

Stalin in Rīga

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The skyline of Riga is well known and beautiful, an ensemble of historic buildings forming a harmonious silhouette, often depicted on postage stamps.

Strolling through Riga, you will suddenly notice a building on the outskirts of the old town that is reminiscent of a number of similar buildings in Moscow, Warsaw and other Eastern European capitals: the Latvian Academy of Sciences building. What is it all about?

Stalinist architecture in the Soviet Union

After the Second World War, Stalin ordered the construction of the "Seven Sisters" in Moscow. They are seven skyscrapers built in a unique style. The most famous are the "Moscow State University on the Hills" on the south side of the city (the MGOE or Lomonosov University) and the Hotel Ukraine at the end of a wide boulevard, the New Arbat (Novy Arbat). Today, the hotel, which has been completely renovated, is known as the Radisson Collection Moscow and is one of the best addresses on the square.

The socialist ideology of the Soviet Union was based on the idea of surpassing capitalist America, the USA, in all areas of life. One of the symbols of capitalist America in the field of architecture was the skyline of New York with its heavenly skyscrapers. Reinforced concrete structures, open or clad in natural stone and ceramics, had made such skyscrapers possible. In Manhattan, every piece of land was and is precious. Offices cannot expand in width, only in height. The skyscrapers are close together. In Moscow, space was not a problem. Stalin had his buildings built in places where they could be seen from afar or

otherwise surprised passers-by. His buildings dominated, they had to impress. Cost was not an issue.

Stalin personally intervened in the building plans, a repetition of history in which Louis XIV, August the Strong of Saxony, Frederick II of Prussia and other absolute princes also used the treasuries of their countries for prestige buildings to enhance their fame. Stalin used prison labour. At its peak, 14,000 German prisoners of war were forced to work on the construction of Lomonosov University.

Stalin's taste

What characterises the style of the buildings? All the buildings have an impressive central tower. The main building is flanked by two or more side towers, some of which are connected by huge side wings. This distinguishes Stalin's buildings from skyscrapers built at the same time in New York, for example, which regularly grow upwards without side wings on a minimal base.

At Stalin's personal request, the central reinforced concrete towers in particular were lavishly decorated with socialist symbols such as the hammer and sickle, 'victorious' workers, peasants and soldiers, laurel and oak wreaths, often generously covered in gold leaf. The decoration combines baroque elements with classicist borrowings from ancient Athens and Rome. There are all kinds of columns, pilasters, ruffles, obelisks, bas-reliefs and precious stones. Scholars have coined the term "**socialist classicism**" to describe Stalin's preferred architectural style. More succinctly, people speak of the "**confectioner's style**".

Early examples of this style can be found in the pavilions of the 1939 Moscow Agricultural Exhibition. With the expansion of the Soviet Union during and after the Second World War, the architectural style was also used as an export commodity in the 'liberated' countries, most notably Poland and Latvia. Both capitals, Warsaw and Riga, have examples of massive high-rise buildings in the Stalinist style. Other urban planners in the capitals of East Central Europe have managed to hide Stalin's architectural export in the cityscape, for example in Prague, on the lowest bank of the Moldava River, or conversely in Bucharest, which has been building its gigantic Stalinist 'House of the People' from the time of Nicolae Ceaușescu to the present day.

Rīga

Based on the Soviet model, the Academy of Sciences of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic was founded in 1946. Initially scattered among various university buildings in Riga, between 1952 and 1958 the Latvian architect Osvalds Tilmanis built a 108-metre-high building in the style of socialist classicism for it, not in a dominant position in the heart of the city as in Warsaw, but outside the old town, on the eastern outskirts of the city in

Maskavas, the 'Moscow suburb'. This old workers' district, originally the home of day labourers and a ghetto for Jews during the Second World War, was chosen by the new government to be transformed into a model socialist city with modern houses, wide streets and parks. The tower of the Palace of Culture and Science was to be the centre of the new Riga. Things turned out differently. The old Riga still stands, as do many buildings in the Moscow suburbs. The old wooden houses are being lovingly restored.

Contrary to propaganda, the building was not a "gift from Comrade Stalin to the Latvian people". It was paid for by the Latvians themselves! Most of the money came from the expropriation of private land ('collectivisation') and from 'voluntary' donations from the population. Moscow undoubtedly provided the Latvian architect Osvalds Tīlmanis and his colleagues with expertise and blueprints of the model buildings. However, the Latvian builders knew how to incorporate specifically Latvian elements. Oak leaves stand out as a decorative element.

The oak has a similar significance in Latvian national culture as it does in German. The dimensions of the central tower match those of the church towers in the Old Town of Riga. The colonnades in the lower part of the tower echo the decorative elements of Riga's 18th-century churches. The viewer's gaze is directed upwards by fully sculpted columns. Prefabricated concrete elements were used for the first time in the Soviet Union and then covered with artificial and natural stone.

The communist symbols at the top of the tower have since been removed. Today the building houses university facilities as well as radio, television and other services. The view from the observation deck of the central tower is said to be breathtaking. I have to go back to Riga!

Warsaw

"Stalin's gift to the Polish people" has stood unchanged as Warsaw's tallest building since 1955 - at 237 metres, it was for a time the second tallest building in Europe after Moscow's Lomonosov University. Unlike in the case of Latvia, the Soviet Union actually paid for most of the construction costs and provided not only the architect, Lev Rudnev, but also most of the skilled workers, with 3,500 construction workers from the Soviet Union. "24/7" – 24-hour shifts, seven days a week – allowed the building to be completed in three years.

Unlike Riga, the building's use was also much broader from the outset. Built in the style of New York's Empire State Building, the "Joseph Stalin Palace of Culture and Science" housed cinemas, theatres, museums, swimming pools, restaurants and apartments in its more than 3,000 rooms. I remember that you could buy heavily subsidised Russian textbooks, dictionaries, records, etc. at very low prices in the palace. However, this did not make the building more popular with the people of Warsaw. The (pre-)history of the German and Soviet occupations weighed too heavily.

At the time of its completion in 1955, the palace stood as a solitaire in a wasteland of ruins: by 1944, German occupation troops had razed more than 90% of Warsaw to the ground on the explicit orders of Adolf Hitler. Today the palace is surrounded by many other skyscrapers. Visually, it has lost some of its dominance and blends in better with its surroundings. As a Warsaw landmark 'against its will', it has even been a listed building for a number of years.

Kiev

A Stalin-style tower was also built in the Ukrainian capital Kiev / Kyiv / Kyïv / Київ. Kiev's city centre was largely destroyed during the Soviet army's retreat from the German Wehrmacht in 1941; the main street, Kreshchatik, was rebuilt under Stalin, but the main tower was never completed. Joseph Stalin's successor, Nikita Khrushchev, abruptly stopped the construction of Stalin-style prestige buildings because they were too expensive and people needed affordable housing quickly and in large numbers. Nothing has changed to this day.

Fig. 1: Soviet postal stationery at 4 kopecks on the occasion of a collector's fair in Rīga with an illustration of an evening atmosphere over the silhouette of the old town of Rīga, Rīga 13 X -13 XI 1964.

Fig. 2: Soviet postal stationery at 40 kopecks on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the Latvian SSR. with illustration of the Academy of Sciences in Rīga, Rīga 30 7 60 19 - Madona

Fig. 3: Soviet Union MiNr. 1528, administration building in Sarjadje; one of the partly planned Moscow high-rise buildings, called the "seven sisters

Fig. 4: Soviet Union MiNr. 1781 A, new building of the Lomonossow-University, Moscow

Fig. 5: Soviet Union MiNr. 766, All-Union Exhibition for Agriculture (II), Moscow 1939; pavilion of the Moscow, Ryazan and Tula regions

Fig. 6: Soviet Union MiNr. 1754, Ten years of the Soviet-Polish friendship treaty, Picture of the Warsaw Palace of Science and Culture

Fig. 7: Building of the Latvian Academy of Sciences today (Source: Wikipedia)

Fig. 8: Wooden houses in the former Jewish Ghetto today, (Source: Wikipedia)

Fig. 9: Palace of Science and Culture Warsaw today (Source: Wikipedia)

Fig. 10: "Kreschtschatik" in Kiev, today (Wikipedia)