

# **THE LATVIAN LEGION**

**According to Independent Observers**

**By Visvaldis Lācis**

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## **FOREWORD**

Why did this book need to be written? The answer to that is clear to those who follow the supposed war crimes committed by Latvian soldiers during the Second World War. Fabrications all. But the generations who grew up under the Soviet regime believe all these lies and are also unable to objectively evaluate Russia's own record of horrific war crimes both previous to and during the war. They look to blame anybody else but themselves.

Therefore Latvians must publicly defend themselves by demonstrating what level heads and honest minds in the West have thoughtfully concluded - which is that there was no wrongdoing found in the ranks of the Latvian Legion. This small sampling of documents proves that the Latvian resolve and Latvian spirit has not been broken even after surviving the dark period of Russian domination. This has been understood and openly admitted by Western politicians, historians and military personnel. That in turn encourages Latvian national consciousness to grow so that the Latvian nation can see itself as honorable in the eyes of the free-thinking world.

That is the reason for this publication.

The publishers.

# THE LATVIAN LEGION

According to Independent Observers

The historical role of the Latvian SS Legion in the Second World War has been hotly debated in both the Latvian and the international press, especially since 1998, after the establishment of the legion's anniversary on March 16<sup>th</sup>. Even though the role and function of the Latvian SS Legion has been thoroughly and creditably dealt with by Latvian scholars, historians, politicians and press who have provided answers to the questions of their founding, their motivations, their fighting capability, still it is really the neutral international observers comments on this matter that are our most reliable and most trustworthy sources of information. The title itself, the so called "Latvian SS" (which we deliberately put in quotation marks) bears some explaining; because it was not Latvians (neither the Latvian civil authorities nor Latvian soldiers, either volunteers or conscripted) who had the power to determine what they were called. The Latvians joined forces with the Germans against the Russians because they regarded the ruling communist regime in Moscow as the biggest threat to their hopes of reestablishing an independent, prosperous Latvia and because they wanted to fight against the communist imperial power of the USSR.

The first official report after the war that the Latvian legionnaires were not associated with the German SS units and the war crimes associated with them comes on February 4, 1946. This cyphered document No. 817/252/59 submitted to the British Foreign Affairs Department, was sent to the Commander of the British forces in Berlin, Germany. The full text is as follows:

*(CYPHER) DEPARTMENTAL NO. 2 . FROM FOREIGN OFFICE TO THE POLITICAL ADVISER TO COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF GERMANY (BERLIN)*

*NO.251. D. 10.30 a.m. 5<sup>th</sup> February, 1946*

*4<sup>th</sup> February, 1946.*

*Repeated to Lubbecke No. 125.*

*\* \* \**

*Your telegram No. 84*

*(of 18<sup>th</sup> January: Soviet requests to hand over Baltic nationals ex S.S. formations).*

*1. We cannot regard Baltic nationals as war criminals or traitors when the only charge against them is that they fought against the Soviet armed forces; but we have no wish to withhold them from justice if they are war criminals in the accepted sense.*

*2. You should therefore insist in each case on the production of satisfactory prima facie evidence that the person concerned has been guilty of a war crime in the ordinary sense, and in doubtful cases you should refer to this office for instructions.<sup>1</sup>*

OTP.

Extremely significant work in the area of WW II scholarship was done by Dr. Heinrich Strods, professor emeritus in history at the University of Latvia. His descriptions of the Latvian Legion's battles in his publications are all the more significant because he has used as his sources not only Gestapo and KGB records, but also the German federal archives at Koblenz, the archives of the German Foreign Ministry at Bonn, Great Britain's historical archives, as well as the U.S. national archives in Washington. Professor H. Strods has uncovered in his research that a political fact-finding mission from Great Britain reporting on June 25, 1943 on the state of German-occupied Latvia, stated that the Latvian nation wanted their representatives in London to actively lobby for Latvian independence from Hitler as well as from Stalin. In the event that the Allies did nothing in this regard, then the Latvians would themselves organize armed resistance. The English fact-finding report states "Latvians know that a time will come when the Bolsheviks will once again overrun their land, and that this time needs to be delayed as long as possible". A later British fact finding mission of July 5, 1943 confirmed this, stating that all Latvians were resolutely against both the Germans and the Russians.<sup>2</sup>

Therefore in 1946 the British Foreign Ministry was already well informed about what the words Latvian SS Legion meant, and why they were fighting against the Soviet armed forces.

John Keegan, author of many books on war history and hundreds of papers on war history, war strategy and international relations was a senior lecturer in Military History at Sandhurst Military Academy from 1960 to 1986. Since 1986 he has been writing for the London Daily Telegraph on military and national security issues. In his book Waffen SS. The asphalt soldiers, this widely acclaimed expert also mentions the Latvian Legion, arguing that, in case of war, considering how badly they had been treated by the Russians, all Latvians had reason enough to go with the Germans to Russia's eastern front. After long being under the rule of the czar, the Baltic states became independent in 1919, with the support of the Western Allies. But in 1940 once again, the Red Army occupied these lands and established Russian imperial rule. Keegan explains that in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania, politicians and citizens alike accepted the Germans as liberators and automatically collaborated with them hoping for the reestablishment of their nations' independence. Before people realized the Germans' real goals in the Baltic, many volunteers came forward to make up the first volunteer battalions. But after the stream of volunteers dwindled, the Germans instituted a mobilization policy and created two Latvian divisions (15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup>) and one Estonian division (20<sup>th</sup>) under the title Waffen SS Grenadier Divisions. Keegan writes that in 1944:

- The Russian occupation with its impending horrors loomed as inevitable and threatened much worse than the German indifference to their independence. So these three SS Divisions voluntarily agreed to keep on fighting. All three divisions suffered heavy casualties and those who survived were sentenced to hard labour in Russia. Keegan underlines:

*"Most of the east European SS was riff-raff with the exception of the Latvian and Estonian divisions, which were fighting in the defence of their own homelands."*<sup>3-4</sup>

In his book Foreign Legions of the Third Reich, the Scottish Aberdeen University's bibliographer David Littlejohn writes that most of this work is dedicated to the eastern nations, formerly Soviet citizens, who chose not so much to fight for Germany as to fight against the despised communist tyranny of Joseph Stalin. D. Littlejohn also tells us how the Latvian Legion was created:

*"In June 1940 Stalin seized the three Baltic States and announced their "voluntary incorporation" into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. There followed a year of terror and repression during which thousands were tortured, killed and deported. Small wonder that the arrival of the German forces in June 1941 seemed to many more like a liberation than a conquest. There is a saying "My enemy's enemy is my friend. "To Baltic peoples after their "Year of Terror" anyone who took up arms against the Stalinist regime and all it stood for, had to be regarded, if not as "a friend", at least, in that phrase which the Anglo-Saxons coined some years later for their anti-fascist Italian mercenaries "a co-belligerent". Baltic, and other "eastern" cooperation with the German forces must be seen in this light."*<sup>5</sup>

The period from June 17, 1940 to July 1, 1941, when Latvia found itself under the power of the USSR, has been deeply and permanently seared into Latvian memory as the "Year of Horror".

The American ambassador Lee Ready in his book The Forgotten Axis. German Partners and Foreign Volunteers in World War II, summarizing the bloody events of the year of horror and the mass arrests and deportations to the Gulag writes:

- Now Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania were ready to fight in the war against the Bolsheviks more than ever before.<sup>6</sup>

During the war, as Sweden was a neutral nation, and located close to the occupied Baltic countries, Stockholm naturally became the place where diplomats and agents on fact-finding missions from many nations, both participants and non-participants of the war, stayed to gather information on the unfolding events in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia.

An American diplomat in Stockholm informed the U.S. Foreign Secretary on December 23, 1942 about the situation in Latvia:

*"... there is a growing belief that Germans early in this year will mobilize the manpower to carry out often expressed and increasingly threatening statements that Baltic people should participate more actively in fight against Bolsheviks. (453) ...Latvians in general had great fear that Soviets may return, but at the same time are more and more disillusioned with the German regime, in which many had placed hopes. (—) ...now feel that the war in the East had shown that two equally*

*powerful forces were opposing each other and would probably fight until both collapsed. This was the great hope in Latvia, since Latvians believed that if that occurred the Anglo-American powers would be able to stop the Soviets from returning to the Baltic States." (454)<sup>7</sup>*

In June 1943 a memorandum reached London which read: "Right from the beginning, men in Latvia were organized into military units:

*"At first this was done for policing in the rear of the fighting line and it was expressly promised to those who enlisted in this force that their duties would consist only in maintaining order in their own land. Soon, however, these police units were dispatched, against all promises, to the fighting line and suffered heavy casualties. Recently the Germans have started to organize a special Latvian Legion, allegedly for the purpose of protecting Latvian territory against possible renewed attacks from the East.*

*All these services are being called "voluntary", but there is ample evidence that great pressure is being exercised and that the enlistment is completely compulsory - whole age groups, for instance, being called up. A decree has been issued that all young persons must satisfy the German authorities that they are usefully employed, and those who cannot produce such evidence must choose between the alternatives of "voluntary" enlistment in either the labor organization or the*

*Legion, or else are deprived of their ration books. It is clear from the above that the activities of the German occupation authorities in Latvia in essence constitute a manifest violation of the generally recognized precepts of international law, and it is the duty of every Latvian vehemently to protect against such methods."<sup>8</sup>*

In October 1943 American ambassador Hershel V. Johnson sent the following dispatch to the U.S. Secretary of State regarding the situation in Latvia and the Latvian Legion:

*"In February 1943, an announcement was made by Hitler to the effect that the Latvians would also be permitted to form an SS Volunteer Legion. It was assumed by the Germans that the formation of the Legion would be attractive to the Latvians for several reasons. In the first place the Soviet Army was approaching the Latvian border. Since the Latvians do not desire the return of the Soviets to their country, it was taken for granted that they be prepared to fight in order to prevent this possibility from becoming a reality. Furthermore, the Germans were aware of the ardent desire of the Latvians to bring about the restoration of the national Latvian army, and they believed that the Latvian Legion would be accepted as a step in this direction.*

*It was assumed that the newly founded national Legion would really attract the sorely afflicted Latvian people, since (1) at the time of the foundation of the Legion the Russians were very near the Latvian border, (2) no one in Latvia wants the Bolshevik period to return, (3) every Latvian is prepared to fight in order to prevent the Russians from returning to Latvian territory and (4) because the whole Latvian population ardently desires the restoration of the Latvian national army, towards the formation of which the Legion, it seemed, might serve as the first step."<sup>3</sup>*

In February 1944 H.V. Johnson submitted further information to the Secretary of State regarding Latvia, noting that February 1944 marked the end of 19 year period of mobilization (1906-1924). He outlined the Latvian political stand as follows:

*"The people still hope for assistance from the Western Democracies. However, on the other hand, the people are becoming embittered because there is no clear indication that these countries reject the Soviet claims on the Baltic countries. The general belief is that the Germans and Soviets have reached some secret agreement and that the reports about heavy fighting are more or less a bluff. It is believed that the Germans will withdraw their troops to the 1941 German-Soviet frontier line, and then conclude an armistice or peace with the Soviets. This belief explains the response of the population to the mobilization order. (On the other hand, it is true*

*that the control has been made more rigid and that it is more difficult to avoid the mobilization.) An open conflict with the Soviets is considered inevitable. There are number of persons hiding in the forests. It is said that Latvians are hiding in Lithuania - and vice versa."<sup>10</sup>*

In March 1944 ambassador H.V. Johnson's report to Washington reads: - As you probably know there is strong opposition among the Germans against the creation of a significantly larger Latvian military force. Often seemingly minor incidents have given the Germans pause in this regard. For example, on the streets of Riga were seen marching a new group of Latvian recruits led by two German soldiers. They were marching and singing: "We'll hit those lousy so and so's and then those blue-grey so and so's." By the way, this song is becoming quite popular.<sup>11</sup>

The author of this text should add here, that right up to the end of the war, the second verse was just as popular: "We're gonna fight the red so and so's and after that the blue-grey so and so's".

Referring to these US diplomatic reports from Stockholm to the US Secretary of State, we consider it crucial that Dr. Andrew Ezergailis, an American history professor and editor of the book Stockholm Documents. The German Occupation of Latvia 1941-1945. What did America Know? in his introduction indicates exactly which documents he uses as the basis for his book:

*"The documents in this volume come from the Records of the United States Department of State relating to the Internal Affairs of Latvia, 1920-1945. The documents are important: 1) for what they say about Latvia under the Nazis; 2) for what they tell us about Latvian resistance against Nazis; and 3) for what they tell us about American knowledge of Latvia during the occupation. "<sup>14</sup>*

Also American historians have turned their attention to the Latvian Legion.

Robert J.Waite, an investigative historian with the SIS (Special Intelligence Service) division of the U.S. Ministry of Justice was one of the presenters at the international investigative historians conference in Riga on June 12-13, 2003, where historians from nine different countries presented papers on the subject of pro-German sentiment in German occupied Latvia. In his paper, titled Some Aspects of Anti-German Sentiment in Latvia (1941-1944) R.Waite clarifies the Latvian stand when the German occupation army was driving the Red Army from Latvia:

*"According to contemporary German accounts, many in Latvia viewed these armed forces, at least temporarily, as liberators who had freed the country from the year of Soviet rule, a period of repression and brutal terror.*

*The Soviets had invaded and occupied the country on June 17, 1940, set up a bogus election in which Latvians "voted" for annexation, and incorporated the country into the Soviet Union. The new rulers moved quickly to eliminate alleged opponents, especially those viewed as political and class enemies. Property was seized and farmers lost their land to the newly established collectivized farms. Businesses were nationalized and the country's independence, gained on November, 1918, eliminated. With the German invasion, locally organized forces drove Russian troops out of some areas, liberating their home territories. In Riga political leaders, prominent nationalists, and large number of patriots believed that German occupation meant autonomy and that Latvia would regain its independence, feelings exploited by the Germans in the first weeks of the occupation. These dreams were but short-lived as the Nazis moved quickly to secure its firm control over all aspects of political and economic life. Latvia was now occupied by another European power, which chose to exploit for its own advantage the economic and human resources it found*

there. As the German military intelligence unit reported, while the Latvian populace "received the troops with enthusiasm," these sentiments "cooled relatively fast" in both the cities and the countryside."<sup>TM</sup>

Touching on the problems regarding the Latvian Legion R.Waite writes:

*"Anti-German sentiment was also recorded among members of the Latvian Legion, a "voluntary" Waffen SS unit established in early 1943. A meeting on January 27,1943, of the Higher SS and Police Leader Latvia and members of the Latvian administration discussed the unit's establishment, noting that "Latvians had always expressed the desire to participate in the fight against the Bolsheviks," but also stating that all of the 32,000 Latvians currently in the Schutzmannschaft "did not all sign up voluntarily. (...)We have been told that many of the 'volunteers' were in fact forced to join these battalions. "More powerful than the resentment of having been forced into a military unit was a broader hostility toward the Germans because they had injured the pride of Latvia and were working against the best interests of the nation. For example, on August 6,1943, memo from the Security Police dealt specifically with "anti-German currents in the Latvian Legion" and concluded that among the officers especially "a crass chauvinistic attitude and rejection of everything German has recently become apparent." That sentiment had filtered down to the regular soldiers, not all of whom, the memo noted, had been positively affected by the front-line experience with German soldiers. Furthermore, the memo described two incidents in Jelgava that illustrated the mounting hostility. A German reported that he had gone to a hotel restau-*

*rant filled with men from the Latvian Legion. A corporal looked at him, noted that he was German, and said: "You know...do you think I put on this uniform to fight for the Germans? No, me and my youngsters know that we are fighting for only one goal, namely that the sun will shine over Latvia again. I don't want to see either the Russians or the German here. They have to get out." He continued the tirade and at the conclusion others gathered around and applauded him. That same evening, the SS captain filing the report spoke with two Legionnaires, scheduled to ship out the next day, both of whom were "very anti-German." In addition, he wrote, Latvian Legion officers salute only superior officers from the Wehrmacht and Waffen SS, but none of the other SS men or police. Noting that these were only a few examples, he added, "they, however, characterize the whole mood within the Legion."^*

American historians H.P. Taylor and R.J. Bender have given this characterization of the political stand of the two Latvian SS weapons divisions:

- The year of Russian occupation from June 1940 to July 1941 Latvia remembers as the *Year of Horror*. When they chased the Red army out of Latvia as part of an unrelenting plan of Barbarossa, they considered the Germans the lesser of two evils. But all the heroism and self-sacrifice in the

ensuing battles only gained Latvia three years of respite from Russian oppression, changing German occupation for Russian rule. What the two Latvian divisions had in common was their bravery and their reputation for self-sacrifice, even in the face of certain defeat, they were completely dedicated to defending Latvia against the return of the Russians. Their inclination to join the Germans was in order to ultimately defeat the Russians once and for all and indefinitely postpone Russian return to their soil. It was this that made the Latvian battalions fight so fiercely and at such great cost.

Regarding the battles between June and October of 1944, Taylor and Bender write:

-The Russian attacks continued in order to force the now severely depleted Latvian divisions west. On July 16<sup>th</sup> they forced them to retreat past the old Russian-Latvian border. From here on, to the war's bitter end, each retreat signified a larger and larger portion of their homeland was falling under Russian rule. But even so, despite enormous odds and their desperate situation, the Latvian resolve to fight grew even stronger.

American historians commenting on events after May 8,1945 regarding Courland's capitulation give us the following news:

*"Other former members of the Latvian Waffen-SS were among the large number who hid them-*

*elves in the dense forests to continue the fight against the Russian invaders as guerrillas. These men fought in separate groups and estimates of their total numbers vary from 5,000 to 8,000 and it is probably not an exaggeration that they amounted to a third of all the Latvian soldiers in Curland."<sup>15</sup>*

There were those among the Americans who defended the necessity of the Latvian soldiers' continuing battle against the Soviet forces. Francis Neilson was one. He was formerly a citizen of Great Britain and a member of Parliament, of the same political party as Winston Churchill. On November 20, 1941, as a member of the press he writes:

*"Military necessity knows no humane law. The first and last consideration must be victory. What is called national defence imposes this law upon the armed forces and, once a war begins, there is no alternative. Consider for a moment the Allied democracies fighting against the three Baltic States and Finland.*

*Before Germany attacked Russia, the latter country bore in upon the Finns, the Estonians, the Latvians, and the Lithuanians in the most ruthless manner, with the determination of depriving them of their independence and reducing them to the position of bond slaves. Great Britain and the United States stood off and watched this unseemly business unper-*

*turbed. Now when Germany is associated with these small states seeking their liberty, the Allied democracies join forces with those of the Soviets because national interest demands the overthrow of Hitler. So it is when you go to war. The wolf of yesterday may be the lamb of today. Morals are shattered by war-like patriotism, and noble ideals are frustrated by military necessity. Politically, it is a dirty business, and our sympathy can only go out to those who must fight under orders and the wretched people who in the battle area, are uprooted and driven from their homes."<sup>16</sup>*

American army lieutenant B. Medfield after being taken prisoner by the Germans in Italy was then taken to a prisoner of war camp in Poland where he was guarded by Latvian soldiers. B. Medfield witnessed the following:

*"We Americans were surprised with the just, good behaviour, kindness, and first class accuracy of the guards of the camp. Very soon, we found out that the guards of the camp were Latvians. Each of them kept hidden the Latvian national flag somewhere under their German uniform. They explained to us: "you Americans are our real friends and hope. The Germans are our hated enemies. Our dream and aim is the independent Latvia."*

*"We American prisoners shall never forget to be grateful to the Latvians, who in every respect relieved our situation and really took care of our welfare."*

*"I am an American and my ancestors are Irish. Before the war, I did not know that there was a Latvian nation and Latvia. As a commanding officer, I have taken part with my unit in the battle of Salerno, as well as in others. I was taken prisoner and spent 13 months as POW in Poland.""*

Precise information regarding the Latvian Legion quickly reached the U.S. War Department. On October 30, 1943 the U.S. War Ministry in the course of gathering data about the territory of the Baltic countries received reports from Greene, one of their agents from Stockholm, about the problems the Germans were having because of their Latvian units.

*"There are indications that the Germans were reluctant to permit the Baltic legions or auxiliary troops to participate in the defense of their countries for the apparent reasons, first, that the Baltic legions could not be fully trusted not to turn against the Germans if given a chance to do so, and, second, that they would be disinclined to cooperate effectively in the anticipated scorched-earth policy to be followed by the Germans if it should be necessary to withdraw beyond the Narva-Peipus-Pskov-Polotsk Line."<sup>8</sup>*

The Canadian historian M.K Baltais, wrote her doctoral dissertation on the topic "United States Foreign Policy in the Fields: The US Army and the Baits, 1944-1947". Her dissertation research

materials included the most different archival sources imaginable: U.S. Army files; the Files of the British Foreign Office; Records of the Reichskommissioner for the Baltic States 1941-1945 (Reichskommissar fur das Ostland); The Reich Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Regions (Reichsministerium fur die bezetzte Ostgebiete); US Army War Department and State Department Investigative Records Repository (a collection of US Army intelligence materials that had been kept secret under the 50 year rule); the Yalta Agreement of Repatriation, under the code name Argonaut 150 - Agreement Relating to Prisoners of War and Civilians Liberated by Forces Operating under Soviet Command and Forces Operating under British Command; UNRA and IRO archives in New York City; files of the Reichsfiirer SS and Chef der deutscher Polizei, Heinrich Himmler. And she also used a small collection of documents from private collections with written accounts of particular incidents as sources.<sup>19</sup>

This historian immediately understood that the problems of the Latvian Legion were all interlocking and in order to unravel them it was essential to answer four main questions: 1. Was the Latvian Legion made up of volunteers? 2. Did the Latvian Legion commit any war crimes? 3. Was the Latvian Legion SS? 4. Were the Latvian

Legion Nazis? M.K. Baltais provides us with dispassionate accounts and truthful answers to these questions from many original sources. Out of this rich research material we can then present several examples illustrating the real character of the Latvian Legion taken from the published material of M.K.Baltais.

On January 18, 1945 Jekabs Ruskis was only one of several soldiers in the legion who was injured or fell in battle. Ruskis, born in 1906, had been called up on Apr. 1,1944 and lost his right hand. At the German army hospital 2/608 he was issued two documents. One was replacing his soldier's Pay book (Soldbuch), noting length of duty and pay that had been lost during the fighting, the other gave permission for him to carry the silver insignia of those wounded in battle. Both documents indicate his rank as "Leg.-Gren. ("Legion-Grenadier)" but not SS-Grenadier or Waffen-SS Grenadier. Clarifying this significant difference about Jekabs Ruskis, K.M. Baltais even included written, sworn statements confirming this, given by two German SS officers after the war. The SS weapons division obersturmbanfuhrer / lieutenant colonel Albert Ekkehard as the General Staff officer in charge of weapons witnessed as follows:

-All the army's foreign volunteers fighting against bolshevism in this war who were forced (original text emphasis) to serve in the weapons division of the SS (Waffen-SS) did not get accepted into the SS and therefore never were members of the SS, who had to be German volunteers. Both their rank title as well as the stripes on their uniform were different<sup>20</sup>

A similarly sworn written statement comes from Ernst Rode, in the same place where A. Ekkehard, at the Darmstadt concentration camp gave his last orders. E. Rode had been appointed by Heinrich Himmler as Chief of the Command Staff of the Reich Leader and Chief of the German Police, and in his testimony he describes how he himself would characterize the so-called Latvian SS weapons divisions:

-The members of these two divisions never did become members of the SS, if for no other reason than because of the certain important directives. That 'was just not possible for them. (Gar nicht sein konnte.- German)<sup>21</sup>

On September 2,1946 the US 3<sup>rd</sup> Army's Staff in Heidelberg, Germany sent out a newsletter (Circular Nr.29) to all army divisions explaining that the US army had officially recognized that the Latvians and Estonians who had been forced by the Germans to fight against the Russians should neither be considered to be Wehrmacht, (German armed forces) nor as belonging to the German SS , despite the fact that they were under the Waffen SS. They should not be considered as persons who were to be

automatically arrested.<sup>22</sup> US armed forces commander in Germany, McCloy, commenting on the formation of the Baltic legions, reported the following to the State Department on April 4, 1950:

- Latvia. In June 1940 Soviet forces occupied Latvia and the next month Latvia became a Soviet Socialist Republic. Immediately there began the relentless persecution of all who were not communists. The anti-Soviet fever reached quite a high pitch then, and the German invasion in 1941 was seen as a welcome change. The Latvians fervently wanted to take revenge and as soon as the situation allowed, the Germans created the following Latvian units in order to fight against the Soviet forces. The 15th SS infantry division (the first Latvian division); the 19th SS Infantry Division (the second Latvian division). Latvians made up these divisions and the Wehrmacht used these divisions mainly in the Baltics to fight against the Soviet forces.<sup>23</sup>

A report sent on April 13, 1950 to the US Secretary of State, and signed by the highest ranking army personnel in Germany, General Frank McCloy, explains the Baltic legions' position:

-These units should not be seen as either volunteers or SS - . Further on in the report we read in section B. that the Latvian and Estonian SS should not be considered to be like the German

SS because (1) They received no Nazi indoctrination; (2) They were never required to affirm any Nazi doctrines; (3) They never swore the SS oath of allegiance (4) They did not enjoy any of the privileges of the SS (5) They did not wear the designated German SS uniform.<sup>24</sup>

On February 5, 1946, Great Britain's Foreign Affairs Office acknowledged: -We cannot consider citizens of the Baltic countries either criminals nor traitors, because the only accusation against them is that they fought against the Soviet armed forces.<sup>25</sup>

Bernd Wegner, a professor at the Bundeswehr University in Hamburg Germany, is considered in historical studies circles to be a world renowned expert in matters of Waffen-SS. In answer to the question of whether the Latvian legionnaires were Nazis, professor Wegner replied:

- As we know only those of German descent were allowed to be members of the National socialist German workers party NSDAP, so it's quite self-evident that members of the Latvian Legion could not be NSDAP members.

- M.K.Baltais has appended in her book the list of WW II NSDAP party members in Latvia. This list confirms the statement of Professor Wegner above: among the list of former NSDAP members in Latvia, there are no Latvians, nor any Latvian legionnaires.<sup>26</sup>

In January of 1998 there was a case before the Canadian federal court regarding a former Latvian legionnaire Peter Arvid Vitols. The Canadian historian Professor Konrad Kwiet was summoned as an expert witness for the prosecution. Under cross-examination, Donald Powell acting for the defense questioned Professor Kwiet.

-The German SS certainly committed many crimes against humanity? -

Professor Kwiet: -Yes. -

Donald Powell: - These crimes are well substantiated with documentation. Professor Ezergailis says that there is no evidence of any incidents where any Latvian Legionnaire has committed any crime against humanity. Do you agree with this assessment?

Professor Kwiet: - Yes. I have not found any crimes against humanity, at least there is not one protocol where I have seen any documented proof.<sup>27</sup>

M.K.Baltais also emphasizes that not one Latvian legionnaire has ever been accused of war crimes outside of the Soviet Union.<sup>28</sup>

The University of Toronto's history professor M.Eksteins describes the German advance into Latvia in the following way:

"Despised as oppressors in 1905, looked on as colonizers in 1918, the Germans returned to Latvia as liberators in 1941. Liberators? Yes, the German occupation was undoubtedly seen as a liberation. Earlier, during the years of national renewal and independence Latvians spoke of the 700 years of German rule as years of slavery. There was no mention of such talk now. After the year of Bolshevik terror German rule seemed like a sweet dream and the return of light. They considered the Germans as "friends" and "saviours" (quotes by the author M. Eksteins -V.L.). People hurried to lay flowers by the Freedom Memorial in central Riga.

M. Eksteins confirms that many Latvians who are still alive and remember the past express the sentiment: "If there had not been a Year of Horror, there wouldn't be a Latvian Legion."<sup>91</sup>

Finally the US stand in the matter of the Latvian Legion clearly and definitely appears in an official letter written by a member of the refugee commission to the prewar appointed Latvian ambassador to Washington Dr.J. Feldman. This very important above mentioned document, in the original text of the letter reads as follows:

*"That the Baltic Waffen SS units (Baltic Legions) are to be considered as separate and distinct in purpose, activities and qualifications for membership from the German SS, and therefore the commission holds them not to be a movement hostile to the Government of the United states under the section 13 the Displaced persons Act, as amended."*

It was five years after the war that the Americans came to a clear understanding of what the words "Latvian SS weapons legion" really meant. The Latvian 15<sup>th</sup> division 33<sup>rd</sup> regiment's commanding officer V Janums on April 20, 1945 decided to defy further German orders requiring that his fighting unit defend Berlin. A risky initiative which could mean the death penalty if he failed to carry out orders. In a seven day period in a secret move through side roads and forest trails he brought out his fighting unit to the Elba River in order to surrender as prisoners of war to the Americans on April 27. During his first interrogation in the presence of some US general and three other American officers, a captain asked Janums:

"Did you know that the Gestapo was operating in Germany?"

Janums: Yes, I knew that, because there were many Latvians that were arrested as well."

The Captain: "So you knew that but still continued to fight with the Germans."

Janums: "We were defending our homeland, because we were afraid of the horrors that we experienced in 1941 from the NKVD (Commissariate for Internal Affairs). How they operated was a lot worse than the Gestapo."

On hearing this all the American officers laughed.<sup>29</sup>

Here we might quote the words of the noted French historian Jean Baptiste Dureselle:

-What a country sees when it looks at its past objectively is often not significant for other countries assessing their place in history. History is a collective memory.

As the archival research of M.K. Baltais, as well as of other historians demonstrates there was an increasing awareness on the part of the Western Allies regarding the Latvian Legion as they realized that the Latvian Legion had been fighting against Bolshevism and that they could not be compared to the German SS men and the Nazis. The Americans especially, came to this realization early on. At the

trials in Nuremberg already, it was conceded that those who had been forced to join the ranks of the SS organizations in such a way that they had no other choice and had committed no war crimes, were not to be considered criminals. This part of the decision was very significant in showing Western society that the Latvian and Estonian "Weapons SS" Divisions did not really belong to that organization. That was the reason that since 1946 the Americans and the British both hurried to free the war-weary soldiers, and not return them to their native lands, but rather created paramilitary organizations from the European refugees. So it was that since March of 1947 the guarding of the Hall of Justice as well as the prison at Nuremberg also included Latvian soldiers, most of whom had been Latvian legionnaires. Some of these guards from Nuremberg are still alive today both in Latvia and outside it.<sup>30,31,32</sup>

Evidently the soldiers from the Latvian and Estonian weapons SS divisions were allowed inclusion in the organized paramilitary units led by the West in occupied Germany, as well as assigned to guard the Nazis and the German prisoners before the courts, because as General Eisenhower, writing in the name of the Western Allies to British General Alexander, on July 10, 1945 said regarding the problem of what to do with all the prisoners of war who were citizens of western nations or neutral nations, who had served under the enemy forces, who were not war criminals should for safety's sake be repatriated, except the Estonian, Latvian, Lithuanian and Polish citizens.<sup>33</sup>

This circumstance where western allied government representatives, jurists and Generals decided immediately after the war to organize Latvian paramilitary units, knowing full well that the majority of these would be Latvian legionnaires, and allowed them to guard the highest ranking Nazi prisoners, in itself demonstrates how absurd it is to call the legionnaires Nazis.

Heinrich Strods, professor emeritus at the University of Latvia has researched the Latvian Legion in six archives. They are: the Latvian Nation's historical archives in Riga, the Koblenz federal archives in Germany, the historical archives of Great Britain, the German Foreign Ministry's political archives in Bonn and the U.S. National Archives in Washington. This research clearly shows that the Russians also knew the whole truth about the Latvian Legion, despite the fact that Russia is now directing the most despicable accusations and lies at the Latvian Legion.

Already on September 16, 1942 M. Bigcevs, who was the unit head commissar of the 7th division of the Red Army's political governing body, basing his remarks on the interrogation material from the prisoners of war of battalions 19 and 21 (19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> were some of the first Latvian battalions who headed east to fight the Bolsheviks -V.L.) reported to the Latvian Communist Party's Central Committee member A.Pelshe in Moscow:

No matter how the Latvians ended up in the 19th and 21<sup>st</sup> battalions, we doubt that they volunteered. The Latvians well know that the Germans look on them with contempt.<sup>34</sup>

June 24, 1943 the USSR National Security commissar V.Merkulov wrote the first secretary of the Latvian Communist Party J. Kalnberzins that in fact the formation of the legion was a result of forced mobilization of men of a certain age group.<sup>35</sup>

E. Fridrihson, the Red Army's political officer for the politburo reported on September 5, 1942 that a few of the legion's officers were causing a stir by saying that as soon the Germans and the Russians would be completely weakened, then the time will come for them to return home with their weapons and establish a bourgeois, democratic Latvia. Certainly their old friends the English would help them out.<sup>36</sup>

Captain V. Melinovski had received especially broad-ranging materials from interrogating prisoners. On April 3, 1944 he wrote that during the March battles 150 Latvians had deserted from the 15<sup>th</sup> Division and the 2<sup>nd</sup> brigade. When the Border guard regiment 2 was informed about being included in the 15<sup>th</sup> Weapons SS Division, 600 people fled. Soldiers were shooting in the air and yelling: "We're not volunteers. Let's not go any further. We don't want to fight on foreign soil for the Germans."<sup>37</sup>

On April 10, 1944 J. Kalnberzins received a secret document Nr.123 by lieutenant Kolegajev from The

Red Army's head political governing body called "The Latvian residents' attitudes about the Soviet Union and an international situation analysis." "Latvians are ready to fight

against the Russians as well as the Germans," is the way that Kolegajev informed the Latvian Communist leadership. Similarly in April of 1944 the head of the Red Army's political governing body (General Batusevski) sent a secret report which states that Latvians are ready to fight against the Russians as well as the Germans. The report reads as follows:

-Until approximately November of 1943 Germans mobilized Latvians into the German army and the national armed forces under the guise of its being voluntary.<sup>38</sup>

In the Russian Federated Republic of today, we rarely find war historians in the ranks of the diplomats, who hold objective views as to why the Baltic nations fought on the side of the Germans against the USSR. The former Red Army lieutenant colonel, the Tartars' diplomat, T.G.Istabulin in the book War and Prisoners of War, writes: In 1939 and 1940 national opposition quickly got more bloody with regard to the Baltic nations, Western Ukraine, Western White Russia, Besarabia and Northern Bukovina joining the USSR. The majority of these nations did not agree to the annexation of their territory, did not freely agree to Soviet governance, to collective farms, etc. They could not forgive the national humiliation, the deportations and the immediate crushing of their nation's active, flowering culture on the spot. - Unfortunately this book was issued in small numbers in Russia only 600 of these books were published for their 150 million inhabitants!<sup>39</sup>

It was the Germans who were the best informed on the state of things and events in occupied Latvia. They knew that most Latvians were afraid of another occurrence of the year of horror and bloodletting that might recur if the Red Army were to occupy Latvia a second time. That's why on February 10, 1943 after the German 6<sup>th</sup> Army was defeated at Stalingrad, Adolph Hitler gave his historic order:

*"Ich befehle des Aufstellung einer lettischer SS-Freiwilligen Legion. Grosse und Art des Verbandes richten sich nach der Zahl zur Verfügung stehenden Manner." (I order the formation of a Latvian SS -volunteer legion. The units' size and form will depend on the existing number of Latvian soldiers.)*

This clearly proves that the "volunteers" were forced into service. The words - I order - certainly in no way relate to the word - voluntary.<sup>40,41</sup>

At the International Historians conference in Riga on June 14-15, 1999, the Canadian historian Harold Otto read a paper entitled: *The Volunteer conscripts: How the Germans conscripted "Volunteers" for the Latvian Legion*. After researching the US National archives, this Canadian historian's conclusion, is this: -No matter how the Germans achieved mobilization in Latvia, according to the Hague Convention, it was illegal of course. If there is a general call to arms, one cannot speak of any kind of voluntary principle.<sup>42</sup>

The German bureaucrats from the Nazi civil government in German occupied Latvia have left newly opened archives that clearly substantiate the Latvian nation's and Latvian Legion's soldiers' political views and goals in battle. The Baltics governing council's political division head, government counsel F. Trampedach wrote a secret letter at the end of July 1941, just as the first four Latvian guard battalions who hoped to battle the Bolsheviks were being formed:

- I consider the formation of a united Latvian unit for the battle against the Bolsheviks to be a serious mistake. Just as the Lithuanians went from partisan battles to concluding that they had a moral right to independence, the Latvians will do the same. - On October 26, 1943 F. Trampedach sent a report to A. Rosenberg, the Minister responsible for Eastern affairs, quoting excerpts from a report of August 1, 1943 entitled "Political considerations to do with the Latvian Legion" by Latvia's Head of Security police and the SD Commander. This document asserts that anti-German propaganda is on the rise from certain chauvinistic quarters, especially among the legionnaires and the officer corps of the local security forces. There is often discussion especially among the officers of the necessity of

defending the nation in the case of German withdrawal.<sup>43</sup>

Also U. Neiburgs, a doctoral candidate at the University of Latvia, draws our attention to the aforementioned report by R. Lange, the head of the Security Police and SD commander in Latvia:

"It strikes us that members of the Latvian brigade who are at the front are influenced by their experiences there and tend to be on the side of cooperation with the Germans, but Latvian combat units that are in training camps in their homeland, especially officers, are becoming more and more nationalistic and denying all things German. The officer corps seems to be among the growing numbers of chauvinists. That results in an increasingly undisciplined and anti-German armed force.<sup>44</sup>

At the beginning of 1944, W.E. von Medem, the commissar for Zemgale district, after the formation of the Latvian Legion, admitted in discussions at the Reichsministry for the Eastern provinces that their worries were not without foundation and that "some Anglophile Latvian politicians are proposing that these Latvian divisions are really the first English divisions fighting against the Bolsheviks." "The Latvians are dreaming about 1919 when they gained their freedom, when they managed to chase the communists out with German assistance, but then with the help of the English they got the upper hand over the German forces. In these struggles they are encouraged by the thought that the former English commander H. Alexander - now a field marshal - commands the Allied forces in the mid-Atlantic.<sup>45</sup>

W.E. von Medem on February 15, 1944, informed A. Rosenberg at a meeting in Riga:

-Today the situation is such that the goal of "Latvia for Latvians" and the idea of an "independent state" has overtaken everyone so that no Latvian who is friendly towards the Germans dare say anything openly, as the only talk is of Latvian sovereignty. The goal of the Latvian people now is to take back ownership of the land with battles and sacrifices and build their own nation's culture. No Latvian legionnaire would fight at the front otherwise.

In this discussion W.E. von Medem, posed a hypothetical question to Rosenberg: - Will these Latvian units operate as messengers of Germany's political agenda, or could they not start operating differently one day?<sup>46</sup>

Also landrat Eger on November 4, 1943 in a report to the reichskomisar H. Lohse complains that the Germans are not satisfied with the fact that the Legion is not big enough and that Latvian officers for the most part regard the establishment of Latvian independence as their goal.<sup>47</sup>

Reports, testimonials and pointed observations about the Latvian Legion reached German military personnel in the armed forces (Wehrmacht) as well as among the SS police officers. Kugler, commander of Liepaja's (Latvia's second largest city) security and SD police sent out the following message on February 17, 1942:

-The residents, quite upset, are all talking about a general mobilization of Latvian men. The common talk is that the Germans want to get Latvia's younger generation into the army, seemingly with good reason, just to use them as cannon fodder at the front and eradicate them.<sup>48</sup>

Even before Kugler, General F Jeckeln, SS and the highest ranking police chief in Northern Russia and the Baltics warned:

-Recently the Latvian population has developed an alternate plan which involves strong national feelings. Just as before, those Latvians who are leaning towards nationalism are yearning after independence. Bolshevism is seen as their worst enemy and by all means they want it defeated.<sup>49</sup>

In the summer of 1944 after the Western Allied forces had landed on the shores of Normandy, the Germans who were assigned to censor the letters of the Latvian legionnaires writing to their homeland from the front noted that the Latvian soldiers are still quite positive towards their duties

considering that with the Western Allied invasion beginning in the west the war would soon be over.<sup>50</sup>

The German army's front line reconnaissance group 212 commander lieutenant Hasselman in his "Status report" writes on December 12, 1944: -Seeing the weakened state of both Germany and the Soviet Union, we see the rapid growth in numbers of those Latvians who hope for an independent Latvia. They see it as their first obligation to stay in their own country, putting all their efforts towards the collapse of their giant neighbours. But in the event that the Soviet Union occupies the country then they would take to the woods and there await the final outcome. -

After getting news from the German front line reconnaissance, the 19<sup>th</sup> Division of the Latvian SS soldiers still wanted to continue fighting against the Bolsheviks. In the event of the collapse of the front line they would fight as partisans.<sup>51</sup>

On January 5, 1945 the front line reconnaissance command Austrumi III wrote a report to the German Army's general staff entitled: "About the Situation in Courland":

- As a result of last months' military action one needs to say that the Latvian residents could be characterized as nervous and high strung... Even though everyone is afraid of the Bolsheviks, the remaining Latvian population in Courland do not want to have anything to do with the Germans either. -<sup>52</sup>

This attitude towards the Germans, whom the majority of people had welcomed as liberators from their greatest evil in 1941 had soured by the end of 1944 and in 1945 was full of bitterness. It must have been rising slowly for quite awhile. The head of the German security police and the SS E. Kaltenbrunner in the summer of 1943 after the Baltic nations longing for independence was thwarted, notified the SS Reichsfürer of "The mood amongst the Latvians and Estonians regarding the refusal to grant autonomy." E. Kaltenbrunner writes that this step by Germany has created a large resistance and once again awakened a strong hatred against anything German.

- The refusal to grant Latvia autonomy, E. Kaltenbrunner concludes, left the city dwellers shaken and the Latvian legionnaires....are becoming more and more aggressive towards all Germans with each passing day.<sup>53</sup>

Professor Dr. Heinrich Strods, as mentioned before, has done much research into the Gestapo and NKVD archives both in Latvia and outside it. He stresses that from the report of E. Kaltenbrunner, one of the highest ranking security officers in Germany, as well as from many other foreign observers' fact-finding reports, we can draw at least two conclusions: 1.) The Legion was a part of the Latvian nation and represented the majority's nationalistic aspirations. 2.) The majority of Latvians and the legion were both against the policies of Greater Germany in the Baltics.<sup>54</sup> Kaltenbrunner's conclusions about the attitude of the Latvian nation and the legion were confirmed by the 15<sup>th</sup> Latvian SS divisional commander Ax on January 27, 1945:

- The division's Latvian soldiers' political attitude is this: First of all they are Latvians. They wish to represent Latvia nationally. When allowed a choice - Germany or Russia, they choose Germany, because they are looking to preserve ties with western civilization. The domination of the Germans seems to them to be the lesser of two evils. They have a deep antipathy towards the Russians, which has grown more profound since the Russians marched in in 1940 and occupied Latvia. Fighting against the Russians is seen as a national obligation.<sup>55</sup>

The German officers well knew the reasons why the legionnaires were fighting so fiercely and occasionally they would use that to their advantage. So the commanding officer of the 15<sup>th</sup> Latvian division Obwurzer - on January 1, 1945 gave a division order with the following message which greatly encouraged the legionnaires:

"You are fighting for a renewal of Latvian independence. You are fighting for freedom for your native Latvia, and after the victory of the Germans it will become an independent state.."<sup>56</sup>

In mid-April 1945 the 15<sup>th</sup> Latvian division was fighting in Germany. The defeat of Germany and the victory of the Allied West was now clearly in sight. The division soldiers still found themselves at the German eastern front and as a part of the rear guard were keeping the Russians at bay, slowing their movements any further westward. The 15<sup>th</sup> Division commander, Burke, finding himself in this particular military and political situation called together all the division officers to a meeting. At the end of the meeting Burke asked those Latvian officers who were willing to fight against the west to stand. No one stood up. Then Burke told those who were willing to continue to fight against the communists to stand. All stood up, to a man. Burke just said:

*"Well then I will hold you to your word. But those who secretly want to go with the English and Americans, I can tell you that will not work out."*

With that the meeting ended.<sup>57</sup>

Because the Latvian soldiers categorically refused to join the war against the Western Allies finally even Burke, the Division commander, had no choice but to give way to the Latvian request, and promise that in the event of defeat, the 15<sup>th</sup> Division could head west and surrender to the the western armed forces which they did. Only about 80 soldiers from the Reconnaissance Battalions were involved in the street fighting in Berlin, defending Berlin from the Red Army, and this only under threat of dire consequences for failing to follow orders.<sup>58</sup>

The Latvian Legion also included a night fighting airborne squadron. The officers involved were formerly with the Latvian Air force. This night bomber squadron fought bitterly at the eastern front against the forces of the Red Army. When the Russian forces had already gained most of the Latvian territory, in August 1944, the Latvian aviation detachment was transferred to Denmark without any airplanes, because the Germans did not trust the Latvian aviators to take off on missions near the western front and not join the western Allies. That was why in November of 1944 the Latvian aviation officers and their support staff were sent to take infantry training in Esjberg Denmark. These courses lasted till the beginning of December, and after they finished the German Colonel Fix, as the course commander, encouraged the Latvians and Estonians (the Estonian aviators were also sent to these courses) to join the battle as infantry on the western front. All the Latvian and Estonian aviators refused to do that, asking that they be sent to their own legions, to the Latvian and the Estonian legions respectively.<sup>59,60</sup>

Also the 19<sup>th</sup> Latvian Division commander SS-General Kruger, speaking about the battles at the surrounded fortress of Courland which included the 19<sup>th</sup> Division which was fighting there from October of 1944 through to the moment of capitulation on May 8, 1945, could neither resist expressing some well-deserved praise for this Division, nor mentioning the German's unfulfilled political promises.

"I can safely say that the Latvian 19<sup>th</sup> Division is the best infantry division in Courland. The men in this division know what they are fighting for. Latvia will indeed be and it will grow out of the heroism of its soldiers, bought with their blood

The Tolz German SS officer school's last commander, after the war, gave a sworn statement at the Nuremberg's war crimes tribunal. In speaking about the future Latvian and Estonian officers who were trained in German war tactics and German weaponry, Richard Schulze-Kossens said:

-It should be noted that Latvians and Estonians did not particularly believe in a national socialist ideology. Rather they considered it their first duty to fight against Bolshevism, which had occupied their land and from which they wanted once again to be free.<sup>62</sup>

H. Stober who had conscientiously familiarized himself with the ways of the soldiers of the Latvian Legion while doing research in Freiburg in the German military archives emphasized:

- The question of whether or not Latvians fought for Germany or for their own country has long been

debated and even now is not completely settled. But these questions have been clarified by the movement of history.

Stober underlines the fact that Latvians fought remembering the bitter lesson of 1940 when they gave away their freedom without a fight. They saw themselves as freedom fighters for an independent Latvia and their main goal in the final analysis was to see the possibility of their culture blooming and their people prospering. Virtually no other German army division in such a short period of time drew the number of laudable comments by the German armed force high command daily news bulletins as did the 19<sup>th</sup> Latvian-SS Division (fourteen times). That is why even the German historian Stober rejects the assertion made by the Israeli historian Stein and by the Israeli army that it was only from the German SS divisions that we get quality work during the war. Stober also mentions that it is a rarity in military psychology that should be particularly noted that 19<sup>th</sup> Division, despite heavy losses, in uninterrupted fighting up until the last days of the war, kept up their will to fight, unflinching and self-reliant.<sup>63</sup>

Another German historian, Hans Werner Neulen in his broad ranging book in a similar vein explains the legionnaires motives and goals in battle:

- On the other hand it is important to note that their involvement in the war was not due primarily to their ideology, nor to their sympathy towards national socialist Germany. The stand the Baltics took belied the title of "voluntary" (quotes by the original author H.V. Neulen) and isolated case examples are more than dubious. - This word "voluntary" H.V. Neulen uses referred to the German title "Freiwillige Lettische Legion der Waffen -SS". Neulen continues:

-The Baltic people, the Finns and the Spanish were all imbued with Middle and Western-Europe's ideology. But to them the themes of German propaganda - nationalism, Greater Germany, New-Europe - meant nothing or next to nothing. The mainspring for the actions of the Estonians, the Latvians and the Finns was anti-communism and nationalism. This is because of their experiences of 1939/40 with the Soviet Communists. Patriotism and nationalism could be explained differently, but for the Finns and the Baltic people these ideas had a similar meaning -to work for one's states' continued independence and to fight against the Soviet Union. H.V. Neulen proposes: - as refers to thoughts about Europe (here Neulen is talking about the German propaganda's "New Europe" - V.L.) the Estonians, Latvians and Finns did not agree with the German view. That's not hard to explain considering their homeland's geopolitical situation. These borderline nations were really the front line nations for whom the fight against Soviet imperialism was a fight for their continued existence. Patriotism and anti-Communism were at the forefront of all their plans.<sup>64</sup>

Because the Latvians were not allowed to form their own army, so the Germans saw it as advantageous to form national SS-units, which many considered to be a first step towards a national army.<sup>65</sup>

The foreword to H.V. Neulen's book An deutscher Seite was written by an offspring of the famous Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, Nikolai Tolstoy, who had found refuge in England after the Communist Revolution and the people's war, and worked as a writer and correspondent in the field of history and politics. N.Tolstoy writes:

- But if war has taught us anything it is to be wary of wide generalizations. Can we honestly blame the Baltic people who had risen up in arms against their Soviet oppressors even before the Germans had set foot on their land? It would be too hasty to judge those who were battling "honourably" just because they joined the only united forces they could find. Such behaviour from the victors would seem to be incomprehensible duplicity. If it really was inexcusably amoral to join the Germans, when they had no other choice, what can you say then about the Western Allies who being good willed (and voluntarily) made an agreement with a country which was just as evil and even more steeped in blood than Nazi Germany? If those volunteers had survived the war then they could explain their reasons with the same words that the British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan used: - If some criminal has got you by the throat, I wonder if you would complain

about the morality of being dragged into the fray. It was not a question of whether we liked joining the Russians or not. In our isolated situation it seemed that this was a heaven-sent stroke of luck.<sup>66</sup>

Regarding the Latvian, Estonian and Western Ukrainian soldiers who were fighting on the side of the Germans, the German war historian K.G. Pfeffer came to the following realization: - They were hoping with their efforts to eventually achieve their homeland's independence.<sup>67</sup>

As the Germans knew the Latvian legionnaires' longing for the renewal of their nation's independence, they did not completely trust them, even up to the last days of the war. On April 1, 1945 the commander of the German armed forces that were under siege at the Courland fortress notified the general staff about the 19th SS Latvian Division:

- After our own armed capabilities, this is also a division that is capable of attack. This division is presently showing signs of distinguished achievement.

However in the report's conclusion we read: "In peaceful sectors of the front this division could become politically unreliable and produce unexpected results."<sup>68</sup>

This German armed forces group report confirms the one time Latvian war correspondent Albert Eglitis' words:

-The high command of the Armed Forces in Kurzeme in a secret document (only two copies) ciphred -1A Nr46/45g.Kdos Chef to the German Armed Forces high command in Germany, assessing the divisions defending the fortress - describes the Latvian Nineteenth as follows:

"It is an admirable war unit from the soldiers to the commanders, but it should not have too much free time, nor should it be kept in one place for long as they start to think too much about

their nations' renewed independence and about their country, which could have sudden unexpected results and which makes it difficult to trust them completely. Though in other respects right now it is the best fighting unit in Courland."<sup>69</sup>

Professor Manfred Scheuch of Vienna, prolific author of many books and articles of history and cultural history has also given his analysis of the Latvian Legion. First of all he emphasizes that a full year before the beginning of the German-USSR war, the three Baltic countries had felt the full force of Stalin's brutality. Scheuch explains how the Latvian weapons SS units were formed and why they came to be:

- When the military situation in the war continued to worsen, Himmler refused to give up, and because of that the armoured Waffen SS divisions only took on Germans (Volksdeutsche and Reichsdeutsche - V.L.). The Eastern European countries Waffen SS units were first organized in Estonia and Latvia. They later fought valiantly against overwhelming odds as the Red Army drew near, fighting against an enemy from whom they could expect no mercy.<sup>70</sup>

French historians are represented by two Carriers. Jean Pierre Carrier was known for his book The First World War. Raymond Carrier with his books "From the First World War to the Second World War. After the Second World War.

as well as the grand opus The Second World War (La Second Guerre mondiale). On page 985 of this book in its German translation we read:

- Over Courland no fewer than six battles were raging, the last of which dragged on until the beginning of April (in the year 1945 -V.L.). The German Armed Forces led by General Hilpert reinforced the Baltic soldiers, especially the Lactvian units who were desperately resisting their ancient oppressors.<sup>71</sup>

The Canadian Historian M.K. Baltais emphasizes that the Red Army shot Latvian prisoners of war because the Russians just presumed that they fight against the Red Latvian government in Russia.<sup>72</sup>

H.Stober, the German war historian also confirms that Red Army troops were shooting captured Latvian prisoners, who happened to find themselves in the course of the battle unarmed and gave themselves up to the opposing side.<sup>73</sup>

However the most disturbing evidence was uncovered by Ritvars Jansons, a researcher for the Centre for Documenting Totalitarianism in Latvia, in the former Soviet Union's national archives. On February 22, 1944 in a secret letter Janis Kalnberzins, the Communist head in Latvia, writing to PSKP central committee member J. Malenkov, desperately pleads for more flown-in weapons. These were not sent even though from Latvia the news was that deserters from the legion were joining the partisan groups 13-25 at a time. As the front got closer to Latvia there were Latvians who did not want to fight in the German army and sought refuge in the woods. Ritvars Jansons, investigating the archival material regarding Latvia's Eastern sector -uncovered instances where civilians in Latgale were mercilessly slaughtered by the red partisans (a pregnant woman with her unborn child was thrown live into a burning house). The accusations against V. Konanovs revealed that the Russian partisans had a vicious hatred of the Latvian Legion and of all Latvians in general. We here submit the decoded Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic partisan movement radiogram sent on May 20,1944 which R. Jansons uncovered in the archives. By way of explanation we should add the following: those who were mobilized into the 15<sup>th</sup> Latvian Division in the spring of 1944, were mostly born in 1925 and 1926. They were quickly trained, poorly dressed, poorly armed and supplied and even weapons and war equipment were not guaranteed. Fighting against the Red Army and superior weaponry, they often ended up being surrounded. Retreating from Russia towards Latvia, individual units of the 15<sup>th</sup> Division found themselves to be constantly fighting to break out of these situations.

Many smaller units were defeated and their soldiers wandered off in small groups, with weapons or without, into the wild and swampy countryside in those Russia provinces that border Latvia. They were unwilling to fight any more and tried to avoid meeting either the Germans or the Soviet Army being in effect deserters heading back towards Latvia. In this wild and swampy countryside there were considerable Russian Communist partisan forces, which often captured these Latvian soldiers and took them prisoner.

A Latvian by the name of Zalums, who was the commander of one of the Red partisan units, writing on January 25,1944 sums it up as follows:

*"Though they were under the Brigade's (meaning the Latvian Red partisan brigade that operated in Latvia - V.L.) orders not to operate in Latvian territory the White Russian partisans just turned a blind eye to these orders (except for robbery, they never tried to start anything else). That particularly applied to Osveja brigade, 2nd Frunze and Zhdanov units. It is really quite shameless how the Kalinina county partisans behaved (...) They usually avoided battle duty and considered Latvia as an enemy country where they should destroy everything and everyone (...)"*

After this information it no longer seems remarkable that on May 20, 1944 Latvia's PSR partisan telegram to his chief of staff VSprogis in Moscow reads:

"Stahovs doesn't have any more Latvian escapees to give us. The Kalinina brigade stopped about 200 Latvians, disarmed them and..."<sup>74</sup>

Burcevs

Note: the rest was not deciphered. So we are left with only one conclusion which is that the soldiers from the Latvian Legion were shot.

Historical documents seen from the perspective of non-Latvian historians and military personnel

confirm that besides their deeply held spiritual motives for fighting - nationalism, which led to wanting renewed independence from Moscow's rule, Latvian legionnaires had another very important motivation, which explains why they fought to the death with such desperation. They knew full well that in the event of their capture death could await them, so the legionnaires fought even more fiercely and more courageously.

The courage of Latvian Legionnaires in battle is confirmed by non-Latvians who followed the course of events. The U.S. army lieutenant Ojars Ozols read the following very significant assessment in an up to 1985 as yet unpublished document in the U.S. army military staff archives: - The Nineteenth Division is composed of Latvian officers, instructors and soldiers. This is the most highly decorated division with high morale, much battle experience, very courageous and well led. The last news indicates (in 1945), that this high quality unit is the cornerstone of the siege at Courland.<sup>75</sup>

Colonel Whitton, head of the General Patton's tank division, after the war began to investigate the history of the Eastern front. After examining many German archival documents that mention the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Divisions and paying particular attention to their battle record, he has evaluated these Latvian soldiers' war capabilities very highly. Whitton later joined the teaching staff at the US Armed Forces General and Staff College, where he finished one of his lectures thus:

- It is hard to understand or describe what both Latvian divisions achieved in the face of overwhelming Russian odds. Words cannot express what I want to say, but before both these courageous divisions, I bow my head.<sup>76</sup>

Marshal G. Mannerheim, the last Finnish president and former Commander-in-chief of the Finnish army in the War for Freedom in 1918 as also in the 1939-1940 winter war, and in the 1941-1944, the so-called continuing war, writes in his memoirs:

- German politics in the Baltics and in the East generally, was incredibly shortsighted. The three Baltic countries, who welcomed the Germans as liberators and were ready to join in the battle against the Soviet Union were not even given their autonomy. Also in many other matters pertaining to the Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians their actions left a lot to be desired. From the Finnish side there were a lot of proposals submitted with the purpose of achieving some improvements. The (German) military leadership agreed to our proposals, but these were then rejected because of the national socialist party policy. So German politics in the Baltics doubtless robbed the German army of much valuable support.<sup>77</sup>

The atmosphere that prevailed in Riga on July 1, 1941 when the Soviet forces hurriedly retreated from Riga was described in the Swedish newspaper Stockholm-Tidningen dated July 3, 1941:

- At 10 o'clock on July 1, the bells of the city started ringing and people flooded onto the streets. Everywhere red-white-red flags were fluttering. It didn't take long for the newly formed armed home guard units to appear smartly marching through the streets, following their flag. Suddenly the Latvian police in their old uniforms also appeared to a wildly enthusiastic reception from the crowd.<sup>78</sup>

This clearly shows the majority attitude of Latvians in its capital city at that time, from the perspective of a Swedish observer, and this undoubtedly facilitated the organization of the first volunteer Latvian battalions in the fight against the Bolsheviks. In 1943 three of these battalions became the core of the Latvian Legion.

The Swedish newspaper Stockholm-Tidningen on July 5, 1941 reports in an article entitled "Terror in Liepaja" :

- In Liepaja (the second largest city in Latvia at that time -V.L.) a few hours before the Russian units left the city the GPU (the Russian cheka) carried out some terrifying acts. Right after the start of the war, many Latvians were arrested, mostly former Latvian army officers. Some were deported

but others were shot on the spot. A German officer on the street was attracted by calls for help from some nearby basement. The German soldiers headed towards the basement where they had to break down several heavily fortified doors. In the first room they discovered four corpses - three men and one woman. After breaking down the second door the German soldiers arrived to see the one who was calling for help, an injured Latvian officer. In the third room lay two more heavily injured Latvian officers among a pile of several terribly mutilated corpses.<sup>79</sup>

After independent Latvia was overrun, in the first year of the Soviet occupation it was specifically Latvian officers who suffered the most from the Soviet's rule of terror. They were arrested, deported to Siberia's gulag camps and many of them were killed. That's why the Latvian officers whether voluntarily or through mobilization joined in the war against the Red Army and the Soviet forces, afraid of a repeat of the terrors should the Russians occupy Latvia for a second time.

The Swedish political monthly journal *Swenska Tidskrift* whose editor was the Parliamentary deputy E. Hostad, in 1943 their first edition bore the following article:

- If we take Russian sources as reliable, the Russian push southward from Lake Ilmen in an attempt to break through the surrounded Leningrad did not mean the collapse of the German's eastern front. It was mostly Estonia and Latvia that were being threatened. Would the Baltic people act to defend themselves against the Russian invasion? It should be noted that they lacked Finland's natural protective borders, so armed resistance for them would rather be a symbolic sign, for their situation was considered hopeless. It would be a sign that confirmed their need to have their own national life and desire to continue to work towards a flowering of their cultural and social life, a flowering evident in the years of freedom before the war.<sup>80</sup>

Some months later the Swedish Journal *Swenska Tidskrift* Number 8 continued to comment on the state of the Baltics:

- The uninterrupted victories over the German Army by Soviet Russia, has led to deathly fear among the small Baltic nations. Their hopes of achieving national independence fade with every passing day. What fate will the Russians bestow on the Baltic nations after they take over these three countries? Will they stop at the bolshevization of the domestic, social and cultural affairs. Or perhaps they will go further and flood these countries with Russians. ("Umsiedlung" - VL.). Of course, it is hard to answer these questions, but they can probably expect the worst...This much is clear that the Russian threat to these three Baltic nations has never been greater than now. In earlier periods when they governed, the Russians severely suppressed these nations and their independent culture but the people could at least live and could speak their own language. This time the threats pertain not only to language but to the people themselves.<sup>81</sup>

The outcome of the Second World War and the resultant almost half-century Russian occupation of Latvia proves that the Latvian legionnaires had a moral right to fight in order to keep the Red Army out of Latvia. At the time of the war in 1943, out of a population of two million, almost 80% were Latvians, now it is only 52% of residents that are Latvian. With a few more years of occupation the Latvians themselves would have become a minority in their own ethnographic territory. Massive deportations to Siberia and Kazakhstan, arrests, the killing of people, the long-standing partisan war till 1956, and the fear (later proved to be well founded) of a repeat of the terror of Russian rule sent 163 thousand to live in exile in Western Europe as well as overseas.

Occasionally, the western nations have indirectly, quite rightly, acknowledged the battle motivations of the Latvian Legion. On Jan 13, 1983, the European Parliament in Strasbourg with 99 votes for, 6 against and 7 deputies abstaining, accepted a special resolution regarding the Baltic nations. It should be noted that five of the six deputies who voted against the resolution were members of the Greek Communist party. The resolution first and foremost emphasized that based on the Molotov-Ribentrop pact, a violent occupation of Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania in 1940 occurred, and from the point of view of international justice this was an unlawful annexation by the USSR. In point "F" of this resolution the European Parliament has expressed its admiration to the Latvian, Estonian

and Lithuanian armed partisans, who were still fighting for their countries' freedom eight years after the end of the war.<sup>82</sup>

Up till now, the most thorough research about the Latvian national partisan war from 1944 to 1956 was done by Latvian University's professor emeritus Dr. Heinrihs Strods in both the Gestapo and the KGB archives. In three separate volumes, in total 1617 pages, any reader can confirm that in this 12 year long fight against the occupation, many of the national partisan units were indeed former Latvian legionnaires.<sup>83</sup>

Opposing this view are Soviet authors who claim that it was the German SS Jagdverband that organized and led the activities of the Latvian partisan movement. The German army at the fortress of Courland considered it pointless for the Germans to facilitate the partisan fight against the Red army in the occupied part of Latvia. As we see from the German 16th Army's reconnaissance officer Timermann's report on January 15, 1945, the Germans considered a national partisan movement unnecessary. "Today", writes Timermann, "a wide partisan movement in Vidzeme is not necessary."<sup>84</sup>

In December of 1943 colonel Sprogis, the chief of staff of the Latvian red partisans, informed Belcenko, the USSR's central partisan chief of staff and head of national security, that they had unconfirmed reports from their agents that a national partisan organization was already operating in Latvia's eastern region of Daugavpils and Rezekne. From these reports it was concluded that after the German army withdrawal from Latvia, one could expect a national partisan war. It is clear that already in 1943 Moscow knew that Latvians would keep fighting against the Red army a national partisan war. This is clearly substantiated from several sources: through the Latvian Communist party's Central Committee and Latvia's PSR NKVD - the Red Army's intelligence (since 1943 - SMERSS), the political government and Latvia's Red partisan staff reports, the Latvian Legion's battle records, the protocols of the Legion deserters and from interrogation records of prisoners of war.<sup>85</sup>

It needs to be emphasized that no other country supported Latvia's national partisans. The only support they received was from the local inhabitants. That's why we can confidently call them national partisans in the full meaning of the term. As already mentioned in this text there are no non-Latvian observers who have not called the Latvian Legionnaires patriots and nationalists who fought for their country's freedom. The fight for Latvia's freedom continued.

A description of the Latvian legionnaires is also given by Swedish Nils Bohman in the newspaper Nya Dagligt Allehanda on June 27, 1943. This article was translated and sent to the USA by the US embassy. The tide is very significant and not so long ago, in December of 2003, European Parliamentary deputies in Strasburg in the United European and Russian joint commission deliberations spoke about the question of the Latvian Legion. Europe's largest political groups -European people's parties and European Democratic group through their deputy Mihael Galer, speaking in committee, expressed the understanding of the Legion's "tragic situation", because "they were not fighting for Germany but for Latvia's independence." "The Legionnaires were fighting not because they were Nazis but because there was no other alternative," emphasized the deputy. He also said that Latvia and Russia have "different views of history" and it will take time before "Russia can get beyond its history."<sup>88</sup>

Finally we would like to explain here the United Nations stand on the question of the Latvian SS Legion. From the point of view of international rights, the decisions of the UN in the hierarchy of decisions, rank the highest in authority. This is clear from many international publications, and recognized in professorial text books. So too in this article we will end with the UN decision regarding the Latvian SS Legion. UNRRA (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) was the very first among the UN organizations whose statutes and goals were signed by 44 of the nations who acknowledged the UN charter in November 1943.

In July 1947 the UNRRA director of repatriation Ralph Price issued a news bulletin in which the Latvian SS Legion is described as follows:

- As our investigations have revealed, units of Baltic soldiers were placed under the jurisdiction of the

SS , but they did not perform as an integral part of the German SS, even though that was part of the plan. UNRRA has accepted the decision of USFET (United States Forces European Theater) that Baltic soldiers should not be branded as members of the Wehrmacht. For the term "SS" to appear on a person's war record is a shame, and that would not be right.<sup>89,90</sup>

So this is how the Latvian Legion appears according to neutral foreign sources in the light of truth.

Visvaldis Lacis

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