

# 11. National Hollidays and Remembrance Days

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January 1, New Year's Day.

Ring in the New Year, with the festivities usually starting on the evening of December 31 (see also New Year's Eve - December 31), it is one of the most thrilling annual events in Latvia. Usually people stay up until past midnight, and exactly at midnight they toast each other with champagne, wishing everyone a happy New Year.

March-April, (in accordance with the Western Church calendar) Easter.

In Latvia, Easter holidays usually last three days: Good Friday, Easter Sunday and Easter Monday. Latvians go to church but also observe Latvian festive traditions, which differ from the rituals introduced by the Christian Church. Easter is usually celebrated in the family or among close friends.

May 1, Convocation of the Constituent Assembly of the Republic of Latvia; Labour Day.

In contrast to most European countries, where this date is Labour Day only, in Latvia May 1 is of special national significance, too. On this date in 1920 the Constitutional Assembly, the first Parliament of the Republic of Latvia democratically elected by the whole nation, convened for its first session. Its task was to draft and pass the State Constitution.

May 4, Restoration of Independence of the Republic of Latvia.

On May 4, 1990 the Supreme Soviet of the Latvian SSR (the highest legislative institution in occupied Latvia) passed a Declaration on the Restoration of Independence of the Republic of Latvia envisaging a transitional period until full independence was regained.

The 2nd Sunday in May, Mothers' Day.

Mothers' Day is a comparatively new holiday in Latvia, officially recognized only from 1992, although it was marked as a family celebration already in the 1920s and 30s. The essence of this family occasion lies in the view that the mother represents the main pillar of a strong family.

A Sunday in May or June (in accordance with the Western Church calendar), Whitsunday.

Whitsunday in Latvia is mainly connected with Christian religious observances, but also includes earlier traditions from before Christianity.

June 23-24, Līgo Day and Jāņi (John's Day).

This is the biggest traditional Latvian festival, having a deep symbolic meaning for Latvians and known in other countries, too. The Līgo-Festival (Līgo-Eve) is on 23<sup>rd</sup> of June, with Jāņi on the following day - 24<sup>th</sup> of June. It coincides with the summer solstice, and the festivities include many ancient traditions: gathering wild flowers and cutting boughs, making wreaths of oak-leaves and flowers, decorating houses and animals, burning a ceremonial bonfire and singing songs with the 'līgo' refrain. Ritual food includes Jāņi cheese with caraway seed and barley beer.

November 18, Proclamation of the Republic of Latvia.

On this day in 1918, in what is nowadays the National Theatre in Riga, the Republic of Latvia was proclaimed as an independent state. In a favourable situation in the wake of World War I, Latvian political groups realized their dream of establishing an independent state. The first period of existence of the Republic of Latvia lasted up to June 17, 1940, when Soviet forces occupied the country. More than 51 years passed before the independent Republic of Latvia was restored on August 21, 1991.

December 24, 25, 26, Christmas.

Christmas is traditionally one of Latvia's most important festivities. Among the Latvians this is a family celebration, when people attend church services. Essential Christmas traditions include decorating the Christmas tree and gift-giving on Christmas Eve - December 24. The celebrations continue on Christmas Day and the day after.

December 31, New Year's Eve.

January 20, Commemoration Day of Defenders of the Barricades in 1991.

In autumn 1990, reactionary forces became increasingly more established in the government of the Soviet Union. It was in their interests to stop the Baltic peoples' move towards restoring independence, and in January 1991 the leaders of the USSR in Moscow took a decision to restore the old order in the Baltics. Latvians from all over the country rushed to Riga to build barricades and defend independent power structures. The 20<sup>th</sup> of January marked the culmination of violence by Soviet forces hostile to Latvian independence. Soviet Special Forces seized the Latvian Ministry of the Interior, a gun-battle ensued and several people were killed.

January 26, International (*de iure*) Recognition of the Republic of Latvia.

On this date in 1921 the Entente countries, the victors in World War I, recognized the independent Republic of Latvia. Thus, the leading world powers of the time recognized independent Latvia as an equal subject under international law.

March 25, Commemoration Day of Victims of Communist Terror.

On this day in 1949, a total of 43 000 people were deported from Latvia to Siberia, mainly prosperous peasants who were regarded by the Soviet occupation regime as alien to communist ideology and the principles of collectivism.

May 8, The Crushing of Nazism and Commemoration Day of Victims of World War II.

For Latvia and the Latvians, World War II was a time of great suffering. Both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union violated international law by mobilizing the population of Latvia into their armed forces. About 200 000 Latvian soldiers served in the forces of both occupying states, and about half of them (100 000) were killed in battle.

May 9, Europe Day.

Since the restoration of the independent Republic of Latvia, one of the main foreign policy tasks has been accession to the European Union. Accordingly, Latvia has adopted this day of remembrance, observed in the European Union in honour of Robert Schuman, who made an immense contribution to unifying the countries of Europe after World War II.

June 14, Commemoration Day of Victims of Communist Terror.

On June 14, 1941 the Soviet occupation regime deported to Siberia around 15 000 people from Latvia, regarding them as ideologically opposed to the Soviet communist system.

June 17, Occupation of the Republic of Latvia.

In accordance with a secret protocol of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of August 23, 1939, which apportioned Latvia to Moscow's sphere of influence, the country was occupied by Soviet forces on June 17, 1940. Latvia was under occupation by the Soviet Union (Russia) from 1940 up to 1941, when the country was occupied by Germany. In 1945 the Soviet occupation regime returned, and the Russian forces of occupation left their last military base in 1998.

June 22, Heroes' Commemoration Day (Anniversary of the Battle of Cēsis).

In June 1919 near the town of Cēsis there was a battle between Latvian and German forces (including local Germans). On June 22, the Latvians, together with Estonian forces, won a decisive victory against the Germans. This victory is traditionally regarded as the triumph of the idea of an independent Latvian state over the principles of power embodied by the Germans in the Baltic.

July 4, Commemoration Day of Genocide against the Jews.

On July 4, 1941, shortly after the occupation by the USSR ended and the occupation by Nazi Germany began, Riga's main Jewish synagogue was destroyed, burning alive those who were trapped inside.

August 11, Commemoration Day of Latvian Freedom Fighters.

The day of remembrance for Latvian freedom fighters is connected with the signing of a peace treaty between Latvia and Soviet Russia on August 11, 1920. The treaty ended the Latvian War of Liberation, which had begun in late 1918. In the war, one of the militarily strongest opponents of the idea of a free Latvian state was the Soviet regime, which had become established in Russia and planned to take over power in Latvia as well.

August 21, Passing of the Constitutional Law on the Status of the Republic of Latvia as a State and Actual Restoration of the Republic of Latvia.

On August 21 the Supreme Council (Parliament) of the Republic of Latvia declared that the Constitution of the Republic of Latvia, as passed on February 15, 1922, was restored in full. This ended the transitional period to a fully independent republic, a process formally instituted on May 4, 1990.

September 1, Knowledge Day (First Day of School).

The new school year usually starts on this date, when classes begin in all teaching institutions in Latvia. Younger students, often accompanied by their parents, traditionally bring flowers to their teachers on this day.

September 22, Baltic Unity Day.

On this date in 1236, Baltic peoples - the ancient Latvians together with the ancient Lithuanians - defeated the German crusading order, the Order of Sword Brethren. The order had been created to gain military and political control of the Baltic region and to convert the indigenous peoples to Christianity.

November 11, Latvian Freedom Fighters' Remembrance Day - Lāčplēšis Day.

On this date in 1919, the Latvian Army won a decisive breakthrough in the fighting against the Russian and German forces led by Pavel Bermont-Avalov, which had taken up arms against the Republic of Latvia. The victory over the forces of Bermont-Avalov marked the conclusion of the Latvian War of Liberation (1918-1920) and allowed to begin the creation of the new state.

The Last Sunday of November (usually), All Souls' Day (unofficial day of remembrance).

On this day and on the previous eve - "Candles Eve" - people visit cemeteries to remember the deceased loved-ones, lighting candles at the graves. A widespread tradition on this day is a visit to the Riga Fraternal Cemetery. Everyone brings a candle, lit to honour the soldiers who fell in the cause of Latvia's freedom.

The 1st Sunday in December, Commemoration Day of Victims of Genocide Against the Latvian People by the Totalitarian Communist Regime.

After World War II about 200 000 Latvians lived in Soviet Russia (later the USSR), having arrived both in the course of peasant emigration in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and as refugees from the fighting in World War I, since from 1915 the front passed through the present territory of Latvia. In 1937-1938 the communist regime in Moscow began genocide against non-Russians living in the USSR, including Latvians. About 70 000 Latvians living in the Soviet Union were killed. The Latvian Parliament has declared the first Sunday of December as a day of remembrance for the Latvians killed in the USSR in the course of repression by Stalin's regime.