

EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF LATVIA
IN THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND

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Dear Ms. Lowenberg,

Thank you for your letter in which you shared your findings about the tragic fate of your family members in 1941-1942. The World War II period in Latvia was indeed very tragic and painful for both its inhabitants and for the country itself. It is the duty of survivors and the new generation to pay respect, to remember and to learn from these events. Pain cannot be measured and no crime should be left unpunished.

The commemoration of the Latvian Legion on 16 March is as controversial as the history of World War II. Therefore, following your request to 'stop the 16 March marches in Riga and Latvians revising history', may I share with you my considerations on this matter.

Latvia has always condemned the crimes committed during World War II – the crimes of Nazism and Stalinism. During the Nazi occupation crimes of unprecedented magnitude in modern history were committed by the Nazis – the Holocaust was carried out by the Nazis themselves or under their authority. Latvia, as a member of the Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance and Research, deeply honours her commitment to encouraging the study of the Holocaust in all its dimensions.

Latvia has been subjected to three different periods of occupation. Under these occupations civilians in Latvia experienced unprecedented suffering inflicted by the occupying powers. War crimes committed in Latvia during World War II are the direct responsibility of the occupying totalitarian regimes of the time – Germany and the Soviet Union – and of the specific individuals, regardless of nationality, who have committed those crimes. It is crucial, however, not to blame an entire nation or a segment of society for the criminal acts of certain individuals.

May I assure you that Latvians are not 'revising' history, but merely restoring a balanced view of some of the key facts of World War II, which were ignored or misrepresented by official Soviet policy and modern Russian historiography over the past 70 years. Only by 'revising' history has Latvia restored the true notion of the Holocaust (denied by the Soviets) as an unprecedented crime against humanity. By 'revising' history, the world has learned about the murder of Polish officers by the Soviets at Katyn, a fact still denied by a number of Russian politicians. Like any other science, history requires regular revision in the light of emerging new facts and testimonies.

Latvia is a democratic country and its Constitution ensures all fundamental human rights and freedoms, including the freedom of assembly. Latvia officially commemorates its fallen on 11 November, but, anyone may pay their respects to someone's memory on any other day in accordance with Latvia's laws and regulations. 16 March is not an official day of commemoration, however, some former soldiers choose to pay their respects to their fallen comrades. Church services are held and people gather in cemeteries and lay flowers at the Monument of Freedom in Riga. I hope you will agree that church services and commemoration in cemeteries cannot be regarded as revision of history or glorification of Waffen SS. Even if some people regard Latvian legionnaires as war heroes, it is my sincere belief they do so because they fought, unfortunately in German, not Latvian uniforms, against the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union had after all been an ally of Nazi Germany from 1939 to 1941 and had occupied Latvia in 1940 deporting thousands of its people to Siberia, eliminating the Latvian State and brutally repressing the civilian population.

May I bring to your attention, that despite its title of 'voluntary SS Legion' Latvian units neither shared Nazi ideological goals nor were they for the most part voluntary. In a bizarre display of observance of international conventions on the rules of war, Nazi authorities did not want to enlist 'racially inferior' inhabitants of Latvia into the regular army but used the name of paramilitary SS organisations as a fig leaf. There are no war crimes attributed to the Latvian units of the Waffen SS which was formed in 1943. Members of the notorious Arajs Komando constituted less than 1% of those enlisted and in most cases they were duly prosecuted after World War II. All the above mentioned was recognised by western allied authorities, including the UK government, when admitting former legionnaires to their territories. In a twist of irony, some were even enlisted by the US army to guard Nazi war criminals at the Nurnberg Tribunal.

May I also point out that no Nazi uniforms, symbols or slogans appear on 16 March. Any display of totalitarian ideology is strictly prohibited by law and would entail immediate prosecution. Taking this into account, Latvian courts subsequently on several occasions have overruled the decision by the authorities to ban these commemorative events.

It is unfortunate that the 16 March events have generated political controversy, protests and international media attention. In recent years some radical groups at both ends of the political spectrum have tried to hijack or disrupt the peaceful 16 March events in order to call attention to themselves and their cause, sometimes deliberately misrepresenting historical facts that lead to a distorted public view and media perception of events. These activities have been strongly condemned by the Latvian authorities as well as by the Legionnaires themselves. In this respect Latvian politicians and officials appeal to the population not to be drawn into these provocations and political manipulations.


In light of the aforementioned I cannot see how your petition would help in bringing justice to the victims of war crimes or crimes against humanity, including the Holocaust. On the contrary, it would simply replicate some of the old but recently reheated Soviet propaganda about 'those Fascist Latvians'. I can only regret that your research into the history of the Latvian Legion was limited to communicating with Mr. Feigmanis and some left wing

politicians in Latvia. Had you contacted the Embassy earlier, I would have been most happy to provide you with panoply of references to internationally recognised sources both in Latvia and the UK.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize Latvia's commitment to the values of a democratic and open society and to express my belief that only a collective effort to remember and understand our common history will lead to a true consolidation of the people and countries who suffered under totalitarian regimes during World War II.

In the meantime, I remain,

Yours sincerely,



Eduards Stiprais
Ambassador