

**TITLE: AGARAIAN REFORM IN LATVIA: THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

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**THE NATIONAL COUNCIL  
FOR SOVIET AND EAST EUROPEAN RESEARCH**

***TITLE VIII PROGRAM***

1755 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20036

PROJECT INFORMATION:<sup>1</sup>

CONTRACTOR: Iowa State University  
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COUNCIL CONTRACT NUMBER: 810-23  
DATE: October 22, 1996

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<sup>1</sup> *The work leading to this report was supported in part by contract funds provided by the National Council for Soviet and East European Research, made available by the U. S. Department of State under Title VIII (the Soviet-Eastern European Research and Training Act of 1983, as amended). The analysis and interpretations contained in the report are those of the author(s).*

## CONTENTS

Abstract .....	1
Introduction .....	1
Usable frameworks .....	3
The Agrarian Reform Law of 1920 .....	6
An Inventory of Agrarian Reforms in Latvia 1804-1995 .....	8
The Latvian Farmer and the State .....	12
The Scattered Farmstead System .....	14
The Family Demography of the Latvian Rural Population .....	15
Conclusion .....	16

# Agrarian Reform in Latvia: The Historical Context<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Agrarian reformers in current post-Soviet Latvia appear to be frustrated at the slow pace of reform and with its unintended consequences. Yet an historical view of agrarian reform in the Latvian territories since the early nineteenth century would suggest that the current reforms are not radically different in duration from the earlier. The earlier reforms included serf emancipation in the 1816-1819 period (lasting until the early 1830s), farmland purchase in the decades between 1855 and 1885, major land redistribution from 1920 to 1937, collectivization from about 1945 to 1955, and the attempted destruction of the dispersed farmstead system from the early 1960s to the mid-1980s. The current reforms began in 1990 (while Latvia was still part of the USSR) and have lasted until the present (five years after the regaining of independence). A systematic examination (as yet not completed) of earlier reforms suggests that reforms lasting for more than a decade were historically the norm in Latvia. It is also clear that the ultimate outcomes of reform were not necessarily those that the reformers had in mind. Each of the earlier reforms, in fact, created problems that a new generation of reformers had to cope with. The emancipation of serfs created a labor rent system, the land-purchase reforms enlarged the number of landless, the interwar reforms created the chronic problem of smallholdership, and collectivization resulted in corruption and inefficiency. Although past reforms were often touted as providing incentives for Latvian farmers to enlarge their families, in the long term there does not appear to be a *direct* relationship between agrarian reform and demographic patterns. Since the mid-nineteenth century, the Latvian rural population has exhibited a preference for relatively late marriages, for staying unmarried, and for a relatively small numbers of children per family.

## Introduction

Even though it has now entered its sixth year of regained independence, Latvia still seems in many respects to be in a state of transition. The reforms it initiated in the 1990-1991 period generated new and difficult problems, thus moving the long-awaited goal of normality just out of reach. This situation is especially evident in the area of agrarian reform. The dismantling of the collective agriculture of the Soviet period and the creation of some 64,000 new production units – mostly small, privately owned family farms – was accompanied by a precipitous drop in productivity that in 1996 stood at just over a half of the 1987-1989 (late Soviet) period level.<sup>2</sup> Such an outcome has generated a lively debate

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 15th Conference of Baltic Studies, Bentley College, Waltham, Mass. in June, 1996. This research has been funded by a grant from the National Council for Soviet and East European Research (Grant 810-23 “Socio-Economic Consequences of Agrarian Reform: The Case of Latvia”), for which the authors express their gratitude.

<sup>2</sup> Arturs Boruks, *Zemnieks, zeme, un zemkopība Latvija* [The Farmer, Land, and Agriculture in Latvia] (Riga: Gramatvedis, 1995), pp. 399, 407.

over whether the productivity decline was “caused” by the land reform or by work habits created in the Soviet period, whether the central government should “protect” family farmers or let competition work its way, and whether “entering Europe” means the inevitable reduction of the role of the farmer (and agriculture generally) in Latvian life and thus, many fear, a transformation of Latvian national identity. To outsiders, and to the many Latvians unacquainted with their own history, the seeming inability of the country to conclude reform (and thus the transition from communism to normality) may appear to be unprecedented, and, in some respects, they are right. But land reform itself, its economic consequences (whatever these will ultimately be), and the feeling of unfulfillment the reform has continued to generate, are in fact perennial themes in the history of the Latvian people and their state. The contemporary idiom in which these matters are now discussed tends to hide the fact that the recent reforms are one of a series of similar reforms – arguably links in a long chain -- that began at the turn of the nineteenth century.

The current debate is not completely oblivious to this fact. A few publications have sought to raise consciousness of precedent by drawing exact parallels between the current reforms and the land reforms of the 1920s and 1930s, the first period of Latvian independence.<sup>3</sup> In most popular discourse, however, knowledge of the rural past remains fragmented and decontextualized. It takes the form of admiring references to the interwar authoritarian regime of Karlis Ulmanis (1934-1940), leader of the Agrarian Union political party and champion of an agriculture-based Latvia; as well as in the use of the term “barons” for successful farmers, which raises images of the Baltic German baronial landed estates that shaped the everyday lives of Latvian peasants from the medieval centuries onward. An even more curious but still-living usage refers to state-owned land, and to military service, as the “Tsar’s land” and “serving the Tsar,” which is a reminder of the centuries when all Latvians were subjects of the Romanov dynasty. These somewhat tongue-in-cheek phrases do suggest a continuing awareness of some long-term continuities that even the Soviet-period (1945-1991) educational system, depicting the Soviet era as a higher stage of historical development and an absolute break with an oppressive past, was unable to eliminate completely. The recent past has also started to look rosier. In the September-October, 1995, parliamentary election, Alberts Kauls, erstwhile director of the large model collective farm “Adazi” and member of Michael Gorbachev’s advisory panel on rural reform, became a popular figure – as a man

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<sup>3</sup>Jazeps Zelonka, *Ka to darija toreiz: ieskats 20-30.gadu agraraja reforma* How they did it then: insights into the agrarian reforms of the 1920s and 1930s (Riga: Zinatne, 1991), No. 24 in the series “Science for Rural Areas.”

who had “friends in high places in Moscow” and “could get things done” -- and for a brief period in 1995-1996 was asked to serve as Minister of Agriculture. Though Latvian historians of Latvian agriculture portray the collective-farm era as a debacle and a “deformation” of the Latvian “historic” preference for individualized farming, this sentiment may not be as widespread among the contemporary Latvian farmers themselves.<sup>4</sup>

### **Usable Frameworks**

The current frustrations with land reform creates an opportunity for a review of reforms of this type in the Latvian past, and for establishing a larger frameworks in which the Latvian reforms can be placed. Unfortunately, English-language academic writing about agrarian reform in the European past does not form a coherent body of specialized research. Suggestive works conceptualizing the subject historically are few, while the bulk of the social science literature in recent decades has focused largely on land reform in the developing world.<sup>5</sup> Historians have tended to subsume agrarian reform under the general rubric of “modernization,” along with such other aspects of the phenomenon as urbanization, industrialization, and demographic change. In European countries where agrarian reform played an important role in national pasts, it is absorbed into national histories and conceptualized (as well as justified) as an inevitable component of national development. Yet any survey of the such reforms in the European, and particularly eastern European, past would suggest that they constitute a genre of transformations that would benefit from comparative analysis cross-culturally and longitudinally.<sup>6</sup> Virtually every one of the new eastern European countries (including the three Baltic states<sup>7</sup>) formed

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Heinrihs Strods, Latvijas lauksaimniecības vesture [History of Latvian Agriculture] (Riga: Zvaigzne, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> The historically oriented analyses are Elias Tuma, Twenty-six Centuries of Agrarian Reform: A Comparative Analysis (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965); Folke Doving, Land and Labor in Europe in the Twentieth Century: A Comparative Survey of Recent Agrarian History (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965); and John P. Powelson, The Story of Land: A World History of Land Tenure and Agrarian Reform (Cambridge, Mass.: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1988).

For a typical example of the latter category see Erich H. Jacoby, Man and Land: The Essential Revolution (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971) (in collaboration with Charlotte F. Jacoby).

<sup>6</sup> A useful survey is Agrarian Reform in Western Countries ( Bombay: The Indian Society of Agricultural Economics, 1946).

<sup>7</sup> For a comparative assessment see Andrejs Plakans, “Agrarian Reform in the Baltic States Between the World Wars: An Historical Overview,” in An Overview of Rural Development Strategies for the Baltics. Report No. BR-9, Center for Agricultural and Rural Development, Iowa State University, 1993. For the Estonian interwar agrarian reform, see Anu Mai Köll, Peasants On the World Market: Agricultural Experience of Independent Estonia 1919-1939. (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 1994); and for Latvia Inesis Feiferis, “Agrarian Reform in Latvia,” in *Agricultural*

after World War I as a result of the collapse of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman Empires carried out an agrarian reform (or several), and many of the same countries repeated the step after the collapse of Soviet bloc in Europe.<sup>8</sup> The call issued by Tuma in 1965 for a “theory” of agrarian reform at least in part based on historical experience (when outcomes are known), and permitting better evaluations of proposed agrarian reform schemes, has not been answered at this writing.<sup>9</sup>

To date, our collaborative research on the historical micro-social structures (families, households and kin groups) of the Latvian peasantry in the nineteenth century has sought to place empirical findings within the framework of the theory of the demographic transition.<sup>10</sup> The provenance of the historical sources we used, however, reminded us continually that the population changes we were examining were concurrent with what seemed in the nineteenth century to be an unceasing series of agrarian reforms. A glance into the twentieth century revealed a continuation of the same dyadic dance: continuing population changes alongside at least three so-designated agrarian reforms. This led to the open questions of whether the two variables were related, which could not be answered until our knowledge of the two-centuries long series of Latvian agrarian reforms was systematized. In the present paper, we offer some preliminary results of that systematization effort, and in future publications we intend to pursue the connection itself. Our working premise is that (1) because family/household size and structure (as well as demographic phenomena) are at least in part the result of economic expectations at the family level; and (2) because agrarian reform in Latvia always affected the

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*Transformation and Privatization in the Baltics*. Report 92-BR7 of the Center for Agricultural and Rural Development. Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Ifor L. Evans, *The Agrarian Revolution in Roumania* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924); Folke Dovring, *Land Reform in Hungary* (Washington, DC: Agency for International Development, 1970); Folke Dovring, *Land Reform in Yugoslavia* (Washington DC: Agency for International Development, 1970); the essays by George and Patricia V. Klein on Yugoslavia, Trond Gilberg on Romania, Tadeusz N. Cieplak on Poland, and Joseph Held on Hungary in Ivan Volgyes, ed. *The Peasantry of Eastern Europe*, Volume II (New York: Pergamon Press, 1979); and League of Nations European Conference on Rural Life. *Contributions of the International Institute of Agriculture*. (Rome: The League of Nations, 1939). A magisterial comparative and historically oriented study of various parts of the European continent is Folke Dovring, *Land and Labor in Europe 1900-1950* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1956).

<sup>9</sup> Tuma, *Twenty-Six Centuries*, pp. 3-7.

<sup>10</sup> Andrejs Plakans and Charles Wetherell, "The Kinship Domain in an Eastern European Peasant Community: Pinkenhof, 1833-1850," *American Historical Review* 93 (April, 1988), 359-396; Plakans and Wetherell, "Family and Economy in an Early Nineteenth-Century Baltic Serf Estate," *Continuity and Change* 7 (1992), 199-223; Wetherell, Plakans, and Barry Wellman, "Social Networks, Kinship and Community in Eastern Europe," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 15 (1994), 639-663; Plakans and Wetherell, "Migration in the Later Years of Life in Traditional Europe," in David Kertzer and Peter Laslett, eds., *Aging in the Past: Demography, Society, and Old Age* (Berkeley, 1995), 156-174.

expectations of large proportions, if not all, of the farming population; (3) population change and agrarian reforms in the Latvian past may have affected each other.

As historians, we are interested in the specificities of time and place, as well as with the theoretical import of our research. Two observations flow from this. First, due to the high proportion of rural people and the relatively small size of the Latvian territory (in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) and the Latvian state (in the 20<sup>th</sup> century), “agrarian” and “land” reforms here historically always had the dimensions of “national” rather than “sector” reforms. They affected directly those who lived in the countryside, but also indirectly those who would normally not be classified as “rural.” At the start of the nineteenth century virtually (85-90%) all Latvians were peasants (i.e. rural); at the start of the first period of independence (1918) the rural proportion of the total population stood at about 60%; and in 1990 the proportion was 30.8%.<sup>11</sup> Urban Latvians continued to be tied to the rural parts of the country through parents, grandparents, or wider kinship ties. Thus in neither the nineteenth nor in most of the twentieth century was there a segment of the Latvian population that wholly remained unaffected by agrarian reform, which helps to explain why discussions of reform were so quickly linked to “national existence” and “national identity.” Certainly during the first period of independence and after 1991, one powerful and influential political party -- the Latvian Agrarian Union – sought and mostly succeeded in making certain that all policy issues affecting Latvians farmers were treated as matters of immense significance to Latvians’ existence as a people and a nation.<sup>12</sup>

Second, we would insist that any specific instance of agrarian reform is both an event and a process. That is, agrarian reforms were datable since they normally began with a piece of legislation, a decree, or a ukase. Most historical surveys cite a reform as “having happened” in this sense. But after a reform was initiated, it took on a life of its own and continues over a period of time, reshaping expectations, opportunities, and relationships at the personal and community levels, and perhaps, making changes not intended by the initiators. After the first step, the presence of a reform may no longer have been recognizable at the event level, and historical descriptions of the time period after the datable reform event may have shifted, as they inevitably must, to other events. But it is precisely this continuing presence in real time of a reform that is of interest, and how the changes a reform measure set into

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<sup>11</sup> Edgars Dunsdorfs, Latvijas vesture 1710-1800 (Stockholm: Daugava, 1973), pp. 281-282; M. Skujeneeks, Latvija: zeme uniedzivotaji (Riga: Valsts Statistiska Parvalde, 1922) pp. 195-196; Latvijas statistikas gadagramata 1993 (Riga: Valsts Statistikas komiteja, 1994), p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> Andrejs Plakans, The Latvians: A Short History. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1995, pp. 129, 195.

motion interacted with and influenced other event chains. A concrete example of reform as process in Latvian history is provided by the Agrarian Reform Law of 1920, which in normal historical descriptions is cited as a major accomplishment of the new post-1918 government. The Law, of course, was datable, but the opportunity structures it continued to create over its seventeen-year-long implementation period were, in a sense, invisible and undatable yet in spite of this part and parcel of Latvian history until the end of the 1930s.

### **The Agrarian Reform Law of 1920<sup>13</sup>**

When in early 1920 the new government of Latvia finally gained control over all the territory within its borders, about 52% of all farmland, in the form of large estates, was still in the hands of its pre-World War I owners, largely the Baltic German nobility. The 1920 Law nationalized most of these properties, created a National Land Fund, and initiated a process of redistribution to landless people and existing smallholders. Redistribution lasted until 1937, though ownership rights to most of the redistributable land were transferred in the 1920s. Redistribution was a process, entailing thousands of daily decisions on the part of the agencies entrusted with the Law's implementation, and thousands more on the part of the recipients, as they sought to become successful farmers. The process of redistribution had distinguishable phases. In the first, which lasted from the fall of 1920 to the fall of 1921, bureaucratic structures (a Central Land Distribution Committee, and regional and local land committees) were created to inventory distributable land, receive applications, and resolve disputes. Membership in these depended in part on expertise in land questions and in part on national and local political connections. Since the Reform law had been passed by the Constitutional Convention (which was simultaneously writing a constitution for the country), this first phase was taking place before the existence of a national parliament and under the watchful eye of political parties formed before and during World War I. An avalanche of practical questions descended on the distribution committees immediately: how much, and what kind of, land to leave to those owners whose land had been confiscated; what to do with farm buildings; and how to deal with the creditors of those confiscated

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<sup>13</sup> The principal (non-archival) primary and secondary sources for the 1920s reform are: V. Markaus, ed. Agraras reformas gaita Latvija 1919-1922 [The Course of Agrarian Reform in Latvia 1919-1922] (Riga: A. Gulbis, 1922); Materiali Latvijas agraras reformas vesturei [Materials for a History of the Latvian Agrarian Reform] (Riga: Latvju kultura, 1929); Latvijas agrara reforma: agraras reformas likuma desmit gadu atcerei [Latvia's Agrarian reform: The Tenth Anniversary of the Reform Law] (Riga: Zemkopibas ministrija, 1930); Latvijas agrara reforma: agraras reformas izvesanas darbu noslegums [Latvia's Agrarian Reform: The Conclusion of the Implementation of the Agrarian Reform] (Riga: Zemkopibas Ministrija, 1938); Arnolds Aizsilnieks, Latvijas saimniecibas vesture 1914-1945 [History of the Latvian Economy 1914-1945] (Stockholm: Daugava, 1968), pp. 233-251;

estates that were heavily mortgaged. The regional peculiarities of the country were also a source of major problems. The easternmost of the four main provinces of the country --Latgale -- for example, had many more landless people than could be satisfied by redistributable land in that province, which led to the question of whether land grants elsewhere would trigger (undesirable) population transfers. Also very serious was the question of former agricultural laborers on the large estates, who now were threatened with unemployment if they did not want to farm. Hovering above all other questions was the problem of governmental responsibility for the new farmers (jaunsaimnieki): how much further assistance could they be offered and on what terms, so that the government through the land reform would not create a class of permanent dependents.

The second phase of the reform lasted from the fall of 1921 to 1925, and during this period the number of requests for land expanded astronomically. Quick transfers of title became essential, requiring an expansion of the number of redistribution committees. This phase also witnessed the first signs of unanticipated problems: shortages of redistributable land in districts other than Latgale, continuous disputes over the question whether forests (an important potential source of income for the state) should be cleared to create new distributable land, resentment from large farmers (who had not been estate owners or heirs but had become land-rich through their own efforts before WWI) over losing part of their properties, and strong indications that land grants could and probably would be misused (e.g. new farmers selling the trees on their granted land for lumber and then abandoning the land itself). By end of this period, the redistribution machinery was being dismantled, and the further work of the redistribution committees was transferred to county (pagasts)<sup>14</sup> governments.

The third phase of the reform, from 1925 to early 1930, revealed that it was quite possible for a prolonged reform to become re-politicized. If in the early years there was public confidence that the process was being conducted fairly and decisions were being made on the basis of expert judgment, in the third phase the process reentered national politics. The first two phases had raised expectations that land was available for the asking, but now it was clear that new (non-confiscated) land would have to be created (probably from state-owned forests and swampland) to satisfy the continuing demand and to ward off the charge that the process was playing favorites. The early years of the reform had in fact created a sense of entitlement to government land grants. It also became clear that cities (such as the capital city, Riga) had not surrendered their landholdings (properties around the city) to the National

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<sup>14</sup> An excellent history of this rural administrative unit in the Latvian territory is Arveds Svabe Pagasta vesture [History of the Pagasts] (Riga: J. Roze, 1926).

Land Fund, and this city land was now targeted as a new source of redistributable land. If in the early phases it was generally felt that redistributable land (coming mostly from Baltic German estates) was payment for past injustices, the possibility that now land owned by Latvian cities would be confiscated for redistribution by the Latvian government began to seem outright socialistic. These matters were now being debated in the national parliament (the Saeima) which had been functioning since 1922.

The final phase of the reform, from 1930 to 1937, overlapped with the arrival of authoritarian government in Latvia in 1934, when Karlis Ulmanis, the head of the Agrarian Union political party, suspended the constitution, dissolved all political parties, and dismissed the parliament. As a firm believer in a state based on smallholding farmers, Ulmanis shifted resource flows into various forms of rural support, and, unsurprisingly, brought the reform process to a conclusion in 1937 by depicting it as an unqualified success. In the seventeen years of its existence, the land reform had made 144,681 grants. Under Ulmanis, the smallholding Latvian farmer felt protected, but this sense of security came to an end three years later when Latvia was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940.

As this brief description of the 1920 Law suggests, historically relevant information about the reform spreads out in both directions from 1920. Working backward from 1920, it is necessary to understand the processes that had produced a population of about 660,000 landless persons (a number than included family members); working forward from that date, the analytical task is to explain how the process of the reform meshed with other processes of change in the Latvian state. We expect to be using this strategy to understand all the reform events that occurred in the past two centuries. As can be seen in the following inventory, such reform events were a recurrent feature in the Latvian countryside.

### **An Inventory of Agrarian Reforms in Latvia 1804-1995<sup>15</sup>**

The start of the series was the *Peasant Law of 1804*, promulgated by the Landtag (Diet) of the Province of Livonia (Lieflandskaya gubernia; Livland), one of the three so-called Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire (the other two --Courland [Kurland; Kurlandskaya gubernia] and Estonia [Estland; Estlandskaya gubernia] – adjoined Livonia south and north, respectively). The 1804 Law meant to control the arbitrary enlargement by estate owners of the obligatory labor required of serf families. For this purpose, it created labor registers (Wackenbucher) that ostensibly fixed labor norms. Traditional

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<sup>15</sup> For a brief history of various reforms in the centuries before the nineteenth principally in the period of Swedish rule, see A. Schwabe, Histoire agraire de la Lettonie (Riga: B. Lamey, 1929), pp. 87-93; or the German version Grundriss der Agrargeschichte Lettlands (Riga: B. Lamey, 1928).

usufruct rights possessed by peasant-serfs toward their holdings were not changed by this Law, but, indirectly, it would have increased the amount of labor a peasant family could devote to its own land. Hard on the heels of the 1804 Law, and before it could be implemented fully, came the emancipation of serfs in all the three Baltic provinces. The *Emancipation Decrees of 1816-1819*, implemented progressively until 1833, not only transformed serfs into “free” peasants, but, on the basis of the free market philosophy behind the decrees, provided that henceforth peasants would “contract” with estate owners to occupy and work farmsteads in exchange for monetary or labor rents. In view of the non-monetized rural economy of the Baltic area, labor rents predominated, requiring farmstead heads to assemble a labor team (farmhands and/or the peasant family members) and to send it to work on the estate’s fields (*demesne*) as in the serf period. Ownership of farmland was transferred to the estate owners, ending the traditional (albeit unwritten) usufruct rights peasants had had under serfdom. The emancipation did not seek to change the typical settlement pattern of the Latvian countryside, which for centuries had been and now continued to be the individual farmstead, or clusters of three to four farmsteads, rather than the village.

The inefficiencies of the labor-rent system combined with peasant unrest in the 1840s and the growing popularity of market ideas persuaded the nobilities of Livonia and Courland to accept the *Reform Laws of the 1840s*, which required that estate owners enable peasants to buy outright the holdings they worked. The thrust of this reform was extended by *Imperial reforms in the 1860s*, which made acquisition of holdings by peasants possible on crown estates. These laws triggered a frenetic forty-year era of farm purchases and created in the Latvian rural population for the first time since the medieval centuries a stratum of owners-occupiers (heavily indebted, of course, to the Imperial government, rural credit societies, and the estate owners from whom the farms were purchased). The farmland that was released for sale, however, constituted by the end of the period only about 48% of all farmland. The other 52% remained in the landed estates, whose owners – most still belonging to the titled nobility -- worked it with agricultural wage laborers.

The First World War brought momentous changes to the Baltic area, the first of which was the occupation by mid-1915 of Courland province by the army of the German Reich. A military-civilian occupation government marshaled the farmsteads to work for military ends. But the conclusion of the War saw the creation of a new Latvian state, the government of which in 1920 created the *Agrarian Reform Act*, already described. By reducing the number of landless by about two-thirds and thus expanding property ownership immensely, the reform skewed Latvian agriculture toward

smallholdership and its attendant problems. The small, usually isolated, farmstead became even more entrenched as the typical residential and cultivation unit of the Latvian countryside.

Stabilization after the 1920s reform was made impossible by the Second World War. The occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union in June 1940 brought with it, starting in September, the *Land Reform of 1940*, which nationalized and then redistributed land to 51,762 landless persons and to 23,321 smallholders.<sup>16</sup> Temporarily, at least, the direction of change in the new Latvian SSR was in the opposite direction from the expected collectivization. This greatly enlarged smallholder agriculture was frozen in place by the German occupation government which held sway in Latvia from June 1941 until the early months of 1945. Since the plans of the Third Reich for the “Ostland” territories included the deportation of Latvians to the interior of a conquered Russia and the resettlement of Latvia with German farmers, the 1941-1945 occupation government sought no interim changes. The return of Soviet power to Latvia in 1945 marked the start of *collectivization efforts* that concluded in the early 1950s with all private, individualized farms having been absorbed into *kolkhoz* and *sovkhoz* systems.<sup>17</sup> A decade later, in 1962, the Soviet Latvian government began a systematic effort to *eliminate the dispersed farmstead system* as a feature of the Latvian countryside. The dispersed farmsteads, which had continued to be places of residence of rural people even after their lands had been absorbed into collective farms, were deemed to be a relic of an unacceptable past that had valued privacy and separateness, and permission to build and repair was granted only for residences in *kolhoz* hamlets.<sup>18</sup> Local “one-room schoolhouses” were closed, access to disposal systems reduced or eliminated, and all resources were aimed toward creating rural residential collectives. This second stage of the collectivization effort, lasting for some twenty years, intertwined with a reduction in the number of persons living and working in the Latvian countryside from 259,700 in 1965 to 197,900 in 1985.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Boruks, *Zemnieks*, p.319.

<sup>17</sup> Boruks, *Zemnieks*, pp. 317-220; Janis Labsvirs, *The Sovietization of the Baltic States: Collectivization of Latvian Agriculture 1944-1956*. (Taunus, 1989); Andriivs Namsons, “Die Entwicklung der Landwirtschaft in Sowjetlettland.” *Acta Baltica*, 9 (1969), pp. 135-176; Andriivs Namsons, “Die Umgestaltung der Landwirtschaft in Lettland,” *Acta Baltica*, 2 (1962), pp. 57-92. For a review of the results of collectivization and other kinds of agrarian reform during the communist period elsewhere in eastern Europe see Rene Dumont, *Types of Rural Economy: Studies in World Agriculture* (London: Methuen, 1954), Ch. 14 (East Germany), Ch. 15 (Hungary), Ch. 16 (Czechoslovakia).

<sup>18</sup> Dovring, *Land and Labor*, p. 35.

<sup>19</sup> Boruks, *Zemnieks*, p. 363

Further developments in collective agriculture in Latvia were ended in the last years of the 1980s, as the Supreme Council, dominated by the Latvian Popular Front and reacting to Gorbachev's call for new thinking, began in 1990 to enact *a series of land reform measures* (1990-1995) that reinstated the centrality of private, individualized farming.<sup>20</sup> Having declared the 1940 absorption of Latvia into the Soviet Union illegal, the Supreme Council thus (in principle) rendered inoperative all the decrees, regulations, and laws promulgated by Soviet Latvian authorities since the 1940s, including all those that had been at the base of the collectivization efforts. These latest reforms continued after the revival of Latvian political independence on August 20, 1991. The number of individual farms grew rapidly throughout the period -- from 7,296 in November, 1990, to 64,262 by January, 1995. Yet the return of individual farming to Latvia could not begin in 1990 from its 1939 base. In 1995, almost a fifth of all farming units remained voluntary "collectives," i.e. collective farms that had transformed themselves into farm corporations owned by their members, and only about a third of all agricultural land was fully "owned" by individual farmers. The rest was still "owned" by the governments (national and local), and by the agricultural corporations.

Each of these reforms is datable, but each also had duration in real time. The emancipation of serfs actually lasted from 1816 to 1833, the purchase of farmland in the nineteenth century from 1855 to 1895, the interwar agrarian reform from 1920 to 1937, collectivization from 1949 to 1955, the destruction of scattered farmsteads from 1962 to the mid-1980s, and the return to individually owned and operated farms from 1990 to 1994. In each of these periods there was a boom phase, during which the major transformations were made, followed by a long period of trailing off, statistically speaking, and followed again by an interim before the next major reform. In the nineteenth century, the post-emancipation and the post-purchase interims were both about a generation long; in the twentieth century, both the duration of the reforms and the interims had relatively uneven lengths. The point to be made, however, is that neither in the nineteenth nor in the twentieth century did the Latvian countryside and its population have long periods of respite from major changes in the farmer-land relationship. At the level of rural family life, it was virtually impossible for farming grandparents and farming grandchildren to have the same kind of attitude toward and expectations about the holding they occupied. From the early 19<sup>th</sup> century onward, Latvian rural culture contained a large component of

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<sup>20</sup> Various aspects of these reforms are discussed in the articles dealing with Latvia in *Agrarian Reform in Central and Eastern Europe. Workshop Papers* (Riga: Latvian State Institute of Agrarian Economics, 1994), pp. 110-175. See also Andris Grutups and Edmunds Krastins, *Ipasuma reforma Latvija* [Property Reform in Latvia] (Riga: Mans Ipasums, 1995), pp. 52-112, which deal with land reform.

uncertainty and impermanence. Such insecurity can be responded to in various ways: through the search for a protector (the government, a political party); through cleaving to tradition ( “the historic Latvian isolated farmstead”); through family, kinship, and friendship at the local level. These three reactions need to be better understood for the intermeshing of agrarian reform and other socio-economic processes to be clarified. At the same time, it should also be noted that in the nineteenth century the timing of the agrarian reform measures differed between the regions of the Latvian territories, and affected different segments of the population at different times.

### **The Latvian Farmer and the State**

In spite of the ubiquity of agrarian reform in modern European, especially eastern European history, no systematic historical account of it has been written. Few hypotheses exist to be verified, and the links between agrarian reform and other aspects of socio-economic change remain obscure. One interesting high-level proposition is put forward by Powelson, who contends that, historically, the further east in Europe the region, the more likely it is that agrarian reform in it was initiated by the government (“reform from above”), rather than by lesser elites or by popular pressure.<sup>21</sup> The Latvian example suggests that there was probably regional and temporal variation in the role of government. Latvian historians, conceptualizing nineteenth-century Latvian peasants as a potential “Latvian nation” seeking to become a “subject” of history, have portrayed agrarian reform as the result of collective action by the peasantry, which created overwhelming pressures for reform on the dominant Baltic-area elites (the Baltic German nobilities [Ritterschaften], and the Russian Imperial government). The extent to which the reformers acted in response to popular sentiments, however, remains an open question. The direct evidence on this question is ambiguous, and requires a close look at four areas: whether the documentable instances of peasant unrest in the last decades of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth century were stochastic or targeted; the extent to which the governing bodies of the Baltic provinces (the Livonian Landtag, and the Courland Oberhauptmannschaft), in adopting reform measures at particular times, were reacting to pressures “from below” (the peasants), “from above” (the reforming Tsars Alexander I and Alexander II) or from their own pocketbooks; the extent to which the Baltic German reformers were seeking, in their own murky and half-hearted manner and regardless of pressures from St. Petersburg, to “modernize” Baltic-area agricultural production; and whether the reforms, once initiated and implemented, subsequently turned in a different direction and had different

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<sup>21</sup> Powelson, The Story of Land

results than those intended by the reformers. The question of who initiated agrarian reform, therefore, is substantially more complicated than Powelson's proposition -- reform in the east came from above -- would suggest.

In the twentieth century, the evidence on this question is equally ambiguous. The three most thorough reforms (the land redistribution reform of the 1920s, the collectivization reform of the late 1940s, and the de-collectivization reform of the late 1980s) were all carried out by differently constituted elites in the name of the "Latvian people," variously defined. In 1920, taking action before there was a constitution and an elected parliament, the elected Latvian Constituent Assembly promulgated the Agrarian Reform Law, and in that one measure (1) protected its own newly-gained power by depriving the Baltic German landed aristocracy of its economic base; (2) ostensibly reduced the attraction of Bolshevism among the Latvian rural landless by creating new rural proprietors; and (3) in view of the number of applicants to the Land Fund created by the Law, responded to a widespread "land hunger" in the Latvian rural population. The collectivization measures by the Soviet Latvian government in the later 1940s were a regional (and later) variant of the larger program of Soviet collectivization begun in the 1930s. The Latvian Communist Party described the measures as expressive of the will of the "rural masses," and carried them out after deporting, in 1949, some 40,000 "kulaks" to the interior of the Soviet Union. In this atmosphere of coercion, the subsequent enrollment of Latvian farmers in collectives was not surprising. The de-collectivization and the return to private individual farming of the late 1980s, initiated by the pre-1991 Supreme Council was a very popular measure, judging by the number of persons who immediately sought to reclaim the nationalized holdings of their parents and grandparents. This process of reclamation, however, did not bring success in each and every instance, because the post-1991 Latvian government has shown itself to be far less protective of new farmers than was expected.

Even from these preliminary observations it is clear that "the state" was at best an unpredictable "protector" of the Latvian farmer. Specific reform measures, of course, originated both in unelected (19<sup>th</sup> century) and elected (20<sup>th</sup> century) political bodies, but in most instances there is sufficient evidence to suspect any claim for purity of motive. In all cases -- including the 1920 Reform -- there was an underside (sometimes unanticipated): the serf emancipation shifted ownership rights to the baronial regime, the land purchase reform clove the peasantry into the landed and landless, the 1920s reform created smallholder dependency on the state, collectivization entailed extreme coercion, and the most

current 1990s reforms have encouraged smallholdership in a continent which does not need Latvian agricultural products.

### **The Scattered Farmstead System**

The Latvian “national awakening” in the second half of the nineteenth century celebrated, among other things, the positive formative influences on personality that flowed from the Latvian isolated farmstead (Latv. *vienseta*, from *viens* [one] and *seta* [farmstead]). These ideas entered the peasantist ideology of influential political leaders during the interwar independence period, though veneration of the *vienseta* did not preclude the growth of a movement of rural cooperatives. But the agrarian reform of the 1920s did not experiment with new forms of agricultural organization and took for granted that the basic unit of rural production was the owner-operated farmstead. In this sense it was a conservative reform because it continued, through state action, the trends that had started in the 1860s, namely, the acquisition of holdings by individuals (and their families), and the enlargement of existing holdings of the same type. Neither did the government urge changes in the dominant pattern of rural settlement. The collectivization of the late 1940s and the attempted elimination of the *vienseta* system in the 1960-1980 period, took aim at both these aspects of Latvian rural life: the former at individual proprietorship and the latter at the alleged inefficacies of isolated residence. The reforms of the late 1980s, by contrast, have definitively sought to restore individually-owned owner-operated farms, but whether they are deliberately seeking to restore fully a system of scattered farmsteads remains unclear. Large numbers of the old isolated farmsteads were physically eliminated from the rural landscape in the 1960-1980 period, and the newly created clustered forms of rural settlement cannot be easily dismantled if for no other reason than cost. For the time being rural residential patterns will continue to be mixed, with never-destroyed but now reclaimed and renovated isolated farmsteads coexisting with various kinds of agrotowns and agro-villages, as well as with farms that are owned and worked by persons who drive to their properties from towns and cities.

An examination of the justifications for these alternating reform goals must deal with the question of which forms of cultivation and residence are “natural” to rural Latvians. The 1920s reform, of course, simply continued existing pre-World War I patterns, and had few doubts on this question. The reforms of the Soviet period articulated a collectivist rationale, claiming, on the one hand, that collective farming (conceived of as a type of industry with “workers”) in line with national-level planning was normal for an industrial superpower; and, on the other, that rural services could better be provided to

residential clusters than to isolated farms. The commentary accompanying the reforms of the late-1980s reforms has frequently portrayed the Soviet-era changes as having wrenched Latvian agriculture out of its “natural” developmental path. In these latter-day descriptions, the call for a full-scale return to a scattered farmstead system has not been particularly loud, but there has been no dearth of references to that system being more consistent with the “historical patterns” of Latvian farming. In light of scarce resources, the new settlement patterns created in the Soviet era cannot simply be dismantled, but the attractions –romanticized or practical – of the vienseta system cannot be ignored either. At the heart of this debate in the Latvian context, in direct analogy with the same debate elsewhere in the western world, is the question of whether the “family farm” is a business enterprise deserving of survival only if it remains competitive, or a special type of productive unit that needs to be protected as the carrier of age-old “national virtues.” Ultimately the current debate continues the interwar debate about national identity – a debate which, in the eyes of many Latvians was never properly concluded because Latvia was by force made into a component of an industrial superpower and subjected to its internal modernization needs.

### **The Family Demography of the Latvian Rural Population**

Judging by the results of earlier research, the Latvian rural family in the nineteenth century (the micro-structure in which virtually all Latvians then grew up) was hardly a “haven from a heartless world.” Rural Latvians began to form families relatively late: age at first marriage for women was the mid-twenties and for men the late twenties. Moreover, the proportion of rural Latvians who never married was also relatively high. Furthermore, Latvian rural families fell into two principal categories: the heads of farmsteads, their immediate families, and their relatives; and the farmhands and their immediate families. The former tended to have relatively continuous residence in the farmsteads, while the latter moved frequently among farmsteads within the boundaries of the landed estate and were known collectively as gajeji (“those who move”). But even the families of heads could not count on absolute security of tenure: research on the farmsteads of one nineteenth-century estate shows that while a handful of peasant families succeeded in staying in a farmstead for three generations, a fourth-generation farm family in the same holding was nearly an impossibility.<sup>22</sup> In those cases where longer-

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Wetherell and Andrejs Plakans, “Intergenerational Transfers of Headships Over the Life Course in an Eastern European Peasant Community, 1782-1850.” Paper presented at the 18th International Congress of Historical Sciences, September, 1995.

term stability was possible, the head had the opportunity to create a complex residential group, but these complex familial structures were not of long duration. They were also not the childhood setting of most of the rural population, since the family structure of the farmhand population was nearly always nuclear because their frequent movement did not permit the residential accumulation of relatives.

It is probable that the Latvian rural population was one of the small populations of eastern Europe that entered the so-called “demographic transition” relatively early.<sup>23</sup> The steady decline of fertility among married women in childbearing years apparently began in the Latvian countryside in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The questions at hand, therefore, are whether and how the insecurities created by frequent agrarian reforms interacted with the fertility decline. In the twentieth century, policy makers from the first independence period<sup>24</sup> through the Soviet years into the present have continued to worry over the evidently preferred small size of farm families, perceiving this continuing phenomenon as “unhealthy.” Whether agrarian reforms accentuated the long-term trend or, by expanding opportunities, caused short-term reversals of it remains to be investigated.

## **Conclusion**

Against the long-term background of agrarian reforms in the Latvian territories, the frustrating inconclusiveness of the current 1990-1994 reforms does not appear unusual. In most of the reforms of the past, implementation lasted far longer than the current reforms have had the opportunity to last, and most of the past reforms actually had no terminus (unless one was officially declared, as in the case of the interwar measure). It is also not at all obvious that the past reforms had precisely the consequences the reform initiators wanted them to have, while it is quite clear that many reforms unintentionally created problems which a new generation of reformers had to address. Each reform measure did alter the relationships between farmers and the land, but these changes were subject to other influences beyond the control of the reform measures – the interests of the state and dominant political groups, historic residential patterns that were economically disadvantageous but seemingly worthy of preservation, family-level preferences that in the aggregate were outside any agency’s control. The

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<sup>23</sup> Ansley Coale, Barbara Anderson, and Erna Harm. 1979. Human Fertility in Russia since the Nineteenth Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp.

<sup>24</sup> For fertility patterns in the interwar independence period see P. Zvidrins and I. Vanovska, Latviesi: statistiski demografisks portretejums [The Latvians: A Statistical Demographic Portrait] (Riga: Zinatne, 1992), pp. 24-44; and Eugene M. Kulischer, Europe on the Move: War and Population Changes 1917-1947 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), pp. 145-147.

history of agrarian reform in the Latvian territory should be a sobering reminder to contemporary reformers that their intentions may have relatively little to do with the outcome of their efforts.

Our future research on agrarian reform will focus on three periods of reform: (1) 1804-1860, (2) 1865-1885, and (3) 1920-1937. Our work on the first period of agrarian reform will examine the Peasant Law of 1804, the emancipation of serfs 1816-1819, and the transition to peasant proprietorship in the 1840s. Our previous work in this period has established the contours of the “farmstead system” of estate agriculture. Independent farmsteads formed the context for the second periods of reform when peasants began purchasing landholdings. Data pertaining to this period, drawn from the Imperial censuses of 1795, 1816, 1833, 1850, as well as Wackenbucher from 1806-1809, are on hand.

Three datasets developed with Council support will form the basis of analysis of the second period of agrarian reform from 1865 to 1885. The first includes the records of land sales in Latvia by district and estates between 1866-1872. Although the data do not cover the entire period, it allows analysis of the extent and pace of land sales within the district of Kurland, and, in turn, an assessment of whether or not a land market developed as a result of reform. The second dataset is record of all land sales in Kurland between 1865 and 1885, in all ten of its districts, on a yearly basis. The two datasets pertaining to sales will provide a reasonably complete picture of reform in Kurland. In addition, the 1881 Imperial census of Kurland, which allows analysis of population and economic characteristics by estate, can be linked to the land sales data. More than half (55.3%) of the 760 estates in nine districts in Kurland in 1881 were private, and hence subject to reform. (The district of Illuxt refused to take part in the census.) In the 420 private estates, containing more than 452,000 people, there were 9,167 farms in nine districts. The records of land sales indicate that peasants bought 8,928 farms in ten districts. Despite inconsistencies, the data suggest that the vast majority of farmsteads in private estates in Kurland (and by implication Latvia) were taken over by peasants in the span of two decades. The census will also allow us to analyze structural relationships between the reform-created land market and estate features, such as size, population, or incipient industrialization. A final dataset is an extract of the 1897 Imperial Census for Latvia that was constructed by the European Fertility Project, and that includes demographic and economic data that will provide an additional point of reference for structural features of Latvia at the turn of the twentieth century.

For the third period of agrarian reform, 1920-1937, we constructed three datasets with Council support. Two datasets deal directly with land, the third is a subset of the 1925 and 1935 census of Latvia. The first land dataset represents 177,828 land “transactions” by region and district recorded in

Latvia between 1919 and 1937: 23,220 confiscations (i.e., records of land taken from particular entities such as local and district governments) and 154,608 disbursements (i.e. records of land given to certain kinds of individuals such as “long-term users” and “soldiers). For the most part, land was confiscated from local (44.4%) and district (26.3%) governments, but also from churches (11.5%) and other societies (17.8%). Although information on recipients is less than complete, it is clear that most grants went to the landless, as soldiers of the Latvian army received nearly a fifth (19.4%) of the grants, and “other landless” nearly half (47.7%). Long term users received more than a quarter (26.9%) of the grants, indicating that reform augmented, as well as created, landholdings.

Unfortunately the “transaction” dataset does not indicate the sizes of either confiscations or disbursements. However, the second dataset, which represents a summary of all transactions, by region, district, and year, contains a rough indication of the size of landholdings. Most land grants were modest, 40-55 acres, but adequate for a farmstead. However, more than a quarter (29.5%) of the grants were less than 38 acres, which in turn indicates the creation of small farms or, as the reform intended, augmentations to existing farms. The summary dataset will also allow us to estimate the extent of corrections needed in the process of reform over nearly two decades. Between 1919 and 1937, some 15,407 transactions were canceled or exchanged. What effect, if any, this may have had on small landholders remains to be seen, but changes, as well as unrecorded sales, among landholders were apparently as much a part of reform as the basic process of confiscation and disbursement.

More than 17,900 land grants were made in the course of reform, which indicates a massive injection of private holdings into the agricultural regime of Latvia. In the course of less than a century, it appears that the number of small, peasant farmsteads in Latvia may have increased by a third, or a higher percent. That suggestion is partially confirmed by the third dataset, an extract of the 1925 and 1935 Latvian censuses, which in general will allow analyses of structural and demographic changes in Latvia since 1897. Of the 187,260 farms enumerated in 1935, 57,867 or 30% were designated as “new farms.” Although the exact meaning of designations remains to be clarified, land reform in Latvia in the 1920s constituted a major redistribution of land and property rights.