



16

MARCH

EXPLAINED

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16 MARCH EXPLAINED

¹ Ezerģailis, Andrievs
(Ed.) (1997)

The Latvian Legion: Heroes,
Nazis, or Victims?: a collection
of documents from OSS war-
crimes investigation files,
1945–1950.

Riga: Historical Institute
of Latvia.

Latvia officially commemorates its fallen soldiers on 11 November (“Lāčplēsis Day”). 16 March is not an official day of commemoration.

The “Latvian Legion” (otherwise known as the Latvian Voluntary SS Legion¹) was created illegally during the years of World War II. In 1940, Latvia was torn apart and experienced consecutive occupations by two totalitarian regimes – the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. With ruthless repressions, un-ending terror, and through intimidation and humiliation, both Nazi Germany and Stalin’s USSR, in flagrant violation of international law, illegally mobilized and coerced Latvian citizens of various ethnic backgrounds into their armed forces. Nazi Germany, in breach of the 1907 Hague Convention on the rules of war, illegally drafted around 115,000 young men of which 25,000 to 30,000 were killed. The flower of the nation perished in the battle between the great powers. Those men that had been drafted into the German army and managed to survive the war were ruthlessly persecuted by the Soviet regime that followed.

Nearly 100,000 Latvian citizens were mobilized in the Red Army and, of those, 35,000 were killed.

The Stalinist USSR and Nazi Germany which started the war bear historical responsibility for the broken fate of the Latvian people. The injustice came to an end only with restoration of the national independence of Latvia in early 1990s.

Unfortunately some public organizations spread falsehoods against Latvia and Latvians referring to 16 March and talking about the rebirth of Nazism and support for it. These allegations are being made and disseminated in order to discredit Latvia.

The preamble of Satversme – the Latvian Constitution - says that Latvia honours the those that fought for its freedom, remembers the victims of foreign powers and condemns the communist and national-socialist regimes and their crimes. The public display of the symbols of the totalitarian regimes is a criminal offense under Latvian law. As a democratic country, Latvia guarantees all human and civil rights and freedoms, including the freedom of assembly.

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WHAT IS 16 MARCH?

From 16 March to 18 March in 1944, the two divisions of the Latvian Legion – 15th and 19th fought for the last time, side-by-side, against the Red Army at Velikaya River in Russia not far from the Latvian border. According to unofficial estimates the Latvians lost around 2,000 men in fierce fighting.

The idea to commemorate this date as a remembrance day of the Latvian Legion was raised in 1952 by exiled Latvians belonging to the veterans' organization *Daugavas Vanagi* in London. They then decided that 16 March would be the day to hold an annual commemoration to honour fellow veterans that had fallen.

Since the late 1980s, former legionnaires and their family members also held public commemorations for those fallen and injured on the battlefields of World War II, the survivors, the exiled, those who passed through the Soviet filtration and penal camps and for those who never returned – for all the Latvian soldiers who had to fight wearing foreign uniforms.

On 16 March, the main events take place in Riga with a church service at the Dome Cathedral; a march with laying of flowers at the Freedom Monument; and at the legionnaires' cemetery in Lestene in the municipality of Tukums. The atmosphere in these events is generally calm. People remember the fallen, many with tears in their eyes when sister remembers her brother, the daughter and grandson – the father and grandfather they never met – and the former soldiers remember their fellow soldiers.

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ATTEMPTS TO DISCREDIT LATVIA

Starting from late 1990s, Russia and its government controlled media interpret the 16 March public events in a biased manner. Their information filled with fabrications and disinformation that have no basis in historical fact. The Russian officials, too, actively express their derogatory opinions about 16 March commemorations labeling the participants as neo-Nazis. These actions are part of Russia's information war which has significantly intensified following the Russian Federation's aggressive acts and overt violations of international law carried out against Ukraine.

In order to give an apparent support to the patently absurd notion about the neo-Nazism as a problem in Latvia or elsewhere in Europe, Russian foreign policy documents demagogically point to the views of particular political groups, cases of desecration of Soviet era monuments, the lawful trials of a few Soviet security forces and war veterans who had committed crimes against humanity. Russia does not accept the concept of fair and equal treatment given by the Latvian authorities concerning all crimes perpetrated by both the Soviet and Nazi regimes' atrocities. The Russian authorities manufacture quaint pieces of ideological "research" in a vain attempt to find "evidence" that allows them to portray the 16 March commemoration events as glorifications of Nazism that, nevertheless, does not actually exist. These assertions about Nazism are unfounded and untrue.

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WHAT WAS THE LATVIAN LEGION?

² **SS (Schutzstaffel)** – the guard units of the National-socialist party (NSDAP), which later were transformed to a separate military force not subordinated to the army command with two branches - military (*Waffen SS*) and general (*Allgemeine SS*), with only the NSDAP members and representatives of the 'Arian race' accepted in the latter. For this reason, the Latvian Legion was included in the *Waffen SS* units, which had only military tasks at the front line.

After the Nazi German defeat at Stalingrad, conscription of the inhabitants of the occupied European countries into the military units of the Third Reich was initiated. On 10 February 1943, the Nazi leadership, in violation of international law, issued an order about the formation of the so-called 'voluntary' Latvian SS legion.

International law as reflected the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 did not permit drafting of residents of the occupied territories into the armed forces therefore these formations were subordinated not to the army – the *Wehrmacht*, but rather to the *SS*², which officially was not a military structure. The notion 'voluntary' which was included in the official title of the legion was just a subterfuge to circumvent the Hague convention of 1907. In reality, the commanders and staff officers of the illegal legion were Germans, Latvians were in lower positions and in fact, served as the "cannon fodder".

Avoiding conscription meant the threat of being sent to a concentration camp. As of 1944, the avoidance of conscription could also be cause for capital punishment. In the summer of 1944, the decision was taken to shoot anyone who would not join a mobilization within a 48 hour period.

According to historical experts, not more than 15-20% of the legion was made up of volunteers; whereas 80-85% were forced to join.

This period in history and the reasons that motivated each individual to fight against the second Soviet occupation should also be taken into account: in 1940, Latvians were deprived of their independence by the USSR and Latvia's citizens were subjected to ruthless campaigns of terror. On 14 June 1941, the Soviet government ordered the deportation of 15,000 residents of Latvia of various ethnic origins to Siberia or other far away and harsh environments. It was not just adult men and women that were deported, but also elderly people, children and infants – nearly everyone in the country had relatives amongst the victims. This was used by Nazi propaganda to offer promises to the legionnaires that they were fighting for a free Latvia although the Germans themselves had no plans at all to re-establish a Latvian state. This contradiction between the tantalising hopes, on the one hand, of regaining

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Latvian independence while preventing a Soviet occupation, and the cruel reality that was the actual case marks the tragedy of the Latvian Legion in the Second World War.

Both divisions of the legion were field units fighting on the front line in 1943-1945 against the Soviet troops. The Latvian Legion as a military formation has no relation to the Holocaust or war crimes. The soldiers mobilized in the legion did not take part in repressive actions against the civilian population. One third of the members of the legion died on the battlefield. Not a single person has been accused of war crimes during his service in the Latvian Legion.

In the course of the war, the Nazi administration included in the legion the so-called police battalions. Several individuals who served there were tried after the war for participation in the Holocaust and the war crimes.

The 15th division of the legion was transferred to Germany at the end of 1944 where it remained till the end of the war. The 19th division stayed in Kurzeme (Kurland) until the capitulation of Germany on 8 May 1945.

The former legionnaires were subject to scrutiny after the war and their possible involvement in the war crimes was investigated both by Western allies and the Soviet security services in Latvia.

The United States of America, Great Britain and France expressed their understanding for the soldiers of the Latvian and Estonian legions in 1946 and granted them the status of political refugees allowing them to settle down in the West. A good illustration is the fact that a number of former Latvian legionnaires were entrusted to guard the accused German Nazi leaders during the Nürnberg international war crimes tribunal as a part of U.S. units guarding the prisoners.

In turn, those men mobilized in the legion who surrendered instead to the Red Army experienced brutal interrogations, deportation and imprisonment in the Gulag camps. Death sentences were not uncommon.

A considerable part of the legionnaires did not surrender, but escaped to

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the forests to wage a guerrilla war against the Soviet regime. This lasted until 1949 when a massive deportation of the supportive rural population took place. The national partisans were overwhelmed by the Soviet security and army troops. The members of the national resistance were sentenced to long terms in the prison camps or shot to death.

For those who survived the long sentences and returned home, the KGB continued to haunt and monitor them as well as imposing various lifelong restrictions (which were only lifted after the liquidation of the KGB in Latvia in 1991). These restrictions were extended also to family members during the Soviet era – the children had fewer opportunities for higher education and employment.

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THE SHADOW OF CRIMES IN THE LATVIAN HISTORY

World War II atrocities endured by the residents of occupied Latvia included those committed by the infamous Arājs komando, are related to the so-called “public order service” (and later, the police) battalions, not the legion itself. During the war years, the Nazis carried out a massive recruitment campaign in the occupied Eastern territories called Ostland which comprised Latvia. 49 police battalions (42 Latvian and 7 Russian) were put together drawing on the local populace. These battalions participated in punitive actions against the partisans in Belarus, the guarding of the Salaspils Concentration Camp and the Riga and Warsaw ghettos, and the transport of Jews to Rumbula near Riga where they were executed. These units were organised and operational before the formation of the Latvian Legion.

In 1943, several police battalions were included in the Legion. There were several members of the “Latvian auxiliary security police” and amongst them were individuals that had previously served in the SD³. This fact in itself does not make the Latvian Legion a criminal structure. Besides, as Nazi documents bear witness, there was a strong anti-German sentiment amongst the legionnaires.

³SD (*Sicherheitsdienst*) – the internal security and intelligence service of Nazi Germany with the primary task to “uncover the enemies of the National Socialist idea”.

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THE OFFICIAL POSITION OF LATVIA

Since regaining of national independence in 1991, the Republic of Latvia has strongly and categorically condemned all totalitarian ideologies and the crimes against humanity and war crimes committed during the Second World War. The illegal conscription of the residents of Latvia into the Latvian Legion was a crime and therefore 16 March has not been named as an official national holiday.

Freedom of speech and freedom of opinion are guaranteed Latvia's Constitution (Article 100 of Satversme) and these include the freedom of understanding and interpretation of historical events.

The chapters of history are not written only in black and white. World War II is connected with regimes of occupation as well as war crimes and crimes against humanity. It is essential to discern the difference between those who committed crimes and those that died in combat at the battle front. War and the oppressiveness of occupying powers meant, for many in Latvia, being forced to choose to fight with one side or the other on the front lines, brother against brother and father against son, dividing the people, splitting Latvia apart. Today, rather than digging lines of division deeper or creating new front lines, we must seek jointly to explore the tragic lessons of history and find common ground while insulating this work from radicalism and politicisation, and never falling prey to provocation.

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ADDITIONAL INFORMA- TION

Ezergailis, Andrievs (Ed.) (1997)

The Latvian Legion: Heroes, Nazis, or Victims?: a collection of documents from OSS war-crimes investigation files, 1945–1950.

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Lācis, Visvaldis (2006)

The Latvian Legion: according to independent observers.

Riga: Jumava.

The film about the Latvian Legion by producer Ināra Kolmane and historian Uldis Neiburgs containing a short review of the key historical dates and testimonies by former soldiers and their family members:

<http://www.latfilma.lv/d/148/>

The film by studio *Deviņi* “Latvian Legion”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHtcgaeC4T8>

Latvian President Andris Bērziņš perspective on the commemoration day of the legionnaires:

http://www.president.lv/pk/content/?art_id=19234

Muižnieks, Nils; Zelče Vita (red.). (2011)

Karojošā piemiņa. 16.marts un 9.maijs.

Rīga: Zinātne.

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EXPERTS ON THE LATVIAN LEGION

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DID YOU KNOW THAT...

During Second World War and after that Latvia suffered from the occupation of two totalitarian regimes – the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Using repressions and terror the **totalitarian** Nazi and Soviet powers **forcibly conscripted many Latvians** into one or another army.

More than 100,000 residents of Latvia were drafted into different units of the German armed forces during the war; about the same number were drafted into the Soviet Red Army.

In 1943, Nazi Germany created the Latvian Legion thereby violating the Hague Convention of 1907 which prohibits an occupying power to draft the inhabitants of the occupied territory into military service. To circumvent the Hague Convention, the conscripts were called “volunteers”. But **trying to avoid conscription meant imprisonment and later – the death penalty.** The Latvian Legion was a combat force and one third of its soldiers died at the front line of battle. There is no person who has been found guilty for war crimes while serving in the Legion.

Former soldiers, who fought one side or the other at the battle front, commemorate and honour fallen soldiers on different dates. 16 March is an unofficial day of remembrance of the soldiers who fought with the German forces during Second World War.

16 March is not an official day of remembrance, but some of the veterans wish to commemorate fallen soldiers on their own initiative. They attend church services, gather in cemeteries and lay flowers at the Freedom Monument without any ideological inspiration. Events of 16 March do not demonstrate support for totalitarian ideologies. Neither on this day nor any other day are Nazi uniforms, symbols or slogans permitted - in fact, they are prohibited by law.

The government of Latvia and other official institutions do not display support or participate in these private events. Latvia pays homage to its fallen soldiers on Lāčplēsis Day, 11 November.

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In recent years, a few radical groups have attempted to disturb these private remembrance events in order to attract public attention to themselves and their aims. **The Russian Federation has been spreading defamatory information alleging that the government or the people of Latvia have pro-Nazi sentiments.**

Latvia has consistently condemned the crimes against humanity committed by both totalitarian regimes. Latvia strongly condemns the Holocaust, commemorates its victims and supports Holocaust education, remembrance and research. Latvia is a democratic country where all the basic civil rights and freedoms are guaranteed by the Constitution. As a party to the European Convention of the Human Rights, Latvia ensures the right to freedom of assembly for all residents of Latvia.