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<http://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/world/buvusius-latvijos-ss-legionierius-nusikalteliais-gali-laikyti-tik-beprociai-sako-salies-prezidentas.d?id=56079493>

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## Latvian President: Anyone Who Thinks Latvian SS are Criminals Must Be Nuts

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Photo WWII SS Legion Veterans March in Riga

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On Tuesday Latvia's president Andris Bērziņš said that the Latvian community and the international community need to have it explained to them why so-called legionnaires who served on the side of Nazi Germany during World War II are honored in the country on March 16<sup>th</sup> every year. He also also said there was no reason to criticize these events.

Speaking on the television channel LNT, he reminded the audience that in 1950 the Displaced Persons Commission of the United States decided that Latvian legionnaires are not war criminals, and that the Supreme Court of the Soviet Union adopted a verdict to rehabilitate these veterans.

“It’s crazy to think they’re war criminals,” Bērziņš said.

He stressed that only about 500 Latvian legionnaires are still alive, with an average age of 90.

“What danger do they pose? This game isn’t fair! This is even more absurd than the referendum on [Russian] language!” the president exclaimed. “Many people lost their lives for the future of Latvia. I don’t see any basis to deny this.”

Bērziņš said he regretted some people seeking popularity were using this problem as a wedge. “Not just in Latvia. Many protestors come from other countries, even if these [countries] have recognized that these people are not criminals. So, it seems to me it’s not acceptable to dishonor these people, before whom we should bow our heads,” he said.

The president said he was sure it would be possible to nip in the bud any disturbances on the day of remembrance.

“I am certain our structures have enough experience to ensure public order on March 16,” he said.

Security Police chief Janis Reinikis said earlier this year more threats to security and public order would arise on March 16 this year because many commemorative events are planned this year. He said further there is increased tension in the country because of the recent referendum whose organizers sought to make Russian the second official language.

According to information received by the Security Police, about 30 to 40 foreigners from Estonia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Russia and Germany are planning to come to Riga to protest the events to commemorate March 16.

“These [people] are a variety of radicals and extremists. Border security will

also be working more intensively,” Reinikis said, adding the Security Police will draw up a “black list” of people who are forbidden to enter Latvia.

At the same time prime minister Valdis Dombrovskis of the ruling center right union warned ministers not to participate in March 16th events. Members of the Right Nationalist Alliance, a member of the tripartite coalition government, have featured prominently in earlier events.

Activists of the Russian and Jewish communities usually organize protests and demonstrations against these events as well, claiming commemoration of Latvian Legionnaire Day is a glorification of Nazism.

During World War II about 140,000 Latvian citizens were called up to serve in the military on the side of Nazi Germany in a specially-formed Latvian SS legion. About 50,000 of them died in fighting or from Soviet oppression after the war.

The Latvian SS Legion was established in February, 1943, and March 16th was chosen as the day of remembrance of the Latvian SS Legion because the 15th and 16th divisions of the Latvian SS Legion overcame Soviet Red Army troops near Opochka along the Velikaya River on that day in 1944.

Before 1998, March 16th was marked at Latvian Legion Day in Latvia, but was not codified in law. That was done in the summer of 1998. But two years later the parliament decided they had made a mistake in allowing official celebration of the day Russians suffered a painful defeat, and they erased the day of remembrance for legionnaires from the calendar.

In 2004 the Russian Federation Foreign Ministry stated that under the findings of the Nuremberg Trials, the Latvian “Waffen SS” legion’s actions were recognized as criminal.

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