, the war and subsequent Nazi occupation postponed the event, and the DLAL in Moscow was eventually held only in 1955 (Kalpiņš 1957: 2). Among the participants were the ethnographic ensembles of Nīca and Bārta villages, as well as the “ethnographic collective” of the kolkhoz named after Zhdanov in Preiļi district, also referred to as the ethnographic ensemble of Bindari village. Their performances included *Evening at the Kolkhoz*, wedding plays, and an ethnographic staging of the Midsummer Eve.<sup>19</sup> The DLAL not only showcased Latvian traditions within the Soviet cultural framework but also stimulated the emergence of new ethnographic ensembles across Latvia. In the following years, as in other Soviet republics, these ensembles consolidated their status and role in the broader cultural landscape, performing both as preservers of traditional music and as representatives of Soviet-approved ethnographic ensembles.

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19 Decade-related performance 1. Available: <https://tinyurl.com/dekade-1> [Accessed 27.06.2025.]; Decade-related performance 2. Available: <https://tinyurl.com/dekade-2> [Accessed 27.06.2025.].

## **The Period of the Folklore Revival Movement**

During the Soviet period, folklore research was conducted under strict censorship and, like other fields of the humanities, was subject to close ideological supervision. The Folklore Institute, since 1956, the Folklore Sector of the Institute of Language and Literature of the Latvian SSR Academy of Sciences functioned as the only official institution engaged in folklore research, and it also bore responsibility for organizing folklore-related events – though these, were relatively rare. When the Folklore Sector undertook an expedition, it customarily concluded with a concert featuring folk singers, ethnographic ensembles, local folk dance groups, and occasionally choirs, accompanied by scholarly presentations. These concerts usually took place in the district or parish centers, the most central or populous area of the expedition route. The presentations delivered by folklore researchers and ethnomusicologists emphasized the uniqueness and richness of local music traditions, while also honoring the most accomplished performers who had preserved and cultivated their skills within their communities. Although annual expedition concerts were typically rooted in rural contexts, the 1978 concert marked a significant departure: it was staged as a nationwide event in Riga, aimed at introducing the capital's audience to the folk music performers documented by the Folklore Sector. The following year, in 1979, a similar large-scale concert was organized in Rēzekne, the cultural center of the Latgale region.

The fourth period in the staging of folk traditions was marked by the concert of folk singers and ethnographic ensembles at the Daile Theatre in Riga on 14 October 1978, organized by the Folklore Sector and the Literature Propaganda Department of the Latvian Union of Soviet Writers. The concert featured the ethnographic ensembles of Bārta, Otaņķi, Alsunga, Dignāja, Briežuciems, Auleja, Rikava, Sauna, Salnava, as well as the Vecpiebalga ethnographic ensembles, the instrumental string ensemble of Mērdzene, the Rencēni and Smiltene music chapels, and individual singers. Papers were presented by folklorists Elza Kokare (1920–2003), Jānis Rozenbergs (1927–2006), as well as musicologist Arnolds Klotiņš. Conceived as a reflection on 30 years of folklore expeditions, the concert enabled the audience to appreciate the richness of folk music in its simplicity and freedom from artifice or pretence, while affirming the value of the folk performers' inherited knowledge and singing skills. The emotional atmosphere of the event created conditions for the emergence of a distinctive culture of folk music performance alongside the aesthetics of the Soviet stage. In later years, this developed into a nationwide folklore revival movement and became part of the Third Awakening (Šmidchens 2014; Ūdre 2019: 149).

This concert marked the beginning of the social processes that Lithuanian researcher Violeta Davoliūtė has called the “rustic turn” in Lithuanian culture, or

what Philipp Herzog has described as a “back-to-the-roots” movement in the Estonian folklore revival (Herzog 2010: 132). It was a broad cultural reaction to the failures of Soviet modernity, gaining traction in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and manifested as a return to the rural, pre-modern roots of identity. What began as a vague nostalgia for a lost way of life grew into a politically charged discourse of collective trauma (Davoliūtė 2013: 125). Initially, the rustic turn appeared as a seemingly apolitical interest in folk heritage, but it developed into a broad ethnographic movement that set standards of cultural authenticity, which were implicitly anti-Soviet. Activists mobilized young people through expeditions, folk rituals, and performances aimed at individual and collective self-transformation (Davoliūtė 2013: 125). The rustic turn in Lithuania corresponds to the folklore revival movement in Latvia in the 1970s and 1980s. The increasing intensity of Russification, which threatened the role of local languages in the Baltic States, must also be taken into account here (Herzog 2010: 131; Kencis 2024: 49). In Latvia, the cultural activists were mainly young people living in Riga, some of them originally from rural regions, who were interested in folk music, began performing it, became the founders of folklore groups, and emerged as informal leaders of folklore revival movement, such as Helmī Stalte (1949–2023) and Dainis Stalts (1939–2014), Valdis Muktupāvels, Ilga Reizniece, Artis Kumsārs (1942–2013), and Iveta Tāle.

These activists, later revivalists, focused not only on performing folklore but also on studying, collecting, and recording it during expeditions. After the 1978 concert, informal and undocumented rumors spread among folklore enthusiasts that researchers from the Folklore Sector, who had previously collected and recorded folklore, would no longer go on expeditions because they had already recorded all the folklore. This prompted folklore enthusiasts to undertake expeditions to visit folk singers, many of whom they had met at the 1978 concert. Although this assumption has never been confirmed, from 1981 to 1985, the Folklore Sector did not organize folklore expeditions, which had been held annually since 1947. Another important reason for folklore enthusiasts to embark on expeditions was the possibility of meeting and experiencing folk singers directly and hearing their performances in person – a characteristic feature of the folklore revival movement that reflected the desire to get closer to the folklore heritage.

## **Modern Times**

The fifth period began with the restoration of Latvia's independence in 1991, when the hidden political aspirations of the folklore revival movement – the restoration of the status of national culture and language in an independent state – were realized. As a result, certain unifying aspects of the



folklore revival movement – resistance to Soviet stage culture and, more broadly, to Soviet ideology and regime – lost their hidden form and immediate relevance. Although the staging of traditions continues, the central goal of the folklore movement’s participants as agents of national awakening has been achieved. As of 2024, there are 281 folk music performer groups in Latvia,<sup>20</sup> including 24 ethnographic ensembles.<sup>21</sup>

### **Ethnographic Ensemble: Form, Content, and Aesthetics**

Ethnography, understood as the science of describing (*gráphō*) the people (*éthnos*), had already been present in the Latvian cultural space since the mid-19th century, when Latvian cultural activists and researchers became involved in the Society of Devotees of Natural Science, Anthropology, and Ethnography in Moscow (Lielbārdis 2022: 97; Lielbārdis 2017: 195). The term ‘ethnographic’ as a marker of ethnic or regional characteristics was also known and used since the 19th century, for example, during the 10th All-Russian Congress of Archaeology in 1896. In the 1930s, expressions such as ‘ethnographic dances’, ‘ethnographic objects’, ‘ethnographic costumes’, and ‘ethnographic value’ were commonly used to denote folk traditions, architecture, or other phenomena in folk art, while also imbuing them with an aura of antiquity and national romanticism. Musicologist Jēkabs Vītolīņš (1898–1977) described the 1934 concert at the Latvian Conservatory, which featured folk singers from Bērzkalne and *kokle* players from the village of Čabatrova in Viļaka parish, as an “ethnographic evening of Latgale” (Vītolīņš 1934). Thus, the term ‘ethnographic’ was also applied to folk music.

In the late 1930s, the term ‘ethnographic performance’ appeared, referring to musical and theatrical presentations rooted in tradition, such as an evening of craftwork (*vakarēšana*) or a Midsummer Eve celebration featuring professional actors, a choir, and musicians. For example, the 1939 Latvian Radio program included an “ethnographic performance with Līgo (Midsummer Eve) songs”, directed by the writer Augusts Melnalksnis (1876–1944), with the participation of an ensemble of actors and the choir *Singing Past (Dziesmotā senatnē)*, conducted by Artūrs Salaks

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20 The Latvian National Centre for Culture reports that, as of 2024, there were 281 folklore collectives active in Latvia, including ethnographic ensembles, distributed across regions – 15 in Selonia, 97 in Latgale, 52 in Kurzeme, 55 in Vidzeme, 25 in Zemgale, 37 in Riga, and 6 among the Latvian diaspora. See for more information: <https://www.lnkc.gov.lv/lv/folklor> [Accessed 20.06.2024.].

21 Recent recordings of ethnographic ensembles are available through the Digital Archives of Latvian Folklore, notably in the collection titled *Etnogrāfisko ansambļu ieraksti*. See for more information: <https://garamantas.lv/en/collection/1285899/Etnografisko-ansambļu-ieraksti> [Accessed 27.06.2025.].

(1891–1984). The performance was hosted by the popular actor Ēvalds Valters (1894–1994) (Unknown 1939c). In the 1920s and 1930s, folk singers and musicians were usually referred to as a ‘choir’, ‘orchestra’, ‘group’, or ‘band’, and only rarely ‘ensemble’. The specific combination of the terms ‘ethnographic’ and ‘ensemble’ had not yet been used.

With the first Soviet occupation of Latvia in 1940, followed by the early preparations for the DLAL in Moscow in 1941, the term ‘ethnographic ensemble’ was used for the first time. Singers from Nīca, Alsunga, Bārta, and Gudenieki were referred to as ethnographic ensembles (LTA 1941). These were stable groups of singers, musicians, and dancers from the villages of Western Kurzeme, already familiar to the Latvian public through concerts at the University of Latvia, the Latvian Conservatory, as well as ethnographic films and Radiophone recordings made in the 1920s and 1930s. Similar performing groups were already known in Estonia in the early 20th century (Kalkun 2017: 12), in Bulgaria and Georgia (Bithell 2014: 194), and in Slovenia during the interwar period (Kunej 2018: 258).

In addition to performing individual songs, dances, or instrumental pieces, the Kurzeme ensembles also staged larger theatrical performances of traditions, incorporating elements characteristic of a stage aesthetic intended for the audience – heightened emotionality, expressive gesticulation, and a distinctive manner of speech. This style of performance is also evident in ethnographic films from the 1930s, where professional actors and directors were involved in the productions. Yet, performance directed toward an audience was not foreign to traditional culture itself, as masquerading during winter solstice celebrations or singing at weddings likewise required acting skills (Kalkun 2017: 10).

Estonian folklore scholar Janika Oras describes the style of Laine Mesikäpp, a 1930s stage folklore performer and professional actress, as a modernized model of performing ancient folk songs that incorporated professional elements: musical diversity, controlled voice production, original compositions based on traditional texts, and external theatricality of performance. According to Oras, Mesikäpp learned from traditional singers but was equally influenced by fellow actors and by the prevailing 1930s attitude toward tradition, which expected adaptation to the modern stage aesthetic of the time (Oras 2024: 115). A similar tendency can be observed in Latvia during the interwar period, where professional directors, actors, and musicians often shaped folklore productions. By contrast, when songs or dances were performed by individual singers, village dance groups, or local folk musicians, the stage style tended to be more robust and straightforward – closer to technical and ethnographic reproduction than to artistic stylization.

After the Soviet occupation, under new political and ideological conditions, the



Figure 4. Aleksandrs Vasiļevskis with the ethnographic ensemble of Bindari village, named after the Zhdanov kolkhoz in Preiļi district (later the Ethnographic Ensemble of Sauna village), 1955. Photographer unknown, LFK 1925, 19550002.

ensembles from Kurzeme were delegated to represent the uniqueness of Latvian folk music traditions in Moscow. At the same time, folk performers were also sought in other regions. Already in 1941, a special commission was established to identify people from the general public with good voices who could perform folklore at the planned DLAL in Moscow. One of the leading experts on Latvian folk music, the composer Emīlis Melngailis, also took part and most likely chaired this commission (Unknown 1941). Since the DLAL was postponed in 1941 due to the war and finally took place 14 years later, in 1955, the concerts featured the ethnographic ensembles of Nīca and Bārta, which had already been identified in 1941, as well as newly created groups, including the ethnographic ensemble of Bindari village of the Zhdanov kolkhoz in the Preiļi district (see Figure 4). This ensemble was founded in 1954, when the singing of local kolkhoz women was noticed by music teacher Aleksandrs Vasiļevskis (1907–1980), who organized the first activities of the ensemble and the following year led it to perform at the DLAL in Moscow (Solovjovs 1955).

Still today, ethnographic ensembles are composed mainly of women, with men present in smaller numbers. Most members are not academically trained in music but have developed their musicality through the intergenerational transmission of



Figure 5. Members of the Bārta and Nīca Ethnographic Ensembles at the DLAL in Moscow, 1955.

In the performance *Wedding in Ancient Nīca*, the bride (foreground, left) is Anna Rizika, a cattle breeder at the kolkhoz *Boļševiks* (Bolshevik), the groom is a worker at the factory *Sarkanais metalurģis* (Red Metallurgist).<sup>22</sup> Photo by V. Lavrentijs, LNA KFFDA F1, 4, 10561.

knowledge and skills within their families or local communities (village or parish). Their repertoire is based on the musical material of their local area. In addition to individual songs, the ensembles also perform theatrical representations of family occasions (weddings, baptisms), calendar customs (Midsummer, Shrovetide), and other rural activities.

In the final concert of the DLAL in Moscow, directed by Eduards Smiļģis (1886–1966), a well-known Latvian theatre director, members of ethnographic ensembles representing the ‘working class’ of local collective farms (kolkhoz) or factories (see Figure 5) performed alongside professional ballet dancers and academic musicians. Some of the *Decade’s* performances had already been staged in Latvia before being presented in Moscow. Musicologist Vītoliņš praised most of the ethnographic ensembles’ musical performances, except for the *Latvian Wedding in Nīca* staged by the Nīca ethnographic ensemble. As professional stage, music, and dance directors were involved in preparing the performance, Vītoliņš called it a “spectacle” rather

<sup>22</sup> Nīca ensemble archival entry. Available: <https://www.redzidzirdlatviju.lv/lv/search/567756?q=n%C4%ABca> [Accessed 27.06.2025].

than “a strict ethnographic demonstration as we see in the performances of other groups”, noting that the centuries-old traditions were accompanied by a symphony orchestra. He stressed the need for clarity about what is meant by an “ethnographic performance”, insisting that it must “show the folk-art tradition as it lives in the people and the main task is to expose it and show it in its pure, direct form”. As he noted:

Wedding performances, however, do not take place in Nīca to the accompaniment of a symphony orchestra. This fact alone shows how far [this] performance differs in principle from an ethnographic performance (Vītolīņš 1955).

Vītolīņš’s assessment influenced later approaches: stage performances were expected to remain close to traditional performances in their functional environment.

During the preparations for the DLAL in Moscow, new ethnographic ensembles were established alongside the existing or “newly discovered” Kurzeme ensembles, particularly in Latgale – most notably the ethnographic ensemble of Bindari village in 1954 and that of Rikava village in 1955, founded with the assistance of Jānis Rozenbergs (1927–2006), a researcher of the Folklore Institute of the Academy of Sciences of the Latvian SSR. Another important milestone in the actualization of folk music and the establishment of ethnographic ensembles was the Latgale Culture Week held in Riga in 1958, which included music concerts, theatre performances, applied art exhibitions, and, significantly, performances by ethnographic ensembles (Unknown 1958). As Jānis Streičs, one of the directors of Latgale Week in Riga and a well-known film director, later pointed out, the event had both a visible and an invisible side. The visible part was to present Latgalian folk art in the capital in a manner consistent with Soviet stylistics, while the hidden part aimed to mobilize Latgale’s sense of national community and its unity with the rest of Latvia – something increasingly threatened by Soviet ideology and policies of Russification (Streičs 2018).<sup>23</sup>

In preparation for this event, state and local cultural institutions, with the support of researchers from the Folklore Institute, established ethnographic ensembles in Bērzgale (1956), Murmastiene (1956), Salnava (1956), Kārsava (1957), Izvalta (1957), Aglona (1957) and Mežvidi (1958). The style of performance of these ethnographic ensembles on stage and in cinema was emotionally heightened, exaggerated, and theatrical (Brenčs 1958).<sup>24</sup> Such a stage aesthetic was typical of folklore

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23 News article about *Latgales kultūras nedēļa* in Riga, 1958: <https://tinyurl.com/Latgale-1958> [Accessed 27.06.2025.].

24 Video excerpt (at 4:35) related to *Latgales kultūras nedēļa*: <https://tinyurl.com/Latgale-1958-video> [Accessed 27.06.2025.].

performances in other Soviet republics and reflected the broader features of Soviet stage culture. Oras notes that Soviet models of folklore performance and festivals promoted specific characteristics such as pomposity, theatricality, joyful expression, and a controlled, professionalized manner of performance (Oras 2024: 115).

The Soviet stage style was also characterized by another Estonian scholar, Kristin Kuutma. She writes that the aesthetic standards of public performance changed significantly in the 1950s. Under the supervision of professional cultural workers (animators), amateur artistic production was transformed into a more modest form of professional art, while at the same time attempting to copy aesthetics and techniques.

Folk dances performed for an audience followed the standard of ballet, folk song performance departed from the classical vocal technique of chamber music, the ideal of a folk instrumentalist was expected to be music-making in a symphony orchestra. The repertoire performed was primarily humorous and gleeful, depicting the frisky and playful entertainment of the simple village folk, or the energetic workmanship achievements of the *kolkhoz* members (Kuutma 1998: 2).

By contrast, speaking about the difference between the “eastern” (Soviet) and “western” models of folklore staging, Pettan pointed out:

In contrast to this model, in which everything was strictly determined, from music and dance arrangements to performance features such as the number and physical appearance of dancers (their unified physical measures, costumes, even smiles on their faces), the “western” model was offering a more relaxed, spontaneous, and varied approaches to rural music (Pettan 2010: 130).

Seeing that the Soviet stage aesthetics suppressed the “raw” performance of traditions and threatened the survival of folk music in its unarranged and authentic forms, just as in 1955 Vītoliņš had opposed the use of the symphony orchestra in ethnographic performances, so in 1978 Ģederts Ramans (1927–1999), Chairman of the Board of the Latvian Union of Soviet Composers, also spoke out against the stylization of folk music. He called for listening to folklore in its original sound and authentic performance – “recordings of folk singers’ voices or a performance by a folklore ensemble” (Ramans 1978). This appeal coincided with preparations by researchers of the Folklore Sector for a folk music concert featuring folk singers, ethnographic ensembles, and instrumental groups or bands, all presenting rough, unembellished folk music (Weaver et al. 2023: 51–53). The concert also included a paper by musicologist Arnolds Klotiņš, who, like Ramans, advocated unadorned music free from the Soviet stage aestheticization, which he described as “the playfully dashing young man” and “the coquettishly sweet maiden” (Klotiņš 1978).





Figure 6. The Rikava ethnographic ensemble performing at the 1978 concert in Riga. Photo by Vaira Strautniece, LFK 2184, 19780062.

This concert marked a turning point in the performance of folk music, moving away from the aesthetics and artistic embellishments of the Soviet stage and initiating a focus on simple, tradition-based, and even intimate modes of performance (see Figure 6). It also launched the folklore revival movement in Latvia, characterized by a markedly different performance aesthetic and a distinct political connotation.<sup>25</sup> Alongside individual folk music performers and newly formed folklore groups in the cities, especially in Riga, ethnographic ensembles and their performances became an essential part of the movement in the following years. Both shortly before and after the 1978 concert, a wave of ethnographic ensembles emerged, particularly in Latgale: in 1978 ensembles were founded in Baltinava, Briežciems, and Dignāja; in 1979 in Zundāni; in 1980 in Pušmucova, Rekava, Upīte, and elsewhere.

In the early post-war years, Klotiņš writes, the desire to present folk art decoratively took precedence over its natural beauty in Latvia, and the notion that professionalizing folklore heritage was the right way to popularize it became deeply rooted among folk music enthusiasts (Klotiņš 2018: 260). Until 1978, the stage performance of ethnographic ensembles oscillated between, on the one hand, Soviet stage aesthetics, characterized by exaggerated enthusiasm, joy, and vitality, and, on

25 For comparison, see the dance-house movement in Hungary in the 1970s (Pettan 2010: 130).

the other, the pursuit of ethnographically accurate and functionally grounded folk music performance. In the 1980s, however, influenced by the ideas of the folklore revival movement, ethnographic ensembles rejected Soviet stage aesthetics. This shift is evidenced by the ethnographic ensemble concerts in the 1980s and by the *Baltica* folklore festival, jointly organized by the Baltic States since 1987, which adopted a different stage aesthetic. Since 1988, when the festival was held in Riga, it has also carried a strong political connotation and background.

Looking at a map of Latvia, performers of traditional music have historically been concentrated at two ends of the country – in the western and southern parts of Kurzeme and Latgale in the East – while the tradition of ethnographic ensembles is largely absent in central Latvia, in Vidzeme and Zemgale. Several factors may explain this distribution. In Vidzeme, folk music traditions were strongly influenced by the powerful choir movement and by the religious practices of the Moravian Brethren (Hernhut) in the 19th century. In Zemgale, the Soviet repression and deportation of prosperous farming families to Siberia in 1941 and 1949 could be one reason, while the economic activity of the Duchy of Courland and Zemgale in the late 18th century may also have shaped folk music traditions there. By contrast, in Latgale, economic modesty in the 19th century allowed traditional cultural values and features associated with the rural environment to survive longer.

At various times, the emergence and development of folk music performance groups have been supported by traditional cultural and educational institutions, as well as by folklore research authorities, and have received both recognition and praise. In the interwar period, this role was played by the Archives of Latvian Folklore, the University of Latvia, and the State Conservatory, with key figures such as Kārlis Straubergs, Ludis Bērziņš, and Emilis Melngailis. During the Soviet occupation, the Folklore Institute and its researchers, including Jēkabs Vītoliņš and Jānis Rozenbergs, were central, alongside teachers and regional activists such as Jēkabs Ķīburs (1897–1972), long-time leader of the Bārta ethnographic ensemble; Jānis Teilāns (1941–2019), teacher, folklore activist, and leader of many ethnographic ensembles in Latgale; and Aleksandrs Vašļevskis, founder of the Bindari ethnographic ensemble. During the Third Awakening period, the establishment of ethnographic ensembles was further promoted by folklore researchers and regional cultural activists, among them the poet Antons (Ontans) Slišāns (1948–2010).

During the Soviet period, the formation of ethnographic ensembles was part of official state policy, and the ensembles were institutionally tied to a specific village, hamlet, or collective farm (kolkhoz). A new ensemble could only be established with the approval of local or state authorities, even if the initiative originated from residents or cultural activists. Nevertheless, both the folk music performance groups of



the interwar period and the ethnographic ensembles in the Soviet years ultimately rested on the inheritance, persistence, and transmission of folk music traditions among their bearers, the musical skills of the participants, and the continued desire for music with traditional content across different regions of Latvia.

## Conclusions

Semi-institutionalized groups that performed folk music and dances already existed during the interwar period, but the term 'ethnographic ensemble' emerged only in the Soviet period. Although musicologist Vītoliņš noted in the 1950s that "ethnographic ensembles" represented a new "line" of amateur artistic activity deserving serious attention not only in Latvia but also on a pan-Union scale (Vītoliņš 1955), it is clear that under Soviet occupation the interwar tradition of ethnographic performances was continued under the new label of 'ethnographic ensemble', with their foundation years reassigned to present them as achievements of the Soviet system. As Oras points out:

Soviet officials labelled traditional folklore and amateur arts the artistic creation of the (working) people to fit into prevailing socialist ideology. In 1940 and the post-war years, the institutions connected with folklore research and performance were reformed and/or renamed according to the Soviet models (Oras 2024: 106).

Despite differences in eras and political systems, the tasks of ethnographic ensembles have remained similar – to preserve local traditions and present them to others, thereby fostering local patriotism both within their own and neighboring collective farms or districts, as well as introducing regional folklore to audiences in Riga, Moscow, Stockholm, and elsewhere. The repertoire of ethnographic ensembles, along with the genres and content of their performances, has not undergone drastic changes. Since the 1896 Ethnographic Exhibition in Riga, they have consistently performed traditional plays, games, dances, and characteristic songs.

The emergence of ethnographic ensembles in the Soviet period was stimulated by the DLAL in Moscow, which reinforced the importance of transmitting traditions both within local communities and on a broader stage. Recognition from state-level officials in Moscow or Riga also encouraged smaller district officials and local communities to value the work of these ensembles. Ethnographic ensembles fit neatly into Soviet ideology, representing the art of the "common working people". Although singers and dancers from Rucava and Alsunga had already represented Latvia at the 3rd International Congress of Dancers in Stockholm in 1939, the new political circumstances added ideological motivation to this mission, while also involving larger numbers of participants and creating more complex and professional artistic compositions. Thus, while ethnographic ensembles were sometimes

instrumentalized for Soviet propaganda, they simultaneously safeguarded the diversity, traditional style, and performance practices of folk music throughout the Soviet years and ensured its transmission to future generations.

During the last decade of the Soviet occupation and the period of the Third Awakening in the 1980s, the personalities of individual folk singers, ethnographic ensembles, and their performances became romanticized as carriers of ancient traditions and folk songs, especially in the eyes of folklore revivalists. The performances of ethnographic ensembles became an integral part of the folklore revival movement; thus, their participants, alongside the actualization and preservation of national identity and cultural values, also took part in the political processes of the Third Awakening, effectively turning Stalin's slogan upside down and the socialist form filling with national content (Herzog 2010; Җencis 2024).

Today, ethnographic ensembles – unlike other folklore performers, such as folklore groups and bands, which are not limited in the choice of repertoire or interpretations and often draw on music from different regions of Latvia – adhere more strictly to the songs, performance styles, and vocal harmonies characteristic of a particular locality. They aim to preserve the traditions of musical folklore connected with annual and family occasions in a form as unchanged as possible. Given the conditions of modern society, including mobility and intensified communication, their repertoires are based not only on cultural knowledge and skills passed down orally, but are also supplemented with materials from archives, research, and publications. Nevertheless, one of the central aims of ethnographic ensembles remains to resist innovation and to continue being 'ethnographic'.

Nowadays, ethnographic ensembles operate mainly in rural areas and hamlets, where, alongside folkdance ensembles, they fulfil the function of folk-art performers. They are primarily engaged for performances at local festivals, visits by state officials, and other events where the cultural characteristics of a particular area to be showcased. Ethnographic ensembles, together with folklore groups, also participate in regional and international folklore festivals as well as in national song festivals. Their survival depends on the ensemble leaders' ability to attract and retain members, available funding, local interest, and the musical tastes and skills of the members themselves.

Although folklore performers and the institutions that administer and organize their activities strive to move beyond the Soviet legacy, the influence of interwar stage traditions, Soviet stage aesthetics, and the peculiarities of amateur art still shape the stage image, performance manner, and style of contemporary ethnographic and other folklore performers. In addition, stage performances are influenced by the aesthetics and style of the folklore revival movement of the Third

Awakening, characterized by an idealization of the past. Thus, contemporary folklore performances continue to be shaped both by earlier stage traditions and by current approaches to adapting folk music and traditions for the stage.

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