

Latvia 1919

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Introduction

This history is really by way of extended notes to myself to help frame the context of the Freikorps campaigns – against the Soviets, Estonians and Latvians in succession.

Where I intend to look at the fighting in greater detail elsewhere I have deliberately left the military details very light. Partly this is because I have been unable to find any source with genuinely reliable numbers for the troops involved, except the Estonians at Cēsis. Readers are advised that the numbers quoted in most of the literature, especially for the number of Freikorps under Bermond-Avalov, are completely bogus.

I have tried to keep all place names in their modern indigenous form but a table at the back allows these to be correlated against other versions, most importantly the German forms often seen in other histories.

Background

Latvia in the Russian Empire

Latvia existed as a concept at the start of the 20th century – it was where the Latvian speaking people lived – but there had never been a unified nation of Latvia in the modern sense. The three provinces of Kurzeme, Latgale and Vidzeme were swallowed by the Russian Empire in various pieces during the 18th Century, and thereafter were ruled directly from St Petersburg.¹ While administration was basically Russian, there was no mass colonisation by Slavic-speaking peoples and the nobility of the previous regime was not ejected. Thus the basic social structure was left largely unchanged.

The nobility of the eastern Baltic coast was in large part German, dating back to the days of the Teutonic Knights and the Hansa. The cities were founded by Germans, and even today one feels in a German town when looking at the buildings in the old towns of Riga or Tallinn. While faithful to their new Russian masters, the German lords kept their culture fairly intact; speaking German² and keeping intellectual links with the other German-speaking lands. Most of the land was owned by these Baltic Germans and they were also the dominant force in the increasing industrialisation of the cities as well and in the professional classes. The Baltic Germans numbered about 5% of the population in 1914. (They were frequently called “Balts” to distinguish them from Reich Germans, and I shall also use that term.)

The ethnic Latvians (or “Letts”) were the workers of the nobility for the most part, either on the farms or in the factories. There were a very few Latvian nobles – the “Grey Barons” – and an increasing number of middle class Latvian speakers in the big towns. The Letts were about 85–90% of the population in 1914.

There were a few Russians and Poles in central Latvia, especially in the Imperial administration and the developing industrial cities, although the number of peasant Russians increased considerably in the east of Latgale, reaching perhaps 25% of the population in the extreme east. (This part was the last part absorbed by the newly emergent Latvia in 1920, so is unimportant for this essay.)

Latvia was in the Jewish “pale” but most of the Jews were new city arrivals with few ties to their new homes. They probably numbered about 5% of the population. In the revolutions and wars that followed it seems that city Jews behaved pretty much like city dwelling Letts and country Jews like country dwelling Letts, so I shall not distinguish the two races apart and any reference to “Letts” or “Latvians” will apply on the whole to Jews.

¹ Latgale was part of Vitebsk province whereas the other two were ruled, along with Estonia, by a governor-general based in Riga. But although Latgale was therefore considered Russia proper, there was no extensive colonisation by Slavic peoples. Modern Latvia has four provinces – Zemgale was formerly considered part of Kurzeme.

² Though the formal language was standard German, the spoken version was somewhat different.



Most Latvians were Lutherans, though the Catholics were more numerous to the south, which was a common bond to the Balts but separated the Letts socially from the Orthodox Russian and Jewish elements.

Serfdom was abolished in the early 19th century, although this did not extend to allowing the peasants to buy the land – this only came in 1861 with the general emancipation of the serfs in Russia. But even though the peasants were now technically free, the rule of the Balt nobility remained almost absolute, and conditions remained very much in favour of the great land-owners.

With a distinct language and culture, Latvia was bound to be swept up in the rise of nationalism in the 19th century. As with most similar places in eastern Europe, the ruling powers suppressed this as much as they could. The nationalism of the Baltic provinces was particularly troubling because it was impossible for the Tsar to co-opt the local elites since they, being German and Polish, were almost entirely ethnic outsiders to the nationalist movements and therefore could not influence them from the inside.

The situation in Estonia was very similar, with a basically German nobility. Although Estonia and Latvia share less culture than their proximity suggests, the same basic social conditions existed and the newly emergent nationalist factions of both countries looked to Scandinavia and western Europe for their examples. Their local dialects were formed into formal languages; flags and other symbols were “rediscovered” or plain invented.

When the 1905 Revolution broke in the Russian empire, following the failures of the Russo-Japanese War and other such incompetence, the peasants and workers of the Baltic provinces joined in enthusiastically. Unlike areas merely seeking more autonomy or representative government, such as Finland or Poland, the Baltic peoples saw that the removal of the “foreign” upper class was a prerequisite for autonomous rule based on their native cultures. The result was that there was a great deal of damage caused to noble property, extending in many cases to violence, and the consequent repression was much more terrible there than in most of the empire, particularly in Latvia. There were a large number of hangings, a lot of pretty much indiscriminate shootings and a renewed suppression of all nationalist activities.

Such a potted history cannot hope to give the full story, of course, but it is important to realise the extent of the ethnic hatred. The Letts started to regard their “nation” as oppressed by centuries of “German” tyranny, not necessarily changed by the advent of Russian rule. The nobles therefore looked for external support to safeguard their position from the vast bulk of the population: and when Russia was unable to support them after WWI, they were quite capable of looking to Germany instead.

The February Revolution in Latvia was mostly free of German-Latvian antagonism, because the former ruling elites were discarded so thoroughly throughout the entire Empire that they no longer were seen as having any say in how the new state might be run, and the peasants and intelligentsia instead mostly discussed the possible Socialist directions that they might take. But later in 1919, when the Bolsheviks had been expelled and the struggle turned to Latvian nationalism versus German control, the old hates emerged as fresh as ever.

WWI in Latvia

After the initial Russian push into East Prussia and the disasters at Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes, the Germans pushed deep into the Russian Empire. By late 1915 the front line had mostly reached the line of the Daugava River, cutting Latvia in half. There it remained for almost the duration of the war.

The Latvians in the Imperial Army petitioned to form national units. Generally the Russians were very unhappy with such expressions of separatist sentiment, and many races in the empire were excluded from the draft in order to prevent any ability to learn the military arts. But by this stage of the war the Russian Army needed all the help it could get, and favoured groups were allowed to form ethnically based units. First battalions, and then eventually a division was formed. Commanded and filled out with Latvians, they used the old title of *Strelnieki*. Defending their own land against an old ethnic enemy, they fought with great determination.

About 180,000 Latvians were to fight in the Russian ranks in the Great War, mostly in the Latvian Division, with some 30,000 killed.



When morale dropped in the Russian Army as a whole, the Latvians continued to fight as before. In late 1916 they attacked the Germans and broke their line in a planned operation, only to find that the reserves to follow them did not arrive. Perhaps it was incompetence or perhaps the morale of the reserves was too poor, but many Latvians suspected treason and were left embittered. As with so many men fighting in the trenches in WWI, on all fronts, socialist ideas began to circulate; spiced in this case with a loss of faith in the empire and Russians in general.

The February Revolution

With the February Revolution, 1917, a series of local governments arose. Some were initially bourgeois and nationalist in aim, but the spread of socialism was dominant.

Indeed many Letts by this stage were radically left-wing. The spread of literacy and a decent-sized proletariat in the major cities combined with a long-standing class hatred of the rulers were ideal conditions for the flourishing of Marxist ideas. As with the rest of the empire, the socialists were divided among various factions but the Bolsheviks were the best organised and most single-minded in pursuit of power. They came to dominate most of the country not occupied by the Germans, and their ability to set up effective rule, compared to other areas falling into anarchy, only brought in more recruits.

Technically the Russians remained at war with the Germans, but activities basically ceased near the Baltic coast as the Germans transferred their better units to the Western Front. Within easy reach of agitators sent from Petrograd, morale plummeted in the Russian Army units, and by mid-1917 their fighting value was near zero. When the Germans attacked on 1 September, just upstream from Riga, there was little opposition.³ The Latvian units wished to continue the fight, but they had no support, so they withdrew rather than be annihilated. Thus Riga and most of northern Latvia was occupied by late 1917. This had important consequences for our tale.

Firstly, the nascent nationalist movement was crushed before it could obtain any outside assistance or support, since Lettish separatism ran counter to German interests. Although popular enough, the various separate bodies could not form properly, either politically or militarily.

In contrast to the other political parties, especially of the middle, the Bolsheviks left a united and dedicated group in Riga, and other towns, who were well used to operating underground. They continued to organise during the occupation, and when the Germans signed the armistice they were by far the best placed group to take over.

The Latvian Division was scattered by the German drive but soon reorganised. Now however they were right on the edge of northern Latvia and most of the men were unable to return to their homes because the Germans sealed the front line. Therefore when the Bolsheviks later requested that they come to Petersburg to defend their coup, they were mostly quite happy to oblige. Because many Letts were firm supporters of the revolution, and pretty much alone among Imperial army units had kept their structure intact, they were hugely influential in assisting the Bolsheviks in their seizure of power, although the numbers involved were quite small. This unit was then the basis of the famous Soviet Latvian Rifle Division, although the number of men actually crossing over from the Imperial to Soviet unit may well have been quite small.

In the part of Latvia not occupied by the German Army a Soviet government was formed, which came to be dominated by Bolsheviks – the Iskolat Republic. This was well before the Bolshevik party took power in Petrograd, and was achieved with no armed struggle. The food supply was maintained, despite the large number of refugees and soldiers. Thus, when Lenin took power in October, it was the Latvian Soviet that supported the Petrograd one, not the other way round. In the Iskolat Republic the peasants started to appropriate land and goods, but they were restrained in their actions because the takeover was gradual. They must no doubt also have been constrained by the thought of the all too likely further advance of the enemy and the likely retaliation that would follow.

Another important consequence of German occupation was that the Baltic German Barons mostly transferred their allegiance to the German banner. Under occupation they could hardly expect to obtain aid

³ This offensive, led by General Hutier, is sometimes said to have been an early example of the infiltration tactics later used to good effect on the Western Front. Perhaps this is so, but a simple headlong charge would probably have been almost as effective, given the lack of defensive will on the part of the Russian units.



from the Provisional Government in Russia – not that they were likely to find support from an ideological enemy. If they tried to remain neutral then they faced the wrath of their tenants alone, with no governmental support, which would have led to the manor burnings and land occupations of 1905. So they either abandoned their land or threw in their lot with the Germans – which was hardly a burden for many considering the language and cultural links. So for the most part the nobility retained their land and stayed in place, but at the cost of further alienating their peasants by collaborating with the enemy.

The new German rulers, for their part, were uncertain how to deal with their new territories. Since Latvia and Estonia had been ruled by German speakers for many centuries, many felt that they should be merged into Germany, either in the manner of East Prussia, or as separate duchies under the Kaiser. Others were inclined to make them client states. Genuine independence was never really considered, and there was certainly no place for the non-German majority to rule any eventual state that might have emerged.

Uncertain of what they would do, German rule in the areas they occupied was draconian, though in no way resembling the “terror” of the civil war that was to follow. Travel of any distance was forbidden and there was an attempt to impose German cultural norms. The result, amongst the non-German speaking population, was to reinforce the idea that rule by German speakers, either native or foreign, would result in continued oppression.

The Situation in 1918

The immediate effects of the Bolshevik takeover in late 1917 were slight in Latvia since the Bolsheviks already controlled the parts not occupied by the Germans. Following the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk the Germans advanced to take over all the Baltic states region. The Iskolat Republic was dismantled and the Latvian provinces reunited under foreign control. The Latvian Division once again elected to withdraw without fighting the Wehrmacht, but at the cost of most of their strength, lost in the haste of the move or deserting, and it took it a long time to reorganise.

By now Latvia was in a disastrous state economically, having entered WWI as one of the most prosperous parts of the Russian empire. In particular the industry of the large towns was completely shattered, and the workers dispersed.

As the Germans had advanced towards the factories of Latvia in the Great War, the Russians had dismantled them wherever possible and moved them to safer locations. Others were smashed to prevent use by the enemy. Usually they had tried to move the workers too. In 1913 Riga had 517,522 inhabitants, most working in industrial and commercial enterprises, but by mid 1917 it had only 210,000 inhabitants (and the number continued to fall slowly through 1918 and 1919).

The German advance across the country also drove country dwellers ahead of it and many Jews were forcibly removed from the front-line areas as a result of Tsarist fears of spying. Perhaps as many as one in four of the 2.5 million Latvians left during the war, with some estimating the numbers as much as 800,000, although many returned slowly after the signing of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty (March 1918).

The disintegration of the Russian Army had also added to Latvia’s woes. Demoralised units plundered wholesale at the front and deserters terrorised the rear areas. Because the front-line stretched across the most populous and prosperous part of Latvia, the damage was immense.

This dislocation did not make the Letts any better disposed towards the Russians or Germans, and only increased the already strongly left-wing attitudes of many. With so many being “proletarians”, the Bolsheviks were only too happy to proselytise among them.

The factories removed, the land ploughed up with trench-digging and artillery and large armies stationed in it, Latvia needed a rest. But Germany was being starved of food and materials by the Allied blockade, so the occupying forces requisitioned food and dismantled whatever industrial material they could use. The blockade also prevented medicines and other essential supplies from being imported, since Germany could not even supply itself properly.

Meanwhile the Latvian Division was sent to guard the Bolshevik government and to fight the nascent Whites and was then reorganised to become the Soviet Latvian Division. Although many Letts left the division, especially the officers, others from among the many Latvian refugees in Russia joined in their



place so that initially the unit stayed mostly Latvian and kept its *esprit de corps*. With such strong political leanings and stuck in Russia, it was inevitable that many Letts should join the Red Army in other units or otherwise assist the new government and not return.⁴

Other Latvians who had been dispersed deep into Russia tried to return but were prevented by the Civil War. Units were formed in Siberia from such men – with regiments based on the cities of Troitsk and Imanta. They were technically aligned to the Whites, but in practice were not that keen on fighting for the reactionary Kolchak. Eventually they would be extracted via Vladivostok by the Allied governments along with the Czech Legion, arriving back in Latvia too late to take part in the fight against the Freikorps.

So by the end of 1918 Latvia was an exhausted land, with its industrial base ruined and agriculture spoiled. Not only was a huge portion of its population in exile, but this missing part was disproportionately heavy in men in the prime of life.

The Soviets Arrive

The Armistice

The ceasefire for the Great War signed between the Allies and Germany had separate sections for the western and eastern fronts. On the eastern front, the Germans were to retire back to their 1914 borders, except that a special proviso was added in clause 12 for the former Imperial Russian territories.

“... All German troops at present in the territories which before the war belonged to Russia shall likewise withdraw within the frontiers of Germany, defined as above, as soon as the Allies, taking into account the internal situation of these territories, shall decide that the time for this has come”

The rationale was that a precipitous withdrawal by the Germans would leave a vacuum that the Bolsheviks would fill. In the south the occupation of the Ukraine by the Central Powers had protected the nascent Cossack Hosts and the Volunteer Army, which the Allies had already started to support; in the north Poland and the Baltic states were seen as deserving independent status by the Allies. The German command was told to take its time withdrawing in order that the nationalist factions on the periphery of the Tsar's empire should be able to adjust to the new situation.

Nonetheless, while the German High Command welcomed the idea of preventing the spread of Bolshevism, the rankers had other ideas. Morale was particularly poor in the Ukraine. Soldiers started to form councils, along the lines of the soviets that had done so much to break-up the Imperial Russian army. In order to prevent their men being stranded by advancing Reds and rapidly forming Poland, the withdrawal in the south was made as quickly as possible. Tens of thousands of men were nonetheless cut off and drawn into the Russian Civil War.

In the Baltic the lines of communication were more clear and withdrawal to East Prussia was a relatively easy option. The Reichswehr fell back from Estonia followed closely by Red units, until by mid-February 1919 only the western portion of Latvia remained under the control of German forces.

During this time the various political factions started to emerge from occupation and organise. The nationalist minded National Council, formed from the merger of the major non-Bolshevik, non-Balt groups declared the independence of Latvia on 18 November and set up a Latvian Provisional Government, with Jānis Čakste as President and Kārlis Ulmanis as Prime Minister. It was almost immediately recognised as the *de facto* government by the Allied powers.

The Balts too started to organise themselves politically, and formed a militia – the *Baltische Landeswehr*. There were eventually three main Balt parties, two based on the professional classes and a much more conservative rural one.

All non-Communist groups were opposed from the start by the Bolsheviks, who were well organised and had external support. An invasion was inevitable.

⁴ The early Cheka was famously full of Latvians and many had important roles in forming Red Guards units (city militias, formed around workplaces generally) and Soviets.



Soviet era publications very sweetly show maps of the campaign as if it were a regular military operation, but there was little fighting. There were three bodies of troops opposing the advance in Latvia – the largely mutinous German army, the Baltic Landeswehr and the nationalist Latvians.

The Soviets had no need to provoke the retiring Germans, who might retaliate with overwhelming force if pressed and who were anyway retiring at full speed. Indeed, the Reds were in open communication with the councils in the German ranks, which enabled them to advance without much fear of retribution. Once the German officers realised that their men were unwilling to fight, they too started to think only of heading home.

The two local armies, the Baltic Landeswehr and the nationalist Letts, did try to put up a fight but were overwhelmed before they had a chance to form properly. The Landeswehr obtained weapons and equipment from the Germans but was never going to be large. The much more numerous Letts were denied weapons and volunteers had to be sent home for lack of them. The few thousand men that formed could not hope to hold off the advance, made all the more difficult because the towns in the rear had sizeable numbers of Bolshevik supporters.

On 3 January 1919, Riga fell and a Bolshevik Latvian regime was set up for the country.

The Soviet Advance Runs out of Steam Everywhere

But the German army did not withdraw from Latvia entirely and, with Allied blessing and following the terms of the armistice, started to resist the Reds. Soon a stalemate set in, with the Germans and nationalist Latvians based in Liepāja and the Reds in Riga both consolidating their forces and attempting to impose some sort of military and political order on the areas they controlled.

In Estonia the nationalists were somewhat better placed, because they had had a chance to organise prior to German occupation and there was a small “White” Russian force in the area. Although almost over-run in the initial wave of Soviet occupation the Estonians quickly took the offensive. Aid quickly arrived from Britain, in the form of the Royal Navy, and Finland – though it was as much a psychological as material boost.

Lithuania was even worse placed than Latvia and was almost entirely swallowed by the Soviets and rapidly forming Polish army. What remained was controlled by the German Army, whose units were rapidly becoming the first freikorps.

It is interesting to observe that the Soviets were unable to finish off any of the three Baltic states. It would seem that the rapid advance largely prevented the opposition from organising but it did so by driving it in front of it rather than destroying it in place. So the most resistant elements anti-Bolshevik elements were forced into a pocket in all three states, where in desperation they set aside differences to fight the common enemy.

Soviet Latvia

The Soviet government of Latvia was no different from similar governments set up for the Don, Ukraine, Finland, Estonia etc. Independent on paper, their only actual independence from Moscow came from the difficulties of communication and transport in the chaos of the time.

By now the Latvians had a reputation for staunch Marxism, and the large proletarian population quite possibly led Lenin and company to believe that the Letts would welcome the Soviet forces. If this was so, then they were to be disappointed. The population of the Baltic states did include many socialists, but as in Finland and Poland this was not incompatible with a desire for true independence – which is what they had understood by the repeated Bolshevik propaganda promises of “self-determination” under their rule.

Since German censorship had prevented any real news about the Great War reaching the Baltic, the German surrender came as a complete surprise. Disoriented by the apparently miraculous collapse of the Wehrmacht and exhausted by the war, it is no surprise that the initial reaction of most Letts was to wait and see what would happen.



The locals did not have to wait long to discover the nature of Soviet rule. The Red Terror commenced soon after even minimal control was established. The first targets of Bolshevik vengeance were the German nobility and pastors (and the “trials” for them were a mere formality, frequently leading to an immediate death sentence) but all the usual class enemies were subject to the Red Terror, including rich peasants.

The obvious supporter of the Communists in Latvia, as elsewhere, should have been the proletariat and the poor peasants. Unfortunately for the new regime, almost all the fiercely revolutionary proletarians were in Russia or the Red Army, having been evacuated during the Great War. The much larger peasant population was initially largely sympathetic to socialist aims, or at least slogans, but quickly changed their allegiance over to the nationalists as a result of the brutality and self-defeating policies of the Communists.

The Red Army was forced to live off the land, since there was no system of central supply, which took precious food from Latvians – who had been hungry enough in WWI. The Soviet army contained many Latvians but the large and undisciplined Russian element was an unwelcome reminder about who would dominate the new Latvian Soviet Republic. The persecution of religion was also an irritant, particularly since the Lutheran clergy was not associated with ignorance and Tsarism as the Orthodox church was in Russia.

But perhaps the Soviets greatest blunder was to immediately start collectivising agriculture. The peasants who had remained on their farms, or deserted one army or another to return home, were expecting the Bolsheviks to partition the great estates in their favour. They were not pleased to discover that the Russians intended to have collective state farms instead, especially since the Baltic villages had never had the communal nature of Russian ones.

The Army of Soviet Latvia

The Soviet leaders firmly believed at that time that as they advanced they would pick up the oppressed and downtrodden to their banner. They fully expected to continue past Latvia and into East Prussia and Poland, gathering steam as they went. They certainly announced their intention to do this, and considered the formation of defeatist soldiers’ councils in the Wehrmacht as an excellent sign. Unfortunately, this new style of warfare failed whenever it reached non-Russian soil,⁵ and Latvia was no exception. Instead of gaining speed, the Soviets advance petered out, despite the almost total lack of opposition, and failed to completely clear Latvia or Lithuania of anti-Bolshevik forces.

In very early 1919 “The Army of Soviet Latvia” came into being based around two divisions: one descended straight from the famous old Imperial *Strelnieki* Division and another “International Division” cobbled together from miscellaneous units of supposedly Latvian origin (actually mostly not). These were to become the 1st and 2nd Soviet Latvian Rifle Divisions respectively. Then there were assorted garrison units and Red militias (almost certainly of little military value).

I have seen a variety of figures quoted for the size of this army, mostly fiction. Mangulis gives the two main divisions a total of 12,000 men in February, growing to 27,000 by conscription. By May the Soviet Latvian Army is supposed to have totaled some 45,000 men⁶ – a number very much larger than all their enemies combined, though it should be remembered that this total includes rear area garrisons and the men opposing the Estonians, not just those facing the Freikorps in Latvia and Lithuania.

But Soviet accounts give the armies invading Estonia and Lithuania started with about 8,000 men each and it is hard to see why Latvia would get much more (these were, after all, side theatres to the Reds). Even the Freikorps figures I have seen are much more in this range.⁷ It was rare for Soviet Divisions to have over 5,000 men, so the versions where they grow to over 10,000 seem unlikely on that evidence alone.⁸

⁵ Because the Soviets did indeed gain in strength as they advanced in the main theatres of their civil war, the Ukraine, Don and Siberia, their faith in the new “revolutionary” style of war remained. This was to lead to Tuchachevski attempting to try it in Poland, with disastrous results.

⁶ Page 49. I have seen figures of 600 machine-guns, 98 field-guns and 3 armoured trains to go with these 45,000 men.

⁷ For example, see the Order of Battle in Engelhardt’s *Das Ritt Nach Riga* for January.

⁸ That the 1st and 2nd Soviet Latvian Rifle Divisions merged after their withdrawal from Latvia tends to suggest that they were not terribly large, even after their recruiting drive, although there must have been a huge desertion rate as they



Certainly the evidence of the fighting instead suggests that the Red Armies in the Baltic were pathetically weak. They were unable to finish off any of the forces they met – German, Estonian, White Russian or Polish, despite the small size of these enemies. Apart from the White Russians in Estonia, who had been permitted to arm by the Germans, these armies were only able to start forming in November 1918 and had to scrape together arms and ammunition, giving the Soviets a year's head start. Yet the Estonians were able to throw the Soviets out of their country by early 1919 and we shall see that the Freikorps in Latvia and Lithuania were also able to advance with ease once they got organised.

In fact, it seems that the Freikorps in Latvia never got to face more than one brigade of the 1st Soviet Latvian Rifle Division, plus assorted parts of the 2nd Division and some militia.⁹ Initially the other units were late arriving to the front or they were recruiting in (and garrisoning) elsewhere. When the Estonians started their campaign in earnest, the two other brigades of the 1st Division were sent to that front and it was this loss of veteran units from the Soviets facing Liepāja that likely saved von der Goltz in the early days before he could sort his army out.

As their occupation wore on the Soviets recruited heavily, but the recruits were extremely unwilling and the quality of their army seems to have fallen even as it increased in size. The failure of the Soviet agricultural policy also no doubt meant that much of the increase in army size was cancelled by the need to protect the requisitioning units in the countryside. In any event, the Soviets never appear to put up much of a defence against the Freikorps.

The reasons proposed by Latvian chauvinist historians to explain the poor performance of the Soviet Latvian forces are doubtful and self-contradictory: that the units were diluted with foreign elements; that their adherence to the revolution was skin-deep; and that they did not desire to fight against the independence of their homeland.

It is true that the Soviet “Latvian” units were increasingly less Latvian as the Russian Civil War progressed, but in early 1919 this cannot have been very important, especially since they were recruiting in Latvia!¹⁰ It is also fair to say that the adherence of the original Latvian Division to the Bolsheviks was greatly overstated by Soviets.

The last explanation – that they did not wish to fight against their own nation – would have more validity if they had been fighting their fellow Letts, but the Freikorps represented a traditional oppressor, that was reactionary and imperialist to boot. If Soviet forces had really not wanted to fight their opponents, I would have expected mass defections of units along with their arms – which was a bit of a feature of the Russian Civil War and which the Letts were known to do in Siberia. Yet the nationalist forces never seem to have gained whole units that way: though in 1919 and again in 1920 plenty of individuals crossed over from the Reds.

Desertion was possibly a factor. Most *Strelnieki* had not been able to see their families for many years, and the temptation to abscond was simply too strong, regardless of their basic motivation. Once back home they must have found the conflicting claims of Soviets, Balts and nationalists rather confusing, and perhaps just sat to wait it out.

It is also my strong personal belief that, contrary to general opinion, the Red Army was total rubbish in early 1919, despite Trotsky's reforms.¹¹ I tend to suspect that even the famous 1st Latvians were actually not very high quality and only looked good in comparison.

But I not discount completely the possibility that the Soviets were relatively well-motivated but that the Germans were actually not heavily outnumbered by them and it was advantages in experience and equipment made the difference.

left. The resulting unit was quite big by the size of most Soviet divisions, but certainly nothing like 27,000 men.

⁹ For example, see the Order of Battle in Engelhardt's *Das Ritt Nach Riga* for January and the map of von der Goltz's *Meine Sendung im Baltikum* for mid-May. The Soviet army appears to be basically the same, although doubtless individual units recruited.

¹⁰ In any case, an increased non-Latvian element contradicts the explanation that they did not want to fight other Letts.

¹¹ In fact, I do not believe that it was much good at any time, but that is beyond the scope of this essay.



Anti-Bolshevik Forces

The Latvian Government and its Forces

The German civilian governor in the Baltic had been August Winnig, who was politically a moderate Social Democrat, although not very moderate about his pro-Balt tendencies. Under the pressure of the Soviet advance, he had chosen to recognise the Lettish Provisional Government of Karlis Umanis on 26 November 1918. This deed was not appreciated by most of the local Balt population, who wished to maintain their dominant position in the country

Then the Ulmanis government reached an agreement with Winnig to form a defence force combining Latvian, Baltic German and White Russian elements.¹² The Latvians did not want to do this, but their meagre forces were clearly unable to prevent the Soviet invasion on their own. They doubtless did not believe in the good will of the Germans, but hoped that the Allies would eventually come to their aid. In any event, the force was only joint on paper. The Balts continued to form separate units and the Germans were to later use the agreement as a suitable legal cover for evading the intention of the Armistice.

Initially the small Latvian nationalist forces operated separately from the Germans and fell back towards Ventspils after the fall of Riga, although the Provisional Government was in Liepāja. They had so few men in arms however, perhaps only a few hundred, that on 9 February Ventspils fell to the Soviets, estimated at only 500 strong,¹³ and an initial attempt to retake it failed. The British saved the day – the 6-inch guns of the *Caledon* were sufficient to clear the town, which was re-occupied by the Letts.

But the number of volunteers grew rapidly despite the loss of most of their country once they saw that, although the situation looked grim, they were not entirely without friends. Former Tsarist officers and NCOs were prominent in the new units. The British estimated them to number 3,500 officers and men by mid-February,¹⁴ though 2,000 seems more likely.¹⁵ They might have recruited more, but weapons and uniforms were lacking. The first unit had been commanded by Captain Jānis Balodis, but Colonel Oskar Kolpaks took eventual command.

The Germans, who saw them as rivals rather than allies, denied them weapons and hindered in many small ways. Despite the German insistence that the Latvians were unreliable and full of Bolsheviks, the Allies slowly came to view them sympathetically. The British sent a shipment of rifles in January to Liepāja, but the Germans dumped them in the harbour. A further shipment of 5,000 rifles, 50 MGs and 5 million rounds arrived there in mid-February, but von der Goltz would not allow them to be landed. They sat in the harbour in the *Saratov*.

An Estonian warship had arrived to assist in the recovery of Ventspils too late, but the new republics saw that they had much common ground and on 18 February a mutual defence agreement was reached. As part of that the Estonians were able to recruit Latvians – the North Latvian Brigade under Colonel Jorģis Zemītāns, with perhaps 1,500 men by March¹⁶ and growing by about a thousand men every month.

White Russians

The White Russians were encouraged by the Germans, who saw them as useful allies in the fight against the Soviets and, at worst, neutrals in the internal Latvian struggles. The Whites were however never to be terribly useful because, although many hated the Soviets, they did not see that either an independent or a German-dominated Latvia was worth fighting for. The officers were driven by a desire to see a conservative Russia which still controlled the Baltic provinces¹⁷ and the men, most likely, just wanted to go home.

¹² The Latvian Defense Force, under German command, was to consist of 18 Latvian, 1 Baltic Russian, and 7 Baltic German companies.

¹³ Cowan's War p74

¹⁴ Cowan's War p74

¹⁵ Mangulis p47

¹⁶ Mangulis p47



The first major unit was headed by Prince Anatol Lieven, raised from former prisoners-of-war. The British assessed it at 1,000 men in January¹⁸ though this too seems rather high. It grew only slowly.

The Baltic Landeswehr

The Germans had begun the process of arming the local German element of the population from as soon as the Armistice was signed, the *Baltische Landeswehr*. They were able to immediately obtain substantial quantities of weapons and equipment from the retiring Germans and took their military inspiration from them in basically every aspect. There were 700 men within a month, and they briefly attempted to hold the Soviet advance outside Riga. Recruitment continued steadily.

The Landeswehr was to prove itself an effective army under Major Fletcher.¹⁹ The German speaking population had not been drafted into the Tsarist army, so unlike the other groups there were lots of fit young men ready to serve. Bound by strong ties of class and language and vehemently opposed to Bolshevism, at least any form of it in the Baltic, morale was not to prove a problem.

Although they fought alongside the Freikorps, and are usually counted in their ranks, the Baltic Landeswehr was quite different. Initially recruited almost entirely from Latvian residents, their concern was to free Latvia of the Soviets and only then attempt to impose a conservative government. They carried none of the mental baggage of the former Wehrmacht soldiers over the Armistice and Versailles Peace Treaty – their aims were strictly practical.

When it became clear that the German Freikorps would be unable to control any independent Latvian nation, the Baltic Landeswehr were to leave the Freikorps' side. Control of the government was indispensable to the main Freikorps if they were to achieve their aims of expanding Germany's realms, or at the very least establishing a solid German colony in the Baltic. Conversely, the Baltic Germans were prepared to accept a Lettish based government if need be, because it at least allowed them the chance to regain their land and property, even if only to sell it and emigrate.

The Freikorps

The freikorps in the Baltic were raised on the same principles as in Germany. Individuals pledged to serve an officer, usually the founding member of the corps. This unit then was fitted into the overall structure, often attached to a larger freikorps. Different units had different standards, but mostly they tended to subscribe to the values of the Imperial Wehrmacht, such as obedience to orders and professionalism in arms.

The commanders were often men of no great standing during the war which avoided the stultifying effect of too many senior officers arguing over priority and stuck in old tactical ruts. However as self-made men they tended to regard their units as private fiefdoms and felt entitled to have a say in politics and run their unit as they felt fit.

It is difficult not to read history backwards and incorrectly link the freikorps with the rise of Nazism: but this should be resisted and the Baltic units especially should not be seen as proto-fascists. Unsurprisingly, some members did indeed become fervent followers of Hitler and later traded on their Baltic credentials, but just as many did not.²⁰ The reader should be clear that the dominant ideology of the early Freikorps was that of Imperial Germany, especially in the Baltic where they were cut off from changes in the political structure of Germany.

¹⁷ Those White Russians aligned with Germany were extremely reactionary even by the low standards set by the Whites in general, being attracted by German militarism and authoritarianism as opposed to the democratic tendencies of France or Britain.

¹⁸ Cowan's War p72

¹⁹ Despite his name, a Prussian. Also sometimes spelled Fletscher.

²⁰ Much material about the Freikorps was collected during the Nazi era for propaganda purposes, and memoirs of the time were written with an eye on the current political situation. Even material written in French and English had a tendency to see nationalist motives in every German action. The reader of material written during that period must not be swayed into believing that "wherever there is smoke there is fire" and credit the freikorps as early fascists.



Initially the driving force in the Baltic was the protection of East Prussia. The Soviets had clearly stated that they were not interested in obeying diplomatic niceties and respecting international borders: they intended to take their revolution to the world. Defence of the Reich required men, and the Armistice terms meant that they had to be volunteers. When the situation had stabilised, and it became clear that the Russian Civil War was going to distract the Soviets from any ability to intervene in Germany, the motivation changed.

In particular, the Freikorps campaigns in the Baltic changed from being primarily anti-Bolshevik: the danger to Germany from that direction was now internal and could not be combated from the Baltic. It is true that at the time the Freikorps “sold” their actions to the West as primarily anti-Communist, but this was propaganda serving to hide their change in aims. By labeling everyone of even mildly left-wing tendencies as “Bolshevik” they could paint their enemies as extremists, and the history of the Latvian Strelnieki did give some credence to the belief that all Latvians were pro-Bolshevik. But from the start well informed Allied observers were aware that this was a smoke-screen.

Later, Nazi-era histories naturally stressed the anti-Communist line above all else because it fitted their ideology, until it took on aspects of a crusade, deliberately reminiscent of the Teutonic Order’s efforts. Soviet historians tended to see everyone as conspiring against them at the best of times, so Russian histories tend to perpetuate this line.²¹

Instead, the primary collective driving force for Freikorps in the Baltic was the retention of some of Germany’s gains in the east and its military prestige. The loss of the Great War came as a terrible shock to all Germany, but perhaps most intensely in the East where the Wehrmacht had almost always been victorious, often spectacularly so. Many Germans who realised that the Allies could not be beaten in France nevertheless managed to convince themselves that the eventual peace would leave Germany in control of much of eastern Europe, and particularly the Baltic states. They reacted with fury when they realised that the Allies were not only not going to allow Germany none of her conquests, but indeed reduce her considerably in size with the loss of Alsace and Lorraine to France and Pozen and Pomerania to Poland.

Although this formed the common ideology, individual Freikorps members were also driven by private matters. As in the German freikorps, some wished to stay in the army but were unable due to the demobilisation after the Great War, perhaps even unable to face a return to civilian life. Others wished to “redeem” themselves after the war, perhaps to see front-line service after rear area duties, while some were youngsters who had been expecting a call-up but for whom the war ended too early.²² To these motivations the Baltikumers could add the attraction of a new start in a new country, and they were particularly attracted by the promises of land. A few hard-core nutters wanted to carry on WWI, repudiating the armistice.

As we shall see, these motivating factors were not really sufficient to drive the enterprise. The idea that Germany would be allowed to keep any Baltic lands became increasingly unlikely, as it became clear that the Allies were prepared to blockade Germany into submission. Once the Reds had been disposed of and the Latvian and Estonian nationalists became the main enemy, the anti-Bolshevik line started to look very thin. Those arriving to seek military glory soon discovered that there was little to be had fighting a small dirty war in a faraway place and those arriving as colonists were to discover that they had been tricked.

Thus, while formed and operating on a similar basis, it is important to remember that the Baltic freikorps were different from those formed in Germany, and their membership overlapped only to a limited extent: they were formed for entirely different purposes and had quite different aims. In particular, the Baltic units were not friendly societies of old soldiers, meeting every so often and going on campaign once or twice to free some place from Spartacists – they were full time military units and had every intention of remaining in the Baltic.

²¹ Thus the Freikorps are added to the list of “White” armies, with generally no mention of the fact that their main battles were against other anti-Bolshevik forces and that, overall, they probably assisted the Soviets more than they hindered them.

²² Such cadets were a driving force in the Russian Civil War, especially for the Whites – still full of the idealism of youth without having yet experienced the brutality of war.



The Allies

In their division of areas of responsibility for the old Russian Empire the Allies designated the Baltic as a British zone, and so it took the lead in most of the dealings in the former Russian Baltic provinces.

Britain had made it clear immediately from the start that the new nations of Latvia and Estonia were to defend themselves on land and that no British troops would be sent. The Royal Navy, however, took an active part in protecting the new countries. Firstly, it kept the Soviet Navy penned up in the Petrograd area, and even captured some vessels which it then handed over to the Estonians. This enabled the Estonians to concentrate on land operations without fear of a landing in their rear. The British also acted as heavy artillery where possible, especially in the Narva area.

In Latvia the Soviet advance was more powerful and the country more receptive, so there was little that could be done to defend Riga. A few rifles were landed and some of the Nationalist politicians were evacuated when it fell, along with various “neutrals”.

The French were concerned that the British were getting rather too much of a head start in the potential trading partners in the Baltic and also sent a small fleet. Though the French Navy was sent in order to counteract the Royal Navy's influence, the officers co-operated extremely well in 1919 in all military matters.

Although it is easy to say that the Allies should have done more to assist the new countries, there were some factors restraining them, quite apart from general war weariness and economic malaise. Firstly, it was by no means clear that the new countries would be friendly to the Allies – there was every chance that they could take a German orientation or become Soviet satellites. Then there was the large and vocal support for the Bolsheviks at home, which acted as a brake on support for groups seen to be too reactionary. Finally, the Baltic was a dangerous place until the 60,000 mines had been cleared – the cruiser *Cassandra* was sunk almost from the moment the navy arrived. The Navy was not going to risk its big battleships in such a situation.

Once the anti-Bolshevik forces were based in Liepāja, the Allies started to assert a more positive influence, posting representatives in the town and securing the harbour. Further north, their guns were an important factor in retaining Ventspils for the Latvians. A small British military mission arrived on 6 March, and a French one soon afterwards.

Germany at this time was still under blockade by the Allies. That blockade was extended to include reinforcements and equipment being sent to Liepāja when it became clear that the freikorps intended to marginalise the Nationalist government as much as possible. Therefore the German supply route to Latvia was primarily by the long rail-link back to Germany, passing via East Prussia. This route was vulnerable and was to be a considerable drag on the later campaigns, as men had to be stationed to guard its length.

As we shall see, the French and British were to provide important military support later in the war, but the Nationalist camp gained far more from the political and moral benefits. Although other than the blockade the first Allied efforts to rein in the Germans were half-hearted, because they did not wish to engage in open combat, it was always clear that they supported the Nationalist government first and foremost. This support both heartened the nationalist supporters inside Latvia and allowed them to negotiate loans and support from abroad.

Typically for the period the Americans arrived late but compensated for this with largesse. It was the Hoover American Relief Administration and Red Cross food and supplies which prevented Latvia from starvation and disease later in 1919. This reduced internal discontent, especially since the Soviets had conspicuously failed in this regard, and allowed the Latvian government to concentrate on political and military matters. The US sent a few naval vessels to the Baltic but these took no part in operations, being mainly there to assist the spread of relief supplies.



The Tide Turns

The Request for Volunteers

With the Allies providing only moral support and a few arms, the Latvian Provisional Government had to turn elsewhere for effective support on land. There were attempts to raise an army in Sweden, but the cost and its probable pro-German orientation made this fruitless.

Desperate, Ulmanis had agreed soon after Christmas to a treaty which granted rights of citizenship to any German volunteers prepared to fight against the Soviets. Immediately the terms were dispatched to Germany and active recruitment began. Winnig pressed for a grant of colonisation rights as well, but this was steadfastly refused.

Recruitment went well. The German government was keen to see its eastern borders defended and many were hopeful that a successful campaign might aid their cause at the peace treaty negotiations. Fears of Communism were played upon, but the prime reason for the large number of volunteers was that they were lead to believe that they could expect to be given land for their service, rather than just citizenship. This was a lie, but extremely effective for recruiting.

Von der Goltz arrives

The new commander of the Freikorps arrived in Liepāja on 1 February to take command. At this stage there were perhaps 2,000 men left there, of which 800 were reliable.²³

Major General Count Rüdiger von der Goltz had an excellent reputation as a soldier. He had led the German forces in the Finnish Civil War, after which he had planned an attack on Petrograd from Estonia in conjunction with White Russian forces. Politically, he was known to favour the extension of German influence in the Baltic. He was liked by his men and a capable negotiator.

He had no time, however, for the newfangled soldiers' committees and he immediately set about destroying their influence. It did not take him long to re-establish the old forms of discipline and respect for orders, at least on the surface. In fact discipline was never the strong point of his forces and there was a least one Spartacist-inspired plot in April that resulted in a unit being sent back to Germany and a few men shot.

His command, technically *VI-Reserve Korps*, was an unusual one. Despite the freikorps not being technically part of the German army proper, he was expected to report to a newly formed command, the OKN (*Armee Oberkommando Grenzschutz Nord*), based in East Prussia. In practice he usually did whatever he wanted and they let him. He paid even less attention to the Weimar Government, except when it backed up its orders with an actual withdrawal of privileges rather than merely commands or threats.

He organised his men into three basic front-line units. The Iron Division²⁴ had been formed in Latvia by Major Bischoff from the remains of the German 8th Army and reinforced with individual volunteers and small units. The First Reserve Guard Division, into which most of the recruits in Germany had been placed was the other main German unit. Both of these were formed largely from amalgamations of smaller freikorps units.

There was also the Baltic Landeswehr, who at this stage were completely committed to following von der Goltz's orders. Slowly the Landeswehr was reinforced by outsiders, probably mostly those who saw themselves as long-term colonists.

Small Latvian and Russian forces were allowed to operate for show purposes, and to keep their potential supporters from sabotaging the freikorps, but kept deliberately small.

During this time the Venta River was the basic border between Soviet and nationalist Latvia. There was no fighting because the failure of the Soviets to hold the nationalist Estonians, now making good speed in clearing their homeland, had lead to many of their forces being sent north.

²³ Cowan's War p72

²⁴ Originally, and briefly the Iron Brigade, but for our purposes it is easier to keep to one name.



The Spring Campaign

Soon von der Goltz felt that he had sufficient strength to go on the offensive against the Soviets. The initial push was from the Baltic Landeswehr, who were to show themselves full of enthusiasm. They cleared the towns of Kuldīga and Ventspils from 12 to 23 February. The resistance was slight, and von der Goltz felt able to move forward down the entire line at the end of February. By 26 March the Freikorps occupied their desired line: Sloka–Jelgava–Bauska, following the Lielupe and Musa rivers. This gave them control of Kurzeme province (German *Kurland*), and the major towns of western Latvia.

Red resistance collapsed quickly and the fighting consisted of little more than some heavy skirmishing. The Freikorps command, however, had reasons for making the campaign look like a considerably more intense affair: they had to persuade the German and Allied governments that the Soviets represented a military real threat and that the freikorps represented the only hope for an independent Latvia.

The forces involved at this stage are very slight. We have a few orders of battle for the period, but it should be remembered that at this stage the Germans were still recruiting heavily, so the numbers were in a state of flux.

The Halt on the Lielupe

At this point the Freikorps stopped. The reason for this halt is debated, but we can be certain it was not because the Soviets were capable of resisting, nor because the Freikorps needed a rest, even though der Goltz claimed that the Allied blockade was preventing him from advancing.

Firstly, the non-Balt portion of the freikorps had no particular reason to conquer Latvia, as such. They sought a Baltic haven outside the terms of the Armistice, but had no attachment to any national cause. Riga would be a prize worth having, but Kurzeme province filled most of their requirements in the meantime. The Allied blockade meant that the gain of Riga port would have been redundant.²⁵

There was also opposition in the German parliament to further campaigning and von der Goltz was told to halt his advance. Though later Nazi historians were to make a great deal of this and other apparent failures to support their men in the field, this must be rejected. The Noske government supported the Baltic troops throughout this period, allowing men, money and equipment to flow readily. Although the Nazi line was that the German government cravenly bowed down to the Allied demands at Versailles, the reality is that they evaded them as much as possible without risking a return to open war.²⁶ If von der Goltz had disobeyed and carried on, the German government may have publicly repudiated his actions, but was unlikely to do anything active to restrain him. In any event, the Baltic Landeswehr, Latvian and Russian troops could probably have taken Riga by themselves, if that is what von der Goltz had wanted, with no need for any Germans to have been involved.

Further, the longer the Soviets held central Latvia and continued the Red Terror the more the population would welcome the Freikorps, especially since feeding the population of Riga had become an urgent problem – which the Germans would have been no more able to effectively solve than the Soviets, should they have conquered the city, other than by letting the Allies take charge.

However the prime reason for the halt, was that the Germans wanted to rectify their political situation before proceeding. The recognition of the Latvian Provisional Government in late 1918 was a thorn in the side of the German expansionists. Initially it allowed the freikorps a perfect legal cover to operate in Latvia – they had been invited in as part of a new Latvian army and were not in breach of the Armistice – but from now on they considered it only a liability.²⁷

²⁵ Also Leipāja and Ventspils was not ice-bound in winter whereas Riga was, and the area north of Ventspils was more heavily mined, so Libāu would probably have continued to serve as the supply base even if Riga's port was taken. Von der Goltz was specifically told that the taking of Riga would not end the blockade unless he allowed the Letts full freedom to organise militarily and politically.

²⁶ A large number of the freikorps members would have welcomed a return to hostilities, so in their opinion any concession to the Allies was unnecessary.

²⁷ An early attempt to remove the Ulmanis government by the Baltic baron Heinrich von Stryk, in association with some Swedish and German supporters, had failed. This failure moreover alerted the Allies to German machinations and



While it was stuck in Liepāja and dependent on German support the Ulmanis government could do little, but if Riga was taken it would be able to call on the support of most of the country. The Germans did not wish to risk losing control of the situation by giving a boost to the Nationalists, which the capture of Riga would inevitably do.

The Missing Lithuanian Element

Because almost all of the English language histories of the Baltic campaign deal exclusively with the Latvia, there is a sense in them that nothing was happening militarily at this time. The freikorps, however, however had a southern flank that extended far into Lithuania.

Vilnius had fallen to the Soviets on 6 January 1919 but their offensive in Lithuania seems to have run out of steam as it did in Latvia and Estonia, leaving a small western portion in the hands of the retiring German army. At the beginning of February an accord had been reached with Allied blessing between the provisional Lithuanian government and the Poles, which allowed the Germans to retain possession their current holdings in Lithuania on the basis of keeping out the Soviets, without interference from Poland.

Freikorps were formed from the remnants of the retiring army and they co-operated with the Nationalist Lithuanians. The Poles were the traditional ruling class in Lithuania, so it was easier here than in Latvia for the Germans to get along with the locals. The Lithuanians resorted to conscription in early March, finally started to sort out an army, and the position was stabilized.

Meanwhile the Poles, were pushing into Belarussia and south-eastern Lithuania against the Soviets, to reach the Niemen in mid-February, soon moving forward to Baranowicz and the outskirts of Lida, where they met firm Soviet opposition. After a pause, an important operation was mounted to take Vilnius and its surrounding area, firmly in Polish hands by the start of May. Taking opportunity of this and the advance in Latvia, the German-Lithuanian forces pushed forward too, if only to prevent further annexations of Lithuania to Poland.

By the start of May, the demarcation line between Poles and Germans ran south of Grodno and northwards slightly to the east of the Niemen to Ukmergė.²⁸ Thus German forces in the Baltic had a line facing the Soviets from Tukums to Ukmergė, of slightly over 200 km, not just the short distance in Latvia shown in most histories of the Baltic campaign. Fortunately for them, the Soviets showed as little interest in attacking here as they did in Latvia.²⁹

This was an enormous space to occupy, half of modern Lithuania, and doubtless the freikorps concentrated on a few vital points and left the rest to the locals, but even so it must have taken quite a while to organise their occupation. Most of the freikorps in this area were independent of von der Goltz, but it does seem that the northern portion around Šiauliai was linked to him. In any case, he could hardly go charging across Latvia and leave his southern flank unprotected, so he would have needed to co-ordinate actions with his southern colleagues, whether they were under his orders or not.

The new Poland already had very poor relations with both Germany and Lithuania. Pilsudski, the Polish leader, appears to have regarded the Lithuanian government as a virtual German puppet and conducted a contradictory strategy of annexing Lithuanian lands while trying to come to a settlement with the Lithuanian government. This led to increasing border incidents between the Lithuanians and the Poles, eventually resolving into an uneasy peace in mid-1919. It appears that as the Lithuanian forces grew stronger and more able to defend their country that the German presence moved to the north-west of the country, supporting the main effort in Latvia, so that freikorps and Poles were no longer in direct contact.

also persuaded many Letts that they Provisional Government was co-operating with the Germans out of need, rather than desire.

²⁸ Pryzbylski p72

²⁹ And incidentally showing that the military failure of the Soviets in Latvia was mirrored in Lithuania, so cannot have just been related to the lack of will in the Latvian Divisions.



Politics

The Baltic German Coup

The Latvian Provisional government, weak and ineffectual as it was, would not be bought or cowed into obedience by the Germans. It could always hope the Allies would come to their aid, and that looked increasingly likely as patience with the Germans began to wear thin with both the British and French. The Germans could not just throw out Ulmanis though, and work as an army of occupation, because in order to maintain the fiction that the Baltic freikorps represented a volunteer Latvian army there needed to be a Latvian government. The German government, which the Freikorps relied on for its money and supplies, would never agree to anything that blatantly risked throwing the Versailles negotiations into doubt.

So a new government was needed – one which on paper was at arm's length from the freikorps and could proclaim itself “Latvian”. This merged nicely with the feelings of most Balts, who felt themselves the natural ruling class of Latvia, and who sought a regime that was more closely aligned to their interests, since the moderate socialism and democratic tendencies of the Provisional Government threatened their land and political influence.

So, with the connivance of von der Goltz,³⁰ the Baltic Germans planned and executed a coup on 16 April, replacing the Ulmanis government with a new one completely dominated by Balts. The head of the new government was a pastor, Andrievs Neidra, but his ability to influence events was marginal since von der Goltz basically called all the important shots.

Although the coup was successful with little bloodshed, the former government ministers were mostly able to escape. At the same time, the Germans briefly arrested large numbers of Latvian officers³¹ and destroyed some headquarters material. The Germans also made hostile movements towards the Allied vessels, installing machine-guns on the wharves, but backed down when the British threatened to shoot them off. Efforts by the Balts to arm two trawlers were also aborted after threats to sink the vessels.

The Allied Response

Although unable to prevent the coup, the Allies immediately acted to protect all the Latvians they could. The majority of the members of the Provisional Government were granted asylum and eventually gathered together on the *Saratov*, still waiting in the Liepāja harbour to unload its weapons. It is likely that the Germans would have commenced a purge of nationalist supporters as well if they had not been restrained by the Allied representatives.

As well as the Germans' political activities and military non-activities, there were plenty of other sources of Allied and Lettish grievance. The freikorps were behaving with increasing brutality to the local population. Citing the blockade again, they requisitioned food to the extent that the population began to starve.³² A naval soup kitchen was able to relieve much of the distress in Liepāja until food supplies started to arrive, but the conditions in the countryside grew worse, with requisitioning turning to looting.

As well as ceasing his own operations, von der Goltz continued to impede others. The Lettish forces were subject to increasing harassment and prevented from training and arming properly. The Estonians proposed that the Russian vessels in Liepāja harbour be turned over to them, so that an attack could be launched in the Bay of Riga but despite Allied urging, the freikorps refused to hand them over.

It had now become clear to the Allied representatives on the spot that von der Goltz was not attempting to defend Latvia from Bolshevism but had some other motives in mind. But when pressure was applied, he would then blackmail the Allies by threatening to withdrawal and leave the country to the Soviets. Forced to play at diplomat, and often unwilling to accept just how far von der Goltz was prepared to go in his deceptions, the officers in Liepāja struggled to find a solution.

³⁰ The Baltic Landeswehr being conveniently moved from the front line for this purpose. There is no doubt that von der Goltz was in on the coup, although he tried to maintain his innocence by being absent at the actual moment.

³¹ 550 of them, if Benoist-Mechin is to be believed, being the entire HQ.

³² In direct contradiction of the Armistice terms.



A submission in mid-May to the British War Cabinet read:

“(d) We are in the inconsistent position that, while we are placing every obstacle in the way of German assistance towards defending Latvia against the Bolsheviks, we are giving no effective support to the Letts. If the Germans withdraw, on account of our denial of sea transport, the onus will be on us of having delivered the country to the mercy of the Bolsheviks. On the other hand the Germans behave as an army of occupation and place every obstacle in the way of the organisation of a Lettish National Force.

“(e) Requests [from the Letts] are constantly made to British naval officers on the spot for statements as to the Allied intentions and for assistance of every description. It is manifestly injurious to British national and naval prestige that such requests should go unanswered.”³³

But while one was clearly needed, setting a clear policy in the Baltic was difficult. As well as the belief that the Germans were the only ones holding the Soviets from finishing off the conquest of Latvia, the Allies were constrained by their support for the White Russians, who were firmly set against any independence movements in the former Empire. The lack of firm information, slow communications, need to consult allies plus the large number of other pressing issues back home further slowed the decision making process.

The Latvian Response

The Lettish troops in the freikorps area were now commanded by Colonel Balodis, after the unfortunate death of Kalpaks.³⁴ Von der Goltz had carefully placed the Lettish units facing the Soviets to the north of the line, so that they were unable to intervene to prevent the coup in Liepāja. They formally objected to the takeover, but decided that they were not strong enough to take on the Germans for the moment, and that the Soviets were the first priority.

Recruiting increased considerably in the Latvian units in the Estonian army, which was now seen as a more effective way to rid Latvia of the Soviets. It would have increased in Kurzeme too if the Germans had not acted to forbid recruiting and had allowed the Letts to arm properly.

The political wing of the nationalist movement did not rest quiet either just because their representatives were in effective exile. They continued to meet, both on the Saratov and secretly ashore. An anti-Niedra newspaper was started. The coup naturally removed any doubts that Ulmanis might be a secret German puppet, so in that respect it acted to increase his standing among Letts and Allies.

The overseas representatives continued to press for recognition and assistance opposed by the White Russians, who were committed to a “one united Russia” and were seduced by von der Goltz’s promises to assist in their anti-Bolshevik crusade. On 28 May the Allies collectively granted *de facto* recognition to the Ulmanis Government, while it still sat in Liepāja harbour, against the competing claims of the Niedra puppet regime and the White Russians. Along with this came promises of more practical support, in terms of food and weapons.

The Summer Campaign

German Preparations

As soon as the new Niedra regime was settled, the freikorps began to prepare their further advance. This could not be delayed too long, or there was the risk that the Estonians would liberate Riga ahead of them.

Plans were delayed for several weeks because this was the season of the thaw, traditionally a season when military operations cease in the east. Another, more comical, problem was the kidnapping of Niedra by nationalist Letts – a substitute puppet had to be found until the former pastor escaped.

³³ Cowan’s War p87.

³⁴ Particularly unfortunate because he was killed by a German bullet. It now seems likely that the incident, which took place in fog, was a genuine mistake, and the Lettish troops involved certainly seem to have accepted this. Most others Letts at the time did not.



The greatest set-back, however, was the order of 5 May that the 1st Guard Reserve Division be withdrawn to Germany, since troops were needed to face Poland, and to stop recruiting in Germany. Faced with the loss of nearly a third of his force, and his most politically sure ones at that, von der Goltz first negotiated for some units to remain, and then renamed others so that in the end only just over a regiment was actually lost.

The new Reichswehr was recruiting in Germany and it must have proved a powerful pull for many of the Freikorps members in the Baltic – the limit to the new German army's size meant that men who waited could well miss out on places. It seems that in Lithuania that most of the freikorps forces were formally enrolled in Reichswehr Brigades and left at this time to face the Poles, although we see some units appearing in von der Goltz's forces later, so not everyone went. The places in the proposed 35th Reichswehr Brigade were allocated to the troops in Latvia, the military powers in Germany having a very high opinion of the Baltic Freikorps – probably more based on their political leanings than their military prowess – and the “Kurland Brigade” was formed in Latvia with the intention that it would become this Brigade, although it seems to have been a paper formation with the troops on the ground remaining in their original units.

Von der Goltz returned to Germany to raise support. The successful clearance of Kurzeme was attracting more volunteers, but now they had to be raised and sent more discreetly than previously. The greater need was for supplies and money.

He also met with Noske and some of his ministers. Seemingly he left feeling that the government secretly wished him to continue, and that its protests were merely a bluff for the Allies, although this was probably mostly wishful thinking. Unlikely as it may seem now, it is quite possible that he did not believe that the government would sign the Versailles peace treaty, since the mood in the military circles he moved in was for rejecting the proposed terms outright. Perhaps he even believed that a successful Latvian campaign would stir patriotic feeling and galvanise opposition to the Versailles terms.

Von der Goltz was also negotiating directly and indirectly with the White Russians in Estonia. He proposed a joint attack on the Bolsheviks, perhaps with his forces designated as Russian. The Whites appear to have been attracted by this plan, but do not seem to have realised that the initial step was for them to attack the Estonians, ostensibly so that they could link up, but actually so that von der Goltz could conquer Latvia undisturbed. Whether he ever intended to march on Petrograd is open to doubt – perhaps he would have eventually, so long as it ensured a German Baltic.

Fortunately for the Estonians, who were aware of this plotting, Yudenich's White Army seem never to have seriously considered his plan. However, these tenuous ideas later took root, especially in Soviet historiography, as proof that the freikorps were “Whiteguard interventionists” – never mind that the Whites stood for “one united Russia” and in direct contrast the whole idea of the freikorps Baltic campaign was to dismember that very Russia.

The German war minister had forbidden the freikorps to advance, but did concede that Latvians might continue to fight. Von der Goltz therefore planned his attack using the Baltic Landeswehr, since it was Latvian – quietly ignoring it was quietly stuffed full of Reich Germans to increase its strength. The Iron Division would merely advance to cover its southern flank. In order to give the appearance of a joint operation, the Letts and Russians moved along the coast where they could not gain any glory.

The Soviets Attack

For some reason the Latvian Soviets had concentrated almost all their efforts against the Estonians, perhaps because Estonia's position closer to Petrograd was more threatening, perhaps because the White Russians were far stronger there. They had had very little success however, their offensives resulting in few gains, which were immediately lost to counter-attacks.

Still the Soviets were prepared to have one more try in the south, with an Spring offensive against the Freikorps. Their offensive was widely advertised in Riga, and so cannot have come as a surprise for the Germans. Although there was some hard fighting, the Reds made no real progress and their attack ground quickly to a halt.

The Soviets' position in Latvia was now basically untenable, squeezed between two increasingly strong enemies and with an army aware that it was beaten. Behind the front lines there was a starving and



increasingly hostile populace, with the Red Terror, collectivisation and lack of food starting to take their toll. Militarily, their forces risked being isolated by a linking up of their opponents as the railway lines from Riga into Soviet held territory were all under extreme threat and the main line through Pskov was cut several times. Only the line along the Daugava River remained, and a sudden campaign by the Freikorps or White partisans could cut it easily at any time.

Riga is Taken

The main attack was undertaken by the Baltic Landeswehr and was only sporadically opposed. The Balt cavalry and the Stormtroopers of young Baron Hans Manteuffel³⁵ led the way. On 22 May, only a day after they started, they stormed across the bridge at Riga, followed into the city that evening by elements of the Iron Division.

The Reds now vanished, much to the chagrin of von der Goltz.³⁶ He sent parties out to maintain contact, but they were unable to keep up with the rapidly fleeing enemy. The Germans' eventual final line was reached over 100 km south-east of Riga – the Soviets retiring entirely from the dangerous Latvian salient. Likewise, Lithuania was also mostly cleared by the end of May.

Since the stated aim of the Germans was to defeat Bolshevism, this should have been great news, but in fact it was the worst possible result for von der Goltz, since with Latvia largely free of Soviet forces there was no need for the freikorps to remain, and certainly not to take control.

The Soviets never again seriously threatened Latvia, nor indeed Estonia or Lithuania. Nationalist forces continued to push out to their natural borders – linguistic and former Imperial boundaries usually – but the Soviet stance was defensive from now on until the peace treaties that ended the civil wars.

Still, the freikorps now took control of Riga, virtually excluding the Letts from their own capital city. A White Terror, as bad as the Red one that had just finished, was now instigated. In Riga alone thousands of opponents were rounded up and crammed into the prisons for the flimsiest of reasons, most of them not having been involved in the Soviet regime in any way. Many were shot every day, after the briefest of trials, and many more died of disease in the terribly unsanitary prisons. The smaller towns were not spared, with hundreds being shot there as well.

The Germans, accustomed to being occupiers rather than liberators by their experience of the Great War and with no civilian power to restrain them, may not have been mentally prepared for popular rule, but the lack of restraint shown by the Balts is quite stupefying – as soon as they gained what they had sought, they set about spoiling it.³⁷

The result, unsurprisingly, was identical to that of the Soviet rule. The nationalists gained in popularity and numbers, while the occupiers were obstructed as much as possible and killed, or worse, if caught isolated. Any doubters in the Allied camp, and there had been a couple, were now persuaded that the Germans and their Balt allies were the problem, not the solution.

With no Soviet forces to impede them, some of the southern Latvian forces moved north and linked up with Zemitāns' Latvians under Estonian command at Limbaži. Lettish recruitment was steady now that almost the entire country was liberated. With the Soviets gone, there was no longer any reason for the Latvians to co-operate with the freikorps in any way and they withdrew their forces.

Meanwhile the Estonian forces moved south into the vacuum left by the Soviets and watched the German advance with great caution. They feared that the Balts would attempt to replicate in Estonia their apparent

³⁵ Yes, a close relative.

³⁶ It is noticeable that an Estonian attack towards Pskov and Valmeira on 17 May was largely unsuccessful, facing numerically larger forces, yet another only a week later made ground with ease – the 1st Latvian Communist Rifle Division seemed unwilling to fight (over 500 were captured inside a week, for the loss of 12 dead and 62 wounded) and the commander of the Red Estonian Rifle Division in the Pskov area offered to defect. The Reds seem completely lost heart once the Freikorps broke their lines.

³⁷ It seems that they really were an oppressive ruling class, based on ethnicity, rather than just the people who had the most money onto whom the poor projected their own hate. Their behaviour shows how the theoretical underpinnings of Marxism must have seemed valid to so many Letts.



victory in Latvia, by calling on the Estonian Balts and White Russians to assist them. There were indeed calls for Baltic German unity, and we have seen that feelers had been put out to the White Russians, but the success of the Estonian state meant that these calls went largely unheeded. The Baltic German unit in the Estonian army, wisely placed facing the Soviets, continued to fight loyally for Estonia.

Estonians meet Freikorps

Victory appears to have gone to the head of the Latvian Balts, however, and their strategy became reckless. A call to arms was sounded which resulted in plenty of new recruits from the formerly Soviet area, although many were very young. But before they had a chance to train and organise the new recruits, they pushed for the immediate clearance from Latvia of the Estonians – despite the fact that the south-eastern portion of Latvia was still Soviet held.

Von der Goltz only warmed slowly to this idea. He still dreamed of a rejection of the Versailles conditions and the resumption of war with Britain and France, but his professional career should have told him that he was taking a big gamble. Other freikorps leaders were far less enthusiastic and some refused outright to take part. Major Bischoff, commander of the Iron Division, was compelled to support the attack, but clearly did not wish to do so.

An intense propaganda campaign commenced. The Balts were told that the Niedra regime should rule all Latvia, and that the Estonian interlopers, with their clear support for the Lettish Provisional Government, should be made to leave. The freikorps were told that only the Niedra regime would grant them land to settle, which was probably true. Everyone was told that the Estonians, and their Latvian allies, were Bolsheviks – and many people actually believed this, including the American Relief staff in Riga.

But the campaign appears to have failed to motivate many of the Germans. The Estonians were clearly not Bolshevik, and in any event most freikorps were motivated mainly to keep Communism out of Germany, not for a crusade to remove it from the world. The superior attitude of the Baltic nobles clearly irritated some of the freikorps – their frequently plebian commanders were not necessarily fond of upper class pretensions. Just perhaps some remembered the start of the Great War, with its certainties that German superiority would quickly overcome all obstacles, and the dreadful result of that hubris. Dozens of freikorps soldiers refused to fight and were imprisoned by von der Goltz.

With the support of the British, and in accordance with their agreement with the Ulmanis government, the Estonians had moved south. By the end of May they formed a line roughly Limbaži–Valmeira–Smiltene–Gulbene, but pushed small units forward, especially ethnic Latvian ones. They then planned a drive on to Jēkabpils, planning to place the Latvian brigade under their command there, facing the Reds.

A week after taking Riga, the Baltic Landeswehr began to advance north. Advanced scouts reached Cēsis on 1 June, then held by a company of the North Latvian Cēsis Regiment, but withdrew. The main body reached Ieriķi, on the rail line some 15 km south of the Estonians in Cēsis, on 3 June. Both sides made demands, which neither side took even slightly seriously, and on 5 June the hostilities officially started. The next day the Landeswehr took Cēsis town from the couple of companies defending it. Fighting continued over the next days around the town as both sides fed troops in, but it appears to have been more by way of sounding out than determined offensives.

At this point an uneasy truce was brokered by the Allied missions, leading to a more formal armistice on 10 June, supposedly lasting until 1 July. The Estonians continued to insist on the legitimacy of the Ulmanis government and that they had the right to enter Latvian territory.³⁸ Von der Goltz insisted that they return to the Latvian–Estonian linguistic border. This was clearly impossible because, quite apart from its position being a matter of dispute, that withdrawal would leave the Estonian troops to the south of Lake Peipus in a position with enemy troops to their rear.

Meanwhile tempers were starting to flare up to the west of Latvia as well. Once the decision was taken to attack the Estonians, the Germans clearly felt that there was no longer any point trying to mollify the

³⁸ The agreement signed between the Latvian Provisional Government and Estonia did allow for the Estonians to hold border areas that were of disputed status. Furthermore, it was clear that the Latvians were happy to allow the Estonians to hold northern Latvia, as the presence of so many Letts in their army shows.



Allies. They placed field guns in the Liepāja harbour facing the Allied fleet and prepared to fight for the town.

On 28 May the Allied Supreme War Council had agreed to allow von der Goltz to remain in Latvia on the basis that he allow the Letts to arm and the Ulmanis government to operate. They were concerned that to order a withdrawal would jeopardise the peace negotiations and were still receiving pro-German reports from the American mission to Latvia. Once the advance on the Estonians and the preparations in Liepāja became known, however, it became clear that they would need to take a much firmer line.³⁹

On 4 June General Foch asked that the blockade be enforced more firmly. On 14 June the Allies demanded that Liepāja and Ventspils be evacuated by the Germans and that all advance on the Estonians be halted. Von der Goltz, answered that this was a matter between the Estonians and the Latvians (i.e. Niedra) – the Iron Division had been transferred for the battle to a nominal status of “Latvians” under Niedra’s control. The Weimar government, caught between their impulses for peace and war, issued ridiculous blanket denials to the Allies while attempting to bring the freikorps to heel.

The British began to fear for their men and ships. They had hoped to restrain the terror in Riga with their presence but ended up withdrawing their destroyers downstream for fear of having them rushed. They also withdrew from Liepāja and when they returned, reinforced, on 24 June they discovered that the Germans has withdrawn from the town, leaving it garrisoned by Prince Lieven’s White Russians, who remained neutral during the following hostilities.

The Battle of Cēsis

The truce was cancelled on 19 June and fighting started immediately on the coast near Limbaži, although this was only a covering action. The Iron Division entered the fray the next day just to the west of Cēsis and the Landeswehr’s main attack on Cēsis came the day after that. But they had blundered badly, and while the initiative was initially in their hands, the result was never in much doubt. It took only three days for the joint Estonian-North Latvian forces to break the Balts completely, with the bulk of the fighting in the Cēsis area and the decisive action occurring on the 22nd. During the fighting the Iron Division gave a remarkably poor showing and soon lost heart completely, though the Baltic Landeswehr showed much more spirit, especially when attacking.

The Battle of Cēsis is celebrated every 23 June as Estonia’s national day – despite the fact that it occurred on Latvian soil and was ostensibly over the issue of who was the rightful Latvian government. There is no disputing, however, the comprehensive nature of the victory.

Nowhere near all the Freikorps forces were able to participate in the Cēsis campaign. The border south of the Daugava against the Soviets needed to be held and Riga and the other major towns had to be garrisoned heavily, since it was clear that otherwise the Balts would be thrown out of them by the Letts. The Germans also needed to keep a close eye on the Balodis’s Latvian Brigade and Lieven’s Russians, though in this they were matched by the Estonians who also had to cover against them joining in on the freikorps’ side. But Balodis’s men stayed out of the fight, watching the border from Jēkabpils north against the Soviets.

The Aftermath of Cēsis

Now the Balts and Germans were in full retreat. On 25 June von der Goltz ordered extraordinary measures to combat indiscipline and defeatism, but to no great effect. He prepared to counter-attack but there was no escaping the fact that he had attacked a stronger, more motivated enemy on their home ground and was paying the price.

At this point, when it seemed it could not get much worse for the freikorps, it did. On 28 June the Versailles peace treaty was signed and the Great War formally ended. For all the Germans in the Baltic this was depressing news. For those freikorps members whose primary motivation was to continue the struggle started in 1914 to an acceptable conclusion for Germany, this was a near fatal blow.

³⁹ The Americans had previously been the most well disposed to the Germans, but their Mission was frustrated in their attempts to restrain the mass arrests and shootings in Riga.



Despite later Nazi protestations that the homeland had left the Baltikumers to their fate, reinforcements were hurriedly rushed to the aid of von der Goltz as soon as the defeat by the Estonians became known, and this led him to hope that the situation could be reversed. However, the Allied blockade and the parlous state of Germany's transport system did not allow the men to arrive sufficiently quickly and he could not hold on long enough for them to make the difference.

In fact the Baltic National Committee, representing the Balt German population, was making peace overtures with the Allies in return for seats in Ulmanis's cabinet and an amnesty for the Landeswehr. Balodis and Lieven were now taking charge of Riga city from the Germans, leaving the German army without even a shred of political legitimacy.

By now the Germans and Balts were in a strong defensive position around Riga city, and had several times repulsed strong Estonian attacks, although a collapse of their northern wing on 1 July made them fall back further and they were now vulnerable to attack from the tiny Estonian navy in the Daugava river. But with their hearts no longer in the fight and the Estonians only a few kilometres from Riga, the fighting stopped and negotiations began.

Peace

Strazdumiūža

On 3 July an agreement brokered by the Allies was signed at Strazdumiūža, whereby Estonians and Germans both withdrew, leaving the Latvians in the middle. The other major clause was that the Baltic Landeswehr was to be detached from German control and made part of the Latvian national forces.

The wisdom of the Allied peace is sometimes questioned, coming as it did when the Germans were facing possible complete collapse – it seems on the face of it that a concerted drive by the Estonians, with the Latvian forces added in, could have driven the freikorps from Latvia. But it is important to note that the Allies were united in their desire to stop the fighting and they were probably right, for a number of reasons.

Militarily, even if Estonia had wished to keep on fighting, it is unlikely that they would have done much more than conquer Riga in the following months. The Germans could have fallen behind the Daugava River, which is a major physical barrier, and the Estonians were not particularly equipped to cross it. Casualties may have been very high, which Estonia could scarcely afford.

It seems inconceivable that Latvia could be freed in one great leap without rest, remembering that Lithuania would also need to be cleared if the Germans refused to give up. The Germans were withdrawing onto their reserves while the Estonian lines were extending along a partially destroyed and vulnerable rail line, so the balance of forces would improve in the freikorps favour, quite apart from the reinforcements Germany was sending. As the Estonians and Latvians advanced they gained an eastern front-line with the Soviets – they would have been forced to detach more and more of their men to defend that border, even as the Germans were losing that problem. The Estonian supply situation was already difficult, and if they had crossed the Daugava it would have been stretched beyond any reasonable limit.

Morally, the Estonian forces would likely lose interest in freeing the western parts of Latvia while their own country remained under the threat of Soviet forces. Conversely, the Germans had shown in the past that they were capable of recovering and putting up a fight when disaster seemed imminent.

Politically, the Allies wanted to avoid another occupation of Riga. Having experienced alternate occupations by Germans and Russians, with seemingly increasing repression each time, they desperately wanted to avoid the Estonians reaching the capital. They feared, perhaps overly cautiously, that with Riga in their hands the Estonian government could force a one-sided treaty on Latvia that would just set up later resentments. They also knew that Estonian occupation would allow the German propaganda machine a field day with their accusations that the Estonians were merely Bolshevik aggressors in disguise – particularly if the Estonians were to start their own terror campaign directed at the Balts, which was always a possibility.

Strategically, the Allies wanted Estonia to concentrate on supporting the White Russians and their soon-to-be-launched drive on Petrograd. The Latvian conflict was always a side-show to the main battle against the



Soviets. With hindsight we realise that the Soviets posed no short-term threat to Estonia, but it was by no means obvious at the time that the absence of half the Estonian army fighting in Latvia would not cause the collapse of the Narva front.

And then there is the distinct possibility that the Germans would leave Riga as rubble, either by defending it grimly or by burning it down on their way out. The freikorps' behaviour up to this point left the Allies under no delusions that continuing the war could lead to enormous numbers of Latvian civilians being killed or made homeless. It was time that Riga had some peace.

The Estonians got their essential requirement, which was for the security of their southern border. They would have liked to follow up into Riga but wisely gave up this short term advantage in order to remain on good terms with the Allies, and particularly the British who were their main supplier of military equipment and whose navy was guarding their coast. The long-term benefits of having a grateful neighbour were not missed either when the eventual border dispute over Valka came to be settled.

The Landeswehr was required to leave Riga and headed for Tukums. The Estonians had originally sought to have it disbanded, but the Allies realised that doing so would be a mistake, since that would perpetuate the Lettish-Balt feud.

Since the Estonians did not take control of Riga, merely sending in a few observers, the treaty was less embarrassing for the freikorps to stomach, which may have been one reason why it could be negotiated so quickly. Although they were certainly well beaten, the Estonians were not able to crow over them from Riga. The freikorps' retention of all their material was an important factor too, since they remained an army in the field.

As we shall see, while von der Goltz kept to the terms of the treaty requiring him to withdraw, he did not particularly intend to follow that up by leaving Latvia for good. It was in his eyes merely a truce which gave him time to reassess the political situation, now that the Treaty of Versailles had been signed, and to restore some order in his ranks.

Latvian Politics

Even before von der Goltz signed the armistice at Strazdumuiža, Niedra had resigned, saying that the Germans' had withdrawn their support for him. On 27 June the Ulmanis government landed in Liepāja from their exile on the *Saratov*, to huge crowds. They could not move to Riga immediately because the Germans forbade land transport and the British feared German mines in Riga harbour. It was not until 7 July the restored Latvian government sailed into Riga on the *Saratov*, the Allies having taken charge of the city in the meantime.

A new government with one Jewish and two Balt members was formed, since the Allies insisted that it try to represent all the people of Latvia. It seems to have been accepted by the vast bulk of the population and it made major efforts to accommodate the ethnic minorities, while never quite overcoming its fear of Balt conspiracies.⁴⁰ In the end only a few Balts had their property confiscated, which fate they could be said to have largely brought on themselves by their refusal to submit to a Lettish dominated government.

Aware that the freikorps was not going to voluntarily withdrawal to Germany, regardless of what they had promised, the Latvians continued to mobilize as fast as possible. The British continued to supply weapons and equipment.

The Soviets must have viewed the German-Latvian struggle with pleasure – not only did it relieve the pressure from them, but it conformed to their theoretical vision of bourgeois society destroying itself. With more important fronts becoming critical, they left the Latvian border only lightly defended. In August the Soviet Latvian Division was reformed and sent south, where it would be critical in the defeat of Denikin at Orel.⁴¹

⁴⁰ There were Jewish ministers in Ulmanis's government, and many Jews fought in Lettish ranks in the new army, four receiving the the Order of *Lacplesis*, the highest military honour.

⁴¹ Desertions had reduced the force to 9,000 men by Orel – and even the commander of the Army Group in Latvia had joined the exodus – and the withdrawal may have been prompted to reduce this plague. The Red Estonian division was also sent to Orel.



They did, however, keep up the offense politically, making peace overtures to both Latvian and Estonia, hoping thereby to drive a wedge between the new nationalist governments and the White Russian forces on their soil. The Allies raised no substantial objections to a Latvian-Soviet peace and informal contact between the two nations began.

The Landeswehr Sent to Fight the Soviets

One of the conditions of the Strazdumiuža peace was that the Baltic Landeswehr be separated from the freikorps. It was sent from Tukums to the Soviet front in Latgale, where the small Lettish unit was struggling to maintain their positions while they anxiously watched events to their rear. This kept the Balts occupied and at some distance from their former Freikorps allies.

Its command given to Lieutenant-Colonel Alexander, later to become Field-Marshal Lord Alexander of Tunis and one of Britain's better generals of WWII – one of the few men to command both Germans and British in combat in the 20th Century. As he spoke good German, was a pure soldier not a politician and came from an aristocratic background like so many Landeswehr officers, he was able to exert more control than would have been thought possible over the unit. Although technically not permitted, Alexander allowed any Reich Germans who wished to fight the Reds to remain in the ranks in the short term, since they contributed a large proportion of the senior officers with combat experience. Only those with overly strong links with the Freikorps were purged. With whole units of Reich Germans lost, and in order to occupy minds, a reorganisation made.⁴²

For most Balts, both in the Landeswehr and civilian, this was the end of their adventure with the freikorps. The new government was seen as an acceptable compromise which would at least compensate them for any land taken in agricultural reform and which would allow them to restart their business and trade. Only a hard core continued to support von der Goltz, mainly the noble element.

Prince Lieven Leaves

The White Russians stood aside from the German-Estonian conflict. Although not in favour of independence for the Baltic nations from Russia, they were no more in favour of German domination.

Since they represented the hated Tsarist order they were not particularly welcome in Latvia. If they had moved to the Soviet border and fought alongside the Letts, then they probably would have been able to stay. As it was, they took food that Letts needed and remained inactive. Numbering about 3,500 by now,⁴³ there were rumours of many thousand more arriving from German POW camps.

The Allies put pressure on Prince Lieven to go and join the main White Russian army massing to attack Petrograd. Lieven, who was an old-school Imperial noble, did want to fight the Bolsheviks but was initially persuaded by von der Goltz to remain. Eventually, after much cajoling, he boarded a ship for Estonia, where his men formed an important part of Yudenich's attack soon afterwards.

However, a large number of Russians refused to be shipped and stayed with the Germans. It may be assumed that their primary reason for staying was to avoid combat on the dangerous Soviet front, regardless of the reasons actually given. I suspect that the men who remained were therefore in large part of little combat value.

Prince Lieven showed the better side of the Tsarist upper class – loyal, caring for his men and country and cultured. His replacement commander of the Russians in freikorps service was a perfect example of the worst of the class – Pavel Bermondtskiy was a charlatan and adventurer, caring little for his men and reckless with their lives. Such men were all too frequent in the White armies of the time, where they were able to take advantage of the class solidarity and old-fashioned scruples of their peers.

Bermondtskiy had adopted the title of Prince Avalov, although he seems to have had no entitlement to it, and is often called Bermondtskiy-Avalov as a result. He also claimed to be a colonel, which is hard to check as his

⁴² This was into three battalions and a squadron. The battalions were 1,200, 950 and 850 strong, still under German commanders in August, and each of three infantry companies, an MG company, a cavalry detachment and a battery of four field guns. The HQ had signallers, engineers, medical services, horsed supply and a squadron of 8 light planes.

⁴³ Mangulis p56



career in WWI appears to have involved little fighting but a great deal of shameless self-promotion. He was selected by von der Goltz as a suitable puppet for his next trick, and lacked any organisational or leadership skills worthy of the position he filled, but his flamboyant manner appears to have been perfect for recruitment.⁴⁴

The “West Russian Volunteer Army” grew steadily, although many were in fact Germans. It was well equipped with German arms and uniforms although some small concessions to Russian-ness, such as large colourful shoulder-boards, were permitted. It was fully integrated into the freikorps, and all major military decisions appear to have been taken by freikorps officers.

Although happy to submit to the nominal command of Admiral Kolchak, safely distant in Siberia, Bermondts always refused even the slightest actual control from Yudenich in Estonia. He had no intention of actually going to fight the Bolsheviks himself and prevented any of his men from going either. The charade of pretending to be interested in the anti-Bolshevik struggle was seen as necessary to keep the Allies off balance but has too often been accepted at face value, especially in Soviet accounts. It is clear that the “Bermondtsists” in Latvia were not, and never could be, a force fighting for “White” Russia and, in particular, should not be included in Yudenich’s forces.

There was a civilian “government” pieced together for this charade, but it was even more fanciful than the army and we can safely ignore it. Everyone did at the time.

The Germans Do Not Leave

Technically, von der Goltz had agreed to evacuate the freikorps from Latvia, but no-one particularly expected him to actually do so. He pulled back from Riga and the ports of Liepāja and Ventspils, but retained most of western Latvia. His forces, now with their HQ in Jelgava, needed to be reorganised completely, but were far from spent.

Opinion about the wisdom of the Baltic adventure was now divided in Berlin and contradictory messages were sent – demanding evacuation on one hand, but continuing to pay the troops when they refused to go. This left the militarists,⁴⁵ fortunately for the freikorps plentiful in the new German Reichswehr, the White Russian party in Berlin and some of the Baltic Barons supporting further action. A propaganda campaign, both in Latvia and in Germany, pounded away on the themes of the destruction of German culture in the Baltic and the perfidy of the Letts in not granting the promised land for colonisation.⁴⁶

It was clear that von der Goltz was waiting for some fortuitous change in the situation, but in the meantime he busied himself with organising his troops, and those of Bermondts. The Reich Germans ejected from the Baltic Landeswehr needed to be reabsorbed. There were new reinforcements from the homeland. On the other hand many men returned home – weary, homesick, no longer willing to fight non-Bolsheviks – and many more were purged for defeatism or disagreements over means and ends. Some left because their government ordered them to, and the obedience to formal orders over-rode their desire to remain. Von der Goltz also set out to remove any half-hearted troops, such as those that put up such a poor showing at Cēsis. It is usually said that the result was a much better army, but to me it is not clear that the end result was a fully effective force. Discipline was still not good as the men struggled to find motivation, and the local population suffered terribly from requisitions and outright plunder, mixed with a fair amount of gratuitous terror.

To countless Allied requests to commence the evacuation, a stream of excuses, prevarications and lies were returned by von der Goltz. These included denying that he had been ordered to leave, refusing to leave by sea, saying that it would take over two months and complaining that his men would cause problems since they had been promised land in return for their service. Some men did indeed leave as a result of the purge of defeatist elements, but the Allies were not unaware that recruitment continued surreptitiously. As a result, the Allied blockade remained in force, aggravating the Germans’ supply and equipment problems –

⁴⁴ He tended to dress Cossack style apparently for no better reason than that it looked theatrically Russian.

⁴⁵ Some of the support for the Baltikumers was from right-wingers who wanted the troops kept together for later, regardless of whether they fought or not, intending them to overthrow the Weimar government.

⁴⁶ Although the Latvians had not only never promised land for colonists, having specifically rejected to include such terms, the propagandists weren’t going to let such a detail affect them.



a couple of German torpedo boats that arrived in Liepāja were escorted back home, being in contravention of the Versailles treaty, which allowed only minesweepers.

Clearly an evacuation was inevitable unless something new could be found. The answer was a variation of a scheme von der Goltz had dabbled with previously – the freikorps would become a White Russian force and march on Smolensk and St Petersburg! The German government was persuaded to accept this plan and, more importantly, continue to pay the men who chose to serve in Russian forces. Unbelievably, the senior officers appear to have taken this hare-brained ploy seriously, although von der Goltz himself seems to have been more realistic. It is hard to tell what the men thought, perhaps they hoped that a victory would result in the promised farmland, but it seems that in practice they increasingly came to regard themselves as merely mercenaries with no personal stake in the battles that they were to fight.⁴⁷

Von der Goltz seemed to realise that his time was up, but started working on the new arrangement. The newly recruited Russians were trained and a “German Legion” was formed, which would fight under the Russian flag.

On 24 August there was a mass refusal of the remaining freikorps, officers and men, to any order to return home. A trainload of the Iron Division setting out was stopped by Bischoff and government representatives harangued. Von der Goltz formally objected, since it was technically mutiny, but nothing effectively changed, other than the pace of evacuation slowing down even further.

The Germans become Russians

On 17 September the official change-over occurred: henceforth orders were issued in Bermondts name. The strictly anti-Bolshevik nature of the new force was stressed, and Letts were invited to join. Furthermore, on September 25 command of the remaining freikorps forces was taken from von der Goltz and given to General von Eberhardt – well in theory anyway – since the previous commander’s name was now so thoroughly discredited in the Allied camp.

The German government secretly accepted that men might volunteer for service in the Russian army, but the Allies were not so compliant. Sick and tired of the machinations, they demanded on 27 September the evacuation of all Reich German soldiers from the Baltic regardless of which army they were in. To force immediate compliance, they threatened a return of the blockade of Germany. This, unsurprisingly, made the German government immediately revoke its permission that men might change over but the new position took, characteristically, a week to reach von der Goltz. He replied, as ingenuous as ever, that he would willingly comply but that the men were no longer under his command – they were now Russian!

The border between the two parties now became more and more active and Germans increasingly encroached on the neutral space between the armies. It was clear to the Letts that something was building.

The Autumn Campaign

Riga is Attacked

On 8 October the “Russians” launched their expected attack. Bermondts directed his attack against Riga, attempting to cut off the Latvian forces on the western bank. He failed in this, but within two days the Latvians were forced to withdraw across the Daugava.

The freikorps spread along the western bank of the Daugava, including Fort Daugavgrīva at the mouth of the river, and began to shell the town of Riga heavily. They also fired on Allied naval vessels, eventually forcing them up towards the mouth of the river. For the first few days the warships did not fire back, hoping at this stage to prevent Allied vs German open conflict, and concerned mainly to protect their missions in the city.

General Balodis increased his forces by taking men from the Soviet front, leaving it guarded entirely by the Landeswehr.

⁴⁷ It is interesting to see that the term “Landsknechte”, with its connotations of military effectiveness and moral laxity, was used in some memoirs.



Because the Allied navies prevented a crossing north of Riga the attempts to cross the Daugava were all made south of the city, and particularly at Jēkabpils and then at Jaunjelgava. They do not seem to have been pressed very hard. It seems that the Germans had assumed that the capture of all Latvia west of the Daugava would force the Letts to recognise the West Russian Army, and perhaps even grant land to its servicemen. The otherwise wanton shelling of Riga appears to have been intended to force the Letts to reach an agreement. The freikorps campaign had run out of steam. Supplies began to dwindle.

Perhaps the freikorps planners hoped for outside help, because there was always the possibility that the Balts of the Landeswehr would come to their rescue. Positioned on the east bank of the Daugava, if that unit had marched north the result would have been very grim for the Latvians.⁴⁸ Bermondts tried actively to get the Landeswehr to turn and the Letts intercepted several radio messages to that effect – Baron von Taube, the Chief of Staff, being the centre of quite a lot of speculation.

It seems, however, that the majority of the Balts had already decided that they could live with the Latvian government and there were few signs of any actual mutiny, although it was clear which side they preferred. By now it should have been clear that only the rich barons really stood to gain by a freikorps victory, and the most ferociously Germanophile had left the Landeswehr by this stage anyway. At the time the personal loyalty that the officers had pledged to “Oberst” Alexander was given as a major reason for their non-intervention.⁴⁹

Even if they had wanted to intervene, there were several problems. To march north would have meant denuding the anti-Soviet front even further, which would certainly not have appealed to the men, and could have proved literally fatal to them if the Soviets took the opportunity to attack. The Estonians cannot be ignored either – they may well have decided to intervene to prevent any march north.

The second blow for the Germans was that the Allies finally decided to fight rather than talk. After completing their primary task, of safe passage from Riga of all Allied Missions and various refugees, the French and British both thought the time had come to act. All German shipping, here and in Libau, was seized by either the Allies or the Letts. Reinforcements were gathered and a largish fleet assembled of British and French vessels, which was to work as one unit in a remarkable display of co-operation.⁵⁰

The first objective was to remove the threat of Fort Daugavgrīva, which threatened all shipping entering the river. The French commander, Commodore Brisson, suggested that as well as bombarding the fort that they should transport some Lettish forces to secure it. An ultimatum was sent on 13 October to the “officers commanding German forces at Mitau [i.e. Jelgava] and Dunamunde [i.e. Daugavgrīva]” from Admiral Cowan demanding the removal of all forces by noon on 15 October. The Germans replied that “There are not and never have been any German troops near Daugavgrīva. Try the Chief of Russian Western Volunteer Army.” Bermondts, for his part, replied that he represented a nation allied to England but had given the required orders.

When it was clear that he had not, the Allied vessels opened fire. Within half an hour the garrison were fleeing, pursued upstream by the Allies. A flotilla of small craft – ferries, launches and tugs – carried a Lettish force to the western bank, where they dug in. Bermondts’s various pleas to the effect that the Allies were shooting at their Russian allies and by doing that assisting the “Bolsheviks” (by which he meant Lettish nationalists) were ignored. Bermondts, in his turn, ignored Yudenich’s vehement attack on him as a “traitor” and orders for him to call a cease fire at once.

The Latvians Counter-Attack

The Latvians decided that prompt counter-attack was required, since apart from the continuing destruction of their capital, they wanted to move before winter. The weather would not particularly affect either army

⁴⁸ It seems to me that without the Landeswehr the Germans had virtually no chance of succeeding in their campaign.

⁴⁹ Not surprisingly the biography of Alexander, *Alex*, makes Colonel Alexander the prime reason for the Balt Barons remaining loyal. But he could have done little to prevent individuals from deserting and the fact that they did not do so in any number can be taken as proof that Bermondts’s campaign was not particularly attractive to them.

⁵⁰ Command in the Daugava was taken by the French Commodore Brisson even though most of the fleet was British, but he consulted on all major decisions with Admiral Cowan, who was at that time overseeing the Royal Navy’s assistance to Estonia.



in the field, but the icing of the Daugava would force the Allied vessels to move from the Riga area removing the best artillery the Latvians had. Further, the closure of Riga port meant that American food and supplies could no longer be landed, and another winter of starvation beckoned. This was all the more urgent, as winter arrived early that year and snow was already falling.

By now Lettish morale was high, since the enemy was obviously not strong enough to deal a killing blow. The knowledge that the Allies had finally definitively taken their side was also a major boost. Their forces reorganised and emergency recruits absorbed – many old men or kids, but determined to fight for their country.

On 3 November the Letts attacked, crossing the river under the Allied guns to the north of Riga. There followed the fiercest fighting of the Latvian wars of independence, and it wasn't until 11 November that the freikorps were decisively broken. The Allied vessels nearly exhausted their ammunition during these battles, but were an important element in the victory.

By 11 November, the Latvian victory was assured – and hence Latvia celebrates 11 November as its day of war remembrance, like a fair part of Europe, except it is for 1919 not 1918.

The Latvians pressed on, determined to finish the job. It is often said that the 1,000–1,500 men of the Rossbach freikorps, which marched overland to the Baltic in defiance of Berlin, saved their countrymen from total defeat, but actually they merely rescued the Iron Division trapped in Thorensberg⁵¹ – the retreat continued unabated.

Bermondts was relieved of his command, and on 18 November von Eberhardt requested a ceasefire. It was refused, and on 21 November Jelgava fell, and the freikorps were in full rout.

Liepāja and Ventspils

While the main battle was raging around Riga, the Germans attempted to capture Liepāja. The main attack commenced on 4 November to be met by steady fire from the British two light cruisers and four destroyers in the harbour. The Allied missions were evacuated on one destroyer and another was sent to Ventspils to see if that was still holding out. It was but its garrison of 300 men thought they might fall to an attack from an estimated 600 Germans. A reinforcement of 150 men was dispatched.

Further German attacks on Liepāja came on the 5th, 6th and 7th, again repulsed with the aid of naval gunfire. Then there was a respite, during which the *Erebus* arrived, originally build to bombard the Belgian coast, she brought more guns and, more importantly, more ammunition for the rapidly dwindling stocks. A French sloop also joined the flotilla.

On the 14th the Germans made their strongest attempt. The British estimated that they had doubled their force to some 4,000 men, against less than 2,000 Letts. They had some initial success, breaking the Lettish lines and penetrating into the town. A counter-attack behind a lifting barrage drove them back.

The Latvians had only 25 men killed, so it can safely be assumed that the Allied gunfire was the deciding factor. This is hardly surprising given the number of vessels and the short range they were operating at (down to less than 2 km). Ammunition once again began to run short, but the freikorps had had enough, and the town was not attacked again.

The Lithuanians Attack

Meanwhile things had gone sour for the Germans in Lithuania too. The simmering Lithuanian-Polish border issues had been cooled by the fixing of a demarcation line by Marshal Foch – and then another when the Poles advanced still further. Although this did not resolve the issues at stake, it at least allowed the Lithuanians to focus on other enemies.

From May to August the Lithuanians had been able at last to advance successfully against the Soviets without any assistance (the Freikorps in Lithuania mostly returning to Germany to form Reichswehr units) largely clearing their country. The Soviets commenced negotiating, seeing in Lithuania an ally against Poland.

⁵¹ The part of Riga south of the Daugava River.



As they moved in Latvia, the Bermondts forces also advanced in Lithuania, again to meet stiff resistance. They occupied the north, basing their operations on Šiauliai and made it clear that they wished a return to Russian rule. The Lithuanians received assurances from the Poles that they would not attack in their rear, and moved their forces to concentrate against the White Russians and Germans. On 15 October fighting broke out in earnest, to the general benefit of the Lithuanians. After the capture on 21 November of Radviliškis, the Freikorps agreed to a ceasefire.

The Aftermath

General Niessel had been sent as head of an Allied commission to oversee the withdrawal of all German forces from the Baltic. He spent a fair time in Berlin before arriving at Memel in East Prussia. Unfortunately, because he had not personally witnessed the German procrastination and excuses of the previous summer, it took him a while to realise that reason and gentle persuasion were not going to work.

He proposed a ceasefire in Latvia, in order to organise a proper withdrawal. This might have reduced the damage that the vengeful Germans were doing to the Latvian countryside as they passed through, but the Latvians were not going to let the Germans off with a warning. On 24 November the Letts allowed a 48 hour truce, hoping that the freikorps would use that time to evacuate without opposition, saving lives on both sides. That was not to be, however, as the remaining Baltikumers once again showed their unwillingness to concede in the slightest. The Latvians continued their drive.

They continued their pursuit until by the end of November the last German had been driven out of their country, at the cost of the burning of a fair amount of Kurzeme. The last days of the campaign saw many terrible acts committed on Latvian civilians and in return any captured German could be grateful if his end came quickly. Atrocity reporting is rarely unbiased, but commentators agree that the freikorps burnt and looted and killed with vengeful determination as they retired.

Lithuania is Cleared

The bulk of the freikorps retired into Lithuania rather than East Prussia, which still left a threat to Kurzeme and the Latvians stood ready on their borders, just in case. They were happy to continue over the border in fact, but the Lithuanians stopped this.

From now on the Allied evacuation commission took over. It persuaded the freikorps leaders that their cause was lost but it still took three weeks to extract the remaining freikorps back into East Prussia. Their behaviour, while not quite as bad as their rampage in Latvia, remained poor and their officers could barely contain them. There were several anonymous attacks on Allied representatives – including a grenade thrown into a room – and severe looting and destruction on a number of occasions. Local civilians also suffered, as the retreating troops plundered for all they were worth. The Iron Division refused to be directed and marched independently to Memel, raising fears of a coup attempt, but in the end all the freikorps were finally cleared out of the Baltic states.

There were also some White Russian and local Lithuanian Balt units still in arms but Niessel took the view, correctly, that with the Germans gone the rest would surrender or could be dealt with by the Lithuanians themselves.

Latgale is Freed

As soon as the freikorps were safely out the way the Latvians turned to the Soviets. In early January 1920 they combined with Poland to take Daugavpils in a large operation. The Poles supplied the bulk of the forces whereas the conquered land was given to Latvia, but the benefit for Pilsudski was that it isolated Lithuania from the Soviets and gave Poland an ally to the north.

The rest of Latgale was cleared more steadily, the Soviets making little resistance, and by the end of January the campaign was finished. On 2 February 1920 the Estonians signed a peace treaty with Russia; Lithuania followed on 30 June. Although the Latvians did not sign until 11 August the war had effectively ended six months before when Latgale was cleared and a secret armistice was signed. Since it was a well kept secret, there was some fighting on the border by troops who were not informed, but this was small-



scale stuff. The Soviets were motivated to respect their bargain, since they were keen to detach from Poland any potential allies in the obviously upcoming flare-up of their conflict, especially since Russia still faced a potential threat from Finland, due to their dispute over Karelia. It has been alleged that the Latvian armistice was kept secret to avoid the desertion of the Soviet Latvian Rifle Division⁵² – many of whose men were keen to return to their homes, and eventually did, past all the barriers erected by the Soviets.⁵³

The Baltic Landeswehr is Split

The Balts had continued to hold the Soviets at bay steadfastly throughout the Bermondts period and remained there until after the Soviets had been cleared from all of Latvia. They numbered some 6,000 men at this stage, still under the command of Alexander, out of a Latvian army approaching 40,000 strong.

Long term, however, the Landeswehr was a problem because it represented a major force that might at any time support a coup intended to return the Balts to the former preferential status in the country. Indeed, a few dispossessed Barons remained eager to incite them in order to recover their land and the Latvians were in no doubt that a mass of volunteers could be raised in Germany to support them. But they could not just be demobilised, since that would have increased their disaffection and perhaps touch off the feared insurrection. In any case, the Latvians were keen for their army to represent the whole country and not just the majority race.

Therefore the government reorganised the army, placing one Balt regiment in each division. Later, the divisions were each reorganised, so as to split the Balt regiments into separate battalions. While seen as necessary, this was not popular with either party, who had after all been fighting each other not so long before and who were now expected to work closely together. There were also practical problems of communication since many Balts spoke no Latvian and the Letts weren't about to speak German in their new country.

The Baltikumers in Weimar Germany

The Weimar government realised that the hard-core Baltikumers were too dangerous to leave intact and the units were officially disbanded, even though some had originally been scheduled to join the Reichswehr. In particular they could not be left in East Prussia, where they would inevitably plan a further escapade in Latvia and probably start to look at removing the Weimar government as well. This lack of gratitude at all they had done for Germany left them even more bitter, and they were among the most enthusiastic members of the Kapp and Beer-Hall *putschen*.⁵⁴ Many drifted into right-wing politics, although sometimes fiercely anti-Nazi.

When Hitler took power, the Baltic campaign was raised to the status of myth. The anti-Bolshevik nature was glorified and an excuse for failure invented in the treacherous behaviour of the Weimar government – the “stab in the back” being the only way Germans could be defeated.

Independent Latvia

The border with Russia sorted out, the Latvians were not quite finished yet. The border with Estonia, and particularly the town of Valka remained a problem. In the end, after much haggling and quite a few threats, a demarcation line was fixed by international arbitration. This ran right through the middle of Valka, which even today remains divided on a “fair” but slightly ridiculous basis.

⁵² Mangulis p65

⁵³ In a typical piece of ungratefulness, the Latvians who chose to remain in Communist service were to suffer particularly heavily in Stalin's purges within two decades. Having served the cause of Internationalism with vigour – and refusing to return to their home country – they were persecuted for their suspected links to a nationalist bourgeoisie state!

⁵⁴ While no expert on the matter, I found that the book that most satisfactorily explains to me the motivations of the freikorps veterans is *The Reichswehr and the German Republic 1919–1926*, Harold J Gordon Jnr, Princeton 1957. This proposes that the freikorps members were opposed to the Reichswehr mainly because they were not permitted to join, rather than any natural right-wing tendencies.



The Lithuanian border was less in dispute, but the Lithuanians desperately wanted access to the sea and the Latvians were keen to see a modification to sort out one of their railway lines that ran briefly into Lithuania. It should have been an easy swap to make, but the Latvian alliance with Poland had soured Lithuania's mood and the treaty took a while coming. In the end the Lithuanians were granted the important port of Memel, which was no compensation in their eyes for the continued Polish occupation of Vilnius. The loss of Memel now meant that Latvia had no border with Germany, which eased their fears somewhat.

Still, the new Latvia faced many problems, not the least of which was its precarious position between two major enemies. It lasted a mere twenty years before the next Soviet invasion followed again by a German invasion. This time though, when the Germans were driven out the nationalists were unable to prevent occupation and Latvia settled down to the grey dawn of Stalinism. But for all their attempts, the Soviets were unable to remove the memories of the days when Latvians fought to call their country their own.

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Indigenous	German	Russian	Other	
Cēsis	Wenden		Võnnu (Est)	Latvian town
Daugava	Düna	Dvina		Russian/Latvian river
Daugavgrīva	Dünamünde			Latvian town
Daugavpils	Dünaburg	Dvinsk		Latvian town
Gulbene	Alt-Schwanenburg			Latvian town
Jaunjelgava	Friedrichstadt			Latvian town
Jēkabpils	Jakobstadt			Latvian town
Jelgava	Mitau	Mitava		Latvian town
Kuldīga	Goldingen			Latvian town
Kurzeme	Kurland	Kurliandiia	Courland (Eng)	Latvian province
Latgale	Lettgallen	Latgaliia	Latgalia (Eng)	Latvian province
Lielupe	Aa (Kurlandisches)			Latvian river
Liepāja	Libau	Libava		Latvian town
Šiauliai (or Šauli)	Schaulen	Shavli	Chavli	Latvian town
Strazsumuiža	Strasdenhof/Strassenhof			Latvian town
Tukums	Tuckum			Latvian town
Ukmergē	Wilkomir	Vilkomir	Wilkomeirz (Pol)	Lithuanian town
Valka (L) or Valga (E)	Walk	Valk		Estonian/Latvian town
Valmeira	Wolmar		Valmeiras (Est)	Latvian town
Venta	Windau			Latvian river
Ventspils	Windau	Vindava		Latvian town
Vidzeme	Livland		Livonia (Eng)	Latvian province
Žemgale	Schemaiten	Zhmud'	Samogitia (Eng)	Latvian province



The Military Collapse of Soviet Latvia.

by Reigo Rosenthal, August 2005

See the maps for troop placements in mid-May 1919. The place names given are, with a couple of exceptions, the names currently used in the modern countries in which they are found. For who struggle to place locations in the Baltic, they can be found on the map showing the Soviet fall back positions.

This article supersedes the information in the general historical article above, and my thanks to Reigo for providing it and the maps. -- M.P.

Looking at the strategic situation in the Baltics in spring 1919, we find the Soviet Estonian Army had started an offensive in the direction of Võru on 17 April. On 26 April that army had 20,112 bayonets and sabres, 98 artillery pieces, 540 MGs, 23 bomb throwers, 5 armoured cars, 5 armoured trains and 14 airplanes. The opposing Estonian forces were generally about half as strong, but they did have an advantage with their 8 armoured trains. Elements of the Marienburg Group of the Soviet Army reached the outskirts of Võru but as a result of a counter-offensive of the Estonian 2nd Division they were thrown back. At the same time, starting on 25 April, the Soviet Latvian Army went onto the offensive against the Estonians in the direction of Rūjiena and Valga. The Reds managed to capture Rūjiena but by 1 May, after a counter-offensive of the Estonian 3rd Division, they were also repulsed from there.

The Red Army then prepared another offensive towards Võru. The Marienburg Group [*modern Alūksne*] was reinforced for this with a Red Cadets Detachment (over 1,100 bayonets, 14 guns) at the end of April, though this was offset when the Polish capture of Vilnius resulted in the 90th Rifle Regiment being sent around this time to Lithuania from the Soviet Estonian Army. This second Red offensive on Võru started on 8 May and the Estonian forces were forced to retreat slightly.

However on 16 May the offensive was cancelled and the Soviet Estonian Army ordered its troops to stay on the defensive: the reason being the successful offensive of the White Russian Northern Corps (under Estonian high command) from the Narva river line. The attack was launched on 13 May and by the next evening Gdov was captured. On 17 May the Whites entered Iamburg [*modern Kingisepp*]. This fulfilled the initial goal of the offensive, which was the capture of Gdov and Iamburg area in order to recruit from the local population. The Estonian command also hoped that this drive would force the enemy to throw some of the forces from southern Estonia against the Northern Corps, and this was equally successful: the Soviet offensive in southern Estonia was cancelled and during the next week the Soviets directed the 3rd, 5th, 7th, 49th and 84th Rifle Regiments, the Cadets Detachment, two blocking detachments, some artillery batteries, some cavalry squadrons and a couple of armoured trains from the south to face the Northern Corps. Besides this, in the middle of May the 6th Latvian Rifle Regiment was sent from the Marienburg Group to the Panevėžys area of Lithuania.

In Latvia the elements of the German VI Reserve Corps stood during April and May on the line of the rivers Lielupe and Musa, with bridgeheads on the eastern banks at Kalnciems, Jelgava and Bauska. Red attempts to eliminate these bridgeheads were repulsed. In Lithuania the German-Lithuanian troops captured between 3 and 8 May the areas around of Ukmerge and Kavarskas. On 18 May the Lithuanians also attacked Panevėžys from south. They took the town the next day, lost it to the 6th Latvian Rifle Regiment on 21 May and then regained it again two days later.

In connection with the weakening of Soviet pressure in southern Estonia, on 16 May the Estonian C-in-C gave orders to his 2nd and 3rd Divisions, together with the Armoured Trains *Divizion*, to attack towards Pskov, Alūksne and Valmiera. The commander of the 2nd Division however thought that his men were not capable of a full scale offensive and decided that, starting on 20 May, he would commence with merely local attacks to tie up enemy forces in front of the division. Elements of the 3rd Division did attack on 17 May in several places, but the small successes were eliminated by the enemy's counter-attacks of the next day.

Then, on 19 May, the Estonian 2nd Division received a proposal from the commander of the Red Estonian Rifle Division that he, and his whole division, would be willing to change sides! The Estonian command decided to use this opportunity to capture Pskov. As it happens, although the changing of colours of the Red Estonian Rifle Division largely failed to eventuate, the desertion of a part of its leadership disorganised



the defense of the Soviet front at Pskov. The Estonian forces started their offensive on 24 May and by the morning of 26 May Pskov and a bridgehead on the eastern bank of Velikaia River were captured. The Estonian losses were very light, while at the same time nearly 1,000 prisoners were taken.

Meanwhile, on 22 May, the Freikorps had captured Riga. Before this the Soviets had attempted again to eliminate the Germans' bridgeheads over the Lielupe: starting from the 18th part of the 1st Brigade of the 1st Soviet Latvian Rifle Division continued to attack the Kalnciems bridgehead and elements of the 2nd Brigade of the 2nd Soviet Latvian Division the Jelgava bridgehead. On the 19th the 3rd Brigade of the 2nd Soviet Latvian Division attacked the Bauska bridgehead. These three attacks were all unsuccessful, and on 22 May all were hit by a German offensive and the Soviets retreated hastily eastwards. Riga was cleared from Reds by that evening.

During the next days VI Reserve Corps moved to the line Bauska–Ikšķile–Ropaži–Gauja river mouth (all 10 to 20 km from Riga). It seems that during this advance the only serious clash with the enemy was on 24 May northwest of Ropaži when the elements of the Prince Lieven Detachment (Baltic Landeswehr) were ambushed by Reds. On 25 May Ropaži fell to the Landeswehr without resistance.

The three brigades of the Soviet Latvian Army listed above had by this time retreated to a line east of Ropaži–Ķegums–Taurkalne–Skaistkalne (basically a N–S line just east of Ogre), but the command of the Soviet Latvian Army were not yet planning any further retreat eastwards. To strengthen the Soviet grouping facing Riga one regiment (the 13th Latvian Rifle Regiment from the Marienburg Group?) together with three batteries were taken from the anti-Estonian front (rather, it was reported on 23 May that they were on the way). On 24 May the combined Livonian-Courland Group was split into two: forming separate Livonian and Courland Groups (only to be merged again at the beginning of June). On the same day the command of the Soviet Latvian Army gave orders to these groups to hold the line Strenči–Gauja River–Rembate–Skaistkalne (basically the same line as before). South of there the Panevėžys Group had to stay on its old front. This meant that the Livonian Group had to abandon the northwestern part of Latvia, although it seems that the local command had already ordered such move previously.

Anyway when the Estonian 3rd Division went on to the offensive in the early morning of 24 May its right wing, heading towards Limbaži, met very little opposition, probably encountering only enemy rearguards. The left wing, attacking towards Valmeira at the same time, met more serious opposition in some places but soon the enemy also retreated here. By 26 May Strenči and Valmiera were captured. The advance of the 3rd Division was now stopped.

The command of the Soviet Latvian Army meanwhile still hoped that, with the help of reinforcements, it would be possible to recapture Riga. But the situation on the army's right flank was becoming worse, with the Soviet Pskov front broken on 24 and 25 May: most of the Red troops there losing their combat capability. The Soviet command saw a danger that their enemy would continue its offensive from Pskov towards Ostrov and Alūksne – that is, to the rear of the Soviet Latvian Army. However, there were still no plans to abandon Latvia and the Soviet Western Front gave an order on 25 May that the Soviet Latvian Army must defend its present positions. The next day the Soviet Western Front ordered its Latvian Army to secure the area of Ostrov and towards Izborsk. The army was also ordered to defend Daugavpils firmly.

The Soviet forces were rearranged: on 25 May the Marienburg Group was subordinated to the Latvian Army and to this was added the 2nd Brigade of the 3rd Rifle Division, whose first echelons had reached the Nevel' area by this time (i.e. 200 km to the east). The High Command of the Red Army also gave the Western Cavalry Division, which was being formed in Bologoye (again 200 km east), to the Western Front, and this division was soon placed at the disposal of the Latvian Army.

The Western Front also reinforced the Soviet Estonian Army, sending the 88th and 89th Rifle Regiments from its reserve towards Pskov. That army received an order to recapture that city, but its attempt at the beginning of June failed completely and a large part of the mentioned regiments deserted to the enemy.

So as we see, the Soviet command did not plan to retreat to Latgale even after the fall of Pskov on 26 May. There was no pressure from the German troops, concentrated in Riga. Therefore one can conclude that the reason why the eventual retreat to Latgale was undertaken was the next Estonian offensive.

This Estonian attack started in the morning of 27 May with the right wing of the Estonian 2nd Division moving in the direction of Alūksne and Jēkabpils, potentially threatening to cut the Soviet troops north of



the Daugava river from their rear. According to a 26 May directive of the Estonian C-in-C, the goal of this offensive was to be the capture of Alūksne, after which the troops were to take favourable defensive positions on the southern border of Estonia. The Estonian command guessed that the Reds would have concentrated part of their forces from the Estonian front to face Riga, which promised success to the 2nd Division. The Estonian command, at that moment, had no plans of cutting off the Soviet Latvian Army: but the Soviet command, supposing that all these counter-revolutionary forces were in fact united, suspected a plan to encircle the Soviet army by simultaneous strikes from south by the German and Polish forces and from north by the Estonian forces.

The group of the Estonian 2nd Division which attacked towards Alūksne counted 4,800 bayonets and sabres, 190 MGs, 24 artillery pieces, 3 armoured trains and 2 armoured cars; which means that they even had some superiority in forces. Although in some places the Red opposition was stiff, already by the first day of the offensive the Marienburg Group was forced to retreat along its whole front. During the evening of 28 May the Estonian 1st Cavalry Regiment, which had left its neighbouring units behind, entered Alūksne, where it stayed the next day awaiting other troops of the division. These didn't meet any serious opposition that day, unlike the previous two.

The command of the 2nd Division decided to continue the offensive on 30 May with the aim of also taking Gulbene. There is no information what happened in the Red staffs from 27 to 29 May, but when the Estonian 1st Battalion of the 3rd Infantry Regiment of the 3rd Division captured Smiltene on 29 May they met opposition there and captured one artillery battery with its crew.

On 30 May the commander of the Soviet Latvian Army reported to the C-in-C of the Red Army that his army did not have sufficient strength to recapture Riga. He also said that the loss of Riga was not too serious a blow and that although some units suffered they were being put back in order. According to him the breakthrough on the right flank of the army, which had resulted in the complete demoralisation of elements of the Marienburg Group, was much more dangerous than the loss of Riga. To prevent the encircling of his army he needed reinforcements from the centre, which could be then concentrated in the area of Ostrov and Pytalovo. He reported that the command of the Western Front had given him a potential line to retreat to, namely Novorzhev–OPOCHKA–Rēzekne–Daugavpils–Polotsk. He also stressed that the left flank of the army was hanging in air since there was no connection with the Soviet Lithuanian-Belorussian Army. At the same time he expressed the hope that if the enemy's breakthrough towards Alūksne could be eliminated with the help of reserves then the army could hold its present positions and, in the future, recapture Riga.

So, somewhere between 27 and 30 May the Soviet Latvian Army had received orders from the Western Front giving a line to retreat to, but at the same time the army command was still wanting to preserve its current positions. These hopes obviously fell apart when the Estonian offensive continued. It can be guessed that the order to retreat to Latgale was given during the last couple of days of May. On 1 June the High Command of the Red Army ordered that the Soviet Latvian Army was to retreat only up to a line 40–50 kilometers west of the Ostrov–Daugavpils railroad. On the same day the command of the Western Front ordered the Latvian army to reinforce the Marienburg Group and marked the line of retreat in Latgale more precisely. This line started from the river Velikaia at lake Beloe over Lake Lubāns along to the mouth of the River Dubna at Līvāni. From there it ran along the northern bank of the Daugava, then on the southern bank over Ilūkste, Avilis lake (west of Zarasai), Diena until Tverečius. This means also that by 1 June at the latest it was also decided to abandon north-eastern Lithuania.

The Estonian offensive continued on 30 May. Gulbene fell on the next day to the 1st Cavalry Regiment. Nearly 1,300 prisoners were taken, plus two batteries and two narrow-gauge armoured trains (one of them was pushed off the line). In the evening of the 31st the command of the 2nd Division gave orders to continue the offensive and to capture Jēkabpils.

Meanwhile the German-Lithuanian troops had, on 26 May, gone onto the offensive between Panevėžys and Kavarskas. By 30 May they captured the area of Kupiškis–Viešintos. The offensive stopped there and the German troops were pulled to the rear. At the same time elements of the 2nd Infantry Brigade of the 1st Guard Reserve Division had continued to advance south of the Daugava and reached the line Taurkalne–Skaistkalne by the end of May. The Iron Division sent two columns towards Jaunjelgava which arrived at Birzgale and Kegums by 31 May. At Kegums the 1st Courland Infantry Regiment had a tough fight before the enemy retreated. The Germans reported these Reds to be the 24th Rifle Regiment (2nd Brigade, 3rd Rifle



Division). On 1 June the Germans entered Jaunjelgava without opposition. One can guess that the Soviet troops south of the Daugava were falling back in connection with the retreat of their friendly units north of the river.

On 2 June, after a day's rest, the Estonian general offensive continued from Gulbene towards Jēkabpils. But there was also some action on 1 June when a recon party captured over 300 men from 4th Latvian Rifle Regiment, together with the regimental "tail" and money, at the Lubāna estate. Further, south of Gulbene a whole regiment – 1,500 men, together with 15 MGs – was captured. This regiment had been heading east: one of its battalions was forced to surrender as the result of a battle, after which the other two surrendered without resistance. (Estonian sources claim this regiment to be 94th Rifle Regiment but this seems to be a mistake, since there seem to be no such regiment at that moment in Latvia.) During the evening of 1 June one squadron also captured Jaungulbene taking about 200 prisoners.

On 2 June Cesvaine fell to the 1st Cavalry Regiment. Soon afterwards the commander of the 9th Latvian Rifle Regiment with his staff arrived from the west and they were taken prisoner. After that the regiment itself approached the town, where it was ambushed by the Estonians. The Soviets dispersed with about 300 men being taken, together with the "tail" and MGs. During the evening of 3 June the 1st Cavalry Regiment reached Ļaudona. According to locals about 8,000 Reds had crossed the bridge over the Aiviekste here not long previously, but a couple of thousand Reds were still at the Ļaudona estate near the bridge, on the west bank of the river. The estate was now attacked suddenly and the enemy retreated in panic over the bridge, failing to blow it up even though preparations for that had been made. Many prisoners were taken. Since the 1st Cavalry Regiment was a long way ahead of other troops it was decided to not to continue moving forward on 4 June.

At the same time the Estonian 2nd Cavalry Regiment moved on the 4th from Jaunpiebalga to Vecpiebalga, capturing on the way the commander of the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Soviet Latvian Rifle Division, together with 4 officers. At the Vecpiebalga church the Estonians met a Latvian company of the Balodis Brigade of the Landeswehr. By 5 June the Estonians had captured Krustpils and Jēkabpils without opposition. The Red troops south of the Daugava had during the previous days crossed the pontoon bridge over the river here, before burning the bridge.

The Soviet Latvian Army now concentrated on the line which the Western Front had named on 1 June. According to Soviet data the Soviet Latvian Army was now missing about 40% of its men: most of them just deserting during the retreat. But it is claimed that 90% of the "old riflemen" (that is those who came back from Russian in 1918) made the retreat to Latgale. During the Alūksne–Jēkabpils campaign the Estonians registered nearly 5,000 prisoners – but many Latvian prisoners were not registered and released to go home, after disarmament.

Meanwhile the Baltic Landeswehr had sent three small columns from Riga eastwards on 1 June. One – composed of a company, a squadron and a battery – went towards Vecpiebalga–Lubāna: and this column probably met the 2nd Cavalry Regiment at Vecpiebalga.

The second column, of identical composition, went along the Riga–Pskov highway towards Balvi and the third one – Stosstruppe elements and 1 gun – went towards Cēsis and Alūksne. They met no opposition. On 2 June these two columns reached Jeriki and by 3 June found Latvians in Cēsis. The Engelhardt squadron of the second column continued to advance towards the east and on 5 June reached the Lietene estate (east of Gulbene) where they met Estonians. This day, 5 June, saw the start of hostilities between Estonians and Germans.

Meanwhile in Lithuania the Lithuanian-German troops had on 31 May started to attack from Kavarskas towards Utena. The Reds put up opposition on the line Kaleki (Kaliėkiai?)–Klewjany–Alanta. They were forced to retreat from Kaleki and Klewjany but the German attacks on Utena failed. On 2 June the town was captured, as the enemy had abandoned it during the previous night. The Reds retreated from here towards Daugavpils. The German troops were now pulled back to the rear, while the Lithuanians continued to pursue the enemy.

In conclusion: the retreat of the Soviet Latvian Army to Latgale was not caused by the capture of Riga by the Germans but the result of the Estonian offensive towards Alūksne and Jēkabpils. Without this offensive the German-Lithuanian-Latvian troops would obviously have had to make much greater efforts and suffer many more casualties in order to clear the Soviet forces from central Latvia and north-eastern Lithuania.



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