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Zigmunde, Alīda
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The Riga Polytechnic Institute – Life of an institution of higher education during WWI

War is the father of all things said Heraklid of Ephesos. This Aphorism shows its real meaning when we look at the fate of the Riga Polytechnic Institute (RPI) during WWI.

When the battlefield reached the outskirts of the Baltic Provinces of the Russian empire in summer 1915 the RPI was evacuated firstly to Tartu and then to Moscow, where it worked with its own students and those teachers which vent to Russia. The RPI functioned within the buildings of moscowite educational institutions and with the participation of Russian teachers.

After the Russian Revolution this all stopped in May 1918. The director of the RPI got punished as he had admitted a very large number of students in the study year 1915/16, who thus avoided the military service, later he was kicked out of office for the same “crime”. After the peace-treaty of Brest-Litovsk the future of the RPI was in doubt. Part of the students and professors wanted to stay in Russia, another part wanted to returned to Riga in the summer of 1918, where the German army was still in power and in October 1918 instead of the RPI a new institution – the German Baltic Technical University started to work, but this did not last long.

On November 18th 1918 a new state declared its independence. Latvia was proclaimed. Following the Versailles peace treaty the German troupes which were still at the Russian border had to retreat to the German territory, but the Bolshevik army followed on their heels. In January 1919 the Bolshevik army reached Riga and captured the largest part of what was to become the Latvian territory. They decided to close down the Baltic Technical University and to found the University of Latvia instead but in May 1919 the Baltic-German Landeswehr and the Latvian Formations which had been built up after the declaration of independence drove the Bolshevik army out of Riga and Latvia.

WWI was fought on the front with Russia in big movements which came to a halt at the eastern side of the Baltic provinces. When the Russian Revolution broke out the Bolsheviks got rid of the Tsarist officers and the Russian soldiers wanted to go home. So this was by no means comparable to the heavy fighting on the Western front. New states emerged: Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania which had fought for their independence for centuries. The RPI which had been founded in 1862 was evacuated to Russia, worked there, split with those who stayed in Russia and those who wanted to come back to their beloved county. The laboratories and libraries which in part were not given back to Riga became the scientific stock of the newly founded Polytechnic School in Ivanovo and other Institutions of higher education in Soviet Russia.

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