

TOWARDS THE STATE OF LATVIA

No. 7

The Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Latvia on 18 November 1918

Latvia 100 

One of the most significant dates in the history of the Latvian statehood is 18 November 1918. At that time, the declaration of the Latvian state embodied a clear vision of independence as the best alternative for the future, the opportunity to successfully use the international political situation, the energetic leaders' faith in the Latvian future and, simultaneously, the imminent uncertainty about the internal political problems and the external political threats.

Historical background

The idea of Latvian independence grew stronger in the minds of the politicians in the autumn of 1917. Two very important political centres were founded at that time – the Latvian Provisional National Council and the Democratic Bloc.

In the autumn of 1917, the influence of radical socialists – the Bolsheviks – increased in Vidzeme and in Russia. It was characterized by the negative attitude towards the self-determination of nations. To clearly state the Latvian nation's interests and rights in this political climate, the right-wing politicians convened the Latvian Provisional National Council (LPNC) in Valka at the end of November 1917. The Council proclaimed

Image 1

Reproduction of painting "Latvian Congress of Latgale in Rēzekne" by Jēkabs Strazdiņš.

The reproduction was gifted to the National History Museum of Latvia in January 2015 by Gunārs Ciglis.

Photographer Roberts Kalniņš

The collection of the National History Museum of Latvia



Image 1

Image 2

The Board of the Latvian Provisional National Council:

First row from the left:

Kristaps Bahmanis (secretary), Jānis Rubulis (deputy chair), Voldemārs Zāmuels (chairman),

Jānis Palcmanis (deputy chair),

Kārlis Pauļuks (deputy chair),

second row from the left:

Vilis Siliņš,

Oto Nonācs, Kārlis Skalbe, Jānis Akuraters, Eduards Laursons.

1917. Nonācs, O. Northern Latvia. Rīga:

Gulbis, 1928, page 29

the full national independence as the future goal of Latvia. In order to achieve this goal, the LPNC operated both with the Allies of the Triple Entente in Western Europe, and during the Bolshevik retaliation in Russia. Rīga was, at that time, out of touch with the situation in Valka, the rest of Vidzeme and Russia, because in September 1917 the city was seized by the German army. Here, an open political activity was no longer possible, so the Latvian politicians from various parties met for informal meetings. The original intention of the meetings was to continue the process of the active political discussions started in summer. The co-operation of the politicians with approximately twenty different political affinities in the German occupied Rīga came to be called the Democratic Bloc. The most influential representatives of the Bloc were Kārlis Ulmanis, Miķelis Valters, Fricis Menders, Pauls Kalniņš, Marģers Skujenieks. Since October–November 1917, the independent Latvian state was also the strategic objective of the Democratic Bloc. At the end of February 1918, the whole territory of Latvia was under German occupation. The politicians of the Democratic Bloc and the leaders of the LPNC remaining in Latvia could start the collaboration. However, the social life was still negatively affected by the control and restrictions of the German occupying power.

Only in the second half of 1918, the news of the political processes in Germany brought a hope of change. The left-wing ideas of the social democrats overrode the Empire worn out by war. In October the revolution broke out; the German army was also defeated in the Western Front. On 9 November 1918, the German Emperor Wilhelm II renounced the throne; whereas, the Armistice of 11

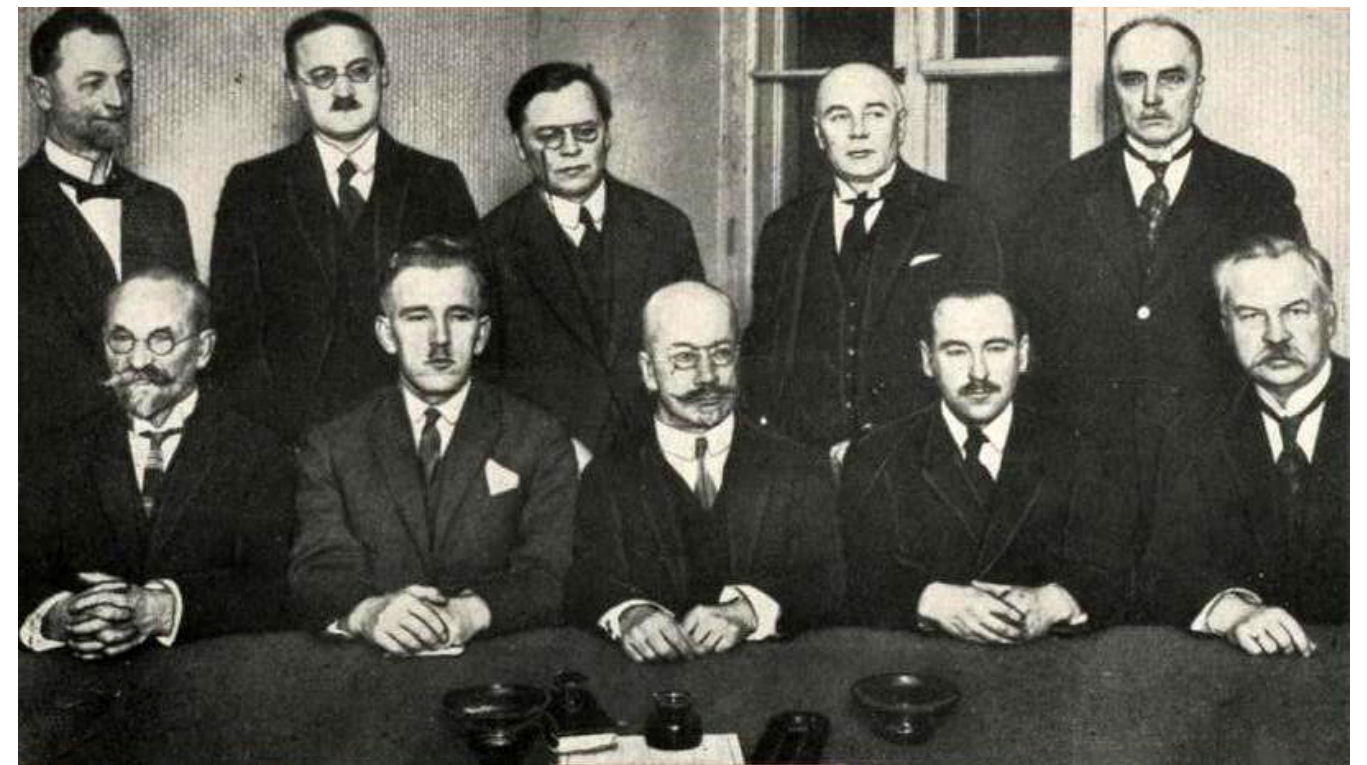


Image 2

November in the Western Front ended the First World War. That allowed to hold political meetings more openly and actively, nevertheless, remaining wary. Already at the end of October, the politicians of both the LPNC, and the Democratic Bloc realized that the opportunity to achieve the Latvian independence has come. It was possible for both the external and internal political reasons. In October and November 1918, the Latvian politicians increased their attempts to seek international support from the Triple Entente (the United Kingdom, France and the USA) and the German politicians. The greatest achievement was the provisional recognition of Latvia's

independence by the British Foreign Secretary that was obtained by the LPNC representative Zigfrīds Anna Meierovics. Likewise, the politicians of the LPNC and the Democratic Bloc started to meet more frequently for mutual consultations. However, even the major common goal – the declaration of independence of Latvia – could not erase the different political affinities so easily. The founders of the Democratic Bloc were certain that the Latvian state must be built by a new organization of political parties, whereas, the leaders of the LPNC held a view that they are a recognized authority, which should be the founder of the Latvian State.

Image 3

Jānis Čakste (1859–1927), Chairman of the People's Council, later the President of Latvia (1922–1927).

Collection of the Latvian War Museum

Formation of the People's Council of Latvia

On 12 and 13 November 1918, the Latvian political parties that were not represented in the Latvian Provisional National Council (LPNC), decided to create a new organization instead of expanding the LPNC. It was important for the overall work to include the left-wing parties and socialists who, at the end of 1917, had dissociated themselves from the work of the LPNC but a year later they were ready to support the formation of an independent Latvia. Therefore, on 16 November 1918, in the meeting of party representatives, despite the hopes of individual LPNC leaders, it was decided to form the People's Council of Latvia.

Among the founders of the People's Council, there were representatives of eight political parties of Latvia, including representatives of the Provisional Land Council of Latgale. The People's Council was comprised of politicians who had been active in the Democratic Bloc, as well as associates from the LPNC.

The People's Council of Latvia was formed on 17 November 1918 in the building of the Riga Latvian Society Artisan's Savings and Loan House on 3 Suvorova (now K. Barona) Street led by Gustavs Zemgals. The representatives of the parties arrived according to the previously issued number of mandates. A total of 40 seats were planned for members, but only 36 arrived at the sitting of 17 November while 38 delegates attended the formal sitting of 18 November. The political platform of the People's Council was discussed in the formation sitting. Jānis Čakste (he arrived in Rīga only on 22 November) was elected as the Chairman of the People's Council, whereas Kārlis Ulmanis was

elected as the Prime Minister of the Latvian Provisional Government. At the conclusion of the sitting, it was decided that on the following day, 18 November, a formal sitting of the People's Council would take place at the Latvian Opera house (nowadays – Latvian National Theatre) where the independence of the Republic of Latvia would be proclaimed. It was decided to print 1200 entry cards for guests. They were typographically printed on the night of 18 November. A committee was also appointed for the preparatory work of the formal sitting.

The process of the formal event of 18 November 1918

The uncertain political circumstances and doubts that German military would turn against the proclaimers of independence of Latvia were the reasons why the formal event for proclaiming the State of Latvia had to be organized in a hurry – in less than 24 hours. However, the People's Council that was formed in a few days' time and the new political platform of the State of Latvia were both presentable. The formal event was also a success – an accordingly decorated theatre hall full of people, elated atmosphere, and speeches that were not exhaustingly long.

The building of the Latvian Opera – the former Second Riga City Theatre – Russian Theatre (nowadays – the Latvian National Theatre) was chosen as a venue for the event. The big hall was of appropriate size, moreover, politicians who had a connection to the Latvian Opera were a part of People's Congress and could help with the organisation of the event.

The sitting was scheduled to begin at 16:00.

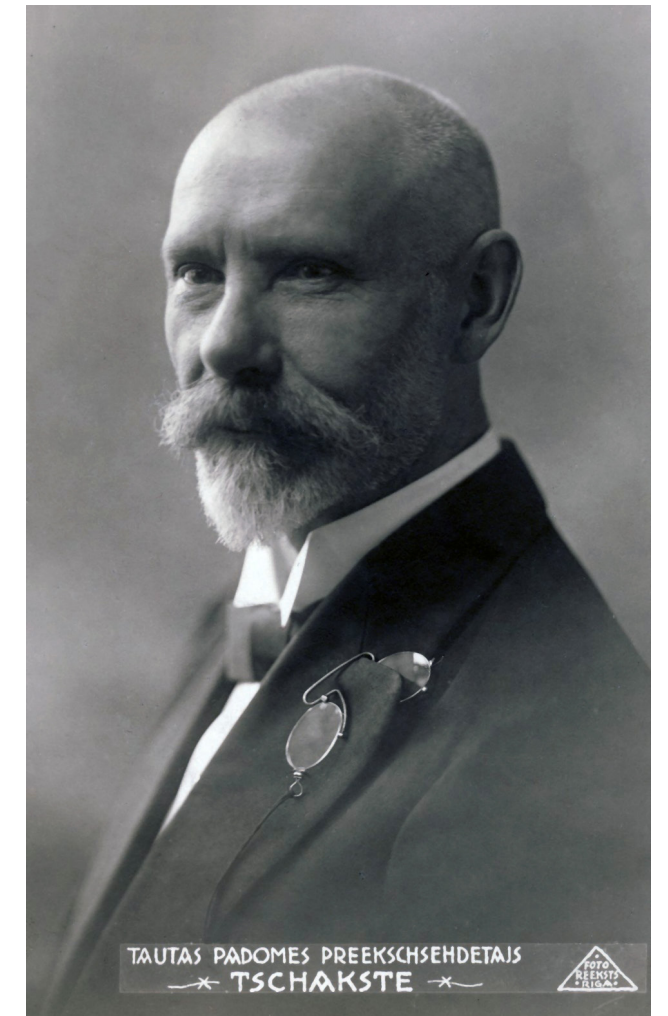


Image 3

Accordingly, on 18 November, guests had to be invited, the stage had to be decorated, and the participation of the Latvian Opera choir led by Pauls Jozuus had to be arranged for a better sounding of the national anthem "Dievs, svētī Latviju" ("God Bless Latvia"). Moreover, until 13:00 a rehearsal of the Latvian Opera choir took place in the hall.

Image 4

Kārlis Ulmanis (1877–1942), Prime Minister of the Latvian Provisional Government in 1918–1921

Prime Minister Kārlis Ulmanis after getting off the ship "Saratov" in Riga.

8 July 1919

Photographer Mārtiņš Lapiņš

The collection of the National History Museum of Latvia

Stage decorations were entrusted to the stage designer Jānis Kuga, who at that time was a part of the Latvian Opera company. To complete this task, the wife of Kuga together with the seamstresses of the theatre created a large flag from red and white fabrics. To enliven the stage, plants were borrowed from the garden and were put in a composition next to the presidium table of the sitting that was covered with a red tablecloth.

The sitting of the People's Council of Latvia started, with a short delay, at 16:30. Accompanied by applause, the 38 members of the People's Council of Latvia walked through the hall and to the stage where they had seats arranged according to their political affinity. Contrary to the previous day's plans, the formal sitting was not attended by Jānis Čakste, Chairman of the People's Council, who was in his countryside house near Jelgava; therefore, his deputy Gustavs Zemgals chaired the sitting. The Secretary of the People's Council Erasts Bite read a passage from the protocol of the Council's formation sitting, announced the name of the Chairman of the People's Council and the Prime Minister. After the reading of the protocol, Gustavs Zemgals announced that the sovereign power is now in the hands of the People's Council and he gave the floor to Kārlis Ulmanis, who proclaimed the independent and democratic Republic of Latvia. After that they sang the national anthem and Ulmanis delivered a speech on the tasks of the Provisional Government. Following the speech, the floor was given to representatives of the political parties that were part of the People's Council. At the end of the formal sitting, they sang the national anthem three times. At 17.45 the declaration of the State of Latvia was concluded.



Image 4

The sitting was immortalized in a photo taken by Vilis Rīdzenieks. Ten years later, in 1929, while filming the "Lāčplēsis", most of the participants of the sitting of 18 November 1918 helped to reconstruct the photo with a view to capture the participants of the sitting in a film.

Image 5

Latvian Opera House, Second Riga City Theatre – Russian Theatre (now - Latvian National Theatre) where on 18 November 1918 the Republic of Latvia was proclaimed.

Collection of the Latvian War Museum

Members of the People's Council of Latvia – the founders of the State

Latvian Farmers' Union

Jānis Ampermanis, Jānis Vārsbergs, Vilis Gulbis, Ernests Bauers, Artūrs Žers, Nikolajs Svemps, Kārlis Vanags, Jānis Bērziņš, Oto Nonācs, Edmunds Freivalds, Pēteris Murītis, Kārlis Ulmanis, Miķelis Valters

Latvian Social Democratic Workers' Party

Fricis Menders, Jūlijs Celms, Pauls Kalniņš, Bruno Kalniņš, Klāra Kalniņa, Andrejs Petrevics, Kārlis Kurševics, Mārgers Skujenieks

Democratic Party of Latvia

Erasts Bite, Dāvids Golts (Zeltiņš), Miķelis Bružis, Augusts Raņķis, Jānis Bergsons
Radical Democratic Party of Latvia
Jānis Zālītis, Gustavs Zemgals, Kārlis Kasparsons, Rūdolfs Bēnuss

Revolutionary Socialist Party of Latvia

Eduards Traubergs, Emīls Skubiķis, Kārlis Albertiņš

Latvian National Democratic Party

Jānis Akuraters, Atis Ķeniņš

Latvian Republican Party

Eduards Strautnieks

Latvian Independence Party

Spricis Paegle

Land Council of Latgale

Staņislavs Kambala

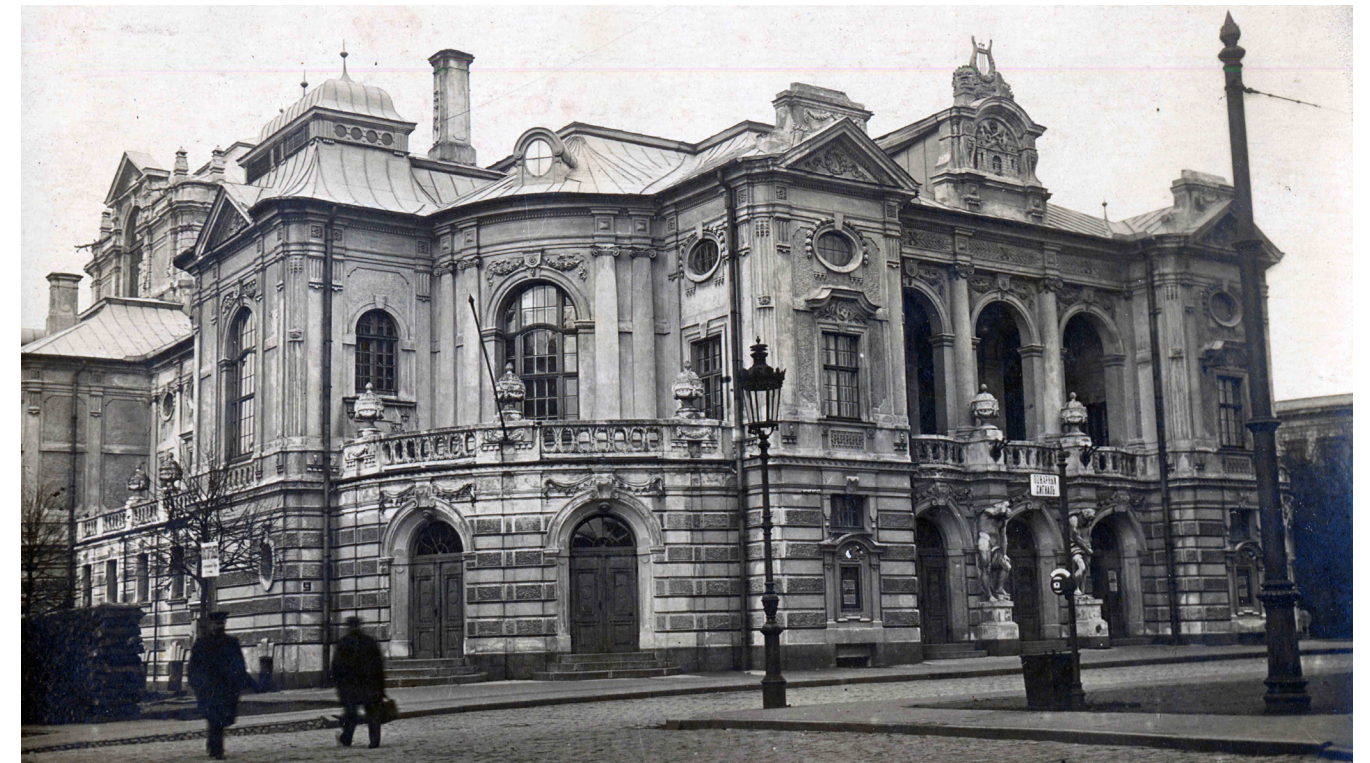


Image 5

Latvia 100 

On the eve of the Centenary of the Latvian State, the State Chancellery prepares series of information materials about formation of the Latvian State and its founders. The goal of information materials is to strengthen the understanding of statehood, history of Latvia and national values as well as bright personalities that affected historical processes and made a considerable contribution in formation and development of the Latvian state, particularly, in the work of its Government.

We are grateful to Dr. hist Toms Ķikuts for the involvement in development of fact sheet "Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Latvia".

Please find information about the origins of our state, its path towards independence and Latvia's centenary events at:

LV100.lv
www.mk.gov.lv/simtgade