

Latvian Exile Archives: the Case of Hoover Institution Holdings on Latvia

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Latvian State Historical Archives

One of the biggest collections of Latvian archival materials abroad form the Hoover Institution Archives' holdings on Latvia. Along with the National library collections, along with probably some German, Russian archives and Estonian History Archives it is one of the most important collections of archival materials on Latvian history. A review of the content of its collections reveals principles or, vice versa, their absence in the creation of this exile archives collection. It also gives helpful insight into and empirical data on several important questions related to the issues of Latvian exile archives and on how to deal with them.

Pre-history

Already in the autumn of 1944 many thousands, it is believed that about 200,000 of Latvians made for exile. Among the people who left Latvia were mainly the intelligentsia, socially active people who soon created extensive, numerous and very active networks of ethnic organizations in Germany, Sweden and later in the USA, Canada, Australia, and South America. A number of Lutheran, catholic, orthodox, and pagan parishes, social welfare societies, professional associations, more than 45 different academic corporate societies, collectors', political, sports etc. societies were established. Needless to say, all of them had their archives. Besides, there were quite numerous intellectuals who often created their own personal archives that could be of some general interest to the public. Hope for the crash of the Soviet occupational regime created hopes for a quick return. However, since the Cold War did not result in a rapid victory over Communism and the liberation of Latvians, discussions on how to preserve the cause of the Latvian exile community for the next generations started already in the 1960s.

Therefore archival materials have always been of great importance. If there are no files on you, you don't exist, goes a famous saying. In 1981, an article was published in the most popular exile newspaper "Laiks" with the very explicit title "What will happen to our archives?" (Akmentiņš 1981). The author, an American-Latvian amateur historian Osvalds Akmentiņš emphasized the tragic conditions of the exile archives in America: mostly they were lost, though several individuals were trying to collect something. For instance, the social activist Ritmanis in Portland, Washington, had, according to the estimations of Akmentiņš, one of the biggest Latvian document collections.

However, keeping documents in private collections or, in other words -- storing archives at home created sometimes very dangerous conditions for the survival of collections. For instance, Akmentiņš mentioned the example of a very interesting and large collection (consisting mostly of the correspondence between him and different artists in Latvia) of the so-called old-American-Latvian poet Freidenfelds whose materials were kept in the basement of the local Latvian journalists society's chairman's home. After this basement was flooded the yard-keeper threw away all it had contained. A fire burnt down part of the collection of the journalist Oļģerts Liepiņš. Akmentiņš concluded that only files from the history of pre-1944 emigration of Latvians were kept in the archives of New York and Boston, and the former consuls' Jēkabs Zībergs' collection.

Thus, because of the lack of proper vision and knowledge of how to keep documents a number of interesting and valuable documents were lost forever. Although many were lost

and many more kept in private flats or rented premises of respective organizations, some files are now preserved and kept in appropriate conditions. The Hoover Institution Archives already had some collections related to Eastern Europe and Latvia in particular and thus it seemed to be the right place to collect the most valuable and interesting files of Latvian exile here in California.

What kind of materials does Hoover Institution have and what it does not have?

In fact, there is just one name behind the Latvian collection at Hoover – that of the Latvian-American historian Edgars Andersons who was a professor at the nearby San Jose State University and was also well aware of the importance of primary sources for historical research and also of the preservation of the exile experience in general.

His activities resulted in the creation of a collection on Latvian holdings. Being active also in the Latvian exile social life, and because of his suggestions several organizations, especially the archives of the Latvian envoys, were transferred to American private archives. I would say that this way documents were saved. Otherwise, we don't know what could have happened to those large collections of documents.

So, what do the Hoover archives have? The most important part from my point of view consists of the already mentioned diplomatic archives that have been preserved quite scrupulously. Collections of the envoys Feldmans, Bīlmanis and some others include their official correspondence, large numbers of newspaper clippings and some other documents. The second largest group consists of private archives donated to the Hoover Institution obviously because of Professor Anderson's activities. Those include for instance the very interesting and important collection of the private correspondence of Gustavs Celmiņš, who was a leader of Latvian active hard-line nationalists between wars and a controversial politician during WWII. Another good example is the famous social democrat's Felikss Cielēns collection containing several boxes of his correspondence. But there are also quite numerous smaller collections of several other Latvian expatriates consisting of private documents or copies of some documents, including photographs. What Hoover Institution Archives clearly lack are collections of the Latvian extensive social activity network. None of the organizations has been represented. However, it seems understandable as the Hoover Institution Archives are focusing mainly on casual collections donated to the archives, though one would expect something more. The third group consists of collections donated after the independence of Latvia had been restored. There are rather big collections of several institutions, consisting mainly of printed material, but also 3 larger collections: one is the correspondence and documents of the Latvian members of the last Soviet parliament in Moscow, then there is the collection of the famous Latvian Jewish politician Vulfsons, and finally and interestingly enough – the collection of the old Latvian Bolshevik, Arved Andreevich Kārklīņš whose collection includes even documents from the Russian civil war. It seems that people who kept those collections before did not expect they would be properly kept in their home country and also they probably thought their names could become this way more internationally known. What kind of policy should the Latvian archives have in dealing with private collections brought to the West now? Unless the Latvian archives can convince people who hold important archival collections, it seems that some interesting and valuable documents will be sent to the archives abroad.

But, anyway, there is still the question of the **importance of the Hoover Institution Archives for Latvia and subsequently – the issue of microfilming and copying**. When I came back from California where I was sent to evaluate the necessity of copying and/or microfilming the specific Hoover Latvian holdings, I started with the files of “must have” – the files which are important to the political, social or other history of Latvia. However, there

were very few files that could be treated as a must. To this category belong the diplomatic collections – not because the files contain something unexplored or essential to the understanding of foreign policy but as we have most of the envoys collections already brought back from London and Washington and in order to complete the collection it could be important to copy the remaining files of envoys kept in the Hoover Institution Archives.

Nowadays, of great research importance, and not only for academic purposes but for clearly political reasons also, are the files of WWII that have been so far kept mostly in the archives abroad. The Hoover Institution collections contain a large collection of the Latvian Central Committee containing numerous statistical and other data collected just after the war. This collection has already been microfilmed through the mediation of the Latvian war veteran organization and is stored in the Latvian State Archives.

A general overview of the Hoover Institution Archives helps to single out the number of collections of Latvian expatriates kept in American archives. Generalizing, my conclusion is that the number is very small, not so significant. The most interesting and valuable are several collections donated by famous politicians, or documents giving evidence of the relations between homeland and exile communities. But there are almost no documents on the exile itself, its organizations, social activities, community members, etc. An additional argument is that the US legislation does not regulate the activities of societies and therefore documents produced by them will be left on their own, unless an archivist from the Latvian State Archives finds and persuades people to hand over their documents. Thus, in future only the archives in Latvia could be the foundation for the creation of a more or less complete vision of the exile.

However, the task to select and bring to Latvian archives the collections belonging previously to different exile societies and individuals needs a lot of work to be done immediately. I hope there won't be such a situation as in the early '90s with the archives of the Latvian Citizen's Congress. Nowadays there is very little documentary evidence of this large and important institution. Most of the activists of this institution did not recognize for reasons of principle the legitimacy of the current Latvian state and thus refused to hand over any of their documents; besides, our archives was probably not flexible enough to convince them. Now I suppose we have nothing on this large movement of the period of the Singing Revolution but the information published in newspapers.

Where should they be kept? Confusing in Latvia now are the very vague borders of responsibility for dealing with archival materials kept abroad. For instance, should Latvian archives be responsible for the selection and microfilming of files? And then, which archives are responsible specifically? Do exile and post-1944 diplomatic collections belong to the Latvian State Historical Archives where there are kept all pre-1944 files, or do they have to be at the Latvian State Archives together with the post-1944 and exile collections? Where should the collection of WWII microfilmed from the Hoover Institute Archives be kept? And what about photo collections – I didn't touch on this problem, since all the largest archives in Latvia are collecting photo materials no matter whether they have or not proper equipment for preserving this specific kind of documents.

As the list of recently acquired collections from exile by Latvian archives and museums shows (“Trimdas arhīvi atgriežas”, Rīga 2000), there is not even the slightest evidence of a common policy in dealing with sometimes numerous incoming exile documents. You can find documents on the same topic in various institutions. Mostly the collecting of documents consists of casual persuasion to bring them to the Latvian archives and as Mr. Brancis from the State archives told in his paper – it is usually based on personal contacts. Since neither Hoover nor any other American archives are consistently collecting

materials on exile it seems that the whole picture of this phenomenon will be rather fragmentary in future.

References

Akmentiņš, O 1981. Kas notiks ar mūsu arhīviem? – Laiks, September 9, 1981.