



ROYAL DANISH EMBASSY  
*Riga*

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Danish volunteer soldiers  
in Latvia's war of  
independence

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1919



By PhD. Historian and Author  
**MIKKEL KIRKEBAEK**



**100** Estonia  
Latvia  
Lithuania  
a **DANISH**  
**INPUT**

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H.B.

## FOREWORD

1.

When we celebrated the 25 years anniversary of the re-establishment of diplomatic relations between Denmark and Latvia in 2016, Senior Researcher at the University of Latvia, Ph.D Didzis Klavins, wrote an elaborate and comprehensive article about the role of Denmark in the renewal of Latvia's independence. It was very useful and contributed in shedding light on the Danish-Latvian relationship during an important historical phase in Latvia but also in Denmark and Europe in general.

In 2018, we celebrate the 100 years anniversary of the establishment of the Latvian Nation. This time we have asked historian at the Royal Danish Defence College, Ph.D. Mikkel Kirkebæk, to write an article about the bilateral links during Latvia's war of independence, which took place throughout a historic period that was equally difficult and problematic to Latvia, the Baltic States and Europe in general. As in 1991, the turbulent time in 1918-19 also provided decisive opportunities that Latvia and her Baltic neighbouring were very skillful in exploiting.

Mikkel Kirkebæk has accomplished new and enlightening research that shows that Denmark – in terms of a contingent of volunteering soldiers – was also



Hans Brask  
Ambassador

actively present in assisting Latvia in establishing her nationhood. The role of the Danish state was less daring than in the early 1990s, but as President Guntis Ulmanis so kindly notes in his foreword, the times were different in 1918 compared to 1991.

I am very pleased that these two articles demonstrate that the Danish-Latvian relationship has been strong from the very beginning. We are proud to have played a small role during the historical accomplishments of Latvians in the struggle for independence. As Mikkel Kirkebæk rightly notes at the very end of his article about Latvia's tough struggle: first of all, "the Latvians themselves freed Latvia". This will power of the Latvian people is an important part of what we celebrate this year.



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G.U.

## FOREWORD

2.

In the course of history one can observe occasional reoccurrence of similar constellation of circumstances as the human nature and the political regularities that follow from it have not changed much over the decades, centuries and even millennia. In the world where the major developments are dictated by the global powers, such constellations of circumstances sometimes create a situation that may decide the destiny of a small nation, offering it “a window of opportunity”.

Such constellations of circumstances that offered Latvia a “window of opportunity” occurred at the end of the First World War and in the early 1990s. The following publication focuses on the former, but I would like to say a few words on the latter, of which I was an eye-witness and a participant.

The changes in the global correlation of power caused by the First World War allowed a shift of borders, thus opening an opportunity for the Baltic peoples, Latvians included, to gain their national independence. Furthermore, it happened at a time when the Latvian nation had matured for its own statehood. It was an opportunity that could not be missed and was used to a full extent. One of the founding fathers of the Republic of Latvia was my great grand uncle Kārlis Ulmanis, then Prime Minister, (1918–1934), later President (1934–1940) of Latvia whom you



Guntis Ulmanis  
President of Latvia, 1993–1999

shall meet in the following pages.

However there is also a starkly contrasting side in our experiences and in these two constellations of historical circumstances – a member of my family stood at the cradle of Latvia’s statehood and worked to consolidate the newly acquired independence, but in a couple of decades was forced to witness the European powers disregard the interests of the small nations in their competition for zones of influence in the world where it was not easy for small nations to find allies. He saw the USSR troops entering Latvia and crushing its statehood along with the lives of many of his compatriots as well as his own. I, in turn, witnessed the withdrawal of the troops of the heir of the USSR, the Russian Federation, from Latvia. I was also destined

to lead my country in its efforts to consolidate and make irreversible its independence. Why our experiences, while containing strong parallels, still were so different? Something must have changed in the world in our attitudes.

In international politics of 1990s a similarly benevolent constellation of circumstances had occurred: the collapse of the USSR, same as the upheavals of the First World War, had created an opportunity for a shift of borders, thus opening for the former Soviet republics a road to independence. The above-mentioned withdrawal of the Russian troops was the most important step in the consolidation of our newly regained independence as it made complete at the same time opening for us the road to international organisations as a guarantee of the continuity of our statehood. I was destined to take personal part in this process and consider its successful completion in August 1994 as one of the most important achievements of my presidency. The withdrawal of the Russian troops was successful thanks both to balanced and pragmatic work on the part of Latvian politicians as well as to a “window of opportunity” opened by a constellation of historical developments. First, at that point Russia was far from the height of its might and had not yet clearly defined the course of its future policies, including its relations with the new neighbours; furthermore, it had to face many other topical issues in the close proximity of its borders and within its traditional sphere of interests. Second, Latvia received support from the Western countries, including Denmark, support, without which this step, so important for our independence, would not have been possible. As the author of the following research clearly illustrates, the Western powers usually are guided by pragmatic interests. And at that point the Western democracies were interested in ensuring stability in our region and in creating

a predictable and loyal to democratic values buffer zone between their prosperous lifestyles and Russia which for them at that time was (and still largely is) an unpredictable phenomenon. Yet I believe that the support received from the Western countries, including Denmark, was at least accompanied or even strongly influenced by human empathy and a sense of historical justice – same as the support that my predecessor Kārlis Ulmanis felt in Denmark in 1919.

It is vital for nations, especially, for small ones, in the name of their statehood and future prosperity, not only resolutely to make use of the “windows of opportunity”, but also to learn from the lessons taught by historical precedents and similar constellations of political circumstances.

Latvia, I am sure, has learned much from the historical pre-war experience and drawn two fundamental conclusions. First, in our geopolitical situation a small nation cannot preserve both its independence and neutrality. In order to safeguard its independence, Latvia must be part of international security and economy community. Thus, right after the regaining of our independence, accession to international structures, first and foremost the EU and NATO, was set as Latvia's foreign policy priority. And second, in our geopolitically sensitive situation, small nations absolutely need trustworthy allies.

Denmark is one of such allies. As the following pages will illustratively show, already in the aftermath of the First World War the founding fathers of Latvia considered Denmark as one of our most trustworthy allies. It was to Denmark that they, including my predecessor Kārlis Ulmanis, went in search of international support, which was vitally necessary for the survival of the young state. The support that was granted within the limits of political reality of that time – and materialized as 200 Danish volunteers

risked their lives (and almost ten times as many were ready to do so) in order not only to counter the international threat posed by Bolshevism, but also to help our young state – was of considerable moral importance, showing that Latvia was not alone. The Danish nation, also being relatively small, was capable of empathy for the Latvian people and, being situated in our region, understood the threat caused by the ideology emerging towards the east.

During my presidency, I also received and highly appreciated support from Denmark. Denmark has consistently supported us on our road towards the EU and NATO. The open discussions with Danish politicians and diplomats encouraged me. For example, a significant turning point in our efforts to achieve the withdrawal of the Russian troops was a three-day visit of me as the President of Latvia to Western Europe on 11<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> April 1994, during which time I visited not only the continental powers France and the UK, but also Denmark.

The current developments testify that Denmark, too, has drawn an important conclusion from the 20<sup>th</sup> century history: everyone must contribute to international security and in our region peace and integrity of borders cannot be taken for granted. Let me just mention the most significant and latest contribution of Denmark to security in the region. Latvian Land Force Infantry Brigade takes part in international peace-keeping missions as part of the Danish Division and hold regular joint exercises. As of 2019 a part of this force, NATO multinational division *North*, will be based in Latvia. Thus we may say that the further described aspirations of my predecessor Kārlis Ulmanis and his associates to place the armed forces of Latvia under the command of a Danish officer, to some extent have been realized...

Thus the circle has become complete in

several historical aspects and levels and it is valuable to summarise the lessons that the relevant historical developments have taught us. Publications such as this one are of great help in this regard. I welcome this timely research effort that teaches us to learn from historical experience and to appreciate our trustworthy allies.





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# DANISH VOLUNTEER SOLDIERS IN LATVIA'S WAR OF INDEPENDENCE 1919

In recent years, the Danish defense has increased its presence in the Baltic States. As part of NATO's advanced defense in the East, Denmark has contributed 200 soldiers to the NATO force "Enhanced Forward Presence" in 2018, and it is likely that it will make a similar contribution from spring 2020. At the same time, Denmark has offered to lead a new NATO division headquarters in Rīga, which will support the Baltic countries' defense planning. The task is to commence in the autumn of 2018, and in this connection up to 50 Danish soldiers will be posted in Latvia.

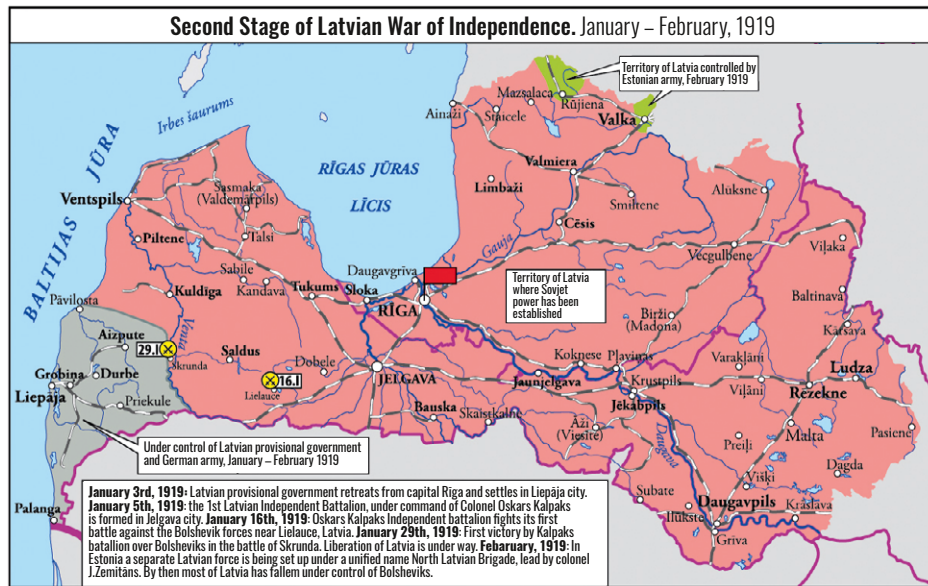
However, few are aware that Danish military forces have previously helped to ensure the independence and security of the Baltic countries. In 1919, more than 2,000 Danes volunteered to participate in the independence wars of the Baltic countries. Mainly due to financial problems, however, only the first of at least four planned companies went. The approximately 200 men came to join the

Estonian army but actually fought longer on Latvian territory than in Estonia. This article deals with the Danish military efforts in Latvia in 1919.<sup>1</sup>

## BACKGROUND - THE SITUATION IN THE BALTICS AT THE END OF 1918

Between 1917 and 1920, the situation in the Baltic Sea Region changed drastically both politically and geographically. During these few years, the region's traditional great powers, the empires in Germany and Russia, broke down, and along the Baltic Sea new states such as Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland emerged. The Baltic border states had all formed part of the great Russian Empire. However, in the wake of World War I and the Russian Revolution, the Baltic national movements gained momentum, and the demand for independence was steadily increasing. During World War I between 1914 and 1918, the Baltic territory had formed part of the eastern front of the war, where huge German and Russian armies collided in a series of violent battles. In the wake of the chaotic situation in Russia after the Russian Revolution in 1917, the German military experienced great military and political victories, giving it control over the entire Baltic Region. When a ceasefire was declared on November 11, 1918, German troops occupied an area reaching as far as Narva in northern Estonia.

<sup>1</sup> This article is written with support from the Danish Defence Staff, Copenhagen



After the Allied victory in World War I, the situation in the Baltic states turned even more chaotic than during the war. Just a few days after the ceasefire, on November 18, 1918, Latvian nationalists, in the newly created “Peoples Council of Latvia,” declared independence for Latvia and formed a provisional government led by Karlis Ulmanis. However, it would not turn out to be an easy beginning for the new state. German troops were still in the country, Soviet red troops were ready to move in, and Russian white forces did not want a future independent Latvia, working, instead, for a resurrected Tsarist empire with a restoration of the frontiers from before the war. However, amidst this chaos and against all odds, Latvian national forces began their armed and political struggle for an independent Latvia, beginning what would come to be known as “The Latvian War of Independence”. Without weapons, money and manpower, it became clear, however,

that Latvian nationalists needed external assistance if their struggle was to succeed. As both the Soviet and Germany had interests in the Latvian territories, it was at the same time a race over time to bring together pro-Latvian army units for the national liberation struggle before the country was again absorbed by one of the regional great powers.

## SCANDINAVIAN INTERVENTION IN THE BALTIC REGION, 1918?

The new Baltic states wished, unsurprisingly, for their German occupiers to leave. But they were also aware that a likely outcome of this would be that the Bolsheviks would try to gain control of the region. As a Soviet Baltic was not of the interest of the Baltic population nor of the allies, especially Great

Britain began working on plans for the period following German occupation. Hence, the idea of temporarily letting a Scandinavian military force take control was born.

To achieve success in the Baltic region, it was important for the intervention forces to be able to act as neutrals in a field of tension between both local and international politics, and not be seen to be holding any imperialist motives. The Scandinavian countries seemed perfectly suited for this task. They had been neutral in World War I, had no ambitions of great power, and contrary to many other nations, they were not worn-down from the war, because they had managed to not take part in actual combat. Also, historically the Scandinavian countries had strong ties to the Baltic Region and would likely also see a benefit in the removal of the Germans from the North, as well as keeping the Bolsheviks away from their own backyard. Furthermore, many outside Scandinavia felt that since the Scandinavians had gotten through the war relatively unscathed, they had a moral obligation to help secure a stable development in the region. On the basis of these considerations, the notion arose of deploying troops from the armies of the Scandinavian countries in the Baltics. The idea originated from the Balts themselves, but the allies were very quick to adopt it. At the end of 1918, there was an intense diplomatic pressure on the Scandinavian countries to ensure that they would send a joint Scandinavian force to the Baltic States.

However, a military intervention in the Baltic Region would be far from unproblematic. The Scandinavian governments rightly feared the consequences of an intervention in the Baltics, where one might risk – or, rather, expect – a military confrontation

with the neighboring great powers of The Soviet Union and Germany. The repercussions would be incalculable. At the same time, they expected a strong domestic resistance towards any thought of taking up arms against the Russians, because of the strong positions held by the labor parties in Scandinavia. On the other hand, it would be difficult for the Scandinavian countries to flat out reject the allies, who would be coming out of World War I as the undisputed winners in Europe. But ultimately the Scandinavian governments declined to send troops to the Baltics. The Scandinavian attitude was considerably annoying for the British, who felt that it would be in the interests of the Scandinavians themselves to prevent the spreading of Bolshevism to the neighboring countries. Consequently, the Danes and Swedes in particular felt obliged to offer the allies an acceptable alternative in the Baltic question. The Swedes had something to prove after their partially German-friendly attitude during the war, and the Danes wanted to regain the territory of Slesvig, having lost it to the Germans in 1864. And every Scandinavian country had an interest in stopping Bolshevism.

There was, therefore, a willingness to accommodate the wishes of the British, as long as they did not include sending regular army units to the Baltics. Could a solution be found, where the Scandinavian countries remained neutral, but were still helping to fight Bolshevism in the Baltics?

In fact, the Swedes were the ones to suggest a “Plan B”: The recruitment of Scandinavian volunteer forces without officially involving the Scandinavian governments. This solution was quickly adopted by the British. In a report from the British representative



in Denmark in the beginning of January 1919 to the Foreign Office, he wrote: *“It seems to me that many objections which lie in the way of our sending regular military expeditions against Bolsheviks might be obviated if it were possible to create special voluntary forces for service with Finnish and Estonian governments.”*<sup>2</sup>

Although the Danish government was fundamentally opposed to the sending of Danish weapons and soldiers to the Baltic states, due to their policy of neutrality, a secret export of Danish “Madsen machine guns” to Britain was allowed, knowing that the weapons were sent directly to the Balts. At the same time, the Danish government decided to close its eyes to the recruitment of volunteers, as long as it was done covertly. This opened the doors for the preparations for a Danish military expedition to the Baltic states as a private enterprise.

## BALTIC STATES CALL FOR HELP

From the Baltic side, there had been intense diplomatic pressure on both the Allied and Scandinavian governments in order for them to send regular army units to the Baltics in 1918. As the possibilities for regular intervention troops faded away, the Balts changed tactics. Their wishes became increasingly focused on financial support, including loans that could finance the Balts’ own building of military capabilities - and, in particular, give them the opportunity to pay wages to foreign volunteers.

On January 15, 1919, the Estonian and Latvian national representatives Ants Piip

and Zigfrīds Anna Meierovics showed up at the English delegation at the Paris Peace Conference. A conference which would determine the new order of Europe after World War I. In addition to a great desire to be recognized as independent nations and to ensure their countries’ views would be heard during the peace talks, the Baltic representatives strongly requested the possibility of loans.

According to the British minutes of the meeting, “Both gentlemen emphasized the fact that, unless their countries could obtain credit, it would be impossible for them to raise and equip volunteers in Finland and Scandinavia, although they could be easily recruited.”<sup>3</sup>

However, the British were critical of providing loans to the Balts. The British policy towards the border states was by no means clearly defined. The problem for the Balts was that they needed immediate action while the powerful British Treasury wanted a number of clarifications before action could be taken. The Treasury did not believe that the Baltic question could be handled separately from the new formation of the whole Eastern European area. And as long as there was no clearly defined allied policy in the area, the Treasury could not justify allocating British funds in the form of loans for the maintenance of a number of uncertain state forms.<sup>4</sup> In 1918 and 1919, the British adopted a moderately supportive but also awaiting attitude towards the Baltic national governments. To secure Bolshevik containment, it became British policy to support the recruitment of volunteer soldiers from Scandinavia paid with Baltic or Scandinavian funds. Similarly, the British exerted pressure on the Scandinavian

governments in recruitment affairs and helped volunteer soldiers with logistics, weapons and equipment.<sup>5</sup>

## THE IDEA OF A DANISH EXPEDITION

With the tacit acceptance of the Danish government, and British pledges for material aid, a circle of Danish patriots friendly to the Defense began the construction of a Danish voluntary expeditionary force, which could be deployed in support of the freedom struggle of the national Baltic governments. The two main actors were the young student Iver Gudme and the older experienced businessman Aage Westenholz. Both had been involved in Danish aid to the white forces in the Finnish Civil War in 1918 with Westenholz as financial benefactor and Gudme as a volunteer soldier. This cooperation was to be continued in the Baltics in 1919 and expanded to a 1,000-man volunteer force, equipped by the British, but partly financed by private Danish funds. Iver Gudme and Westenholz each had their function in relation to the formation of the Danish expedition corps. Gudme was the young man with the ideas, the practitioner and initiator, while the older Westenholz used his influential network to create contacts and finances. Both, however, had the same goal: A militant fight against Bolshevism based on national and ideological considerations. The fear of expansive Bolshevism was thus very strong in Denmark in 1919. On a daily basis, the press would report one shaking description after the other about the cruelty of the Bolsheviks, and with the Spartacist Revolt in Berlin in early 1919, the threat felt very present for many Danes.

Westenholz was deeply engaged in the national Danish defense and was the man behind the creation of a number of Danish volunteer home guard corps that could support the army in the event of a crisis and war. These corps were all machine-gun units specially trained in the operation of the Danish-produced and at the time very advanced Madsen light recoil machine-gun. Westenholz was firmly convinced that it would be in Denmark’s interest to stop Bolshevism in the east before it spread to the west. Thus the freedom of the Baltic states became closely linked to Danish freedom and sovereignty. Initially, efforts were made to send a military force to Estonia. Meanwhile, the arrival of voluntary Finnish troops in Estonia on December 30, 1918, and their subsequent rapid advance on all fronts, meant that the military threat in the country had diminished dramatically. Perhaps, therefore, the Danish troops could be of better use in Latvia?

## THE LATVIANS’ MEETING WITH WESTENHOLZ

By mid-January, 1919, three Latvian ministers had departed from Latvia to ask for help and volunteer troops in the Scandinavian countries. The military situation in Latvia was far worse than in Estonia. When the Germans decided to leave the country, the Bolsheviks attacked a few days later on Latvian territory, and on January 4, 1919, Rīga was conquered. Danish residents in Latvia were sailed home as refugees, and they reported in the press about the desperate situation.<sup>6</sup> In Latvia, Prime Minister Karlis Ulmanis and the Latvian government had to flee to Liepāja (Libau). In

<sup>2</sup> National Archive, UK (NA). NA. FO 371/3954. Writing from Kilmarnock to Foreign Office, dated 02.01.1919

<sup>3</sup> NA. FO 308/182. Writing from the British delegation in Paris to the Foreign Office, dated 18.01.1919

<sup>4</sup> NA. FO 608/184. Report from the Foreign Office, dated 28.03.1919

<sup>5</sup> The contents of the first paragraphs has previously been presented at the Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes 18th Conference 16-20 April 2018, Belgrade, Serbia (“Alliance planning and coalition warfare: historical and contemporary

approaches”). Paper: “Scandinavian military alliance and volunteers in the Baltic States 1919.” (Kirkebaek 2018)

<sup>6</sup> See ex. *Berlingske Tidende* 07.01.1919 “Flugten fra Riga”

a desperate race with time, they sought to build combat forces that could fight against the red troops. The Latvian delegation, led by Ulmanis, arrived in Copenhagen on January 21 and stayed at Paladshotellet. The desire of the delegation was to enter into talks with the Danish government, and at the same time visiting the Entente's representatives in Copenhagen. At the hotel in Copenhagen, the delegation gladly welcomed journalists, and the Latvian representatives willingly laid out the objectives of their trip: "We have traveled to tell the world how bad it is at home. I do not think you really understand the danger that threatens Europe if Bolshevism is not curbed. We have been the guard against it: but now we cannot do anymore. We lack the arms, ammunition and soldiers. »Have you travelled to ask for these things?« Yes, we want to encourage volunteer troops to sign up and fight with us."<sup>7</sup>

The interview is from the newspaper *København*, but many other news outlets also covered the case. One of them was to become quite important to the issue of Danish volunteers. This was the conservative newspaper *Vort Land*, which had arranged an interview with Ulmanis at Paladshotellet the same day the letter had arrived in Copenhagen. During the meeting, the newspaper's journalist asked whether Ulmanis intended to speak with the Danish Ministry of War regarding troops, to which Ulmanis replied that he knew the Danish government's position well, but that he had to try to get both the Scandinavian countries and the Entente to understand the importance of fighting Bolshevism. Not only for the sake of the Latvians but for Europe. The journalist from *Vort Land* then informed the president about the rumors

that had flourished in the Danish press that Westenholz would finance Danish volunteer soldiers to Estonia. The newspaper described the conversation with the Latvian president as follows: "Mr. Ullmann listens with interest to my account and asks for information about engineer Westenholz. I tell of the corps carrying his name, about the movement of volunteer soldiers across the country and the young Dane who fought against the red of Finland, and finally of Mr. Westenholz' description of the possibility of him paying the expenses for the formation of a corps against the Bolsheviks. »This man I must speak with«, declares Mr. Ullmann. »And on this day. When I have been to the Ministry, I must arrange for a meeting with him.«"<sup>8</sup>

The contact between Ulmanis and Westenholz was quickly established, and in the afternoon of January 23 a meeting was held at Paladshotellet between Westenholz and the Latvian delegation. The following day, several newspapers were able to bring an interview with Westenholz, who reported on the contents of the conversations. The Latvians had wanted an armed corps of Danish volunteers of 500 to 1,000 men, and Westenholz had promised to assist in the establishment of such a corps if the economic conditions fell into place. Westenholz would pay for recruitment etc. in Denmark, but the Latvians were to pay the volunteers' salaries and insurance. The newspaper *København* brought an interview with Westenholz on January 24, concluding that the Latvians had succeeded in making him interested in the matter. At the same time, details of the conversations were passed on to the press: "»It does not have to be a large force«, Mr. Westenholz said during

a conversation with him over the course of the evening. »It turned out that 150 men were sufficient to occupy the Town Dorpat [Tartu] and I would assume that 300 or 500 men, not to mention if we could get 1,000 men, would be of good use«. – In which way has the director considered gathering such a corps? »By directing a request to suitable young men. I think there are many here in this country who would like to help the people of Latvia«. And how will you get the weapons and ammunition? »We have a reasonable hope of getting them from 'the other side.«"<sup>9</sup>

On the question of what Westenholz believed the Danish government would say to the plans, the answer was that he could not imagine that it would have anything against it, as many Danes had volunteered in French and English service during the World War. Westenholz also spoke to the newspaper *Hovedstaden* about the hotel meeting with Ulmanis: "It all depends on whether the Latvians can guarantee our people the needed conditions and arms. They are currently trying to raise a loan, and at the same time we are trying to raise a corps of skilled young men (...) I believe the issue should attract Danish sympathy as it is a small peaceful country that has been assaulted. If I were young, I would immediately report."<sup>10</sup>

Also, internally in the circle of organizers, Westenholz informed about the turning of events in the question of an expedition corps to the Baltic States. To the Danish Captain Stürup, he wrote, among other things: "At 3 o'clock today I was with the Latvian ministers and had a longer conversation with them, which gave me hope, that the plan can become reality." Westenholz then explained

that he was to meet the Latvians again at Paladshotellet to discuss more details and that he would like Stürup and Gudme to attend the meeting as well.<sup>11</sup>

From working for the Estonian case, Westenholz thus shifted focus to the construction of a 1,000-man strong expedition corps to Latvia. On January 24, Westenholz wrote a letter to the Danish Major general Holten Castensciold. In this he explained that he had written to the volunteer corps earlier the same month to find recruits for a smaller unit to be sent to Estonia, but that that plan had now been dropped. Westenholz further explained that he had come into contact with three Latvian ministers in Copenhagen, who wanted to have 500-1,000 volunteers in a single Danish corps. And Westenholz continued: "The question is whether the Latvians can really provide the weapons and financial resources. If it turns out that they can, I would like to do what I can to help them find volunteers, and in such a case I have thought to send inquiries to all volunteer corps. I hope that you will not mind this. The danger of war does not seem to threaten our country anymore, and the inner danger, Bolshevism, we can fight best by meeting it as far from our country as possible. I do not believe the corps can benefit their cause in any better way than to represent itself as beautifully and numerously as possible in such an expedition." At the same time, Westenholz began the acquisition of men to Latvia through his large network in the voluntary corps.

<sup>7</sup> *København* 22.01.1919. "Tre lettiske Ministre i København"

<sup>8</sup> *Vort Land* 22.01.1919. "Den lettiske Republik beder om militær Hjælp mod Bolschevikerne"

<sup>9</sup> *København* 24.01.1919. "Et dansk frivilligt Korps til den lettiske Republik". Also see, *Vort Land* 24.01.1919 "Det frivillige Korps til Lathavia"

<sup>10</sup> *Hovedstaden* 25.01.1919. "Et dansk Korps til Lifland?"

<sup>11</sup> National Archive, Estonia (ERA). ERA.592.1.1. Letter from Westenholz to Stürup, undated



## DANISH SUPREME COMMANDER OF THE LATVIAN NATIONAL FORCES?

While Westenholz began working on a Danish expedition corps for Latvia, he also engaged in the Latvian issue in another way. In his diary on February 21, 1919, Danish Major general Holten Castenschiold noted that he had received a letter from Westenholz, who asked if he was interested in becoming supreme commander of the united Latvian armed forces that were at this time being formed to fight against the Bolsheviks. According to the diary, Westenholz's inquiry was made on behalf of the three Latvian ministers who were in Copenhagen to seek help for their cause. The Latvians wanted a Scandinavian or Finnish general as supreme commander, which was the reason for the inquiry.<sup>12</sup> As it appears, Westenholz's conversations with the Latvians were also about other military issues and not just the Danish expedition corps. That Westenholz had agreed to assist in finding a suitable army chief for Latvia was of course connected to Westenholz's large network in the Danish military. Through his involvement in the voluntary corps and voluntary defense, he had created many friends and contacts in the army's top circles. He now sought to activate them for the benefit of the Latvians. Westenholz's role in this case was thus simply to link the Latvians and the potential Danish candidates for the post as commander. In the letters Westenholz circulated to potential candidates, he did not hide the fact that the task was difficult. The Latvian army was small. According to Westenholz, it consisted of only a few thousand men gathered around

Liepaja. At the same time, the army was composed of several nations that did not agree with each other on many issues (Russians, Latvians, Germans, Estonians, etc.), which was why the Latvian government wanted a commander from a neutral state. On top of the internal disputes, the extremely unstable political conditions in Latvia were a concern. The government was chosen only by the part of the population that was not subjected to the Bolsheviks. According to Westenholz, the Latvian government had no political or economic power of significance. The commander needed to build everything from scratch, and, with Westenholz's words, had to be both general, politician and diplomat. However, there were some uplifting factors. For example, the Danish corps of 1,000 men would according to the plan be included as part of the total Latvian armed forces. At the same time, Westenholz believed that there would be ample supplies of good weapons from the Entente and important brothers of arms in Estonia and Finland. According to Westenholz, the moral motivation was clear. The cause was "as good as one could imagine", and a Danish contribution to the world showdown with Bolshevism should be welcomed.<sup>13</sup>

While trying to help the Latvians find a suitable Danish commander, a search for a qualified leader for the proposed volunteer corps of 1,000 men was on-going. Here, later Danish army chief Colonel Lieutenant Erik With was strongly considered. And With was very positive towards the idea. In an answer to Westenholz's suggestion, With wrote on January 25, 1919: "In connection to the director's initiative for the organization of a voluntary corps for the help of the Latvians, I

<sup>12</sup> RA. Private archive. Aage Westenholz, pk. 46. Letter from Westenholz to Castenschiold and Berthelsen, dated 20.02.1919, 05.03.1919 and 15.03.1919

hereby offer my service as Head of the Corps." With further explained how he was driven by the desire to "test myself in reality and thereby develop my skills as a soldier for the good of my country," as the Lieutenant Colonel expressed it. At the same time, With described how it had felt, as a soldier, to watch from the sidelines during the World War: "The whole world has been on fire. Officers of all Armies have fought and bled in the struggle for freedom and justice, and only the officers of the neutral states have been stuck in a cage as spectators to all that has happened since 1914."<sup>14</sup>

Westenholz's impressive network in the military circles was used diligently. One of those who helped Westenholz propose candidates for service in Latvia was Major general Palle Berthelsen, Head of the Danish General Staff during World War I and responsible for the mobilized national security force. He had also been the head of the Academic Rifle Corps and had also joined the board of the voluntary corps. In a letter to Westenholz, Berthelsen proposed the Chief of Staff of the 1st General Command, Colonel Otto Moltke, and Major general P. W. Ibsen as the two persons best suited for the task. Both officers were described as intelligent and energetic with good skills as leaders. According to Berthelsen, the latter may have been too tough and militaristic, but "would surely treat the Bolsheviks in the right way," as the Major general expressed it. Berthelsen also asked Westenholz to keep his involvement in the case "perfectly confidential."<sup>15</sup> Another candidate who came quite far in the negotiations with the Latvians was Colonel Vilhelm Lewald. As it appears, there was a great will by senior

<sup>14</sup> RA. Private archive. Aage Westenholz, pk. 26. Letter from With to Westenholz, dated 25.01.1919

Danish officers to join Westenholz's various military projects in the Baltics – despite the Danish government's hesitation. It was thus not a lack of will that prevented Lewald, With or any other top leaders in the Danish army from going to Latvia. Two things, however, were of crucial importance: The Latvian government failed to obtain the financial resources needed to realize the Danish-Latvian military cooperation in 1919. And at the same time, the Danish Ministry of War prohibited the recruitment of permanent military personnel for foreign service. As it became clear that the Ministry of War would not provide the necessary permits, a number of well-known, high-ranking Danish officers rejected the offer "no matter how much it excites me", as one of them, Major general Holten Castenschiold, noted in his diary.

For the reasons mentioned above, the Danish organizers' contact to the government of Latvia ran into the sand. However, the Estonians returned in the spring 1919 and the Danish corps were now directed to Estonia. An agreement was reached for 1,000 Danish volunteers to leave, but due to especially economic problems, only the first company of approx. 200 men left. However, the Danish force should prove to be of great benefit to the Latvian cause.

## THE DANISH CORPS IN LATVIA

The Danish organizers of the Baltic aid did not succeed in keeping the recruitment hidden from the public in Denmark. This led to major domestic policy problems for the Danish government and the organizers of the corps.

<sup>15</sup> RA. Private archive. Aage Westenholz, pk. 27. Letter from Berthelsen til Westenholz, dated 12.03.1919

But in spite of the problems, at the end of March, 1919, 200 Danish volunteer soldiers had been shipped under the command of Danish reserve officers. The corps departed by ship from Copenhagen on March 26, and after transit in Finland, the voluntary Danish force arrived in Estonia on April 4, 1919. The corps was set up as an infantry company, but carried as much as 24 Madsen machine guns and therefore made for an extremely powerful unit. The military leadership was put in the hands of Lieutenant Richard Gustav Borgelin, who, after arriving at Tallinn, was appointed Estonian captain. After a brief training in the area around the Estonian capital, the corps was sent to the southern front of Estonia near the Latvian border. After a relatively hassle-free advance through Estonia, the corps on May 29, 1919, found itself at the Latvian border.

The political and military situation in Latvia was extremely complicated - and very different than in Estonia. The Bolsheviks had occupied most of the country at the beginning of 1919. However, it was still possible to assemble an anti-Bolshevik alliance consisting of Latvian national troops, Russian white troops and German volunteers, the latter consisting of both local German-Balts and Reich Germans. Both the German and the Russian white forces had war targets other than the Latvian national units, but initially they constituted a total military opposition to the Soviet occupation of Latvia. Thus, in February 1919, the national Latvian and German forces in the southwest succeeded in advancing through the western Kurzeme and further east in March 1919, so that most of Kurzeme was freed by the end of the month.<sup>16</sup>



Picture 1

The Danish press reported widely on the departure from Copenhagen of the Danish Volunteers in March 1919. The headline of the article reads: *The Fight against Bolshevism. Danish Volunteers in Uniform on their Way to Latvia.* (Private archive).

On May 22, the united German, Latvian and Russian white forces conquered Rīga. After the fall of Rīga, the red forces in Latvia began to flee from west to east. Not least because Lithuanian troops advanced towards the Bolsheviks at Latvia's southern border. At the same time, in the Estonian army command, it was decided to attack the Bolsheviks from the north. The Bolshevik forces in Latvia were thus squeezed from three sides - south, west and north - and were now forced to retreat through Latvia to the Russian border in the east. This was where the Danish corps entered the scene.

<sup>16</sup> Olavi, Hovi: *The Baltic area in British policy, 1918-1921.* Finnish Historical Society 1980, p. 136

## THE MILITARY PLANNING BEHIND THE MISSION IN LATVIA

The Estonian attack in Latvia was partly meant to put pressure from the north on the Bolshevik forces and partly to cut off the Bolsheviks' escape route into Russia. The plan required - roughly speaking - that the Estonian forces divided into two main flanks. One flank was meant to cut quickly through Latvia along the eastern boundary, thereby occupying important transport hubs, eliminating the possibility of escape into Russia. The other flank would be brought toward Rīga in the west fighting down the Red Armies in Latvia or forcing them to the east and the waiting trap. The first flank passed Alūksne (Marienburg), Gulbene (Schwanenburg) and Jēkabpils (Jakobstadt), while the second crossed Cēsis (Wenden) against Rīga.

The Danes participated in the first Estonian flank along Latvia's eastern border. As already mentioned, the purpose of this endeavor was to close down the border, so none would escape when the enemy began to flow towards Russia from eastern Latvia. If this was to succeed, a rapid advance through Latvia from north to south was required. As the Danish company was meant to form part of the spearhead of the attack, the keyword of the advance was "speed". The target for the first Estonian flank was Jēkabpils about 200 km south of the outset at the Estonian-Latvian border. As motorized units were largely unavailable, the Danes and the other units would daily have to cover long distances by foot in their advance. On average, 30-40 km a day. This placed great emphasis on the discipline, form and endurance of the crew.

<sup>17</sup> Viggo Hansen's description. In *Sorø Amts Dagblad* 16.07.1919 "I Kamplinien paa den estniske Front"

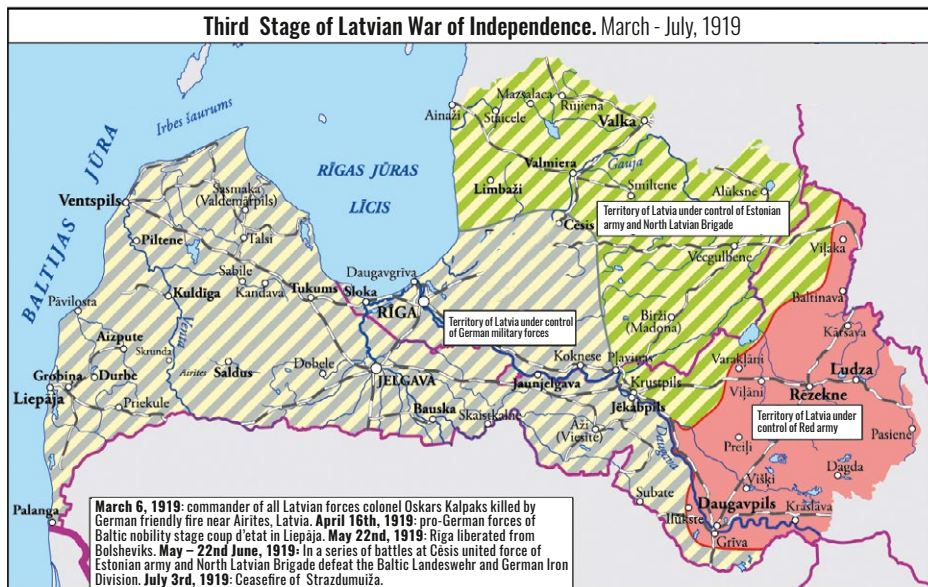
## FORCED MARCH AND MOBILE WARFARE

The offensive into Latvia was commenced at 02:30, the morning of May 29.<sup>17</sup> The attack force that included the Danes consisted of 4 Estonian infantry companies, 1 Latvian infantry company, 1 Danish infantry company, a cavalry unit of 120 men and 1 artillery battery (half-battery). In total approx. 1,500 men under the command of Estonian cavalry chief Gustav Johnson (later Major general). The participating Latvian company was part of the so-called Northern Latvia Brigade under Captain Jorgis Zemītans. In agreement with the Estonians, the brigade had been gathered and settled on Estonian soil from February 1919, while most of Latvia was under the control of Bolsheviks. The Northern Brigade consisted of approx. 1,500 men from the northern Latvian provinces, and one of the brigade's companies would now join the eastern flank together with the Danish and Estonian forces.<sup>18</sup>

The first military objective was to advance towards the city of Alūksne to interrupt the rail link between the cities of Vecgulbene (Alt-Schwanenburg) and Valka (Walk). As the roads in the Baltics were generally in a very poor condition, rail transport was of very high strategic significance. If the railroad links in Latvia could be disjunctured, the Bolsheviks would be prevented from bringing troops and supplies from Latvia to Estonia via Valka, located on the Estonian-Latvian border.

Alūksne was located about 25 km from the Estonian border and, as mentioned, it was the first major target for the force now crossing the Latvian border. As the transportation

<sup>18</sup> Mangulis, Visvaldis: *Latvia in the Wars of the 20th Century.* Cognition Books, 1983, p. 47, 51-52



options were generally few and bad, the available horse-drawn carriages were reserved for transportation of ammunition, supplies and, if any, the sick and injured. Some of the officers - and orderlies - had access to horses. The remaining had to walk. At the start of the march in Latvia, the corps was followed by Captain Grant's Estonian company, dubbed "Captain Grant's Children" by the Danes, after the classic Jules Verne novel of the same name. As one of the Danish officers wrote in his memories, the war in Latvia was fought with the feet, as it was characterized by endless marches more than military actions. For a long time, the advancing troops saw nothing of the Bolsheviks other than the various obstacles they had placed in order to prevent the attackers from pushing forward. For example, across the roads on which the advancement against Alūksne took place,

logs of tree had been placed. And what was more, the state of the roads caused problems for the wagons, that often got stuck in the sand, holes and mud: "... it would even touch one's heart to see how much the poor horses had to drag,"<sup>19</sup> as a volunteer noted in a letter. It did not delay the infantry, but the many obstacles caused many problems for the supply train, which quickly fell behind. The same did the artillery. Along their route, the Danes met a number of large abandoned estates. These estates were found in both Estonia and Latvia, and for the most part they belonged to the German-Baltic nobility, which traditionally also owned large parts of the land in the two countries. In Latvia, the Danes got the opportunity for the first time to come close to a number of these castles and manors, which had previously been wealthy and well-kept, but now appeared ravaged

<sup>19</sup> *Fyens Stiftstidende* 20.10.1919, "Det danske frivillige Hjelpekorps." Regarding the challenges to train and artillery, see also Hugo Arboes description in *Herning Avis* 04.07.1919 "Med Pansertog ved Bolschevikfronten"



Picture 2

Danish volunteers in training in Estonia. The shooters pose together with their essential armament; the Danish produced Madsen Machinegun. (Private archive)

and miskept. When the Bolsheviks took power, the original owners had either been killed or had escaped, and the buildings were often used to house Bolshevik troops, who even destroyed furniture they considered as the upper class symbols. In addition, the buildings were also exposed to the common robberies that war and chaos often cause. Many of the Danish soldiers interpreted the formerly magnificent, but now ruined, estates as a tangible evidence of the Bolsheviks' primitive nature and barbarism.<sup>20</sup> After 8 km, the Danish-Estonian force reached the Ziemera estate (Semershof), where they managed to take four prisoners who, according to lieutenant Gudme, had probably been too slow to follow when the Bolshevik main force had fled. A military picture appeared in which Bolsheviks everywhere retreated in delayed actions, without desiring to confront the attacking forces in any serious way. Similarly, the Estonian-Danish-Latvian alliance sought to advance with such great speed that the

<sup>20</sup> For descriptions regarding the encounter with one of the damaged estates, see ex. Viggo Hansen's description. In *Sorø Amts Dagblad* 17.07.1919 "I Kamplinien paa den estniske Front." See also Hugo Læssøe Arboes description in *Aalborg Stiftstidende* 09.07.1919 "De danske Frivillige i Estland"

Bolsheviks would not have time to prepare a proper defense. At Ziemera, the Danes were separated from Captain Grant's Estonian company, which took another direction towards Alūksne, to widen the front. After this division, the Danes no longer had any Allied units in front of them, and the corps even ended up being the left wing in the advancement, which meant that the corps' commander, Richard Borgelin, had to dispatch small front patrols in an attempt to secure the main force against surprise attacks. The deployment of proper side patrols quickly had to be abandoned as they could not keep up with the company in the rough woods that ran along the roads.<sup>21</sup> The company was thus very much alone and exposed during the advancement - as Borgelin describes the situation in his memories: "... it was a strange feeling to go this way through a land full of enemies without any proper protection on the right and left, yes, even in the back we were only partially secured, and we never had a proper connection to the base from which we came. This was felt, as it became difficult to get the needed supplies to us."<sup>22</sup>

But the advance, however, did succeed according to plan. Without big problems, the Estonian cavalry further forward had taken Alūksne, which was abandoned by the Bolsheviks that same morning. As the first of the infantry companies, the Danes moved into the town at 13:00 on May 29 on the first day of the Latvian campaign. The corps was assigned quarters at the city's "Latin School" and was able to rest. Unfortunately, the supply train did not arrive until 21:00 and caused great dissatisfaction among the weary and hungry soldiers. "A bloody mess, those supplies!",

<sup>21</sup> RA. Private archive. Richard Gustav Borgelin. *Vor sidste Kamp for Estland*, p. 105

<sup>22</sup> RA. Private archive. Richard Gustav Borgelin. *Vor sidste Kamp for Estland*, s. 107





Picture 3

*The Danish Volunteers were not officially sent to Latvia by Denmark but nevertheless they fought in the independence wars in the Baltics in Danish uniforms and under the Danish flag. Here the flag ("Dannebrog") is hoisted over the training camp in Nõmme in Estonia. (Private archive)*

Lieutenant Peter de Hemmer Gudme noted in his diary, but at the same time wrote that the crew of the supply train was well excused when thinking of all the burned bridges and cut down trees over the roads they had to pass with their horses and wagons to reach the city. According to Peter de Hemmer Gudme's notes, Alüksne was a beautiful and idyllically located city, which, like the rest of those the corps had passed, was now plundered and ravaged from the Bolsheviks' stay in the city. They had left nothing of value, according to Gudme: "what they could not bring with them, they have destroyed, so that others could not benefit from it. This applies to everything from furniture in the castle to typewriters, horses, cows and medications,"<sup>23</sup> as he noted. However, the time in Alüksne would be quite short. The enemy was only about 6 km away, and in order to maintain the momentum of the offensive, keeping pressure on the fleeing enemy, the Estonian cavalry

chief, the oldest officer, decided that the advancement should continue the next morning. According to Peter de Hemmer Gudme's diary, several of the company commanders including Grant and Borgelin, had otherwise asked for a day's rest as the crew was exhausted after the long march, but this was rejected. Therefore, the order was to move forward at 08:00 on May 30. The target was the railway junctions in the city of Vecgulbene and the railway station Sita, where four important lines ran together, including the railways to Jēkabpils, Rīga, Valka and Russia. It was the objective to prevent the Bolsheviks from the Rīga-front, who were pressured by both Estonian, Latvian and German-Baltic attacks, from being evacuated through the railroad to the east. At the same time, the ability to supply crew and supplies the other way would be cut off.

The Danes, two Estonian companies and the artillery moved, along with a smaller division from the cavalry, to Sita in the south, while the Latvians and the remaining part of the Estonians moved towards the Vecgulbene in the southwest. After a long march, the Danish group came close to the enemy around 16:00. At first, however, the contact was mostly in the form of artillery duels, while the infantry continued its march. A couple of hours later, the infantry received information that enemy forces had been spotted on a large estate a few kilometers north of the railroad going to Rīga. At the estate, the Danes attempted to encircle the enemy, but as the Estonians opened fire before the Danes were in place, the result was nothing but an extra march for the Danes, who would see the Bolsheviks withdraw from the estate at high speed.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> "I Kamplinien paa den estniske Front." According to Borgelin, the Estate was named Lettin. See Borgelin's description in RA. Private archive. Richard Gustav Borgelin. *Vor sidste Kamp for Estland*, s. 122

<sup>23</sup> RA. Private archive. Peter de Hemmer Gudme. "Et moderne Korstog" 1919 (unpublished), Journal notes 03.06.1919

<sup>24</sup> Viggo Hansen's description. In *Sorø Amts Dagblad* 16.07.1919

Instead, the group now moved forward, cutting across the railway line not far from Sita, which is close to the border between Russia and Latvia. After breaking up the rails, a fire attack on the train was prepared as a train with red troops was supposedly on the way from Vecgulbene towards the Russian border.<sup>25</sup> However, there was no train, so the exhausted troops found a place to sleep. The group the Danes belonged to had traveled 42 km, and after only a few hours of sleep the corps was awakened at 4:00. It was early morning on May 31, and the still tired and exhausted Danes started an approx. 18 km march west to Vecgulbene to unite with the Estonian and Latvian companies that had been moved directly to the city the day before. The Bolsheviks had tried to escape the city as the white forces approached, but a 200-men red company had outside the city run straight in the arms of the Latvians to whom they had surrendered.

Parts of the Danish volunteers had no military background and consequently were not trained for the long day marches. Marching up to 40 kilometers a day with kit is bad enough for well-trained soldiers, but for those untrained in the corps it was a great trial. In the officer Lieutenant Arildskov's memoirs, he describes how much of the force was so marked by the marches that they could not carry their own equipment, meaning the strongest had to carry guns and packs for the untrained members. Arildskov, whose 53-year-old father also participated in the corps, describes, for example, one member called "Stump" (Shorty), who besides being a bit too heavy also suffered from other physical problems caused by the endless marches:

<sup>25</sup> See also Grunnet's description in *Aarhus Stiftstidende* 16.08.1919 "Med de danske frivillige i Estland"

"Stump could not walk because the skin in his crotch was like bloody meat. Borgelin gave Dad, who was carrying Stump's rifle, etc., orders to either get him going or shoot him... Through pushing and shoving Dad got him along!" Whether Borgelin's wording is true is uncertain, but there is no doubt that tough methods were used in order to get the untrained and completely run-down soldiers to keep up. Arildskov also describes an episode with a private named "Skipper" who could not follow: "I had to force Skipper from hill to hill by saying to him, 'As soon as I see an enemy in your presence, I will shoot you first!' Fortunately, this drove him to do his best - we got him along!"<sup>26</sup>

On those days when the troops moved over long distances, the supply train had difficulty keeping up with them, and the exhausted soldiers, as previously described, often had no food until at night when the food and supply wagons had caught up with the infantry. In many cases, it meant that the Danes had to "order" food from local farmers to ensure supplies to the troops, which was not unproblematic.

## RELATIONS TO THE CIVILIANS

Many of the Danish soldiers felt that a large part of the civilian Latvian population sympathized with the Bolsheviks. At the same time, many of the volunteers had a somewhat colonial view of the Baltic States, thus operating with a cultural distinction between the "primitive east" and civilized Western Europe. Some volunteers therefore felt distrustful to the local population. After

<sup>26</sup> RA. Private archive. Max Arildskov. Erindringer, unpublished. Description of the Estonian freedom struggle p. 32.

the arrival in Latvia, however, the enormous distress and poverty that prevailed in the country characterize most of the volunteers' descriptions of the population. In the countryside, there was occasionally food to get, but the farmers often kept it for themselves, which made the food situation in the towns very difficult. One of the Danish volunteers describes his impression of the situation in a letter home: "Never before has need been greater for rich and for poor. The rich man has become poor, but the poor has certainly become even poorer. Fighting can be caused by simply throwing a dry piece of rye bread on the street."<sup>27</sup> As supplies to the corps during the advancement were few, the Danish corps often had to take the last that the peasants had. For example, one of the Danish officers noted in his diary: "We have had to find our own supplies everywhere, which is not easy to do in a country that the Bolsheviks have already suffocated."<sup>28</sup> To "live off the land" has been normal practice for advancing armies throughout history. However, the confiscation of food naturally created a somewhat problematic relationship with the civilian population. Especially because the line between "necessary" requisitions and plain robbery was often thin. And at the same time because the requisitions often had to take place under threats of violence, as the farmers' own existence was often dependent on the things the soldiers demanded. A Danish officer explained, for example, that "Some places, especially when we wanted to pick up wagons, the gun had to be brought out."<sup>29</sup> If the officers did not keep the soldiers in a tight leash, the requisitions risked developing into actual robberies, where the soldiers not only took what was most necessary.

The Danish corps' arrival at Vecgulbene was described by Lieutenant Peter de Hemmer Gudme, for example, in this way in his diary: "Since food supplies had been short lately, Captain Borgelin gave the crew permission to make requisitions on their own in the area - which was not necessary because a calf had already been secured for the company - and this permission, the soldiers took so literally that they hunted hens and ducks - and even a sheep - to a great extent. It became a rather embarrassing story, and the officers have now had to walk around and excuse themselves while paying compensation for the damages."<sup>30</sup>

## THE BRUTALITY OF THE WAR

Even though the Danish Corps did not participate in much tough fighting in Latvia, the soldiers could not avoid experiencing the brutality of the war. Shortly before the Danish corps' departure from Denmark, the famous Latvian general, Augusts Misiņš, was briefly in Copenhagen on the way to the Liepāja front after a stay in, among other places, London. Facing the Danish press, he described the task in Latvia: "... it is simply a matter of beating down a group of robbers that are a danger to the whole world."<sup>31</sup> As Misiņš' statement shows, the war in Latvia was not easily comparable to the intergovernmental showdowns during the great war. The war in Latvia was fought by different combatants who fought by different rules. And the Danes would soon come to experience this.

When the corps arrived at Vecgulbene, they were assigned quarters on a large estate.

<sup>27</sup> *Herning Avis* 04.07.1919 "Med Pansertog ved Bolschevikfronten"

<sup>28</sup> RA. Private archive, Peter de Hemmer Gudme. "Et moderne Korstog" 1919 (unpublished), Journal notes 07.06.1919

<sup>29</sup> RA. Private archive. Alfred Larsen. Unpublished journal notes, journal note 10.06.1919..

<sup>30</sup> RA. Private archive. Peter de Hemmer Gudme. "Et moderne Korstog" 1919 (unpublished), journal notes 01.06.1919

<sup>31</sup> A few days after, Misiņš was named chief of staff in the provisional government's armed forces. *Dagens nyheder* 21.03.1919 "Den baltiske Mannerheim om Kampen mod Bolschevikkerne"



Picture 4

*The advancement through Latvia by the Danish corps took place on foot or - as here - on obtained house carts. (Private archive).*

Like the previously described estates, which had housed Bolshevik troops, this was also completely destroyed. According to several volunteers' reports, the Bolsheviks had held tribunals on the estate and convicted a large number of civilian "enemies" to death. In the surrounding park, the Danes found a number of mass graves that contained the earthly remains of the Bolshevik victims. The independence wars in Finland and Estonia were generally fought with great brutality - and Latvia was no exception. Just a month before the Danish forces began marching in Latvia, the British diplomat in Liepaja, Herbert Adolphus Grant Watson, described the war in Latvia as "a civil war and it is being waged with unprecedented barbarity. The Bolsheviks kill their prisoners with every refinement of savagery and the Balts give no quarter."<sup>32</sup> That none of the sides spared civilians or prisoners of war is evidenced by a series of simultaneous descriptions and reports. After a trip in Estonia in March 1919, Lt. Col. Tallents from the British Relief Mission, wrote a situation report,

<sup>32</sup> NA. FO 608/184. Report by Herbert Adolphus Grant Watson, dated 01.04.1919

<sup>33</sup> NA. FO. 608/184 Report by Lt. Col. Tallents from the "British Relief Mission" p. 12, dated March 1919

including information about the southern front where the Danes were fighting. Tallents explained, among other things, that the Estonians in the battle against the red Latvian units attempted to deviate from "their general rule of killing all Bolshevik prisoners," as Tallents expressed it, as the Estonians hoped to lure Latvian soldiers on to the white side. However, according to Tallents, this practice had a serious setback, as the Estonians had just shot down an entire red Latvian regiment of 400 men who were about to surrender. Tallent's descriptions - regardless of whether the number is correctly stated - clearly shows that routine shooting of prisoners of war was a widespread practice.<sup>33</sup>

The Danish volunteers during their participation in the Baltic wars were also involved in this kind of warfare - either as witnesses or as directly involved. In the memoirs of the Danish Chief of Corps, many pages describe the bestiality and ruthlessness of the red. The red terror had thus also been extensive in Latvia with the shooting of class enemies, prisoners of war and political opponents of the Red Revolution. But occasionally, in the memoirs of the corps officer, one sees that brutality also went the other way. For example, Borgelin describes the horrors that had taken place in the Latvian cities when the red held tribunals and sentenced priests, teachers and other civilians to death. But in a side note he added that some of these were rescued when Danish-Estonian-Latvian forces arrived "and held 'court' over the worst red beasts."<sup>34</sup> In several of the volunteers' letters and diaries, a 'court' over and subsequent execution of four women in Vecgulbene is described in details. One of the Danish officers

<sup>34</sup> RA. Private archive. Richard Gustav Borgelin. *Vor sidste Kamp for Estland*, p. 153

participated in the panel that sentenced the captured women to death. On both sides of the conflict, these 'courts' were used to give executions a degree of legitimacy, but no legal protection of the accused was offered. In practice, both sides shot those they perceived as ideological opponents. In the volunteers' descriptions, it is somewhat unclear why the previously mentioned women had to be shot. Some say they had participated in a tribunal that had sentenced thousands of civilians to death, others said they had opened fire on an Estonian patrol and others again that they had tortured a Swedish volunteer. The episode is just one of a number of executions that the Danish soldiers write about in letters and diaries. A Danish volunteer, for example, describes how the Estonian and Latvian units at night had fought against the Bolsheviks' protruding units, trying to get away: "The day after the battle, I went through the streets of Alte Schwanenburg. I saw the big prisoner transports coming. First came the sick and wounded; they were driven on the supply trains carts. Then more soldiers, after which more wagons of sick and sore followed (...) they did not have boots on their feet; these had been taken when they were taken prisoner. There were young men in the age of 15-16, and there were older men in the age of 50, but they were all dirty and everyone was exhausted."<sup>35</sup> As it appears, during the rapidly moving war through Latvia, many prisoners were taken - in many cases also by the Danes. In practice, one of the volunteers wrote that the red soldiers who had been forced into the war after capture were enrolled in the white forces. The fate of the remaining red prisoners of war, he describes as follows: "But those who had volunteered, or the Estonians

and Latvians who had enlisted voluntarily in the Bolshevik ranks, were shot immediately without any form of trial."<sup>36</sup>

As already mentioned, of course, it was not only the white forces that shot prisoners of war. In English archives, a number of eye-witness reports about the use of the same practice by the Bolsheviks are collected. An Estonian white soldier who had been captured in Valka on the southern front were the Danes were situated miraculously survived a mass killing of prisoners of war by playing dead, and subsequently gave this description of what had happened: "They took our caps, coats and cloaks. Thirty-five armed Bolsheviks surrounded us in order to prevent any attempt of escape. Our hands were bound behind our backs. Besides this, we were fastened in couples, and then each pair joined a long rope, so we marched all attached to the one rope. Thus, we were led to death. As I protested against this barbaric treatment, the Bolshevik's officer struck me twice on the head with a riding whip and said, »Shooting is too good for you, your eyes should be put out before death«. At the word of command, the Bolsheviks fired a volley. The bound group fell to earth. I was also pulled down by the others, though I had not been here. The Bolsheviks fired four rounds on the fallen. Fortunately, I was again missed. Then the executioners fell upon us like wild animals to rob us. Anyone who still moved was finally killed by bayonets or blows from butt-ends of rifles. I kept as still as possible. One of the Bolsheviks took my boots..."<sup>37</sup> The mission in Latvia was no "Sunday school excursion" as a Danish volunteer put it. However, a fundamental difference was that in the years after

<sup>35</sup> Hugo Læssøe Arboe's description in *Aalborg Stiftstidende* 10.07.1919 "De danske frivillige i Estland"

<sup>36</sup> Hugo Læssøe Arboe's description in *Aalborg Stiftstidende* 10.07.1919 "De danske frivillige i Estland"

<sup>37</sup> NA. FO. 608/181 Report, "Bolshevists atrocities in Estonia - Further supplementary reports", dated 17.02.1919

the war, the Baltic countries managed to transform themselves into relatively liberal societies while the Soviet remained faithful to the legacy of the civil war and continued the highly repressive, occasional genocidal practices founded during the civil war.

## ADVANCING SOUTH AGAIN

While the Danish Corps expected a longer ceasefire after the arrival to Vecgulbene, the command had other plans. Not aware of this, the Danish Corps spent the whole of Sunday June 1 swimming, resting and sleeping. However, the crew was awoken without notice at 01:30 and asked to prepare for immediate departure. The Danish corps continued towards the southern Vidzeme, and the advance had the town of Krustpils (Kreuzburg) at the Daugava River (Düna) as the target. From here, the river had to be crossed to Jēkabpils on the opposite river bank, to connect with the Allied German, Latvian or Lithuanian forces operating south of the river. Like Vecgulbene, Krustpils was an important railway hub, only about 100 kilometers further south. If Krustpils could be taken, the railways from Rīga and Jelgava (Mitau) would be cut to the east and the Bolsheviks in Latvia would be trapped in a pocket. First, however, the corps marched in the middle of the night against Jaungulbene (Neu-Swanenburg), which was both the name of a castle and a railway station. Departure was ordered so quickly that the Danes did not eat before marching. The reason that the Danish company and Grant's company were sent to Jaungulbene in the middle of the night was that in the evening,

<sup>38</sup> Translated freely from telegram: "Richtung Kreuzburg dringen unsere Truppen vor. Stop. Sind Erbeuten eine Schwere Batterie mit Pferden komma 16 Maschinengevähre und 1600 gefangene gemacht." ERA.1590.1.3. Telegram signed "oberst Soots", dated 02.06.1919



a number of Bolsheviks had been caught a little further west. In the Estonian staff chief, Colonel Soot's daily report from June 2, it was stated: "In the direction of Krustpils, our troops are moving rapidly. A heavy horse-drawn battery, 16 machine guns and 1,600 prisoners of war have fallen into our hands."<sup>38</sup> The command therefore thought that more large enemy forces might try to cross the area of Jaungulbene from the west in the hope of reaching the Russian border in the east. Grant and Borgelin's companies were dispatched to meet the retiring troops so that they would not escape. On the march against Jaungulbene, lieutenant Peter de Hemmer Gudme wrote: "We met a part of the prisoners on the way. They looked pitiful, tired, and unhealthy. It seems that the Bolsheviks



have completely lost their will here in Latvia; they did not attempt to escape, but had marched along the road with a white flag in front and had quietly surrendered.”<sup>39</sup> At 7:00 Monday morning, June 2, the Danes arrived at Jaungulbene where they were quartered on the castle. But they would quickly have to move on.

The group of Estonians, Latvians and Danes, who had been at the forefront of the initial campaign against Alūksne in Latvia, would now be reunited to form the spearhead of the attack on Krustpils. Greater troop forces would then follow and form a chain of fortified positions on the border to the Soviet Union. Unlike earlier, it was now planned that the Danish corps would go by train some of the way towards Krustpils. Some of the Danes who had been pioneer soldiers were sent together with Estonian colleagues in advance to repair the bridges that the Bolsheviks had destroyed during their retreat. However, the train did not go more than 15 km before it reached a broken bridge that was not easily repairable. Therefore, the corps had to leave the train and walk 8 km to the castle Cesvaine (Sesswegen), where they spent the night. As the cavalry had contact with the enemy, they knew that the Bolsheviks retreated in the same direction as the Danes marched forward. However, it was Lieutenant Peter de Hemmer Gudme’s assessment that the chance of catching them was very little as the Bolsheviks had seized all the area’s horse-drawn carriages and therefore could retreat faster with equipment and crew than the Danes were able to move forward. Cesvaine was left as early as 07:00 the next morning, and the town of Madona

(Modohn) was reached at 01.00 at night. At noon the next day, the corps marched on to Laudona (Laudohn), which was reached late in the afternoon. The same night, at 03:00, the group continued. According to Peter de Hemmer Gudme, the Estonians preferred to start the marches as early as possible at night to march least possible during the warmest hours of the day, in which rest was often needed. In his designs for June 4, Chief of Staff Colonel Soot, simply wrote: “In the direction of Krustpils, our troops yesterday moved along the Ewsti [Aiviekste] River to Laudona and continue on.” Shortly after, the chief of staff could announce that in the area of Cesvaine troops had succeeded in capturing several departments of an enemy regiment.<sup>40</sup> Thus everything went on smoothly and according to plan.

Krustpils was a little over 30 kilometers to the south and was reached at 13:00 on June 5. Along the way, the Danes had not seen the enemy, and Krustpils was also emptied when the Danes reached the city as the first company. Throughout the route from Laudona to Krustpils, the corps had seen a lot of trenches and barbed wire barriers still untouched from the previous war. During the World War there had been very tough fighting between German and Russian forces over Krustpils and German artillery had largely leveled the city - and Jēkabpils had suffered almost the same fate.<sup>41</sup> In most places, only the sites of the fires remained, and many of the Danish volunteers noted the huge devastation in their letters - such as private Viggo Hansen: “... all the houses were shot down, some resembling piles of dust with pieces of bricks and tree protruding. Elsewhere, only the chimneys and



Picture 5

*The Danish volunteers were the first to enter Jekabpils during the advancement towards the Southern part of Latvia in the beginning of June 1919. Here the Danes are crossing the Daugava-river on a rope ferry between Krustpils og Jekabpils. (Private archive).*

parts of the gables still stood (...) Imagine how it would be to see a city like Sorø or Korsør shot completely down except 3 or 4 houses.”<sup>42</sup> The bridge between the two cities on each side of the Daugava River had been blown away during World War I. According to Borgelin, the Estonians had orders to under no circumstances move further than to Daugava. However, as it was considered dangerous not to secure the positions by occupying the opposite river bank, the Danes were sent across the river.<sup>43</sup> By 18:00, the company was thus ferried across the approx. 500 m wide river and then took Jēkabpils. They took stay at the town hall, which was one of the reasonably well-preserved buildings after the bombings. The Danes, however, felt vulnerable on this side of the river, fearing that the Bolsheviks would return. Therefore, the corps placed strong patrols on strategic locations in the city, secured the riverbank with a patrol, stopped all civilian traffic across the

river, and collected all boats within a radius of 2 km to allow for a possible retreat across the river. Meanwhile, in the streets, guards manned with machine guns were posted.<sup>44</sup> While the Danes were in Jēkabpils, they lifted the Danish flag above the town hall and took the role of the city’s supreme authority. The remaining civilians in town came to the Danes with matters of civil administration. For example, Viggo Hansen describes how a gentleman had come to the Danish headquarters and explained that he had rented a garden from the town authorities the previous year and he would like to do so again. According to Viggo Hansen, the Danes replied that they were happy to inform that it was a deal, “then we were rid of him”, Hansen noted.<sup>45</sup> In Soot’s June 7 report, it said “Krustpils and Jēkabpils have been taken from the Bolsheviks by our troops on June 5 and have been handed to the Latvian troops under our command, who arrived at their destination today [June 7].” According to the private Hugo Læssøe Arboe, the Danes were alone in Jēkabpils from June 5-7, upon which the Latvians from Northern Brigade arrived and took over the administration of the city.<sup>46</sup>

With the conquest of Krustpils and Jēkabpils, the Danish-Estonian-Latvian group had reached its military objective. In just over a week, more than 200 km had been passed in Latvia, and the rapid advance had allowed a coherent and sealed line from north to south along the Latvian eastern border. Had the Bolshevik resistance been greater, the group could have easily been cut off and caught deep in enemy territory. However,

<sup>39</sup> RA. Private archive. Peter de Hemmer Gudme. “Et moderne Korstog” 1919 (unpublished), Journal notes 03.06.1919

<sup>40</sup> Translated freely from telegram: “Richtung Kreutzburg hatten gestern unsere Truppen Linie Flusses Ewsti bis Kirche Laudon eingenommen und drangen vorwärts”.

ERA.1590.1.3. Telegrams signed “oberst Soots”, dated 05.06.1919 og 06.06.1919

<sup>41</sup> See also, Hugo Læssøe Arboe’s description of the two damaged cities at Daugava in *Aalborg Stiftstidende* 10.08.1919 “De danske frivillige i Estland”

<sup>42</sup> Viggo Hansen’s description. In *Sorø Amts Dagblad* 17.07.1919 “I Kamplinien paa den estniske Front”

<sup>43</sup> RA. Private archive. Richard Gustav Borgelin. *Vor sidste Kamp for Estland*, p. 171

<sup>44</sup> Viggo Hansen’s description. In *Sorø Amts Dagblad* 17.07.1919 “I Kamplinien paa den estniske Front”

<sup>45</sup> Viggo Hansen’s beretning. Trykt i *Sorø Amts Dagblad* 18.07.1919 “I Kamplinien paa den estniske Front.” on the Danes’ stay in Jēkabpils, see also RA. Private archive. Richard Gustav Borgelin. *Vor sidste Kamp for Estland*, p. 176

<sup>46</sup> See *Aalborg Stiftstidende* 10.08.1919 “De danske frivillige i Estland”

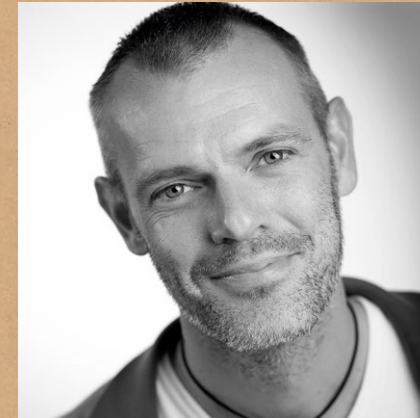
this did not happen and the campaign was an unconditional success. The Bolsheviks had abandoned the organized resistance in Latvia and now fled wildly. The Danish-Estonian-Latvian group had taken many prisoners and had experienced only few casualties. The Danish corps was praised for its endurance and lost only one man during the Latvian campaign - and this not even in battle. The dead Danish soldier had failed to receive his vaccinations, became ill and died of black smallpox in a hospital in Vecgulbene. But considering the daring nature of the advance, this was a small price. While all seemed well, Estonian and Latvian forces in western Latvia were attacked by German forces. Instead of combating the fledgling Bolsheviks, German-Baltic forces together with German volunteer corps had turned their weapons against the Estonians and Latvians in the hope of expanding the German influence in the area. The Estonians and the Latvians, however, fought back, which became the start of the so-called "Landeswehr war", where Estonian and Latvian troops jointly defeated German-Baltic and German volunteer troops in Latvia. For political reasons, the Danish expeditionary force was banned from taking part in fighting German troops and, hence, at the outbreak of the Landeswehr war, was harshly withdrawn from Latvia. The corps later arrived in Russia at Ostrow and fought here until the contract expired on September 1, 1919, after which it returned to Denmark. The fighting in the Baltic States came to cost the Danish corps 7 dead, four captured (only one of whom came back from Soviet prison camps), approximately 30 injured and a number of disappeared. As the

numbers suggest, the Danish corps eventually became involved in much harder fighting at the Ostrow front in Russia.

For the new Latvian state, it was of great moral importance that Western troops volunteered to Latvia to participate in the national independence war. The Latvians had not been entirely alone in the world after all. Therefore, the efforts of the Danish corps were not forgotten in Latvia. Company commander Richard Gustav Borgelin was awarded the highest Latvian military order: The Order of Lacplesis (Bearslayer). At the end of May 1927 - about eight years after the war - another four corps participants received this military honor. In the Latvian consulate in Copenhagen, a ceremony was held in which Lieutenant Colonel Iver de Hemmer Gudme, Lieutenant Peter de Hemmer Gudme, Captain Peter Viggo Christensen and Sergeant Aage Grunnet all received the Order of the Bear Slayer. Before the orders were fastened on the chest of the four Danes, Latvia's envoy to Denmark and Sweden, Karlis Zarins, held a speech in which he thanked the volunteers for their courage during Latvia's struggle for freedom. Next, the Danish Consul General in Latvia, Vilhelm Christiansen, spoke and expressed his hope that the four veterans would also contribute to good connections between Denmark and Latvia in peacetime.<sup>47</sup>

The efforts of the Danish corps may not have had a decisive military influence on the outcome. In their tough struggles against German forces, the Latvian forces themselves liberated their country. The Danish aid was a welcomed and treasured contribution, but the Latvians themselves freed Latvia.

<sup>47</sup> *Nationaltidende* 01.06.1927 "En Ordens-Højtidelighed i det lettiske Konsulat"



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