

# Estonia Today

## Soviet deportations from Estonia in 1940s

The 23rd of August 2009 will mark 70 years since the signing of the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. According to the secret protocols of the pact, Eastern Europe was divided into spheres of influence. The MRP paved the way for German-Soviet Union co-operation in World War II (1939 – 1941). In the aftermath of World War II, Estonia lost approximately 17.5% of its population. The Soviet occupation brought about an event that until then had only been read about in history books and which became the most horrible memory of the past centuries — mass deportations, which affected people of all nationalities living in Estonia. The two deportations that affected Estonia the most deeply, on 14 June 1941 and 25 March 1949, are observed as days of mourning. The largest of these deportations took place 60 years ago this year: on 25 March 1949 more than 20 000 people, mostly women and children, were deported from Estonia.

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### Prologue to the deportations of the 1940s

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. 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. Although the Estonian Government declared its complete neutrality at the beginning of World War II, on 28 September 1939 the Soviet Union coerced Estonia, with direct military threats, into concluding a so-called mutual military assistance pact, which resulted in the deployment of USSR 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 was 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 Winter War. The international community reacted to this Soviet act of aggression by expelling the USSR from the League of Nations. Unfortunately, this did not influence the policies of the Soviet Union in any way.

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. At the initiative of the Soviet authorities, illegal parliamentary elections with forged results were organised in the Baltic states, the results of which were not recognised by democratic Western countries. The Soviet authorities immediately implemented a reign of terror, which also victimised Estonia's ethnic minorities like Jews and Russians. Special emphasis was placed upon the elimination of the nation's cultural, business, political, and military elite.

During the war, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union and occupied Estonia from July 1941 until September 1944, after which the Soviet Union re-established its occupation.



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

### Preparations for repressions

The Soviet Union had started preparations for the launch of terror in Estonian civil society already before the occupation of Estonia. As elsewhere, the purpose of communist terror was to suppress any possible resistance from the very beginning and to inculcate great fear among people in order to rule out any kind of organised 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, as well as the displacement of large groups of people were intended to destroy societal and economic order in Estonia. The lists of people to be repressed were prepared well in advance. From the files of the security organs, it seems 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, the following people in the territories to be

annexed into the Soviet Union and their family members were to be subjected to repression: all the members of the former governments, higher state officials and judges, higher military personnel, former politicians, members of voluntary state defence organisations, members of student organisations, persons having actively participated in anti-Soviet armed combat, Russian émigrés, 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. Approximately 23 percent 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.



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

The Soviet security organs started their repressive activities in Estonia already before its formal annexation into the Soviet Union during the course of occupation. In June 1940 the first persons were detained for political reasons, and from then on it only increased. On 17 July 1940 the last Chief Commander of the Estonian Defence Forces, Johan Laidoner, and his wife were exiled to Pensa. On 30 July 1940, the President of the Republic of Estonia, Konstantin Päts, and his family were exiled to Ufa. Both General Johan Laidoner and President Konstantin Päts died in captivity in the Soviet Union.

### Mass deportations begin

Preparations for carrying out mass deportations were begun not later than 1940 and were part of the total violence directed against the territories occupied by the Soviet Union in 1939 – 1940. The Ukrainian and Belarusian territories 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, Vladimir Bochkaryov, demanded that the anti-Soviet element

be exiled from the borders of the Estonian SSR. Concrete preparations for deportations began in the winter of 1940–1941. On 14 May 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".

### 14 June 1941

The first deportation raid was begun on the night of 13 June and early morning of 14 June. 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. The search for persons subjected to arrest or deportation continued until the morning of 16 June. 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 13 June order issued from Moscow, over 10 000 people were deported from Estonia during 14-17 June 1941. Over 7 000 women, children and elderly people were among the deported. The extent of the genocide is indicated by the fact that more than 25% of all the people deported in June 1941 were minors (under 16 years of age). The deportations also severely affected Estonia's Jewish population— more than 400 Estonian Jews, approximately 10% of the Estonian Jewish population, were among the deportees. As the first trains loaded with deportees arrived at their destinations, the next wave of deportation was being prepared in Estonia by Soviet authorities. 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.

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 hundreds of the detainees were shot to death. By the spring of 1942, of the more than 3 000 men dispatched to prison camps, only a couple of hundred were still alive.

The fate of women and children sent to the remote regions of Kirov and Novosibirsk oblasts was also onerous. 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.

In the course of the deportation of 1941, within one week about 95 000 people from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Bessarabia (Moldova) were deported to Russia.

Several recollections and documents bear witness to the hard fate of the deportees, among which the diary of ten-year-old Rein Vare, which he kept in the period 1941-1944, is one of the most shocking. The diary tells of the deportation and 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 labour 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 in Tallinn and then he was sent back to Siberia. That finally broke 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 people. Rein Vare had become embittered against the whole world. He eventually died in the Orwellian year of 1984 in Viljandi, where his body was found several days after his death. 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.

In 1944, the Red Army again occupied Estonia. The Soviet occupation forces used thoroughgoing repressions against the local population. On 15 August 1945 the Soviet authorities arranged the deportation of more than 400 people to Siberia; most of them were of German descent. The reason for their deportation had nothing to do with their activity during the war, which was not even investigated. It was collective punishment, the deportation of an entire (albeit small) national group. As a result of this deportation, Estonia permanently lost one of its historical ethnic minorities—the Baltic Germans.

### 25 March 1949

Very soon after that, discussion started among Soviet authorities on carrying out a new mass 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). Clandestine preparations lasted over two years and by March 1949, the occupation power was ready to carry out a

new deportation. In the course of the operation that began on 25 March 1949, over 20 000 people – nearly 3 percent of the 1945 Estonian population – were seized in a few days and dispatched to remote areas of Siberia. The deportation was demanded by the Communist Party in order to complete collectivisation and “eliminate the kulaks as a class”. 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.” The majority of the 1949 deportees were women (49.4%) and children (29.8%) The youngest deportee was less than one year old; the oldest was 95 years old. At least 2 babies were born on the train. A file still exists on four children sent to Siberia from Rakvere without their parents, after having been held hostage for two days in an attempt to trap their parents.



Deported Estonian children in the Irkutsk region of Siberia in 1952

Particularly inhumane was the second deportation of children who had first been deported in 1941 and then allowed to rejoin their relatives in Estonia at the end of the war. 5 000 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.

### Final deportations and the return of the deported

Oppression also targeted religious congregations in the now-atheistic state. A later post-war deportation took place in April 1951, when 353 Jehovah's Witnesses with their family members were deported to Siberia. The action was part of a large-scale USSR-wide operation, in the course of which Jehovah's

Witnesses were systematically deported from states and territories occupied by the Soviet Union.

It was not until the late 1950s that deportees who had survived their ordeal 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, and no formal pardon was ever issued.

### Legal evaluation and accountability

The legal definition of crimes against humanity was formulated for the purpose of the Nuremberg trials, although the fact that hostility towards civilians was forbidden had been a self-evident part of European civilisation for quite some time already. The so-named Martens clause of the Hague Convention of 1899 emphasised the demands of humanity in all war situations. For the purposes of the Nuremberg trials, the definition of crimes against humanity included deportations (Article 6 (c)). The Nuremberg experience makes it apparent that massive acts of violence against civilians are, with complete certainty, considered crimes against humanity. It is deplorable that Russia, the legal successor of the Soviet Union and one of the victors in World War II, has not recognised the deportations, which painfully affected the occupied nations as well as the Russian nation, as a crime against humanity.

During the Soviet occupation all information related to the deportations was highly secretive, so bringing the perpetrators to justice was not possible. The rights of deportees were fully reinstated only upon the restoration of Estonia's independence in 1991. On 2 October 1998 President of Estonia Lennart Meri convened the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity. The investigation of crimes against humanity committed against Estonian citizens or on the territory of Estonia during the occupation of the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany was set down as the main objective of the Commission's work. The Commission's position is that deportation is undoubtedly a crime against humanity. The Reports of the International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity have been published on its webpage: <http://www.historycommission.ee/temp/index.htm>

On 18 February 2002, the Parliament of Estonia declared deportations a crime against humanity without a statute of limitations and attested that the parties responsible for them were the USSR Communist Party, which directed the activities of the USSR's institutions of oppression, and that organisation's branch in occupied Estonia. The same decision emphasises that an individual's accountability for crimes of the regime is not determined by his membership in one of the aforementioned organisations, but by his individual participation in actually implementing crimes against humanity. The verdict on an individual's participation in crimes of humanity can only be decided in court.



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