

Estonia Today

22 September 1944: From One Occupation to Another

In 2007, the Estonian parliament, to commemorate the Otto Tief Government (see below), declared September 22 to be Resistance Day. This day symbolises the Estonian nation's resistance to the repressive occupations, by two totalitarian great powers, that were unleashed upon the three Baltic states in the course of the Second World War.

On 22 September 1944, units of the Red Army captured Tallinn. Although it was a milestone on the road to Allied victory in Europe, the recapture of Tallinn by Soviet forces was far from being a "liberation" for the Estonian people. It merely marked a change in foreign regimes and the beginning of a nightmarishly repressive occupation that would last for nearly 50 years. This Soviet occupation was never recognized by most Western countries. For Estonia, World War II did not end, de facto, until 31 August 1994, with the final withdrawal of former Soviet troops from Estonian soil.

Just prior to the events of 22 September 1944, an attempt was made to restore Estonia's independence. The Otto Tief Government, appointed by the acting Estonian president, Jüri Uluots, remains, to this day, historically significant from the standpoint of the legal continuity of the Republic of Estonia.

Estonian men went to war, at that time, with the hope that it would eventually end with the restoration of Estonia's independence.

Estonia's direct human losses during the occupations (1940 – 1991) reached 180,000, which is 17.5 per cent of the Estonian population. Half of these people were killed, while the remainder left, or were forced to leave, their homeland. In the course of the two Soviet occupations, a total of more than 33,000 people living in Estonia were deported to the Soviet Union.

The Soviet and German occupations of Estonia

On 23 August 1939, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany concluded the so-called Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the secret protocols of which divided Central and Eastern Europe into respective spheres of influence.

On 1 September 1939, Germany launched the Second World War with its attack against Poland.

The Estonian Government declared its complete neutrality at the beginning of World War II.

On 17 September, the other party to the Pact, the Soviet Union, started to fulfil its role by invading Poland from the east, at the same time concentrating large forces on the borders of the three Baltic states and Finland. On 28 September 1939, the Soviet Union coerced Estonia, through the intimidating presence of its units on the border and with direct military threats, into concluding a so-called mutual military assistance pact, which allowed the USSR to establish military bases in Estonia. Similar treaties were also forced upon Estonia's southern neighbours Latvia and Lithuania. The seriousness of the Soviet pressure and threats is demonstrated by the fact that when Helsinki refused to conclude such a treaty with Moscow, the USSR began to invade Finland, which is known as the infamous Winter War. The international community reacted to this Soviet act of blatant aggression by expelling the USSR from the League of Nations.

The Soviet Union occupied and forcibly annexed Estonia, along with Latvia and Lithuania, in the summer of 1940, on the basis of the aforementioned Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Moscow used to its advantage the moment when the rest of the world was distracted by the shattering events in France. The Soviet authorities immediately implemented a reign of terror, which also victimised the Estonia's ethnic minorities like the Jews and the Russians. Special stress was placed upon the elimination of the nation's cultural, business, political, and military elite. In June 1941, over 10,000 people were deported to Siberia, where they were imprisoned in forced labour camps.

Following the outbreak of war between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in June 1941, the Soviet authorities mobilised as many as 50,000 Estonian men into their armed forces. Of these, they forcibly sent over 30,000 to labour camps in the Soviet Union, where a great many of these men perished. At the end of 1942, the survivors were transferred to a Red Army combat unit that saw extensive action on the Eastern Front.

In the summer of 1941, thousands of Estonians hid in the Estonian forests to avoid deportation or forced military mobilisation. A number of men had managed to flee to Finland where they joined the Finnish army. During this one year of occupation, over 2,000 Estonians were murdered by Soviet military intelligence units as well as the Soviet internal security force, the NKVD (the forerunner of the KGB), and its local collaborators.

The Soviet occupation was followed by Estonia's occupation by Nazi Germany in July 1941. This German occupation lasted until the late summer of 1944. It is estimated that during this period approximately 8,000 Estonian citizens or residents were killed by the Nazis. More than 20,000 citizens of other European countries, among them numerous Jews and Soviet prisoners of war were brought to Estonia. These people were either killed or died in Nazi prison camps, which had been established by the German occupation regime in Estonia.

In August 1942, the German leadership sanctioned the formation of an Estonian Legion as a part of the Waffen SS. In violation of international laws of war, the occupying German authorities began to conscript Estonian men into the German military forces. Just as during the Soviet occupation, some Estonian citizens opted to collaborate voluntarily with the occupiers.

The front reaches Estonia

In January 1944, the Red Army launched its Baltic offensive and began moving westward towards Estonia. At the end of January, the German authorities began a massive conscription of Estonian men into the military. On 7 February 1944, Estonia's acting president, Jüri Uluots, called upon Estonians to comply with this mobilisation. Along with many other Estonian politicians, Uluots saw this stand against the Red Army as a means of preventing a new Soviet occupation and of, hopefully, restoring Estonia's independence once the war was over.

By the spring and summer of 1944, approximately 38,000 men had been mobilised into the German armed forces. Seven so-called Border Defence Regiments were formed as well as the Estonian 20th Waffen SS Division (consisting of 15,000 men). Even 3,000 youngsters, aged 16-17, had been conscripted into the German air force auxiliary service.

At the beginning of February 1944, the Red Army crossed the Narva River and established several bridgeheads in preparation for further massive assaults. On 11 February 1944, the Red Army began a major attack on the city of Narva, which the German forces succeeded in stopping. On 9 - 10 March 1944, the Soviets carried out a large-scale air raid on the capital, Tallinn, inflicting serious damage in the central part of the city and causing a large number of civilian casualties. The Red Army's new push on Narva began at the end of July, and they soon succeeded in capturing the city. Following the fall of Narva, the German army retreated to the so-called Tannenberg Line, situated about 20 kilometres west of the city, in the hills of North- Eastern Estonia known as the Sinimäed. Extremely fierce fighting lasted there for almost three weeks, with both sides suffering very heavy losses. Among these casualties were large numbers of Estonians who had been conscripted by one side or the other.

In mid-August, the Red Army launched a new offensive in South-Eastern Estonia. In September, the Soviet leadership sent fresh reinforcements to the front, including the 8th Estonian Rifle Division. Hitler ordered

the evacuation of Estonia on 16 September 1944. On the next day, the Red Army began a fresh offensive. From 17 until 22 September, Estonian units serving in the two opposing armies came face to face, resulting in bloody armed clashes between fellow countrymen.

Jüri Uluots, the Otto Tief Government, and Estonia's legal continuity

In the course of the first few months of 1944, a broad-based coordinative body - the National Committee of the Republic of Estonia - was formed. Numerous political groups and prominent individuals, who had been active in Estonian politics in the second half of the 1930s and had managed to survive both Soviet as well as German repressions, participated in the Committee. The National Committee's aim was the restoration of Estonia's independence on the basis of legal continuity as well as the Atlantic Charter. The latter, which had been jointly issued by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill in August 1941, called for the restoration of the independence of those states that had been occupied in the course of the war.

On 19 - 20 April, the German internal security authorities arrested 365 Estonians suspected of underground nationalist activities. The Estonian National Committee, accused of being pro-English, was especially hard hit. Several of those arrested perished in Tallinn's Central Prison, or in Stutthof concentration camp.

On 18 September 1944, Acting President Jüri Uluots appointed a new Government headed by Otto Tief. The aim was to make use of the brief window of opportunity, which was created when the Germans were leaving but the Soviets had not yet stormed in.

The Government published an issue of the "*Riigi Teataja*" (State Gazette), and over the radio, in English, declared its neutrality in the war. As the German forces were evacuating Tallinn, the national tricolour was raised in Pikk Hermann Tower, which overlooks the city and is part of the Estonian parliament building complex.

The small military units that the national Government managed to form clashed with both the retreating Nazi and advancing Soviet troops.

The Estonian Government, which was able to function for only eight days (18 - 25 September 1944), left Tallinn just prior to the Red Army's arrival. Most cabinet members were later arrested by the Soviet authorities, and were subsequently deported to forced labour camps in Siberia. Acting President Jüri Uluots managed to escape to Sweden where he died shortly after his arrival. Before his death, he appointed August Rei as his successor, who, in 1953, in Oslo, appointed the Estonian Government in Exile.

Although the attempt to restore Estonian independence in September of 1944 did not succeed, the Otto Tief Government is an integral part of the *de jure* continuity of Estonia. The appointment of the Tief Government did not pass unnoticed abroad, where Finnish and Swedish newspapers wrote about it. In its own way, the Soviet

secret police also gave its recognition to the Tief Government. The members of the Government who ended up in the clutches of the NKVD were charged with just that - that they were members of the Tief Government.

The president of Estonia, Konstantin Päts, had been arrested and deported by the NKVD already in 1940.

The second Soviet occupation

On 22 September 1944, units of the Red Army captured Tallinn. The Estonian blue, black, and white was again replaced by the red Soviet flag. Intense battles raged on the islands off the west coast of Estonia until the end of November.

Approximately 70,000 Estonians were forced to flee their homeland. Most of them escaped by sea to either Sweden or Germany, where they were placed in refugee camps.

The Soviet administrative authorities arrived in Tallinn on 25 September 1944. Their main task was to eradicate all vestiges of Estonian statehood. In 1944-1953, thousands of Estonians were deported to the hinterlands of the Soviet Union, where they were either imprisoned in forced labour camps, or were resettled, under extremely harsh conditions, in remote rural villages.

According to the "White Paper" compiled by a special commission established by the Estonian parliament, direct human losses during the occupations (1940 – 1991) reached 180,000, which is 17.5 per cent of the nation's population. 90,000 of these people were killed, while the other 90,000 left Estonia, either as deportees, or as refugees or émigrés. As a result of the two Soviet occupations, more than 33,000 people were deported from Estonia to the Soviet Union. Traditional Estonian ethnic minorities like the Baltic Germans, Swedes, Jews, and Romanies either left or were annihilated. Approximately 80,000 Estonians of the pre-war population fled to either Sweden or Western Europe and did not return to Estonia (including approximately 7,000 ethnic Swedes). Approximately 20,000 Baltic Germans settled in Germany. In 1941, the Soviet regime deported 400 Jews to Siberia (10% of the Jewish community in Estonia). From 1941-1944, 1,000 Jews living in Estonia, practically all those who had not been able to escape abroad, were killed by the German occupiers. The Nazi regime also brought in and killed large numbers of citizens of other countries, primarily Jews, in its concentration camps in Estonia.

The occupied Baltic States were the only countries that had been overrun during the course of World War II, whose independence was not restored at the end of the war. It must also be noted, that the Atlantic Charter's points concerning territorial adjustments and self-determination were not applied to the Baltic states, even though the Soviet Union, too, had acceded to the Charter. The Baltic states were the only members of the League of Nations that were not given seats in the new post-war world organization, the United Nations. But fortunately, there was an exile government to embody the *de jure* continuity of the Republic of Estonia during the subsequent period of almost half a century.

Despite the Soviet occupation of Estonia, which lasted for decades, democratic countries continued to recognise the Republic of Estonia as well as its diplomatic representations in the United States and the United Kingdom.

The exile government officially ceased its activities on 7 October 1992, when - in the Estonian parliament - Heinrich Mark, the acting president of the Republic in exile, handed his credentials over to Lennart Meri, who had been elected, by the citizens of the re-independent nation, president of the Republic.

On 15 February 2007, the *Riigikogu* (Estonian parliament) declared September 22 to be Resistance Day, so as to commemorate the Otto Tief Government and its overthrow, on that date, by the invading Soviet forces.

Estonian citizens in occupying military forces

Violating international law, the occupying Soviet authorities, in 1940, made the existing Estonian armed forces, over 5,000 men, a part of the Soviet military. At the same time, practically the entire Estonian officer corps was murdered. Following the outbreak of the war between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in June 1941, the Soviets forcibly mobilised up to 50,000 conscription-age Estonian men. While some managed to escape, approximately 33,000 were sent to labour camps in Russia, where they were kept until the end of 1942. Thousands died in the camps as a result of inhumane conditions and disease. In 1942, the Red Army 8th Rifle Corps was formed, consisting largely of Estonians who had either been forcibly sent to the Soviet Union or had already lived there since before the war.

During the German occupation, up to 70,000 Estonian citizens were forcibly drafted into various military and paramilitary units. Until 1943, no Estonian citizens had been mobilised into the occupying German military forces. This was based on Nazi ideology - since Estonians were not considered to be "pure" Aryans, they were not trustworthy.

When the situation on the Eastern Front became critical for the Germans, several forced recruitments and mobilisations were carried out in Estonia in 1943-1944. These mobilised Estonians were not taken into the German National Army, the *Wehrmacht*, but were, rather, placed into various security and assault units, including the *Waffen SS*. The military mobilisation of the citizens of occupied territories is prohibited by the international laws of war. Therefore, the Germans attempted to cover up this activity by presenting the forcibly drafted men as volunteers in military auxiliary services (allowed by the international laws of war), or as volunteers in the Estonian *Waffen SS* Division. However, what actually occurred was clearly the mobilisation of an occupied territory's citizens into an occupier's military forces.

In the years 1941-1944, approximately 3,400 Estonians escaped to Finland and joined the Finnish armed forces to avoid German military service. Half of them returned

to Estonia in 1944 to support, with arms, the Estonian attempt to restore independence.

After reoccupying Estonia in the autumn of 1944, the Soviet forces resumed the forced military mobilisation of Estonian citizens.

Over 100,000 Estonian citizens, representing close to 10% of the population, were mobilised by the two occupiers during World War II. The Stalin regime did not recognise any of the principles of the Atlantic Charter. The Soviet occupation continued after World War II and was accompanied by massive crimes against humanity. In 1949, for instance, tens of thousands of Estonians were deported to the hinterlands of the Soviet Union, where they were either imprisoned in forced labour camps or were forcibly resettled in remote villages.

The forced enlistment of Estonians into the military forces of the occupying Soviet regime continued until Estonia's restoration of independence in 1991.

The Estonian nation was among the early victims of the horrors of World War II. Estonia's fate - the violent annihilation of its independence - was decided by the same Berlin-Moscow agreement (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) from which Nazi Germany drew its

confidence and courage to trigger the Second World War. In addition to many other degradations, Estonian citizens were forced to fight in the armies of the occupying countries. Estonian soldiers were not able to fight in their own country's uniform, for the independence of their own country, for the freedom of their own people.

As a democratic country, Estonia does not consider those who were forcefully enlisted to fight for the occupying regimes to be criminals, and therefore sees no need for them to be punished. A very similar position was held by the Western democracies following World War II, when Estonians who had fought in the German armed forces were not prevented from obtaining a residence permit or even citizenship in these countries. This understanding attitude did not, of course, apply to war criminals who had participated in bloody repressions carried out by the occupying powers. Unfortunately it must be noted that some people, for various reasons, accepted the ideologies of the occupiers and participated in the brutalities perpetrated by these totalitarian regimes. But the majority of the Estonian people have always condemned this kind of despicable behaviour and have remained true to their nation, with its humanitarian and democratic principles.