

Territory of Latvia and its Inhabitants

16th – 18th century

Livonia ceased to exist after the disastrous Livonian War, which lasted in several phases from 1558 to 1583. The Livonian Order was liquidated in 1561 after the master of the Livonian Order subjected to Grand Duke of Lithuania and king of Poland [9*]. In the following centuries, the territory of Latvia was divided and until the end of the 18th century no longer had a united governing. Moreover, large-scale destructive wars, at least once a hundred years, changed the ruling powers in the territory of Latvia. The Duchy of Courland and Semigallia, established in 1561 and subjected to the king of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (Rzeczpospolita), existed for the longest period of time. The last master of the Livonian Order Gotthard Kettler became the first duke of Courland. Only in 1795 the duchy was incorporated into the Russian Empire. The Eastern part of Latvia (Vidzeme and Latgale regions) after the Livonian War was under the Polish-Lithuanian rule as the Duchy of Livonia (Polish Livonia or Inflanty). However, as the result of the Polish-Swedish War in the early 17th century it was divided. In 1621 the Swedish king Gustav II Adolf annexed Rīga and for a century Vidzeme was under the Swedish power [11]. In the beginning of the 18th century the profitable port of Rīga and Vidzeme region during the destructive Great Northern War were attached to Russia. Latgale region until the division of Poland in 1772 continued to be a part of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth [12].

More stable than the political power in the territory of Latvia was the social structure, economy and types of occupation. The towns continued to develop as local and international trade and guild crafts centres. Rīga was an important trade town of the Baltic Sea region, which continued to use its profitable trade routes that had been established in the previous centuries – from the rural areas of Poland-Lithuania and Russia to the Western Europe. Other towns in the territory of Latvia were considerably smaller than Riga [16–17].

In rural areas the early modern age (16th–18th century) was the period when manors and nobility consolidated their political power and rights to develop their manors as privileged economic centres. Nobility, using its political impact, defined serfdom as unambiguous legal norm. Performing labour duties set the daily life of peasants. Serfdom reached the most ruthless forms in the 18th century, when the peasants had actually become the manor's inventory [18–19]. In the early modern centuries the formation process of Latvians as one ethnic group ended – written Latvian language was formed; the actual differences of material culture no longer formed the boundaries of the ancient pre-Christian peoples' cultures. Differences in language, folklore, clothing and other spheres became the local peculiarities [19].

The centre of the spiritual life was the church. However, after the Reformation in the 16th century various Christian denominations strengthened [21–22]. The majority of the population in the Duchy of Couronia and Semigallia and in Vidzeme were Lutherans, while in Latgale (Inflanty) under the Polish-Lithuanian rule the influence of the Catholic Church was strengthened. Under the shelter of the church developed not only education in towns but also efforts to ensure peasants' literacy and the basic knowledge of religion. At the end of the 17th century the Bible was translated into Latvian and in the second half of the 18th century the first secular printed materials of literature in Latvian appeared and were spread [20].

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