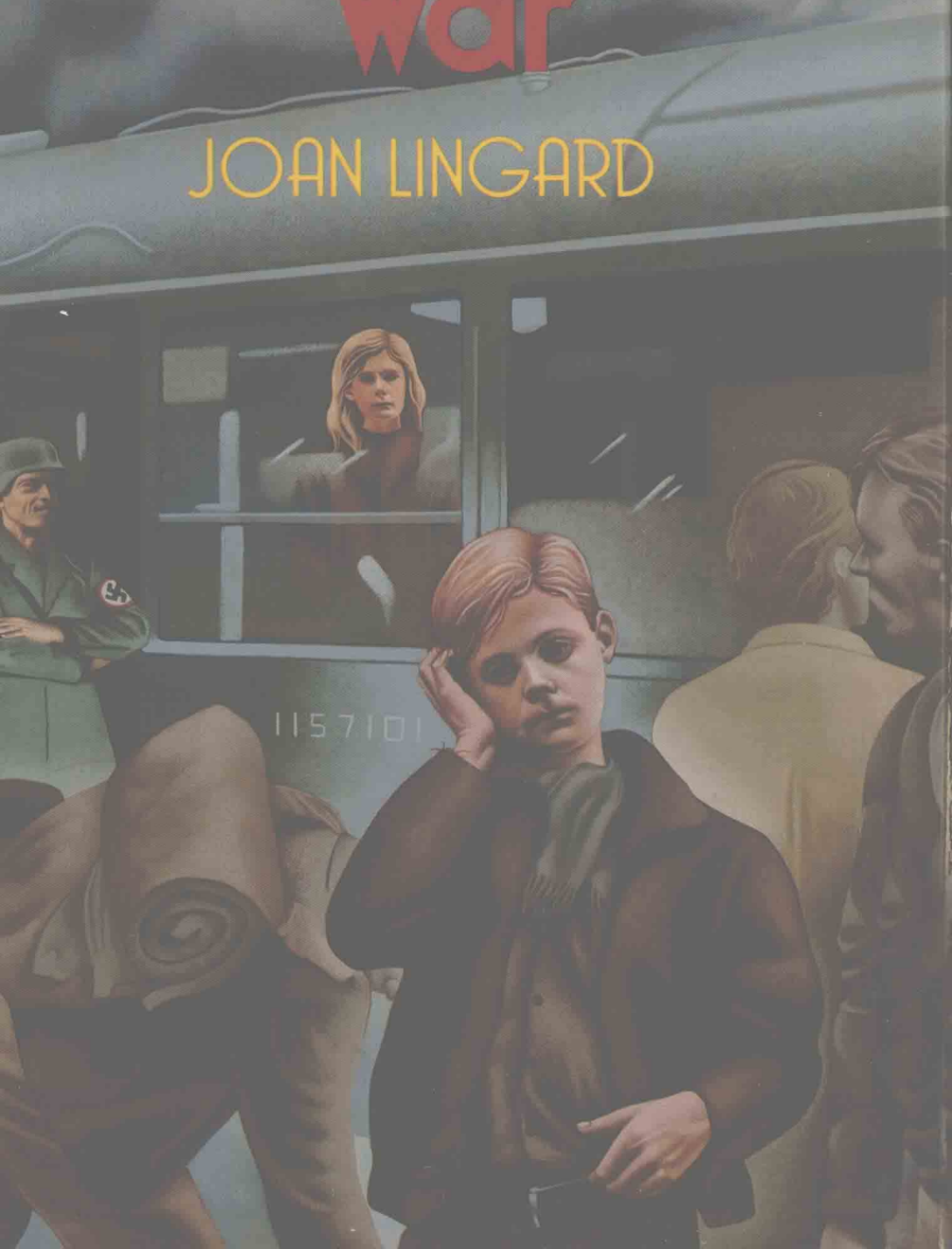


Tug of War

JOAN LINGARD



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LODESTAR BOOKS • DUTTON • NEW YORK

No character in this book is intended to represent any actual person; all the incidents of the story are entirely fictional in nature.

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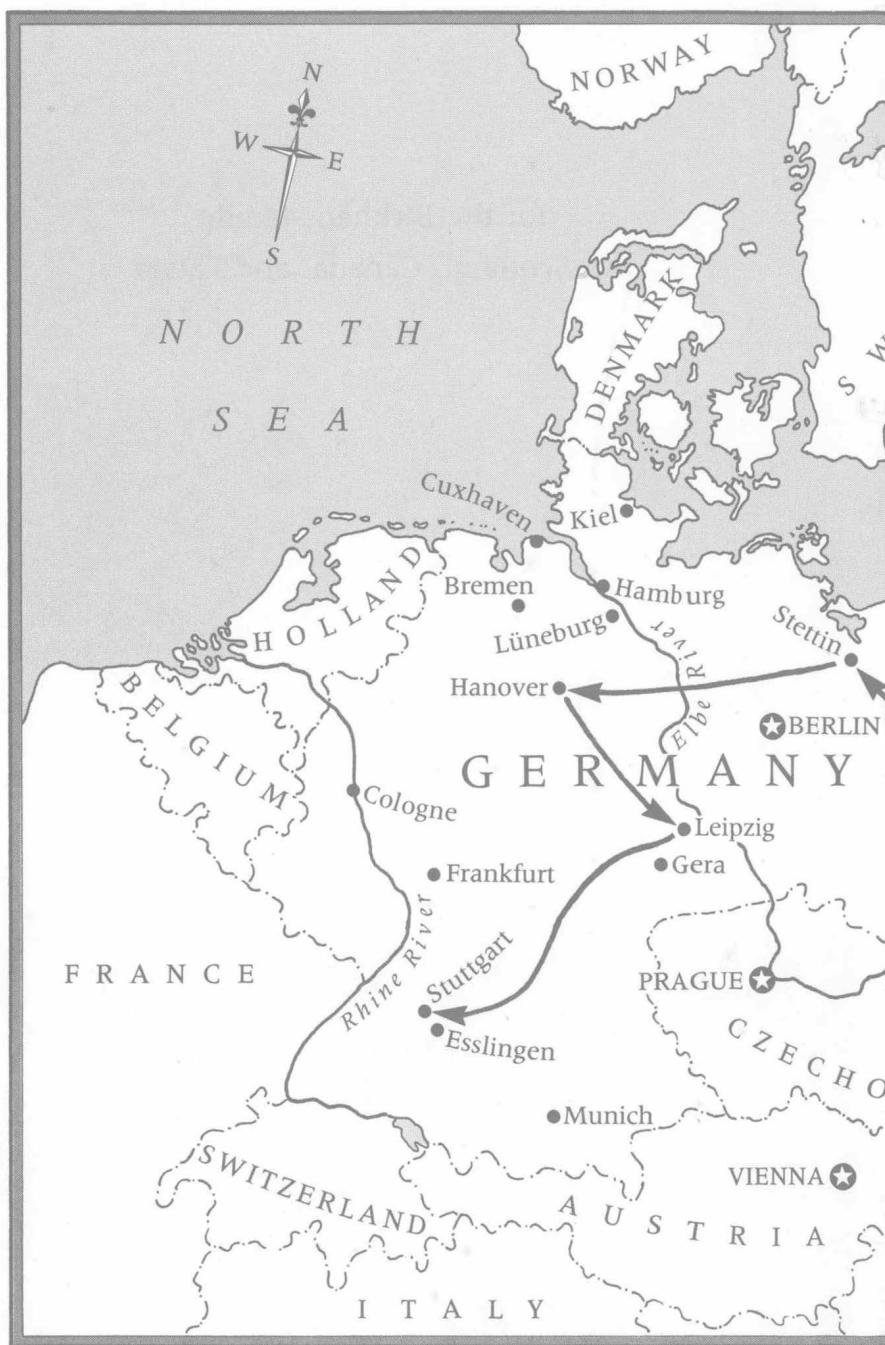
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Tug of War

for the Birkhans family
in Scotland, Canada, and Latvia





Historical Note

Throughout its history Latvia has been fought over and occupied by bigger, neighboring powers, most notably Germany and Russia. In November 1918 it declared independence, but its freedom was to last for not quite twenty-two years, until June 1940, nine months after the beginning of World War II.

From 1940 to 1941 Latvia was occupied by Russia; then the Germans drove the Russians out and took control. In 1944 the Russians came back and routed the Germans. The Potsdam Agreement of August 1945, drawn up by the Allies—Britain, America and Russia—ceded Latvia, along with the two other Baltic states of Estonia and Lithuania, to Russia. Since then they have been part of the Soviet Union.

In spite of living almost continuously under foreign occupation, Latvia has retained a strong sense of nationhood and cultural identity. The advent of President Mikhail Gorbachev and *perestroika* has allowed that identity to surface again—there is now greater freedom of expression and of movement, and the Latvians are being given more autonomy over their own affairs. The Latvian flag can be seen in public places, whereas, previously, flying it was forbidden. Every day people gather in front of the Freedom Monument in the center of Riga to lay down red and white flowers to symbolize the flag, and to demonstrate their desire for freedom.

1

“THIRTY MINUTES,” said Lukas Petersons. “And then we must go. The train will not wait. Fetch your bags, children! We should have gone before—last month, or even earlier,” he added in a quiet aside to his wife, Kristina, who was standing behind him, hands clenched tightly in front of her.

Astra heard the aside. She heard, too, her mother say, “It’ll be all right, Lukas, as long as we get the train. . . .”

Hugo and Tomas had already gone upstairs. Astra slipped out onto the verandah. The old rocking chair was still sitting there with its patchwork cushion faded from sun and air, her tennis racket stood propped up in the corner looking scuffed around the edges, a pair of Tomas’s canvas sandals lay underneath the rattan table on which they breakfasted on sunny summer mornings. Had breakfasted. They were unlikely to again. Unless—no, they had given up expecting miracles. It was largely through hoping for them that they had waited so long.

She dropped down into the rocking chair and rocked a little, keeping one foot on the floor, letting her head rest against the raffia back. It was their fourteenth birthday—

hers and Hugo's. The twenty-fourth of September, 1944. They'd got up before dawn and walked together through the fields. They'd seen the sun rise. Where shall we be this time next year, they had asked each other. They'd watched a formation of ducks grouping overhead, then wheeling away southward. Emigrating, Hugo had said, like them. Except that they knew that they might not return in the spring with the birds.

Astra continued to rock. An unusual torpor had come over her at the very moment when they must gather themselves together and flee. I could sit here forever, she thought. On the lawn in front of the house two fat black-birds were waddling up and down, stopping to dip their heads and peck at the grass. In the distance the sound of artillery fire rumbled on.

It had been a good summer, in spite of the constant noise of the war going on in the distance. Odd, perhaps, that it should have been, but it was. They had helped on Klavins' farm, all three of them, even Tomas, who had herded cows in his bare feet, walking in the cow pats to warm them in early morning, and they had swum in the river on lazy, still evenings, watching the dragonflies skimming the surface of the green water. And she had walked through the meadows with Klavins' son Valdis, their feet cutting swathes through the clover and buttercups. He had taken her hand and they had swung their arms loosely between them. Hugo had been fed up. "Don't be jealous," she had told him. She wanted to smile when she remembered the look on Hugo's face, but instead found that hot tears were pricking her eyes. She blinked to chase them away. When she thought of Valdis her throat felt thick, as if she had a cold coming. After today she might never see him again. . . . Of course she would see him! They were leaving for only a little while, until this horrible war could be sorted out.

For months everyone had been talking about the advance of the Russian army into the Baltic states. But until they had actually heard the whine of aircraft and the crackle of gunfire and watched the night sky exploding into flame, they had not quite been able to believe that one day it would arrive *here*, in this place which was their home. It was such a peaceful spot, deep in the countryside. They had lulled themselves into thinking that they might be able to lie low, since they were so tucked away, with woods all around, protecting them, keeping them safe. They ought to have known that no one is safe in war.

And now the Russians were in Estonia to the north and Lithuania to the south and in possession of part of eastern and central Latvia, which meant that the country was split in two. Their father had shown them on the map the evening before. Their only escape route was a narrow strip beside the Baltic Sea running down the Courland peninsula. Apart from that, they were boxed in. And from there the only way out of the country would be by sea. To Germany. There was nowhere else to go. Earlier in the war some of their friends had slipped away in boats under cover of darkness to Sweden. They should have followed their friends' example, but it was too late now—small boats could no longer slide undetected into the darkness.

Stay and live under Russian occupation, or go to Germany—these were the choices they had. For their father the first option would be suicidal; he was on a list of those classified as Enemies of the People by the Russians, who would almost certainly deport him to Siberia. He was an educated man, a classical scholar, and a university professor, and he owned land, not a great deal, but enough to be listed. Enemies to the Soviets meant anyone in authority or who held views opposed to communist doctrine. The categories listed included, among others, lawyers, journal-

ists, trade union officials, hoteliers and restaurateurs, landowners, shipowners, mayors, policemen, and clergymen. When the Russians had been in occupation between 1940 and 1941 they had transported to Siberia more than thirty thousand men, women, and children. Most had gone during one night of terror when people had cowered in darkness, listening to the ring of sharp booted heels on the pavement, waiting for a knock on the door.

Their father had spent that year in hiding. He could not hope to do it again and survive. They'd lived in the capital, Riga, then. Lukas's younger brother, Gunnars, had been among those taken away by the Russians; also Astra's godfather, who was a lawyer. He'd been found later in a field, dead, with spikes driven through his head. For weeks afterward Astra had wakened gasping for breath, thinking that someone was holding her down and trying to drive spikes into *her* skull.

Lukas had gone into hiding somewhere in the city back streets; they had never known where. Best not to know, their mother had said. They had all heard the story, though, many times, until they felt they had seen it with their own eyes: of their father running and the Cheka—secret police, known to everyone as the Blue Hats—firing, and then their father doubling over with both his hands flying down to clasp his right knee, and in the next second recovering his balance and lurching on, dragging his shattered leg behind him, and then the Blue Hats firing again and their father, with a last surge, turning the corner. He had crawled away into a cellar where he'd huddled, waiting for the Blue Hats to pass and trying not to moan with the pain.

Later Lukas had managed to drag himself to the apartment of one of his friends who hid him in his loft for a few weeks. Then Paulis Jansons, the tenant at their country home, had gone into Riga with a hay cart and smuggled

him out to a safe house in another part of the country. This was one of the reasons that the Jansons were going to come with them now—Paulis was on the Soviet blacklist because he'd helped Lukas Petersons.

After their father had gone into hiding, the Cheka had come to their apartment in Riga and questioned them. Their mother had been white and calm: Astra could still see her face as she'd raised it to answer the Blue Hats. They had pulled every room apart, stuck their bayonets into clothes closets and toy boxes. Astra had felt as if the tip of the bayonet were running into her own stomach.

The next day a message had come via Sils the baker: Go to the country. The family had gone and never returned to their home in the city. But Astra could never forget those men from the Cheka: the way the floors of their apartment had quivered under their heavy black boots and the sound their stamping had made. Involuntarily she put her hands over her ears.

"Astra!" her mother was calling. "What *are* you doing?"

"It's all right—I'm ready!" Astra leaped from the chair, leaving it rocking, and sprinted up the stairs to her room. Hugo's door was closed, she saw.

Hugo's packed rucksack stood just inside his bedroom door. It felt like a sack of potatoes when he tried to lift it. "You'll break your back trying to carry that!" Astra had said earlier. "You'd better take some of those books out." But he had not.

He went to the window and leaned out to take a last look. A slight wind was rippling through the birch trees, making the thin black branches tremble and the yellow-green leaves quiver. They were on the turn. In the meadow beyond he could see Klavins' black-and-white cows, all six of them, their heads down in the long grass, their tails swishing to

and fro like windshield wipers. He had milked them on many occasions and had a favorite one called Milda. She would come to him and muzzle his hand and walk beside him, bumping her wide-barreled body against his.

Behind the hill at the back of the long meadow, smoke could be seen. The smoke of battle. It was not far away, no more than six miles. What if the Russians were to advance quickly, come running over the hill and across the meadow like a hot knife slicing through butter? What idiots they'd been to wait so long!

His father maintained that people nearly always did wait until the last moment and it was only then that they realized it *was* the last moment. "But I don't know why we were so reluctant to believe it," he had said. "We are used to invading armies in our country, after all." The bitterness in his voice had made them stir uneasily, for usually he spoke softly. "One goes out and another comes in. That is the history of Latvia! It is a sad fate to be a small country squeezed between two big powerful ones."

Latvia had had only twenty-two years without an army of occupation, between 1918 and 1940. When would they ever be really free, Hugo wondered, without waiting for the next army to come in? And what would it be like for them in Germany? Here, far from the city, they had seen little of the occupying German forces, but he remembered how, in July 1941, they had watched as the German troops had marched through Cesis, the nearby town, their rifles clenched to their left shoulders, their steel helmets glinting in the summer sunshine, their eyes set straight ahead.

"I hate armies," their mother had murmured.

"But they've come to free us from the Russians." Hugo had looked at her in surprise.

"I know. But they're not bringing us freedom."

When they had seen the Gestapo they had shivered, for

they had heard many tales of the brutality of the German secret police. Secret police everywhere were to be feared, their mother had said, whatever country they came from.

The Germans also purged the Latvian population, but their main targets were the Jews. They removed sixty thousand. The Russians had already deported a number, some five thousand or so. One of Lukas's closest friends, a Jew, and a professor of philosophy at the University of Riga, was taken away by the Germans along with his wife and four children. No one knew where they'd gone.

Non-Jewish university professors were left alone. So Lukas was able to come out of hiding and rejoin his family. For the last three years they had lived quietly in the country, doing nothing to attract attention. The war in Europe had continued to rage on, the Germans and Russians battling it out on Russian soil. Until early 1943 the German armies had seemed invincible, and then the tide had turned and the Russians had begun to drive the Germans back, until in March 1944 they had reached the Estonian border.

For most of that time, a German dentist, who worked at the military hospital near Cesis, had been billeted with the Petersons.' Lieutenant Schwarz was a quiet man; he liked to play chess in the evenings with his landlord and to listen to his landlady playing the piano. He did not speak of the war except when he wished that it would be over soon so that he could return home. He missed his family in Germany and would talk about them and pass their photographs around.

And now the Petersons' only hope of escaping the Russians was to go to Germany themselves. They had a contact there, an old professor of their father's from his student days in Heidelberg. Otto Zimmermann was a good, kindly man, and Hugo's godfather. Hugo was fond of him even though he had seen him only three times, when the professor had come to visit them before the war. But Professor Zimmer-

mann had kept up a regular correspondence with both Lukas and Hugo. Now he was retired and living in Leipzig. In the spring they had had a letter from him in which he had said, "Do not hesitate to come here if the situation gets too difficult for you in Latvia. You cannot run the risk of letting yourself fall into Soviet hands, Lukas. We have a large house with plenty of room. . . ."

Last week Lukas had written to say that they were finally going to take him up on his offer.

Across the landing Astra was trying and failing to fasten the straps of her rucksack. What could she take out? She needed everything: the clothes and her toothbrush and face cloth and the talcum powder given to her by her friend Mara Jansons for her birthday, and the string of red wooden beads which had been a present from her mother and father, and the straw bag made for her by Hugo, and *Jane Eyre* written by the English novelist Charlotte Brontë and translated into Latvian. She would read it on the train. They would have to change in Riga for the Baltic port of Liepaja. It would be a long, slow journey, for everything was confused these days, with the Russians advancing and the Germans retreating and Latvians running hither and thither not sure where to go, and then there was always the risk of the trains being bombed.

By removing one of her shirts she managed to draw the strings of the sack together. She tied them firmly and fastened the buckles.

As she turned she caught sight of herself in the dressing table mirror and went closer. She sat down on the stool and leaned forward, resting her elbows on the top and her chin on her hands. This is *me*, she said to herself, Astra Petersons. She felt as if she might not see this self again. She looked into her gray eyes, raised a finger to touch the small freckles

sprinkled over the bridge of her nose and across the tops of her cheeks.

It seemed to have gone very quiet everywhere. There was even a lull in the gunfire, and she could hear the sound of her own breathing in the room.

And then the artillery started up again. It had come nearer, surely?

"Wait here!" she said to the girl in the mirror, leaning forward so that her breath misted the glass. "I'll be back."

"Are you ready?" asked Hugo, who had come into the room.

Startled, Astra jumped up and whirled around, putting her back to the mirror.

At the same time their father called to them from downstairs. "Children!" His voice was becoming impatient. They could hear him walking up and down, trailing his lame leg behind him.

Hugo went first. Astra followed, after a last quick backward glance into her room. The sun was slanting in, touching the old rag rug beside her bed, lighting up its reds and blues. Her grandmother had made that rug. They had gone to say good-bye to her yesterday. She was not coming; she was too old to give up her home, she said. It had been difficult saying good-bye, and their father had wept. Their maternal grandmother was in Riga, but they would not have time to stop and see her, nor their aunt and uncle and cousins.

Astra closed the door of her room behind her and ran downstairs.

"Klavins and Valdis are here," said her father.

"A moment, Astra." Her mother beckoned to her.

Astra turned back.

Her mother held out a string of glistening yellow amber beads. "Bend your head, dear."