

RIGA CASTLE FIRE: HISTORY AFLAME

For seven centuries, Riga Castle has been a symbol of power on the banks of the River Daugava. The rulers who issued orders from its main chambers came and went, leaving behind good or bad memories, but the castle walls and towers continued to rise above the river, evoking a feeling of peace and stable urban life. Overnight to June 21, a fire broke out in Riga Castle which Latvian President Andris Berzins called "a national disaster." It was not just the walls of the castle that were on fire that night: history itself was aflame...

CENTURIES AND PARADOXES

Riga Castle has no resident ghost: you will not see the White Lady, the mysterious White Knight or the Black Monk; however, compared with the castle's centuries-long history which is so rich in paradoxes, any spectre pales into insignificance. Firstly, there were two Riga Castles: the first stood for about a century, and the other is still here, although it was stormed many times. Paradoxically, it was not foreign fighters who stormed the castle but Riga residents.

"Political passions" were already raging in this small area on the sunny day in June 1330, when the master of the Livonian Order put the first stone into the castle foundation. In those times, they used to build solid structures without haste, and in 20 years (what's 20 years to the

Livonian Order that planned to stay on the Daugava banks forever!), a standard medieval castle with thick walls and narrow embrasures was fully completed.

The round Tower of the Holy Spirit with a view of the Daugava and the Lead Tower facing the town stood in splendor at the corners of the castle. It was surrounded by a deep moat, according to a good old tradition.

But Riga residents were not happy either with the castle or the glorious warriors it accommodated. The knights made wars all over the Baltic Sea region, establishing their authority and spreading Christianity. Riga Castle became the main stronghold of the foreigners. The enmity between the Livonian Order and the town simmered for years, until it erupted in a dazzling flame in 1481, when the knights' cannon "Lion" shelled the town and the townsfolk used their gun - "The Raven" - to return fire. The Riga residents won the long war as the defendants of the besieged castle finally surrendered.

But mere capitulation was not enough for the victors: for the next three days, the chief town crier urged the Riga residents to help demolish the castle. The air was full of dust for two months on the bank of the Daugava, as hundreds of people swarmed over the once impregnable walls to take them apart stone by stone. The urban poor carried away bricks while heavier stones were taken for ship ballast. Very soon, nothing reminded the townsfolk of the castle...

It took the Livonian Order ten years to recover from this blow, and it was only in 1491 that the knights decided to besiege Riga. This time,



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Juris Dambis (Doctor of Architecture), head of State Inspection for Heritage Protection, Republic of Latvia, since 1989, comments on the accident:

Riga Castle is one of the oldest and most significant cultural and historical sites of Old Riga. The castle has preserved a high degree of authenticity. It keeps the features of different epochs, all of immense cultural value. The cultural and historical heritage therefore suffered great losses as a result of the fire that raged throughout the night. The blaze ruined original details of the interior, and although these can be restored, they will remain copies.

The blaze severely damaged the Festive Hall, designed by architect Eizens Laube and built in 1938. It ruined the murals, and approximately one-sixth of the ceiling finish and one corner of the hall collapsed. The interior, however, was more or less intact.

the good fortune turned away from the residents and the members of the town council patiently listened to the peace terms recited by new landmarshal of the Order Walter von Plettenberg. The town had to build a new castle for the Livonian Order in six years.

In 1515, Riga met its commitment to build a new fortress on the bank of the Daugava and Walter von Plettenberg solemnly rode into his new residence. There was a bas relief by the gates of the Holy Spirit Tower for long years, showing the

The largest refurbishment works are due in the White Hall, which appeared in the castle in 1818. In 1860-1862 it was considerably enlarged to the design of the Vidzeme province architect Friedrich Kristian von Breikreiz. It had been the largest hall in the castle before the Festive Hall was built, and its interior did not change for a long period. It should be noted however, that before the fire, the hall's structural integrity had been compromised: cracks appeared on the walls and the ceiling as the foundation sank, and the White Hall was slated for major reinforcing and revamping works.

The fire also damaged the Ambassador Accreditation Hall. Its interior was designed by artist Ansis Cirulis who also painted ceiling murals. The valuable interior was damaged by not so much fire as water. The fire completely destroyed the original roof structure of the hall and the attic, and ravaged the museum section of the castle.

landmarshal, his hand gripping a heavy sword, his face stern and uncompromising. But the new master did not stay for long in the luxurious apartments: the Livonian War broke out, followed by other conflicts...

The knights were gradually losing their influence, and in March 1562, the history of the Livonian Order came to an end in Riga Castle, when the last landmarshal, Gothard Kettler, passed his symbols of power - the cross and the keys to the castle - to the Polish king's envoy, in

exchange for the crown of the Duke of Courland, a liegeman of Poland. Then Poland began a war with Sweden, and Polish and Swedish rulers successively replaced each other in Riga Castle chambers.

Russia's victory over Sweden in the Northern War opened a new chapter in the history of the castle. That period began with a paradox, too: the Russian troops led by General Fieldmarshal Boris Sheremetev besieged Riga. Although the siege lasted eight months, Riga Castle was not stormed, because its capture served no strategic objective.

RUSSIAN PAGES OF THE RIGA CASTLE HISTORY

After the signing of the Niestadt Peace Treaty in 1721, Riga passed into the possession of the Russian Empire while Riga Castle became the official residence of Liefland governors general. Under its high domes, the fortunes of different people twined together in an odd manner.

In 1744, the Princess of Anhalt-Zerbst, Sophie Friederike Auguste nicknamed Figchen by her close kin - the future Russian empress Catherine II - stayed at the castle. She was the fiancée of Russia's heir to the throne Pyotr III Fedorovich. Her mother, Duchess Johanna Elizabeth, in letters to her husband, expressed admiration for the luxuri-



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ous interior of the castle: excellent furniture, parquet floors, gilding, carpets and carved doors... Hundreds of guests, men in dress coats and tailcoats, ladies in splendid dresses, their jewelry glittering in candle light.

In a new twist of the story, the guests were assigned a special escort of Riga garrison cuirassiers led by Baron

Karl Hieronymus Friedrich von Munchausen, a captain of the cuirassier regiment. He was the Munchausen whose adventures were narrated by German writer Rudolf Erich Raspe. Luckily, the Baron did not read that book, otherwise he would surely have challenged the author to a duel.

Catherine II traveled to Riga a second time in 1764. It was there that she heard the news that pretender to the throne Ioann IV Antonovich had died in the Shlisselburg Fortress. Following is writer Valentin Pikul's narration of the event in his novel "The Favorite."

Crowds of Rigans lined the streets waiting for military tattoo. Catherine nearly fell out of the coach.

"I've got so tired today," she told Browne.

The trumpeters played tattoo, and Browne took the empress along to Riga Castle chambers.

"Your Majesty, there's news from Shlisselburg..."

After reading the dispatch about Ioann IV Antonovich's death, Catherine knew that from that time on there was "just one rival to her in matters of the throne: her son Pavel," Pikul writes.

An order was sent from Riga Castle to the Shlisselburg Fortress commander to give the nameless prisoner a Christian burial.

Such was the sad end of Ioann IV Antonovich, one of the most ill-starred pretenders to the

Russian throne. He was announced heir to the throne by Empress Anna Ioannovna; her niece Princess Anna was his mother. Well, things did not work out...

Before he was sent to Shlisselberg till his last days, the boy Ioann and his mother were prisoners in Riga Castle. According to reports by



the chief guard of disgraced Count Vasili Saltykov, Ioann often played skittles in the inner yard. A legend has it that Princess Anna hid countless riches somewhere in the castle, but nobody has been able to find them yet...

Riga Castle saw other guests of royal blood. Russian Emperor Alexander I who had defeated Napoleon stayed there. Shortly before World War I broke out, Emperor Nicholas II and his whole family visited the castle. The Emperor's yacht was moored right in front.

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she often recalled the lines dedicated to her by Pushkin as she waltzed: "A magic moment I remember..." It was from Riga that Anna Kern sent to

Pushkin a collection of Lord Byron's works in four volumes as a gift.

They were uncommon people who served in the castle. Famous

fable writer Ivan Krylov was a low-level clerk in the governor-general's office. The classic of the Russian literature was no glutton for work; his colleagues said they often saw him dozing in the office.

But Emperor Peter I, who traveled to Riga many times, never stayed in the castle. Perhaps he could not forget the offense given to him by Riga Governor-General Erik Dahlberg who had not invited him to the castle...

Conspicuous at Riga Castle balls was incomparable Anna Kern, the wife of Riga Garrison commandant General Ermolay Kern. You might wonder if

In a faux pas that occurred on a hot summer day, Krylov habitually lay down on a couch and dozed off precisely at the moment when Governor-General Sergei Golitsyn decided to inspect his staff. Upon hearing the shout "Prince on the way!" he jumped up and rushed to the table forgetting his state of undress. Golitsyn entered the office, saw a nearly naked clerk writing something with diligence without raising his head and said as if nothing had

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signers' idea it should symbolize "the epoch of peoples' unity."

But this epoch, too, came to an end, and the castle had a half century pause as a venue of singing, dancing, designing, Christmas parties, and unhurried museum work.

The situation changed in 1995: Riga Castle became the official residence of the president of independent Latvia. Guntis

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Juris Dambis

Both European and world experience shows that cultural heritage cannot be absolutely safe. Things happen even at the most closely guarded sites now and then. Of course, all the historical sites should most strictly observe the fire safety rules. That fire was a lesson for everybody. Although fire safety is not the inspectors' department, we'll urge services to pay special attention to such issues.



were urged back in 1999. It was only in 2012 that the Latvian authorities managed to get things going. In July 2012, the Blackheads House was named the temporary presidential residence. A year later, a fire devastated Riga Castle.

A competent report on the cause of the fire will follow; police and experts will do their job. But when national symbols catch fire, residents might associate it will some ill omens: is there some mystic significance in the fact that Riga Castle, a symbol of Latvia's statehood, burnt on the day when EU prime ministers approved Latvia's entry in the euro zone? Or, perhaps, the building of the National Library which is under construction on the other bank of the Daugava

happened: "I do like it: always at his place, doing his duties properly. But tell me my dear fellow: where did you order your fine costume?"

Krylov held out two years in Riga Castle; his biographers said he "showed ineptitude to that job." However, it did not mar Ivan Krylov's literary career in the slightest... Incidentally, before the fire, Ivan Krylov's portrait hung in the Latvian president's reception room.

These are just a few stories associated with Riga Castle where their shadows hover around, ever alive.

FROM RESIDENCE TO RESIDENCE

Every new master of the castle rebuilt or revamped it to his taste. In the late 19th century, the castle added the fourth floor. The wooden houses nearby were pulled down to clear a large area. New representation offices appeared in the latest revamping project which dates back to the 1930s. They were designed by such well-known Latvian masters as architect Eizens Laube, theatre designer Janis Kuga and applied arts master Ansis Cirulis. Around that time, the fifth tower was built in the center of the castle. According to the de-

Ulmanis was the first to move in, followed by Vaira Vike-Freiberga, Valdis Zatlers and Andris Berzins. The castle ceased to be an architectural and cultural movement and again became a symbol of power.

WHAT HAS THE FIRE HIGHLIGHTED?

Frequent financial or organizational problems kept delaying Riga Castle repairs which



upset a certain balance of energy in Riga, as local esoterists claim. Or the sun came too close to Earth that day. Symbols are full of mystique. That's what symbols are for.

Ina Osinskaya,
for Amber Bridge