

French Collaborationists fighting for the Nazi Forces

Légion des volontaires français contre le bolchévisme

(Legion of French Volunteers Against Bolshevism) – also officially known as *638 Infanterieregiment* in Nazi Germany.

The German invasion of the Soviet Union on the 22nd June 1941 provided a major fillip to the French collaborationists. The Legion of French Volunteers Against Bolshevism (or simply *Légion des volontaires français*, **LVF**) was a (private) collaborationist French militia founded on July 8, 1941.

The Legion of French Volunteers was mainly made up of right-wing Frenchmen and French prisoners of war who preferred fighting to forced labour in Germany. Many Russians who fled the Bolshevik Revolution (1917–1922) and who were enrolled in the *Légion Étrangère* (Foreign Legion) joined the LVF. It gathered various collaborationist parties, including Marcel Bucard's *Mouvement Franciste*, Marcel Déat's *National Popular Rally*, Jacques Doriot's *French Popular Party*, Eugène Deloncle's *Social Revolutionary Movement*, Pierre Clémenti's *French National-Collectivist Party* and Pierre Costantini's *French League*.

French volunteers wore German uniforms. But, like other foreign volunteers, the French were allowed to wear their national colours on the right sleeve of their German uniform and on the Stahlhelm (helmet). Both German and French decorations were worn. The wearing of German uniforms may well have been a hindrance to the recruitment of right-wing, but albeit patriotic, Frenchmen.

The LVF was torn by the collaborationist political in-fighting, deplorable management, much embezzlement, and a sprawling bureaucracy at home in Paris while the troops were being slaughtered at the front.

On the 4th September 1941 the first convoy of 850 men left France for the eastern front. Two main assembly points were established in Poland, at Deba, near Krakow and Kruszyna about 90 km south of Lodz.



Bundesarchiv, Bild 101-141-1288-08
Foto: Mombert, 1. November 1941

Generalfeldmarschall Hans Günther von Kluge visits the 638 Infanterie-Regiment, November 1941

In October 1941, Infanterieregiment 638 (LVF), 2,452 men strong, crossed the frontier of the Soviet Union as part of the foreign contingent of the German invasion force. The LVF fought near Moscow in November/December 1941 as part of the 7th Infantry Division. They suffered heavy losses and were soon retired from the front, while a third battalion was created in France to compensate for the losses. During the spring of 1942, the LVF was reorganized with only the 1st and 3rd battalions and the men were assigned to fighting partisans in the rear areas in the Byelorussian (Belarus) part of the front.

La Légion tricolore (Tricolour Regiment)

The Tricolour Regiment, created in 1941, existed only on paper and was abandoned in the autumn of 1942.

The Tricolour Legion was an attempt by the Vichy government (Laval and his Secretary of State Jacques Benoist-Méchin) to recover the LVF both politically and militarily from the other right-wing factions. The LVF had been the creation of the French collaborationist parties and had the status of a private association. The Tricolour Legion, however, was intended to snatch the LVF from its political strife, to create a French force with French targets (intervention in North Africa in particular), to recruit a military armistice army and increase collaboration with the Germans.

The commemorative stamps were issued on 12th October 1942 having been originally demanded by the Ministry of propaganda on 2nd July 1941. There seems to have been quite a heated exchange between politicians and the PTT over the design and desired impact of issuing the stamps for propaganda purposes, per se and that there was a delay between commissioning and production of the stamps. Initial plans for a stamp with a face value of 1F50 with a surcharge of 3F50 were replaced with two stamps printed in the form of a triptych which had a face value of 1F20 and a surcharge of 8F80. Although intended to commemorate the Legion's first anniversary, by the time the stamps were actually issued, the Legion had already fallen out of favour with the Germans.



A delegate from the Armistice Commission conducted an investigation and refused to recognise the Legion. That led the Germans to demand of the Vichy French government its dissolution. Hitler banned it on 17th September 1942. The French government then complied with the Decree No. 1113 of 28th December, the Legion was dissolved and the members were reincorporated into the LVF.



French soldiers in Russia, November 1941

The LVF's French commander, Colonel Roger Labonne, was relieved in mid-1942, and the unit was attached to various German divisions until June 1943 when Colonel Edgar Puaud took command. In June 1943, the two independent battalions were again united in a single regiment and continued fighting partisans in Ukraine.

The LVF fought well on the Ukraine front against the Soviets. In June 1944, hours before the LVF's planned departure to France,



it was called into action when Army Group Centre's front crumpled under the Red Army's summer offensive. On 25 June, at the Babruyka River, elements of the LVF under Major Bridoux fought for 48 hours against a Soviet assault. Attached to the 4th SS-Police Division and supported by Stukas and five Tiger I tanks, they checked a number of attacks in what is generally regarded as the LVF's most successful operation. Forty or more Soviet tanks were destroyed in front of the French position. Testimony to the ability of the LVF came from a Soviet communique which spoke of their forces being stopped by the sacrifice of "two French divisions".

Within a month, a new recruiting drive in Vichy France attracted 3,000 applicants, mostly members of collaborating militias and university students. This unit, the 8th SS Volunteer Sturmbrigade France was led by a former Foreign Legionnaire, SS-Obersturmbannführer Paul Marie Gamory-Dubourdeau. The 1st battalion, of about 1,000 men, was attached to SS Division Horst Wessel and sent to Galicia to fight the Soviet advance. In fierce fighting the battalion suffered heavy casualties.

The LVF had no formal link with the Vichy regime, even though it was recognised as an "association of public usefulness" by Pierre Laval's government in February 1943. Maréchal Pétain, head of state of Vichy France, personally disapproved of Frenchmen wearing German uniforms and never went beyond individual and informal words of support to some specific officers.



On 1 September 1944, the Legion of French Volunteers was officially disbanded. It merged with the Milice¹ to create the SS Charlemagne Division. The 33rd Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS Charlemagne (1st French) and Charlemagne Regiment are collective names used for units of French volunteers in the Wehrmacht and later Waffen-SS. From estimates of 7,400 to 11,000 at its peak in 1944 the strength of the division fell to just sixty men by May 1945.

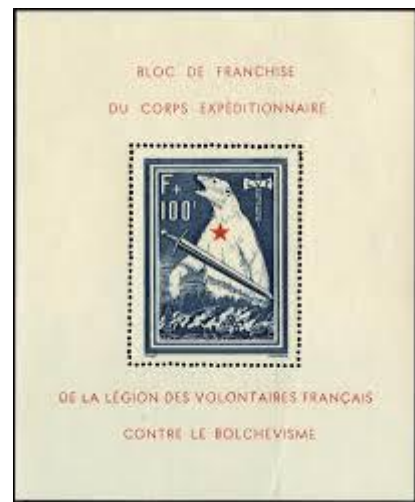
¹ The Milice (*Milice française* or French Militia) was a paramilitary force created on January 30, 1943 by the Vichy regime (with German aid) to help fight against the French Resistance. The Milice's formal head was Prime Minister Pierre Laval, although its Chief of Operations and de facto leader was Secretary General Joseph Darnand. It participated in summary executions and assassinations, helping to round up Jews and *résistants* in France for deportation.

They were one of the last German units to see action in a pitched battle during World War II, where they held central Berlin and the Führerbunker against the onslaught of Soviet infantry and armour. Knowing that they would not survive should Germany be defeated, they were among the last to surrender in the brutal house-to-house and street-to-street fighting, during the final days of the Battle in Berlin.

Following the cessation of hostilities at the end of WWII, the French civil authority handed out many death sentences and prison terms to collaborators after the war. Some Frenchmen who had fought for the Germans were given the option to redeem themselves by serving in the Foreign Legion in French Indochina. Some of the higher-ranking officers, however, were still executed, while rank-and-file members were given prison terms.

LVF postage stamps/vignettes

A sheet (114 x 97mm) with a face value of 100F was issued on 24th October 1941. This has taken on the name “ours” or (polar) bear. Some 30,000 were printed, with 25,000 sold by application and the other 5,000 for the LVF offices. This was subsequently augmented by the LVF ‘philatelic services’.



Later, after the ‘volunteers’ were posted to the East, new Air Mail vignettes were issued in the December. These were intended to be affixed to mail to/from the Front. On this occasion, of the 450,000 pairs that were printed only some 141,000 were sold.

Subsequently, the vignettes were reissued in January 1942 with the overprint “*Front de l’Est, Ostfront*”. Of these some 137,000 pairs were sold. The remaining stock was eventually incinerated.



From the 1st to 6th December 1941 the LVF confronted the Soviet army for the control of the village of Djukowo. This village was situated next to Borodino, the place from where Napoléon was borne away when besieging Moscow in 1812. Victims of both the extreme cold and the Soviets’ resistance, the LVF were retired to the rear for anti-partisan and protection duties.

Five “Borodino” stamps, as they have become known, were issued in 1942 to commemorate the LVF’s battle at the gates of Moscow. Some 1 million stamps were put on sale of which only 450,000 were sold. They had a face value of 250F (F) + 1F, were printed in Germany and came with an attached vignette in the form of a design representing a medieval shield, sword and helm.



The vignettes of the LVF went on sale exclusively in France. They had no real postal value other than for the benefit of those on military duties sending letters home. Due to the nature of the issue, it was not given a final date of validity. Whilst genuine examples of mail with Borodino stamps do exist, the philatelic market is flooded with examples created by fantasiers or forgers.