

United in diversity:**ANTHEMS AND FLAGS OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,**

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Latvia

1. Flag

- Created in 1917
and adopted in 1921, then in 1990

While the Latvian flag with its present form and colours was created by artists in 1917 and endorsed by parliament in 1921, it actually dates back to the 13th century, which makes it one of the oldest flags in the world, at least in terms of its aesthetic concept.



The colour red is said to hark back to the mulberry juice used to dye Latvian warriors' garments, although another version tells us that the colours were chosen when a warrior chieftain who had been wounded in battle was being carried by his troops in a white sheet and his blood stained the edges of the sheet red. The stained cloth was promptly used as a banner and led the troops to victory, going on to become the emblem of Latvia.

German missionaries of the time set up the Order of the Livonian Brothers of the Sword to convert the pagan Baltic tribes, such as the Curonians in the west (in Courland), the Latvians in the east and the Livonians in the north (in Livonia). The feudal system was enforced in the countryside, while German traders called the shots in the main towns and Riga became an important trading post in the Hanseatic system.

In the 1860s a student discovered this historical information in the Chronicle of the Livonian Order and, with his colleagues, he promptly revived the flag at the Riga Song Festival in 1873.

When it was adopted after the First World War and the Latvian state's independence, the dark garnet colour commonly known as "Latvian red" was chosen not only because of the flag's origins but also to distinguish it from Russia's bright red. The two coloured bands are twice the width of the central white band.

The flag was banned during the Soviet occupation in 1940 and only resurfaced in 1988. It became legal again after the country regained its independence on 27 February 1990. Latvia was probably the Baltic country that suffered the most under the Soviet yoke, its tense relations with its powerful neighbour being caused by the presence of a large Russian population in the country.

2. Anthem

- *Dievs, svētī Latviju* (God Bless Latvia)
- Written and composed by Kārlis Baumanis
- Composed in 1873
and adopted in 1920, then in 1990

This tranquil melody was first heard at the National Song Festival in Riga in 1873. It was also the first time the country's name appeared in a popular Latvian song, but the Russians had the word *Latviju*, seen as a gesture of defiance against the czarist regime, replaced by a reference to the Baltic. The czarists pursued an intense policy of "Russification" for the whole of the century.

• *Dievs, svētī Latviju*

• *Dievs, svētī Latviju,*
• *Mūs' dārgo tēviju,*
• *Svētī jel Latviju,*
• *Ak, svētī jel to!*
• *Kur latvju meitas zied,*
• *Kur latvju dēli dzied,*
• *Laid mums tur laimē diet,*
• *Mūs' Latvijā!*

• *God Bless Latvia*

God bless Latvia,
Our beloved fatherland.
Bless Latvia,
Oh bless it, we beseech thee!
Where Latvian daughters bloom,
Where Latvian sons sing,
Let us dance happily there,
In our Latvia!

The song, written and composed by a school teacher and member of the "Young Latvians" government, reveals the importance of song as an authentic vessel for the people's identity. Popular songs, or *dainas*, at the time generally told simple stories of daily life after a hard day's work, although they sometimes referred also to mythology and local custom. They became the object of systematic research and publication during the 19th century.

Kārlis Baumanis' work is different from numerous other national anthems in that it makes no mention of war or of national liberation struggles, affording priority rather to flower-bedecked youngsters singing and dancing for joy.

Later on, song festivals were kept up and encouraged under the communist regime because, in its eyes, they were a way of showcasing the people's *joie de vivre*. From 1973 on, the crowds gradually plucked up the courage to sing songs that were not on the official programme, reviving in 1988 the song that was to become their official national anthem two years later.

An antidote to the presence of powerful occupying forces until that moment, the song festival tradition was maintained thereafter, albeit in a strongly modernised form, to attract the younger generations by supplementing traditional themes with far more modern kinds of music. Unesco has added the celebration of Baltic song and dance for all three Baltic countries - Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - to its intangible cultural heritage list.

