



# Exploring Baltic military history

***Military heritage tourism is an opportunity to travel and learn about history right where it happened, especially in the Baltics, where many former battlegrounds, military sites and other visible landmarks still exist. Now a new joint project maps out heritage sites in Latvia and Lithuania.***

by ALEXANDER WELSCHER

**E**stonia, Latvia and Lithuania have shared a similar fate throughout history. All three countries gained their independence for the first time in the turmoil of World War I and were forced to defend it in the Wars of Independence. During World War II, both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union occupied the countries and fierce, bloody battles were fought all across the Baltics as the front line ran right through

their territories. Nowadays, you can visit some of the grim reminders of those eras, which bear witness to the violence and suffering on the battlefield – and offer the chance to learn about military history right where it happened.

Recognising the common history shared by the Baltic States, which have been caught up in the same geopolitical affairs in the 20th century, the Latvian

Country Tourism Association Lauku ceļotājs and its project partners have developed a military heritage tourism guide and travel map. While the project started with the mapping out of military heritage sites in Latvia and Estonia, it has now been expanded to include Lithuania as well, revealing the full story of the Baltics that only regained their independence in 1990/1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

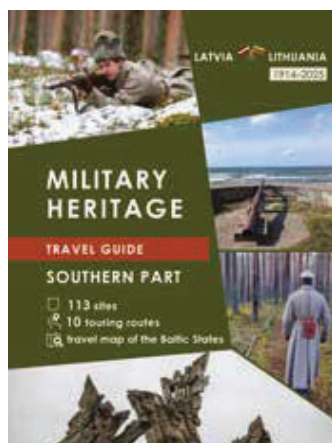
“We want to map military heritage tourism across all three countries and to inform and educate about our common history in the Baltics with all its similarities,” Lauku ceļotājs project manager Katrīna Seržante explains the idea behind the project, adding that it aims to explore and highlight the role of the Baltics in European geopolitical developments from the end of World War I to the present day under the common slogan “Strong yesterday – free today!”.

The two guides for the Northern and Southern parts as well as the map are available for download on the Military Heritage Tourism project website ([www.militaryheritagetourism.info](http://www.militaryheritagetourism.info)) and in print. Published in different languages, the guides list former battlefields, military sites and other landmarks along with practical information for visitors and the historical context. Each site has its own story to tell. For a deeper exploration, there are also cross-border routes with tour durations of up to several days.

While, traditionally, it was mostly military history enthusiasts, war veterans and their families who showed an interest in these sites, demand has been increasing among other people as well. Military heritage tourism

is considered a growing niche and has gained both popularity and acclamation in the Baltics and beyond. Another overall objective of the initiative is thus to enhance its role in the economic and regional development of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

“We want to show that tourism is not only about visiting the most popular attractions, but about



going to regions and finding interesting, different places and sites there as well. Essentially, we want to attract people to regions to get to know their heritage and to share the story,” emphasises Kotryna Miliūnė from the Lithuanian Countryside Tourism Association, which has teamed up with Lauku ceļotājs to develop the new joint cross-border program. “There is a lot to discover.”

## THE END OF WORLD WAR II IN COURLAND

One of the historically most interesting places included in the new Latvia and Lithuania military heritage tourism project is right on the border between the two countries. In Ezere near the Saldus-Mažeikiai highway is the “Muitas Nams” (“Customs House”) where the act of capitulation of the Nazi German army unit surrounded in the so-called Courland Pocket was signed on 8 May 1945. “This building is actually a very special and historically significant one,” says Antra Sīpeniece, who takes care of both the house and its repository of exhibits covering the events of the end of World War II and local history.

Following Germany’s unconditional surrender on all fronts on 7 May 1945, the headquarters of the Leningrad Front of the Soviet Army received a brief radiogram informing them that the Army Group Courland had accepted the surrender. This military unit was the last group of German troops in the Soviet Union. It had been separated from the rest of the German army in one corner of Latvia and was to remain cut off for the rest of the war.

### SURRENDERING IN A NEUTRAL ZONE

Both sides coordinated radio communication and ultimately

negotiations took place between German General Otto Reuser and Soviet Colonel-general Markian Popov in a customs house at what is today the Latvian-Lithuanian border. “They needed to meet somewhere neutral because they could not go to each other’s headquarters and this was basically no-man’s land. So they convened here and at 10.05 in the evening of the 8th of May, the surrender was signed,” Sīpeniece explains next to a display board with information about the act of capitulation that detailed the surrender procedure, weapons and combat equipment collection points, documents and information to be submitted and other practicalities.

Although at this time German soldiers were surrendering all over Europe and the Courland was no longer a battlefield with a major impact on the outcome of the war, the surrender of Army Group Courland is regarded as the effective end of World War II because this was the moment the last well organised unit of the Nazi-German Armed Forces ceased to exist. Around 185,000 troops surrendered – among them approximately 14,000 Latvians fighting on the German side either voluntarily or as forced conscripts following the German occupation of Latvia.

### REMAINS AND REMINDER

During the Courland battles that lasted for seven months from October 1944 to May 1945, the German Army lost more than 150,000 soldiers, who were killed, injured or went missing. Approximately 25,000 of them are buried in the German Soldiers’ Cemetery near Saldus, where a small exhibition on the battles can be seen in the memorial room. The largest burial site of Soviet soldiers is in Priekule where 23,000 men are buried. However, forests still cover the remains of thousands of unburied soldiers – and unexploded ammunition and other dangerous war relicts can still be found on the sites of the former battlefields.

Unlike after the end of the war in Western Europe, the surrender of Courland did not bring peace and prosperity. German soldiers and tens of thousands of local citizens were detained and brought to filtration camps by the Soviet authorities, while some of the Latvian soldiers fighting on the German side and others started to form partisan organisations to continue their struggles against the Soviets and for the independence of Latvia. Many of them dissipated into the countryside where forests and marshlands became seedbeds of resistance. Their bunkers and other hiding places can still be seen and visited today.