

History of Latvian firefighting

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FIRE-FIGHTING DURING RUSSIAN EMPIRE

At the end of the 19th century in towns of Kurzeme and Vidzeme industry developed rapidly and trade turnover in ports increased. Riga had become the biggest industrial city in the Baltics.

Expansion of towns and resettling of rural residents to them was followed by increase of number of devastating fires. First numerically small town fire brigade was formed on 1845 in Dinaburg (Daugavpils). In Riga there were four police fire brigades. However, they were powerless in fighting great fires of summer 1864, occurred in Maskavas (nowadays Latgale) suburb. They were technically underequipped and professionally unready.

Traders, industrials and social activists of Riga understood that Riga's ineffective fire-fighting system must be substituted by organized, trained and professional fire brigades. On 1865 Riga City Voluntary Fire-fighters' Society was founded.

Afterwards voluntary fire-fighters' societies were formed in Jelgava, Piltene, Cesis, Valmiera, Limbazi, Jekabpils, Tukums, Liepaja and other towns. At the eve of the I World War there were more than 90 voluntary fire-fighters' societies in Latvia.

Fire-fighting had entered a new phase.

1865 – 1875

On 19 November 1864 foundation meeting of Riga City Voluntary Fire-fighters' Society took place and Ivans Himillers (1835-1876) was elected its chairman. On 15 February 1865 statutes of Society were approved and Riga City Voluntary Fire-fighters' Society began its work – gathered donations, procured most necessary equipment, organized trainings and established four divisions.

On 17 May Riga City Voluntary Fire-fighters' Society brigade for the first time coordinately extinguished fire in the house of chimneysweep on Aleksandra street (nowadays Brivibas street) in Riga. This event is being considered as beginnings of fire-fighting in Latvia.

In subsequent years Society got recognition of people that was followed by generous donations and gifts. It facilitated creation and development of base for technical equipment, procurement of manual and steam "syringes"-pumps, mechanical ladders and hoses. At that time active members of Voluntary Fire-fighters' Society were divided into nozzle-carriers, pump-operators, breakers and order keepers.

On 1865 Jelgava town also formed Jelgava Voluntary Fire-fighters' Society and baker Adolfs Eduards Prals was elected a first chairman. During this period voluntary and paid fire brigades were formed in Liepaja.

On 1875 with the increase of the amount of fires Riga had finished installations of fire telegraph with 53 locations, meant for fire notification.

1875 – 1885

Public confidence in voluntary fire-fighters' societies rose due to their successful work. Amount of societies rose, nevertheless amount of fires rose as well. On 1882 Riga City Council formed so called "Running Column". Members of this formation were paid as professional fire-fighters by the City Council. "Running Column" consisted of 16 well trained men and were based on Maskavas street.

Society paid great attention to training process, however at those times each man was taught to operate only his equipment. Most valued were climbers and nozzle-carriers.

On 1882 institutions of Riga municipality adopted "Public Fire Safety Programme", which provided significant further development of industry, including building of fire-stations and formation of Riga city fire brigade.

On July 1882 first telephone station was opened in Riga and it was great progress in fire notification.



Riga voluntary fire-fighters at the Blackheads House, end of the 19th century

1885 – 1895

From 1886 till 1902 four firestations were built in Riga – Maskavas street 3, Matisa street 9, Akmenu street 17 and Ludzas street 24, which were built according to the project of Riga main architect Reinholds Smelings. Buildings were remarkable with their specific red brick architectural style. These buildings except Ludzas street 24 are used as firestations also nowadays.

1895 – 1905

Following development of industry and trade at the turn of 19th and 20th centuries in Riga, Liepaja, Jelgava and Daugavpils amount of inhabitants continued to grow. Comfortable residential and workers neighbourhoods, as well as industrial and administrative centres were created in them. Municipalities developed subsidized services, including fire services. In order to ensure fire safety in industrial facilities and residential neighbourhoods new voluntary fire-fighters' societies with response teams continued to be formed in the whole territory of Latvia.

1905 – 1918

At the beginning of 1907 Riga City Council finished reorganisation of fire-fighting system that resulted in establishment of Riga City Fire Brigade consisting of "Running Column" and police fire detachments. Karlis Summers became the first brandmajor (chief) of Riga City Fire Brigade. It had 5 divisions and each division guarded its own territory.

On 1910 Riga City Council procured first fire automobile (steam driven), but Peter's Voluntary Fire Fighters' Society ordered fire automobile "Russo-Balt" from Riga Wagon factory. Fire automobile "Russo-Balt" is the first automobile made in Latvia that survived till nowadays and can be seen in Riga Motor museum. In the following years range of available equipment extended and in the possession of fire-fighters came 16 meter long balancing ladders, 24 meter long "Magirus" ladders, manual extinguishing apparatus, hydropulps and smoke protectors.

Development of fire-fighting was interrupted by the First World War. On 1915 Russian army exported from Latvia to Russia industrial equipment, fire-fighting equipment and other equipment.

Despite the lack of equipment during the war fire-fighters continued to extinguish fires and sometimes also performed police and

sanitary duties.

Fire-fighting during independence times

World War I was a heavy examination for all of people. Many were forced to flee and around 400 manufacturing companies were evacuated, properties were destroyed. As a result fire-fighting organizations lost a great deal of their members, technique and equipment.

On 18 November 1918 in Riga in the hall of nowadays Latvian National Theatre the independence of Latvia was proclaimed.

In after years Latvia experienced a high industrial and commercial development, the number of people augmented, new industrial, administrative and cultural buildings were established, the borders of towns were expanded, but thereby came also a great number of fires. At the same time fire-fighting was also developing in Riga, Liepaja and Daugavpils, the municipalities hired fire-fighting teams and they were continuing to develop all over the territory of Latvia. Gradually usage of horses for moving the equipment was switched to mechanical transport, the necessity arose to organize the work of fire-fighters by the same principles and to establish a coherent regulation. The voluntary fire-fighting societies were not only extinguishing fires, but they were popular public organizations actively organizing celebrations and collecting donations for charity purposes.

After a short time Latvian fire-fighters achieved the level of many Western European countries by the means of technical capabilities and professional skills. Before World War II there were about 200 voluntary fire-fighters' societies and many town teams.

1918 – 1925

After World War I the idea of founding fire-fighters unifying organization appeared because it was decided that the questions of organization, financial and economic character had to be coordinated on state level. The first Latvian Fire-fighters' Congress took place on May 1921 with 76 fire-fighting organizations and town brigades attending from all over Latvia. It was decided to found the Latvian Fire-fighters' Union.

Latvian Fire-fighters' Union has a remarkable meaning in development of fire-fighting because it gave contribution in issuing many fire-fighting regulating documents, instructions for teaching commanders, descriptions of a new uniform, setting of membership fee, rewarding system and monthly magazine "The Fire-fighter". As a result many voluntary fire-fighters and municipality brigades started to work by uniform principles.

On 1922 the Latvian Saeima (parliament) adopted law on laborer insurance in case of accidents, wherewith the fire-fighters were insured against possible accidents at work.

On 1924 the Latvian Fire-fighters' Union organized the first Latvian fire prevention exhibition, which showed the accomplishments in the field of fire prevention, new tendencies in fire-fighting equipment, construction and fire safe buildings.

1925 – 1935



During the period from 1929 till 1932 the European countries were struck by the world economic crisis. In Latvia this crisis was deepened and tremendous damage was made by many big fires – in Leitners bicycle factory, Hasan sawmill, timber and firewood warehouses, warehouse of the factory of matches “Vulkans”. On 11 April 1930 during the fire in “Provodniks” factory building flax warehouse two of Riga city fire-fighters lost their lives. The series of fires were concluded by fires in Ludza and Aluksne.

On September 1926 in Riga the Baltic States Fire-fighters' Union was founded in which there was unanimous consensus that common ways of the Baltic States to improve fire prevention are to be found.

On 1929 Latvia joined International Association of Prevention and Fighting Fires (CTIF). On 1930 “Law of fire prevention” was approved, which determined that the general management of fire prevention matters is delegated to the Construction administration under the Ministry of Interior, within it also the fire prevention council and fire prevention inspector, and that “for fire prevention, fire-fighting and assistance during fires there are public, municipal, private and voluntary fire-fighters' societies”. This law determined the legal status of fire-fighters and possibilities to receive material support from the state. On 1932 amendments of law determined fire-fighters to receive material support in case of injury or death during a fire.

Fire-fighting in Soviet Latvia

The Second World War, occupation of Latvia, repressions and emigration of thousands of people stopped development of economics in Latvia, including fire-fighting. During war thousands of men were mobilized in both armies. At the end of war fire-fighters lost many fire automobiles and technics taken away by both armies.

First changes in fire-fighting took place already on 1940 after occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union. Voluntary fire-fighters' organizations were reorganized, fire-fighters were prohibited to wear their uniforms and insignia, had to deliver their flags. Regulations of fire-fighting existing in the USSR were introduced. During German occupation structure of Latvian fire-fighters' societies was renewed.

In after-war period fire-fighting became one of priorities of the state: voluntary fire-fighters' societies were organized in plants, offices, collective farms, garages for automobiles were built, preventive measures taken, fire sports competitions organized. Political classes became part of everyday life of fire-fighters. Technical bases of fire-fighting was formed mainly by technics produced in the Soviet Union. Attention was paid to training of fire-fighters, they could acquire profession not only in Latvia but in corresponding schools in the USSR.

With growth of number of inhabitants and development of industry more fire-brigades and voluntary fire-fighters' commands were founded. Greater attention was paid to fire safety, control and education.

After renewal of independence of Latvia many demands of soviet times in fire-fighting, fire prevention and organization of work

were taken over and are used also nowadays.

1940 – 1945

After occupation of Latvia by the Soviet Union on 1940 great changes took place in fire-fighting. Jurisdiction of independent Latvia was replaced by regulations existing in the USSR. Voluntary fire-fighters were prohibited to wear their uniforms and insignia, had to deliver their flags. During German occupation structure of Latvian fire-fighters' societies was renewed.

In Latvian SSR Peoples' Commissariat of Interior Fire Department was formed with militarized fire brigades subordinated to it. On the training bases formed in independent Latvia first fire courses called Preparatory school of junior commanding staff were organized. On February 1940 "Fire Safety Regulations of Latvian SSR" were confirmed.

On 22 June 1941 the Second World War came to Latvia. On 29 June tower of St. Peters' Church caught fire, collapsing it ruined House of Blackheads, Town Hall and buildings beside them. Riga waterline was damaged and fire-fighters lacked water to fight fires.

During war fire-fighters had to fight many fires, they also guarded significant economical objects. At the end of war fire technics and equipment was taken away by both armies and after war fire-fighters got back only part of it.

1945 – 1955

At the end of 1945 first afterwar Voluntary fire-fighters' conference took place. At this conference Latvian SSR Voluntary Fire-fighters' Society guided by Central Council was founded.

On 1946 Council of Ministers of the USSR confirmed regulations "On militarized fire-service of Ministry of Interior of the USSR", stating that militarized fire-service was to be organized in administrative centers and largest industrial objects. The staff of militarized fire service was subjugated to army regulations, wore army pattern uniforms and insignia.

On 18 September 1947 first competition in fire sports took place in Riga, militarized fire departments from Riga and Liepaja participated in it.

On 1953 Militarized fire service Junior commanding staff school was reorganized for Fire Board militarized fire service Training Unit.



Voluntary fire-fighters' competitions at the end of 1940s

1955 – 1965

Economics being renewed great attention was paid to fire prevention in industrial enterprises, offices, schools and among inhabitants.

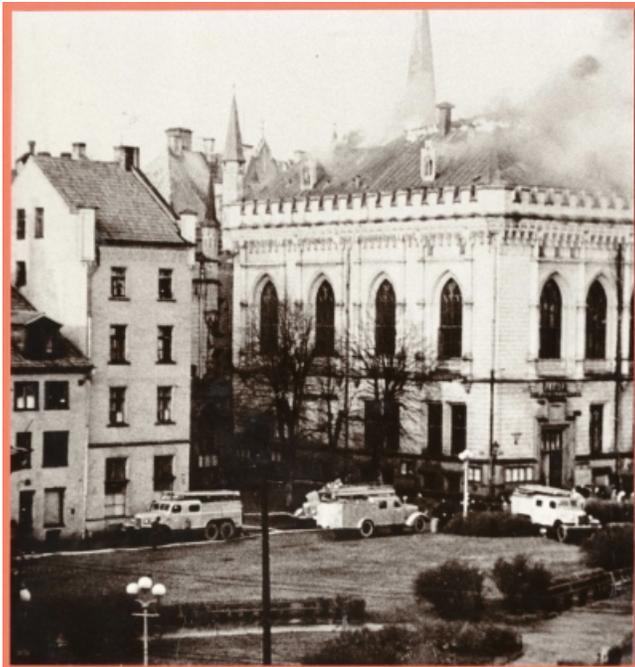
On 1956 recurrent reorganization of fire service took place- fire brigades were renamed independent militarized fire units and their chiefs were responsible not only for fire-fighting but also for fire-safety of corresponding region.

Number of voluntary fire-fighters' societies grew, and on 1958 they had 57000 members.

At 1960 Fire Board and militarized fire units gradually turned into engineering-technical service, with engineers involved. On 1962 Fire testing station was founded investigating large fires, giving experts' conclusions, doing scientific research work , testing various materials and substances for fire hazard.

On January 1964 All-union Fire Sports Federation was founded within USSR Sports Societies and Organizations Union. Next month Latvian Fire Sports Federation was founded. On September Latvian SSR Fire sports championship took place at "Dinamo" stadium. Next year the USSR first championship in fire sports took place, and Latvian champion team participated in it.

The largest fires of that period were: fire at Skirotava station after clash of two trains (1961), fire on steamer "Janis Rainis" (1961), fire in repair shop of Riga Tram and trolleybus board (1963), fire in State Philharmonic Hall (1963) and fire in Mezaparks open-air platform.



Fire in State Philharmonic Hall, 1963

1965 – 1975

Decision of Council of Ministers of the USSR of May 1966 "On improvement of organization of fire-fighting" determined two ways of fire-fighting service: professional fire-fighting - militarized, non-militarized and department fire-fighting and voluntary fire-fighting.

On September 1966 in accordance with Decision of Latvian SSR Council of Ministers professional fire-service was formed, services of administrative centers, towns, villages and industrial enterprises being subordinate to it. Fire prevention work was done by professional, militarized and voluntary fire-fighters prevention groups.

On 1965 - 100th anniversary of foundation of Riga Voluntary fire-fighters' society great celebration took place and in premises of Kundzinsala voluntary fire-fighters' society exhibition on history of fire-fighting was arranged.

At 1970s in accordance with the decision of the USSR Council of Ministers 1970 "On improvement of fire safety in economy

units' fire alarm and automatic fire-extinguishing systems were introduced in many enterprises.

On 1974 Training Unit was moved to Kengaraga Street 3 in Riga where new depot was built with garages for 10 cars and all the necessary equipment for training.

At 1970s Civil defence and mobilization department was formed in Fire Board, and its task was management and coordination of civil protection in the whole territory of Latvia.

On 1972 All-union competition in fire sports took place in Riga.

1975 – 1985

Training Unit being moved to Kengaraga Street reorganization and reconstruction took place on Hanzas Street. On 1978 in one floor of the building Communications Center was arranged. During international competitions in Riga fire-technical exhibition was opened on Hanzas Street but on 1980 it became Latvian Fire-fighting Museum.

On 1980 Training Unit was turned into Ministry of Interior Training Center, but on 1989 it was renamed Fire and Rescue Service Department Training Center.

At the turn of 1970s-1980s fire-fighters had to fight several large fires. On 1976 fire-fighters saved more than 40 people from fire in cultural center "Ziemeļblazma". On 1983 extinguishing fire of Central Market vegetable pavilion lasted for several days. On 6 March 1985 fire-fighters had to fight severe fire broken out in Ventspils port on tanker 'Ludvigs Svoboda'" threatening town of Ventspils and its inhabitants.

1985 – 1990

Voluntary fire-fighters organizations worked in largest industrial enterprises and collective farms. Voluntary fire-fighters' society had become production enterprise with many-sided profile. Fire prevention work among inhabitants was done by them in cooperation with State insurance companies. Very popular, especially among youths were fire sports competitions. On 1986 in Soviet Latvia there were 2822 voluntary fire-fighters' societies with more than 200 thousand members and 762 youth voluntary fire-fighters' units.

The largest fire of 1980s was fire in the plant VEF on 1989 having damaged two blocks at 8700 square metres area.

At the end of the 1980s National Awakening started in Latvia. Ideas of independence of Latvia spread and became more and more popular. Society of Latvia and also fire-fighting faced great changes.

Fire-fighting in renewed Republic of Latvia

On 1990 independence of Latvia was renewed. Rules and regulations of the USSR were no more valid and normative documents regulating fire service- fire safety, fire fighting etc. -were worked out. Fire service gradually became fire and rescue service performing first aid, rescue works on water, of traffic accidents and chemical accidents as well as aid to inhabitants in everyday accidents. From 1997 coordination of civil protection was also included in the functions of fire and rescue service.

Gradually new technics and equipment were purchased. Cooperation with neighbouring countries and Western Europe fire services developed. Development of professional skills and technical provision was promoted also by various projects of European Union foundations.

During years the name of fire service has changed, functions and tasks widened, but mission of fire-fighter rescuer has remained the same- to help people in trouble. And therefore profession of fire-fighter rescuer has gained honor and recognition of society.

1990 – 1995

At the beginning of the 1990s fire-fighting system faced cardinal reforms. On 1 November 1990 (order of Ministry of Interior Nr. 294 from 31 October 1990) Latvian Republic Ministry of Interior State Fire and Rescue Service Department was founded.

On 1991 fire-fighters' uniforms and insignia were worked out, the following ranks of service were introduced: private: junior commanding staff- corporal, sergeant,, first sergeant, junior officer; middling commanding staff- lieutenant, first lieutenant, captain; senior commanding staff- major, lieutenant colonel, colonel: higher commanding staff – general.

On 1992 law "On fire-fighting" came into force determining three ways of fire service in Latvia - Ministry of Interior State Fire and Rescue Service Department, fire services of offices, companies and organizations and voluntary fire- fighters' formations.

To prepare officers for fire-fighting of Republic of Latvia on 8 October 1991 in Training Center 11 months courses for junior and middle commanding staff and 40 days training for fire-fighters were organized. On 1994 on the bases of Training Center Fire Technical School was organized.

On 1994 Latvian Fire-sports Federation was renewed.

1995 – 2005

On November 1996 rescue call number 112 was introduced in Latvia.

On 1997 in accordance with amendments of law "On fire-fighting" State Fire and Rescue Service Department was renamed State Fire and Rescue Service and tasks of civil protection were delegated to it.

On 17 May 2001 in Riga Tornakalna church new flag of State Fire and Rescue Service was consecrated; logo of the Service was supplemented by blue triangle- international symbol of civil protection.

On 1 April 2002 on the bases of Fire Technical School Fire Safety and Civil Protection College was founded.

At that period skills of fire-fighters rescuers were tested in several serious fires and accidents. On November 1998 after railway accident at Vecumnieki 11 tankers with diesel flared up. On March 2000 at Livberze after clash with a car several tankers with diesel went off the rails and caught fire. On 2005 after clash of two trains in Riga fire-fighters rescuers had to do complicated rescue works.

2005 – 2015

On 1 June 2009 reorganization of State Fire and Rescue Service territorial units started and as a result of it instead of 33 territorial brigades 5 regional structural units were formed and fire departments and posts of the corresponding region are subordinated to them. On 1 February 2011 112 Communications centers were reorganized forming 5 regional Communications centers. On April 2013 they were renamed Call Centers and subordinated to Operative Management Board.

As a result of economical crises on 1 January 2009 Staicele and Rundale posts were closed, but on 2012 Stende post was closed, but Roja post formed.

On 2008 – 2009 Fire and Rescue Service purchased 71 specialized transport vehicle. On 2013 Cabinet of Ministers adopted gradual purchasing of 93 specialized vehicles up to 2018.

On December 2014 first up to date fire depot complex built in renewed independent Latvia was opened in Cesis. On summer 2015 building of depot in Valka will be finished. Building, reconstruction and renovation of several depots is planned up to 2017.

2013 was one of the most difficult and most tragic years in the history of fire-fighting. On March in cooperation with National Armed Forces and State Borderguards 232 people were rescued from drifting piece of ice in Riga Bay. On April rescue works were performed in flooded Ogre, Plavinas and Daugavpils. On June two days and nights fire-fighters extinguished fire of Riga Castle. The largest rescue works in history of fire-fighting were done on November when roof of supermarket Maxima in Riga,

Priedaines Street collapsed. Rescue works lasted for 94 hours and 557 fire-fighters rescuers from the whole Latvia participated in them. In that accident 54 people lost their lives, among them were 3 fire-fighters rescuers.

Today State Fire and Rescue Service is developed professional and many-sided institution taking care of security of people. Every day dispatchers of Call centers receive apr. 4500 calls from people and fire-fighters rescuers from 43 departments and 49 posts and Fire Safety and Civil Protection College practical training department are ready to help them. On 2014 fire-fighters rescuers foughted 12175 fires and performed 6182 rescue works saving 595 people. Fire inspectors annually check more than 8000 objects.

From the 1989 to 1997 chief of Service was general J. Labis

From the 1997 to 2005 chief of Service was general A. Straume

From the 2005 to 2011 chief of Service was general A. Pencis

From 2011 Service is lead by general O. Abolins



[Latvijas ugunsdzēsības hronoloģija 150 gadus \(buklets\)](https://www.muzejs.vugd.gov.lv/en/history-latvian-firefighting) 

<https://www.muzejs.vugd.gov.lv/en/history-latvian-firefighting>