

The Cross of Recognition

Published: 12.03.2021.



The Cross of Recognition (Croix de la reconnaissance) was established in Liepāja in 1710 and reinstated in Latvia in 1938 in commemoration to honour the upsurge of the Duchy of Courland and Zemgale (Semigallia). It was restored once again in 2004 by the adoption of the law on state decorations.

The motto for the Cross of Recognition is “Pour les honnêtes gens” (For Decent People).

The Cross of Recognition is an award for faithful service to Fatherland and outstanding merits in constitutional and public work, culture, science, sports, and education. This refers to loyal service in a state or local government job, exemplary and honest work, public services, and development of the spirit of the people and their ability to do work of an economic and other nature.

The Cross of Recognition or its Medal of Honour can be awarded to local individuals or foreigners. The Cross of Recognition can be presented to foreign heads of state or government, leaders of international organisations, foreign ambassadors, or other foreign officials.

Description of the Order

The Cross of Recognition has five classes and three levels of the Medal of Honour. Recipients of the Cross of Recognition, First Class become Commanders of the Great Cross of the Order. Those who receive the Cross of Recognition, Second Class are Grand Officers, Third Class – Commanders, Fourth Class – Officers, and Fifth Class – Bearers of the Order.

The Cross of Recognition is a white enamel Maltese cross with a gilded edge. There is a bead at each corner, with eight rings linking the joints. On the front of the cross, there are the Great Seal of State and the year 1938. On the reverse, there is the seal of the duchy, along with the year 1710. Both seals are presented in their heraldic colours. The logo is at the end of the three branches of the cross: “pour/ les – honn/êtes – ge/ns.”

The first, second and third Class of the Cross of Recognition have a size of 49x49 mm, while the fourth and fifth Class have a size of 40x40 mm.

The Cross of Recognition, First Class and Second Class, is accompanied by an eight-point silver star with the Order at its centre. The size of the star for the First Class is 75x75 mm, and for the Second Class, it is 70x70 mm. The cross and the ribbon are linked with eight gilded rings.

The ribbon of the Order is red with silver edging.

The width of the ribbon is 110 mm for male and 75 mm for female Commanders of the Great Cross. For Grand Officers and Commanders, it is 32 mm (tied in a bow for ladies), for Officers, it is 32 mm with a rosette, and for Bearers, it is 32 mm.

The Medal of Honour of the Cross of Recognition is a round medallion with a raised image of the cross on the front and an emblem on the reverse – a crown, a ring and the text “DOMAS — UN — DARBUS — LATVIJAI” (THOUGHTS AND WORK FOR LATVIA). The three classes of the Medal of Honour are, respectively, gilded, silvered, and bronzed. The diameter of the medal in all cases is 32 mm. The width of the ribbon for the Medal of Honour of the Cross of Recognition is 32 mm.

The miniature versions of the Cross of Recognition are identical for all classes of the Cross:

- 1) The miniature cross (14x14 mm), linked to a ribbon that is 13 mm wide;
- 2) A rosette of the Cross ribbon with a miniature order at a diameter of 12 mm.

The miniature Medal of Honour of the Cross of Recognition is a miniature of the Order with a folded triangular ribbon – gilded for First Class, silvered for Second Class, and bronzed for Third Class. The miniature Order has a diameter of 12 mm, and the width of the ribbon is 13 mm.

History of the Cross

On 28 November 1561, the last Master of the Livonian Order, Gotthard Kettler, signed a truce with Polish King Sigismund II Augustus, thus bringing the existence of the Livonian Order to an end on 5 March 1562. A new state, the Duchy of Courland and Zemgale (Semigallia), was established. The court of the duke became the most important socio-political centre in the land, and it was where the leading officials and institutions of governance and power were concentrated. The Duchy of Courland existed from 1561 until 1795.

Friedrich Kazimir, son of the great Duke Jacob Kettler, died in early 1698, and his son and heir, Friedrich Wilhelm, was only five years old. An uncle, Ferdinand, took over as regent. The widow of the Duke, Elizabeth Sofia, fled Courland to save her children and herself from the ravages of the Great Northern War, finding refuge with her brother, Prussian King Friedrich I, who took the throne in 1701.

Swedish and Russian forces marched hither and yon across the duchy, and its fate was primarily settled in October 1709 in Eastern Prussia, where a wedding was arranged. The groom was Friedrich Wilhelm, who had now reached the age of 17. The bride was Anna, daughter of Tsar Peter the Great's half-brother Ivan. Thus, the Duchy of Courland came under the sway of the Russian Empire. The Duke was sent to Germany to be educated as a knight at the Erlang Knights Academy. He was declared to be of age by the council of the duchy in 1709.

Establishment of the Order

Duke Friedrich Wilhelm returned to the duchy on 13 May 1710. In Liepāja, he immediately announced the establishment of a new order, the Order of Recognition (l'Ordre de la Reconnaissance). The Order was established by the mores of the age, and its motto was “Pour les honnêtes gens” (“For Decent People”).

People who have studied the history of the Order have stated that the Order should really be known as the Order of Gratitude, because the statutes of the Order stated that “it has been established in thanks to God Almighty for the recovery of Courland after the Great Northern War” (“et in memoriam recuperatae Curlandiae”). The war had devastated Courland, and the duke, while still a child, had been forced into exile with his mother, Duchess Elizabeth Sofia. They first found refuge in Prussia, but when the duchess remarried, they moved to Bayreuth. The duke was thankful for “overcoming the disaster that one has experienced during the long period of absence from one's own land.”

Historians also recall that before the Order of Recognition was established, Elizabeth Sofia had established an Order in memory of her late husband. It had the motto "Fidele, constat et sincere" ("Trustworthy, Constant and Open"). The Order was established in 1698, and the duchess awarded it to her closest confidants. That is all that is known about it.

The idea of establishing the Order of Recognition occurred to Friedrich Wilhelm in Prussia, where he witnessed the establishment and presentation of the Order of the Black Eagle in 1701. The Order was presented to him, and perhaps Friedrich hoped to use it to establish a nucleus of aristocrats who would be loyal to him. Given the situation at that time, that would have been of substantial political importance.

Bestowing the Order

The Order of Recognition was presented for outstanding civilian and military accomplishments, and recipients received a title of nobility, which they could pass on to their heirs.

There was only one Class to the Order of Recognition. It was carried around the neck on a light red ribbon with silver edges. The ribbon was the width of a man's thumb. When a recipient of the Order died, all other holders of the Order covered the ribbon in black for the next four weeks. Those who had the Order had to wear it at all public appearances. If they did not, it could be taken away. After a recipient died, the Order had to be returned to the Chapter of Orders.

The Order itself was a Maltese cross with white enamel and gilded balls at all eight corners. The cross hung from a gold ring, which appeared to be a snake. On the front of the Order, in a central medallion, was the enamelled seal of the Duchy of Courland in natural colours, with the text above "Pour les honnêtes gens" at the end of the cross. On the reverse of the Order, there was a central medallion bearing the initials F.W.

No more than 24 people were allowed to carry the Order of Recognition at any one time. This restriction did not apply to rulers, to whom the Order could be awarded without limitations, to the chancellor of the Order, to two advisors to the Chapter of Orders, the four senior advisors of Courland, and the two advisors to the land of Piltene, all of whom received the Order upon taking on their position. The duke could choose no more than one-half of the recipients of the Order from among foreigners, while the other half had to be men of Courland. The chancellor and advisors were appointed by the duke. The chancellor was appointed for life, while the advisors served at the pleasure of the duke. The first advisor of the duke had to be a nobleman from Courland. The chancellor received an annual wage of 500 talers, while the advisors were paid 200 talers a year apiece. The chancellor and advisors handled all organisational aspects of the Order, but it was the duke and the duke alone who took decisions as to who should be awarded the Order.

Obligations of the Chevaliers

Men who received the Order of Recognition were obliged to live godly lives and to behave themselves. If someone acted poorly and brought shame upon the Order, the Chapter of the Order could vote to have the Order taken away. The Order was received from the hand of the duke, and the recipient had to promise to honour his ruler and to live in peace and harmony with other holders of the Order. If a recipient of the Order was suddenly visited by disaster or if he was captured at war, the other recipients of the Order were obliged to come to his assistance and to take care of him.

On the anniversary of the establishment of the Order, recipients were expected to engage in good deeds such as presenting alms to the poor. The Chapter of the Order met on the anniversary each year. The duke had intended to establish a special hall for the recipients of the Order, with each recipient paying 25 talers to maintain the room and another 12 talers to reward the secretary of the Order for recording their names in the documentation. Each recipient of the Order had to have his portrait painted within six months' time and to submit it, along with his seal, to decorate the hall. There were plans for pension funds for the brethren of the Order, but the duke ran out of time.

He died on January 21, 1711, while returning from Petersburg, where he had celebrated his wedding to Anna Ivanovna for two whole months.

During his brief rule, the duke managed to distribute only 18 orders, and once he died, the Order essentially died, as well. In 1937, there was information to suggest that one of the orders was kept by a museum in the town of Jelgava, but today there is no hint as to whether an example of the Order of Recognition of the Duchy of Courland and Zemgale has survived.

The new ruler of the duchy was the dead duke's uncle, Ferdinand. He spent most of his time in Danzig and awarded no further orders. In fact, he instructed recipients of the Order to give it back, but no one did.

The Order during the independent Republic of Latvia

The Cross of Recognition was re-established in Latvia in 1938, and it resembles its predecessor only in part. The secretary to President of Latvia Kārlis Ulmanis, Jānis Grandaus, wrote, "This is not a precise restoration of the old Order. It is a reformed version of the old Order because there have been other contemporary changes."

Unlike the Order of Recognition established in Liepāja, the Cross of Recognition had five classes and three medals of honour, as well as a separate first level for the medal. In place of the initials F.W., the cross now bore the Great Seal of State.

Thought was given on harmonising the Cross of Recognition with the Order of the Three Stars, which has a wreath of oak leaves above the cross, and the Order of Viesturs, which has the Great Seal above the cross. It was decided that the Cross of Recognition would have eight interwoven rings to represent the eight dukes of Courland who ensured that the duchy flourished. The 1938 Cross of Recognition was designed by the sculptor Gustavs Šķilters.

The law on orders and medals of honour was amended on 26 February 1940 to say that the Cross of Recognition would have three levels of medals of honour and a separate first level. The Cross of Recognition was awarded for the outstanding love of the Fatherland and for achievements on behalf of the state, the people of Latvia, and Latvian culture.

The Cross of Recognition, First Class, was awarded to 21 people, Second Class to 21 people, Third Class to 110 people, Fourth Class to 341 people, and Fifth Class to 1,314 people. The medals of honour were awarded to 730 people at the first level, 764 at the second level and 354 at the third level.

<https://www.president.lv/en/cross-recognition>