

## **Riga's First Totalitarian Regime** **January 3 – May 22, 1919**

*Riga changed hands several times during the wars of 1914-1920 (under the Czars from 1710-1917, under the Russian provisional government in 1917, occupied by Germany 1917-1918, declared capital of the new Latvia in November 1918). In January of 1919, the Latvian and Russian Red Army chased out the last German forces. The newly independent Latvians had failed to create an army in time to save the city and, for almost five months, the city was in communist hands before the Germans and Latvians could re-take it.*

*The following entries are from the diary of Baroness Angelika von Korff (24 years old, an ethnic German, like 13% of the population of Riga, part of the upper class). Her "von" makes her a member of the former German nobility:*

### **3 January, 1919**

A fateful day! The bolsheviks have arrived....In the morning it looked sad enough out on the streets...there was shooting everywhere, and bodies....That evening we dared to go back out on the streets. The bolsheviks were everywhere, standing in groups or up on their horses. Some had wild faces ran down the street and broke into the house at Antonien Street 10...Everywhere you see the red flag, everywhere the animal-like, brutal faces with dirty strains of hair on their foreheads. Housekeepers run out of their houses and greet the riflemen happily, others join their forces. The sight was so grotesque, we went back home. I now have the definite feeling that an avalanche has come over us, nobody cares about us, nobody thanks us, we have sunk into misery...Maybe it is for the best as we can learn what is really important. The good Lord let it happen. It must be for our good.

### **4 January, 1919**

During the morning there was a search of the Kalning house. They had found out that he had a lot of cloth. They came and took it all. The truck was parked out front, and was loaded up with all the best material which had been given to him for safe keeping by others. He lost 75,000 rubles worth of goods. Erika and I have hidden everything of value, money and gold. I sewed my broach into a dress. On the streets there are posters with orders on them. You're only allowed to have a limited amount of food. Another problem. We have way too many potatoes and too much flour. We ran our heels off getting it distributed to friends.

### **9 January 1919**

A very unpleasant day. 15 bolsheviks moved into Drachenfels's apartment. Two wanted to live with us. They came up the stairs and said that the three of us could easily live in one room while they took the rest of the flat. I gave them my best in broken Latvian and flattered them as much as I could and got them to the point where they went back downstairs to reconsider. Two hours later they were there again, but not to move in, but to bring me down stairs and make me play for them. One was very friendly, but the other very crude and he said they had every right to demand that I come downstairs and play them some arias. I was frozen in terror, but I kept superficially calm and insisted that I couldn't play. (she succeeds in convincing them to leave again) I was dead set on not going into that den of thieves.

### **11 January 1919**

The soldiers downstairs are making a lot of noise and trouble. They took the laundry out of the Drachenfels apartment and insisted on taking the gramophone. .... The Fahrbachs lost all their silver...actually they are allowed to "administer it", but it "belongs" to the Soviet government.

Leni and I went to look for work, without any luck. The city kitchens are closed, so now only war soup is available. Lotte is triumphant that now all will be equal. Terrible woman.

### **12 January, 1919**

Today there was a mass-burial on the Esplanade [*a park and parade grounds near the center of town*]. All the communists who died while fighting for the city were buried in red coffins amidst large ceremony...

### **15 January 1919**

We went to the employment office today. It cost me all my pride and courage to ask these people for work. There was a commissar Sahlit who was very nice to us, promised to get us work. I was worried how I would hide my "von", but nobody asked to see our passports. I am angry about Erika. She doesn't lift a finger and just watches with contempt while I look for work. She says it is beneath her dignity to work for these people. As if I were happy about it! Erika's place of preference is lying on the sofa with her guitar...

### **16 January 1919**

The cold, the cold is terrible. We have to save wood and the hunger is beginning to be very noticeable. I don't even want to think about what might come. Dagmar Heyking is almost starving. They don't have any reserves and there is nothing to buy in the shops. It is often very hard to keep your head up....

### **18 January 1919**

I was in the statistical office [*looking for work*]....we were told that we might get jobs during the next census. In the churches large meetings are being held. Commissars stand at the pulpit and give speeches, with their hats on, about the advance of bolshevism. The most irritating thing is that there are so many Spartakists [*German communists*]. That Germans are even capable of being part of such a terrible movement. Erika Löwis has been arrested, and many well-known men. The prisoners are all starving. Thies Rück is also in prison. Frau von Boetticher's house was searched and much stolen, including her gold clock.

### **20 January 1919**

I am taking English classes from Cary. That's a lot of fun. I am with the Budbergs a lot, as they are having a very bad time. I go to von Voigt's office to practice on the typewriter. That is how I try to pass the time. I hardly get any reading done, as I can't calm down enough....

## **23 January 1919**

It is a miracle that our house hasn't been searched yet. Everywhere you hear, the people have been plundered, robbed and put out on the street. The bolsheviks publish orders to the effect that everybody who has more than 20,000 rubles have to turn themselves in and pay enormous taxes. Items of all kinds are to be turned in: clothes, sheets, pillows, etc. Leni thinks I am a coward, but I just can't imagine these grizzly men and these gun women will search through my things and take what they want...

## **22 March 1919**

New terrors again. An order was issued...that "all Germans in the Elizabeth, Todleben, Thronfolger, Alexander, Scheunen, and Kalk streets" have to move out and go to where the military authorities send them. [*Thousands end up living on sandy islands in the river or in workers barracks on the edge of town, while thousands of proletariats from the city edges are moved into the now-empty apartments.*] [...] When I think of how many lives are being destroyed, I can only ask again and again, "Why does the good Lord let this happen?" Leni's street is also being resettled. She managed to get permission to stay because of her bolshevik working papers...Today there were many death sentences published in the paper...

## **28 March 1919**

At the office everyone was supposed to note what they need in the way of clothes. Material and boots have become so expensive and cannot be found anywhere, so the great and glorious government is now passing out the clothes, sheets and boots that have been stolen from the "bourgeois" in systematic house searches, so that the "ideal ideas" of communism in the sense of equality and brotherhood can also be realized here. It is truly hilarious. Now we might get back what was taken from us, or you might recognize a dress from Budbergs or an ornate pair of socks from Ullrichens. I let my gaze wander over the crowd of "workers". Nothing but fashionable, well-dressed Latvian women in knee-high boots, silk blouses and ceiling-high hair-dos. These then are the workers whom the Germans are supposed to have so harshly oppressed. If that is how they look, then they are doing the German treatment every justice....The distribution of clothes was a rather strange procedure. You were supposed to say what you needed most, then they would check your old item and see if you really needed a new one. I was against the very idea of getting any of these already worn, stolen things. So I said I needed bed sheets. They could only check that with difficulty, so I knew they wouldn't give me anything.

## **2 April 1919**

....Here things are getting worse and worse. On the street one is constantly being asked for documents and often people are led off. The most anger is directed against the nobility. Stutchka [*the Latvian communist leader*] recently wrote, "we show no compromise with the nobility. They can go hide in the forest, but we will find them and get rid of them". We are totally without rights, anybody who wants to can just shoot us. Pastors and businessmen are also high on their list and the prisons are overcrowded.

#### **4 April 1919**

The bread cards are now based on categories. The first category gets one pound per day and those are the house servants and factory workers. The second category are office workers and get ½ pound. The third category, with no occupation, get ¼ pound...

#### **6 April 1919**

...Out of the house at Weidendamm 7, where so many nobles lived, more than 100 people have been taken away. Also in Antonien, Elizabeth and Nikolai Streets, in short, our whole city quarter, where the good society lives, has been searched and the nobility has been brought to prison. Pastors, doctors, businessmen – all dragged off. Now almost all my acquaintances are in prison. Its a miracle that we haven't been found out....In the empty houses, bolsheviks move in, the maidservants, the butlers. Now they are all gone, the Engelhardts, Oelsens, Panders, Reckes, Brüggens, Roennes, Bistrams, Drude Korff, Jenny Grandidier, ach, almost all of them...

#### **7 April 1919**

Pastor Eckhardt is arrested during the service. He was just confirming some young people and was holding the confirmation sermon when armed soldiers came into the church and took him....The congregation sang "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"[...] Uncle Ernst and Aunt Wanda were also arrested during the night. [...] Today some of the children were released and they are returning to their empty houses, without parents and without food...

#### **1 May 1919**

...this morning the city was quite a site. Everywhere red flags, garlands, posters. Lasalle, Bebel, Trotzky, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Liebknecht, all these glorious communist leaders in all sizes on the streets and in the shop windows. ...

We gathered on the square in front of Riga castle and were called into military formation in rows of four. Leni and I managed to get into one row together with (two other acquaintances) and the endless wait began. Flags were brought. The choir organized, armed women walked around passing out papers which were to be returned at the end of the day to assure that nobody skipped out. We could hear cannon fire from the front behind the river and our heartbeats quickened at that wonderful sound. After about one and a half hours, the column began to move toward the Daugava [*the river*] where we were to form up with the other administration groups [*they are marching with the other women of their office department*]. The flag went in front, followed by the singing choir and then us. To the right and left a watch marched to make sure none of us left the formation. At the river we waited again for a long time while the other groups joined us. From here we could here the front even more clearly and we listened intently and exchanged knowing glances. [...] The banks of the river were black with crowds of waiting people, there were many flags and the wait seemed to last forever. We were already exhausted when the column began to move to the sound of the International and the Latvian Marsaillaise up Alexander Street toward the Griesberg [*a park near the edge of town*]. The column had to stop again and again before we arrived, after four or five hours, at that Sandbox. Our feet were in pain from the poor pavement, our limbs were tired and we began to get very hungry. At first we weren't allowed to sit down. Later they let us rest on the ground. We threw ourselves down and devoured our lunch. [...] After ten minutes the march began anew. We heard that the end of the column on the Daugava and just started to move. [...] We marched back to the Esplanade with long stops along the way. All

along the way there were a lot of onlookers. On the corners there were photographers and the singing drove me despair. Whenever the column stopped, we rested on the stairs of nearby houses. A Latvian woman who was marching nearby was talking about me with her neighbor. She certainly wasn't saying anything good. Half dead of exhaustion we dragged ourselves to the Esplanade where the real festivities were to start. There were to be speeches, songs etc. Stutchka wasn't there yet, so we waited. My feet were giving in, I could hardly stand. Fräulein Rool next to me had taken cover. She sat on the street like a Turk. I asked a militiaman to let me go home because of sickness. He strictly refused. I kept standing, resigned to my fate. All around me there was an irritated, tired, dulled mass of people. There was no sign of anything like enthusiasm. There was only despair about this torture. Finally, finally Stutchka appeared, got up to the podium, where about 20 red flags were waving, and held a long, enthusiastic speech about the glory of the first of May and the revolution. Then Simon Berg and other Bolshevik leaders spoke and I found it interesting to personally see and hear the men who had spread so much suffering wherever they went, and who had made everything that was good into a desert and a sea of tears. When it had been endured, they let us go and I staggered home, hardly able to climb the stairs, and humiliated at having experienced it all. I will keep this day in eternal memory, a day that was supposed to be a celebration for the many, but not even they were able to celebrate. Even they had realized the evil of this rule and I was glad that the speeches were not met with any enthusiasm [*from the crowds*]. Most everybody was quiet and suppressed.

*From:*  
*von Korff, Baroness Angelika: Riga 1919. Ein Tagebuch. Hannover-Döhren, 1991. Excerpts selected and translated by Mark R. Hatlie.*

## May Day – The official version

*This is how the ceremony was described according to the communist newspaper the Red Flag, printed in Riga the day after the May 1<sup>st</sup> ceremony:*

“No one else was visible, only workers' faces. This wasn't the first time that celebrations were held. Not even the first workers' celebration. But at those, you could see onlookers on the street corners or on the sidewalks: Bürger and bourgeois who watched the workers curiously. Back then you could also observe a more distant working class public which made an effort to join their class brothers in the procession.

But today the streets are empty. The moneyed classes, the shopkeepers and the property owners are nowhere to be seen. Some have fled, others are in concentration camps. Those who are still in Riga have decided to stay at home, as far from the festivities as possible. [...]

Today I had to think several times that this is Proletarian Riga.

[...]

Starting at the Griesberg, an endless column of people moved toward Communist Square. The first marchers had reached Stabu iela before the last marchers had even gathered at the starting point. [...] After defiling past the graves and paying their respects to the fallen communists, the demonstrators left Communist Square. On Revolution Prospect a podium was set up from which comrades Stucka, Beika, Irklis, and Berg greeted the workers.

The military units carried banners which read, "War to the end", "Death to capitalism!", "Long live the dictatorship of the proletariat of the whole world!", "Long live the red armed terror!" and other slogans. The soldiers marched firmly and with good discipline. With pride and joy the workers watched their brothers, the riflemen, and were conscious that this was the power and foundation of the revolution. With the stamp of fanatic conviction on their faces, the armed workers' regiments marched past. The naval detachment got special attention with its especially artful banner proclaiming, "Better death than slavery!"

The best proof of the organized power of Rigas proletariat was the column of the production cooperatives and organizations which included 33 organizations of various sizes with almost 30,000 members. The column included forty flags and stretched from the end of International Street [*today Elizabetas iela*] to the ends of both iron bridges.

The workers chanted slogans again and again: "Whoever doesn't work, shouldn't eat!", "Long live the free labor of the free worker!". The Public Health workers called out "Long live collective labor!"; the 2000 workers of the trade and industry union display a banner, "World communism is our goal!" The 3000 men of the railroad union called out, "Long live the republic! Death to Capitalism!" "Death to the barons and the white guards!" was the call of the agrarian and fishery sections.

The demonstrators from the other side of the Daugava marched in, lead by the communists of the second rayon. Among them were the comrades of the Russian army units – workers from Moscow and Petersburg, under a banner reading, "The Red Army is the defender of the proletarian revolution!"

The total number of demonstrators in the procession was almost 60,000, a number that Latvia's metropolis can be proud of.

There were ten concert-demonstrations that evening.

The day ended with an illumination. When darkness came, the banks of the Daugava and the Bastej hill looked like a Johanni celebration: Rockets, torches and illumination created high spirits. The people celebrated on the streets until all hours of the night. The evening is warm – nothing disturbs the festive mood.[...]"