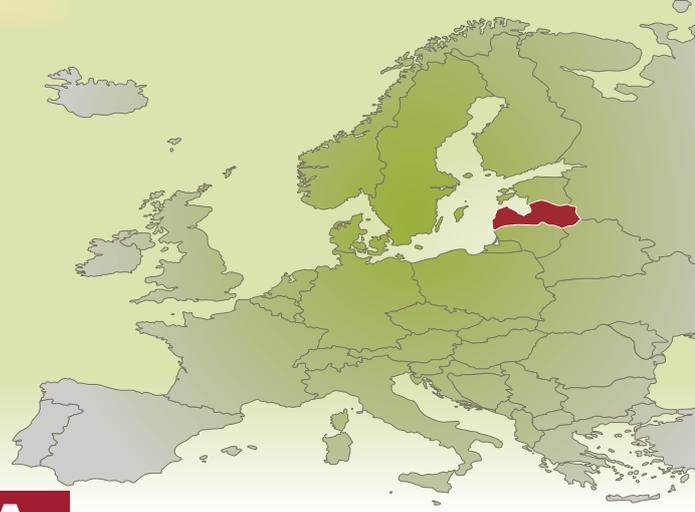


The territory known today as Latvia has been inhabited since 9000 BC. In the first half of 2000 BC, the proto-Balts or early Baltic peoples arrived. They are the forefathers of the Latvian people.



# HISTORY OF LATVIA

## A CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS

Text: Ph.D. Valters Nollendorfs

### Ancient History of Latvians

#### ~ 3000 B.C.

Finno-Ugrian peoples, ancestors of present-day Finns, Estonians and Livs (Livonians), arrive in the Baltic area

#### ~ 2000 B.C.

Baltic peoples, ancestors of present-day Lithuanians and Latvians arrive in the Baltic area.

#### ~ 100 A.D.

Roman historian Tacitus in his Germania mentions the Aestii living on the right shore of the Suevic (Baltic) Sea who are industrious farmers and gather amber. Amber was in great demand by the Romans, amber trade with the eastern shore of the Baltic Sea flourished.

### The Age of German, Polish, Swedish and Russian Rule in Latvia (12th century – 1914)

#### 9th–11th c.

Viking raids and conquests in the Baltic area. Among the proto-Latvians, the Curonians (in present-day Western Latvia and Lithuania) are mentioned as feared opponents of the Scandinavian Vikings.

#### Late 12th c.

Arrival of German merchants and Christian missionaries. Establishment of first settlements on lower Daugava in Liv (Livonian) areas.

#### 1198

Beginning of the crusades to Christianize the Baltic. At this time, besides the Livs, proto-Latvian Curonians, Semigalians, Selonians and Latgians (whose name evolved into the name of the entire Latvian people) have already established their own principalities and oppose the invaders.

#### 1201

The City of Riga is founded near the site of a Liv village on the confluence of Ridzene and Daugava rivers. It becomes the centre for the conquest of the Baltic by the Brothers of the Sword, later, the Livonian Order. Riga also becomes a major trade centre, joining the Hanseatic League in 1282.

#### ~ 1300

German conquests in present-day Latvia and Estonia principally concluded. The land becomes known as Livonia (from the Livs), in the beginning a loose confederation of five principalities, four bishoprics and the state of the Livonian Order. Northern Estonia is ruled by the Danish kingdom. The Germans become the ruling class in the cities. German knights become landed barons and keep their privileges until World War I.

#### 1501–1503

Under Master Walter von Plettenberg of the Livonian Order, the Livonian army with large numbers of local soldiers staves off Russian forces of Tsar Ivan III and signs a peace treaty.

#### 1561

The Livonian Confederation ceases to exist. After incursions of the army of Russian Tsar Ivan IV ("The Terrible"), Danish and Polish-Lithuanian forces, Gotthard Kopper, the last Master of the Livonian Order, surrenders to the Polish-Lithuanian king Sigismund II Augustus. He becomes Duke of Courland, the lands west of Daugava. The German landed gentry obtains broad privileges from the Polish king. Present-day Latvian territories to the east of Daugava come under Polish rule. Wars in Latvian territory last until 1583.

#### 1585, 1586

The Roman Catholic and Lutheran catechisms printed as the first books in the Latvian language. Most of Latvian become Lutheran in the 16th century. Eastern Latvia, Latgale (Latgalia), has remained mainly Catholic to this day. Written Latvian language is developed by German clergymen in the 17th century, culminating in the Latvian translation of the Bible, which becomes a standard and the prime vehicle for literacy.



**Ancient Latgalian and Semigallian bronze jewellery, 10th–12th centuries**

**Latvian Peasants in the Drawings of J.C.Brotze, end of the 18th century**



## 1621

After wars from 1600 on, Riga is conquered by Sweden under Gustavus Adolphus. Because the Swedish kings rein in the privileges of the German barons, their rule in Northern Latvia and Estonia becomes known as the "good Swedish times". Eastern Latvia remains under Polish rule.

## 1650s

The apogee of the Duchy of Courland: Duke Jacob founds colonies in Gambia in Africa and on the Caribbean island Tobago.

## 1710

Riga surrenders to the forces of Tsar Peter I ("The Great") during the Northern War (1700–1721). Northern Latvia, nowadays known as Vidzeme, comes under Russian rule and, together with southern Estonia, becomes the Russian province of Livonia. Latvian peasants become serfs of their German barons. In 1772, during the First Partition of Poland, Eastern Latvia, Latgale, becomes part of the Russian province of Polotsk, later – Vitebsk. During the Third Partition of Poland in 1795, the Duchy of Courland becomes a Russian province.

## 1818, 1820

Serfdom is abolished in the provinces of Courland and Livonia. Latvian peasants gain ostensible freedom but lose their land and become, in effect, indentured servants. Only around mid-century Latvians obtain the right to buy land. In Latgale, serfdom is abolished only with the rest of Russia in 1863.

## Late 19th c.

Rise of national consciousness and modernization of society, called the "Awakening": increasing economic independence, migration to cities, rise of a working class, rising levels of education, development of cultural and political awareness and emergence of modern Latvian idiom, culture and national identity.

## 1905

The 1905 Russian Revolution assumes a double characteristic in Latvia: it is both a workers and farmers revolution with a strong national accent led by educated Latvians and the Latvian Social Democratic Workers Party. The Revolution becomes a training ground for applied democracy at the popular level. It turns against both the Tsar's government and the landed German gentry. Burning of German baronial mansions becomes a widespread phenomenon. The Russian government sends punishment expeditions to the country welcomed by the German gentry. Hundreds are executed, thousands sent into exile or flee the country.

## The Fight for Independence and the Republic of Latvia (1914–1939)

### 1914–1918

World War I takes a heavy toll on Latvia. Half of its territory is occupied by German forces 1915–1917, all of it in 1918. Heavy battles are fought on Latvian soil from 1915 on. Some 700 000 become refugees, most of them in Russia. Latvian soldiers serving in the Russian army suffer heavy losses.

### 1915

Founding of national military units, the Latvian Riflemen battalions, later regiments, commanded by Latvian officers within the Russian army to defend Riga against the German army. When the Germans take over the country in 1917–18, many leave for Russia and join the Communist revolution.



## 1918

November 18. Independence declared in Riga one week after World War I armistice but with Latvia still under German occupation. The Provisional Government is headed by Kārlis Ulmanis. The Liberation War starts as the new state is threatened by the Red Army. Among its troops the Latvian Riflemen.

**December 17.** The Latvian Socialist Soviet Republic is declared. The government led by Pēteris Stučka institutes its rule with draconian laws and ruthless terror.

## 1919

**January 3.** Riga is taken by Red Army troops. The Provisional Government and its small military units retreat to Liepāja in south-western Latvia. While seeking assistance from Entente Powers, the government is forced to accept the help of German local Home Guard and army irregulars to fight against Communist forces.

**March 3.** A counterattack by the combined German and Latvian forces against the Red Army begins. The commander of the Latvian Brigade, Col. Oskars Kalpaks, is killed by friendly fire on 6 March.

**April 16.** A German coup in Liepāja fails to overthrow the Provisional Government, which finds refuge on a ship guarded by Entente warships, but a pro-German Latvian government is established nevertheless.

**May 22.** German troops take Riga from the Reds and instigate an indiscriminate killing spree against communists and suspected sympathisers. Instead of pursuing Soviet forces, the Germans move against the Estonian army and Latvian Northern Brigade in northern Latvia.

**June 22–23.** The Germans are defeated by Estonian and Latvian forces near Cēsis. The German proxy government collapses. The Germans sign an armistice, but the irregulars fail to keep its provisions and stay in the country. The Latvian Provisional Government returns to Riga.

**November 11.** The last German attempt to take over under the cover of a fake Western Russian Volunteer Army led by Bermond-Avalov is foiled as the Latvian Army, helped by the firepower of British and French warships, retakes the western part of Riga to end a one-month standoff on the shores of Daugava.

## 1920

**February 1.** An armistice with Soviet Russia takes effect after the Latvian Army with the aid of Polish troops has liberated Eastern Latvia from the Red Army. The Latvian Communist government is dissolved on 13 January 1920.

**May 1.** The elected Constitutional Assembly begins its work as a temporary legislative body with the main charge to write a Constitution. Its most far-reaching law on Agrarian Reform is passed on 16 September 1920. It expropriates large German land holdings and distributes land to the landless, giving special consideration to participants in the Liberation War.

**August 11.** A Peace Treaty is signed with Soviet Russia, in which Soviet Russia without reservations recognizes Latvian independence and sovereignty, renouncing voluntarily and forever any claims to Latvian sovereignty that belonged to the Russian state.

## 1921

**January 26.** Latvian independence is recognized by the Allied Supreme Council, soon followed by other states. Latvia joins the League of Nations on 22 September 1921.

## 1922

**February 22.** The Constitutional Assembly adopts the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia. It declares Latvia to be an independent, democratic state whose sovereign power resides in the people. Only the people in a referendum can change its status.

**October 7–8.** Election of the First Saeima (parliament). The Saeima meets on November 7 and on November 14 elects Jānis Čakste as the first President of Latvia. Four Saeimas are elected during the first independence period.

## 1934

**May 15.** Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis organizes a bloodless coup. The Saeima is dismissed and all political parties banned. Like a number of other countries in Europe, Latvia becomes an authoritarian state. Though far from a totalitarian regime, the government does not tolerate dissent and rules by decree.

## 1937

**November 30.** As part of Stalin's Great Terror, Soviet authorities order closing down of Latvian organizations and cultural institutions and mass arrests of Latvians residing in the USSR as suspected foreign agents. Around 25,000 are arrested, of whom 16,500 are executed.

*The Act of the Proclamation of Independence, Riga, 18 November 1918*

## The Loss of Independence, Second World War and Soviet Era in Latvia (1939–1980s)

### 1939

**August 23.** Hitler's Foreign Minister Ribbentrop and Stalin's Foreign Minister Molotov sign a Non-Aggression Treaty, also known as the Hitler–Stalin Pact, which allows Hitler to attack Poland and later – Western Europe. The pact includes secret protocols which designate Finland, Estonia, Latvia and parts of Rumania as Soviet sphere of influence. On 28 September a Friendship and Border Treaty is signed, whose secret protocols assign Lithuania to the Soviet sphere of influence and allow ethnic Germans to leave the areas under Soviet influence. Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union become de facto allies for almost two years.

**October 5.** Under military threat, Latvia is forced to sign a Mutual Assistance Treaty with the Soviet Union, which assures Latvian independence but allows some 25,000 Soviet troops to be stationed in Western Latvia. When Finland refuses to sign a similar treaty, the Soviet Union attacks on October 30. Finland is forced to surrender in March 1940.

### 1940

**June 16.** Claiming breaches of the Mutual Assistance Treaty, the Soviet Union issues an ultimatum to be answered within six hours, demanding installation of a government and allowing an unlimited number of Soviet troops to enter the country. The Ulmanis government accepts the ultimatum under the implied threat of large Soviet forces massed at the border and the occupation of Lithuania on 15 June.

**June 17.** Soviet troops occupy the country. Stalin's emissary Andrei Vishinsky, the prosecutor of the Great Terror, comes to guide the take-over. A new Moscow-approved government is installed, which proceeds to prepare the country for political sovietisation.

**July 21.** The People's Saeima, "elected" in a near-unanimous one-party election on 14 and 15 July, unanimously declares Latvia to be a Soviet state, asks for admission to the Soviet Union and passes the first Soviet-style expropriation laws.

**July 23.** US Acting Secretary of State Sumner Welles issues a scathing denunciation of the "devious processes" by which the Baltic States are "deliberately annihilated" by a "more powerful neighbour." The declaration initiates the continuing refusal of US and other governments to recognise the take-over "by the use of force or the threat of force."

**August 5.** Latvia becomes the 15th Republic of the Soviet Union. The incorporation is never recognized de iure by most Western governments. In international law, the Republic of Latvia continues to exist. In the USA, the United Kingdom and several other countries Latvian legations and other diplomatic representations continue to work. De facto sovereignty is re-established 51 years later, on 21 August 1991.

### 1941

**June 14.** More than 15,000 Latvian citizens are deported on Moscow's orders to distant parts of the Soviet Union. Men are separated from their families, tried under Article 58 of Soviet Russian criminal code as "counterrevolutionaries" and imprisoned in GULAG hard labour camps. Only 1/5 of the more than 5000 survive. The families as accessories are sent to forced settlement areas in Siberia. Death rates are high, especially among the children and elderly. An estimated 25,000 (1.25%) Latvian citizens become victims of the one-year Communist rule.

**June 22.** Nazi Germany attacks the USSR. The Red Army flees in disarray. About 50,000 Latvian inhabitants flee Latvia or are taken along as prisoners. Riga is occupied by German forces on 1 July. All of Latvian territory is in German hands by 7 July. Although greeted at first as liberators from Soviet terror, the Germans deal with Latvia as occupied Soviet territory and never recognise its independence.

**July–December.** German Security Service (SD) Operative Group A instigates and guides the annihilation of Latvia's Jewish population, co-opting and involving Latvian proxies in the mass murder. Of the 94,000-pre-war Jews in Latvia about 70,000 are killed in the Holocaust. Others killed on German orders include communists, Roma, and mentally ill. The notorious Arājs' Commando, an auxiliary SD unit, is involved in many of the murders.

**October 12.** On Stalin's decree the 201st Latvian Riflemen's Division with about 10,000 soldiers is formed in Russia. A year later it becomes the 43rd Latvian Guards' Division, and in 1944 the 130th Latvian Riflemen's Corps is formed, which is augmented by men drafted in the territories occupied by the Red Army. An estimated 80,000 Latvians serve in Soviet armed units during the war. Germans start organising closed Latvian "police" battalions to fight at the Eastern front and participate in anti-partisan activities behind the front. At first volunteer, during 1942 recruits are increasingly obtained through propaganda and financial enticement.



**Poster. Long live USSR – prototype of a brotherhood of workers of all nationalities of the world! 1935**

### 1943

**February 10.** Hitler signs a decree establishing the "Latvian SS Volunteer Legion," which is neither "SS," nor "volunteer" and actually consists of fighting units under the field command of the Wehrmacht, though formally belonging to the Waffen-SS. The Legion subsumes some Latvian "police" battalions fighting on the eastern front, but most of its soldiers are drafted in contravention of the 1907 Hague Convention. About 20,000 desert at war's end and surrender to the Western Allies, who eventually recognize the legionnaires as illegally conscripted citizens of Latvia. About 115,000 Latvians are estimated to have served under German military command.

### 1944

**July.** The Red Army re-enters Latvian territory. Refugee treks westward begin. About 5000 risk their lives and reach Swedish shores; about 150,000 are evacuated to Germany and German-held areas in the West.

**October 6.** On Moscow's orders, the Supreme Soviet of the Latvian SSR cedes the city of Abrene (now Pitalova) and six townships to Soviet Russia. In 2007, the loss of area was recognised in a border treaty with Russia by independent Latvia.

**October 13.** Soviet troops take Riga. The Latvian SSR government returns. The German Army Group North escapes to Kurzeme (Western Latvia), which becomes an enclave, withstands at least six major Soviet attacks and holds out until the end of the war.

### 1944–1956

Latvian national partisans, also known as the Forest Brethren, wage a war after the war against the Soviet occupiers and their collaborators. Armed resistance starts as soon as the front passes in 1944 and encompasses all of Latvia after war's end in May 1945. The number of partisans is estimated at 15–20,000, not counting their civilian supporters. Soviet authorities send troops and local Communist Party activists against the partisans and employ KGB agents to infiltrate partisan units.

### 1945

**February 4–11.** The Yalta Conference of US, UK and USSR heads of government, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin, principally decide the post-war arrangements in Europe, conceding USSR control in Eastern Europe, but simultaneously calling for free elections. The fate of Latvia and the other Baltic States was actually decided already at the Teheran Conference 8 November to 2 December 1943

**May 8.** At war's end, Latvia has lost approximately a third of its population. About 120,000 Latvians in the West refuse to return and eventually settle in the UK, USA, Canada, Australia and other countries. In Latvia, settlers from other parts of the USSR start arriving. Immigration is encouraged by large-scale industrialization in the 1960s and 1970s, reducing the proportion of Latvians from more than 3/4 in the 1935 census to just over a half in 1989.

**May 9.** The German army in the Kurzeme enclave surrenders, among them a division of Latvian legionnaires. Soviet repressions against the population extend to all of Latvia. Tens of thousands are arrested, sent to prisons and hard labour camps.

**August 15.** A Latvian Central Committee is established in Western Germany, the first of representative Latvian organizations outside Latvia in the West. Both in refugee camps and after emigration to other countries, representative central and local organizations, church congregations, schools, cultural and youth organizations are established; an active social and cultural life ensues.

## 1949

**March 25.** A second mass deportation of about 44,000 is directed against Latvian farmers, who do not want to collectivize, and Latvian partisan supporters. Entire families are settled "for life," most of them in Siberian areas of Omsk, Tomsk and Krasnoyarsk. After Stalin's death in 1953, many are allowed to return to Latvia, but are stigmatized for life. A wave of collectivization take place, but the collective farms are inefficient, and food shortages become common. The deportation considerably reduces national partisan activities.

## 1959

**July.** Soviet and Latvian Communist parties crackdown against Latvian national communists for opposing Russification and colonization tendencies. Internal party dissent continues, however, and in 1972, a letter protesting Soviet policies reaches Communist parties and press publications in the West.

## Reinstating Independence and Modern Latvia (From the 1980s)

## 1986

In the wake of the *perestroika* and *glasnost* policy of new CPSU chairman Mikhail Gorbachev, popular protests against building a hydroelectric dam on the Daugava break out. Later, the plan to build an underground railway in Rīga joins the list of environmentally questionable projects stopped by popular action.

## 1987

**June 14.** The human rights group Helsinki-86, formed a year earlier, organizes an unsanctioned event at the Freedom Monument in Rīga to commemorate the victims of Soviet deportations that attracts a large number of people. It is the beginning of mass meetings and protests on memorial days, especially 25 March and 14 June (mass deportations), 23 August (Hitler–Stalin Pact) and 18 November (Latvian Independence Day). A number of unsanctioned civic groups are founded in 1987, such as the Environmental Protection Club and a Lutheran ministers group "Rebirth and Renewal".

## 1988

**June 1–2.** The special expanded plenum of the official Latvian Writers' Union calls for greater cultural autonomy, strengthening the role of the Latvian language, and establishment of independent cultural organizations. For the first time during Soviet rule, the takeover of 17 June 1940 is openly declared to be an occupation. In June, for the first time the national flag is carried in the streets; the national anthem is sung in July. The national flag and the coat-of-arms of independent Latvia become official state symbols of the Latvian SSR in February 1990.

**October 8–9.** The Latvian Popular Front (LPF) is established and attracts a membership of several hundred thousand. It becomes the guiding force toward independence.

## 1990

**May 4.** After winning the March elections, the LPF delegates to the Latvian SSR Supreme Council obtain 2/3 majority to pass a law renouncing as illegal the USSR occupation and usurpation of power in 1940, re-establishing the 1922 constitution and the name of the Republic of Latvia. The law provides a transition period before the installation of the new Saeima and the restoration of full sovereignty.

## 1991

**January 13.** A demonstration to protest the attack of USSR forces on Lithuanian institutions attracts ca. 500,000 in Rīga. Barricades are built in the Old Town and around important objects, guarded by some 100,000 unarmed defenders. Several are shot and killed by Soviet security forces, but massive use of force is not employed

**August 21.** As the coup attempt to overthrow the Soviet government of President Mikhail Gorbachev fails, the Latvian Supreme Council passes the Constitutional Law declaring Latvia an independent democratic republic according to the 1922 constitution and cancelling the transition period decreed on 4 May 1990. Island is the first state re-establishing diplomatic relations. Others follow in rapid succession. The Russian Federation under the signature of President Boris Yeltsin recognizes Latvian independence on 23 August; the Soviet Union on September 6. Latvia becomes a member of the United Nations on September 18.

## 1993

**June 5–6.** Elections to the fifth Saeima, continuing the numbering from the first independence period, takes place. The Saeima meets on 6 July and on 7 July elects the first President after restoration, Guntis Ulmanis. In 1999, he is succeeded by Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga. In 2007, Valdis Zatlers assumes the President's office.

## 1994

**August 31.** Troops of the Russian Army leave Latvian territory. For the first time since September 1939 there are no foreign troops in Latvian territory. The unfinished strategic locator in Skrunda was destroyed on 4 May 1995. The remaining Russian locators were decommissioned on 31 August 1998.

## 2004

**March 29.** Latvia becomes a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance. It participates in NATO missions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Afghanistan. May 4. Latvia becomes a member of the European Union.

## 2010

**November 18.** Latvia celebrates the 92nd anniversary of its independence, only the 39th in freedom.



**The Mass Demonstration for Independence in early 1991**



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