

Barricades of January 1991 and their role in restoring Latvia's independence

In January 1991, the opponents of Latvia's independence attempted to suspend the process of restoration of independence and overthrow the legitimate power of the Republic of Latvia. In order to resist such aggressive actions, the barricades were built around many buildings of strategic importance, and a large number of civilians were involved in the on-call duties at the barricades. As a result of broad public involvement, the opponents' attempt to seize power failed. The barricades of January 1991 are an excellent example of non-violent resistance of international importance.

Historical context

The national independence of the Republic of Latvia was lost during the Second World War when in 1940 Latvia was occupied by the USSR. Neither the long-term control by the USSR's occupation regime, nor the forced Soviet ideology and repressions could eliminate longing of the Latvian people for the restoration of independence. Through the political reforms, which were carried out in the USSR in the second half of the 80s of the 20th century, the population of the Baltic States unequivocally notified its willingness to restore the independence of the Baltic States. In 1988, the popular movements (Popular Front of Latvia (PFL) in Latvia) were created in the Baltic States, which soon announced that their main goal was to restore the independence of the Baltic States.



Image 1

Manifestation of 13 January at the Daugava Embankment. Rīga, 1991.

Author – Ilgvars Gradovskis

Collection of the Museum of Barricades of 1991

Image 1

Image 2

Participants of the barricades at the bonfire on Dome Square. The building of the Radio Committee in the background. Rīga, 13-25 January 1991.

Author – Ilgvars Gradovskis

Collection of the Museum of Barricades of 1991

During the restoration of independence, the PFL actively collaborated with the movements of the other two Baltic States in Lithuania and Estonia. A striking example of cooperation and strength was the action "The Baltic Way" that was held on 23 August 1989 when about 2.2 million people joined hands and made a human chain through all three Baltic countries. In 1990, the popular movements of the Baltic States won national parliamentary elections, gaining a convincing majority. The PFL also won the elections of March-April 1990. It allowed for the adoption of the Declaration of Independence of 4 May 1990 with the support of more than two-thirds of Members of the Parliament.

Despite the victory in the elections and the adoption of the declaration, the actual takeover of power was much more complicated. The USSR's central authority did not recognize the Declaration of Independence, the President of the USSR, M. Gorbachev signed a decree on illegality of the Declarations of Independence of the Baltic States on 14 May 1990.

The next day, the opponents of Latvia's independence attempted to seize the building of the Parliament (the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia) by force.

Although the new government of the Republic of Latvia was formed under the leadership of Ivars Godmanis, individual structures of the Ministry of the Interior did not want to cooperate with the new government. The USSR army, which was dislocated in Latvia, also did not abide the Parliament and the government.

The opponents of Latvia's independence also united. At the initiative of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Latvia, the opponents of Latvia's independence



Image 2

(Interfronte, the "Equality" faction of the Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia, the Baltic Soldiers' Union, etc.) merged to form the Action Group for the Defence of Human Rights in the USSR and the Latvian SSR. As the political situation worsened, at the end of 1990, this organization became the All-Latvia Salvation of Society Committee.

There were attempts to divide the Latvian society, incl. according to the national principle, in an attempt to counterpose Latvians and other inhabitants of Latvia.

Image 3

Participants of the barricades at the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia (current Cabinet of Ministers). Rīga, January 1991.

Author – Ilmārs Znotiņš

Photo from the Latvian War Museum's collection

Events of January 1991

Notwithstanding M.Gorbachev's promises not to use violent methods to change power in the Baltics, Lithuania and Latvia, in January 1991, the USSR army and the interior structures attacked local authorities and strategic sites. In Latvia, the situation escalated, reaching its peak on 14-20 January when periodic attacks against the Latvian authorities by the USSR's special forces took place. In these attacks, officers and civilians were killed: policemen, Vladimir Gomanovich and Sergey Kononenko, driver of the Ministry of the Interior, Roberts Mūrnieks, and pupil Edijs Riekstiņš, cameramen Andris Slapiņš and Gvido Zvaigzne.

On 21 January 1990, Ilgvars Grieziņš was killed in the accident (during the construction of the barricades at the building of the Supreme Council).

Active involvement of the society by blocking access to the public administration institutions and objects of national significance (barricades) broke the attempt to overthrow the legitimate power in the Republic of Latvia. In the fight against aggressors in January 1991, nonviolent resistance methods were used proficiently. At the invitation of the government and the PFL, the barricades guarded by unarmed civilians were quickly created around the objects of national importance. Citizens from all over Latvia involved in the creation of barricades, and the representatives of rural areas came to the forefront with the heavy agriculture machines, logging etc. machinery.

Participants were arranged on duty and regular replacement of participants was ensured, if any. The volunteers supplied food and medical



Image 3

posts were prepared with doctors on duty. About 40-50 thousand people participated directly in the barricades while several hundred thousand inhabitants participated indirectly at various meetings. The barricades were built on each site by taking into account the actual situation. In the construction of the barricades around the building of the Council of Ministers both the heavy trucks and timber were used.

Image 4

Participants of the barricades at the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Latvia (current Cabinet of Ministers). Rīga, January 1991.

Author – Adrian Ghibaudo (Italy)

Adrian Ghibaudo is the only foreigner whose perspective on barricades of January 1991 can be found in the collection of the Latvian War Museum. The museum does not have comprehensive information about A Ghibaudo. He is known to have been involved in journalism. During the barricades, he lived at the Service Hotel of the University of Latvia in front of Bastejkalns. At the pinnacle of events, he not only photographed but also participated in defending the barricades. The emotional experience urged him to return to Rīga a number of times and bring with him also friends from Italy.

In 1995, A.Ghibaudo presented his photos of the barricades of January 1991 to the museum.

Photo from the Latvian War Museum's collection

The outcome of barricades of January 1991

The broad public involvement prevented the most serious attempt of that time to overthrow the legally elected and approved power structures of the Republic of Latvia. The response of the international community also played a role. Despite the fact that the international community's attention was focused on the war in Kuwait and Iraq (the military release of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation launched by the US-led coalition), Western countries clearly warned the leadership of the USSR that the violence in the Baltic States would greatly complicate the international position of the USSR. At the same time, the events of the barricades clearly showed that the USSR does not intend to recognize the independence of the Baltic States, and is ready to use violent methods in the struggle for the preservation of control in the Baltics. The USSR recognized the independence of the Baltic States only when it actually collapsed after the August 1991 putsch in Moscow.

The events of barricades of 1991 symbolize the regaining of Latvia's independence. After the restoration of independence, extensive series of events are being held to commemorate the events of barricades. Commemorative signs have been presented to the participants of the barricades. The Museum of Barricades of 1991 has been open since 2001 at 3 Krāmu Street in Rīga, and the Association of Participant of Barricades of 1991 is active.



Image 4

As we approach the centenary of Latvia, the State Chancellery is producing a series of stories about the formation of the State of Latvia and its founders. These stories are aimed at strengthening the sense of statehood, raising awareness of the history of Latvia and its national values, as well as presenting notable people who influenced history and strongly contributed to the foundation and growth of the State of Latvia, particularly to the work of the government.

We would like to express gratitude to Dr. hist Gatis Krumiņš for participation in developing a fact sheet about the events of barricades of January 1991.

Please find information about the origins of our state, its path towards independence and Latvia's centenary events at:

LV100.lv
www.mk.gov.lv/simtgade

