

The Latvians should not let this critical [*gustigen*] historical moment pass; they must defend with their weapons in hand Soviet power in Russia, in order to secure the end result of a free Latvia. This issue brings both non-party and Latvian Bolsheviks together on the same path.

--I. I. Vatsietis¹

Introduction

The saga of the Latvian Rifle regiments could be seen as a tragic metaphor for the experience of all the frustrated, marginalized ethnicities during the Great War who readily agreed, at least at first, to serve in national military units in the hopes of earning national autonomy or independence. Colonial units composed of troops from French North Africa and the British Dominions took their place in the trenches of the Western Front, while a myriad of subject peoples of the Austro-Hungarian, German, Russian, and Ottoman empires likewise fought in the hopes of advancing the cause of national liberty. This was nothing new in the annals of warfare. One has but to recall the fate of thousands of Poles inspired with enthusiasm for Napoleon after his creation of the “Grand Duchy of Warsaw,” who died on behalf of causes not their own on the battlefields of Europe and the Caribbean only to face eventual re-subjugation to the “Prison of Nations,” the Russian Empire.

Still, the experience of the Latvian Rifles stands apart, both for the complexity of their motivation, and the significance of their contribution to the success—and indeed, very survival—of the Bolshevik Revolution. Yet to date there exists no substantive history of these famous regiments in English, and precious few in any other. As far as this researcher has been able to determine, there are in fact only three monograph length treatments of the subject: one each in German, Russian, and Latvian.² No doubt a major obstacle to research is the scarcity of scholars who have the requisite language skills, the necessary historical background, and the interest to go through the primary and secondary sources that do exist.³ I certainly do not

pretend to meet all of these qualifications (I do not read Latvian for one thing), and what I have prepared for today is—with a few exceptions—essentially a synthesis of the secondary literature

The “road map” is as follows:

First, we will search the socio-political context of pre-war Latvia for clues about the complexity of these men’s motivation, and their military prowess.

Second, we will trace the formation and pre-Revolutionary wartime experience of the Rifles.

Third, we will examine the role the Rifles played in the success of the Bolshevik coup, and the subsequent triumph of the new Soviet state over counter-revolution, conspiracy, and civil war.

Finally, we will consider the eventual fate of the Riflemen, as their usefulness faded and they emerged as a political liability to the new regime.

Fertile Ground: Latvia in 1900

One could hardly conceive of an environment more likely to foster nationalist and revolutionary sentiment than that which existed in the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire at the turn of the 20th century. This was particularly true in Latvia, where rapid industrialization, accompanied by the emergence of political nationalism, took place in the last third of the nineteenth century. Both developments were facilitated by the growing importance of the city of Riga, which acted as a catalyst and focus for revolutionary activity. By the end of the century Riga had become one of the most industrially advanced and economically prosperous cities in the entire Empire, and of the 800,000 industrial workers in the Baltic provinces, over half worked there.⁴

Although one might assume that, as in Poland, the chief target of nationalist resentment would be the tsarist autocracy, in fact in Latvia long standing and fervent hatred for the German landowning aristocracy (the so-called “black barons”) led most Baltic nationalists, especially Latvians, to look to Russia and Russians for salvation, despite the increasing severity of the policy of Russification begun during the reign of Alexander III.⁵ This fundamental orientation never changed until the Revolution, and for some Latvians, as we shall see, not even then. To be sure, as history would demonstrate, Latvian nationalists had little reason to expect better from the Germans, who tended to view the Baltic—like Ukraine—as land reserved by destiny for their colonization.⁶

By 1904, radical Latvian socialism was well organized as the Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party (LSDRP), later known as the Latvian SD. The Latvian SD swiftly came under Russian Bolshevik influence, and eventually Lenin’s direct control, who sought this influence largely because for some time the Latvian party was considerably larger in membership than his. Among the revolutionary socialist community, the Latvian comrades were always more associated with action than theory, as they soon demonstrated in the course of the Revolution of 1905 and the events which followed.⁷

The brutality of the punitive expeditions in the wake of this uprising fanned the flames of revolution and national resistance. Groups of armed youth with names like “Flail” and “Forest Bothers,” many affiliated with the Latvian SD, organized in forests and countryside, ambushing isolated Tsarist forces for the next several years in a small scale but vicious guerilla war that lasted almost until the outbreak of the Great War in 1914.⁸ This gave many young Latvian men an exposure to combat, hardship, and danger which undoubtedly was reflected in the fighting qualities of the Latvian Rifles during the war. An excellent example is the experience of Peter

Kyuzis, later known as Yan Karlovich Berzin, who as a teenager fought in a Latvian SD guerilla organization during this time, and later served in the Latvian Rifles and the Red Army, before becoming chief of Red Army Intelligence in the mid-1920s.

The Latvian Rifles at War

Upon the outbreak of the Great War in August 1914, Latvia immediately became involved. The entire Baltic, still reeling from the punitive expeditions of only a few years before, was now subject to the heavy hand of the imperial recruiters. In the course of “mobilization,” men throughout the empire were caught up in recruiting sweeps which frequently sparked spontaneous massed opposition, and more than a few riots.⁹ Tens of thousands of Latvians were quickly deployed in the two Russian armies advancing into East Prussia in August. In one corps, the XXth, eighty percent of the men were Latvian. Many became casualties in the disastrous defeat at the Masurian Lakes. During the course of the subsequent retreat, XX Corps was surrounded by advancing German units in the Augustov forests and all but destroyed in February 1915. Some 20,000 Latvians were killed, wounded or captured.¹⁰

By May, the Germans reached Latvia, and by the end of September 1915, all of Latvia west of Riga was under German occupation. Perhaps half of the Latvian population fled from the German advance. The Russians also evacuated 85,000 Latvian workers from Riga to the east many of whom ended up in Petrograd's Vyborg District.¹¹ In terms of sheer social disruption, this calamity surpassed even that of the 1905 Revolution, and substantially contributed to the growing revolutionary situation in Petrograd. Meanwhile, the Bolsheviks and the Latvian SD disseminated propaganda tracts and pamphlets. There was more than sufficient reason for the Latvian troops to be susceptible to such agitation. Throughout 1915 and into 1916, more and more of them in front-line units became radicalized.¹²

When the Germans resumed their advance in April 1915, some prominent Latvians in the *Duma*, led by Janis Goldmanis, called upon the Tsar to authorize raising all-Latvian battalions.¹³

They argued that such national units, commanded and composed of people who despised the Germans and were willing to fight to the death to defend their homeland, would prove to be a valuable military asset. At about the same time, two Latvian Home Guard battalions put up an impressive fight at Jelgava, defeating the vanguard of the German advance.¹⁴ Faced with imminent German occupation of much of the Baltic provinces—and a consequent threat to Petrograd—the Russian General Staff (*Stavka*) finally recommended that Latvian rifle battalions be formed. The tsar approved on 19 July 1915.¹⁵

The first battalions were raised in August, and sent straight into the fighting on the Riga front. The officers as well as the enlisted men were Latvian. They quickly and predictably became the focus of Latvian nationalist aspirations. The Rifles, or *Strelniki*, as they were called, soon earned a justified reputation for tenacity in combat. The first Latvian units were composed entirely of volunteers. But high casualties and an excellent fighting reputation, especially compared with the lackluster performance of many of the Russian units, led to the raising of more Latvian battalions in the following months, and manpower began to come from a variety of sources. Some Latvians transferred from the Russian units in which they had been previously serving; still others were émigrés who had fled following the 1905 Revolution and returned now to fight in what they regarded as a proto-Latvian army.¹⁶ The increase in Latvian Rifle battalions eventually required conscription in order to fill the ranks. Altogether, including replacements, probably between 60-70,000 Latvians ultimately served in the Latvian Rifles. Still, this was a much smaller number than continued to serve in Russian units—approximately 150-160,000.¹⁷

By November 1915, the Latvians were organized into eight combat battalions and one reserve battalion. A year later, the battalions were formed into regiments, each named for a region in Latvia. Lt. Col. Jukums Vacietis, a graduate of the St. Petersburg Military Academy, commander of the 5th Latvian Rifles Regiment, and future C-in-C of the Red Army, proposed in 1916 that an entire Latvian Army Corps be formed.¹⁸ The course of events, however, intervened before this could be organized.

Meanwhile, the Latvian SD confronted a dilemma. On the one hand, the formation of Latvian battalions as an autonomous military force seemed to be an important step towards Latvian independence. Additionally, many of their fellow Latvians were eager to revenge themselves on the Germans. On the other hand, the success of the Latvian units in combat could serve to improve the military situation for the Russian empire, and the Tsar, thus delaying the military collapse which would surely precipitate the revolution. The Latvian Socialists ultimately decided to denounce the formation of the Latvian Rifles as a "slavish groveling before the Tsar," and the main target for Latvian SD agitation now became these Latvian units.¹⁹

Their efforts were aided by the growing perception among the *Strelniki* that they were being used as cannon fodder, or, perhaps even more sinisterly, in an effort to bleed Latvia of her military strength to undermine any move towards independence. They believed a pattern had clearly emerged. Chosen to lead one attack after another, beginning with the March 1916 offensive launched by the Northern *Front*, the Rifles, subordinate to the 12th Army and usually in the vanguard of any offensive, repeatedly achieved a breakthrough at great cost, only to have flanking Russian units fail to advance, and supporting Russians (often, in fact, Siberians) fail to relieve them.²⁰ This may have been more of a reflection of the demoralization of the Russian units and the general incompetence of the Russian command system (no doubt further aggravated by language barriers among the various ethnicities), however, than any deliberate intrigue.

Nevertheless, examples abounded, including a diversionary attack near Riga prior to the general Russian offensive against the Austrians in July 1916, and the Battle of the "Island of Death" throughout the summer and early fall of 1916. The worst example was the ill-fated Battle of Machine Gun Hill which opened on 23 December 1916 and lasted for twenty-five days. In the course of this engagement, also known as the Christmas Offensive, the two Latvian brigades leading the offensive sustained 8,000 casualties, in spite of the fact that at the end of the battle the front was more or less where it had been before. The casualties came so fast and heavy that

the Latvians called it the "Blizzard of Souls."²¹ Once more, many Latvians suspected treachery.

Behind the front, *Strelniki* who had "voluntary demobilized" (i.e., deserted), together with other Latvian deserters, displaced workers from Riga, and refugees, played an increasingly central role in the growing radicalization of the Vyborg District of Petrograd by late 1916. The Vyborg section of the Bolshevik Party, composed largely of Latvians, soon became recognized as the "most militant" in the entire organization. During the disturbances of 25 February 1917, the entire Vyborg District of the city was the first to fall "wholly in the hands of the insurrection."²²

Revolution

After the fall of the Romanovs and the emergence of the "Dyarchy" of the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet, the Bolsheviks, who had largely been taken by surprise by the spontaneous February Revolution, now sought to expand their influence at the front, while consolidating their organization and gains in Petrograd. Bolshevik military power during the February Revolution, such as it was, had been limited to a handful of Party cells in the Petrograd garrison, Baltic fleet, and front line units. However, a new potentially useful form of revolutionary military power emerged after the fall of the autocracy. Small organizations of factory workers and soldiers began on their own to form local militias, calling themselves "Red Guards."²³ A priority for Lenin became the control of as many Red Guards units as possible.

Prominent among this new force were the Latvian Red Guards. These units were mainly made up of deserters from Latvian Rifles regiments and Latvian factory workers, many of whom were from the Vyborg District. Eventually, by the time of the October Revolution, whole Latvian Rifles units, including entire regiments, were reconstituted as Red Guards by the simple expedient of changing the names of their units.²⁴ Latvian troops had a fearsome reputation at the front—even something of a mystique—and as noted above, the Latvian Bolsheviks in Vyborg were known for their militancy. It therefore seems logical that Lenin would look to these men as

the potential military vanguard of a Bolshevik revolution. Indeed, the importance of the Latvian militia, and later the Latvian Red Guards, as a reliable Bolshevik armed force grew rapidly after February.

Ironically, those *Strelniki* who supported the Bolsheviks seem to have done so for the most part out of national patriotism, rather than Socialist conviction. In March and April 1917, the first meetings of the Latvian Rifles Soviet, the *Iskolastrel*, all overwhelmingly endorsed a program calling for the liberation of Latvia through victory over Germany, much to the disgust of Lenin's internationalists. By May, however, the pro-Leninist Latvian SD managed to seize control of the *Iskolastrel*.²⁵ They won over many *Strelniki* with Lenin's promise that a socialist Russia would support a free and independent Latvia, and contrasted this with the Provisional Government, which was liberally populated with "Russian chauvinists" who insisted that Russia needed to remain united to defeat Germany, and even refused to organize Latvian units above the brigade level for fear (so it was said) of encouraging Latvian separatism. Also, the Latvians understood quite rightly that there was no possibility of nationalist accommodation with the Germans. That left only the Bolsheviks.

On 16 June 1917, the Russian army began the so-called "Kerensky Offensive." There had been serious disciplinary problems in the army even before the February Revolution. Since then, these were exacerbated by the Bolshevik-inspired General Order No. 1, and in the weeks leading up to the offensive they got much worse. The contribution of Latvian riflemen to the imminent disintegration of the Russian army was predictably most significant in the 12th Army. The Bolshevikized elements of this army had in fact already set up a "soviet," *Iskosol* (not to be confused with the Rifles' Soviet, *Iskolastrel*).²⁶ In late August, the 12th Army broke. On 3 September 1917 the Germans finally occupied Riga.

Back in Petrograd, the combination of bad war news from the front and rumors of another food shortage resulted in spontaneous demonstrations and strikes on 3 July, encouraged by Bolshevik and SR agitators. In the course of these demonstrations, Latvian Red Guards clashed

with troops loyal to the Provisional Government but were eventually dispersed by machine gun fire.²⁷

The July crisis demonstrated, at least to Lenin, that the Provisional Government's support rested on a very tenuous foundation.²⁸ It also led some in the Russian high command to conclude that the time had come restore order, precipitating the so-called "Kornilov Affair." This prospective "counter-revolution" foundered badly, however, due to poor organization, irresolute leadership, the fragile morale of his men, and a timely strike by the railway workers union.²⁹ The Red Guards, and especially the Latvian Red Guards, chose to back Kerensky against a military coup, and proved to be the only real military force immediately available until troops loyal to the Provisional Government could be found and deployed.

Following the July Days crisis, the Petrograd Soviet was housed in the Smolney Institute, located fortuitously just south of the Neva River opposite the Vyborg District. A Latvian Red Guards unit, destined to play an important role in subsequent events, was assigned to protect the building. It was created earlier that month, probably by amalgamating several other *ad hoc* Latvian Red Guards units. Sometime referred to "the Smolney Guards," it was later re-named the 1st Latvian Communist Detachment. It subsequently became the bodyguard for Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership, and saw extensive service during the Civil War, when some called it Lenin's Praetorian Guard.³⁰

Meanwhile, events at the front provoked further disaffection among the *Strelniki*. Since spring 1917, the Latvian Rifles had been consolidated into a division attached to the VI Siberian Corps of the 12th Army.³¹ When the Germans renewed their advance on Riga in the summer, Russian resistance collapsed—except for the *Strelniki*, who were now fighting for their homeland. In an irony that did not escape their notice, the Latvians fought and died to buy time for the rest of the Russian army to extricate itself—and plunder Riga and other Latvian towns and villages along their line of retreat. By this time, most of the original *Strelniki* were gone, and fresh levies were much younger, had far less military experience, and were far more radical. The

summer and fall of 1917 was a crucial time in the emergence of Bolshevik sympathies in Latvian regiments. Kerensky's proposal in the fall to finally authorize the creation of a Latvian army corps was too little, too late.

The Latvian Red Guards, many of whom as we have seen were former *Strelniki*, played a central role in the Bolshevik Coup in October 1917. One historian notes that they were "unbeatable at the crucial early moments of the birth of the Soviet Union. The force was small, but even a small force can prevail in a power vacuum." During the coup itself, Latvian Rifles and Red Guards units were instrumental in securing strategic points within Petrograd, and isolating the city by occupying local rail junctions. The only significant military force near Petrograd potentially available to Kerensky was the 12th Army. Latvian *Strelniki* quickly achieved control over its soldiers' organizations, and through a combination of propaganda and intimidation effectively managed to neutralize the entire army.³² Thereafter, over the next few months, the Latvians provided much of the muscle for the Bolshevik's consolidation of power.

In early December Lenin's revolutionary government created the "All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage," the Vecheka (more commonly known as the Cheka). Its basic task was to destroy internal threats to the revolution. Among its original college of directors were several Latvians and Poles. For larger scale operations, it also had a force known as the Military Corps. By April 1918 several Latvian Riflemen were assigned specifically to this unit. Some of these troops came from Lenin's Latvian bodyguards.³³

Counter-Revolution and Civil War

By the summer of 1918, the Bolsheviks had essentially created a one-party dictatorship. All other political parties, save the Left SRs, were outlawed. Tensions between the Left SR leadership and the Bolsheviks grew rapidly as forces hostile to the Revolution, energized by the capitulation of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, began to coalesce and go on the offensive. The Left

SRs, who had since March grown rapidly in strength compared to the Bolsheviks, were concerned both about the growing exclusion of other political parties and the consequences of the treaty.³⁴

In July 1918 they decided to act. On 6 July 1918 two Left SRs, members of the Moscow Cheka, assassinated the German envoy. Other SR detachments in Moscow seized control of the Cheka headquarters and the main telegraph office, from where they began sending cables all over Russia explaining and justifying their actions. Most of the Moscow Red Guards and other paramilitary units remained neutral, an ominous sign for the Bolsheviks, and no doubt a factor in the severity of the Bolshevik "Red Terror" which followed. It was the Latvian Rifles who saved the day. Led by Vacietis, they deployed against SR strongholds on the morning of 7 July and succeeded in crushing the uprising by early afternoon.³⁵

Although the Left SR "uprising" was quickly suppressed, the lukewarm support expressed for the Bolsheviks during the brief crisis served as a catalyst for forces mobilizing against the new regime. Civil war broke out, and for most of the next two and half years the Bolsheviks were in a struggle for survival against a wide variety of forces, including the Whites Guards, Allied expeditionary troops, Cossacks, and even a stranded corps of Czechs. Throughout much of this period, the Latvian *Strelniki*, now re-named the Red Latvian Rifles, continued to remain the only truly reliable troops available to the Bolsheviks, and eventually became the original nucleus of Trotsky's RKKA, the Workers and Peasants Red Army. They were deployed wherever Soviet power was challenged, eventually further and further away from their beloved Baltic homeland.

In August 1918, Lenin's Latvian Rifles bodyguard, commanded by Eduard Berzin, became involved in one of the most notorious episodes of the revolution: the so-called "Lockhart

Plot.” According to most authoritative sources, this was a carefully planned deception operation by the Cheka to expose foreign intrigue, gain access to Western hard currency, or both. On 14 August, two veterans of the Latvian bodyguard, Berzin and Ian Sprogis, after being vetted by the British naval attaché, met with British diplomatic representative Robert Bruce Lockhart to discuss the possibility of Latvian defection to the British forces deployed at Archangel. Lockhart in turn passed them on to SIS agent Sidney Reilly, who agreed to provide the Latvians over one million rubles for their defection—apparently to be provided by the British, French, and American governments. Some have even suggested that Reilly had delusions of grandeur, intending for the Latvians to carry through a counter revolution which would leave him in charge of a new Russian government.

The scheme seemed to be unfolding as planned until untimely real assassination attempts by Left SRs on 30 August left one senior Bolshevik dead and Lenin seriously wounded. The Cheka and the Latvian Bodyguard promptly swept up all known or suspected opposition, including the foreign representatives implicated in the Lockhart Plot. Lockhart and the others (the representatives from France and the United States) spent some time in Soviet custody, guarded by *Strelniki*, but were eventually released. The Bolshevik press announced triumphantly that yet another plot by the interventionists had been foiled. Reilly apparently later insisted that the Latvians were genuine in their desire to defect, but we may never know. As for Reilly, although he escaped the clutches of the Cheka on this occasion, he was later lured back into Soviet Russia by a brilliant Cheka operation called the “Trust,” where the best guess is that he spent years in prison before finally being finally executed or dying in a labor camp.³⁶

Away from all the intrigue in the capital, one of the first engagements of the Red Latvian Rifles was at the Volga town of Yaroslavl, about 150 miles northeast of Moscow. The town had

been captured in July by the forces of Boris Savinkov, the principle White commander in the region.³⁷ In addition to a handful of Cheka troops, the Bolsheviks dispatched the 6th and 8th Red Latvian Rifle Regiments to retake the town, which they did by 22 July. What happened next sullied the reputation of the Latvian troops and other Latvian units through guilt by association for years to come. By late July 1918, Lenin and Dzerzhinskiy had decided to resort to deliberate "Red Terror" in an attempt to cow possible White supporters and intimidate the rest of the population into obedience.³⁸ Over 400 people were summarily executed after a brief pro forma process; following this, the fiction of legal procedure was dropped, and the Cheka began carrying out numerous summary executions.³⁹ The full extent of Latvian involvement in these atrocities—which clearly were orchestrated by the Cheka—remains unclear, though protestations that they had nothing to do with them at all ring false.

Latvian *Strelniki* also played the decisive role in the Red victory over the Whites at Kazan in August 1918. This Volga city was seized by the Czech Legion on 6 August. A few weeks earlier, on 12 July Vacietis had been appointed commander of the 5th Red Army (largely composed of Latvian units), which he now led against the Czechs.⁴⁰ The Battle for Kazan lasted until 10 September, when, supported by a Volga gunboat flotilla, Vacietis directed the final successful assault. Trotsky himself arrived to bring iron discipline to the Red Army's rear area. Following his victory at Kazan, characterized by W. Bruce Lincoln as the "Valmy of the Russian Revolution,"⁴¹ Commissar for War Trotsky made Vacietis the first commander in chief of the Red Army.

Sensing that the final collapse of the capitalist order was at hand, at least in Europe, as early as March 1918 the Soviet leadership began to look west to the weak Baltic and Ukrainian states as the bridge to an anticipated German Socialist republic. Much of subsequent Bolshevik

policy, through the war with Poland, reflected this hope. The revolution was to be spread by the bayonet, as the Red Army advanced westward, and by mass action, as the allied (and subordinate) Communist parties behind capitalist lines organized insurrection. In late November 1918, to support the claim that the Red Army was "liberating" the workers and peasants, Lenin encouraged the creation of Communist "provisional governments" for all of the states along the projected line of march.⁴²

In late November 1918, in his capacity as Commander in Chief, Vacietis moved some Red Latvian Rifles to the vicinity of Pskov in preparation for an offensive into the Baltic. Southern Estonia and northern Latvia were occupied by the Red Army that same month.⁴³ The Reds at first encountered virtually no resistance; German forces were in a temporary state of chaos following the Armistice on the the Western Front. On 4 December, a Provisional Latvian Soviet government was created, headed by Peter Stucka, and on 3 January the Red Army entered Riga.⁴⁴ Stucka had earlier suggested that Vacietis's appointment as commander of the advancing army, together with the heavy representation of Latvian Rifles units in it, would give credibility to the Provisional Latvian Soviet government, and further support the argument that the Red Army were liberators.⁴⁵ Events proved this to be a forlorn hope. The main priority for the new Latvian Socialist regime was to raise troops and money to defend against the inevitable imperialist counterattack. However, the by now standard Bolshevik policies of forced mobilization and wholesale confiscation of private property, from the great estates owned by the German barons to small Latvian homesteads, combined with the Party's militant atheism, provoked widespread resistance.⁴⁶

In response, the new worker's state predictably applied Red Terror. Few details of the short-lived Latvian Bolshevik regime appear in the literature; it has been all but ignored by

Western writers, and Latvian ones, who focus instead on the White and Latvian Nationalist efforts to defeat the Bolsheviks.⁴⁷ The Soviet literature likewise only discusses the destruction of the Red regime in the context of imperialist counterrevolution. Consequently, we can only speculate about the form the Red Terror took in Latvia, or the role, if any, played in it by the Red *Strelniki*. What is known is that in Latvia the Red Army, notoriously ravaged by wholesale desertion in the best of times, now experienced truly disastrous levels of desertion, clearly reflecting the fact that over half of the Bolshevik army in the Baltic was composed of Latvians. This no doubt influenced Lenin's subsequent decisions about where to employ the increasingly suspect Latvian troops.

Most of the original Latvian Rifles who had joined the Bolsheviks were dead by now; many of those who remained had been forcibly recruited, and deserted when the Red Army approached their homes. The efforts of the Red Army, the Cheka, and the Latvian Soviet government managed to increase the number of Latvians in all units of the RKKA from 12,000 in February to 27,000 by May 1919; however, most of these men were unreliable. Many simply ran off the first time they were shot at, and when the Latvian divisions were transferred south to fight Deniken following the retreat from Riga (see below), most deserted. In fact, one source puts the total number of Latvians "recruited" by the Red Army in Latvia at 110,000, of which 100,000 deserted.⁴⁸

When German forces and a Latvian national army began to drive against the Latvian Bolsheviks in the Spring of 1919, the Red Army found itself outnumbered and outfought. Adding to the level of violence and confusion was the fact that German *freikorps* and the "Baltic German" *Landeswehr*, the members of which were usually extreme Germanic chauvinists, in clear violation of directives from the Allied control commission in Paris attacked both

Bolsheviks and the Latvian nationalist army. By late May, the Germans were besieging Riga again; the Red Army and the Latvian Bolshevik government fled on the 23rd. Pskov and Iamburg were lost, as well. Perhaps 11,000 Latvians and Russians fell victim to "White Terror," a series of random atrocities perpetrated by the German troops.⁴⁹ Taking advantage of the Bolsheviks' flight, Latvian and Estonian troops began to press to the south and east. Soon the Red Army was in a full-scale retreat from the central Baltic region.⁵⁰

In the summer of 1919 the Red Army seemed to be in the midst of the worst crisis it had yet faced. To the west, the Ukraine was in open revolt against Soviet authority. In the north, the recently organized Northwestern White Army, commanded by Nikolai Yudenich, prepared to press towards Petrograd.⁵¹ And in the south, Anton Deniken's army captured Tsaritsyn (later known as Stalingrad and then Volgograd), the Donets Basin, and Kharkov by June, and next planned to strike towards the new Bolshevik capital at Moscow (moved there after the German conquest of Riga).

In response, Lenin ordered the Red Latvian Rifles to redeploy from their Baltic homeland south to the Tsaritsyn Front, where, as noted above, most soon deserted. This decision was opposed by Trotsky, and prompted the resignation of Vacietis as C-in-C in July. The remaining elements of the Red Latdivision, as the combined Latvian Rifles units were now known, nevertheless still fought effectively, leading the pursuit of Denikin's army, commanded next by Peter Wrangel, down into the Crimea. There the *Strelniki* were further diminished by heavy combat losses and typhus. This time the all too familiar failure of other units to support their attacks seemed to indicate that it was now the Bolsheviks, instead of the Tsar, who wanted to see them destroyed. A counterattack by Wrangle in June 1920 shattered the remnants of the 9th Latvian regiment, and decimated three other Red Latvian regiments as well.⁵²

This almost proved to be the last straw. When the 6th Red Latvian Rifles regiment was ordered to make an attack in early July, it refused, and instead demanded repatriation to Latvia. Desertions skyrocketed. Military tribunals failed to restore discipline, although there seems to be no evidence that there were reprisals at the time in the form of executions. Surprisingly, the remaining men in the Latdivision continued to fight effectively against Wrangle, destroying his last defensive position in November 1920, thereby precipitating the evacuation of the last organized White forces from the Crimea. One can only speculate about the motivation of the *Strelniki* by this point. Undoubtedly a large portion of it was the soldier's universal sense of duty to his comrades, combined perhaps with a sense of fatalism, in that the journey home to Latvia was long and perilous. It seems doubtful that many still clung to any delusions about the nature of Soviet power or Lenin's real position on Latvian national aspirations.⁵³

The Fate of the Latvian *Strelniki*

By late 1920 Lenin's government now had the luxury of going onto the offensive, in an effort to rebuild, at least in part, the Imperial "prison of nations." With respect to the Red Latvian Rifles, their usefulness to the Revolution had clearly come to an end. With the establishment of an independent Latvian state in spite of Bolshevik efforts, not because of them, most Latvians had little reason to continue in Red service. The desertions speak for themselves. They also suggest, once again, the true motivation of Latvian troops. Vacietis' resignation merely underscored the point. The gradual emergence of a reasonably effective Red Army also meant that the dangerous example of a strongly nationalistic military organization no longer had to be tolerated. The Latdivision consequently was officially disbanded on 29 November 1920, although many of its remaining number went on to serve in the Red Army, notably the Fifteenth Army, which played a central role in the Soviet-Polish war of 1920 under a new commander, Mikhail Tukhachevskiy.

Many Latvians continued to serve in high positions in the Soviet government, including military command, the diplomatic service, secret police, and military intelligence. As Stalin consolidated his power, however, more and more “foreigners” were purged, including many Poles, Finns, Jews, and Latvians. The fate of Jukums Vaciētis, the first C-in-C of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army, serves, like the experience of the Latvian Rifles, as something of a metaphor for what happened to thousands of foreign “specialists” under Stalin. Rejected by his homeland for his pro-Bolshevik service, he remained in the Red Army, eventually becoming a lecturer at the Voroshilov Military Academy. He was arrested in the middle of a lecture during Stalin’s purge of the Army, and shot without ceremony in 1938.⁵⁴

¹ Cited in Uldis Germanis, *Oberst Vacietis und die lettischen Schuetzen im Weltkrieg und in der Oktoberrevolution* (Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell, 1974), p. 242; translation mine.

² Germanis; Ya. P. Krastynya, ed., *Istoria latyshskikh strelkov* (Riga: Izdatl'stvo "Zinatne", 1972); and Arvids Memenis, *Strelnieki: Latviesu Strelnieki I parsauls kara* (Riga: Junda, 1995).

³ An excellent survey of these sources appears in Ch. 2 of Germanis.

4. Ibid., p. 457.

5. Two other points of view on this issue are represented in the scholarship of Andrejs Plakans in "The Latvians", *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914*, ed. by Edward C. Thaden (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), and Paulis Lazda, "The Phenomenon of Russophilism in the Development of Latvian Nationalism in the 19th Century," in *National Movements in the Baltic Countries During the 19th Century* (Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell International, 1983). Also, see the conclusions of Toivo U. Raun in "The Revolution of 1905 in the Baltic Provinces and Finland," *Slavic Review*, vol. 43, no. 3 (Fall 1984), pp. 456-57.

⁶ German efforts to expand into the Baltic, of course, is at least as old as the crusades fought by the Teutonic Knights in the 13th and 14th centuries, and may even be traced back to the campaigns of Charlemagne.

7. Other modern scholars have described the Latvian SD as "theoretically vacuous"; see Andrew Ezergailis, *The 1917 Revolution in Latvia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974.), p. 25.

8. See for example the account of Walter Duranty, as quoted in Visvaldis Mangulis, *Latvia in the Wars of the 20th Century* (Princeton Junction, N.J.: Cognition Books, 1983), p. 6. An illustrative example is provided by the experience of future Red Army Intelligence chief GRU chief Yan Karlovich Berzin; see Vladimir Ponizovskii, "Starik," *Soldatskoe pole: geroicheskie biografii* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo vsesoyuznogo ordena krasnogo znameni dobrovol'nogo obshchestva sodeistviya armii, aviatsii i floty, 1971), p. 109.

9. Allan K. Wildman, *The End of the Russian Imperial Army*, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 76-80. Wildman also cautions that "one should not infer, however, that disorders were universal."

10. Mangulis, pp. 9-10.

11. Germanis, p. 295.

12. Ovid Gorchakov, "V golovonom dozore RKKA," *Vstretimya posle zadaniya* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo DOSAAF, 1973), p. 31.

¹³ Ibid.

14. Mangulis, p. 11. For the Battle of Jelgava (also known as Mitau) see in addition Germanis, pp. 67-69.

15. For the creation of these units, see Germanis, Ch. 5.
16. Mangulis, p. 12.
17. Ibid.; Germanis, p. 295.
18. Germanis, pp. 295-96. The battalions were named as follows—1st: Daugavgrivas; 2nd: Rigas; 3rd: Kurzemes; 4th: Vidzemes; 5th: Zemgales; 6th: Tukuma; 7th: Bauskas; 8th: Valmieras (Memenis, p. 16). Their battle flags bore traditional and patriotic Latvian slogans (Mangulis, p. 11).
19. Germanis, p. 296.
20. Mangulis, pp. 13-14. It was after the July attack that the Latvian Rifle battalions were combined into the First Latvian Rifle Brigade.
21. Germanis, pp. 296-97; Mangulis, pp. 15-16.
22. Leon Trotsky, The Russian Revolution, trans. by Max Eastman, selected and edited by F.W. Dupee (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), p. 97; 107-08.
23. Francesco Benvenuti, The Bolsheviks and the Red Army, 1918-1922 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 13-15.
24. Colonel G. Solonitsyn, "Nachal'nik sovetskoi razvedki," Voennoe-istoricheskii zhurnal, no. 11 (November 1979), p. 93.
25. Germanis, pp. 298-99; also see Mangulis, pp. 19-22.
26. For the role of the Latvians in the mutinies of summer 1917, see Wildman, vol. 2, pp. 46-54; Mangulis, pp. 20-22; and especially Germanis, Ch. 11.
27. Ponizovskii, p. 114. On the Latvian Rifles and the July Days crisis, see Germanis, pp. 207-11.
28. Alexander Rabinowitch, The Bolsheviks Come to Power: the Revolution of 1917 in Petrograd (New York, N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), pp. 11-38. For the reaction of the army, see Wildman, vol. 2, 112-14, 125-26.
29. Material on the general course of the Kornilov affair comes from Rabinowitch, Chs. 7 and 8.
30. Krastynya, p. 223. This may have been the same units described by Leggett as a "specially formed composite battalion commanded by Ia. Kh. Peterson, hand-picked from the eight Lettish rifle regiments serving in the Russian army"; George Leggett, The Cheka: Lenin's Political Police (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 9.
31. Nick Cornish, The Russian Army, 1914-1918. Osprey Men-At Arms Series (Oxford: Osprey, 2001), p. 20.
32. Mangulis, p. 25.
33. Leggett, pp. 34-35; for general discussion, also see Chs. 1 and 2.
34. Lutz Haefner, "The Assassination of Count Mirbach and the 'July Uprising' of the Left Socialist

Revolutionaries in Moscow, 1918," The Russian Review, vol. 50., no. 3 (July 1991), pp. 324-25.

35. Ibid., pp. 328-29. In addition to the available *strelniki*, of whom there were some 2,750, a group of eighty students from a local military academy were "the only forces that defended Lenin's government against the Left SRs"; Mikhail Heller and Aleksandr Nekrich, Utopia in Power: the History of the Soviet Union from 1917 to the Present, trans. by Phyllis B. Carlos (New York: Summit Books, 1986), p. 69. Leggett writes that the Bolsheviks recaptured the Cheka HQ (the Lubianka) on the 6th of July, as the result of a "ruse" carried out by one of Dzerzhinskiy's deputies, Latvian Ia. Kh. Peters. All of the other authoritative sources claim it was Latvian Rifle artillery fire which forced the SRs at the Lubianka to capitulate on the afternoon of the 7th. Loath as I am to go against Leggett, I find myself having to do so on this occasion.

³⁶The Lockhart Plot is one of the standard episodes covered in the literature. A sampling of some of the more valuable and interesting accounts includes Mangulis, pp. 37-38; Krastynya, pp. 264-66; Leggett, pp. 280-83; John Dziak, Chekisty: A History of the KGB (New York: Ivy Books, 1988), pp. 46-48; R. H. Bruce Lockhart, Memoirs of a British Agent (London: MacMillan London Ltd., 1974), pp. 314-16; Robin Bruce Lockhart, Reilly: Ace of Spies (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), pp. 92; and Christopher Andrew and Oleg Gordievsky, KGB: The Inside Story (New York: Harper Collins, 1990), pp. 56-59. One of the most detailed accounts of the role of Latvian Rifles in this plot can be found in A.I. Spreslis, Latvyskie strelki na strazhe zavoevanii oktyabrya, 1917-1918 gg. (Riga: Izdatel'stvo zinatne, 1967), pp. 151-56.

37. This attack was timed to coincide with an Allied landing at Archangel which was eventually postponed until a month later. Mangulis, p. 36; Lockhart, Memoirs, p. 303.

38. Leggett maintains that the Red Terror really began in earnest in response to the Left SR uprising and the revolts sponsored by Savinkov in July. It became official public policy and assumed a nationwide scope, however, in August following an attempt on Lenin's life (pp. 102-5).

39. Heller and Nekrich, p. 80; W. Bruce Lincoln, Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 146. Lincoln argues that this episode really marks the outbreak of the terror, used by both sides, which characterized most of the rest of the Civil War. No source offers a guess at the total number of executions, but given what is known about other applications of Red Terror, it seems likely that they ran into the several hundreds, if not thousands.

40. Lincoln, pp. 187-91. For the exploits of the Czech Legion, including a brief account of the fighting around Kazan, see Edwin P. Hoyt, The Army Without a Country (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1967). Kazan would later become one of the main centers of the clandestine Soviet-German military cooperation, hosting the tank school where future practitioners of blitzkrieg and "Deep Battle" would train. John Erickson, The Soviet High Command (London: St Martin's Press, 1962), p. 251. On the day before the town fell, Vacietis ordered the 5th Latvian Regiment to secure the Russian gold reserves held in the local bank since their removal from Moscow and Petrograd. Sixteen trucks "with valuables" were removed (Krastynya, p. 285). Considerable disagreement exists among historians about the fate of the Russian gold reserves at Kazan. J.D. Smele provides the best consideration of the matter in "White Gold: The Imperial Russian Gold Reserve in the Anti-Bolshevik East, 1918-? (An Unconcluded Chapter in the History of the Russian Civil War)," Europe-Asia Studies, vol. 46, no. 8 (1994), pp. 1317-47. Smele maintains that when Kazan was seized by the Whites, "little, if any, of the gold was saved" by the Bolsheviks. However, in endnote no. 9 Smele notes that some White sources claimed that the Red Army evacuated as many as 100 cases of bouillon (six million rubles) before the town fell (pp. 1320, 1339-40). This would certainly accord with Krastynya's account. Clearly, though, most of the precious metal reserves were captured by the Whites. One account puts the amount at 1.7 million gold, 500,000 platinum, and 900 million silver francs. Thomas G. Butson, The Tsar's Lieutenant: The Soviet Marshal (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1984), p. 32.

41. Benvenuti, p. 42.; Lincoln, p. 188.

42. "As our troops push westwards into the Ukraine, provisional regional Soviet governments are being formed to back up soviets in the localities. This has the advantage of depriving the Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian chauvinists of the chance to regard our troop movements as an occupation, and of creating a favorable situation for the further advance of our forces." Lenin to Vacietis, 29 November 1918, as quoted in White, p. 1362.

43. Mangulis, p. 45.

44. Bilmanis, pp. 312-14.

45. White, p. 1363.

46. Gorchakov, p. 32.

47. See for example Georg von Rauch, *Geschichte der baltischen Staaten* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer Verlag, 1970), pp. 50-71, and Mangulis, pp. 46-53; Bilmanis, Ch. 16. Mangulis briefly notes that "during their four and a half months of rule in Riga the Bolsheviks had killed thousands as part of the Red Terror" (p. 51). Even specialists on the Cheka and Red Terror fail to consider Latvia or the other Baltic states; the usual pattern is to go into detail about terror in the Ukraine, and then the Russo-Polish War. See Leggett, Ch. 9.

48. Mangulis, *Latvia*, pp. 49,54. How many of these "troops" were actually organized into combat units is certainly a matter of debate.

49. Gorchakov, p. 33. The killings were eventually halted at the insistence of the Allies. See Mangulis, p. 51. Lincoln observes that von der Goltz's *Freikorps* was responsible for a "'reign of terror' that claimed the lives of three thousand Latvians in Riga alone" (p. 294).

50. Mangulis, pp. 50-1.

51. See Erickson, pp. 66-70; Lincoln, Chs. 6 and 8.

⁵²Mangulis, pp. 64-5.

⁵³Geoffrey Swain argues that the disillusionment of the Latvian Rifles had much to do with ideological differences between the Leninists in the Latvian SD and the "Luxembourgist" elements in the *Iskolastrel*. Although there may be some merit in this explanation, the bulk of the evidence—and historical precedent—strongly suggests that ideology for the average Latvian soldier meant basically one thing: a free Latvia, and that there were plenty of other reasons for their disillusionment than a dispute over the relative internationalism of the particular form of socialism espoused by one party faction or another. See Geoffrey Swain, "The Disillusioning of the Revolution's Praetorian Guard: The Latvian Riflemen, Summer-Autumn 1918," *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 51, no. 4 (June 1999), pp. 667-86.

⁵⁴Mangulis, pp. 66, 72.