

*A Small Nation's*  
STRUGGLE  
*for*  
FREEDOM



*A Small Nation's*

STRUGGLE

*for*

FREEDOM

*Latvian Soldiers*

*in World War II*

*By*

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This is a grim story; yet it may serve as another warning for the nations which are still free and as a reminder of the past and present struggles waged by smaller nations against tyranny.

#### A NEW STATE IS BORN

The close of the 18th century saw the end of the last independent state on the territory inhabited by the Latvians — the Duchy of Courland. With this, the entire Latvian people fell under Russian subjection. This domination lasted for about 120 years to 1918. It must not be forgotten by those who may think that in those 120 years Russia gained a valid title to Latvia that greater nations have for even longer periods found themselves under the yoke of subjection.

Yet this long period with lifted frontiers could not eradicate the dissimilarities which divide Latvia from Russia. These variances remained far deeper than those between, for example, France and Germany. Deeply patriotic and imbued with the spirit of West European culture, the Latvians retained their distinctive spiritual and material values. This was achieved with stubborn defiance and recurrent open revolts against the foreign domination.

It would be wrong to assume that the Latvian struggle for political and cultural independence had been a repercussion of the advent of Communist regime in Russia. The Latvians cherish no hatred of any people. They distinguish between peoples and governments, and therefore cannot refrain from sympathizing with the Russian nation which has been afflicted with the scourge of Communism. But they are also conscious that by having fought Communism they have been upholding the cause of the entire mankind.

It would be somewhat outside the scope of this narrative to describe the trials which had to be faced by the Latvian nation before it achieved its independent State. It will suffice to mention the Revolution of 1905, the combat of two Latvian infantry brigades against the Germans in the First World War, 1915—1917, and the War of Independence, 1918—1920, waged against both the Russian Red Army and the so-called *Balticum* armies, led by Count von der Goltz and General Bermond-Aval-off.

The material and man-power losses of Latvia were relatively higher than those suffered by any other country during World War I. It lost about 27 percent of her population.

Yet Latvia became a prosperous country during the twenty years in which her people lived as a free nation. Universal acknowledgement was accorded to Latvia not only for its notable economic achievements but also for its wise social laws and the equality enjoyed by the various racial minorities which were assured protection by special laws. Indeed, few other countries had guaranteed such wide cultural autonomy to their minorities.

Having for centuries been ground between the two giant millstones, Germany and Russia, Latvia was determined to avoid any further experience of foreign rule. Every effort was therefore made to satisfy the two, particularly the Soviet Union as the most threatening. In particular, preferential treatment was granted to Soviet

Russia in respect of goods transit and port and storage facilities. In this respect far superior service was rendered to Soviet Russia than the Russian Czars had ever been — and the present masters are — able to organize in this area. While the European situation in the late thirties deteriorated, the crises growing until they culminated in World War II, Latvia not only repeatedly declared strict neutrality, but also acted accordingly. But this proved to be of no avail: Communist Russia and Nazi Germany agreed in August 1939 to divide Europe into spheres of interest, opening the way for World War II.

Poland had scarcely been crushed by the joint onslaught of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, before the latter demanded military bases in the Baltic States, allegedly in order to "ensure peace". Stalin and Molotov solemnly declared to the Foreign Ministers of the Baltic States that there was not the slightest intention of interfering in the internal affairs of the countries concerned. It was furthermore promised that the Soviet forces would be withdrawn immediately at the end of the war. Left to their own fate, the Baltic States had no option but to yield one by one to the Soviet demands. Pacts of "Friendship and Mutual Assistance" were signed at the dictate of the Kremlin, and Red Army units moved into the bases in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, specified in the pacts.

This was in October 1939. In this hour of grave danger, the Baltic people displayed calm and fortitude and rallied only more closely round their governments. This attitude still prevailed when the Soviet demands grew provocative. The Russian military forces having taken possession of their bases, increasing demands were made as to supplies for the troops, maintenance of existing military installations, erection of new ones, et cetera. They were conceded by the respective governments as they arose. All this was undoubtedly designed to provoke some visible signs of discontent, if not disorders. It failed to do this, yet it also failed to surfeit the Soviet appetite.



In June 1940 the Kremlin presented to each of the three Baltic States in turn a new ultimatum, based on the fiction that the "friendship and mutual assistance" pacts had been broken and that the Baltic countries had planned on an aggression of the Soviet Union.<sup>1)</sup> This Soviet move had in fact been expected already in 1939, but it was also hoped that the international situation might gradually improve and thereby the final Russian onslaught could somehow be withstood. This hope did not materialize. The state of European affairs changed from bad to worse in 1939—1940. Germany had smashed the Western front and established herself as the actual ruler of Western Europe; the Soviet Union on her part had crushed Finland, Poland and Rumania, in each case annexing part of the foreign territory. The Baltic States were therefore completely isolated from the outside world, while Russian troops were already firmly established in key positions within their frontiers. No assistance was to be expected from any quarters — nor had even moral support been offered. The Latvian Government knew that the nation was determined to fight to the bitter end yet it did not feel justified in demanding futile sacrifices which would have led to nothing but heroic national suicide. It was hoped that surrender would save many lives. Time was to show the futility of this policy. Thousands of innocent people were to perish in Soviet prisons, having undergone torture and humiliation. Many more thousands of aged and young men and women and children were deported to Russian slave labour camps.

June 17, 1940, when the Soviet troops occupied Latvia, was the beginning of the destruction and annihilation of the Latvian Republic and the Latvian people. This process continues even today.

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<sup>1)</sup> The absurdity of this allegation is perhaps best shown by a comparison of the populations. The combined population of the three Baltic States is 6 millions, as against 180 millions in the Soviet Union.

## SOVIET OCCUPATION JUNE 1940 TO JUNE 1941 OR THE YEAR OF THE RED TERROR

This was the second Soviet invasion of Latvia within a generation. The first, in 1918—1919, when the Red Army did not succeed in occupying the entire Latvian territory, lasted some six months. Even in that short space of time the Soviets murdered over 2,000 people. This was later referred to as a trifling number by P. Stuchka, whom the Kremlin installed as Prime Minister of Latvia, in his book "Six Months of Soviet Latvia". Upon their second occupation, in 1940—1941, the Bolsheviks murdered or deported to slave camps roughly 1.8 percent of the Latvian population.

The initial act of violence against the Latvian people was committed on the night of June 14, 1940. An armed Soviet squad raided an outpost of Latvian frontier guards, burning down the buildings and murdering the guards, their wives and children. This was done with the deliberate intention of provoking an armed frontier incident which would have served as an excuse for further action. The Latvian Government, however, was well aware of the Soviet scheme and made resolute efforts to avoid any sharp reaction, imposing a ban on all public comments on the incident. The Chief of the Frontier Guards, General Bolšteins, was instructed by the Government to conduct a formal investigation. He could only report the actual facts, namely, that there had been a clear and flagrant violation of a sovereign country's frontiers. He took his own life after the Soviet forces had occupied Latvia a few days later; thereby he saved himself from torture and death at the hands of the NKVD.

Exactly one year later, during the night from June 13 to 14, 1941, the first mass deportations took place in Latvia and the other Baltic States. Over 15,000 Latvians, regardless of sex or age were dragged from their sleep to lorries and transported to railway "loading stations", where the male heads of families were separated from

their wives and children. The deportees were crammed into freight cars. For sanitary purposes, the cars had holes cut into the floor, which also served as the only opening for air. Thus the victims were subjected to unbearable physical and mental torture in the stifling cars, scorched by the summer heat, without food and water. Their journey which ultimately took them to slave labour camps in remote districts of Arctic Russia and Siberia, lasted for several weeks.

This dreadful night is still commemorated as a day of mourning by the Baltic people in the free world. Hardly a Latvian family exists which has not lost a close relative or friend. The names of deportees, as far as they could be ascertained after the Red Army was driven from Latvia, were compiled in a list lodged with the International Red Cross in Geneva. This list was published by the Latvian National Foundation in Scandinavia under the title "These Names Accuse" in 1951. Among the many thousands of deportees there were 291 infants under one year, and 315 people over 70 years of age.

When the Red Army retreated from Latvia, blood-stained torture chambers at the State and district headquarters of the NKVD were revealed, and numerous mass-graves containing the mutilated bodies of the victims were discovered in various parts of Latvia, as testified by many witnesses in public hearings at Washington, New York, Detroit and Chicago before the United States House Baltic Committee in 1953. Similar revelations were made in the other Baltic countries.

#### LATVIAN SOLDIERS UNDER THE BOLSHEVIK YOKE

The peace-time armed forces of Latvia had a total strength of 25,000. Latvian Riflemen Regiments during the First World War, and the subsequent War of Independence, established the traditions of patriotism and Christianity, which were the principles on which this

well-disciplined force was trained. Even the Soviet authors described it, along with the armed forces of the other Baltic States, in military manuals as the best organized force on Russia's western frontier. Having their origin from the same social stratum, the soldiers of the Latvian Army had a good morale, based on good relations between the rank and file and the officers. The regular armed forces were complemented by a voluntary Home Guard with a strength of some 48,000 men. Most ex-servicemen joined this upon completion of the obligatory service. A similar homeguard organization existed also for the women.

Ostensibly by accident, the Latvian Minister of War, General Berķis a hero of the Independence War, was invited to Moscow at the very time when the Soviet march into Latvia was being decided. He was given a red-carpet reception. Nevertheless, he was one of the very first deportees. This initiated wholesale arrests among the higher ranks of the armed forces. The Chief of the Staff of the Army, General Rozenšteins, and the former Army Commander and War Minister General Balodis were deported already in the summer of 1940. The first victims included the 70-year old President of the Latvian Boy Scout organization, a hero of the first World War, General Goppers who had long since retired from active service. His mutilated body, hands bound with barbed wire, was later found in one of the mass graves. The Latvian Minister to Moscow, Lt.-Col. Kociņš and his Military Attache, Lt.-Col. Zālītis were apprehended in Moscow in spite of their diplomatic immunity.

Colonel Celmiņš, Chief of the Intelligence Division of the General Staff of the Army, took his own life rather than become a traitor by succumbing to Bolshevik extortion.

A number of officers and other ranks of the former Latvian Army were retained in service after careful screening, and were forcibly enlisted in the Red Army where they formed the 24th (Latvian) Territorial Corps.

In spite of their abhorrence at serving a foreign power which had destroyed their State, they had no choice. Every Latvian soldier was closely watched. He was robbed of the last remnants of privacy, on or off duty, and even his family was not immune from the omnipotent Soviet secret police. Wives of officers and NCO's were forced to attend evening classes for political indoctrination at least once a week. The "political officers" tried also to assess the general mood prevailing in the families by provocative questions.

Once the leading ranks of the Army had been liquidated, arrests began among junior and non-commissioned officers and members of the previously disbanded police force. Aware of the fate which awaited them, many were determined to sell their lives as dearly as possible. The majority, however, were seized in circumstances which excluded any possibility of resistance, mostly during the small hours of night when the unsuspecting victims were asleep. Others offered no opposition convinced that they had done nothing unlawful, and naively supposing that their cases would be cleared in no time.

Notwithstanding these afflictions, the men did not lose courage. It was the nation's hope and wish that at least a part of the Latvian armed forces be preserved in some form, to emerge when the hour of need arises. The validity of this assumption had been proved in the course of history. It had been evinced that the Latvian soldier's loyalty lay with his people, not with the foreign uniform he had been forced to wear.

From May 1941 onward, the purge among active and retired Latvian officers was intensified. The deportations of civilians on June 14th did not spare the soldiers. The majority of the officers of the staff of the 24th Territorial Corps were assembled for alleged tactical manoeuvres in some remote forest area. They found themselves surrounded by a large concentration of Russian troops. The Russian commanding officer called the Latvians to attention and then bellowed out something to the effect

that "Today's tactical manoeuvres will begin with the order: Hands up!". Some of the Latvian officers thus trapped were killed on the spot (a number of them were later found in mass graves), but the fate of the largest number was never reliably found out. Later in the same year a census taken of the Latvian officers still living showed that over 50 percent of the whole officers corps were either known to have been murdered or were listed as missing, presumably deported.

Yet even after this relentless purge, the Bolsheviks continued to view the remnants of the 24th Territorial Corps with deep mistrust, and it was eventually disbanded. When the Russo-German war broke out on June 22, 1941, no Latvian units were sent into the field, though the adversary was Germany against whom, as the Kremlin well knew, the Latvians had fought in 1915—1920. This obvious distrust proves that the Bolsheviks had no illusions as to whom the Latvians regarded as their most deadly enemy.

THE LATVIAN PEOPLE ALTHOUGH  
WHOLEHEARTEDLY SUPPORTING THE CAUSE  
OF THE WESTERN DEMOCRACIES CANNOT  
BACK UP BOLSHEVISM

During World War I two Latvian brigades valiantly fought on the Allied side, even when it meant fighting side by side with Czarist Russia. But the Latvians insisted on their rights to live as a free and independent nation. In 1918—1920 the Latvians had to defend their just cause in the era of revolutionary turmoil not only against Russia but also the Weimar Republic which rose out of the debris of Imperial Germany. The Latvian War of Independence was successful because Russia had collapsed under Germany's pressure and Germany, in turn, had been crushed by the Western Allies from which Latvia was later to receive considerable material and moral support. This, coupled with the early *de jure* recognition



of the new Republic, caused Latvia to entertain great friendliness towards the Western Democracies. Her foreign policy was also influenced by it, and was consistently pro-Western. It was therefore natural that the nation's sympathies with the Western Allies continued when the Second World War broke out.

When events had moved so far that the Soviet Union was already ravaging their country, the Latvians could only hope that history would repeat itself by reiterating the events of First World War, Russia failing first, followed by Germany, with Latvia regaining her independence and achieving lasting peace which could in any case not be envisaged without the defeat of both Communist Russia and Nazi Germany. From the Latvian standpoint it was vital to support any such process by every possible means. The outbreak of war between Germany and the Soviet Union was therefore welcomed by Latvia no less than by the British, the French and many other nations, though possibly for a different reason. That day held for Latvians a promise of delivery from the Soviet yoke. Following the mass deportations by only one week, war found the Baltic peoples in a state of deep depression, and this fresh turn of events was regarded by many as the just act of God and His divine intervention. Many even ventured to hope that the rapidly advancing German troops might intercept the slow deportation trains and restore lost relatives and friends.

It cannot be doubted that on invading Latvia in 1941 the Germans would have encountered fierce resistance, if a year earlier the Red Army had not occupied the country, imposing a rule of terror. Under favourable circumstances, the country would in all probability have supported Soviet Russia, though it is now clear that in this event Latvia's ultimate fate would have been no different from that which befell Poland, Czechoslovakia and other countries behind the Iron Curtain.

The truth, however, is that in 1941 Latvia was in a

totally defenceless position in facing German invasion, as the Bolsheviks had liquidated her national army, and even the 24th Territorial Corps was largely disbanded. Furthermore, for psychological reasons alone, it was impossible at that time for the Latvians to make a simple move in defence of their Soviet tyrants. Their only desire, whatever the cost, was to escape the Bolshevik noose.

It is therefore wrong to draw any comparison with the reaction in France and in the Low Countries when Germany attacked. In that area all resistance brought nearer the hour when liberation in the true sense would be brought by the Western Allied armies. It was natural for them to acclaim Soviet military successes because they facilitated the turning of the tide in Western Europe without involving the least threat to the then occupied countries, even if they had known the true nature of Bolshevism, which they clearly did not. Had the Eastern "Ally" been governed by civilized and democratic principles or had the Latvians been in a similar geographical position, they would assuredly have followed the Western peoples' example, as they did in 1914—18. However, the dice had already been thrown.

#### LATVIANS ATTEMPT TO RESTORE THEIR ARMED FORCES AND GOVERNMENT ADMINISTRATION

Soviet terrorism impelled many Latvians to seek refuge in the forests. Their numbers began to swell after the mass deportations of June 1941. This led to the formation of guerilla or self-defence units. Their original aim was to defend themselves — hence the name — but soon they extended their activities to freeing political prisoners, et cetera. When the Russo-German war started, the Soviet forces were unexpectedly quick in succumbing to the German attack. Retreating marauders from the Red Army began to loot the countryside. The leaders of the



local Communist party and the Russian political police tried to wreak revenge wherever the opportunity arose. The self-defence forces concentrated on hindering such acts of violence, at the same doing all in their power to cut off the retreat of the Soviet occupation armies and officials. This state of affairs could last from a few days to, in some districts, many weeks. The self-defence units then endeavoured to restore order within those areas. This was usually done by reinstating the pre-Soviet administrative apparatus in remote country districts as well as in the central governmental offices in Riga. It was accomplished with little difficulty, since many Latvian officials had managed to escape and now came forward to resume their duties.

When the Germans arrived, they were faced with a *fait accompli* — the Latvian administrative machinery, including the local and central governments, the police and the judiciary were again in operation. The German authorities had little success in weakening the national solidarity thus achieved. For the time being, therefore, the people of Latvia felt almost free again: the national flag appeared on the buildings, the national anthem was stirringly sung by the people, free newspapers made their appearance and Radio Riga, as yet uncensored, announced the news at special broadcasts. On the whole, there was very little interference by the mobile German armies whose main business was to follow up the retreating Red Army. Their behaviour towards the local population was exemplary. And the Latvians were justified in claiming that full order had been restored to the country exclusively by their own hands.

But the German armies moved on and were followed by another "army", the German civilian administration whose members were Nazi. They wore brown uniforms and were to be known as "gold pheasants". These new arrivals frustrated all hopes of the captive peoples.

## THE GERMAN OCCUPATION AND POLICY

It is only natural that Latvia, together with other nations under the Kremlin's yoke, longed to see the Soviet rule finally smashed. The start of the Russo-German war offered a way of release from the bonds of slavery. This feeling was shared by every single nation under the Soviet rule. Not even the Russians were an exception, as was clearly shown during the first months of war, when nearly one-third of the Red Army capitulated. This was certainly no mere military defeat in the battle-field but a revolt against the Kremlin.

It would be unjust to assume that such an attitude was rooted in sympathy towards Nazi Germany. But the captive peoples had an overwhelming reason for welcoming the outbreak of war as a herald of changes. Consequently, in respect of many Eastern European nations the Germans found themselves in a very favourable political and psychological position. But Hitler's policy was: "We do not want inferior allies, we want to be feared." Therefore the German occupation authorities did everything in their power to eradicate the last remnants and memories of freedom. Hitler's policy was outlined in Point 6 of a supplement to his personal instruction of July 23, 1941: "The small forces available for the safety of the occupied regions will only then be able to perform their task satisfactorily... if they can intimidate the (local) population so that it loses all inclination to organize resistance." <sup>2)</sup>

This was written only one month after the war started, when the German conquests were restricted to the three Baltic States and a part of the Ukraine, that is, areas where anti-Bolshevik feeling was at its strongest, and

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<sup>2)</sup> Ergänzung zur Weisung No. 33: "Die zur Sicherung der eroberten Ostgebiete zur Verfügung stehenden Truppen reichen nur dann aus.... wenn die Besatzungsmacht denjenigen Schrecken verbreitet, der allein geeignet ist der Bevölkerung Lust zur Widersetzlichkeit zu nehmen."

clearly shows that at this early stage Hitler's only conception of securing the loyalty of the occupied nations was to frighten them into submission. He had not the slightest interest in listening to the national aspirations of the nations concerned, nor was he capable of seeing matters in their true perspective.

In accordance with this policy, the territory of Latvia was regarded as just another part of the "Reichskommissariat Ostland", which, in addition to the three Baltic States, comprised Byelorussia. It was an offence even to mention the name "Latvia", the Latvian University, the Latvian Academy of Arts, the Latvian State Library etc. Every measure was calculated to drive home the point that the Germans were the absolute masters, that they meant to retain that status and the Latvians would do well to resign themselves to the role of a subordinate nation.

With deep misgivings the Latvians watched how deliberately the new masters proceeded to liquidate the local self-defence forces which should have received every conceivable encouragement, if only more political foresight had prevailed. For it could not be denied that these forces had done their best to protect the population against the retreating Bolshevik gangs, at the same time greatly facilitating the German advance. Still, one of the very first orders the Germans issued in Latvia called for their immediate disintegration. Members of these forces were ordered to surrender all weapons under a threat of capital punishment.

Everything possible was done to eliminate the country's national character. Streets were renamed, mostly after German officials and Party leaders. The cultural institutions were gradually Germanized. The University of Latvia, renamed University of Riga, was particularly hard hit. Many scientists on its faculty were summarily dismissed and in some cases even forbidden to continue their academic activities, because of alleged Germanophobia. The Latvian Society of Riga, an institution of long-

standing traditions and importance, was evicted from its headquarters. When rationing was introduced, the Latvians were allocated only one-third of the rations allowed to Germans, and although stocks were ample, they were completely barred from any supply of clothing and footwear, unless special permission was obtained.

Little imagination is needed to realize what this meant to a nation which only a year ago had been its own master, proud of the achievements during twenty years of independence, and expecting to recover soon from the wounds of Soviet occupation. This reaction was accentuated by the German genocidal actions against certain groups of the population, that is, Jews, Gypsies and mentally defectives who were almost entirely exterminated.

#### THE GERMANS FIND THEY CANNOT STAND ALONE

In his Order of July 23, 1941, mentioned above, Hitler decreed in essence that security must be achieved in the occupied territories by whatever drastic measures the local chief of the German army or other responsible authority deemed necessary.<sup>3)</sup>

It soon became evident, however, that terror could not ensure safety for both the German forces and the civilian population. As the situation gradually deteriorated, the local German authorities found it necessary to recommend other methods and were at times compelled to offend the letter of Hitler's own order.

By the end of 1941 the Germans had discovered that their man-power was inadequate to cover the vast plains and deep forests of Russia. It was therefore realized that the co-operation of the native peoples would have

<sup>3)</sup> The relevant passage reads: "...nicht in Anforderung weiterer Sicherungskräfte, sondern in Anwendung entsprechender drakonischer Massnahmen müssen die Befehlshaber das Mittel finden ihre Sicherungsräume in Ordnung zu halten..."

to be sought. But the approach was made so clumsily that it only enhanced the antagonism of the nations concerned. All such endeavours would have been futile had it not been for the fierce desire of the Eastern European nations to settle their own accounts with the Soviet regime. Thus the Germans reaped an advantage which no amount of political blindness and national arrogance could destroy.

#### "POLICE BATTALIONS"

The Germans themselves had not overlooked it. Late in 1941 they called for volunteers to serve in the so-called Police Battalions, also known as Security Battalions after their German name, *Schutzmannschaften*. In explanation of this sudden change of tactics it was advanced that this measure was taken in the interests of local security. Volunteers were asked to sign up for six months' service in their own country, at the end of which time they would instantly be released. Since there was very little insecurity within the Latvian territory, and service therefore promised not to be exhausting, a number of volunteers applied. Additional reasons for the response were the bad conditions which prevailed for civilians with a shortage of the primary necessities of life. Another category of volunteers was constituted by individuals who felt themselves liable to retaliation on account of their past — an occasional collaborator with the Bolsheviks, et cetera — who took the proffered security of the German uniform.

The number of volunteers was small, however, most people adopting a wait-and-see attitude, because the Germans had already made it amply clear that Latvian national aspirations would receive very little consideration. Although some sections envisaged these units as a possible core of future Latvian armed forces, most politicians and Army men believed that this new development should be watched with suspicion. Consequently, volun-

tary support from these quarters was out of the question.

Naturally, there was wide discussion of the necessity of national armed forces as a safeguard against the future. On this score there was no doubt, but two considerations weighed heavily against any immediate commitments in this respect: (1) the time did not yet seem ripe for such action, and (2) it was doubtful whether the Germans would allow any national units to serve exclusively in their own country.

The German authorities made all decisions on Latvian matters without consulting the spokesmen of the people and without regard to the possible reaction. Accordingly, most of the members of the former Latvian Home Guard were coerced into the ranks of the newly formed Police Battalions, a single stroke of the pen putting them under martial law. Since the Home Guard comprised most men who had completed their compulsory military service, this ingenious tactics supplied the Germans with some twenty battalions.

Needless to say, all promises as to the term and place of service were broken once the transfer had been accomplished. Soon the Police Battalions were supplying much needed reserves to replace the heavy losses encountered by the German forces all along the Eastern Front. This of course was the real intention behind this indirect mobilization of the Home Guards.

These new troops underwent no medical examination, and it soon became evident that a large number of the men were not fit for front service. Repeated Latvian protests were ignored, it was difficult to secure discharge even in cases of complete disability. It seemed at times that not one German official possessed even the authority to acknowledge the receipt of protests, far less deal with them. Much discontent was felt when it was confirmed that the newly formed units were to bear the name of *Schutzmannschaften*, which was taken to imply that they were not to have a military character. A storm of protest arose when it leaked out that some of the Battalions



had been despatched to a neighbouring country for alleged security purposes. Men who were eager to fight the Red Army, considered it as an insult when they were ordered to do "police service" in a country which shared their fate. Eventually these units were withdrawn and transferred to the front line. Yet trouble could not be kept down. Captain Praudiņš, Commander of a Police Battalion, was accused of insubordination and contempt of the Germans, on which charges he was court-martialled and executed. Such court-martial proceedings against Latvian officers who had encountered disfavour were not rare. Occasionally an execution would occur without formal charges or a trial. The commander of a Police Battalion was shot to death by a private whose leave had been cancelled. The murderer could not be held to account because it was revealed that he was a member of the *Sicherheits-Dienst*, and all investigations were consequently suspended. Repeated incidents of this type, as well as complaints about inadequate supplies to the Police Battalions, caused the local Latvian authorities to order an investigation on the spot. This task was entrusted to Colonel Kandis, a former commander of the Latvian Air Force. He was assassinated by the *Sicherheits-Dienst*. The Germans subsequently went to great lengths to play down this incident, representing his death as suicide, at the same time refusing all requests for an inquiry. This type of suicide was no isolated occurrence.

In the field, the Latvian Police Battalions were attached to German units in such a way that no direct contact was possible between them. Nominally, a Latvian officer was in charge of each battalion, but the real commander — except in battle — was a German liaison officer (policeman) with his staff.

The equipment of the Latvian units, particularly in respect of weapons, was far below all reasonable requirements. However, the Germans had no other resources to draw upon, as soon as the first real difficulties were encountered on the Eastern Front, and owing to their

desperate determination to prevent Bolshevism's return to Latvia, these hard-pressed troops fought bravely.

The Latvian authorities were at last successful and in 1944 the remnants of the Police Battalions were withdrawn. By the middle of 1944 the losses of these units were: 900 fallen, 130 missing and about treble this number seriously wounded. The unfit, including all men over normal service age were discharged. A few battalions later formed the core of the glorious 2nd(19th) Division of the Latvian Legion. The rest, reorganized into two regiments, were thrown into battle when the Red Army reached Latvia in 1944.

Meanwhile events on the Russian battlefields had rendered inevitable the formation of a larger national armed force. This subsequently proved to be the most significant Latvian effort to defend the country and an attempt to influence the course of events.

#### THE FORMATION OF THE LATVIAN LEGION

The importance which the Latvians placed on a national defence force has already been pointed out. This was, however, a very delicate problem and many factors had to be considered. Briefly, Latvian interests demanded that two main conditions should be met, if such a force were to be created: (1) it should be used solely for the defence of Latvia and (2) that it be under nominal and actual Latvian command. All other standpoints, including organizational questions, were regarded as of secondary importance. Germany, on the other hand, was accustomed to dictating its own arbitrary terms, even where negotiations were admitted at all.

Towards the middle of 1942 danger approached from the East once more. This brought the question to a head. Late in 1942 the fact leaked out that the Estonians who also had "Police Battalions" had been authorized to enlarge their total strength to about two divisions



and to organize them into an Estonian Legion. This news was received with great interest in Latvia, especially since it was rumoured that German authorities had conceded the Estonian demand that the Legion should remain within its national territory. Yet the news was not wholly satisfactory. The Estonian Legion was to be formed under the supervision of the *Waffen-SS* (Rifle-SS, as distinct from the SS proper), a rival formation of field units to the *Wehrmacht*. This, in combination with the occupying power's general behaviour and its treatment of the "Police Battalions" made it difficult for the Latvians to decide upon their attitude, in the event that they should be asked to follow the Estonian example.

The German occupation authorities now acted quickly. They approached the Latvian Administration<sup>4)</sup> with a detailed plan for establishing a large volunteer brigade, representing the plan as an act of peculiar grace towards the Latvians. The project was instantly turned down by the Chairman of the Latvian Administration, General Dankers (a former officer of the Latvian Army) who declared that there seemed no possibility of recruiting volunteers.<sup>5)</sup> Undeterred, the Germans sought someone bold enough to lend his name to this scheme. A number of other high officers of the former Latvian Army were approached, but with no success.

The prolonged preliminary negotiations provided an opportunity to impress the Latvian point of view on the the Germans, also gaining time for further tactical moves. This was of some importance, since, because the creation of a Latvian force in one form or other was a foregone conclusion and if the Latvians were unwilling to come to an agreement with the Germans, the latter would proceed in their own way.

<sup>4)</sup> An administrative body which acted as the Latvian central administrative agency under German supervision in Latvia.

<sup>5)</sup> Minutes of session of the Latvian Administration, held November 4, 1942.

The complicated situation can perhaps best be illustrated by recapitulating some of the arguments advanced by the negotiators. On the one hand it was contended that the Latvian mentality could hardly become reconciled to the specific nature of the the SS, (into which the Latvian Legion was to be incorporated, even though it was to be the *Waffen SS*). The Germans replied that the SS proper (*Allgemeine SS*), should not be confused with the Rifle-SS which consisted purely of fighting troops considered as the elite of the German armed forces.

The Latvians further argued that they could not be mobilized into armed forces at all, since formally Latvia was an occupied territory, where no form of call-up could be justified.

The question of independence thus being raised, the *Generalkommissar* (Head of the German civilian administration in Latvia) in Riga pointed out that no hopes need be harboured of Latvia receiving a status similar to that of Slovakia. The latter's limited independence had been granted, he said, in times of peace. During the war no changes of status would be allowed. From the German viewpoint it would be most inopportune to grant any of the Latvian wishes, since this would open the way for a flood of similar demands from other nations in the same position, Belgium, Holland and Estonia. The Latvian representatives should also not forget that the *Fuehrer* was too busy with things of more immediate urgency to have his time taken up by such rather high-handed demands. The *Generalkommissar* said he felt bound to point out that the general attitude of the Latvian population did not make it easy to grant concessions. Farmers had not been complying with the regulations on the compulsory delivery of farm produce and in general the Latvians were not friendly towards the Germans. This situation was all the graver because it was duplicated in the other two Baltic countries.<sup>6)</sup>

<sup>6)</sup> Ibidem, December 28, 1942.

The stalling attitude of the Latvian representatives was carefully thought out. A flat refusal of the German demands would have been interpreted as an act of deliberate defiance. On the other hand, it was essential that no opportunity be lost to organize defences against the Soviet aggression, and it was clear that the Latvians could do little on their own.

Later, when the defeat of Germany was already approaching and the Latvians were totally engrossed in their struggle for freedom, it was easy to interpret their decision as an attempt to turn the balance in Nazi favour. But there was no other way! Latvia withheld its fateful decision until the eleventh hour, and even then it was only made reluctantly. However, there were no other means of stemming the Soviet onslaught. To do this Latvia was forced to utilize what limited resources it had and shoulder the consequences. In this sense only can it be argued that the declining German fortunes inspired the formation of Latvian military units, but the sole aim was to prevent the Red Tide from advancing again.

During the second half of 1942 Labour Exchanges received German orders to conscript certain categories of men for the services. All able-bodied individuals were registered and controlled as to job assignment by these exchanges. Now a number of men were assigned to do work with German military units, and once there, they were ordered to work as *Hilfswillige* (volunteer assistants). This German move was discussed by the Latvian Administration on December 8, 1942, when General Danckers reported on the very poor living conditions of these men. The winter clothing supplied was very inadequate and they were miserably treated by their immediate German superiors. It was resolved to approach the *General-kommissar* of Latvia with a view to achieving improvements.<sup>7)</sup>

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<sup>7)</sup> Ib., December 8, 1942.

The recruitment of the *Hilfswillige* was organized so surreptitiously that even the Latvian Administration only heard of it by the time it was well launched. It caused much unrest and naturally influenced the people's attitude towards military mobilization. The adverse treatment of the Latvian Police Battalions contributed to this unfavourable attitude.

But the Germans were determined to lose no time in implementing their plans. Late in January 1943 it was rumoured that the Latvian Legion had already been set up, and that the Police Battalions which were stationed on the front near Leningrad had been assigned to it to form the core. This news was officially confirmed at a meeting between General Schroeder, Chief of the SS and Police in Latvia, and the Latvian Administration. Schroeder broke the news that "the Fuehrer's approval to form a Latvian Legion had at last been obtained" and that the plan had already been inaugurated and the first brigade of the Legion was already at the front. He urged the Latvians to do their utmost to recruit the required number of volunteers in order to "justify the Fuehrer's confidence". He said he believed that this was no difficult task for a nation like Latvia, with about 10,000 university students and a considerable number of active sportsmen. According to Schroeder, the Latvian Administration had only to find suitable ways to induce these people for service in the Legion.

The Latvian representatives present did not share Schroeder's optimism. The possibility of encouraging students and sportsmen to volunteer was rejected outright, while a genuine Latvian cooperation towards a Legion seemed highly improbable, unless the Germans substantially changed their methods in Latvia. Based on these arguments, the following proposals were laid before Schroeder: (1) that the German authorities publicly state their intention to restore independent Latvia and then fulfil this by immediate action, (2) that all political prisoners

be freed immediately and satisfactory assurances be given that there would be no further political arrests, (3) that the Soviet decrees of nationalization of private property would be immediately annulled and the properties returned to their former owners or trustees, even where they were now in the hands of the German authorities or newly formed German companies, and that the Latvians would be put on a par with the Germans with regard to rationing, civil liberties and salaries. General Schroeder replied that he would inform his Chief of these proposals and that personally he felt confident of favourable results.<sup>8)</sup>

Two days later, on January 29, 1943, another meeting took place at the *Generalkommissar's* headquarters. Nothing new had occurred, and both sides only explained their points of view in more detail. Each of the members of the Latvian Administration restated that the Latvian nation was convinced that everything possible should be done to stop the Bolshevik westward advance; on the other hand, they found it impossible to commit themselves to any decision as long as conditions prevailed which antagonized the people. Neither was it clear whether the *Fuehrer* had *allowed* or *ordered* a Latvian Legion to be formed, or who had approached him. The Latvian representatives also pointed out that there was a difference between the Germans and the Latvians in their respective reaction to the "Fuehrer's" appeal:

"You (the Germans) were led by and followed a man of your own blood and spirit. We belong to a different people. The Latvians know that the Bolsheviks are close to their borders and they know what to expect should the Bolsheviks invade their country once more. Yet, the country is still as if under the spell of a weird calm. It is a calm of hopelessness. People cannot live only to hate

<sup>8)</sup> An account of this meeting, by Colonel Silgailis who attended it, was published in DAUGAVASVANAGI, a monthly publication, No. 10, 1951.

and to destroy. They must have a constructive aim, a bright hope. The German nation knows why it is fighting: not only to annihilate Bolshevism but also to secure for itself possibilities of existence and development. But what should the Latvians fight for now? What should we tell them, except of the need to fight the Bolsheviks? We have nothing to tell them".<sup>9)</sup>

As a result of this meeting, the German authorities understood that no recruits would be forthcoming on a voluntary basis and decided upon forced mobilization.

The minutes of the Latvian Administration show their struggle to make the restoration of free Latvia and the rights of the Latvian people a condition for the formation of the Latvian Legion, and they also show the German disregard of the Latvian claim and their use of coercion in establishing the Latvian Legion.

At a closed session of the Latvian Administration, immediately after the meeting described above, possible further courses of action were discussed. It was agreed that since the call for volunteers was rejected, there was no way to include Latvians in any German plan for a general mobilization until Latvia's sovereignty was recognized. There was, however, the possibility that even if the Germans could not legally enforce any general enlistment scheme, they would have no scruples about putting pressure on the Latvian authorities to effect it. This possibility had even been hinted at. A number of points had remained unclear. The Germans, for instance, had kept talking only of army units but the necessary arrangements were entrusted to General Schroeder, a Police officer. Similarly, it had been implied that there were to be independent Latvian regiments, but that they would be under the command of German officers. The Germans had carefully avoided committing themselves on Latvian demands for the restoration of nationalized property. The

<sup>9)</sup> Minutes of the Latvian Administration, January 29, 1943. These minutes were later mimeographed and distributed.



same was true of the demand for sovereignty. The gains, if any, were that the Germans had been fully informed of Latvian demands. They also knew now that they were held responsible for any future disasters. The occupying power was clearly shown that they had been put in a position where demands must be met if Latvian cooperation was to be obtained.

On the other hand, there were no illusions as to the German intention of introducing enlistment, if necessary not even stopping short at conscription. The meeting was unable to decide what policy would best serve Latvian interests, whether the extended hand should be shaken, whether the Latvian claims were too stiff, or would both the individual and the nation as a whole be in a healthier position if organized into military formations should the Soviets return. No course of action could be decided on and it was agreed to wait for about ten days before any further steps were taken.<sup>10</sup>

During the next few days the general confusion was enhanced by the anxiety caused by an order of General Schroeder, published in the press on February 5, 1943 that all officers and NCO's of the former Latvian Army must present themselves at the Police headquarters for registration. Although mentioned by Schroeder during his talks with the Latvian representatives, this order was in direct violation of all previous promises, since the order specifically stipulated that defaulters would be dealt with under martial law.<sup>11</sup>)

Meanwhile, an office of the *SS-Ersatzkommando Ostland* (SS-Reserve Administration in the Eastern Areas) had been established in Riga and was to be entrusted with recruitment for the Legion and its organization.

On February 6, 1943, the Head of the Latvian Administration and two senior officers of the former Latvian Army had a meeting with General Schroeder who told

them that general mobilization, under the Latvian Administration, was a necessity. He stressed that the time had come for Latvia to act, and they would be well-advised to show the *Fuehrer* their first division as soon as possible. He also argued that the Latvian authorities needed no special powers in this respect, for their own President K. Ulmanis had ruled for six years without legislative sanction, thereby establishing a precedent!<sup>12</sup>) His visitors still showing reluctance, General Schroeder expressed his great disappointment, and the meeting dispersed in an atmosphere of rather stilted cordiality.

Within a few hours the same Latvian officials were again invited to a meeting, this time with General Jeckeln, SS and Police Chief in the entire north-eastern European area under German occupation, with headquarters in Riga. General Jeckeln was a fairly rare type amongst German officials, mainly characterized by their arrogance. He was a clever diplomatist, somewhat given to posing as a man of the world, a skilful arbitrator. He chose to approach the whole matter in a conciliatory manner. He admitted that the Germans had committed a good many mistakes in the past but with sincerity and good will on both sides, these could still be corrected to everybody's satisfaction. Deviating from the line of the absolute necessity of the Legion, he spoke as though his guests' acceptance had already been won and only some minor points remained to be settled. He therefore concentrated on outlining in some detail the advantages he had allegedly been able to procure for the Latvian nation "at the very highest level".

He stated that at the outset it had been planned that all officers above the rank of a battalion commander should be Germans but that he held a warrant allowing

<sup>10</sup>) *Ib.*, January 30, 1943, No. 80.

<sup>11</sup>) *Ib.*, February 5, 1943, No. 82.

<sup>12</sup>) The last President of Latvia, Dr. K. Ulmanis, who had a considerable role in the country's struggle for independence, and became its first Prime Minister, established a form of totalitarian regime in 1934. He was deported to the Soviet Union in 1940.



Latvians to be placed in command of regiments. He himself was quite willing, he said, to concede to further points: (1) that Latvians should be in command of divisions, (2) that, in accordance with the Latvian Administration's wish, the Latvian formations should serve on the front as close to their own country as only possible, (3) that the Latvian Police Battalions which at present were serving in remote parts of the combat zone should be incorporated into the Legion and transferred to its combat zone, and (4) that, finally, Latvian demands for the restoration of nationalized property should be met in full. In return for this, Jeckeln bargained for a draft of annual classes 1921—24 and asked that possible candidates for regimental commands should be nominated without delay. All members of the former Latvian Army were also promised full recognition of their former ranks. Further, he requested that a prominent Latvian officer be nominated to act as liaison officer with the *SS-Ersatzkommando Ostland*, the organization which would in all probability be responsible for forming the Legion. As an immediate concession he announced that all current proceedings against Latvian patriots on political grounds had already been stopped.

The Latvian representatives remained true to their former standpoint. They reiterated that any commitments would depend on proof that their demands, as expressed in a note sent that day to the German civilian administration, would be met. No further concessions were at the moment possible, because mobilization would be in direct violation of international law and it would adversely affect the status of Latvian prisoners of war if the Legion were to be formed before independence was granted to Latvia, that is, while the Germans still treated the country as if it were legally a part of the Soviet Union.

This last point was discussed in more detail when, a couple of days later, the Head of the Latvian Administration called on Dr. Drechsler, the *Generalkommissar* of Latvia. The latter was of the opinion that no declara-

tion of independence would help Latvian soldiers if they had the bad fortune to be taken prisoners by the Soviets, it being very unlikely that the Bolsheviks would acknowledge the validity of any changes in the status of Latvia. The fate of any Latvian POW was a foregone conclusion — he would be dealt with as a traitor to the Soviet Union.

The opportunity was taken to air another point of friction. Lately there had been many cases where members of the re-established Latvian Home Guard had virtually been arrested and despatched to the vicinity of Leningrad as part of a mobile labour force in the combat zone. Dr. Drechsler expressed his regrets for this hasty action, of which he did not approve, and for which he blamed the German police authorities, who had acted on their own accord.

Coming at last to the main point, Dr. Drechsler informed General Dankers that there was no news regarding mobilization but that more precise information was to be expected shortly.<sup>13)</sup>

Having discussed General Schroeder's and Dr. Drechsler's information, the Latvian Administration resolved: (1) that the transfer of the Police Battalions to the Legion should be acceded to, (2) that support for any appeal for volunteers should depend on whether the Germans were willing to implement improvements in general conditions in Latvia and (3) that no mobilization would enter the question unless Latvia's independence was restored in full.

Yet, while these points were unanimously accepted, a certain note of dissent was discernible at this meeting. The opinion was expressed that international law was nowhere strictly adhered to, especially during war and that the people would rather accept some deviations from it — such as possible mobilization — than any unexpected

<sup>13)</sup> Minutes of the Latvian Administration, No. 83, February 8, 1943.

drafting into the German Army's labour units, which was usually done at very short notice and which, particularly in the country districts, caused much hardship and ill-feeling.<sup>14)</sup>

On February 15th, the members of the Latvian Administration were again summoned to Dr. Drechsler who informed them that plans were now complete for a nationwide call-up of the annual classes 1919—24. This would be implemented on the strength of the "Order Concerning Compulsory Registration for Employment under War-Time Conditions", issued by the *Reichskommissar* of the *Ostland*. A proclamation to that effect was to be released immediately. It was calculated that about 60,000 men would be drafted, and assigned as follows: 17,000 to the Latvian Legion, 25,000 to the labour squads of the Germany Army and the rest to be required to undertake any other vital duties assigned to them, probably in factories working for the war potential.

The Latvian representatives were not to be shaken from their negative attitude, for, as they pointed out, the scheme totally ignored all instructions issued by the Ministry for Affairs of Eastern Territories in Berlin. Furthermore, the *Generalkommissar's* intentions would directly violate well-established principles of human rights and justice, being devoid of all legal foundation.<sup>15)</sup>

The German officials had repeatedly referred to Hitler's sanction or order to organize a Latvian Legion, but so far the Latvians had not been made acquainted with the full text of this document. A whole year was to pass before the Inspector General of the Legion was able to obtain a photostatic copy of this decree. It read, in translation: "Adolf Hitler, Fuehrer's Headquarters, February 10, 1943. I order herewith the formation of a Latvian SS-Volunteer Legion. The size of the unit and the manner of its formation are to depend upon the number of Latvian

male persons available. (signed) Adolf Hitler". The document was countersigned by Heinrich Himmler. It reveals that the German authorities in Latvia were by no means paying strict observance to this order. For example, a volunteers' Legion is mentioned, which, logically, should be formed expressly of volunteers. However, as we have already related, the local German officials had given up every hope of achieving results in this manner and accordingly they were planning a general mobilization.

The question might be asked: Could it be that Hitler, when issuing his orders, was ill-informed as to the opposition of the Latvians? The answer is no. In Hitler's totalitarian state the term "volunteer" had lost its true significance. Hitler had never intended to call for volunteers among the Latvians, a people he once sneeringly described as a "fractional nation" (*Splittervolk*). Hitler and his associate Himmler who was the real instigator of this order knew only too well what they aimed at — the formula was devised to give an appearance of legality to an action which was at variance with international law, specifically the conventions concerning the treatment of occupied territories.

Again, with reference to SS, did Hitler and Himmler really intend to draft any available number of Latvians into the elite corps of the Nazi military system, the true and privileged guardians of the Third Reich and the German race? Latvians were not even accorded a place on the Nazi list of so-called Arian nations! Obviously, the Latvians would never be allowed to claim any of the privileges granted to the German SS. From the very outset it was emphasized that the difference between the German SS-men and the Latvian legionaries was so great that any grade in the former outranked even the highest officer of the latter. The designation "SS" was meant in a purely possessive sense; the name *Lettische Freiwillige Legion der SS* meant that the Legion belonged to the SS but was not an integral part of it.

At the same time it did no harm to call the Latvian

<sup>14)</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>15)</sup> Ibidem, February 16, 1943. No. 84.

Legion an SS unit in order to enhance still further the fame of the SS as fearless fighters. This was certainly achieved, for the Latvian Legion was soon to earn a name of its own for its exploits in the battle field.

Further, Hitler's order decreed that the size of the Legion was to depend on the number of available men; however, out of some 60,000 conscripts less than one-third were assigned to the Legion (see above for the statement by the *Generalkommissar*). In other words, this order was carefully designed to conceal an entirely different purpose. It should be remembered that the Latvians were completely at the mercy of the occupying power, which, if it retreated, would be instantly replaced by a more ruthless one. In such circumstances, the Latvians had to rely on their own decision in choosing the lesser of two evils. This choice was made not because of political leanings — the Communist and Nazi systems were equally distasteful — but for the sake of national interests. The Latvian legal resistance during the German occupation was an organized attempt to negotiate the most favourable terms, bowing to the inevitable.

Seen in the light of contemporary circumstances, these efforts can be summed up as follows:

- (1) To achieve the restoration of Latvia's international status.
- (2) To end all further conscription, or at least to secure its postponement until the fulfilment of the promise to release the Police Battalions in the combat zone or transfer them to the Latvian Legion.
- (3) In the event that the Legion was formed, to ensure that its commanding officers, including the Commander in Chief, were Latvians appointed by the Latvian Administration.
- (4) To achieve that no Latvian national was under arms in any unit but the Latvian Legion

- (5) To provide that conscripts to the Legion should receive a minimum of six months' training on Latvian territory
- (6) To ensure that the Legion should be exclusively engaged in defending Latvian territory against Bolshevik invasion, and that it should be under the command of the *Wehrmacht* rather than the SS
- (7) To secure adequate arms and supplies for the Legion, on similar standards as the German Army
- (8) To secure the abolition of compulsory enlistment and an honourable discharge for all conscripts who did not choose to continue in military service.

These demands were persistently placed before the German authorities. They appeared to sympathize with these claims, though rejecting as inopportune any points which might be interpreted abroad as a sign of German weakness. The only flat refusal was to the demand to abolish compulsory enlistment, it being argued that thereby the opportunists would profit over people with a highly developed sense of public duty. This argument proved conclusively that the Germans were fully aware of the unpopularity of volunteer service and its poor chances of success. Some of the local German officials were in any case opposed to a large Latvian army but would have preferred to conscript the Latvians into German units. Having failed to obtain Latvian cooperation on this last point, the Germans decided to go ahead without further negotiations.

In February 1943 the *Reichskommissar* of the *Ostland* issued an order, published in the local newspapers, decreeing that all male inhabitants of Latvia were subject to compulsory enlistment for military service.

On February 23rd the Head of the Latvian Administration reported to his colleagues that on the strength of the aforesaid order, the Labour Department of the German civil administration in Latvia had summoned all



men born in 1919—24 to appear before draft boards four days later. It now appeared that in spite of the *Generalkommissar's* recent assurance that Latvian authorities would organize the draft if it were implemented, the *SS-Ersatzkommando Ostland* had been instructed to undertake this. This office had already set up posters and notices printed in poor Latvian, evidently composed by someone with only a superficial knowledge of the language. It was not expected that the draft boards would allow individual preferences for fear that all conscripts would go to the Legion; they would be selected haphazardly for the Legion, the German Army or the labour units, at the will of the German draft boards.

It was obvious that this form of conscription would result in the scattering of Latvian manpower which the Latvian Administration wished to avoid. Moreover, the German authorities had completely disregarded Latvian requests to reinstate the legal independence of the country, Nor had the Germans confirmed in writing previous concessions concerning the formation, training and the command of the Legion. Therefore the Latvian Administration decided to submit a written protest to the *Reichskommissar* of the *Ostland*.<sup>16)</sup>

In order to give the Germans no excuse to ignore it, the protest was couched in moderate language, but it clearly recapitulated the original Latvian proposals.<sup>17)</sup>

Within a few days the *Generalkommissar* of Latvia proclaimed a general call up. The wording was such that the Latvian Administration pointed out that the population would hardly take kindly to the mention of the British and the Americans side by side with the Bolsheviks. The Germans replied that Great Britain and the United States would in any case never come to the assistance of Latvia. Still, the Latvian authorities were invited to draft another and more acceptable proclama-

tion. The Latvian spokesmen pointed out in their turn that a general call to arms was extremely premature and that no proclamation at all was needed.<sup>18)</sup>

On February 26, 1943, through the medium of their Labour Exchanges and the *SS-Ersatzkommando-Ostland* the Germans began enlisting men born 1919—24 as well as a number of commissioned and non-commissioned officers. These were men who had grown up in free Latvia. Many of them had only recently left school and were expecting to enter university. They totalled the impressive figure of 90,000, so the Germans had no difficulties in selecting the required 58,000 and distributing them according to their requirements. The Latvian Legion received the small contingent of 15,000 men, which was even less than anticipated. About 20,000 were assigned to the German Army as *Hilfswillige* and the others were absorbed elsewhere.

About 10 percent of the draftees defaulted. This was less than anticipated. The people knew their country to be facing the approach of the Red Army and preferred to fight rather than submit to Soviet subjugation once again. Neither is it easy to evade draft in a small and comparatively flat and open country like Latvia. The enlisted men saw the advantage of serving in the Latvian Legion. But since only one-fourth of the conscripts was assigned to the Legion, freedom of choice was practically non-existent. The draft boards had been instructed not to divulge to the conscripts their unit and destination but only to state whether the man had been accepted or temporarily released. In practice the only way to procure exemption or deferment was to obtain the so-called indispensability certificates from the German authorities, certifying that the holder was a civilian whose job furthered the war effort. Medical examination was restricted to noting the weight and height; it was

<sup>16)</sup> *Ib.*, February 23, 1943, No. 85.

<sup>17)</sup> *Ib.*, February 25, 1943, No. 86.

<sup>18)</sup> *Ib.*, February 27, 1943, No. 87.

therefore not surprising that physically unfit men had been recruited, most of them for the Legion.

Those passed for service were immediately despatched to guarded camps, without even an opportunity for a leave-taking from their families. The camps were short of food supply for several days. The conscripts did not learn of their individual assignments and destinations until thousands were assembled in the camps. It was only when the draft boards had finished their work that they were enlightened. A number of protests were raised, but on March 8, 1943 the *Generalkommissar* announced that the conscripts could be given no choice.<sup>19)</sup>

Hitler's order, it will be recalled, provided that the strength of the Latvian Legion was to depend on the number of men available. Who was responsible for a gross misinterpretation of this order, only one-fourth of the men being assigned to the Legion and the remainder absorbed into units not mentioned in the order? It could not be overlooked that a far better fighting unit could have been established if all the men had been put into the same unit, under Latvian command. This decision lay not so much with the German military authorities who were moved by purely military considerations, as with the German civilian authorities who were afraid of permitting a large Latvian unit. Even 60,000 men seemed a dangerous number if fully armed. Besides, this number could easily be increased by transferring the 20 existing Police Battalions to the Legion. Such a strong military force would undoubtedly have a considerable influence on the future Latvian attitude towards the Germans and would also almost certainly restrict the German occupation authorities' freedom of action through sheer moral pressure.

In the final issue the Germans altered their original designs from the fear not of too few but of too many men.

Largely as a result of pressure from the Latvian

authorities, the Germans at first refrained from sending new conscripts to the Police Battalions but later these were reinforced by some 6,000 men. As many of the men could not be immediately taken from their civil jobs and some could not easily be placed in the troops, the draft, though reaching its peak in the months of February and March, continued until late in the autumn.

The first 1,000 for the Legion were immediately sent to the front-line to reinforce the Latvian Brigade which had recently been formed from the Police Battalions. With the exception of a few born in 1919, most of these were youths without any previous military training whatsoever. In view of the German promise that all conscripts would receive a 6-months training on home territory, this fact heightened the indignation which the whole enlisting procedure had aroused among the Latvians.

The remaining 14,000 of the first batch for the Legion were sent to southern Courland where the First Latvian Division was later formed.

Officers and NCO's were enlisted concurrently, but the large concentration of conscripts was sent to camps before the commanding staff was formed. This was because, despite their promises, the Germans had originally intended to form the commanding corps from their own officers or at least to hold the number of Latvian officers to the absolute minimum.

In conclusion a few words must be said about the fate of those men who were drafted into the auxiliary services of the *Wehrmacht* (*Hilfswillige der Wehrmacht*, abbreviated to *HiWi*). According to the Chief of the *SS-Ersatzkommando Ostland* these comprised 27,000, or the majority of the recruits born in 1919-24. In small groups these unfortunate and unprotected Latvians were thrown from one place to another as the German units moved. They made persistent appeals to the Latvian authorities, especially to the Inspector General of the Legion, whose determined efforts later resulted in many transfers to Latvian units. A large number

<sup>19)</sup> *Ib.*, March 12, 1943, No. 91.

resorted to desertion but were frequently caught and court-martialled. Other deserters reported to the Legion hoping for protection, and it was possible to arrange their unofficial transfer.

The treatment of those sent to the German Military Labour Corps, the "Organisation Todt", was similar to that of HiWi and in fact most of them were later transferred to HiWi.

#### THE COMMAND OF THE LEGION

Once the draft became inevitable, the question of the commanding staff of the Latvian Legion had to be solved. The primary consideration was not so much a matter of prestige, as of preserving Latvian patriotism and promoting the country's aims.

It has already been stated that during the negotiations on the Legion, the German officials had promised to give the Latvians a free hand in selecting and appointing the officers. But once conscription had become a fact, this changed. The *SS-Ersatzkommando* had recruited a limited number of Latvian officers and NCO's in February 1943, but it was not clear for what purpose.

At a meeting of the Latvian Administration it was found necessary to establish a Military Committee which would be empowered to discuss military matters with the Germans. It was also likely that this group could be proposed as the Chief Command of Latvian Forces. General Bangerskis was selected as the Chief of the Command, with Colonel Silgailis as his Chief of Staff.<sup>20)</sup>

General Bangerskis, was a former divisional commander both in the Imperial Russian and in the Latvian Army as well as several times Minister of War in Latvian left-wing coalition governments. He was one of the most popular officers of the Latvian Riflemen in World War I. He did not speak German, but was favoured by

his countrymen as a democratic, humane and religious man, with a deep understanding of his nation's sufferings and hopes.

Colonel Silgailis was a former Divisional Chief of Staff and lecturer on military tactics at the War Academy at Riga; an energetic officer who spoke fluent German.

The Germans however had grown steadily more reticent on the question of the officer corps, procrastinating with the excuse that "a General" was expected to arrive from Berlin with the necessary powers to settle this and other questions.<sup>21)</sup>

This officer did arrive in March, but merely stated that the appointment of General Bangerskis had not yet been confirmed.<sup>22)</sup> Under the circumstances, Latvian officers followed the tactics of evading service in whatever way they could.

About the same time the news leaked out that the Germans planned to enlist 10,000 Latvian women for compulsory labour service in Germany. Thus the Latvian Administration now had two causes for anxiety, the enlistment of women and the thousands of men who were entirely at German mercy.<sup>23)</sup>

The command of the Legion was also still unsettled. On March 9th the emissary from Berlin was able to impart that General Bangerskis' appointment as the Commander of the Legion was being actively and favourably considered. By the end of March it became known that General Bangerskis had been appointed commander not of the Legion, but of the 1st Latvian Division only, and that Colonel Silgailis was to be his aide-de-camp. It was believed at the time that the Legion would consist of one division only, and little significance was therefore accorded to the fact that the appointments were not quite in accordance with expectations.

<sup>21)</sup> Ib., March 5, 1943, No. 89.

<sup>22)</sup> Ib., March 5, 1943,

<sup>23)</sup> Ib., March 2, 1943, No. 88.

<sup>20)</sup> Ib., February 16, 1943, No. 84.



The two soldiers reported to the Latvian Administration on March 23rd for instructions. Hopes were expressed that sacrifices would not be in vain but would contribute towards the fulfilment of the country's aims.<sup>24)</sup>

However, even General Bangerskis' appointment turned out to be a misunderstanding. On March 31st he had to report to the Latvian Administration that a German General, Hansen, had been appointed Commander of the Legion and that his own status was unclear in relation to the German military authorities. A proposal had been broached to appoint him as Inspector of the Legion. He requested the Administration to consider the new situation and give instructions. It was decided to hold out for the following demands: that General Bangerskis' appointment as the commander of the 1st Latvian Division be confirmed or that, failing this, he should in the capacity of the Inspector General of the Legion, have full authority over all Latvian military formations, including those outside the Legion.<sup>25)</sup>

But the matter was settled in another way. Brigadier General Hansen, the newly appointed commander of the Latvian Legion, unexpectedly returned to Germany and the post remained vacant for a time. Later another German officer, accompanied by his own staff, arrived to assume the command of the 1st Latvian Division. General Bangerskis was then appointed Inspector-General of the Legion, and it was stressed that his post was higher than that of the divisional commander. When he inquired specifically what his functions would be, he received a promise that further instructions would arrive from Berlin in due course. However, two full years were to elapse, and this time did not arrive until the end of the war.

From the above it is clear that the Germans would not permit a Latvian officer to hold a senior rank in the

<sup>24)</sup> Ib., March 23, 1943, No. 94.

<sup>25)</sup> Ib., March 31, 1943, No. 97.

Legion and in fact were seeking ways and means of shelving the officer selected by the Latvian authorities. Unable to get rid of him altogether, they left the definition of his duties and rights so vague that whenever a dispute arose, he could be told that it was outside his sphere. The opinion prevailed among the Latvian representatives that General Bangerskis had to remain in his nominal post of Inspector General, since to resign would be playing into German hands. The position must be held at all costs, and General Bangerskis must exploit it by doing his utmost to further Latvian interests and to form some sort of higher Latvian military command under the cover of his official position.

The following curious fact may be mentioned as it throws light on the confusion prevailing among the German occupation authorities. It was reported to the Latvian Administration that the Latvian-language Riga daily newspaper *Tevija* had received from the Administration's Home Affairs Department the text of Hitler's order for the formation of the Legion but that the German censorship had obliterated the statement that the size of the Legion would depend on the number of men available.<sup>26)</sup> Thus local German censorship dared to censor even Hitler's own order.

By the end of April 1943, the staff had been nominated for the following sections of the Legion:

#### I. The Commanding Staff

Commanders of divisions to be German officers with their own staffs; German supplies officers and Germans from the *Waffen SS* in most other capacities, with exception of some arms technicians.

Divisional infantry commanders (later also artillery commander of the two divisions), regimental commanders and other officers to be Latvians.

<sup>26)</sup> Ib., March 12, 1943, No. 91.

It should be noted that the post of divisional infantry commander was one without defined rights and duties. It was first created by the Germans in the 1st Latvian Division in order to get rid of Colonel Silgailis who, it will be remembered, was selected Chief of Staff by the Latvian authorities; but later this post was introduced also in the 2nd Division, so that Colonel Lobe, commander of a regiment and a thorn in the German eye, could be removed from active command.

## II. The Inspectorate General

This was a Latvian post. As mentioned above, this office remained without any defined rights and duties until the end of the war.

From the very day of its creation the Germans tried to circumvent and, if possible, even ignore it. Inadequate premises and staff were allocated and many restrictions imposed. The Inspector General, for example, was forbidden to visit units without express permission from the commander of the respective division; Latvian officers had also first to obtain special permission before contacting the Inspector General, even in writing.

The German commander of the 1st Division attempted to censor the activities of the Inspectorate General by appointing an emissary with special powers to advise the Inspector General. However, the Latvian officers completely disregarded this functionary, which further strained the relations between the Inspectorate General and the German command of the Legion.

Because of the growing popularity of the Inspector General, the Germans refrained from assaulting him in person, but they retaliated on officers of his staff.

The Inspector General concentrated his efforts on preserving the unity of the Latvian forces. He also endeavoured to intervene on behalf of any individual wronged by the Germans. Latvians arrested by the Germans were sure of his particular attention.

Without any rights approved by the German authorities, without any direct responsibility or influence on operative activities, the Inspectorate General became the actual centre of all Latvian defence activities. Its offices were visited and contacted by soldiers and civilians alike, by Latvian deserters from the German forces and by those arrested or sentenced. Politicians, intellectuals, manual workers, all came here to air their grievances, to receive encouragement and protection. Lacking real power, this office could serve as little more than a confidant where all wrongs could be told. But, thanks to General Bangerskis' tactful methods and perseverance, many wrongs were rectified. The Latvian military forces already had some power which had to be reckoned with. The Germans knew that this body was behind the Inspector General whenever he approached them, and this knowledge shaped their attitude towards him. In the eyes of the Latvian nation the Legion and its Inspectorate General had become the focus of all hopes.

## THE ORGANIZATION OF LATVIAN UNITS AND THE RANKS OF THE LEGION

Although the Legion was not created at the time nor in the manner the Latvians desired, the country's unanimous hope was to turn it into a national defence force; a revival of the former Latvian Army with its spirit and traditions.

The officers' corps of the former Latvian Army had suffered heavy losses during the Soviet occupation (1940—41), and this time recruitment and appointments were subject to German approval. Nevertheless, the Latvian authorities succeeded in procuring the appointment of patriotic and reliable officers to all regimental commands, almost all of whom had fought for their country during the Independence War in 1918—20.

A great advantage to Latvians was the fact that the German divisional commanders and their staff officers were

greatly hampered by language difficulties, so that their actual influence did not reach beyond giving operative and supply orders in the field.

The 2nd(19th) Latvian Division, the oldest unit of the Legion, was formed in the battle area and remained there for the duration of the war. Its internal discipline was almost entirely in the hands of Latvian officers, which in itself allowed the Division to be modelled on the pattern of the former Latvian Army. It is also worth mentioning that neither this nor other units of the Legion were in training or action together with the SS but only the *Wehrmacht* units, the internal organization of which was in many ways similar to that of the former Latvian Army. Hence, there was little foreign influence on the Legion.

Practically the only opportunity the German divisional commanders had of interfering with the internal matters of Latvian units was when the 1st(15th) Division was formed on Latvian territory. But since the training camp was in the south of Courland and the Divisional Headquarters in Riga, the contact was feeble and superficial. The commander of the 1st Division, Count von Pickler, paid little attention to Legion affairs, spending most of his time in enjoying the amusements the still rich city of Riga could offer. The officers of his staff followed his example.

The greatest interference in regimental conditions came from the German quartermasters who visited the units sometimes more often than necessary and occasionally even tried to keep check on the actions of the regimental commanders. But this interference mainly referred to equipment questions, so even in this 1st Division Latvian officers were free to follow the traditions of the Latvian Army, and to train the soldiers accordingly.

The official language of the Legion was Latvian, except when corresponding with the divisional headquarters. The ranks were also the same as in the former Latvian Army. Trifling matter though this point might

seem, it meant to the Latvians that the Legion never became Germanized, and that it never became adjusted to German aims. In common usage the units were also referred to by the names which corresponded to those of the Latvian Army, although the Germans had the units numbered and named to agree with their records. To differentiate between the legionaries and the German soldiers, the former were in German military records given the prefix "*Leg.*" before their rank, which later became "*Waff.*" but never "*SS*". To this, there was only one exception, when a certain officer was designated "*SS*" on promotion. The Divisional Commander Count von Pickler later admitted that he was aware of the forthcoming promotion, but was himself surprised to see the officer in question promoted to "*SS*" rank. However, it later transpired to be no more than a misprint on the part of some ill-informed printer. The German rank designations were so complicated that it was left entirely to the official interpreters to translate these names for official use as required in correspondence or other contact with the German authorities.

Since the core of the Legion consisted of youths born in 1919—24, brought up and educated in free Latvia, the prevailing spirit was patriotic without any particular effort by the officers. The legionaries were unswervingly loyal to the concept of independent Latvia and immune to any foreign ideology. German policy as pursued in Latvia and elsewhere had effectively contributed to this. They were of a single mind as to who were the enemies of their nation, and earnestly longed for the day when each foe would meet his retribution.

As in the former Latvian Army, the regular evening roll-call ended with the Latvian national anthem and a hymn. Wherever possible, Sunday services were held, and it was arranged that two priests, one from each of the principal churches, Lutheran and Roman Catholic, were attached to each Latvian division. This was done in defiance to all "*Waffen-SS*" regulations.



Practically the only difference between a soldier of the former Latvian army and a legionary was an outward one — the uniform. To counterbalance this, the Inspector General ordered all Latvian soldiers, irrespective of their unit or station, to wear a national badge with the inscription "Latvija" (Latvia) above the elbow of the left sleeve. The Germans never even ventured to protest against this order, although it had no official authorization. Prior to this any demonstration of national Latvian emblems was forbidden and this action was an open demonstration which heartened also those outside the Legion.

Legion recruits were often issued with cast-off clothing from SS troops but by a special order of the Supreme Headquarters of the *Waffen SS*, the SS badge on the collar had to be immediately removed under German supervision. No legionary therefore wore markings which associated him with the SS.

Fairness demands that attention be drawn to the difference in behaviour between the German military and civilian authorities.

The German policy in Latvia caused intense bitterness and indignation among the local population, especially the harsh acts of such civilian authorities as the *Sicherheitsdienst* and similar agencies whose functions were to enforce submission.

But there was little complaint about the German soldier, including the "Waffen SS" men, except for some minor incidents inevitable in wartime. It may be said to the credit of the German military authorities that they were meticulous in doing everything possible to avoid even minor incidents. In Latvia not a woman was violated, nor a theft perpetrated by the German soldier. He behaved himself in a civilized way. Moreover, the Latvian troops can speak only highly of the Germans when they fought together on the front or could be observed behind the lines. The Latvian soldier had fought against the German soldier in World War I and the Indepen-

dence War but he did not underrate or hate his foe as many others did. He did not succumb to the temptation to abuse his enemy without a cause.

#### FRESH MOBILIZATION

In the autumn of 1943 Red Army had nearly reached Latvian frontiers. This led the Germans to plan further enlistments in the Baltic States.

The Inspector General of the Latvian Legion was strongly against any further recruiting until all Latvians scattered among the German units were transferred to the Legion and the Police Battalions had been placed in the Latvian frontier areas. They were actually recalled from the front and stationed near Latvia. In this way it was possible to reinforce their strength with new recruits supplied through the fresh enlistment order. They were also reorganized into 3 regiments to form reserves for the defence of the Latvian frontiers. Very few of the *Hilfswillige* were returned to Latvian units.

Both divisions of the Legion had suffered heavy losses in action, particularly the 1st(15th) Division which was thrown into battle without proper training or equipment.

Since the Germans had scant interest in the efforts to concentrate all Latvians to the Legion, and were only concerned with drafting the greatest possible number of men, the *Generalkommissar* of Latvia issued a new mobilization order in the autumn of 1943. This time no words were wasted in a call for volunteers, and the proclamation openly decreed a general mobilization of those born in 1915—24. This order applied to all three Baltic States.

Since these year classes had already been called up in Latvia, the order affected only those still exempt, but it was interpreted as a foretaste of things to come. The Germans obviously wanted to test public reaction. This time it was entrusted to the Latvian authorities to carry the order into effect. Whatever the German reason for

this, it was a relief to Latvians because it at last enabled them to have some say as to who and how many were to be called to arms. This was no insignificant question, as this time the draft boards had to deal with people who had weighty reasons for requesting exemption, often the only bread-winners of their families.

It was also declared that enlistment was for the Legion only. Later the Germans tried to annul this declaration and to determine the procedure, but without much success.

This mobilization, though now made with the Latvian Administration's approval, caused great unrest in the country, as is clearly reflected in the Administration's minutes. This was so because the hard conditions under which people were living had now been sharpened by the daily advance of the Bolshevik peril. They were eager to resist another Soviet invasion with all their power. But they needed arms in order to resist. Therefore, although there was no objection to the recruiting as the only means of obtaining arms, there were still many problems which could not be lightly dismissed.

In the first place there was the fundamental objection that Germany was at war against the Western Allies, with whom the Latvians did not regard themselves at war. In these circumstances the Germans benefitted from the Latvian resistance to Bolshevism to further their own cause in the West, and this was directly contrary to everything the Latvians wished. The people widely felt a strong sympathy for the Western Allies, which the Latvian Administration could not ignore. It was partly because of these sentiments that the negotiations with the Germans over the Latvian forces had been so protracted that the enemy was on the very doorstep of Latvia before its soldiers were armed. In spite of German threats and persecution, much attention was paid to Western broadcasts in the hope that some hint would be heard that Latvian interests would not be forgotten, and that the Western Allies would one day reconcile their

Bolshevik allies to the recognition of Latvia as an independent state as soon as the war was over. There was an almost universal wish to hear some such announcement, and some even would profess to have heard statements to this effect, erroneously of course! But it is undeniable that these illusions, this wishful thinking, added as much to the state of confusion as the tyrannical rules of the Germans themselves.

But, whatever hopes and illusions may have been held, the grim reality could not be ignored, namely that the Germans were there and the even more dreaded enemy, Communist Russia, was at the doorstep. There was literally no choice. One wonders now whether the Czechs and the Poles, who certainly had no cause to cherish the Germans, would not have advised the same course.

This much was certain: the moment the one enemy left, the other would invade the country. But Latvia wanted to be free. Only on this basis could she defend herself properly and safeguard her interests. Therefore the most persistent demand the Latvians put to Germans was this: "It is in your own interests that we fight the Bolsheviks. We can do it better as an independent state. If you contend that Great Britain and the United States have left us in Russian hands, declare that Germany at any rate does not accept the incorporation of Latvia into the Soviet Union but recognizes it as a sovereign state".<sup>27)</sup>

The following memorandum, sent to the Inspector General of the Legion on behalf of a number of prominent persons illustrates the position and wishes of the Latvian nation.

"To the Inspector General of the Latvian Legion:

"As you well know, the historical enemy of Latvia is again advancing on our country. Not only has this created unrest and anxiety among the people but there

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<sup>27)</sup> Minutes of the Latvian Administration's meeting on January 29, 1943, referring to the talks with the *General-kommissar*.

is also the peril that the country will be overrun in case the German Supreme Command decides to reduce the combat zone, which would inevitably mean the annihilation of our people and our nation. For this reason many of the spokesmen of the people feel that the time has come when earnest efforts should be made to organize our defence. It is also felt that you are the only person who has the confidence of the people and authority to take the proper action. We are convinced that it is absolutely necessary to enlist within the shortest possible time every available man, with a view to forming a large Latvian national army for the specific purpose of defending the country's frontiers against the Russian invasion. Needless to say, the establishment of such a force, as well as the repelling of the Bolsheviks, can only be done with the assistance of the German army, and in close cooperation with it.<sup>28)</sup>

"To do this successfully, a number of psychological factors must be considered in advance. In spite of the nation's anxiety, mobilization may prove unpopular, and is in any case not the most effective way of obtaining the best results as to the number and quality of the recruits. It may be assumed that a number of men will try to default, while others will be in a state of depression because they have no constructive aims to fight and die for. Yet it would be futile to point out that the only aim is to save the maximum number of lives, since individuals may persuade themselves that there are better ways of saving their lives than in the Army, and thereby add to the demoralization.

"On the other hand there undoubtedly are a great number of people who fully understand the seriousness of the situation, but they cannot act since their hands are tied. They cannot put their influence to serve this highly

<sup>28)</sup> It should be remembered that this document was written under German occupation and actually intended for perusal by the German authorities, so a certain amount of lip-service was inevitable

important question of organizing defences, because they must be in a position to do more than merely point out the danger. They cannot appeal to the nation because they have no constructive aims to show beyond the immediate threat. If these people were under the present circumstances to attempt to strengthen the spirit of resistance in the country, they would most probably meet only contempt and ridicule and be accused of acting as the paid agents of the Germans. Every word they uttered would be heard distorted as if it were foreign propaganda.

"Therefore the proposed organization of our defence cannot be successfully accomplished unless our nation knows that its longings and hopes have an immediate prospect of fulfilment. These aspirations which have given the people fortitude during the years of suffering and without which they would find life devoid of human dignity, embody, as you know, the heartfelt desire of the whole nation that the country's sovereignty, abolished by the Bolsheviks, be restored. The only constructive goal the nation could and would accept is the resurrection of the independent state of Latvia which has never ceased to exist in the eyes of the law. This would endow the people with enthusiasm and the strength to oppose their eternal enemies, the Bolsheviks.

"Since it is the German occupation authorities who must concede these rights we feel sure that you would find it proper to approach them.

Riga, October 16, 1943."

This petition was signed by 40 prominent persons from all walks of life. A photostatic copy of the document is in the hands of the publishers.

In dealing with the Germans, the Inspector General used this document in support of his demands and those of the Latvian Administration. A similar memorandum was submitted to the Inspector General by a number of Latvian politicians, headed by the Praesidium of the 4th Parliament (See Appendix 1).



The German authorities were little moved by this. The usual reply was forthcoming: "We know. But we have no time for these things now. First we have to settle with the Bolsheviks, and then we will clear up all other problems also".

The only result of the attempts to induce the Germans to restore Latvian freedom, was a letter from the *Generalkommissar*, dated November 9, 1943, as follows "Confidential. To the Director General for Home Affairs, Riga. With regard to our discussions today concerning the mobilization in Latvia of the annual classes of 1915—24, I wish to assure you that all German authorities will be instructed to give you every possible assistance in putting it into effect. (Signed) Drechsler." <sup>29)</sup>

In his letter the *Generalkommissar* referred to Latvia as a *Generalbezirk* (that is an area under the rule of a German *Generalkommissar*). In order to avoid approaching the Latvian Administration as a body, he addressed his letter to a Director General (the German title for heads of individual departments of the Latvian Administration) personally. No mention was made of the Latvian demand that at least Latvia should be proclaimed as separate from the Soviet Union. (The Latvians were even in their passports described by the Germans as Soviet citizens.)

It was only natural that the Latvian Administration considered this letter to be of little significance. Discussions of the actual situation, however, revealed that the Germans were determined to carry out the mobilization and to do it in their own way. It was therefore decided that the Latvians should be prepared to try to gain control of the mobilization, so that all conscripts could be assigned to the Legion. The grounds for this decision were by and large the same as those outlined in the memorandum of the Latvian politicians (Appendix 1),

namely, that there is no power on earth which can forbid a nation the right to defend itself when its very life and existence is in danger. (See also the Latvian Administration's minutes of November 10, 1943).

To air this question still further, a large meeting of local government representatives from all parts of the country took place on November 15th. This assembly endorsed the decision taken by the Administration. Another note was sent to the *Generalkommissar* reiterating that all previous demands were being sustained by the Latvians and that the Administration intended to resign *en bloc* if they were not satisfactorily met. <sup>30)</sup> It was again requested that all existing Latvian military formations and soldiers should be united into the Legion, in order to allow Latvian men to defend their country against the Bolsheviks effectively — and only against the Bolsheviks. The *Generalkommissar*'s attention was also drawn to German inconsistency in still treating Latvia as legally part of the Soviet Union, except when they needed Latvian man-power.

There was no reply to this note. A number of reminders were sent. At last, on February 2, 1944, a letter was received from the *Generalkommissar* (again addressed to the Director General for Home Affairs), containing the following passage: "I am now empowered to inform you that the District of Latvia (*Generalbezirk Lettland*) is regarded as having lost its Soviet identity through German occupation and that, hence, it is not regarded as a part of the U.S.S.R." There can hardly be a better example of German political blindness than this procrastination.

By this time the Latvian Administration had already accepted the idea of further mobilization; it had also assumed the responsibility and charged the Inspector General with putting the order into effect.

The mobilization was carried out in accordance with

<sup>29)</sup> Minutes of the Latvian Administration, November 10, 1943, No. 145.

<sup>30)</sup> Latvian Administration's note to the *Generalkommissar*, dated November 16, 1943.

the laws of the Republic of Latvia. The specific law defied Germans instructions in that it incorporated exemptions that the occupying powers had vetoed. All possible grounds for exemption having been allowed, the recruitment at first yielded some 5,000 men. It was planned first to train and arm this group and, since camp facilities were restricted, to register those who would be liable for the next call-up. The Latvians were also anxious to see what happened to these 5,000 men, since there was still a suspicion that the Germans might take over the men and divert them. This fear proved to be groundless. However, another problem arose. The earlier drafts, handled by the SS *Ersatzkommando Ostland*, had yielded some 55,000 recruits. Now that the mobilization had been handed over to the Latvians, the aforesaid agency feared that this source of reserves would be lost for it. Its protests had the result that the Inspector General of the Legion and his Chief of Staff were suddenly summoned to Berlin to offer explanations. Even the SS and Police Chief of the *Ostland* was reprimanded in a very strong letter from Himmler himself, intimating that a special commission would shortly arrive in Latvia in order to investigate the "sinister activities" of the Latvian draft boards and would court-martial Latvians officers found guilty of defying German orders. This German action was groundless, since in any case no equipment or supplies were available for a larger number of men, insofar as they were to be drafted into the Legion.

But it was reason enough for the Germans to take the recruitment into their own hands again. General Jeckeln, the SS and Police Chief of the *Ostland* again became the deciding authority over Latvian lives. Events then moved quickly. The spring of 1944 saw the mobilization of the 1906—1914 annual classes, none of whom were assigned to the Legion. In the summer came the turn of those born in 1925—26, who were to augment the depleted ranks of the 1st Latvian Division. Later even concentration camp and prison inmates were drafted. On

August 8, 1944, General Jeckeln ordered a special unit to be formed of 400 legionaries interned by the Germans in a camp at Salaspils near Riga. On September 5, 1944 he ordered that two companies of engineers should be formed from 245 Latvian and 118 Russian prisoners in the Salaspils concentration camp.<sup>31)</sup> A similar order, dated August 23, 1944, provided for an engineers' battalion to be created from prisoners freed from the Central Prison in Riga and the Salaspils concentration camps as follows: 14 officers, 56 NCO's and 563 privates. The same order also instructed that another pioneers' battalion was to be composed of prisoners from the Salaspils camp.<sup>32)</sup>

And, late in 1944, came the turn of those born in 1927—28, and, in some cases even 1929—30. All these were assigned to the auxiliary services of the German Air Force.

#### THE UNITS AND STRENGTH OF THE LEGION

The designation of Legion units was changed by the Germans more than once during the comparatively short period of its existence, although the prefix "SS" never held the same significance as when applied to German formations and was meant in a possessive sense.

<sup>31)</sup> The original runs as follows: 1) Es sind sofort aus den in Salaspils befindlichen U-Häftlingen in Stärke von 245 Mann und weiteren 118 Russen 2 Bau-Kompanien zu formieren. — 2) Die Bau-Kompanien führen den Namen 1. und 2. Bau-Kompanien der RS.

<sup>32)</sup> In the original: 1) Es ist sofort ein weiteres Bau-Btl. gemäss Stärkennachweisung von 9/8/1944, Befehl des HSSuP Ia, Nr. 814/44 aus den z.Zt. aus dem Zentralgefängnis und aus Salaspils zwecks Bewährung entlassenen Männern zu bilden. Stärke: 14 Führer, 1 Verwaltungsbeamter, 56 Unterführer und 563 Männer. — 2) Das Bau-Btl. führt den Namen 6. Lett. Bau-Btl. S und ist im Lager Salaspils aufzustellen.

On May 8, 1945, the Latvian Legion consisted of the following formations:

- (1) 15. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (Lettische Nr. 1) /15th Rifles Division of the SS (Latvian No. 1)/
- (2) 19. Waffen-Grenadier-Division der SS (Lettische No. 2) /19th Rifles Division of the SS (Latvian No. 2)/
- (3) Flak-Abteilung (Anti-Aircraft Unit)
- (4) Lettisches Feldersatz Depot (Latvian Reserve Depot)
- (5) Waffen-Grenadier Ausbildungs- und Ersatz-Bataillon No. 15 (Rifles Training and Reserve Battalion No. 15). The latter consisted mainly of convalescent soldiers.

The Inspectorate General and a special Reserves Administration also counted as part of the Legion.

The exact number of men detailed to the Legion has never been ascertained, nor is it known how many men were drafted into German units. It is, however, a safe guess that no less than 100,000 Latvians were enlisted and fought against Bolshevism in the years 1941—45.

On May 8, 1945, the man-power of the various Latvian units was as follows

- |                                                                                      |                      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| (1) In Courland: 2nd(19th) Division, Police Battalions and Engineers Units . . . . . | approximately 17,000 |
| (2) In Germany: 1st (15th) Division                                                  | „ 9,000              |
| Reserve Depot                                                                        | „ 8,000              |
| Part of the 1st (15th) Division near Danzig                                          | „ 2,000              |
| (3) In Denmark: 15th Training and Reserve Battalion                                  | „ 2,000              |

Total approximately 38,000

Those in Courland and Danzig fell into Russian hands, as did a small number of those in Germany who were not able to break through to the Western Allies.

## THE LEGION IN ACTION

To avoid any misunderstandings or misinterpretations it must be made clear that:

- (a) Not a single unit of the Latvian Legion has ever taken part in any action in the rear;
- (b) The Latvian Legion fought against the Red Army only, as specifically provided in its oath of allegiance and not a single Latvian has ever fought against the Western Allies.

In this connection it must not be forgotten that hostilities were not started by Latvia but by the Soviet Union through her aggression in 1939 when, with German approval under the secret Nazi-Soviet treaty of August 23, 1939, she invaded the country and instituted a terror regime in 1940.

The Legion's exploits and its role in halting the Bolshevik advance in 1943—45 are worthy of a special report and justice can hardly be done by the following brief outline.

### *2nd(19th) Latvian Division*

In spite of its designation, this division was actually formed first. It will be recalled that it came into being at Leningrad where the first Latvian Brigade was formed in the summer of 1943. This division continued in the combat zone until the end of the war. It is therefore easy to imagine the hardships its men endured in spite of the endeavours of the Latvian officers to minimize the loss of lives, in contrast to the behaviour of the German officers. The plight of this division was heightened by the frequent change of the German commanding officers. These were often Police officers with inadequate knowledge of tactics and inexperienced in the command of larger units. The same was true of all German officers at division headquarters. They were mostly young men with Party rather than military background. Once at the combat zone, they were zealous in trying to gain



distinction and decorations and thus added to the difficulties of the Latvian officers. A constant struggle for authority was rife between these youths and the experienced Latvian officers, the former usually alleging that they acted on the authority of the divisional commander. As a result many Latvian officers were dismissed or court-martialled. The Germans tended to replace these older Latvian officers by inexperienced junior officers hoping that they would lack authority. In this, however, they were mistaken. Time and again it was proved that the Latvian officers' first consideration was responsibility towards their own people. They made no attempts to disguise this, despite German decorations or punishments. This was equally true of both Latvian divisions.

All Latvian attempts to have the 2nd Division withdrawn from the front for a much-needed rest failed. Finally it was forced to capitulate in the very front line of the combat zone.

The Division fought first in the outskirts of Leningrad, was then transferred to the Volkhov river, later to the Velikaya river sector, south of Ostrov, in the district of Opochna. As the Red Army advanced, the 2nd Latvian Division moved across Latvia to Courland where, in October 1944, it was to make a last stand together with 30 German divisions until May 8, 1945.

#### *1st(15th) Latvian Division*

This Division was created early in 1943, in Courland. The Germans treated these forces as though they constituted the reserve of the 2nd Division. Most of the recruits, trained or untrained, were sent to reinforce the 2nd Division as casualties occurred. Hence, when the Division was sent to the combat zone in the district of Nevel and Novosokolnyk in October 1943, it consisted largely of untrained men. It was disastrously ill-equipped, and even the scant supplies travelled with the Division in separate trucks under lock and key, so that the soldiers

arrived unarmed in the combat zone. In Courland these troops had handled only special training weapons and when at last, rifles were distributed, they were unable to use them, but were nevertheless thrown into battle immediately. The confusion which thus ensued was aggravated by the fact that the Division was not sent to battle as a compact formation, its units being dispersed among the German forces. Many units, were detached from their Latvian commanders, who did not even know the whereabouts of their men. This led to protests by Latvian officers, as a result of which two regimental commanders and several officers of lower ranks were summarily dismissed. As a consequence, many soldiers simply fled, either searching for their own officers or deserting. The Division's losses during the first days of the battle were catastrophic. The Division threatened to be virtually non-existent within a few weeks. The Inspector General of the Legion appealed to German headquarters and at last the Division was withdrawn behind the lines. The German commander was dismissed despite his protests to Latvian officers that he had merely carried out instructions to the letter. A similar unfortunate fate dogged the Division wherever it was stationed.

In February 1944 these troops were transferred to the district of Staraya Rusa and thence to the river Velikaya where both Latvian divisions were united into a single group which, sometimes assisted by German divisions, resisted the Russian forces until the frontier of Latvia was reached. Constituting as it did the rearguard of the retreating German armies, this Latvian corps sustained heavy losses, and the 1st (15th) Division was withdrawn on reaching Latvia, most of its men being utilized to supplement the 2nd(19th) Division.

The 1st Division then received a large consignment of new conscripts, born 1925—26. The Germans had evidently learned their lesson. These fresh recruits were to be trained. However, it was considered unsafe to keep such a large contingent of men in Latvia and the Division

was therefore transferred to Germany on the excuse that training fields in East Pomerania would provide better facilities and conditions under which to train the Division into a combat force. It was promised that the Division would then be returned to Latvia without delay. Nevertheless, Latvians protested against this transfer to Germany, especially the conscripts themselves, who considered that their rightful place was near their own people in the perilous times which were approaching their country.

Once in Pomerania a large part of the Division was primarily used to build fortifications against a Soviet invasion. It was not until the winter of 1944 that training commenced, and hence the unfortunate events of more than a year ago were reproduced. The Russian advance was so rapid that it became necessary to throw the Division into battle in January 1945, again untrained and inadequately equipped. The Division faced the foe at Danzig where later many of its auxiliary units fell into Russian hands. It continued in active combat until March when it was able to retreat to the district of Neubrandenburg-Neustrelitz in Mecklenburg. At this point the Inspector General of the Legion convinced the German authorities that there was no point in throwing the thin lines of the Division into battle again, and it was withdrawn entirely from action.

Naturally all Latvian soldiers in Germany entertained the hope of falling into the hands of the Western Allies. When a Latvian regiment was unexpectedly formed to defend Berlin, its commander, Colonel Janums, acting on these hopes, ignored German orders and took the first opportunity to order his men to proceed westward where they capitulated to the Americans near Magdeburg on April 27th. This unit came to be known as Janums' Combat Unit.

On April 29, 1945, the Inspector General of the Legion signed an order to all Latvian formations in Germany to retreat from the combat zone avoiding contact with

the enemy and, with the least possible delay and losses, to advance towards the west in order to surrender to the Western Allies. This order was carried out wherever possible and some formations had already followed the example of Janums' combat unit.

It may in conclusion be stated that, acting in the best traditions of the Latvian Army, the Legion was not only a major obstacle to the Soviet advance but also endeavoured to safeguard civilians in the area behind the front. Not a single instance is recorded where it acted tyrannically to other national groups. Russian civilians who came in contact with the Legion would most certainly testify to this effect. In Russia the Latvian Legion forces were regarded as trusted friends, and many a Russian expected them to constitute the nucleus of a Liberation Army which would in time sweep their Soviet tyrants from power.

#### SUMMARY

All Latvian military units in World War II were created by foreign powers. Between June 1940 and June 1941 this power was Soviet Russia who established the Latvian Territorial Corps. From July 1941 onwards the Germans followed this example, and created a fighting force. Neither of these foreign powers hesitated to use tyranny in deciding over even the existence of the Latvian nation. They recognized no right but their own in planning Latvian formations. They alone decided whom to recruit and when; where and for what purpose the draftees should serve and fight; who was to command.

Yet even in these circumstances the Latvian soldier remained true to his ideals, which so closely coincided with those of Western Allies. This is no attempt to lay the cards at a later date, for the Latvian nation has followed this philosophy throughout its recent history, and it was a standard point which made far greater calls on the moral strength and courage of the Latvian soldier under

German command than from those who were loyal to the West European ideal under less desperate circumstances. Indeed, the ranks of those who in other countries under similar pressure fought against the Western Allies were many even though they acted so under compulsion. The Latvian soldier conceived it to be his first and only duty to fight for the freedom of his country.

In foreign uniform, it was not exactly the same Army that safeguarded its country's twenty years of independence. But, despite the shortcomings, and outward differences it was the same in spirit and it was this attitude, springing from the spiritual resources of the nation, which to the end triumphed over the foreign uniform.

#### APPENDIX I

To General Bangerskis,  
Inspector General of the Latvian Legion.

Dear General:

The enemy from the East which invaded our country on June 17, 1940 once again menaces Latvian frontiers. This power, purporting to act in the name of the Latvian nation, violated all democratic principles by holding an election with only one list of candidates — Communists and their fellow-travellers and even then falsified the results of the elections. By this means a puppet government, chosen by the occupation authorities, and acting on their orders asked for Latvia to be incorporated into the Soviet Union. Afterwards, when the incorporation was accomplished, the world was notified that Latvia had voluntarily joined the Soviet Union.

Similar action was taken with respect to the independent republics of Estonia and Lithuania.

The enforced incorporation of Latvia into the Soviet Union was achieved by the gross violation of the Constitution of the Latvian Republic and by arbitrarily break-

ing all bilateral pacts and treaties, as well as the Covenant of the League of Nations, and a number of international agreements. Therefore, the annexation of Latvia is void from the standpoint of international law.

It naturally follows that the independent Latvian Republic is still in existence under the interpretation of international law. There is absolutely no legal foundation for the Soviet Union's insistence that Latvia is an integral part of Soviet Union and should return to that status. This viewpoint has been consistently repeated by the Soviet press and even by certain sections of the press in other countries.

It follows that also the present German occupation authorities are equally transgressing international law and usage if they now regard Latvia as having been a part of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, they have clearly shown by various political and economic acts that they adopt this attitude. The enlistment of our men into the German armed forces, which has been done at the orders of the German occupation authorities, is an equally unlawful act. Our nation has therefore deep cause for the unrest and dissatisfaction it has manifested.

Its sense of justice and its self-respect would allow the Latvian nation to accept mobilization only on the condition that this were undertaken to obtain recruits for the Latvian National Army at the order of the legal authorities of independent Latvia and exclusively for the defence of this country. This is the only proper way to organize our military forces and to ensure an army of high standing.

We realize that the moment has now arrived in the Second World War when the very life of our nation is at stake. We face the fateful moment of decision — to be or not to be?

There is no law of nature or of man which can deny us the right to defend ourselves if the nation's very existence is threatened, as is now the case beyond all doubt.



These are the reasons why we now declare that it is the solemn will of the Latvian nation to do all within its power to defend the frontiers of the Latvian State against the attackers, and that the nation is ready to act in accordance with this determination.

We further declare in the name of the Latvian nation that the nation unitedly makes the following demands:

- (1) that the full sovereignty of the Latvian Republic be restored without delay,
- (2) that, in accordance with the still valid Latvian Constitution of 1922, a Latvian Government be established in the form of a coalition, representing the entire Latvian people,
- (3) that the immediate tasks of the new Government will be:
  - (a) to restore the normal State machinery and the National Army,
  - (b) to organize defence, and to guard the territory of the country against the imminent Soviet aggression,
  - (c) to establish diplomatic relations with other countries, as far as war conditions allow, primarily with countries recognizing the validity of the present declaration and willing and able to give military assistance towards the defence of the Latvian State,
  - (d) we also deem it vital that intimate relations are established and maintained with the Republics of Estonia and Lithuania, aiming at the ultimate goal of a confederation of Baltic States.

Our purpose in thus affirming the existence of Latvian sovereignty within the meaning of international law, in thus declaring the Latvians nation's will to also restore this sovereignty in fact; and in thus declaring the firm

determination of our nation to defend the country against aggression is to

request you, General, to convey the above desires to such powers as are willing and able to appreciate the necessity and the importance of the restoration of full sovereignty to Latvia and to render all possible assistance to Latvia in defending its sovereignty and its territory

The undersigned have the honour to express their most cordial regards.

(signed) P. Kalniņš, President of the last (4th) Saeima  
(Parliament)

(signed) K. Pauļuks, Vice President of the last (4th)  
Saeima

(signed) Bishop Rancāns, Deputy Vice President of the  
last (4th) Saeima

(186 more signatures follow)

In the Capital of Latvia, March 22, 1944.

#### APPENDIX 2.

Copy	Secret, Military Matters
The Reichsführer of the SS	11 copies
RF/M	2nd copy
Tgb. Nr II 753/44 g.Kdos	
To the SS and Police Chief of the Ostland, Riga.	

The reports I have received concerning misuse of the mobilization decree in Latvia compel me to issue the following orders:

- (1) All cases of exemption from mobilization by draft boards must be examined by a special German SS-Commission which shall apply the most rigid standards in all cases. All improper exemptions shall be annulled and the individuals concerned ordered to report within 14 days to the Reserve Battalions of the Latvian *Waffen* Divisions of the SS.

- (2) Officers and civilian employees of the local draft boards found guilty of misapplying orders shall be tried by special court-martial.
- (3) The responsibility for mobilization in Latvia is now transferred to the SS Reserve Inspectorate for the Occupied Eastern Regions.