

Latvian Provisional National Council

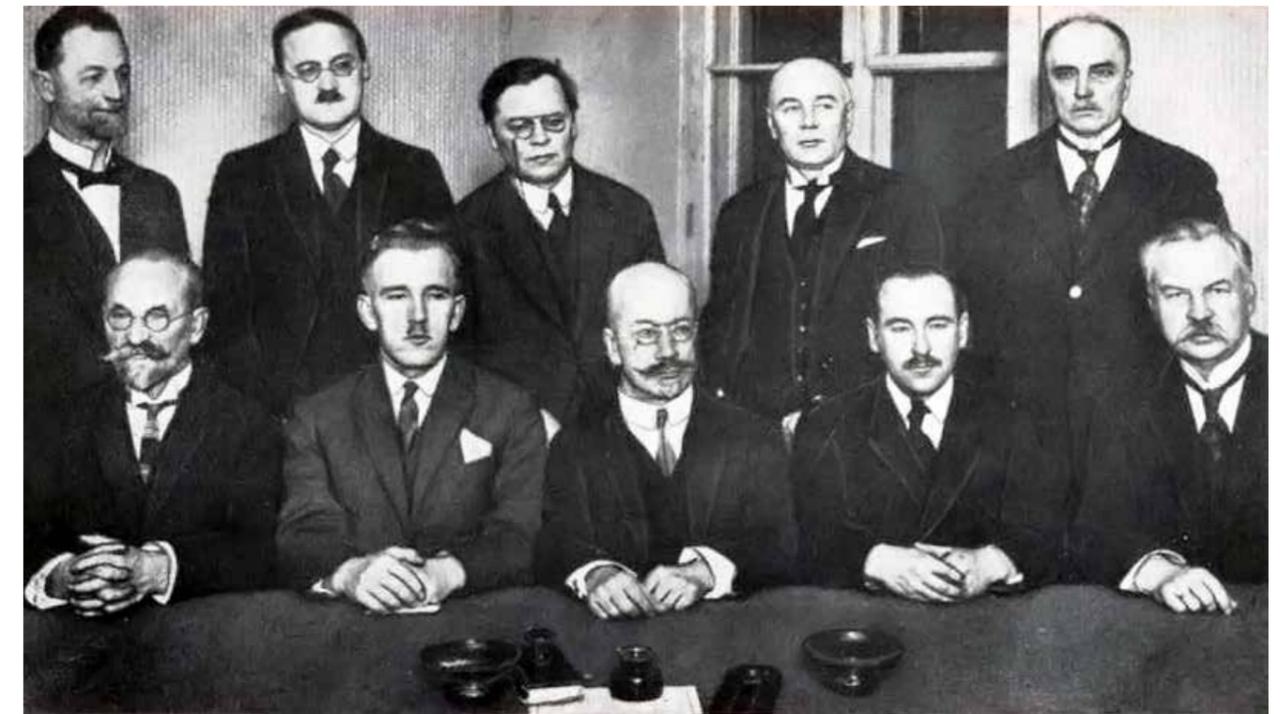
29 November 1917 –
17 November 1918

World War I (1914-1918) destroyed the great empires of Europe, paving the way for the creation of new nation-states including Latvia. The Latvian Provisional National Council (LPNC) that was established in autumn 1917 in Valka played an important role in Latvia's road towards independence and actively promoted the idea of independence both at home and abroad.

The idea of the establishment of the National Council was voiced for the first time in the press shortly after the February Revolution in Russia in 1917 and the Tsar's renunciation of the throne.

Following the victory in the Revolution, a half-year long period of democracy in Russia (which Latvia was an integral part of at the time) began with a sharp political struggle, party squabbles and growing uncertainty about Russia's future.

In the summer of 1917, calls were increasingly made by some politically active Latvian groups (especially among the Moscow refugees) to abandon the traditional autonomy demand and set the idea of independence as the main objective ("Free Latvia in free Russia"). However, by September 1917, an absolute majority of Latvian politicians did not dare to elaborate on such radical ideas. It would inevitably lead to conflicts with the Russian Provisional Government, jeopardising the supply of Latvian refugees and existence of the Latvian Riflemen units as well as possible reforms in the future.



Picture

*Board of the Latvian Provisional National Council:
In the first row from the left - Kristaps Bahmanis
(Secretary), Jānis Rubulis (Deputy Chairman),
Voldemārs Zāmuels (Chairman), Jānis Palcmanis
(Deputy Chairman), Kārlis Pauļuks (Deputy
Chairman); in the second row from the left - Vilis
Siliņš, Oto Nonācs, Kārlis Skalbe, Jānis Akuraters,
Eduards Laursons (1917).*

*Nonācs, O. (1928). Ziemeļlatvija. Rīga:
Gulbis, 29.lpp*

On 3 September 1917, the German army occupied Rīga. This encouraged the Latvian political and public figures to radically change their position. The Russian Provisional Government demonstrated complete indifference to the fate of Latvia; it rejected the request to merge the areas populated by Latvians into one administrative unit and preferred not to start discussing the possible autonomy of Latvia. Representatives of the Latvian parties and organizations learned of it on 2 October 1917 (19 September, old style) during a visit to the Head of the Russian Provisional Government, Alexander Kerensky.

Russia's military and political collapse, on the one side, and threats of German occupation, on the other side, motivated the Latvian politicians to lean toward the idea of independence. Only separation from the collapsing Russia and inclusion of Latvia's issue on the international agenda could allow for the hope of freedom from the German occupying power in the future - after the end of World War I. These considerations and focus on Western countries (UK, France, USA) later turned out to be fully justified.

Picture

Building of Valka City Council (at present, 11 Kesk Street in Valga, Estonia) where the founding meeting of the Latvian Provisional National Council was held on 29 November 1917.

Valka (1916).

Collection of the Valka Local History Museum

Timeline

3 September 1917 – German army occupies Rīga

11 September 1917 – newly-elected Vidzeme Land Council meets in Valka

23 October 1917 – civil politicians withdraw from the Vidzeme Land Council

7 November 1917– Bolshevik revolution in Petrograd

11 November 1917 – date initially determined for the first LPNC session

20 November 1917 – Bolsheviks seize power in Valka

21-22 November 1917 – power in Vidzeme is seized by Iskolat – Executive Committee of the Soviet of Workers, Soldiers, and the Landless residing in Valka

29 November – 2 December 1917 – first LPNC session in Valka

3 December 1917 – first LPNC board meeting in Valka

8 December 1917 – newspaper “Lidums” publishes the LPNC appeal “To all Latvians!”

19 December 1917 – Iskolat closes the newspaper “Lidums”

1 January 1918 – Iskolat bans the LPNC activities

18-19 January 1918 – convening of the Russian Constituent Assembly



28-31 January 1918 – second LPNC session in Petrograd

22 February 1918 – German army occupies Valka

3 March 1918 – peace treaty between Germany and Russia (Treaty of Brest-Litovsk)

23 April 1918 – Latvian Provisional National Theatre becomes operational in Valka

26 -28 June 1918 – third LPLC session in Petrograd

11 November 1918 – end of World War I

17 November 1918 – establishment of People's Council of Latvia

18 November 1918 – People's Council of Latvia proclaims an independent state of Latvia

Jānis Goldmanis (1875–1955)

Deputy of the Russian State Duma, one of the initiators of establishing the Latvian Rifleman battalions, and Chairman of the Organizational Committee of Latvian Riflemen. He participated in the formation of the LPNC; he was Head of the LPNC Foreign Affairs Division, member of the Latvian People's Council, and Minister for Agriculture of the Latvian Provisional Government (1918-1919). On 18 October 1917, through funds of the Latvian Riflemen, J. Goldmanis established the Latvian Information Office in Petrograd which later became the LPNC Foreign Affairs Division. It served as the basis for the establishment of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia.

Collection of the Latvian War Museum

Jānis Zālītis (1874–1919)

Deputy of the Russian State Duma, one of the organizers of the Latvian Rifleman battalions. J. Zālītis took part in the formation of the LPNC. From 1917-1918, he was a member of the LPNC, represented Latvia in the Scandinavian countries; later J. Zālītis was a member of the Latvian People's Council and the first Minister for Defence of the Republic of Latvia (1918-1919).

Collection of the Latvian War Museum

Jānis Čakste (1859–1927)

Chairman of the Latvian People's Council, later President of Latvia (1922-1927). From 1915-1917, Vice-chairman and later Chairman of the Central Committee of Latvian Refugees. From 1918-1919, member of the LPNC, head of the Latvian delegation in the Paris Peace Conference. In 1920, he was elected Chairman of the Latvian Constitutional Assembly.

Collection of the Latvian War Museum

**Radical socialists (later called Communists) were at that time referred to as the Bolsheviks*

Establishment of the Latvian Provisional National Council October-November 1917

In order to develop and promote the idea of Latvia's independence among Latvians as well as abroad, it was necessary to create a new political structure bringing together the largest Latvian political and social organizations.

At the end of September 1917, the Councillors of the state of Russia, J. Goldmanis and J. Zālītis, undertook a broad consultation on opportunities to create the Latvian political centre. The first open meeting on this issue took place on 14-15 October 1917 in Petrograd in the premises of the Central Committee of Latvian Refugees. It was attended by about 20 delegates. The meeting was not attended by official representatives of the Vidzeme Land Council because their *Bolshevik leadership did not permit. At the meeting a bureau of the organisation was set up which was asked to prepare for the convening of the LPNC.

At the end of October, a confidential meeting was also held. It was attended by Jānis Goldmanis, Jānis Zālītis, Zigfrīds Anna Meierovics, Ādolfs Klīve, Jānis Čakste un Arveds Bergs. The purpose of the meeting was to set the guidelines for Latvia's independence. The participants of the meeting agreed that it was necessary to avoid mentioning openly the requirement of independence as it would lead to negative reactions not only from the Russian Provisional Government, but also from Western countries which were allies of Russia and, therefore, could not openly support Latvia's independence. Instead it was decided to use a designation of an autonomous and indivisible country as an alternative to the concept of 'independence'.

On 18 October 1917, J. Goldmanis established the Latvian Information Office (Head J. Sesks)



Jānis Goldmanis

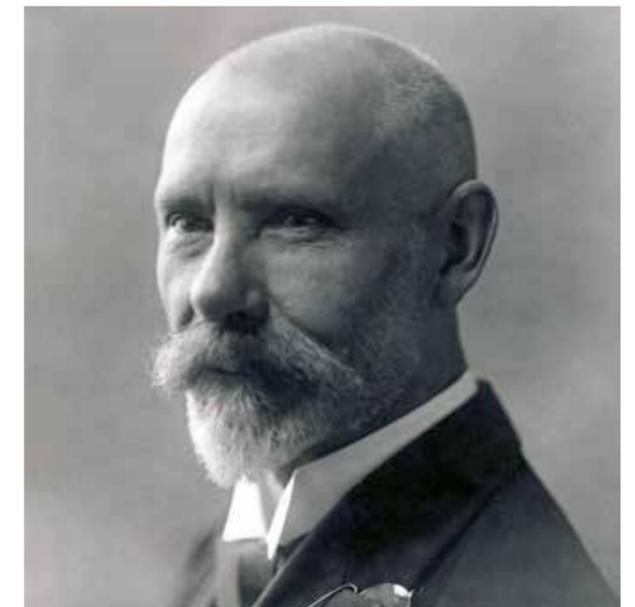


Jānis Zālītis

in Petrograd through funds of the Latvian Rifleman. Later it became the basis for the LPNC Foreign Affairs Division that played an important role in establishing relations with foreign countries and promoting the idea of Latvia's independence.

Meanwhile, relations with the newly-elected Vidzeme Land Council, whose Bolshevik majority flatly refused to participate in developing the LPNC, had become aggravated. On 23 October 1917, a faction of Latvian civil politicians demonstratively withdrew from the Vidzeme Land Council. These events contributed to the LPNC meeting, as it had become evident that constructive cooperation with the Bolsheviks was not possible.

The LPNC Organizing Committee that met on 31 October 1917 in Petrograd decided to immediately convene the first LPNC session. It had to meet on 11 November 1917 in Valka.



Jānis Čakste

Dāvids Rudzītis (1881–1939)

At the end of 1917, D. Rudzītis took part in work of the LPNC. At the end of the second LPNC session, on 31 January 1918, he was elected Secretary of the Council. In the summer of 1918, under conditions of the German occupation and on the assignment of LPNC, D. Rudzītis propagated the idea of the need to establish an independent state. Later D. Rudzītis became the first Director of the State Chancellery (1918-1939).

Collection of the State Chancellery

Zigfrīds Anna Meierovics (1887–1925)

Minister for Foreign Affairs (1918–1924, 1924–1925), Prime Minister (1921–1922, 1922–1923, 1923–1924)

On 12 July 1918, the LNC granted an authorization, No. 157/160, to Z. A. Meierovics. Its content was as follows:

"The Latvian National Council, which is currently the highest public authority of emerging Latvia and combines all Latvian national parties and central public authorities, is sending cand. rer. merc. Zigfrīds Meierovics to England as its authorized representative, the sole bearer of this authorization.

Mr. Meierovics is certified to establish relations with the state and statesmen of England, and to participate and speak in conferences and meetings on behalf of the LNC. Moreover, Mr. Meierovics works in a manner that will demonstrate the need for a sovereign and undivided Latvia with an international guarantee for its independence." Based on this authorization, Meierovics expanded activities in Western countries.

On 23 October 1918, Arthur James Balfour, British Foreign Secretary, informed Z. A. Meierovics that the British government had decided to provisionally recognize the Latvian National Council as the government of Latvia until the peace conference would finally decide on the status of Latvia. The LPNC perceived the statement by Balfour as a de facto recognition. On 30 October 1918, Z. A. Meierovics sent Balfour a letter asking for a written declaration of recognition of Latvia's independence. In response to the letter, on 11 November Mr. Balfour informed Meierovics in an official letter that the British government "is pleased to reaffirm its readiness to give provisional recognition of the Latvian National Council as a de facto independent authority."

Collection of the State Chancellery

The First LPNC Session 29 November-2 December 1917

However, political developments in Russia slightly adjusted these plans. On 7 November 1917, the Bolshevik Revolution took place in Petrograd. As a result, the Russian Provisional Government led by A. Kerensky was replaced by the Soviet government led by V. Lenin. The LPNC met for its first session much later than originally planned - on 29 November 1917, in the premises of Valka City Council.

As Rīga was already under German occupation during this time, Valka had become the centre of Latvian cultural and political life. Changes in Russia's political life urged a contingent of Latvian politicians, contrary to previous arrangements, to speak openly about the opportunity to gain independence.

This advocacy was done by the most famous politicians from civil society - J. Goldmanis and J. Zālītis, as well as K. Bahmanis and K. Skalbe. However, political uncertainty, indecisiveness on the part of some delegates, and hope for the forthcoming meeting of the Russian Constituent Assembly led to the rather moderate declarations and LPNC resolutions of 2 December. The LPNC declared Latvia as an autonomous state unit whose future would be determined by the Constitutional Assembly of Latvia.

This compromise designation - 'autonomous state unit' - could even be interpreted by independence proponents as a declaration of national independence while by its opponents as the same earlier request for political autonomy. The decision to leave the future of Latvia to a Constitutional Assembly that was unlikely to hold a meeting in the near future was also indicative of the meeting's indecisiveness.

Following the first session, the Bolsheviks exercised different kinds of repressions against



Dāvids Rudzītis



Zigfrīds Anna Meierovics

"In 1917 there were only vague talks in Rīga about autonomy. The star of independent Latvia rose in Valka where the Latvian National Council assembled in late autumn to express opposition to the annexation of Kurzeme to Germany and to declare that Vidzeme, Kurzeme and Latgale are indivisible, independent national units whose political system will be determined by the Constitutional Assembly of Latvia. This was the first proclamation of Latvia," wrote Kārlis Skalbe in his notes "Latvijas iecerēšana" (1920)¹.

the LPNC - liquidation of the Office of the Organizational Committee of Latvian Riflemen and the closing of a number of civil and socially moderate democratic newspapers ("Lidums," "Strādnieku Avīze," etc.). The Bolshevik repressions and peace negotiations with Germany launched by the Soviet government urged Latvian politicians to act more decisively. The divisions that were established at the LPNC founding meeting were active, especially the Foreign Affairs' Division (Head, J. Goldmanis).

Its head had also been elected to the Russian Constituent Assembly, and this highest representative body of Russia had to become a

tribune from which Latvians could express their political demands.

The Constituent Assembly met in Tauride Palace in the evening of 18 January 1918. By the next morning, the Bolsheviks, with Latvian Riflemen also taking part, banished it. However, J. Goldmanis managed to deliver a speech at this historic meeting highlighting the principle of self-determination of people as well as the fact that Latvia's issue had gained international significance; Goldmanis argued that Latvia's future could no longer be decided solely by Russia.

¹Ādolfs Erss. Vidzeme brīvības cīņās. R., Pagalms, 1935. 22., 55.lpp.

Picture

Letter by Jānis Akuraters to his wife Marija Akuratore (2 handwritten pages in ink), written on the LPNC form. An envelope printed for the needs of the Council is included. J. Akuraters was the LPNC Board Member for the entire period of its existence.

Valka, 5 January 1918. Collection of the Literature and Music Museum

²Kārlis Skalbe. *Kopotī raksti. 9.sējums, R., Jānis Roze, 1939. 248.lpp.*

As we approach the centenary of Latvia, the State Chancellery is producing a series of informative materials about the formation of the State of Latvia and its founders. The informative material is aimed at strengthening the sense of statehood, raising awareness of the history of Latvia and its national values, as well as vivid personalities who influenced history and contributed significantly to the foundation and growth of the State of Latvia, particularly to the work of the government.

We are grateful to Dr. hist. Jānis Šiliņš for his contribution to the fact sheet on the Latvian Provisional National Council.

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

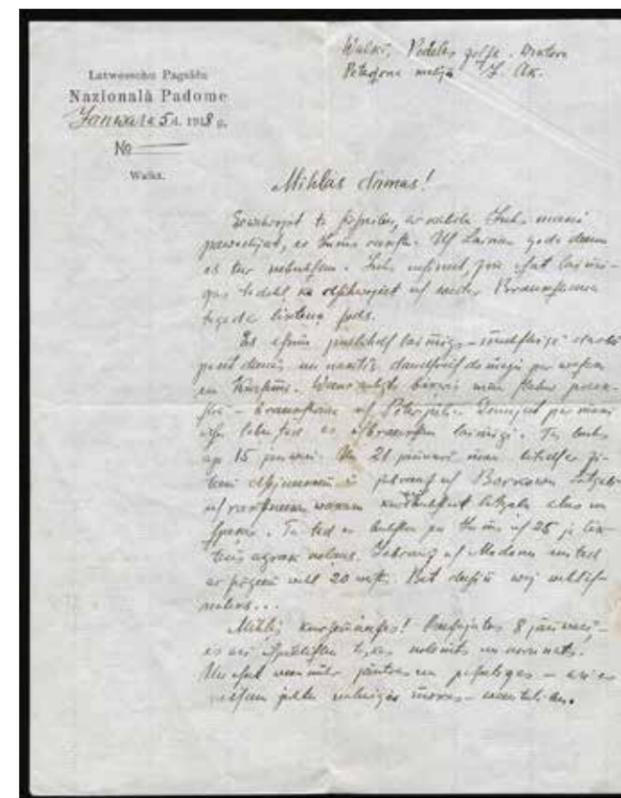
LPNC's Struggle for Recognition of Latvia's Independence January-November 1918

Eviction of the Russian Constituent Assembly burned the last bridge between a Russia that was sinking in Bolshevism, and the civil and social democratic circles of Latvians.

The second LPNC session met on 28-31 January in Petrograd. On 31 January, it adopted the famous declaration recognizing that Latvia must be an independent democratic Republic.

However, there was no longer any possibility to breathe life into this declaration. Vidzeme was under complete Bolshevik rule, and any attempts to create independent public administration structures would be eliminated immediately. The LPNC postponed hope for international recognition of Latvia's independence. This task was particularly important at the end of February 1918, when Germany occupied the entirety of Vidzeme and Latgale and signed a peace treaty with Soviet Russia on 3 March.

The third and final LPNC session was held on 26-28 June in Petrograd in the apartment of J.Goldmanis under completely illegal conditions. The Bolsheviks had kept the host in custody for several days. At that time, the most important task of the LPNC was to send diplomatic representatives abroad. They were required to gain support to the idea of Latvia's independence, and under favourable conditions - they also demanded international recognition of the LPNC. On 29 July, Z. A. Meierovics was the first to travel. He performed his task brilliantly and, on 11 November 1918, the United Kingdom de facto recognized the state of Latvia. On 17 November 1918, the Latvian political parties (Democratic bloc), bypassing



In his book, "Vidzeme brīvības cīņās," Ādolfs Erss pointed out that when large numbers of wartime refugees arrived in Valka during World War I, it became the Latvian spiritual and cultural centre. "We will always have to remember the role of Valka at that time when we speak about the creation of Latvia. Not only did the Rīga intelligentsia participate in the realization of important national ideas, but also local people."²

the LPNC, agreed on the establishment of the Latvian People's Council. Mutual disagreements among politicians led to a formal merger of two major Latvian political organizations. The next day, the Latvian People's Council proclaimed the independence of Latvia.

The operation of the LPNC was thus terminated (LPNC Divisions continued to operate in Ukraine, Siberia and the Far East).

However, LPNC members actively participated in the work of the Latvian People's Council (Chairman, LPNC member, J. Čakste) and the Provisional Government led by K. Ulmanis (Minister for Agriculture, J. Goldmanis; Minister for Defence, J. Zālītis).

