

What really happens at the commemoration events of the Latvian Legion on March 16th.

The origin of the date of 16 March

The Baltic SS military divisions (Baltic legions) in the view of their aim, ideology, activity and qualification of their contents should be considered as separate formations and different from German SS divisions, therefore the commission does not regard them as hostile movement to the USA government policy according to the amendments made in the Law about displaced persons, paragraph 13." (by Harry N. Rozenfeld, member of the Commission of Displaced Persons). (The source: "Latvian Legion. Heroes, Nazis or victims? A collection of documents From OSS War-Crimes investigation files 1945-1950. Riga: The Historical Institute of Latvia, 1997).

On February 10th 1943, in violating the international Hague Convention of 1907 about the regulations for warfare provisions which forbade the occupation states to mobilize the local population, Adolf Hitler issued the command about the formation of a Latvian Legion from the citizens of the Republic of Latvia which was at that time occupied by Germany. The service in Legion was "voluntary" obligatory, that is, in case of refusal it would qualify for a prison sentence for desertion. It can not be denied that a big part of why people joined the legion at the very beginning of its formation, was in order not to prevent the repeated invasion of the Soviet Union into the territory of Latvia. Altogether there were five big mobilization rounds, as a result of which about 115 000 Latvian soldiers were fighting in the armed forces of the German army. From all the mobilized Latvians two divisions were formed – Number 15 and Number 19 Waffen SS divisions. Many legionnaires also formed the core group for the 11 years long resistance movement against Soviet occupation.

In March 16 -18, 1944, both divisions fought together, shoulder to shoulder, only once, in the battle near the Velikaya River, therefore the organization "*Daugavas Vanagi*" (The Daugava Hawks) in the West in 1952 chose this day – March 16, as the remembrance day of legion.

March 16 is not the day of the formation of legion, but it is the remembrance and memory day of Latvian Legion and the killed soldiers.

In 1950 the US Commission of Displaced persons recognized that the Legion has not been involved in war crimes. The Latvian Legion was formed as a pure battlefield division in the war against the Soviet Union.

Controversy of the Remembrance Day

In the 1990s the celebration was very peaceful and did not attract much attention from politicians, nor by the local or international media.

1997 can be regarded as the "breaking point" in terms of the controversy surrounding the event. Several MPs as well as Mr Juris Dalbiņš (MP, Latvian Peoples' Party since 1998, member-party of the EPP), Commander of National Armed Forces, took part in the event. This caused the sharp reaction of the Russian Foreign Affairs ministry, which deplored the event and labelled it as "a march of former SS members". Mr Dalbiņš took part in the event in 1998 again and was consequently dismissed from his office.

In 1998 participants of the event were faced by anti-Nazi demonstrators, effectively Russian-backed organizations, spreading the statements of the Russian Government on the event. This immediately attracted local pro-Russian media and Russian speaking leftist radicals to the event, shouting threats and insults, which in turn now attracts radicals of the other end of the spectrum, thus adding a dimension of radicalism, controversy and ideological and political battle to an event which in its original form was intended to be just solely a private act of remembrance.

1998 can therefore be regarded as the starting point for the Russian anti-Nazi propaganda machine to start to spread misleading information about the Latvian Legion.

Russian-backed organizations gather around the march, try to block it and caricature the event as celebration of the Nazi regime. These photos are often misleadingly used by foreign press as photos of the commemoration ceremony itself.



(Ilmars Znotins/AFP/Getty Images)

The Latvian Legion Day on 16 March was made an official remembrance day in Latvia from 1998 to 2000 when after the strong pressure of the left-wing political forces as well as pressure from Russian propaganda accusing the Latvian Republic of the "glorification of Nazism" and a "revival of Nazism" its status of the official commemoration day was cancelled.

Abolishment of the official Remembrance Day

The official Remembrance Day was abolished in 2000 after a huge escalation of the local and international media attention and sharp reaction by the Russian Government.

The Annual commemoration event in Riga city centre was of minor importance during 2001-2006, it was not held at all for a few years, legionnaires instead gathered for the commemoration event in the Legionnaires' cemetery in Lestene on the same date.

Since 2007 the area of the Freedom Monument has been blocked by street barriers and police and the official authorisation for a mass gathering has not been issued by the respective municipal authorities.

The commemoration event however is still organised by the Latvian National Soldiers association and other patriotic organisations.

One of the reasons to abolish the ceremony at the Monument of Freedom was concerns over the possible provocations and mass disorder caused by both sides of participants.

Format of the remembrance event

Traditionally on 16 March a memorial service is held in Riga Cathedral, after which the participants holding Latvian flags go in procession to the Freedom Monument where they lay wreaths in memory of their killed friends and family members.

According with the official sources, the number of participants in the event varies at around several hundreds of people.

As one can see in the photos and video below, no pro-Nazi symbols or any other form of ideological expression is being used by the participants; it is a peaceful wreath-laying ceremony with a few hundred participants, mostly elderly persons.

Video of the commemoration event held on 16 March 2009 is available here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Uf14qkzYEg>

The commemoration event in the Legionnaires' cemetery in Lestene

There is another commemoration event organised in the same date in the Legionnaires' cemetery and being attended by the number of politicians.

The Fraternal Cemetery at Lestene, in the Tukums region of western Latvia, is the memorial where not only Latvian legionnaires but also other soldiers, defenders of Latvia during the World War II are buried. This is a second largest fraternal cemetery in Latvia and its construction was supported both by private donations and the state budget resources.

Some photos from the commemoration event held on 16 March 2008 are available here:

http://www.ntz.lv/photogalleries/ntz.lv/content.html?g_id=37&p_id=266

Back in June 2008, the opening event of the Lestene cemetery was attended by the Speaker of the National Parliament Viesturs Daudze, several MPs and MEP Ģirts Valdis Kristovskis (now chairman of Civil Union party, EPP), Vice-admiral of Nation Armed Forces Gaidis Andrejs Zeibots, former State President Guntis Ulmanis and others. The written address by the State President Valdis Zatlers was delivered.

In 2009, the commemoration event of 16 March was attended by representatives of the Civil Union party, currently having 2 MEPs in the EPP group. **Former MEP Ģirts Valdis Kristovskis (currently the Chairman of the Civil Union Party, EPP group) and MEP Sandra Kalniete (MEP, EPP) took part in the ceremony and even addressed the event with public speeches**, unlike their party colleagues MPs Ina Druviete, Ilma Čepāne, Kārlis Šadurskis who were amongst the participants but not speakers in the event. MP Inguna Rībena from the New Era party (current Prime Minister party, EPP), MP Dzintars Ābiķis (at that time a member of the Latvian Peoples' Party, EPP group) as well as MP Juris Dobelis from the "Fatherland and Freedom"/LNNK party also were present.

* * * * *