CALL FOR PAPERS

International scientific conference

Forced to Serve:

History and Memory of Forcibly Conscripted French and Latvian Soldiers in the Armed Forces of Nazi Germany

Riga, Latvia – Latvian War Museum
27-28 May 2027

Conference Overview

During the Second World War, hundreds of thousands of non-German citizens from the occupied European territories were forced by Nazi Germany to perform compulsory military service in the German armed forces. Following an initial phase of calls for volunteers, some 130,000 French nationals from Alsace and Moselle ("Malgré-nous") were forcibly conscripted into the Wehrmacht or the Waffen-SS from 1942 onwards, and at least 110,000 Latvians into the 'Latvian Legion' from 1943 onwards and other German military formations.

Some of them committed war crimes or crimes against humanity, either before their forced conscription (such as the Latvian volunteers of the Sonderkommando Arajs, who took part in the genocide of the Jews before being transferred to the 'Latvian Legion') – or after it (such as French conscripts involved in the Oradour-sur-Glane massacre). Beyond the legal unity of this group – all of whom were conscripted in breach of international law – and beyond the sweeping generalisations – whether an accusatory narrative portraying them all as volunteers or criminals, or a victimising narrative that erases historical complexity – recent historiography highlights the diversity of these non-German conscripts in terms of profiles, opinions, attitudes and wartime experiences, both between the French and Latvian contexts and within each population, as well as the diversity of memorial discourses.

The French forced conscripts received official recognition from the French State as early as 1944 with the designation 'Mort pour la France' (Died for France) and quickly organised themselves into associations promoting a narrative of victimhood and French patriotism, whilst on the Latvian side the memory of forced conscription was long suppressed or distorted by the Soviet regime. Following the restoration of independence, the Latvian parliament adopted a declaration in 1998 rehabilitating the 'Latvian Legion'. But today – in the context of European integration and growing Russian interference and threat – a divided memory prevails: the Latvian State no longer officially commemorates the legionnaires, public opinion is split, political actors clash in memory conflicts, while efforts to reach a consensus are emerging, based on the construction of a narrative of victimhood, but also on the development of scientific historical research.

This international conference will bring together historians, legal scholars, military researchers, and human rights experts from Latvia, France and beyond to examine the phenomenon of forced mobilisation during the Second World War and its long-term consequences. Adopting a comparative and transnational perspective, the conference will explore the experiences of the forced conscripts from Latvia and from Alsace and Moselle in the Wehrmacht or the Waffen-SS. It will address how populations in occupied territories became instruments of totalitarian regimes and how they reacted to these constraints. It will also examine how their experiences have been interpreted in historical memory, legal discourse, and public narratives. In doing so, the conference aims to contribute to the writing of a dispassionate and nuanced European history that brings together the historical experiences of Western and Eastern Europe, particularly those of the Baltic states.

The conference aims to:

Deepen scholarly understanding of forced mobilisation under totalitarian rule, examine its legal evaluation in international law, reflect on questions of individual responsibility and victimhood, and foster Latvian–French academic cooperation and dialogue.

Themes and Topics

We invite contributions addressing (but not limited to) the following themes:

1. Forced Mobilisation in Totalitarian Systems

- Legal frameworks and mobilisation practices in Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union
- Forced conscription in occupied European territories during the Second World War
- Forced conscription in other geographical and historical contexts
- Status of (forced) conscripts under international law, including the Hague Regulations and the Geneva Conventions

2. Latvian, Alsatian and Mosellan Soldiers in the German Armed Forces: A Comparative and Transnational Perspective

- Geopolitical contexts and occupation policies
- The volunteers and their motivations
- Women in the *Reichsarbeitsdienst* and *Kriegshilfsdienst*
- Underage soldiers (*Luftwaffenhelfer*; *Volkssturm* members)
- The mechanisms of forced service and the reactions of the populations
- Wartime experiences (involvement in combat and non-combat operations, including war crimes and crimes against humanity), captivity, and repatriation
- Latvian soldiers in Alsace and Moselle, and Alsatian and Mosellan soldiers in Latvia

3. Post-war Legal Consequences and Moral Responsibility

- Boundaries between collaboration, coercion, treason, and victimhood
- Legal accountability in light of international humanitarian law and human rights
- Post-war societal and political attitudes: suspicion, silence, rehabilitation

4. Politics of Memory and Contemporary Perspectives

- Construction and evolution of memory and memory politics in France and Latvia
- Narratives, reinterpretations, and public debates
- Relevance for contemporary Europe and discussions on occupation and coercion

Suggested Approaches

We particularly encourage:

- comparative and transnational perspectives
- interdisciplinary approaches (history, law, sociology, memory studies)
- microhistorical case studies (including individual fates)
- research on lesser-known regions affected by forced mobilisation

Please include in the submission:

- Title of the paper
- Abstract, up to 300 words
- Author name(s) and affiliation(s)
- Short bio (max. 100 words)
- Languages: Latvian, French or English

Please send your proposals simultaneously to:

- kristine.bekere@karamuzejs.lv
- catherine.maurer@unistra.fr

Deadline for submission: **15 February 2027**

Notification of acceptance: **15 March 2027**

The conference will take place on **27-28 May 2027** at the Latvian War Museum, Riga, Latvia.

The conference organisers will cover participants' travel and accommodation costs as far as possible.

Scientific committee

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Organising partners

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Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Latvia

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