

HISTORICAL NARRATIVES IN CONTEMPORARY LATVIAN THEATRE: CONSTRUCTING SOCIAL IDENTITY

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Abstract

This research explores the relationship between theatre narratives and the formation of collective memory and social identity in contemporary society. Focusing on Latvia, the study examines how current theatrical practices represent twentieth-century historical events – particularly those related to the Second World War and its aftermath – and how these representations influence national social consciousness and cultural trauma. While grounded in the Latvian context, the analysis highlights the broader relevance of these issues within European discourse. Using frameworks from memory studies and social identity theory, the study explores how performance narratives serve as tools for shaping social identity and collective memory. The findings suggest that Latvian repertory theatre predominantly promotes a humanistic collective memory, but also point to the need for narratives that acknowledge the nation's victimhood under occupation and promote a positive sense of identity among younger generations.

Keywords: *collective memory, social identity, historical narratives, trauma, contemporary Latvian theatre*

Introduction

The focus on the relationship between theatre narratives and the formation of collective memory and social identity in contemporary society is what this research explores. It looks at how these representations influence social consciousness and

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examines attitudes towards the cultural trauma left behind by the occupation. While based in the Latvian context, the analysis shows how these issues are relevant to European discourse, particularly in post-Soviet societies grappling with questions of historical interpretation and national identity. In the late 1980s, national identity gained prominence in Latvia as a direct challenge to the Soviet-promoted sense of social belonging. This emphasis culminated in the Singing Revolution and the broader Awakening movement, which decisively de-occupied the country [Blinkena 1998]. Subsequently, as Latvia sought integration into European institutions, the focus shifted from reconciling a threatened national identity to embracing democratic values and adapting to broader European cultural standards. As Kõresaar notes, "After an intensive period of retrospective justice that gave the victims the long denied and much needed recognition but also turned their stories to sole representatives of the nations' past, the social memory of Baltic societies over the previous decade has experienced certain emancipation from the hegemony of anti-Soviet representation." [Kõresaar 2019: 17] However, this shift raises questions about the potential risks of self-censorship or identity dilution under external pressures to conform. Scholars of the post-Soviet context, for example, warn of the tendency towards cultural homogenisation and the possible suppression or marginalisation of the histories and narratives of smaller nations [Suciu, Surea 2015: 30]. While these processes promote fundamental democratic values, they can also lead to a distancing from uncomfortable aspects of national histories, with implications for how collective memory is maintained and transmitted.

This article is part of a broader study within the National Research Programme *Research on 20th and 21st Century History and Human Capital Regeneration* (No. VPP-IZM-History-2023/1-0003). The objective of this study is to analyse how contemporary theatre interprets and shapes collective memory of 20th-century historical events, with a particular focus on Latvia's experience during the Soviet occupation and its aftermath. The central research question guiding this study is, as follows: How do theatre performances in Latvia function as sites of collective memory, and what role do they play in shaping social identity in relation to Latvia's traumatic historical experiences? A thorough examination of intergenerational theatre productions dealing with these historical events demonstrates that younger Latvian theatre-makers are eager to proactively explore the past. It is evident that these representations facilitate a nuanced comprehension of contemporary geopolitical realities. In contrast, the traumas experienced by preceding generations appear to be less immediate or personally relevant to contemporary creators. [Levalde 2024] This observation underlines the importance of investigating how collective memory of the Second World War and Soviet occupation is constructed and transmitted through theatre, contributing to social cohesion and cultural identity.

Theoretical underpinnings of the analysis

The analytical framework relies on a combination of theoretical perspectives. Firstly, theatre semiotics [Elam 1980] – the study of how meaning is created through signs and symbols – informed the interpretation of staging, character interactions and the visual and auditory elements of the performances. Second, narratology [Genette 1980], with its focus on narrative structure and storytelling techniques, guided the analysis of plot, character development, and how the performances conveyed their messages. Finally, the framework incorporates memory studies, particularly the work of Assmann on cultural and collective memory, and Hirsch's concept of postmemory. According to Aleida Assmann [Assmann, A. 2008], institutions such as nations do not inherently possess memory; rather, they "create" it through symbols, texts, rituals and monuments that forge collective identities. Jan Assmann [Assmann, J. 1988] extends this by proposing the concept of cultural memory, which refers to the enduring significance of key historical events *fixed points* – that are maintained through cultural constructions, including theatre. The concept of postmemory, developed by Marianne Hirsch [Hirsch 2012], emphasises that the historical experiences of previous generations are transmitted through cultural texts and performances, shaping the identities of subsequent generations who did not experience these events directly. Social identity theory [Tajfel & Turner 1979], which posits the notion that individuals derive a proportion of their sense of self from their group membership, provides a framework for comprehending how nations forge their identities on the basis of shared historical references and the manner in which these collective histories influence perceptions of in-group/out-group distinctions. By combining these approaches, this research aims to identify the key narrative strategies employed by theatre makers as authors to construct and communicate specific messages related to collective memory and social identity. As Wayne Booth asserts, "In short, the author's judgment is always present, always evident to anyone who knows how to look for it. (...) As we begin now to deal with this question, we must never forget that though the author can to some extent choose his disguises, he can never choose to disappear." [Booth 1983: 20] This quote underscores the importance of critically engaging with theatrical narratives, recognizing that creators embed their own perspectives and biases within their storytelling; therefore, a central aim of this methodological approach is to acknowledge the unavoidable influence of the theatre creators' perspectives on the narrative.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach to analyse select contemporary theatre productions from Latvia that address the country's traumatic history, particularly the Soviet occupation and World War II. This approach does

not aim to evaluate the artistic quality of the selected performances, but rather to explore their role in shaping collective memory and social identity through a focused analysis of their narrative and performative strategies. This section will outline the specific methodologies and theoretical frameworks used to achieve this objective. The data collection process consisted of several key steps: viewing the performances to understand staging, performance, and impact; analysing scripts to identify themes, structures, character development, and dialogue contributing to collective memory and social identity; and examining the staging, set design, costumes, lighting, sound, and other symbols to assess their significance and impact on the audience. The analysis particularly focused on the narrative elements of each performance, including plot structure, storytelling techniques, and narrative voice.

War and its aftermath: Performance selection rationale

In the context of trauma, World War II holds particular significance for Latvia, which experienced multiple occupations and endured the Soviet annexation for fifty years. The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has revived this traumatic past, bringing the themes of war and its consequences to the forefront once again. Over the past seasons, numerous theatre productions have addressed these themes, reflecting on the enduring impact of war on society. Given this landscape, several key criteria guided the selection of specific performances for this study, ensuring a focused and meaningful analysis of how Latvian theatre engages with collective memory and social identity. First, the performances chosen were those staged outside the capital, Rīga. This was deliberate, as regional theatres often operate with greater artistic autonomy and may be less subject to the influences of national cultural policies or dominant narratives prevalent in the capital. This independence allows for a potentially more diverse range of perspectives on historical and cultural issues. Second, the productions chosen did not receive state target subsidies. Productions funded by specific government grants may be subject to certain expectations or guidelines, potentially influencing the dramaturgical material and thematic content. By focusing on performances created without this direct financial support, the study aimed to capture artistic expressions that the creative team's vision, rather than external pressures such as contractual obligations with the Ministry of Culture, primarily drove. Third, it was essential to select productions by professional theatres. This criterion ensures a baseline level of artistic competence and production quality, enabling the application of equivalent analytical criteria across all selected performances. Professional theatres typically have established artistic teams, experienced actors, and dedicated resources, allowing for a more sophisticated and nuanced exploration of complex themes.

To explore the interplay between theoretical frameworks and theatrical practice, three productions have been selected for analysis, each offering a unique perspective

on collective memory, social identity, and national trauma. The following productions are to be considered: *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Survival Notes*, and *In the Name of Love*. The analytical process was iterative, involving multiple rounds of coding and interpretation to refine the identification of key themes. The initial viewing of the performances revealed a broad range of potential themes related to collective memory and social identity. Close analysis of the scripts and staging methods, coupled with a consideration of audience reception (as documented in reviews and online commentary), then allowed for a refinement of these themes. The research question guided this process, ensuring the analysis focused on the relationship between theatrical narratives and the construction of collective memory in Latvia.

Although *The Diary of Anne Frank* is widely known within the context of the Holocaust, its themes of civilian victims of war gain renewed resonance in light of the current geopolitical situation, particularly Russia's war in Ukraine. This connection makes its inclusion in this analysis particularly relevant. The Liepāja Theatre's production, directed by Laura Groza, adapts Wendy Kesselman's Broadway version, emphasizing the story of the Holocaust from a teenager's perspective. By presenting the Holocaust through the eyes of a young girl and by avoiding the use of Dutch and German accents, Kesselman's production seeks to emphasize what ties the Holocaust and its universal scale, as explained by Assmann, whose work is rooted in building collective memory through storytelling to avoid cultural context. Kesselman's version minimizes freedom of interpretation through directions and theatrical expressions, which also supports Assmann's ideas, where historical evidence of humanism can assist in unifying the nation and encouraging the adoption of the group membership. Audience responses confirm the impact on constructing memory through trauma. Even in a global setting, audiences are able to tie the events of the holocaust to the war in Ukraine, which suggests that the stage production has a purpose of showing a specific tragedy that will allow others to establish a connection between the past and present.

The production *Survival Notes*, created by playwright Krista Burāne and director Mārtiņš Eihe, uses the war in Ukraine as a historical analogy, referencing Edvīns Šnore's film *Soviet Story* to depict a regime slaughtering its own people on an industrial scale. The play deliberately links the crimes of the Russian-speaking army in Berlin with those in Ukraine, shifting the focus from the "regime" to a specific culture – Russian – in wartime conditions. Burāne's emphasis on "criminals speaking in the language of Pushkin" [Burāne 2024] reveals the shocking content of journalist Marta Hillers' diary entries and the attempt to use historical memory to condemn the present. By depicting the horrors of the Russian-led war in Ukraine, the play aims to influence the audience's understanding of historical events by reinforcing identities, including the identity of the "aggressor".

The Liepāja Theatre production *In the Name of Love* explicitly addresses social identity by presenting a broader understanding of the ethnic group shaped by historical perceptions. Beginning with the biblical story of Eve and Adam in the Garden of Eden, the production introduces the theme of “family” and questions its connection to “Latvian sexuality”. Through a free interpretation of Garlieb Helwig Merkel’s tract *The Latvians*, the playwright emphasises the negative characterisation of the nation from the perspective of the out-group, portraying Latvians as animals and a tribe far removed from civilisation. This negative portrayal reflects on collective memory, as Merkel appears in the foreground to make the performance a critique, questioning conventional views of national identity by highlighting different historical views. By using a blend of buffoonery, folk songs, and excerpts from classics, the performance combines a witty farce, ironic fragments, and poses from a book on sexual relations published during the Soviet era. The play emphasizes the negative image of the nation in different periods of history, and is particularly harsh on Latvian collaborationism during the Soviet occupation. By prompting the audience to question their own values, this performance may function as a means of cultural critique of Latvian society. The performance supports Assmann’s concept of collective memory, which emphasizes that nations should choose historical views to support their self-esteem and encourage action.

Anne Frank: Staging memory

Her father, the sole survivor of the Holocaust, published Anne Frank’s Dutch diary, written during her two-year hiding in an annex with another Jewish family, posthumously. Anne died of typhus in Bergen-Belsen. The diary exists in two versions: *Version A*, in notebooks, and *Version B*, her transcription on loose sheets from 1944, prepared after hearing her diary would be used as documentary evidence. Otto Frank edited and published these fragments as *Version C* in 1947. [Amsterdam District Court 2015] The 1956 play by Hackett and Goodrich, based on this version, won the Pulitzer Prize and depicts Anne’s story without emphasizing her Jewish identity, highlighting “a pure heart in a time of horror” [Anne Frank Fonds]. Wendy Kesselman’s 1997 Broadway adaptation included later fragments and clarified the historical context, with stage directions meticulously regulating interpretation, including projections of Anne’s words across the stage and instructions to avoid Dutch or German accents to reflect the Holocaust’s global scale. [Goodrich, Hackett, Kesselman 2016] This careful selection of facts and choice of contextual emphases in the publication of wartime testimony is fully in line with Assmann’s concept of building the collective memory of a nation. The Liepāja Theatre production used this adapted version, translated into Latvian by Ieva Viese-Vigula, although it did not completely follow the established interpretation guidelines.



Figure 1. A scene from Liepāja Theatre's production "The Diary of Anne Frank" (2024). Photo: Justīne Grīnberga

Anna Fischer's original music for a string quartet, harp, piano, and double bass is included in the soundscape, enhancing the emotional backdrop of the performance. Anne is a cheerful teenager who first sees hiding as an adventure, then gradually matures and experiences her first love. The emotional scene of the Jewish ritual of Hanukkah, with its songs, prayers and gifts arranged by Anne for each of her fated companions, helps to shape the message of the play. That the only formula for survival, then and now, is to maintain humanity, respect and love for one another. By staging the Holocaust in this way, the production emphasizes the universal value of human life and frames the tragedy as a global event, transcending specific national contexts. It is important to note that the production is supported by the Latvian fund *Uniting*, which has financed several studies related to the Holocaust and their integration into artistic works, thereby keeping the memory of the Holocaust alive in Latvian society.

The feedback from the audience and theatre critics differs in evaluating the artistic quality of the performance but aligns on the social and political context of the production. One-audience review states: "After the performance, the atmosphere is dual. One must think of the immense tragedy as a whole, not just of Anne's family, and about the current massacre in Ukraine." [Sedoro Ice 2024] In the theatre critic Ilze Kļaviņa's review: "The war in Ukraine unfortunately reminds us today of the brutality of the Holocaust, violence, and nihilism towards human life and

existence.” [Kļaviņa 2024] The production elicits empathy from viewers, embracing the Jewish primary role – the victim – in history while allowing a connection between the depicted tragedy and the current geopolitical situation, not linking it to the Israel-Palestine conflict but to the Russia-Ukraine war, distinctly separating victims from perpetrators in consciousness. In Guna Zeltiņa’s review, the Holocaust performance is linked not only to the contexts of Russia and Ukraine but also to Latvia, pointing out similarities in cultural trauma:

“The new production at Liepāja Theatre – The Diary of Anne Frank – directed by Laura Groza, thematically fits both the director’s prior productions at the Russian Theatre in Rīga, namely With Dancing Shoes in Siberian Snow and Stage on Fire, as well as the contemporary context of global insecurity and impending warfare.” [Zeltiņa 2024]

In the last decade, the tragedy of the Holocaust has increasingly been viewed in the public sphere in terms of historical responsibility, examining Latvian involvement in the Holocaust and its passive observation while simultaneously praising Jewish rescuers, thus reaching a reconciliation with historical experience and allowing it to be seen as a lesson for the present.

Survival notes: Performing analogy

The war in Ukraine is used as a historical analogy in the production *Survival Notes* created by dramatist Krista Burāne and stage director Mārtiņš Eihe. The production, like Edvīns Šnore’s film *Soviet Story* made in 2008 at the *Labvakar* studio, tells of a regime, which slaughtered its own people on an industrial scale. As stated on the film’s website, “Assisted by the West, this power triumphed on May 9th, 1945. Its crimes were made taboo, and the complete story of Europe’s most murderous regime has never been told.” [Šnore 2008] The production *Survival Notes* deliberately links the crimes of the Russian-speaking army in Berlin with the crimes of the Russian-speaking army in Ukraine, shifting the focus of memory from the “regime” to specific culture – Russian – under wartime conditions. The events in Berlin in 1945 are reflected in the insights of contemporary Ukrainian journalist Oksana Zabuzhko into what is happening in Ukraine today.

The emphasis on “criminals speaking in Pushkin’s language” [Burāne 2024] is fully revealed in the diary entries of journalist Marta Hillers, and the shocking content of these texts is also reflected in their fate. Initially published anonymously in 1954, the author’s identity was only revealed after her death in 2013. In Latvia, a book titled *A Woman in Berlin* was published in 2023, also without the author’s name. “After the original publication, the book sank without trace in a country that had decided to deal with the horrors of its immediate past through collective silence.



Figure 2. "Survival notes" (2024) VDT. Marta Hillers – Gerda Embure, Russian – Mārtiņš Liepa. Photo: Matīss Markovskis

But since the end of the Cold War, and German reunification, writers and historians have begun to deal with the theme of German suffering." [Harding 2003] The thesis "victors are not judged", which prevailed in the Western world until the collapse of the USSR, must be recognised as false, even criminal, in the context of the Ukrainian war. This is the message of the production *Survival Notes*. The actress Gerda Embure plays Martha Hiller, balancing the documentary's taut but laconic narration with spontaneous physical openness: From the cold numbness of submission to the rapists to the tearful, gaze into the distance. Each rape is symbolically marked by the removal of a dress. As the performance continues, more and more of the women's torn dresses pile up on the floor of the barn, like bodies violently robbed by marauders. This confrontation of the intersection of history in 1945 and now in 2025 makes us look at war differently. It is not just a brutal clash of states and ideologies with collateral damage; it is the individual tragedy and undeserved suffering of people at war against their will. The social value of photojournalist Hiller's memoir lies in its exploration of the psychology of the victim and the perpetrator, illustrating that military aggression is closely linked to moral degradation; thus, the relationship between victim and perpetrator cannot be defined solely on the level of national identity.

In the Name of Love: Deconstructing identity

If the influence of the aforementioned productions on the formation of the social identity of the Latvian population is indirect and centred on the phrase “I am a human”, the Liepāja Theatre production *In the Name of Love* explicitly conveys a broader understanding of the social identity of its ethnic group, shaped by historical perceptions. Introducing the theme of “family”, the production begins with the biblical story of human creation – the story of Eve and Adam in the Garden of Eden, which has nothing to do with the “history of Latvian sexuality” declared by the play’s creators, since the Latvians were not Christians in the beginning, but worshipped nature and natural phenomena. They worshipped female deities in connection with fertility and the family. It is possible that the theatre creators wanted to emphasise the introduction of Christianity as the beginning of dogmatism. The next episode already shows degenerate Latvians. It is a free interpretation of the tractates *The Latvians*, written in 1796 by a German author, an Enlightenment thinker and campaigner for the abolition of serfdom, Garlieb Helwig Merkel (1769–1850). In her explication, the playwright emphasises the negative characterisation of the nation from the perspective of the out-group, or the German: “Garlieb Merkel steps into the foreground; he perceives Latvians more as a colony of animals or a tribe that stands far removed from civilisation. In the background, a grim scene is visible; depicting impoverished, dishevelled Latvians whose appearance enhances and even illustrates Merkel’s texts.” [Muižniece 2024: 3] What follows is a witty farce with elements of buffoonery, in which interpretations of cheeky folk songs, ironic fragments from various classics of Latvian literature, and poses from the first book on sexual relations published during the Soviet era – Jānis Zālītis’s book *In the Name of Love* – are woven into the movement score. Thus ends the first act.

The second act begins with a caricature of the historical context of the Soviet occupation. The authors of the production have chosen a traditional Latvian celebration – *Jāņi* (Midsummer) – as a fixed point of the Soviet occupation, giving this episode the title *The Fern Flower* and associating it with one interpretation of this symbol – sexuality. However, this episode, deviating from the theme of intimate relationships, addresses one of the national traumas – collaboration with the occupying regime. In this episode, all the men are named Jānis, the traditional Latvian name, while the women are called Līga, Janīna (Latvian names), and Alyona (Russian name), who speaks with a strong Russian accent. In a relatively friendly conversation about Midsummer traditions, one of the men suddenly emerges as a primitive, intellectually uncomplicated USSR KGB agent, called “Chekist” in Latvian: “From now on, you must call Midsummer Līgo! The only desire will be to gorge and get drunk, to hit one another and drive while intoxicated.” [Muižniece 2024: 29]



Figure 3. *In the Name of Love* (2024) at Liepāja Theatre. Actors: Agija Dreimane, Kārlis Artejevs, Valts Skuja. Photo: Justīne Grīnberga

Then, Soviet-ideology-praising parodies of Midsummer songs are chanted. If the production had flowed until that point as a stylistically pure, witty farce about Latvians and their weaknesses, the interpretation of the Soviet era rejects the nation's victim role and the complexity of the historical situation. It is possible that collaboration, unlike the Holocaust, has not been sufficiently discussed in society to overcome it as a cultural trauma and to achieve reconciliation with this historical experience. Historians also acknowledge this: "(...) many human decisions and actions during the Soviet period do not lend themselves to simple evaluations; similarly, the collective mentality and morality of that time (or its Soviet decay) cannot be defined in a few words or sentences, nor be placed into a straightforward matrix of "what is good?/what is bad?" [Kaprāns, Zelče 2010: 20] Nevertheless, the production's creators strictly employ categorical matrices and express a desire to distance themselves from a social identity related to national belonging. This is also evidenced by other details of the play – in the background of the Eden scene, an American band, *The Magnetic Fields*, plays *The Book of Love*¹, and during the dialogue between Latvian national poets Rainis and Aspazija, the song *Je t'aime...*

¹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7FtbrDFgB_4

moi non plus by Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin² serves as an ironic commentary on the situation. In a final episode that caricatures Latvian politicians, negatively constructed characters invoke national belonging. This stage interpretation in the second act evokes a radically different audience response, signalling serious rifts in the formation of cultural memory.

Conclusions

This study set out to examine how theatre performances in Latvia function as sites of collective memory, and what role they play in shaping social identity in relation to Latvia's traumatic historical experiences. The analysis of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Survival Notes*, and *In the Name of Love* reveals that Latvian theatre serves as a crucial arena for negotiating collective memory, engaging with traumatic historical experiences, and shaping national identity. Through diverse narrative and performative strategies, these productions actively construct, challenge, and transmit cultural memory, contributing to a complex and evolving understanding of Latvia's past and present. This aligns with previous claims regarding theatre's role in shaping cultural understanding [Levalde 2024]. The performances underscore the fact that collective memory is not a static entity but a constantly evolving narrative shaped by cultural forces, including theatre [Assmann, A. 2008]. The *Diary of Anne Frank* provides a humanist narrative; *Survival Notes* employs a historical analogy of the war in Ukraine, and *In the Name of Love* questions national identity through historical interpretations. While the scope of the data limits the generalizability of these conclusions, the performances underscore how key themes are interwoven. A key point remains the underlying tensions between victimhood and cultural identity, especially regarding in-group/out-group distinctions, national pride, and trauma [Assmann, A. 2008]. Further research, focusing on audience analysis, is essential to determine how audiences receive the intended message, or reject it completely. Further research into cultural identity formation in Latvia is required to answer the questions raised by this study.

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² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JlQiGN-vO-g>

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