

World War I and Establishment of the Republic of Latvia (1914-1940)

On 1 August 1914, World War I began. The unpredictable calamity during the four years of war weakened the entire Europe. German, Austro-Hungarian and Russian Empires collapsed in 1917 and 1918. The war, however, had given hope for a better future to nations of Eastern Europe. Countries were established or restored their independence on the ruins of empires. During World War I, Latvians as a part of the Russian Empire were serving in different riflemen battalions established in 1915 [1]*. In 1917, after the revolution in Russia, political actions of several Latvian public figures became more active to facilitate ideas of the independence or autonomy of Latvia.

On 18 November 1918, independence of the Republic of Latvia was proclaimed. Latvians had established a democratic country guaranteeing freedom of rights, speech and economy to people of different nations. Establishment of an independent country is the most important achievement of the nation in the 20th century. The independence of Latvia was, however, threatened by the Red Army and the Bolsheviks. In January 1919, the Provisional Government of the Republic of Latvia was forced to leave Rīga. Public support for the Soviets was small and in summer of 1919, the Provisional Government of the Republic of Latvia had managed to form the armed forces. During the War of Independence, from 1918 to 1920, Latvian Army had to fight against the Red Army, different German Army units, as well as the so called Volunteer Army of the Western Russia. The victory took more than 3000 lives. During World War I and the War of Independence, cities and countryside of Latvia were destroyed.

After the war, in 1920, general elections took place and the Constitutional Assembly was elected [5]. The Constitutional Assembly drafted the supreme law of the state – the Constitution [Satversme]. Latvia became a democratic parliamentary republic. Until 1940 Latvians elected four convocations of the Parliament [Saeima] [8]. The Parliament elected the Presidents of Latvia: Jānis Čakste (twice) [9], Gustavs Zemgals [10] and Alberts Kviesis [11].

In the foreign affairs, the first task of the Republic of Latvia was to make peace and obtain the international recognition of the state [6]. On 11 August 1920, peace treaty was concluded with the Soviet Russia. The treaty prescribed that Soviet Russia recognised the independence of Latvia as inviolable "for all future time". On 26 January 1921, the Republic of Latvia was recognized *de iure* by the Western countries. In further years, Latvia tried to strengthen cooperation of the Baltic states, however, the efforts were not so successful.

On 15 May 1934, *coup d'etat* was carried out by Kārlis Ulmanis [12], the first Prime Minister of the Provisional Government of the Republic of Latvia. As a result, the democratic system was destroyed, the Parliament was dissolved and authoritarian regime was established. However, the darkest days of Latvian nation were ahead. According to a secret protocol between Stalin and Hitler attached to the so called

Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, concluded on 23 August 1939 by the Nazi Germany and the USSR, on dividing Eastern Europe, Latvia lost its independence on 17 June 1940, when tanks of the Red Army entered Latvia.

** The numbers in square brackets indicate the relevant showcases.*