The territory known today as Latvia has been inhabited since 9000 BC. In the first half of 2000 BC, the proto-Balts or early Baltic peoples arrived. They are the forefathers of the Latvian people.

**HISTORY OF LATVIA**

**Legendary History**

At the beginning of this era the territory known today as Latvia became famous as a trading crossroads. The famous ‘route from the Vikings to the Greeks’ mentioned in ancient chronicles stretched from Scandinavia through Latvian territory along the river Daugava to the Ancient Russia and Byzantine Empire. The ancient Balts of this time actively participated in the trading network. Across the European continent, Latvia’s coast was known as a place for obtaining amber. Up to and into the Middle Ages amber was more valuable than gold in many places. Latvian amber was known in places as far away as Ancient Greece and the Roman Empire.

In the 900s AD, the ancient Balts began to establish specific tribal realms. Gradually, four individual Baltic tribal cultures developed: Couronians, Latgallians, Selonians, Semigallians (in Latvian: kurši, latgali, sēli and zemgali). The largest of them was the Latgalian tribe, which was the most advanced in its socio-political development. In the 1100s and 1200s, the Couronians maintained a lifestyle of intensive invasions that included looting and pillaging. Located on the east coast of the Baltic, they became known as the ‘Baltic Vikings’. Their contemporaries, the inland Selonians and Semigallians, were known as peace-loving and prosperous farmers.

**Under German Rule**

Because of its strategic geographic location, Latvian territory was frequently invaded by neighbouring nations, largely defining the fate of Latvia and its people.

By the late 1100s, Latvia was increasingly visited by traders from western Europe who used Latvia’s longest river, the Daugava, as a trade route to Russia. At the close of the 12th century, German traders arrived, bringing with them missionaries who attempted to convert the pagan Baltic and Finno-Ugrian tribes to the Christian faith.

Out of loyalty to their ancient pantheistic beliefs, the Balts resisted the imposition of a foreign religion, especially the ritual of christening. When news of this reached the Pope in Rome, he ordered a military Crusade against the Baltic peoples. At the turn of the century, armed Germanic Crusaders were hired to assist the Christian missionaries and knights in a brutal campaign to forcibly convert the people of the region.

The Germans founded Riga in 1201, establishing it as the largest and most powerful city on the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. As the German Crusaders seized control of the region, the development of separate tribal realms in ancient Latvia came to an end.

In the 1200s, a confederation of feudal nations was developed under German rule and named Livonia. The territory included today’s Latvia and Estonia. In 1282, Riga and later Cēsis, Limbaži, Koknese and Valmiera, were included in the Northern German Trading Organisation, or the Hanseatic League (Hansa). Subsequently, Riga became an important centre not only for east-west trade, but for the entire eastern Baltic region, developing close cultural contacts with Western Europe.
The Fight for Independence

The idea of an independent Latvia became a reality at the beginning of the 1900s. As the First World War spread to Latvian territory and directly engaged the entire Latvian population, a powerful pro-independence movement developed. Courageous Latvian riflemen called *latviešu strēlnieki* fought on the Tsarist Russian side during this war, and earned recognition for their bravery across Europe. Post-war confusion enabled pro-independence forces to consolidate their efforts and pursue their dream. Latvia’s independence was proclaimed shortly after the end of the First World War – on November 18, 1918. The first to recognise Latvia’s independence was Soviet Russia, which relinquished authority and pretences to Latvian territory for ever. However, future actions proved that these had been empty promises. The international community recognised Latvia’s independence on January 26, 1921. In the same year Latvia also became a member of the League of Nations and took an active role in the European community of democratic nations.

During this period Latvia gained an international reputation as a country that cared for and paid special attention to the rights of national minorities. Latvia was often referred to as a role model for other nations in the area of minority rights.

Loss of Independence

Latvia’s longstanding strategic importance to the USSR was underlined with the signing of the Soviet-German non-aggression pact (so-called ‘Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact’) on August 23, 1939. In concordance with this unlawful secret
agreement, the Soviet army occupied Latvia on June 17, 1940. A few months later, against the wishes of the Latvian nation, Latvia was forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union. During the ‘Night of Terror’ (June 13-14, 1941) thousands of Latvia’s inhabitants were brutally taken from their homes, placed in box cars and deported to Siberia. Thirty-five thousand people suffered Soviet repression in the first year of Soviet occupation.

In the summer of 1941, the Soviets were forced to retreat as Latvia was invaded by German occupation forces. Under subsequent Nazi German rule, 90 percent of Latvia’s Jewish population was systematically annihilated. In 1944, the USSR reinvaded Latvia. Following heavy fighting between German and Soviet troops, the Red Army eventually gained the upper hand. During the course of the war, both occupying forces conscripted Latvians into their armies, in this way increasing the loss of the nation’s ‘human resource’. By 1945, Latvia was once again under total Soviet occupation and pre-war Soviet rule was reinstated.

The first post war years marked a particularly dismal and sombre period in Latvia’s history. Soviet rule was characterised by systematic repression and genocide against the Latvian people. One hundred and twenty thousand Latvian inhabitants were imprisoned or deported to Soviet concentration (GULAG) camps. More than one hundred and forty thousand rural residents were deported from the Soviet army by fleeing to the West. On March 25, 1949, more than forty thousand rural residents were deported to Siberia in a sweeping repressive action. An extensive Russification campaign began in Latvia and many administrative obstacles were created to hinder the use of the Latvian language.

The secret protocol
of the
’Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact’
(1939), which determined the tragic fate of the Baltic countries.

The secret protocol of the ‘Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact’ (1939), which determined the tragic fate of the Baltic countries.

A demonstration in Riga on 18 November, 1989 gathered about half a million people who demanded an immediate end to the Soviet occupation.

Reinstating Independence

A liberalisation within the communist regime in the USSR, known as ‘glasnost’, began in the mid 1980s. This opportunity was immediately seized by pro-independence forces in the population, who formed mass, nationally oriented socio-political organisations – Tautas Fronte (The Popular Front of Latvia), Latvijas Naцionālсs Neatkarības Kurilse (Latvia’s National Independence Movement), Pilсonu Kongress (The Congress of Citizens of Latvia). All eventually supported the restoration of Latvia’s national independence.

August 23, 1989, marked the 50th anniversary of the signing of notorious ‘Molotov-Ribbentrop’ pact, which had led to the Soviet occupations of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. In order to draw the world’s attention to the fate of the Baltic nations, around 2 million Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians joined hands in a human chain that stretched 600 kilometres from Tallinn, to Riga, to Vilnius. It symbolically represented the united wish of the Baltic States for independence. A major step toward restoration of independence was taken on May 4, 1990, when the Latvian SSR parliamentary body known as the Supreme Council adopted a declaration calling for the restoring independence following a transition period. On August 21, 1991 the parliament voted to end this transition period, thus restoring Latvia’s pre-war independence. In September 1991, Latvian independence was recognised by the USSR.

Soon after reinstating independence, Latvia became a member of the United Nations and swiftly returned to the world community of democratic nations. In 1992, Latvia became eligible for the International Monetary Fund and in 1994, joined the NATO ‘Partnership for Peace’ program, as well as signed the free trade agreement with the European Union. Latvia became a member nation of the European Council and a candidate for membership in the European Union and Western European Union. In 1999 Latvia was the first of the Baltic nations to be accepted into the World Trade Organisation.

At the end of 1999 in Helsinki, the heads of the European Union countries and governments invited Latvia to begin negotiations regarding accession to the European Union. In 2004 Latvia’s most important foreign policy goals – membership in the European Union and NATO – were fulfilled. On April 2, Latvia became a member of NATO and on May 1, Latvia together with the other two Baltic States (Estonia and Lithuania) became a full-fledged member of the European Union.

Latvia was forced to adopt Soviet farming practices and the economic infrastructure developed in the 1920s and 1930s was purposely destroyed. Rural areas were forced into collectivisation. Since Latvia still had a well-developed infrastructure and educated specialists, Moscow decided to base some of the Soviet Union’s most advanced manufacturing factories in Latvia. To supply the large labour force needed to run these factories, Soviet workers from Russia and other Soviet republics were flooded into the country, dramatically decreasing the proportion of Latvian nationals. Whereas prior to the Second World War Latvians comprised 75 percent of the population, by the end of the 1980s, this number was reduced to 50 percent. (Presently the total population is 2.3 million).
Arrival of the first inhabitants on Latvian soil, after the withdrawal of the glaciers.
Proto-Balts (forefathers of the modern Latvians) settle Latvia’s territory.
Individual Baltic tribal groups (Couronians, Latgallians, Selonians, Semigallians) start to form specific tribal realms.
The arrival of German traders, missionaries and crusaders in Latvia. The city of Riga founded 1201. Territories inhabited by tribal realms fall into the hands of the Germans. Livonia is established.

1500s Livonian War (1558 – 1583). Latvian territory under Polish-Lithuanian rule. The dukedoms of Kurzeme (Courland and Semigalia) and Polish Livonia, or Infantry are formed.

1600s Polish-Swedish War (1600 – 1629). Vidzeme (Livland) and Riga under Swedish rule. Riga – Sweden’s largest city. Dukedom of Kurzeme experiences an economic boom.

1700s The Great Northern War (1700 – 1721). Vidzeme and Riga come under Russian rule. During the course of this century Latgallia and the dukedom of Kurzeme are annexed to Russia.

1850s – 1870s National awakening of the Latvian people. The movement of jaunlatvieši (’New-Latvians’).

November 18, 1918 Proclamation of independence of Latvia.

August 11, 1920 Soviet Russia (later – the USSR) and the Republic of Latvia sign a Peace Treaty. Russia acknowledges Latvia’s independence and for ever withdraws its claims for the territory of Latvia.

August 23, 1939 Non-aggression pact between the USSR and Germany (so-called ‘Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact’): both totalitarian states divide Eastern Europe between them. According to the secret protocol, Latvia together with Estonia and later also Lithuania, are absorbed within the Soviet sphere of influence.

October 5, 1939 Threatening armed intervention, the USSR forces Latvia’s government to sign an agreement allowing Soviet army bases on Latvian territory (officially called a ’mutual assistance agreement’).

June 16, 1940 Violating all agreements and treaties between the two states, as well as the principles of international law, the USSR delivers an ultimatum to Latvia. It demands the formation of a new pro-Soviet government and announces the immediate deployment of Soviet armed forces to the country.

June 17, 1940 Latvia occupied by USSR troops.

July 23, 1940 The USA Foreign Affairs department declares that the occupation of the Baltic countries is illegal and their incorporation into the USSR is not recognised by the USA.

June 14, 1941 15,424 Latvians are deported from Latvia to Siberia: the political and business elite of Latvia is considered to be hostile towards the occupation regime. Among the deported are almost 100 infants under the age of 1 and more than 3000 children under the age of 16.

1941 – 1945 Latvia occupied by the German Third Reich.

March 1943 Germany begins compulsory recruitment of Latvian civilians into its occupation army.

1941 – 1944 The German occupation regime exterminates over 90,000 Latvian civilians, mainly Jews.

May 8, 1945 End of the Second World War. The German occupation army capitulates and the USSR occupation power is re-established in the territory of Latvia.

1945 – 1956 A continuous Latvian national partisan armed struggle against the second Soviet occupation spread throughout the country.

March 25, 1949 More than 43,000 innocent people are labelled as enemies of the re-established Soviet regime and are deported to Siberia.

June 14 and August 23, 1987 The first large anti-Soviet and anti-occupation demonstrations in Riga.

May 4, 1990 A declaration restoring independence with a transition period is adopted.

August 21, 1991 Complete reinstatement of Latvia’s independence.

August 31, 1994 The last troops of Russian (former USSR) occupation army leave Latvia.

April – May 2004 Latvia becomes a member of NATO and the European Union.