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## **Guests Beyond the Iron Curtain: Cross-Border Visits of Latvian Folklorists during the Cold War**

### **Viesi viņpus dzelzs priekškara: latviešu folkloristu pārrobežu vizītes Aukstā kara laikā**

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#### **Atslēgvārdi:**

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## Summary

This article examines cross-border encounters of Latvian folklorists during the Cold War, when the Iron Curtain separated exile communities in the West from scholars in Soviet-occupied Latvia. The work of research institutions in Riga, including the Andrejs Upīts's Institute of Language and Literature at the Latvian SSR Academy of Sciences and its various departments, among them the Folklore Department, was largely shaped by the ideological framework of the Soviet regime. Geopolitical circumstances determined isolation from the West and minimal academic information exchange beyond the borders of the socialist bloc countries. Folklorists in the occupied Latvia worked while being aware of the surveillance of the State Security Committee (KGB). At the same time, the KGB's subsidiary body, the Committee for Cultural Relations with Compatriots Abroad, enabled a certain level of interaction between folklorists in Western exile and the Latvian SSR.

Some individuals with a keen interest, including Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, Imants Freibergs, and Austris Grasis, visited Riga. In the 1980s, guests from the other side of the Iron Curtain, folklorists Elza Kokare and Jadviga Darbiniece, were permitted to attend Stockholm and participate in the Conference on Baltic Studies in Scandinavia. These episodes reveal both the risks and possibilities of intellectual life under Soviet occupation.

## Kopsavilkums

Rakstā aplūkota latviešu folkloristu saskarsme Aukstā kara laikā, kad dzelzs priekšsargs nodalīja Rietumu trimdā dzīvojošos folkloras pētniekus no zinātniekiem okupētajā Latvijā. Pētniecības institūti Rīgā, tostarp Latvijas PSR Zinātņu akadēmijas Andreja Upīša Valodas un literatūras institūts un tā Folkloras sektors, lielā mērā darbojās pēc padomju režīma ideoloģiskā regulējuma. Ģeopolitiskie apstākļi noteica Latvijas PSR izolāciju no Rietumiem un minimālu akadēmiskās informācijas apmaiņu viņpus sociālistiskā bloka valstīm. Okupētajā Latvijā folkloristi strādāja, apzinoties Valsts drošības komitejas (VDK) uzraugošo klātbūtni. Tajā pašā laikā Komiteja kultūras sakariem ar tautiešiem ārzemēs – VDK piesegstruktūra – nodrošināja zināmu mijiedarbību starp folkloristiem Rietumu trimdā un Latvijas PSR.

Rīgu apmeklēja vairāki ieinteresēti latviešu diasporas pārstāvji, tostarp Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, Imants Freibergs un Austris Grasis. Savukārt viešņām no otras dzelzs priekškara puses – folkloristēm Elzai Kokarei un Jadvigai Darbiniecei – 20. gadsimta 80. gados bija iespēja apmeklēt Stokholmu un piedalīties Baltijas studiju konferencē Skandināvijā. Šie notikumi atklāj gan riskus, gan iespējas intelektuālajā dzīvē padomju okupācijas laikā.

## Introduction

The Soviet occupation of Latvia and the Cold War rivalry between the global superpowers, the USSR and the US, during the second half of the 20th century created a geopolitical and ideological rift between Latvian folklore scholars on opposite sides of the Iron Curtain. The Folklore Department of the Institute of Language and Literature at the Latvian SSR Academy of Sciences, a key folklore research center in occupied Latvia, operated within the constraints of the Soviet legal and ideological framework. During the Soviet period, folklorists had to navigate between official ideological demands and their personal values. However, there was always the risk of attracting the attention – and potential punishment – of supervisory bodies, the highest of which was the State Security Committee (KGB). Demonstrating loyalty to Soviet ideology and cooperating with the Committee for Cultural Relations with Compatriots Abroad was often a necessary condition for any engagement with the world beyond the Iron Curtain.

In contrast, the Latvian exile community was strictly dissociated from the Latvian SSR and opposed to KGB provocations. Nevertheless, some researchers from the exile communities were able to take advantage of certain circumstances that allowed them to visit the Latvian SSR and meet Latvian folklore scholars in their occupied homeland.

## Against the Background of the Cold War

The 1980s were a vivid period in Latvian culture, during which traditional culture in occupied Latvia flourished as an alternative way of life, most notably through the folklore movement. At the official institutional level, Latvian folklore research and its interpretations in the Latvian SSR were delegated exclusively to the Folklore Department of the Institute of Language and Literature at the Latvian SSR Academy of Sciences, the successor to the Archives of Latvian Folklore, established in 1924.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Researchers of the Institute were involved in organizing several events significant to the folklore movement, and also reflected on issues of authenticity in folklore, as opposed to its staged and beautified forms. Thus, for example, the concert of 14 October 1978 and the following discussion marked a significant point in the starting period of the folklore revival (Weaver et al. 2023: 51–53). A critical and analytical assessment of the interaction between these two “worlds”, academic and lifestyle folklore movement, however, has yet to be undertaken.

Although a major paradigm shift in theoretical and methodological understanding of folklore studies, such as that experienced by their Western counterparts on the other side of the Iron Curtain, was yet to emerge among Latvian folklore researchers (see Bula 2011: 14–22), the first half of the 1980s was marked by a certain sense of elation, increased openness of the Institute to the wider public, and the launch of a new annual conference. The five-year period between 1981 and 1985 unfolded in anticipation of the 150th anniversary of Krišjānis Barons (1835–1923), the prominent systematizer and publisher of Latvian folk songs. As a result of cultural policy planning in the Latvian SSR and cross-sectoral cooperation, the period of five years was filled with ambitious events of both social and scholarly significance (see Grīnvalde 2022: 162–167). The culminating academic event was the International Research Conference *Folk Song and Contemporary Culture*, held in Riga from 30 October to 1 November 1984. It was organized by the Folklore Department in cooperation with the Writers' Union and other institutions. This was the first international conference hosted by Latvian folklorists in several decades, the previous one being the Conference of Folklorists of the Baltic Soviet Republics in 1951. The framework of the Barons' jubilee offered platforms both within the Latvian SSR and across the Iron Curtain, enabling a rapprochement between Western and Eastern scholars. In the West, a notable academic event was the Eighth Conference on Baltic Studies in Scandinavia, organized by the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies (AABS), which took place in Stockholm, Sweden, in June of 1985.

The aim of this article is to address the following research questions: How possible was it for Latvian folklore researchers to travel to the other side of the Iron Curtain? What can we learn about the ideological conditions of these visits? What were the attitudes toward these travelers in exile society and among fellow citizens in the Latvian SSR? And how did the visitors themselves reflect on their experiences?

The Cold War was a period of geopolitical tension between the United States and its Western Bloc allies on one side and the Soviet Union and its Eastern Bloc allies on the other. It was a protracted ideological and strategic rivalry between great powers that began soon after the Second World War and lasted until the early 1990s. Although the Cold War did not escalate into a direct, large-scale military conflict between East and West, it was characterized by an arms race, espionage and a global struggle for influence across a world divided by the Iron Curtain. At its core, the Cold War was driven by opposing visions of political and economic governance. The United States supported the ideas of liberal democracy and market economies, while the USSR sought to spread its model of centralized planned economy under the rule of a single Communist Party.

The Cold War had a profound impact on global politics, economics, and culture in the second half of the 20th century. For both sides, the heightened tensions in foreign affairs and the associated risks were seen as matters of national security. It was the period of competing military alliances, like NATO versus the Warsaw Pact, although the latter's military utility as well as political value have been questioned (Mastny 2005: 74), as well as a nuclear arms race. Moreover, the Cold War was also the arena of an international space race (Reichstein 1999). As part of this unconventional warfare, both culture and science and the involvement of their representatives also served the strategic agendas of the superpowers.

The Cold War was a complex conflict whose distinct historical appearances are often described in metaphorical terms, as noted by German historian and political scientist Wilfried Loth (Loth 2010: 19–22): 'Iron Curtain', 'Thaw', 'Prague Spring', 'Velvet Revolution', etc. He also drew attention to the fact that the designation 'Cold War' was itself a metaphor that originated in a speech by Bernard Mannes Baruch, American statesman, in 1947 (Loth 2010: 19).

The specific period covered by this study is the so-called Second Cold War (1981–1985), which followed the initial phase of the Cold War and the *détente* of the 1970s, eventually leading to the end of the Cold War (Fink 2022: 205–230; Blair, Curtis 2009: 85–104; Painter 2002: 106–122). In the early 1980s, the strident anti-communist rhetoric of U.S. President Ronald Reagan targeted the dangerously unpredictable Kremlin leadership, whose consecutive leaders, Leonid Brezhnev (1906–1982), Yuri Andropov (1914–1984), and Konstantin Chernenko (1911–1985), were seen as unsuitable for measured diplomatic action or, at times, even had ceased to function while in office. This created an atmosphere of insecurity among those Europeans who had to watch the mutually threatening arguments of the big global players. During Reagan's first term of presidency, many Western Europeans lived in fear of war, which only ended with Mikhail Gorbachev (1931–2022) becoming Soviet leader in 1985 (Gilbert 2015: 230).

The periodization of this timeframe is underpinned by increasing global geopolitical turbulences which hit the rock bottom around 1984:

Carter's successor, Ronald Reagan (1981–89), denounced the Soviet Union as an immoral 'evil empire', and fought the last phase of the Cold War vigorously on all fronts. Alleging that the Soviets were the source of most of the world's problems, Reagan persuaded the US Congress to approve massive increases in military spending, effectively ended arms control negotiations with the Soviets, and pursued an aggressive policy to roll back Soviet influence in the Third World. Reagan's policies resulted in a mushrooming budget deficit; a powerful, and at times anti-US, peace movement in Western Europe; strains within the NATO alliance; and a heightening of Cold War tensions.

This 'second Cold War' proved short-lived, however. After Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, the Soviet Union began to pursue policies aimed at improving relations with the United States. With the Soviets making most of the concessions, the United States and the Soviet Union reached important arms control agreements. In 1989, faced with chronic unrest in Eastern Europe and economic decline at home, the Soviets allowed communist regimes in Eastern Europe to collapse. The following year, they agreed to German reunification on Western terms. Improved East-West relations and the Soviet Union's retreat from a world role also led to the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in early 1989 and facilitated negotiated settlements to local and regional conflicts in southern Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central America (Painter 2002: 106).

However, there are authors who, through their reflections on the second half of the 20th century, argue in favor of "long détente" which, as proposed, existed between East and West from the 1950s to the 1980s as a rather peaceful framework for the final stages of the divisions between the Western and Eastern rivals (Niedhart 2017). Literary scholar Eva Eglāja-Kristsone, whose monograph *Iron Cutters. Cultural Contacts between Soviet Latvian and Latvian Exile Writers* (2013) is the most comprehensive study on the disputed connections between Latvian writers on either side of the Iron Curtain, also claims that, among Latvians, détente lingered, since the cultural relationships between the two sides had become more personal and reciprocal (Eglāja-Kristsone 2013: 332).

The Cold War shaped the folklore studies on both sides of the Iron Curtain, and a divide was growing between them. During this period, there were noticeable changes in academic trends, and with the passage of time, we can legitimately ask questions about the extent to which scientific independence was maintained in the face of Cold War dynamics and the overarching influence of each country's unique geopolitical position. The case of Finnish folkloristics, through the lens of Finlandization, has been studied by Eija Stark (2021). She showed that, at this time, folklorists' international contacts were approached with great caution reflecting Finland's official policy of neutrality in the Cold War. The Cold War-influenced and contextualized attitudes towards the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian folklorists and ethnologists in exile in Sweden were studied by Barbro Klein. She observed that these scholars from the other side of the Baltic Sea were viewed with suspicion and were never fully integrated into the Swedish society: "During the Cold War, it was a given that exile scholars from the Baltic countries were not a part of the Nordic world, even though they lived in Sweden and were Swedish citizens" (Klein 2017: 101).

For the last 10 years, the Commission for Scientific Research of the KGB of the Latvian SSR (*LPSR Valsts drošības komitejas zinātniskās izpētes komisija*) has been systematically researching sources produced by the KGB and its substructures. The Commission's studies have covered different thematic axes, covering also topics related to the Committee for Cultural Relations and other KGB subsidiary

bodies (Jarinovska 2016; Jarinovska et al. 2017). While cultural relations in the history of Latvian literature are now relatively well explored – thanks largely to Eglāja-Kristsons's research – and some research has also been done in the history of art (Astahovska 2019), the history of Latvian folkloristics has yet to address contacts across the Iron Curtain. However, as the following sections will show, the conditions and limitations imposed by the undemocratic regime represented by the USSR remained consistent.

If we adopt the figurative term "iron cutters" proposed by Eglāja-Kristsons, we must acknowledge that there were indeed such people who saw and seized opportunities to cross the Iron Curtain in Latvian folkloristics too. Although attempts to bridge the divide were strictly limited, they did occur. Individual motivations varied in each case, however, with the Iron Curtain slightly ajar, the possibility of visiting the long-unseen Motherland or, to the other party concerned, taking a look at any of the capitalist countries, otherwise closed to Soviet citizens, was tempting enough. The Cold War had reduced communication between folklorists in the West and those in the Latvian SSR to a minimum: these are just a few persons and a couple of episodes for which we have archival and oral evidence. However, it is worth taking a closer look at them in order to get a better understanding of the broader disciplinary history of that time.

## **Sources of the Study**

The main sources for this research are life story interviews with witnesses and individuals involved in efforts to bring Western and Soviet folklorists closer. The interviews are relatively recent, conducted between 2015 and 2025. With the distance of time, the informants have been able to reflect on personal and disciplinary history issues that might have been concealed or self-censored, especially under the non-democratic Soviet regime. A total of 19 interviews have been explored through thematic analysis. The life story recordings are represented by two collections of the Archives of Latvian Folklore, Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art of the University of Latvia: Interviews of The Archives of Latvian Folklore – LFK [2250], and Folklore Movement Collections: Interviews with participants of the folklore movement – LFK Fkk [1].

Through careful listening to the interview recordings and close reading of their transcripts, the following themes were identified: interactions between Western and Latvian SSR scholars; communication between the exile community and the people of occupied Latvia; the presence of State Security Committee agents; propaganda efforts; attitudes towards communism or its counterpart, capitalism; and the exchange of literature across the Iron Curtain.

Together with her fellow researchers, the author of this article has conducted several of the interviews analyzed in this article. Topics concerning the occupation period in Latvia and the informant's adaptation to Cold War conditions, regardless of which side of the Iron Curtain they were on, were often difficult for them to articulate. Although several decades have passed since the collapse of the USSR, a noticeable caution in articulating personal memories was evident in many conversations. Common among the informants was the uneasiness of these memories and a perceptible atmosphere of fear and mistrust, shaped by being in the KGB surveillance area. Western Latvians vividly remembered the condemnation they faced from strict and uncompromising groups of exiles, typically the older generation, when visiting the Latvian SSR. Folklorists who remained in Latvia were either KGB-monitored and even repressed or, in contrast, ideologically adapted and supported by official authorities. The latter group, now that Latvia had regained its independence, has been reluctant to highlight their relatively privileged status in the context of Soviet ideology. The relationship of intellectuals to the memory of the past regime and collaboration is uneasy throughout East Central Europe, fluctuating between a willingness to reveal the full truth and more lenient approaches (Zake 2017: 63–64).

To examine the facts mentioned in the interviews from the point of view of KGB informants, the DELTA database of State Security Committee documents at the Latvian State Archives was consulted. Printed in limited copies, documentary evidence of the Institute of Language and Literature at the Latvian SSR Academy of Sciences was used as additional historical sources. The Institute's small-circulation in-house journal *Vārds un Darbs* (Word and Work), which provides a valuable insight into the formal and informal working life of Latvian folklorists under socialism (see Grīnvalde 2021), was analyzed alongside other press publications of the time, both from the Latvian SSR and exile communities. Printed media, together with radio and television, played a crucial role in disseminating ideas on both sides of the Iron Curtain throughout the 1980s (see Bastiansen et al. 2019).

## Being Watched

Folklore researchers at the Folklore Department of the Institute of Language and Literature at the Latvian SSR Academy of Sciences belonged to the Soviet intelligentsia. Under Brezhnev's rule in the late socialist period, intellectuals were subject to direct Party control. Political loyalty was monitored, and political criteria heavily influenced their careers. Brezhnev's policy envisaged inclusion of leading intellectuals in the Communist Party as well as involvement in direct cooperation with the State Security Committee, the KGB.<sup>2</sup>

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2 An acronym from Russian *Komitēt gosudarstvennoj bezopasnosti*.



There was also pressure for their active participation in spreading Soviet ideology and investing in ideological education of academics (Shlapentokh 1990: 173–180). The State Security Committee in the Latvian SSR operated under the same model as in other Soviet republics, subordinated to the centralized KGB organization in Moscow and controlled by the Communist Party (see Knight 2021).

The Institute, like any research institution in the Soviet Union, was an implementer of centralized ideological directives from Moscow. This included structural arrangements within the institution, adherence to ideology at the level of planning time, and, to some extent, methods of work. The Institute's management oversaw the ideological upbringing of the staff, the dissemination of the Communist Party messages and ethos, and the organization of socialist festivals and customs in the workplace (Grīnvalde 2021: 43–47; cf. Karlson, Boldāne–Zeļenkova 2021: 61–62).

For Latvian folklorists, the repressive nature of Soviet regime – which included hostile surveillance of individuals, denunciations, tests of ideological suitability, criticism of “bourgeois scholarship”, public self-criticism, and other rituals of power – was already present in their institutional history during Stalin's totalitarian rule after the Second World War (Treija 2019). In the following decades, representatives of Soviet ideology were less harsh and more refined, yet their disfavor toward folklorists who were not entirely loyal to the ideology still resulted in individual acts of persecution.

For example, in the early 1970s, after unsanctioned, i.e. not coordinated with the Party, exploration and celebration of folk traditions such as the summer and winter solstices and traditional dances, Beatrise Reidzāne (b. 1942), Harijs Sūna (1923–1999), and Māra Vīksna (b. 1949) experienced KGB raids at their homes in search of banned literature: so-called *samizdat*<sup>3</sup>, exile publications, interwar-period books, and publications by Western authors. In Reidzāne's case, it resulted in her resignation from the Folklore Sector (until 1979). Only the fact that she was pregnant at the time allowed her to stay at the Institute, reassigned to the Dictionaries Sector. She was also discouraged from attending academic events, such as the 3rd All-Union Conference of Baltists in Vilnius in 1975, where she could potentially come into contact with Western academics and intellectuals who had emigrated from the Baltic States (interview, Reidzāne 2019; interview, Reidzāne 2022).

The musicologist Vilis Bendorfs, in turn, was summoned to the KGB's “Corner House”<sup>4</sup> for questioning about his activities in the folklore movement, his

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3 *Samizdat* (Russian *sam* ‘self’ + *izdatel'stvo* ‘publishing’) was illegal literature secretly circulated in the Soviet Union, usually provided by dissidents in few typewritten copies.

4 The ‘Corner House’ (*Stūra māja*) in Riga at 61 Brīvības Street was the headquarters of the KGB.

involvement in “national singing” with his ensemble *Sendziesma*, and also regarding the ensemble *Skandinieki* (interview, Bendorfs 2019). Sometimes KGB agents would come to the Folklore Department posing as regular visitors or readers of archival sources, and in friendly conversations tried to uncover anti-Soviet activities: “For example, he asked: ‘Where do you read exile literature? Where do you get exile books?’” (interview, Vīksna 2019). In numerous interviews (Darbiniece 2016; Vīksna 2019; Melne 2019; Olupe 2021; Rožkalne 2021; Reidzāne 2019), there is evidence that people felt that they were being observed and believed that the KGB had a presence in the Academy of Sciences building, where the Institute was located. It had its own working premises, the so-called Second Department. Among folklorists, there were always ambiguous suspicions and uneasy speculation: who among us is the informer cooperating with the KGB?

These conditions in the Folklore Department, as well as in institutions and working environments throughout occupied Latvia, created an Orwellian atmosphere – marked by caution, the moderation of dissenting opinions, and a persistent sensation that BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU. Any travel abroad – even within the USSR republics and socialist bloc countries, but even more so to the West – as well as the admission of foreign academic visitors to the Institute of Language and Literature, could only take place with the ideological approval and consent of the supervising bodies.

## **It Is Perilous to Look West**

Contacts with foreigners, whether through postal correspondence with relatives, the circulation of books not authorized by the ideological regime of the USSR, or listening to Radio Free Europe, the ‘flagship of the Western effort’ in the international context of Cold War broadcasting (Urban 1997: ix) – were all activities that could potentially lead to criminal proceedings. Any attempt to deviate from the ideologically defined path was always accompanied by suspicion on the part of the supervising authorities. The condemnation of an individual who broke the ban on unauthorized Western information – rarely dismissed by the State Security Committee as merely a personal matter – served as a clear warning to any potential risk-taker that such actions could have serious repercussions, potentially affecting family members, friends, colleagues, and one’s personal career.

Unsanctioned communication with the West – particularly with Latvians in exile – was grounds for incriminating a person as guilty of anti-Soviet initiatives. References to the constant surveillance of the State Security Committee, sometimes resulting in “invitations to negotiate”, are reflected in recent interviews with

both academics and members of the folklore movement, and other representatives of intelligentsia. The most thoroughly documented case among persons involved in the cultural sector seems to be the case of Valdis Muktupāvels (b. 1958), a key figure in the folklore movement and a musicologist. Starting from 1984, the KGB repeatedly carried out operational actions against Muktupāvels; he was tracked, and his correspondence was monitored. Several recruited KGB agents closely monitored his daily activities, provoked him, created compromising situations and later reported to their KGB superiors. In addition to cultivating nationalism, his transgressions against the Soviet regime included contacts with representatives of Western society, including frequent meetings in Riga during their visits (interview, Muktupāvels 2024). Regarding Muktupāvels, there is a considerable collection of documents from 1984–1987 prepared by KGB agents under the aliases ‘Ernests’, ‘Inga’, and ‘Lapsa’ (DELTA 302792, 308727, 309080, 310825, 310931, 310994, 310996–311003, 31005–31007, 311014).

In the 1980s, however, the KGB’s efforts to maintain full control over interactions between Latvians from the West and those in occupied Latvia were often unsuccessful – at least that is how they are revealed in interviews. For example, musicologist Arnolds Klotiņš (b. 1934) who kept mail contacts with some foreigners was unsuccessfully pressured to provide information about Latvian exiles to the KGB (interview, Klotiņš 2022b).<sup>5</sup> Another example of how KGB tactics had become all too familiar and therefore more easily circumvented comes from 1985, when folklore revivalist Ilga Reizniece (b. 1956) met Latvian-Canadian scholar, folk song researcher Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga (b. 1937) for the first time at Hotel *Latvia*. During their meeting, others present subtly gestured to Reizniece not to talk too much, as the hotel was known to be equipped with listening devices (interview, Reizniece 2022).

Nonetheless, the KGB was aware that, among intelligentsia, it was a matter of interest to get to know the capitalist part of the world. Therefore, this longing of the Soviet individual for countries beyond the Iron Curtain was exploited in the realm of cultural relations.

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5 When interviewed, Arnolds Klotiņš remembered a visit from a KGB agent to Latvian SSR Composers’ Union, where Klotiņš was serving as secretary at the time: “He started talking to me in all sorts of ways: ‘We are having difficulty finding out anything, we can’t find out where the youth congress meeting will take place. We know that you correspond with people abroad, so tell us when the congress will take place.’ I said that I would not provide any information without knowing how it would be used, but he kept pushing: ‘Maybe give us a call...’” (interview, Klotiņš 2022b).

## Travelling Within Restrictions

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union, including occupied Latvia, was largely closed off from the rest of the world. Both academic and private trips, even to other Soviet Socialist Republics, required official approval and was not available to every folklore researcher. Moscow and Leningrad (now Saint Petersburg) were the main centers of colonial power, and Latvian folklorists working on their dissertations frequently travelled there. Other USSR cities visited by researchers from the Folklore Department of the Institute of Language and Literature as part of academic missions included Gorky (now Nizhny Novgorod), Sverdlovsk (now Yekaterinburg), Kazan, Kuybyshev (now Samara), Ulyanovsk and Suzdal in the Russian SFSR; Kyiv and Chernivtsi in the Ukrainian SSR; Minsk in the Belarusian SSR; Kishinev (now Chişinău) in the Moldavian SSR; Tbilisi in the Georgian SSR; Grozny in the Chechen-Ingush ASSR; Alma-Ata (now Almaty) in the Kazakh SSR; Dushanbe in the Tajik SSR; and Võru in the Estonian SSR.

However, closer contacts, including regular mail correspondence, were maintained with colleagues from neighboring republics, such as Lithuanian folklorists in Vilnius and Estonian researchers in Tartu and Tallinn. Some members of the Folklore Department also participated in conferences held in other Soviet republics; they travelled to study in libraries and archives, to meet with other Soviet folklorists, and to discuss upcoming dissertations and the like. As the travel descriptions in the magazine *Vārds un Darbs* show, they also took the opportunity to go on tourist trips as far as they were allowed within the socialist bloc (Grīnvalde 2021: 51–52).

Likewise, to be published outside the USSR and its lingua franca, Russian, was a rarity. Folklorist Ojārs Ambainis (1926–1995) had one such opportunity in the face of constraints: in 1977, his collection of Latvian folklore *Latvian Fairy Tales* (*Lettische Volksmärchen*) was published in German. The book was released by *Akademie-Verlag* in Berlin, German Democratic Republic, as part of a series of books featuring selections of folk tales from different peoples of the USSR republics. Ambainis' selection was reprinted several times. In 1978, he was fortunate to be included in the USSR delegation to East Germany and travelled via Moscow and Berlin to Rostock, where he participated in a colloquium dedicated to Johann Gottfried Herder (Ambainis 1978).

Travel to the capitalist countries of the West was a privilege granted only to a small number of USSR citizens. This exclusive and tempting opportunity was offered to selected candidates by the Committees for Cultural Relations with Compatriots Abroad, which were units of the State Security Committee of the Soviet Union. In the Latvian SSR, such a committee was already functioning in 1955 (before its formal establishment in 1964) "to the objectives set by the KGB and under its close

supervision" (Eglāja-Kristsone 2006: 90). Located in the center at Gorky Street 11a<sup>6</sup>, the Committee brought together leading writers, artists, filmmakers, scientists and other members of the intelligentsia for focused collaboration. The Committee's declared tasks included promoting the cultural achievements of the Latvian SSR to Latvians who had fled to the West during the Second World War and were living in different countries. However, the real aim of the Committee, operating in the Cold War environment, was to destabilize the Western world (Eglāja-Kristsone 2006: 83).

The Committee did both organize visits of Soviet intellectuals to the West and gave exiles the chance to visit Riga. In order to reach out to Latvians abroad and to cover up the role of the KGB, the Committee operated under the names of various sub-organizations. These included cultural relations organizations. Cultural societies were set up for cooperation between the USSR and target countries in the West: Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Italy, France, Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, Spain, Portugal, Algeria, and several Latin American countries (see: *Latvijas un ārzemju kultūras sakaru biedrība*).

Imants Lešinskis (1931–1985)<sup>7</sup> who managed the Latvian SSR Committee for Cultural Relations with Compatriots Abroad from 1970–1976, described the mightiness of the organization, using a biblical allusion – a double-edged sword:<sup>8</sup> "To the great delight of the KGB, 'cultural relations' are a double-edged sword: by undermining the political activity of the exile community, they also contribute to the moral decline of the Latvian intelligentsia in their homeland" (Lešinskis 1985: 19).

That was during his time in office, when the focus on Latvian youth in exile and scholarly contacts was increased. The exchange of books, periodicals and sound recordings across both sides of the Iron Curtain was organized.<sup>9</sup> For the representatives of the Latvian exile community, the true intentions and the leadership role of the KGB in these cooperation activities were concealed by all possible means. For example, Western exiled scholars were formally invited to visit Riga by the Latvian

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6 Today, Krišjānis Valdemārs' Street 11a is the building of the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Latvia.

7 Imants Lešinskis was a KGB agent and a double agent for the Central Intelligence Agency. After defecting from the Soviet Union to the United States, he openly exposed the KGB's methods and disclosed his own activities to the Latvian exile community.

8 "For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Hebr. 4: 12).

9 Exile publications never reached the general public in the Latvian SSR. They were primarily collected and used for the purposes of the KGB operations.

SSR Academy of Sciences, although de facto invitations were prepared by its International Department run by KGB people (Lešinskis 1985: 27).

Similarly, young exiles who visited Latvia over several summers beginning in 1976 to take part in summer courses in which they were taught Latvian language, folklore and folk dances by local experts, according to Lešinskis, did not even realize that they had been under active KGB surveillance throughout these courses. Listening devices were reportedly used on youngsters in their accommodations in Jūrmala (Lešinskis 1985: 25–26).<sup>10</sup> The two-week summer course gathered lecturers who were experts in various fields of humanities, among them folklorists Elza Kokare (1920–2003) and Alma Ancelāne (1910–1991), musicologist Arnolds Klotiņš, linguist Aina Blinkena (1929–2017) (L. R. 1980).

In Latvian exile communities, the cultural relations initiated by the Soviets were generally treated with hostility and suspicion. Individuals involved in these activities were often criticized for collaborating with the communists, submitting to their propaganda, and thus legitimizing the occupation of Latvia (Eglāja-Kristsone 2013: 332; Krūmiņa 2020/2021: 63). The rhetoric at exile events and in the press was often very sharp: “A worm of cultural relations is chewing the apple of exile” (M. D. 1981); “The term ‘cultural relations’ was invented by the KGB in Moscow to cover their subversive activities.” (A. R. 1980); “Isn’t it finally time to break away from those who, with bent backs, hat in one hand and bouquet of flowers in the other, humbly greet and accompany the ‘cultural’ orderlies sent from Riga by the KGB?” (F. L. 1982). In contrast, official periodicals of the Latvian SSR and especially the KGB-curated propaganda newspaper *Dzimtenes Balss* (Voice of the Homeland), addressed to exiles, presented cultural relations as a mutually necessary, thriving, generous and humane activity (see Lešinskis 1985: 2–3).

## Visits to Riga

Two individuals who did not stay only on the Western side of the Iron Curtain, but consistently and purposefully visited the Latvian SSR to promote scientific processes among scholars in occupied Latvia, were computer scientist Imants Freibergs (1934–2026) and psychologist Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga (b. 1937).<sup>11</sup>

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10 Testimonies from young exiles who travelled to the Latvian SSR during this period reveal awareness that the summer courses were a means of Soviet propaganda and that the Committee for Cultural Relations had ulterior motives to gather information about the exile community, using secret surveillance among its methods (see: Akerberga 1981: 27).

11 After Latvia regained its independence, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga became active in politics, serving as President of the Republic of Latvia from 1999 to 2007.

In addition to their respective academic fields and responsibilities, they devoted their professional interests to creating the first computerized corpus of Latvian folk songs and to studying folk songs based on technological methods. Based in Montreal, Canada, the Freibergs maintained contacts with Latvians in occupied Riga – efforts that were often quite harshly criticized within the Latvian exile community. Continuing this work required a strong internal position and resilience. Their experiences have been well documented (interview, Freibergs 2015; interview, Freibergs, Vīķe-Freiberga 2023; interview, Freibergs 2023; interview, Vīķe-Freiberga 2023; Cimdīņa 2001: 97–106; Freibergs 2024: 106–137).

As a computer scientist, Imants Freibergs made a major contribution to Latvian folklore studies. Together with his wife, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, he pioneered the digitization of Latvian folklore. The project began in 1966 at McGill University in Montreal, Canada, when they received a grant from the Canadian government to carry out this work. This pioneering step was taken several decades before the digitization of folklore manuscripts in various countries around the world began to take off with the increasing development of information technology.

Imants Freibergs presented a paper on the initial results of the computerization of folk songs at the 1967 Congress of Latvian Scientists in Montreal. A delegation of Soviet Latvian scientists – Jānis Stradiņš (1933–2019), Juris Ekmanis (1941–2016), Emīlija Gudreniece (1920–2004), as well as Vilis Samsons (1920–2011) from the Academy of Sciences of the Latvian SSR, were present at this conference. This marked the first contact between the Freibergs couple and scientists from the other side of the Iron Curtain, initiating a long and productive cooperation with representatives of the Latvian SSR.

The Freibergs were willing to host Soviet guests in their home and sought to acquaint themselves and their children not only with interwar Latvian literature, but also with contemporary works being written on the other side of the Iron Curtain. “In the late 1980s, groups of artists from Latvia – poets, singers, actors, folklore groups – started coming to visit us regularly. [...] Those who came found out what life was like in the West – not just from the stories they heard in Soviet Latvia” (Freibergs 2024: 108).

Both Imants Freibergs and Vaira Vīķe-Freibergs received official invitations from the Latvian SSR Academy of Sciences to visit Riga on professional visits. Vīķe-Freiberga had already visited Riga individually in 1969, when she presented a research paper to a relatively small audience of Soviet Latvian scholars in the humanities. She later reflected on this meeting and the unfriendly reactions of the local researchers:

In 1969 I came and gave my first paper on charms. To a small, very selective group of members, chosen by the Archives of Folklore [Folklore Sector], at the end of which there was a deafening silence. Because they were all completely dumbfounded by the way I had analyzed these folk song texts, and they didn't know how to react. And now there is the silence of death and the sternness of death. And then comrade Kalniņš, who was the head of the sector, spoke up, he said: 'Oh, I remember my sister, every time she went to milk the cows, she used to recite the proverbs, so that the milk in cow's udder would start to flow.' [...] And then immediately the ice seemed to melt, and others in the audience, in a very gentle way, allowed themselves to make a few comments. But you have to understand that this was a situation where... If I happened to go from one room to another, I had Kārlis Arājs in my company. One of the folklorists or one of the linguists from the Folklore Sector would come towards me, and when he saw me, he would freeze as if in fear and almost look as if he wanted to crawl inside the wall. He sticks to the wall and walks past me as if there were a dragon or a beast coming towards him. Not alone, and for several days I noticed the same reaction. And it was only after Latvia regained its independence that Kārlis Arājs, with whom we became friends, told me that they had all been warned not to come near me, not to talk to me. Because I was a CIA agent and a very dangerous person. And the KGB followed me... (interview, Vīķe-Freiberga 2023).

The atmosphere of fear that prevailed during meetings with exiles was mentioned in an interview with Arnolds Klotiņš: "Do I remember the first or the second occasion of [Vaira Vīķe-] Freiberga's visit? We were all invited upstairs to a bigger room. At the elevator, someone asked me: 'May I come too?' The people were frightened – terribly mute" (interview, Klotiņš 2022a). With lectures in Riga, the Latvian SSR, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga from Canada returned on the occasion of the five-year celebration of Krišjānis Barons' 150th anniversary: in April 1983, when she and her husband Imants Freibergs gave a lecture on folk song research, and in 1985, when she gave a stand-alone lecture on the structure of folk songs on May 22 (Ancītis 1987: 325–326).

Imants Freibergs's first professional visit took place in 1973, when the whole Freibergs family visited their country of origin. In his report to the Latvian Academy of Sciences, Freibergs talked about computerization of songs and its advantages, trying to convince that such work could also be possible in the Latvian SSR, where rich collections of Latvian folklore were preserved. Among the audience were literary scholar Viktors Hausmanis (1931–2023), and folklore researcher Kārlis Arājs (1929–2001), who responded enthusiastically to the idea.

However, serious computerization of folk songs in Riga began in the early 1980s, when Imants Freibergs met physicist Harijs Bondars (1942–2011),<sup>12</sup> who was able to attract human resources for the so-called Riga Song Project. The participants were students from the Faculty of Physics and Mathematics at the Latvian

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12 The archive of Latvian SSR KGB documents reveals his connection with the KGB – he was an agent operating under the code name 'Sandis'.





Figure 1. Imants Freibergs giving a presentation in Rīga in 1984.  
Photo by Vaira Strautniece.  
LFK 2184, 19840013

State University, who worked on the transcription of Krišjānis Barons's *Latvju dainas* (Latvian Folk Songs; 6 volumes, 1894–1915) as part of their study program.

This meticulous and highly specialized work (see Kokina, Rāta 1991: 4) lasted until 1994 and was carefully coordinated by Harijs Bondars. The folklorist Kārlis Arājs advised the IT project in terms of content, and also edited the texts. Imants Freibergs, in his turn, attracted Western funding for the next major phase of the digitization of Latvian folklore: the digital transfer of Krišjānis Barons's Folk Song Cabinet (*Dainu Skapis*). This work was carried out at the Archives of Latvian Folklore during the 1990s and early 2000s and, with the involvement of the entrepreneur Ainars Brūvelis (b. 1965), culminated in the online availability of the collection (see *dainuskapis.lv*). This chain of key events illustrates how engagement in the cultural relations contributed to the digitization of the intangible cultural heritage and the implementation of fundamental projects in Latvian folklore studies.

Another benefit – or added value – of cultural relations in the field of folklore studies was experienced in Latvian Soviet literature: it manifested in thematic collections of Latvian folk songs. Inspired by the Freibergs's project of computerizing folk songs, a series of small books titled *My Folk Song* (*Mana tautasdziesma*) was published, each accompanied by forewords and commentaries by the compilers. The most popular selections in Latvia in the 1980s were those compiled by the renowned poet Imants Ziedonis (1933–2013), who was an active participant in cultural exchange on the Latvian SSR side (Eglāja-Kristsone 2013: 83; Cimdiņa 2001: 108).

Imants Freibergs also visited Riga in 1983 and 1984. In 1984, he gave a presentation titled *Studying Folk Songs with Mathematical Methods* at a symposium on folk song translation held at the Latvian SSR Writers' Union (see Figure 1). The

symposium was part of an international conference *Folk Song and Contemporary Culture*, organized jointly by Andrejs Upīts's Institute of Language and Literature at the Latvian SSR Academy of Sciences and the Latvian SSR Writers' Union. Another exile participant at the symposium was Latvian-American linguist Valdis Zeps (1932–1996), who delivered a paper titled *Folk Song Metrics and Rhythmics*. Despite the international scope of the conference, the exile guests were kept at a distance from local and other socialist-bloc scientists for ideological security reasons. For example, during a trip to Turaida, the Westerners were placed on a separate bus (interview, Darbiniece 2016). This was likely done for the convenience of KGB surveillance.

Vaira Viķe-Freiberga and Imants Freibergs were among the few exile scholars who actively shared their research interests with academics in Riga during visits made under Soviet occupation. In the 1970s, Riga was also visited by Latvian folklorist Biruta Senkēviča (Senkēviča-Ziemane, 1904–1993), then residing in Canada. A former employee of the Archives of Latvian Folklore and author of several books in the Archives' B series, she had continued her folklore research in exile. However, Senkēviča's visit to the Latvian SSR was motivated by personal family reasons. Moreover, in the exile public sphere, she strongly condemned cultural contacts with persons in the Latvian SSR and criticized travelling to communist-occupied Latvia (Cimdiņa 2001: 101–102).

A frequent visitor to Soviet-occupied Latvia and one of the exiles open to cultural relations with compatriots was philologist Austris Grasis (b. 1942), a lecturer at the University of Bonn in Germany. As he pointed out in a recent interview, he was fully aware from the outset that cultural relations were organized and monitored by the KGB. Despite that, unlike the older generation of exiles, for him – and for many other young people of Latvian origin – it was a strong and conscious choice to get closer to their compatriots in the Latvian SSR (interview, Grasis 2025; cf. Freibergs 2024: 107). Most Latvian exiles who visited the Latvian SSR within the framework of cultural relations were similarly informed, yet maintained a critical perspective that allowed them to distinguish between propaganda and factual claims (Zālīte 1998). Starting with a summer language course in the 1970s organized by the Committee for Cultural Relations with Compatriots Abroad, Grasis tried to visit Riga often, actively seeking contact and establishing connections with Latvian linguists and folklorists. Grasis visited the Folklore Department at Andrejs Upīts's Institute of Language and Literature, where he was received "kindly, but not with much interest" (interview, Grasis 2022b). The main person he met there was the Head of the Folklore Department, Elza Kokare. However, his first meeting with Jadviga Darbiniece took place in Stockholm in 1985, when she participated in the Eighth Conference on Baltic Studies in Scandinavia.

Visits to the Latvian SSR brought Austris Grasis together with folklorist Jānis Rozenbergs (1927–2006) and his wife, ethnographer Velta Rozenberga (1929–1997), who kindly allowed Grasis to visit the Latvian folk costume exhibition at the Latvian State History Museum outside office hours and take as many photographs as he wished. It was 1985 when Grasis was particularly drawn to Latvian folklore and national costumes. “[The photos] which I later travelled all over the world with, with a collection of slides. I was in America, Australia, giving a paper on folk costume” (interview, Grasis 2022a; cf. interview, Grasis 2025). In the following years, Austris Grasis addressed various Latvian communities in their homes, inviting them to get to know better and honor their national costume (Grasis 1987; Zariņš 1987). The cross-border visits of Austris Grasis, as well as his activities in the Western world, were reflected in the KGB monitoring reports (DELTA 304029, 309859, 310139, 312370, 30101).

## Latvian SSR Guests in Stockholm

During the second Soviet occupation (1944–1990), only two individuals from the Folklore Department of the Institute of Language and Literature at the Latvian SSR Academy of Sciences undertook academic trips outside the socialist bloc. Both, as Heads of the Folklore Department,<sup>13</sup> took the opportunity to visit Stockholm as part of cultural contacts: Elza Kokare in 1981 and Jadviga Darbiniece (b. 1936) in 1985. These trips were rewards for their professional work and smooth ideological loyalty.

For Elza Kokare, the long-time Head of the Department, this was her second attempt to cross the Baltic Sea and visit the West. In the early 1970s, she was preparing to give lectures at the University of Helsinki, where she had been invited. Her lecture course, focusing on comparative proverb research, was scheduled for the 1973/1974 academic year. Such an opportunity was very rare for Soviet scholars, and Kokare prepared for the upcoming event with great care, including additional study of German, the foreign language she planned to use for the lectures. However, this remarkable academic work was suspended after the younger generation of the Folklore Department was accused of unsanctioned and nationalist activities (see the subchapter *Being Watched*), as well as for having direct contact with Lithuanian folklorists and members of the Lithuanian folklore movement. Later, one of them, Beatrise Reidzāne, ironically commented on the repressive nature of ideological monitors:

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13 Elza Kokare served as Head of the Folklore Department (Sector) for over 30 years (1953–1985). She was succeeded by Jadviga Darbiniece, who held the position from 1985 to 1993.

Research itself and the management of research work is only one of the duties of a Soviet leader; there is another duty – the education of cadres, especially young cadres, to become true Soviet people, internationalists, in the constant struggle against the manifestations of nationalism, which are especially dangerous in such an ideologically important place as the study of folklore (Reidzāne 2011: 133).

After being denied the opportunity to go to Helsinki, several years later Elza Kokare was given another chance to travel as a representative of the Latvian SSR Academy of Sciences – this time to Sweden. In 1981, she participated in the Sixth Conference on Baltic Studies in Scandinavia, held from June 5 to 8 in Stockholm. The conference was sponsored by the Baltic Scientific Institute in Scandinavia, in cooperation with the University of Stockholm and the Royal Academy of Music. Elza Kokare's paper, *Das Problem der Genese internationaler Sprichwörter in der lettischen Folklore* (The Problem of the Genesis of International Proverbs in Latvian Folklore), was included in the second Plenary Session, chaired by Baiba Kangere (b. 1942, Baltic Scientific Institute) and Austris Grasis (University of Bonn). Another representative supported by Soviet cultural relations who presented at the same Plenary Session was poet Māris Čaklais (1914–2013), who, on behalf of the Latvian SSR Writers' Union, gave a speech on the newest Latvian poetry (Sixth Conference 1981: 396). The conference marked the 10th anniversary of the Baltic Scientific Institute and was well attended, bringing together 120 scientists from 18 countries. Although both Kokare's and Čaklais's papers were recognized as interesting by the exile press, the conference itself was seen as controversial. The debate revolved around whether, and to what extent, the KGB was taking part in organizing the event by delegating presenters from the occupied Baltic countries – that is, how apolitical and ideologically independent this academic forum actually was (V. 1981).

There is no doubt that Elza Kokare's visit was organized by the Committee for Cultural Relations with Compatriots Abroad. First, it was in fact the only legal opportunity for scholars to travel abroad under the occupation, and it was granted to a very small group of people selected by the KGB. Second, she was mentioned in the propaganda newspaper *Dzimtenes Balss* among Latvian SSR scientists, artists, actors, filmmakers, writers, and other cultural figures who benefited from opportunities to travel abroad in 1981 (see Baranovskis 1981).

Elza Kokare herself, in her trip report *Some Thoughts on the Stockholm Conference*, noted that her feelings about the visit to Stockholm were contradictory. Although she appreciated the opportunity – which had long been a dream of hers to visit the Nordic countries in person – she felt uneasy about the impending contact with exiled Latvians, or "emigrants", toward whom she had never felt particular interest. Moreover, the forthcoming conference was overshadowed by risks: according to

Kokare, it was expected that Soviet scholars might be targeted for sabotage or protest actions led by activist Bruno Kalniņš, including a potential boycott of the conference (Kokare 1981: 16, 18–19). That such protest sentiments, though not manifested, were in the air is also evidenced by poet Čaklais's writing in the newspaper *Literatūra un Māksla* (Literature and Art):

The 6th Baltic Studies Conference, in which I had the opportunity to participate with the paper *The Glance in the New Latvian Poetry (the Invisible Presence of Folklore)*, was an exchange of honest monologues, the next stage of which could be a dialogue. This stage was perfectly understandable, as it was in line with the Institute's own declared aims, and it was also the first time that scholars from the three Baltic republics took part in a conference of this size (the previous one had been attended by four Estonian representatives). The Baltic Institute itself, as well as Stockholm University and the Royal Academy of Music, were apparently solid enough organizations not to allow politicizing battle-mace wavers to prevail, and the atmosphere at Hässelby Palace was one of professional work for all four days (Čaklais 1985: 15).

Protest culture was highly developed in the Latvian exile community: especially Latvian youth seized any opportunity to draw attention in their home countries or on the international stage to the fact of Latvia's occupation. Unlike other diasporas in Western Europe, Latvian exile was political exile, and political activism aimed at being heard by Western governments was part of the community's agenda. The Soviets, on the other hand, tried by all means to silence the anti-Communist activities of the exiles: from repatriations, to later, more subtly presented efforts to persuade them to return to Latvia, to recruiting informants within the exile community (Zaļkalne 2018: 11). Exile political activism withstood Soviet propaganda pressure for several decades. Latvian protests took many creative forms:

Latvianness included politics at all levels: participating in international conferences, petitioning statesmen, playing political street theatre, disrupting a Soviet statesman's visit with a piglet, holding a happening with mice, marrying a dissident, painting posters, distributing event programmes with altered content, participating in joint actions of oppressed peoples, wearing T-shirts with appropriate slogans, allowing themselves to be arrested (Beķere 2018: 12).

Overseas missions organized by the Committee for Cultural Relations with Compatriots Abroad in 1981 were primarily designed to weaken Latvian national activism in exile. The ethos demonstrated by the Committee to Latvians abroad, under the tension and the threat of exposure was as follows:

In the face of attempts by the reactionary Latvian emigration to torpedo the efforts of Latvians living abroad to expand contacts and cultural relations with Soviet Latvia, using anti-Soviet fabrications and slandering the Committee for Cultural Relations, concrete work was carried out, to make the achievements of Soviet Latvia, especially in science and culture, even more widely known to

compatriots abroad, by organizing more exhibitions abroad, more presentations by all the most prominent masters of culture and art and outstanding scientists of the republic, and, together with *Intūrists*,<sup>14</sup> diversifying the stay of foreign tourists of Latvian origin in Latvia (Baranovskis 1981: 4).

Thus, researchers and other delegates from the Latvian SSR were not only representatives of their fields at academic or cultural events, but also, by their presence, active Soviet players in the Cold War tensions between the West and the USSR.

Elza Kokare's impressions of the conference were fragmentary, as it was very large and she was unable to attend all the papers of interest. In her summary, Kokare concluded:

The overall impression is that the level of presentations varied widely – from more or less in-depth treatment of individual problems to informative overviews. However, all are characterized by an avoidance of deliberate aggravation of relations and an attempt to find understanding. I will not, of course, present the content of the papers here. I would only like to mention Austris Grasis' presentation on the study of the Curonian language, which included demonstrations of particular recordings. He promised to bring these recordings and provide them to the linguists at our institute (Kokare 1981: 18).

By "avoidance of deliberate aggravation of relations," Kokare was more likely referring to the culture of academic debate she observed during the conference sessions than to the larger geopolitical picture in which the conference took place.

In her essay, Elza Kokare also shared her impressions of Stockholm itself: the nature, parks, architecture, and various local young people, including street musicians (Kokare 1981: 17). The Latvian SSR visitor expressed the emotion she felt during the social intervals of the conference at the lively interest of foreign Latvians in Latvian language, folklore and music-making: "Are we singing properly? Is this how Latvian ethnographic ensembles sing?"<sup>15</sup> (Kokare 1981: 19).

In 1985, when Latvians on both sides of the Iron Curtain celebrated the 150th anniversary of Krišjānis Barons, the Eighth Conference on Baltic Studies in Scandinavia took place in Stockholm on June 7–11. Similar to 1981, the conference was sponsored by the Institute in Scandinavia and the Centre for Baltic Studies at the University of Stockholm, in cooperation with the Royal Academy of Music.

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14 *Intūrists* (Intourist), or *Inturist* (in Russian), was a shareholder company of the Soviet Union. The Riga branch had the difficult task of carrying out political and informational work aimed at convincing the "enemies of socialism" of the success of communism and its advantages (Riekstiņš 2001: 11; cf. Lipša 2017).

15 The enquirers were members of *Mālu ansamblis* (Clay Ensemble), a theatre group from Australia and Stockholm, Sweden, which, alongside theatre, was also dedicated to performing Latvian folk music.



Figure 2. Viktors Hausmanis and Jadviga Darbiniece in Stockholm in 1985. Photo by Austris Grasis. LFK 2250, 34

The sections on Baltic folklore, eight in total, were organized by exile Latvian Baiba Kangere from the University of Stockholm. Professor Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga,<sup>16</sup> serving as President of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies at that time, gave the lecture *The Work of Krišjānis Barons and its Significance for Latvian Culture* at the opening session of the conference. The delegation from the Latvian SSR was quite numerous; among the participants were representatives from the Writers' Union (Jānis Peters, Jānis Kalniņš, Saulcerīte Viese, Māra Misiņa, Liliņa Dzene), as well as two guests from the Latvian SSR Academy of Sciences: Director of the Andrejs Upīts's Institute of Language and Literature, Viktors Hausmanis,<sup>17</sup> and Head of its Folklore Department, Jadviga Darbiniece (see Figure 2). Hausmanis's paper *Die Folklore und Lettische Theater* (Folklore and Latvian Theatre), was

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16 Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga was President of the AABS from 1984 to 1986.

17 Viktors Hausmanis served as Director of the Andrejs Upīts's Institute of Language and Literature at the Latvian SSR Academy of Sciences (since 1992, the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art of the University of Latvia) from 1983 to 1999.



included in the plenary session chaired by Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga and Austris Grasis. Darbiniece, in her turn, presented her paper *Kr. Barons's Heritage and the Academic Edition of 'Latviešu tautasdziesmas'* at the second session of the conference (Eighth Conference 1985: 173–174). The KGB agent “Borisov” had taken notes of both of them and other representatives of the Latvian SSR visiting Stockholm (DELTA 302970).

Jadviga Darbiniece, in a life story interview recorded in 2016 (interview, Darbiniece 2016), recalled her working life at the Folklore Department in the 1970s and 1980s as very beautiful and uplifting. At that time, folklore was of interest to a growing number in the general public, as well as to many creative figures – such as poets Imants Ziedonis and Knuts Skujenieks, composer Raimonds Pauls, filmmaker Andris Slapiņš, and others – who came to the Institute to study folklore recordings for their creative projects.

In this atmosphere of folkloric elation shortly before the Third Awakening or the so-called Singing Revolution (1986–1991), Jadviga Darbiniece travelled to Stockholm to attend the Eighth Conference on Baltic Studies in Scandinavia. She recalled the grandeur with which the anniversary of Krišjānis Barons was celebrated in Stockholm:

Stockholm University hosted the Krišjānis Barons Jubilee Conference [...] in 1985. And we were all there. All the expats were there, Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga was already in front. Oh, it was a big anniversary! At the State level! We had lunch in the Golden Hall, we drank champagne. [...] Austris Grasis took us in his car to show us around Stockholm's Old Town. [...] Nobody took us there, but Grasis came in his car, picked us up and took us to have a look (interview, Darbiniece 2016).

The Baltic Studies Conference in 1985 brought Latvians in Sweden, Germany, and other Western countries closer together with those in the Latvian SSR. Participation in the conference in Stockholm gave the Latvian exile linguist and folklore researcher Velta Rūķe-Draviņa (1917–2003) the opportunity to get to know Jadviga Darbiniece. Since 1970, Professor Rūķe-Draviņa had been teaching a special course on Latvian folk songs at Stockholm Evening University. In 1987, Jadviga Darbiniece was invited to give several guest lectures at the university.

While visiting Sweden in 1985, together with Viktors Hausmanis, Darbiniece also met with the exile Latvian playwright Mārtiņš Zīverts (1903–1990). Both Rūķe-Draviņa and Zīverts were among those who had previously travelled to the Latvian SSR. Thanks to such cultural contacts, by the time of the collapse of the USSR, some signs of engagement and familiarity between Latvians in Latvia and Latvians abroad were already visible. However, it was only after 1990, free from ideological oversight and policing, that a more active reunification of the divided nation could begin.



## Conclusions

This article has examined the nature of scholarly exchanges between Western researchers of Latvian origin and Latvian SSR folklorists during the Cold War, with a particular focus on the 1980s. Despite the geopolitical division symbolized by the Iron Curtain, some cases of cross-border engagement did occur. Based on interviews, archival sources, and published historical evidence, it can be concluded that in the field of folklore studies, no stable international networks of scholarly cooperation existed between the West and the Latvian SSR; however, there were several vivid individual cases. Among the guests from beyond the Iron Curtain were Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga, Imants Freibergs, and Austris Grasis, who visited Riga, the capital of the Latvian SSR, on several occasions. Conversely, the Latvian Soviet folklorists who managed to attend the Baltic studies conferences in Stockholm, Sweden – organized by the exile community – were Elza Kokare and Jadviga Darbiniece.

The freedom of Latvian folklorists to travel and exchange academic ideas during the Cold War was, understandably, very limited. Paradoxically, it was the KGB and the Committees for Cultural Relations with Compatriots Abroad – established by the KGB – that facilitated not only short-term academic visits between the separated Latvian worlds of 20th-century history (namely, to Riga and to Stockholm), but also contributed to long-term projects involving both sides, such as the digitization of Latvian folklore.

The issues raised in this article can certainly be explored further. In the author's opinion, each episode of contact between the West and the Latvian SSR mentioned here could be developed individually into a broader analytical narrative.

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