

A Brief History of the Jungfernhof Site, in Context

Introduction

The glaciers that covered all of northern Europe and are responsible for present-day Latvia's topographical flatness receded about 12,000 years ago. At some unknowable point thereafter, humans first found this place and began to leave their mark on it. While some obvious traces linger, most of the evidence has been obliterated either intentionally by human action or simply by time, and is literally buried beneath the soil. Human glaciers of ignorance and forgetfulness must be kept at bay with the heat of our memory.

1259 - 1915:

Crusader Cloister and Baltic German Manor

The territory comprising today's Republic of Latvia, for geographical reasons, has long been of importance. During the flourishing of the Roman Empire, its existence as a source of amber, fur, and honey was vaguely known as far away as the Mediterranean. Archeology reveals that the land was traversed by traders and raiders during Europe's "Dark Ages," including the Vikings and proto-Russian and Ukrainian cultures.

Yet History begins when human activity leaves written records. Hence, for the people who inhabited the lands of present-day Latvia, History began in the late-1100s, at the tips of the lances of German crusaders. These invaders were called the "Sword Brothers" by the native tribes, the last pagan population in Europe, the proto-Latvians whom the German knights conquered.

In 1201, the leader of the German crusade, Bishop Albert, made his headquarters at Rīga, just a few kilometers from Mazjumpravas manor, and it became his bishopric and later an archbishopric. Today, this year is celebrated as the founding of the city, though the area had been inhabited and engaged in trade long before. Rīga joined the ranks of the Hanseatic League, the great north-German maritime trade network, in 1282.

As the people of the surrounding territory were subjugated, the Germans imposed a new order. All the lands were parceled out to the Church and as fiefs to a new German baronial class who were the hereditary masters of their territories until the end of the First World War. The defeated were Christianized and enserfed: tied to the land and made to farm for generations of lords. Thus, the medieval division between the powerful and the powerless here was encoded not only in patrimonial feudal custom, but also by linguistic, ethnic, and ultimately national difference. Unchallengeable German privilege and perpetual indigenous peonage would durably persist under three separate expansionist powers: the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Swedish Empire, and the Russian Empire.

The oldest records concerning the habitation of this exact place come from 1259. Bishop Albert had given the land to the Cistercian Order, and a nunnery was founded here, which gave the site its enduring names: "Jungfernhof" to the Germans, and its Latvian variant, "Mazjumpravas

muiža.” Both names refer to the manor’s original identity as a convent. It was both a religious site and a site of agricultural production.

In the late 1500s, the Jesuit Order acquired the Mazjumpravas manor. The most Catholic of Orders, the Jesuits left when the whole territory was conquered from the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth by the Protestant Swedish Empire. It was the time of the 30 Years’ War between Protestants and Catholics in Germany, which became a battlefield that drew in forces from across Europe. King Gustavus II Adolphus of Sweden gave the manor to the master of the Rīga mint in 1627, who sold it to the city a decade later. The ruins that are visible today, and are the current focus of much archeological attention, date from about this time.

In 1700, during the Great Northern War that Peter the Great fought against Sweden, Russian troops besieging Rīga were billeted not at the Mazjumpravas manor house itself but, because of the objections of the German owner, with the peasants instead. He was later sent to Siberia apparently as punishment. The son then inherited the estate and denuded it of almost everything of value, including the very trees of the orchard, which were uprooted and sent to another of his properties. Thus, the manor declined appreciably in the 1700s and did not recover in the 1800s, though the impoverished area was still inhabited by several thousand peasants. Records show the existence of some 16 buildings at this site, including a water mill and a pub.

In 1915, Mazjumpravas manor was completely abandoned and during the Latvian Independence War the buildings on the site were largely damaged or destroyed.

From 1925 until the first Soviet occupation of Latvia, 1940-1941, the place was disused, except for a ferry that crossed the Daugava River here. The Soviets built a small airstrip at the site during that first, brief, occupation.

1941 - 1944:

Model of the Nazi Future in The East

Latvia fell quickly during the German invasion: in the summer of 1941 the Red Army was in headlong flight. Operation Barbarossa began on 22 June 1941 and the Germans were in Rīga on 1 July.

To understand what the Nazis believed they were doing with Latvia and with Jungfernhof, it is necessary to become familiar with their ideology. The Nazis had grandiose ambitions for the territories east of Germany that they occupied, and they made elaborate efforts to realize their fantasies of racial supremacy. Adolf Hitler’s ideology cast all of human history as a chronicle of unremitting race-war. In human affairs as in nature, might made right in Hitler’s eyes. All races were at all times either in decline or in ascension, and their relative power – the collective indicator of their inherent biological value – was measurable in terms of the resources they proved themselves capable of seizing and defending from other races for the purposes of perpetuating and expanding their own. Lebensraum, “Space for Living,” was both the strategic and ideological objective of his invasion of the Soviet Union. The whole territory up to the Ural Mountains was to be made a racial paradise, a German Garden of Eden for the Master Race. Other nationalities – “races” by Hitler’s lights – would be reduced to nought within a few

generations of servitude as illiterate menial helots who would help build German civilization until their own cultures disintegrated and they died out. This was the Nazis' sneering "General Plan for the East."

To Hitler and the Nazis, the Jews were a special racial category unto themselves. Building on 2,000 years of paranoiac prejudices and bizarre conspiracy theories, Hitler posited that Jews were a "race" unlike the others: more dangerous, more devious, parasitical, in fact subhuman. They had to be removed first, with some to be put to "productive" use in the meantime. Under the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, conversion to Christianity had no bearing on a person's putative race. Hence, a small number of the people deported to Jungfernhof were Jewish converts to Christianity.

For convenience, together with Estonia, Lithuania, and western Belarus, Latvia was merged into the Nazi administrative entity called "Ostland," inside the skin of which it was hoped that their national identities could be digested and racially valuable elements absorbed into Germany's own biological mass. Here and throughout the occupied territories of the Soviet Union, the Nazis began to enact their predatory neo-feudal fantasies with a high hand.

1941 - 1944:

Place of Foreign Exile, Slavery, and Death for German and Austrian Jews

Mazjumpravas Manor became "SS Estate Jungfernhof," and it was the first Nazi concentration camp established in German-occupied Latvia. The Nazi Mayor of Rīga under the Nazi civil administration, Hugo Wittrock, formally leased Jungfernhof to the SS on January 8, 1942, to retroactively begin in Fall 1941.

The only Kommandant of the camp, a sergeant, SS-Oberscharführer Rudolf Joachim Seck, was born into a family of German farmers. He joined the Nazi Party in 1931 and arrived in Rīga in August 1941. He was given his assignment as the Kommandant of Jungfernhof after having attended SS agriculture school in January 1941. He was informed that his minor fief would be populated with Jews from the Reich itself, who would produce food for the SS.

Owing to the thinness of the German presence on the ground, Hitler's elite, the SS, which had been given the task as of July 1941 of killing every single Jewish man, woman, and child in the occupied eastern territories, found it expedient to recruit local volunteers to help them in this task. These they organized in Latvia first and foremost into a unit called the Latvian Auxiliary Security Police. Informally, it was named the "Arajs Kommando" after Viktors Arājs, the group's leader. A detail of men from this unit provided the camp's guards under the command of Seck.

It was to the disused, dilapidated, and derelict Mazjumpravas manor site that nearly 4,000 German and Austrian Jews were deported in November and December 1941 as part of the Nazi effort to make the Third Reich itself "free of Jews." They came by train from collection points in Nuremberg, Stuttgart, Vienna, and Hamburg – whole families, including 137 children under the age of ten. They de-trained at the Šķīrotava railway station and made their way on foot, hastened by the orders and screams of their German and Latvian persecutors.

Almost immediately after their arrival, in December 1941, over 200 men were sent to work at the construction site the Salaspils concentration camp, of whom few survived. In January 1942, around 200 women were sent to the Rīga Ghetto for work. Jungfernhof was now part of a network of sites established by the Nazis in Latvia to imprison, enslave, and kill. During that first, historically cold winter, about 800 of the deportees to Jungfernhof died of exposure and disease, or were wantonly killed at the hands of Kommandant Seck at the Arajs Kommando guards. The existing husks of buildings provided no shelter against the cold, and when the well froze, only river water was available to drink. Lack of firewood meant that the water could not be boiled and sickness was the result. Here they languished. In February 1942, dynamite was used to blast a hole in the frozen ground for use as a mass grave, which was only covered the following month.

Today, this grave is invisible, but it has been located by Holocaust archaeologists using the technological tools of the geosciences: non-invasive ground penetrating radar and electrical resistivity tomography studies that show the telltale disturbance of the earth.

More diabolical Nazi depredations dramatically reduced the total number of inmates still further in the Spring of 1942. In a ploy to weed out those incapable of the hard labor the Nazis had planned for the inmates, volunteers were solicited for transfer to a non-existent fish-cannery at Dünamünde, where they promised that conditions would be easier. When insufficient numbers were forthcoming, the Kommandant hand-selected the balance. All were shot by the men of the Arajs Kommando in the Biķernieki forest not far distant.

Only about 450 Jews from Germany and Austria remained: mostly the relatively strong, young, and healthy whose whole extended families had just been neglected to death in subzero temperatures or outright murdered. They were forced to bust up the Soviet landing strip with hand tools and convert the area to more furrows for planting crops. Together, this group planted and took in the harvest of 1942. This was to be again the main function of the land: growing crops. Kommandant Seck was directly compared by survivors to a feudal lord of old who spoke of “his Jews.” In 1943, a large portion of the inmates were transferred, and the harvest was taken in by a temporary labor pool of inmates sent from the Rīga Ghetto.

Accounts from some of the inmates who were sent to Jungfernhof and survived the Holocaust mention a multitude of structures, none of which have wholly survived and most of which have disappeared. However, survivor accounts have been corroborated by period maps and by geoscience specialists. The structures included a well, a sewing shop, a carpenter’s shop, a clinic, two brick barracks, one wooden barracks, three warehouses, two stables, a mill, and a barn, in addition to Seck’s headquarters and residence. Some of the site’s pre-existing structures, dilapidated and pestilential, were demolished after the Dünamünde killings. Other structures were repaired, while still others were built from scratch, including a barracks. All of this was done under the most dire of circumstances and under the ever present threat of death.

After the tide of the war turned against Nazi Germany, the camp was dismantled and in July 1944 the last 50 inmates were dispersed to other slave labor detachments and genocidal detention centers. Of the nearly 4,000 people sent to Jungfernhof, 148 survived the Holocaust.

**1945 - 1991:
Soviet Military Compound**

In 1944 and 1945, the Soviet Red Army displaced the Germans and reconquered Latvia.

Thereafter, the Soviets kept large military formations on the territory of Latvia and during its days as a Soviet Socialist Republic after the Second World War it hosted many key strategic facilities: the ports at Rīga, Liepāja, and Ventspils for the Soviet Baltic Sea Fleet, a massive underground nuclear doomsday shelter at Līgatne, and the Skrunda radar station, for example.

Mazjumpravas manor was no such great strategic asset. Nevertheless, as another “military object” in the Soviets’ sprawling machine, it was shielded by secrecy. Virtually nothing is known about activities at the site between the end of the Second World War and the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

From this era there is the silence of a police state.

**2013 - Present:
Recreational Space in the Republic of Latvia**

Following the restoration of Latvian independence in 1991 and the withdrawal of Russian forces from its territory in 1994 (the radar station at Skrunda remained manned until 1998), Mazjumpravas manor fell into complete disuse again.

In 2004, Latvia took its place in the European Union and as a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

Beginning in 2013, the city of Rīga undertook a beautification effort at Mazjumpravas manor. A promenade has been placed alongside the embankment of the Daugava River for the enjoyment of cyclists. Streetlights, benches, and other infrastructure have been installed, along with a capacious parking lot that indicates a large number of expected visitors. There is an attractive mural and a museum about the early history of the site, along with other amenities.

Things at this spot are very probably better now than at any time since human activity at the site first commenced. But these comfortable surroundings sharply belie a very violent history – one that captures in microcosm the history of the whole of Latvia. Everyone who visits should be made to appreciate everything that happened at Mazjumpravas manor before it arrived at its blissful present state of idyll.

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