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Old Believers – Soldiers of the Latvian Army (1918–1940)

Key words: Old Believers, Latvian army, War of Independence, civil society, integration

Summary

Old Believers in Latvia have served in the Latvian Army since its inception, notably participating in battles for independence in 1918. Many from Courland and Latgale joined Prince Anatoly Lieven's volunteer rifle detachment, including politician Melety Kallistratov. Following the War of Independence, the Latvian army transitioned to peacetime operations. Army personnel were established through universal military service, which applied to all citizens of Latvia. In Tsarist Russia, military service was mandatory for men, but typically only eldest sons served due to various exemptions. Families could also pay for someone else to serve on their behalf, a practice especially common among Old Believers. The Latvian army did not offer special benefits, and most young Old Believers served dutifully, learned Latvian, and earned rewards for good conduct. Military service was respected and often helped young people advance, as exemplary soldiers received recommendations to local governments. However, access to war schools and officer positions remained limited. The methodology of the article is a historically analytical synthesis.

Vecticībnieki – Latvijas armijas karavīri (1918–1940)

Atslēgas vārdi: vecticībnieki, Latvijas armija, Neatkarības karš, pilsoniskā sabiedrība, integrācija

Kopsavilkums

Latvijas vecticībnieki aktīvi piedalījās Latvijas armijas izveidē un neatkarības cīņās 1918. gadā. Baltās kustības dalībnieka pulkveža Anatolija Līvena vadītajā brīvprātīgo šautenes pulkā dienēja ievērojams skaits vecticībnieku no Kurzemes un Latgales, tostarp politiķis Meletijs Kaļistratovs. Pēc Neatkarības kara Latvijas armija tika veidota, balstoties uz obligāto militāro dienestu visiem pilsoņiem. Cara Krievijā vīriešiem bija obligāts militārais dienests, taču nereti dienēja tikai vecākie dēli, un bija iespējams "atpirkties" vai atrast aizvietotāju; šo iespēju īpaši izmantoja vecticībnieku ģimenes. Latvijas armijā gandrīz katrs jaunais vecticībnieks dienēja, apguva latviešu valodu un saņēma atzinību par labu dienestu. Armija kalpoja kā sociālais "lifts", bet bija ierobežojumi virsnieka karjerai un mācībām kara skolās. Raksta metodoloģija – vēsturiski analītiskā sintēze.

Introduction

This article discusses how the Latvian army contributed to integrating young Old Believers into Latvian civil society.

Old Believers are Russian Christians who rejected Patriarch Nikon's 17th-century reforms of the Russian Orthodox Church and faced persecution from church and state. Many fled abroad to preserve their traditional faith in foreign lands. In 1918 they found themselves in the territory of the newly-proclaimed independent Republic of Latvia. The Old Believers, after being oppressed for about 250 years and living in closed communities, stepped into a civil society with laws, duties, and traditions that were different from their own. This transition was significant as it marked their integration into a broader societal framework, which included participating in military service and adapting to new social norms and responsibilities.

In Christianity, any murder is absolutely prohibited. Anyone who commits murder (whether voluntary or involuntary, legal or illegal, intentional or accidental) is guilty and must be cleansed by repentance. One of the Church Fathers, St. Athanasius the Great (circa 295–373) wrote in his "Epistle to the Monk Amun": "It is not permissible to kill, but to exterminate the enemy in war is both lawful and worthy of praise" (<https://azbyka.ru/otechnik-afanasy>). Another Church Father, St. Basil the Great (circa 330–379) stated in the thirteenth canon: "Our fathers did not impute murder in battle as murder, excused, as it seems to me, the champions of chastity and piety. But perhaps it would be good to advise them, as having unclean hands, to refrain from communion of the Holy Mysteries for three years" (<https://azbyka.ru/otechnik-vasily>). The Old Believers followed the teachings of the Church Fathers, who condemned murder but allowed the lawful extermination of enemies in war, with spiritual consequences for those participating in the battle, along with strict repentance for the murders committed.

The methodology of the research can be described as a historically analytical synthesis, based on primary archival sources/documents research, supported by quantitative data, and enriched by biographical and material culture evidence. It is also reflecting an interdisciplinary methodology, including religious studies, sociology, and education. The narrative is chronological, tracing developments from the Russian Empire through the Latvian War of Independence and into the interwar period of the Republic of Latvia.

Old Believers' participation in the War of Independence

After the proclamation of the independent Republic of Latvia on 18 November 1918, to protect the new-born state, small units of troops loyal to the new government began to form. Over the course of several key months, the formation and first battles of various Latvian military units took place, and on 10 July 1919, a united Latvian army was officially established.

Parallel to the Latvian formations, other formations arose with participation of ethnic Russians and Old Believers among them. They took up the fight against their enemies – the Bolsheviks. The reason for the participation of Latvian Old Believers in the resistance against the Bolsheviks was primarily their denial of religion,

consequently – the removal of Bible lessons from schools, repressions against clergy as well as against Old Believers.

Latvian historian Andrejs Gusačenko gives them their due, acknowledging that it was Russian Colonel Mikhail Afanasyev's (*Михаил Афанасьев*, 1884–1941) partisan unit of 300 horsemen, which became the first military force in Latvia to engage in the fight against the Red Army from 13 October 1918 (Gusačenko 2019, 68). The unit consisted mainly of residents of Russian ethnicity from Latgale (Rezekne County mostly), wealthy landowners donated horses and crops for the maintenance of the unit. According to the results of the first census in the Rezekne County, in 1920 Old Believers made up 80% of the residents of Russian ethnicity (*Latvijas statistiskā gada grāmata 1921*, 4-5), so their active participation in the Afanasjev's unit is obvious, though it needs more detailed investigation.

On 9 December 1918, M. Afanasyev's cavalry unit was included in the provisional government's service with the task of defending Latvia's borders from the Bolsheviks. (Jekabsons 1996, 49, 52)

In the contract on the establishment of the Landeswehr (National Guard, a German-led military formation operating in Latvia) of 7.12.1918, it was planned to divide Latvians, Germans, and Russians living in the Latvian state, including company officers, into separate companies according to nationality (*Līgums starp Latvijas Pagaidu valdību un Vācijas valdības ģenerālpilnvaroto A. Vinnigu par landesvēra dibināšanu*, p.2). Captain (later Colonel) Kliment Dydorov (*Климент Дыдорев*, 1885–1938) was appointed the commander of the Russian company (Volkov, D-408). So, Kliment Dydorov stood at the origins of the creation of the Latvian army and the Latvian state. Dydorov did not belong to Old Believers himself, but his Russian company included rather many Old Believers. Dydorov's Russian company joined the Lieven's division established by Prince Anatoly Lieven (1872–1937) and later became part of the Baltic Landeswehr (Volkov, L-224). The unit was purely Russian, with Old Believers among them as well; the soldiers of that division called themselves "liventsy" and were proud of that belonging. On the general list of officers and volunteers of the Russian company of the Baltic Landeswehr, who went to the front on 23 January 1919 to fight against the Bolsheviks, there were the names of two prominent Old Believers from Daugavpils, Melety Kallistratov and Grigory Eliseev (LNA LVVA, 5434. f., 1.apr., 984. l., 70. lp.). The religion of the other soldiers remains unknown, it was not mentioned on the list, so it presents an objective for future investigations.

Later, Dydorov wrote about those remarkable days, about that necessarily important and fruitful collaboration of Latvians, Russians, Poles, and Germans during operations near Ventspils, Jelgava, and the strategic capture of Riga: "The fighting was fierce. Prince Lieven's detachment got the order to survey the Tyrel Marsh to find a way to move troops through it to strike at the Bolsheviks from the road from Kalnciems to Riga." An Old Believer, Grigory Eliseev, a warrant officer (*прапорщик*) of Lieven's unit, knew the paths through the Tyrel swamp best; so he managed to find the way and the Lieven's unit fighters successfully maneuvered through the enemy's rear in the swamps considered impassable for troops and especially for heavy artillery (Tiurin 2012, 8). On 22 May 1919, the Russian detachment of Prince Anatoly Lieven and the

Latvian Jānis Balodis regiment, which advanced through Piņķi, together with German units, liberated Riga from the Red Army (Volkov 2023, 45-46).

Latvian historian Jānis Šiliņš evaluates the liberation of the capital as one of the most brilliant military operations of its time, carried out by the ethnically and socially fragmented Latvian society, united for the sake of the supreme goal. This liberated the course of Latvian development from the communist alternative for 20 years (Šiliņš 2013, 201).

After the War of Independence, Grigory Eliseev (*Григорий Елисеев*, 1896–1967) became a politician, a well-known figure in public education, and a member of the Latvian Parliament (*Latvijas Republikas Saeima*). Melety Kallistratov (*Мелетий Каллистратов*, 1896–1941) became a permanent leader of the Old Believers List and served as a member of the 1st to the 4th Saeimas (Kuznecov 1992, 2).

Another remarkable Old Believer, Stefan Tsvetkov (*Стефан Цветков*, 1892–1982), joined the Latvian army voluntarily on 13 June 1919. He took part in fighting against the Bermontians and distinguished himself during the regiment's engagements. For example, on 20 November 1919, near Jelgava, Tsvetkov led a group of just twenty men behind enemy lines, capturing several buildings under heavy fire, seizing a machine gun, and taking forty-three prisoners. For his bravery, Tsvetkov was awarded the Order of Lāčplēsis – the highest Latvian military award for heroism during the War of Independence; he was among only fifteen Russians to receive this award in 1922 (LKOK nr.3/1418).

By 1920, the Latvian army had grown to 73,446 soldiers, with ethnic Russians accounting for about 4% – approximately 3,000 individuals, reflecting the diverse backgrounds of those who fought for Latvia's independence, not separated by religion. 3,029 soldiers lost their lives in the battles of the War of Independence (Jēkabsons 2021, 43). How many Old Believers were among them? Rather many Old Believers sacrificed their lives for Latvian independence, their names and even number remain unknown, history has saved so far the name of Sergey Kolosov (*Сергей Колосов*, ?–1919) from Rēzekne, a son of Illarion Kolosov (*Илларион Колосов*, 1866–?), who headed the Central Committee for Old Believers' Affairs of Latvia in 1926–1934 (Gusačenko 2019, 68).

Military service as a new social experience for Latvian Old Believers

After the War of Independence, the Conscription Law was adopted on 17 July 1923 (*Kara klausības likums 1923*) mandating service for males aged 17 to 50.

Old Believers had some experience of serving in the Russian Army. Universal military service was introduced in the Russian Empire in 1874, instituting selective conscription with exemptions for clergy and professionals. Government records show that only 20-25% of conscripts were called up, while 30% of those conscripted did not join the army. Ultimately, only about 14-17% truly became soldiers, highlighting widespread avoidance or exemption from service. For Old Believer families, this meant diligently seeking all available legal avenues for their children to avoid military service – a practice rooted in both religious convictions and a desire to preserve their community's autonomy (Baidarov 2006, 32).

However, unlike in Russia, there were no legal ways to avoid joining the Latvian Army. The Conscription law required all male citizens of Latvia between 17 and 50 years of age to participate in national defence. Young men reaching 21 (in some cases, 20) were drafted into compulsory military service for a period of 18 months (in 1931 it was reduced to 12-15 months), all the others were enrolled in the reserve or National Guard (*zemessardze*). Unlike the Russian system prior to Latvian independence, the Latvian conscription law did not allow for legal exemptions on religious or other grounds. As a result, all eligible young Old Believers were required to serve in some capacity (Kara klausības likums, pp.15-22). The lack of exemptions forced Old Believer youth to reconcile their religious convictions with the obligations of citizenship and military duty. It was forcing Old Believer youths to navigate a new set of social and cultural expectations.

One of the main challenges faced by young Old Believers and the broader Russian minority was a low literacy rate compared to their Latvian peers. In 1920, the literacy rate among Latvian young men was 78%, rising to 85% by 1925. In contrast, the literacy rate among Russians was significantly lower – 41% in 1920 and only reaching 58% by 1925. Government educational statistics from the period show that these disparities primarily stemmed from historical disadvantages (*Ceturtais tautas skaitīšana 1935*, 366).

The structure of military ranks in the Latvian Army included three main categories: soldiers, instructors, and officers. For ethnic Russians, including Old Believers, the opportunities to enter even instructor roles – or to pursue advancement through the non-commissioned or commissioned ranks – were limited (Jekabsons 2017, 155-164). This was often due to factors such as language barriers, lower literacy rates, and at times, social discrimination within military institutions. Historical studies of the interwar Latvia note that such barriers made it difficult for Russian-speaking conscripts to move beyond basic enlisted ranks, despite the formal equality promised by the new state.

By breaking down these aspects, we can better understand the complexities Old Believers faced as they navigated the demands of military service and integration into Latvian society in the years after independence.

Military authorities made deliberate choices about where soldiers would serve. For example, people from Latgale, a culturally distinct region in eastern Latvia, were sent to serve in other regions such as Vidzeme, Kurzeme, or Zemgale. Newcomers from those regions were sent to Latgale (LNA LVVA, 1500.f., 1. apr., 228. l., 605.lp.). This approach was meant to introduce young men, both Latvians and representatives of ethnic minorities, to the life, traditions, and society of other parts of the country and unite the entire nation as one common unit. It also aimed to help integrate young Old Believers – a Russian-speaking religious minority group with distinct traditions – into the broader Latvian society.

At the end of the recruits' training period, they gave a solemn oath to the state to protect Latvia: "I solemnly promise to protect the State of Latvia..." Only after signing this oath, were they officially recognized as soldiers. For a contemporary researcher to

discover a familiar signature – their father’s signature – in the archive must be an exceptionally emotional moment (LNA LVVA, 1500.f., 1. apr., 228. l., 1278. lp).

As a result of these integration efforts, many recruits gained a stronger sense of Latvian national identity and a deeper understanding of the country’s diverse cultural landscape. This process united various ethnic and religious groups, strengthening cohesion in the Latvian army and society.

The command respected Old Believer soldiers’ religious needs and made special arrangements for their spiritual life. Given the historical marginalization of Old Believers within Russian society, these accommodations marked a notable step toward religious inclusivity within the military and reflected a broader commitment to recognizing Latvia’s religious diversity.

In Daugavpils Fortress, which housed several military units, the Fortress Cathedral was assigned to the Lutheran garrison; the left side chapel of the Cathedral went to the Catholics, while, upon the request of Archpriest (future Metropolitan), Augustine Peterson (*Augustīns Pētersons*, 1873–1955), the right side chapel was allocated to the Orthodox. Inside the Fortress, there was no place for praying for Old Believers. So they had to visit the house of prayer (*моленная*) of the 1st Novostroyeniye community (*Первая Новостроенская община*). Before religious holidays, city residents could often witness a small but orderly column of Old Believer soldiers making their way through the city.

In 1936, Grigory Romanov (1869–1942) was appointed as the spiritual leader (*духовный наставник*) of the military Old Believers by order of the Commander of the 4th Zemgale Infantry Division in the Daugavpils garrison (LNA LVVA, 1500.f., 1. apr., 228. l., 421. lp.).

In Jelgava, Ioann Alexeev (*Иоанн Алексеев*, 1865–1932) was first appointed as the spiritual leader of the military Old Believers in 1929; after his death, Simeon Rys (*Симеон Рысь*, 1875-1936) succeeded him (LNA LVVA, 1370.f., 1. apr., 1367. l.). These actions provided not only for the practical religious life of Old Believer soldiers but also affirmed their place within the broader military community, fostering a sense of belonging and mutual respect.

Many photographs can still be found in Old Believer families with images capturing their ancestors’ days of military service. There are some examples in the collection of Daugavpils University Oral History Centre. These include individual and group portraits, scenes from parades, training exercises, summer camps, and moments of rest during marches. Families took great pride in their sons who served as soldiers in the Latvian Army. It is difficult to explain, how people managed to save these photographs throughout the Soviet period, when only the Soviet Army was officially recognized. They must have shown remarkable courage to keep these old pictures instead of destroying them. Such cases highlight the deep sense of pride and resilience in Old Believer households, even during the most restrictive times.

For modern researchers, these photographs are an invaluable historical source. In one Old Believer household visited by the author of the article, a picture of a soldier in uniform with aiguillettes (decorative shoulder cords) was displayed on the wall. The children of that soldier, Ignaty Mikhailov (*Игнатий Михайлов*, 1914–1970), did not

know the meaning of the aiguillettes at first. With help from the staff of the Latvian War Museum, they learned that their ancestor had been recognized as an excellent marksman and winner of shooting competitions. To encourage skill and foster a spirit of excellence, annual shooting competitions were organized within military units. Participants who obtained the highest results received special aiguillettes, cash awards, and additional recognitions. These competitions were a prestigious tradition in the military, and earning an aiguillette was considered a mark of honour among soldiers, symbolizing both exceptional skill and dedication to service.

For Old Believers, the opportunities for promotion, pursuing advancement were limited, but still possible. The document presented to the 1st battalion commander of the 12th Bauska Infantry Regiment on 12 November 1936 about soldiers rising to the next rank includes the list of them, mostly instructors: “I ask for your care to raise the following soldiers for dedication, good knowledge of the service, and performance to the next ranks [the list of soldiers followed]. All the above soldiers, apart from the last two (Andreev and Remskus), graduated from the instructors’ adornment” (LNA LVVA, 1500.f., 1. apr., 229. l., 262. lp.).

But still there were cases of getting promotion without being an instructor. One of such cases is exemplified by Sergey Andreev (*Сергей Андреев*, 1914–2005) who was an Old Believer from Vishki parish (*Višķu pagasts*). He was able to overcome all the difficulties of the military service, even not being educated enough, and deserved the next rank of a lance corporal (*dižkareivis*) marked by adding a single narrow vertical stripe to a soldier’s white stripe on the dark red collar insignia. This official request for promotion illustrates that Old Believer soldiers were not only integrated into military structures but also recognized for their merit, challenging common stereotypes about their social status or capabilities. Such recognition is significant, as it demonstrates that, despite facing barriers in education and advancement, Old Believer conscripts could earn respect and opportunities within the army based on their performance. One can imagine the joy of soldier Sergey Andreev and his family, who reunited on Trinity, one of the most important Old Believer holidays, their son and brother came on a well-deserved vacation. For Old Believers, Trinity is a time for family and community to come together, making such reunions especially meaningful in the context of military service.

When soldiers were discharged from military service, those who had distinguished themselves received an official extract from the commander’s order. This document acted as a social elevator by highlighting their abilities to local authorities. These extracts were highly valued, as they often helped demobilized soldiers secure positions in public service or local administration by formally recognizing their conduct and skills. At the end of the required 12 months of service, the regiment commander would issue an order sending the soldier on leave until further notice and removing their name from the regiment’s list. The official record often included comments such as: “Behaviour is very good, duties performed very well. Fit for public service and municipal work. Moral character is impeccable. Mental development good.” (LNA LVVA, 1500. f., 1. apr., 119. l., 3.lp.).

For many young Old Believers, service in the Latvian Army was not just a duty – it was a transformative period filled with moments that shaped their lives. One might imagine an Old Believer conscript from Daugavpils, struggling at first with the Latvian language, but gradually mastering it through daily interactions with fellow soldiers from across the country. Shared experiences during military exercises were helping break down barriers of faith and ethnicity, young people bonded during rare times of rest after tough days. Those days spent together during military service often lead to lasting friendships in the civilian life after the service.

Conclusions

Latvian Old Believers played a significant part during the War of Independence, serving both as soldiers and in supporting roles, motivated by a desire to protect their community and help secure Latvia's sovereignty. Their involvement not only demonstrated loyalty but also fostered cooperation with other ethnic groups within the country.

Old Believers in Latvia, despite facing barriers such as lower literacy rates, language difficulties, and limited advancement within the ranks, were able to integrate into the military and wider society through merit, resilience, and active participation. Old Believers made significant contributions achieving distinction and even leadership. The compulsory nature of Latvian military service forced Old Believer youths to adapt, fostering integration and greater national unity. Through these experiences, young people from diverse communities played a vital role in shaping Latvia's armed forces and strengthening the cohesion of the newly independent state.

Old Believers in Latvia developed a unique approach to military service, guided by religious teachings that distinguished between murder and lawful combat. Their participation in the Latvian War of Independence and subsequent peacetime army service reflected both the challenges they faced and their integration into Latvian society.

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