

Estonia Today

22 September 1944: From one occupation to another

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 more years. The occupation was never recognized by most Western countries. For Estonia, World War II only ended, *de facto*, on 31 August 1994, with the final withdrawal of former Soviet troops from Estonian soil.

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

Estonia and World War II – Facts

- The Estonian Government declared its complete neutrality at the beginning of World War II.
- The Soviet Union occupied Estonia, in 1940, on the basis of a secret pre-war agreement (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) concluded between the Soviet Union and Germany, which divided up Europe between the two totalitarian regimes.
- After Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, Estonia became a battlefield and by October was completely occupied by Hitler's forces.
- In 1944, the Soviet Union reoccupied Estonia, although fierce battles raged on in the islands off Estonia's west coast. With the capture of the southern tip of the island of Saaremaa on 24 November, the Soviets asserted their control over the entire country.
- The second Soviet occupation ended in 1991 with the restoration of Estonian independence, and the last Russian military forces left Estonia in 1994.
- According to the "[White Paper](#)" compiled by a special commission established by the Estonian parliament, direct human losses during the occupations reached 180,000, which is 17 per cent of the Estonian population. In addition, several traditional Estonian national minorities either left or were destroyed - Germans, Swedes and Jews. Approximately 80 000 Estonians from the pre-war population escaped or emigrated 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 who had not been able to escape abroad, were killed by the German occupiers. The Nazi regime also killed citizens of other countries, primarily Jews, in its concentration camps in Estonia.

Jüri Uluots, the Otto Tief Government and Estonia's Legal Continuity

- Before the Soviets reconsolidated power in 1944, an attempt was made to restore Estonian independence.
 - On 23 March 1944, an Estonia-wide coordinative body - the National Committee of the Republic of Estonia - was formed. The Committee's aim was the restoration of Estonia's independence on the basis of legal continuity and the Atlantic Charter*, which provided for the restoration of the independence of those states that were occupied during the Second World War.
 - On 18 September 1944, acting President Jüri Uluots appointed a new government led by Otto Tief. The government published the first *Riigi Teataja* (State Gazette), and over the radio, in English, declared its neutrality in the war. As German forces were evacuating from Tallinn, the national tricolour was raised on Pikk Hermann Tower, the seat of the Estonian government.
 - On 22 September 1944, Soviet troops conquered Tallinn. The Estonian national tricolour was torn from the flagstaff on Tallinn's Pikk Hermann Tower and was replaced by the symbol of the new occupation, the Soviet banner.
 - 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 reported on it: on 21 and 22 September, just before Tallinn was taken by the Soviets, the Estonian flag flew once again atop the Pikk Hermann Tower. In its own way, the Soviet secret police also gave its recognition to the Tief government. The charges against the members of the government who ended up in the clutches of the NKVD were just that - that they were government members.
 - The government left Tallinn prior to the Red Army's arrival. Most cabinet members were later arrested and suffered repressions by the Soviet authorities, or were sent to labour camps in Siberia. 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. 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.
 - 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 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.
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Estonian citizens in foreign military forces

- Violating international law, the Soviet Union forced Estonian soldiers, including conscripts, to serve in its occupying military forces. At the same time, practically the entire Estonian officer corps was murdered. During the war with Germany, more than 33 000 Estonian citizens were "militarily mobilised" to other parts of the Soviet Union, where the majority were placed into labour camps, which were actually part of the prison camp system. At least one-third of these men died during the first year of imprisonment due to starvation, disease and excruciating work requirements. In 1942, the Red Army 8th Rifle Corps was formed, consisting of the survivors and other Estonians who had lived in the Soviet Union prior to World War II.
- 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. But taking advantage of the anger that the Soviet repressions had caused in Estonia, the Germans did recruit limited numbers of Estonian volunteers. These men were generally used for ensuring security behind German lines, but many of them eventually ended up on the front.
- 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. The 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 law 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 law 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. All together, up to 70 000 Estonian citizens were mobilised, on Estonian territory, into various units.
- At the beginning of 1944, Estonia's underground National Committee and its constitutional Prime Minister acting as President, Jüri Uluots, called upon Estonians not to avoid the German draft, irrespective of the fact that the mobilisation was in violation of international law. Estonians hoped that with German weapons they could create a national army and thus be able to prevent a new Soviet occupation as well as be able to restore Estonia's independence. Nazi Germany of course refused to accept or recognise the restoration of Estonia's independence, but at that point, Estonians had no doubt that Germany was losing the war, and that the Estonian nation would have to start dealing, one way or another, with the oncoming Soviets. And if Estonians had arms, they could perhaps hold off the Soviets until the chaos in Europe was cleared up. The Estonian patriots were convinced that the organisation of post-war Europe would be based on the idealistic principles of the 1941 Atlantic Charter *.
- In 1943-1944, approximately 3 400 Estonians escaped to Finland and joined the Finnish Army to avoid the German mobilisation. 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 continued the forced mobilisation of Estonian citizens.
- Over 100 000 Estonian citizens, representing close to 10% of the population, were mobilised by the two occupants during World War II. The Stalin regime did not recognise any of the principles of the Atlantic Charter. The occupation continued after World War II and was accompanied by genocide. In 1949, tens of thousands of Estonians were deported from their homes to Siberia.
- 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 one of the first victims of World War II. Estonia's fate - the violent annihilation of its independence - was decided by the same deal (the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact) from which Nazi Germany drew its confidence and courage to trigger World War II by attacking Poland. Having lost their independence, the citizens of Estonia also became the victims of aggression by foreign powers. Among the 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 on the German side were not prevented from obtaining residence permits or even citizenship in these countries. Exceptions were made in the case of those who had committed crimes against humanity by participating in the repressions carried out by the occupying powers. With regret, it must be noted, that some people, for various reasons, accepted the ideologies of the totalitarian regimes and participated in the violence willingly. 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 ideals.

* British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed the Atlantic Charter on 14 August 1941, in which they declared that they wished to see sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who had been forcibly deprived of them.

Further information:

The Kistler-Ritso Estonian Foundation www.okupatsioon.ee

The White Book <http://www.just.ee/orb.aw/class=file/action=preview/id=12709/TheWhiteBook.pdf>

Estonian history <http://www.vm.ee/estonia/>
