

# Estonia Today

## Deportation from Estonia in 1941 and 1949

*In 1940, based on the secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact concluded with Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union occupied the Republic of Estonia and annexed it. In the hope that surrendering would save Estonia from destruction, Estonian leaders directed their people to surrender without a fight. Unfortunately that decision did not save Estonia from terror. Nearly a third of the population suffered in one way or another. According to the "White Paper" compiled by the Commission established by the Riigikogu of the Republic of Estonia, direct human losses reached 180,000 or 17 per cent of the Estonian population. In the United States such a percentage of the pre-war population would have meant the loss of 22.4 million, in Germany the loss of 13.7 million, in Great Britain the loss of 8.1 million and in Sweden the loss of 1.1 million people.*

### Preparations to repressions

The Soviet Union had started preparations for the launch of terror already before the occupation of Estonia by the Red Army. As elsewhere, the purpose of communist terror was to suppress any possible resistance from the very beginning and to inculcate great fear throughout civil society in order to rule out any kind of organized general resistance movement in the future as well. In Estonia, the planned extermination of the national elite, i.e. of the more outstanding and active persons and the displacement of large groups of people were intended to weaken the Estonians as a people in addition to changing their national identity. The lists of people to be liquidated were prepared well in advance. It appears from the files of the security organs that already in the early 1930's the Soviet security organs had collected data on persons to be subjected to repressions. Pursuant to the instructions issued in 1941, in the territories to be annexed into the Soviet Union all the members of the former governments, higher state officials and judges, higher military personnel, members of political parties, members of voluntary state defense organizations, members of student organizations, persons having actively participated in anti-Soviet armed combat, security police officers and police officers, representatives of foreign companies and in general all people having contacts abroad, entrepreneurs and bankers, clergymen and members of the Red Cross together with their families were to be subjected to repressions. Approximately 23 per cent of the population belonged to these categories. In fact the number of those actually subjected to repressions was much greater, for a large number of people not included in the lists also fell victim to the settlement of scores.

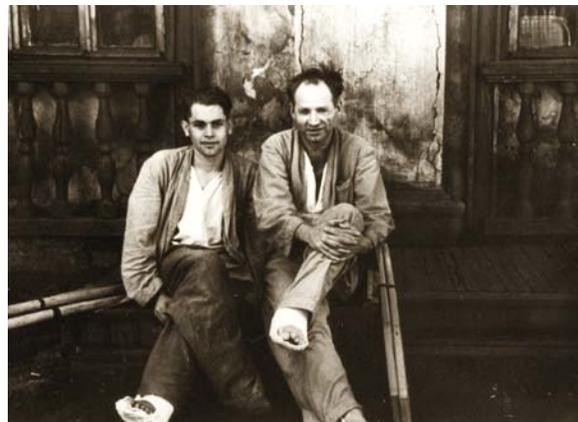
### Extermination of the national elite

The Soviet security organs started their repressive activities in Estonia already before its official annexation into the Soviet Union during the course of occupation. In June 1940, 28 persons were detained for political reasons. In July the number of the detained persons was already 121 and from then on only increased. On July 17, 1940, the last Chief Commander of the Estonian Defence Forces, Johan Laidoner and his wife were exiled to Pensa. On July 30, 1940, the President of the Republic of Estonia, Konstantin Päts and his family were exiled to Ufa. After the Russian-German war began, both Laidoner and Päts were arrested. General Laidoner died in the summer of 1953 in

the Vladimir prison and President Päts in 1956 in a special-purpose psychiatric hospital in Kalinin oblast.

### Mass deportations begin

The most comprehensive act of genocide was constituted by the deportation of whole families to Siberia in an operation that began on June 14, 1941. Preparations for carrying out mass deportations were begun not later than 1940 and were part of the total violence directed against the territories incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940. The Ukrainian and Belarusian territories, which had been conquered from Poland, were the first to be hit by deportations. The first written reference briefly noting that Estonians should be exiled to Siberia is found in the papers of Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin's commissioner who supervised the annihilation of the independence of Estonia in the summer of 1940. Describing the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) in the fall of 1940, the on-site representative of Moscow, V.Bochkaryov demanded that the anti-Soviet element and the former "landed gentry" be exiled from the borders of the Estonian SSR. Also A.Andreyev, Chairman of the Party Control Committee of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), who in December 1940 inspected Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, acknowledged in a report sent to Stalin that obviously the proposal of the local authorities to exile the landowners should be satisfied.



Deportees injured in the Vorkuta mine in front of the Vorkuta hospital in Siberia 1956



Concrete preparations for deportation began in the winter of 1940–1941. The Soviet security organs divided Estonia into regions and started to compile lists of people to be subjected to deportation. Pursuant to the instructions obtained from Moscow the execution of the operation was entrusted to “troikas”. The mass deportation from Estonia was directed by the troika including People’s State Security Commissioner of the Estonian SSR, Boris Kumm, People’s Commissioner of the Interior Affairs of the ESSR, Andrei Murro and First Secretary of the Estonian Communist Party (Bolsheviks), Karl Säre. On May 14, 1941, the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and the Council of the People’s Commissioners of the Soviet Union issued a top secret directive (No 1299-526) “Directive on the Deportation of the Socially Alien Element from the Baltic Republics, Western Ukraine, Western Belorussia and Moldavia”.

### June 14, 1941

The first deportation raid was begun on the night of June 13 towards morning of June 14. Families who had gone to bed on Friday night with no inkling of anything bad about to happen were woken up in the early morning hours by pounding on their doors. A decree declaring them to be under arrest or subject to deportation from their homeland without any legal process or court decision was read aloud to them. All their property was declared to be subject to seizure. They were given an hour to pack. A few hours after the start of the deportation the first trucks began arriving at railroad cars waiting on sidings. Altogether 490 cattle cars had been set aside for that purpose. In Tallinn those cars were waiting in the port, in Kopli station and Pääsküla, but also elsewhere in Estonia, for example in Haapsalu, Keila, Tamsalu, Narva, Petseri, Valga, Tartu and Jõgeva. The search for persons subjected to arrest or deportation continued until the morning of June 16. Those carrying out the deportations behaved with extraordinary cruelty: even pregnant women and seriously ill elderly people were packed into overcrowded stockcars. According to the June 13 order issued from Moscow, a total of 11,102 people were to have been deported from Estonia. However, all those persons were not captured then. According to the Estonian Repressed Persons Records Bureau, a total of 9,254 people were exiled from Estonia during June 14-17, 1941.

On June 17, 1941, trains loaded with deported people rolled through Narva and Irboska out of Estonia. The first cases of death occurred already on the way to Siberia. Initially, the majority of the detained men were sent to the camps of Starobelsk and Babino, some were immediately taken to the prison camps in Kirov oblast. The detainees sent to Starobelsk and Babino found themselves in an area of military action because of the rapidly advancing German troops. For that reason these men were soon taken to Siberian prison camps. Because of the cold, poor nourishment and very hard forced labor the majority of the detainees died already in their first Siberian winter. At the end of 1941, investigative commissions started to operate in the prison camps, carrying out on-site interrogations and passing court decisions, under which a great number of the detainees were shot to death. By the spring of 1942, of approximately 3,500 men dispatched to prison camps only a couple of hundred were alive.

The fate of women and children sent to the remote regions of Kirov and Novosibirsk oblasts was also onerous. Here, also because of cold, starvation and hard work a great many of the deportees died. Altogether 4,331 persons or less than a half of the 1941 deportees ever returned to their homeland.

Several recollections and documents bear witness to the hard fate of the deportees, among which the diary of ten year old Rein Varek, which he kept in the period 1941-1944 is one of the most shocking. The diary tells of the deportation, the journey to Siberia as well as his day to day experiences. With adult seriousness Rein Vare illustrated his diary with markers for the graves of his playmates. A great part of the diary has been dedicated to his beloved father, Rein Vare, the schoolmaster of Sausti, who by then had already died of hunger in the Isaroskino prison camp. But in his son’s diary he was still alive. A more positive turning point in the fate of the family came in 1946, when Rein together with his sister was allowed to return to Estonia to their relatives. Their mother’s yearning for her children was at that moment so great that she lost all sense of reality. She fled from Siberia, trying to follow them. Unfortunately she got only as far as Leningrad where she was arrested and sentenced to three more years of labor camp. In 1951, young Rein Vare who had meanwhile graduated from school in Estonia was again arrested. For a couple of months he was held in the Patarei prison and then he was sent back to Siberia. That broke finally him. Although by the end of 1958 the Vare family was finally allowed to return to Estonia, the members of the family were no longer the same persons. Rein Vare had become embittered against the whole world; there was no sunny side of life for him. He was unable to hold down a job, alcoholism took its toll and finally he died in the Orwellian year of 1984 in Viljandi, where his body was found several days after his death. But Rein Vare’s rodent chewed diary was also found and eventually published. That document, itself comparable to Anne Frank’s diary, had survived to serve witness.

### Shift of occupations

As the first trains loaded with deportees arrived at their destinations, the next wave of deportation was being prepared in Estonia. But the implementation was hampered by Germany’s assault on the Soviet Union. Due to the rapid advancement of the front, a second deportation was carried out only on the island of Saaremaa. Out of the people rounded up during those days only the heads of families actually arrived in Siberia. The advancing German units and Estonian partisans freed the women and children being sent to Siberia over the mainland in Põllküla, Lääne County.

In 1944, the Red Army again occupied Estonia. The National Committee of the Republic of Estonia, which had functioned underground during the German occupation, tried to restore Estonia’s independence as German forces withdrew. The Red Army crushed this brave attempt. Nevertheless the resistance movement continued during the Soviet occupation. The Soviet occupation forces used thoroughgoing repressions against the resistance.



Typical clay hut giving shelter to Estonians deported to Siberia, the Novosibirsk region 1950

### March 25, 1949

Very soon discussion started about carrying out a new deportation, much larger than that of the year 1941. In 1946, the topic was discussed in the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party (ECP). Preparations lasted over two years and by March 1949, the occupation forces were ready to carry out a new deportation. In the course of the operation that began on March 25, 1949, over 20,000 people – nearly 3 per cent of the 1945 Estonian population – were seized in a few days and dispatched to remote areas of Siberia. The exact number of deportees in March 1949 is still not clear today; the numbers used fluctuate between 20,000 and 22,000. The deportation was demanded by the Communist Party in order to “eliminate the kulaks as a class” and to complete collectivization. Nearly a third of those declared to be “kulaks” managed to evade their captors. In the words of Party Secretary Nikolai Karotamm, other families were “grabbed” in order to “fill the quota.” Sixty-five percent of the 1949 deportees were the families of so-called “bandits, henchmen and bourgeois nationalists” – those taken into custody earlier. The majority of the 1949 deportees were women (10,274) and children (5,717).

Preparation of the lists had again been started much earlier as is indicated by the fact that many of the people being searched for had fled abroad in 1943-44. The legal basis for deportation was the Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union of 26 November 1948. The deportation was approved by Resolution No 014 of 14 March 1949 of the Council of Ministers of the ESSR, but the final choice of those to be exiled depended on the local party and soviet activists. The majority of deportation decisions were formalized after the event, from three months to a year after the actual day of deportation. The youngest deportee was nine months old; the oldest

was 95 years old. And at least 2 babies were born on the train. A file still exists on four minor children sent to Siberia from Rakvere without their parents, after having been held hostage for two days in an attempt to trap their parents.

In addition to the March deportation of 1949, the Soviet occupants carried out smaller deportations as well. In August 1945, persons of German nationality, a total of 342 people were rounded up from various parts of Estonia and taken to Perm oblast. Particularly inhumane was the deportation after March 1949 for the second time of children who had first been deported in 1941 and then allowed to join their relatives in Estonia at the end of the war. 5000 Estonians were dispatched into Omsk oblast, into the region directly affected by the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site. From 1949 to 1956, about 260 nuclear and fusion bomb explosions were carried out there. The victims of radiation sickness were left without medical treatment for decades. Sick people, as well as the parents of babies born with abnormalities were told that they had contracted brucellosis infection from animals.

It was not until the late 1950's that deportees had a chance to return to their homeland, but despite a partial rehabilitation they still remained second-rate citizens in the Soviet Union. A great number of them continued to be under the surveillance of the security organs; their confiscated property was not returned to them. The rights of deportees were fully reinstated only upon the re-establishment of Estonia's independence in 1991. The Estonian *Riigikogu* declared deportations a crime against humanity; a few members of the former security organs who participated in deportations have been brought to trial and found guilty. Russia has not recognized deportation as a crime against humanity and has not paid any compensation to the victims.



Children deported together with their mother and whose father was imprisoned, 1952



A boy, deported as an infant in 1949, 10 years later with his father in the Novosibirsk region of Siberia (1958)



Deported Estonian women doing forestry work in Siberia, the Kirov region in the 1950s