

Why did they flee?

The background

by Niklavs Lapukins

Why they fled

The night between June 14 and 15, 1941 the Soviet power deported 15,081 so called "anti-Soviet elements" from Latvia. This was the Night of Bartholomew of the Baltics (similar deportations took place in the other Baltic states) that turned into the decisive event for the majority of the people, who in 1944-45 chose to flee the approaching Soviet army.

That night the daily terror escalated to a frightening crescendo, as after the Soviet occupation and annexation of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania during the months June to August, 1940. The intent was probably double, to liquidate those that could lead a resistance against the Soviet occupation, and to demoralize the Baltic people and frighten them into unconditional submission.

Those who were deported were so called contra revolutionaries and anti-Soviet elements. They were politicians and important officials. They were members from all political parties (except the Communist party). They were police officers, military and home guard. They were judges and prosecutors. They were businessmen and landowners. They were priests. They were persons with vast foreign contacts (including Esperantists and philatelists ). It was also not least, about their families, from old weak seniors to new born babies.

They were gathered at railway stations and locked into iron

bared cattle wagons, where the sanitary conditions were awful. They had to wait for several days for the journey to begin and had to survive on food and drink each had brought along from home. Many died already then or during the strained and degrading trip. And many of those who survived the trip starved or froze to death in the Siberian tundra. This night is forever engraved in the Baltic peoples collective consciousness.

Already during the year prior to this deportation there were plenty of signs as to what was about to happen, what kind of future the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin had in mind for the Baltic states.

From onset the Soviet occupiers lied about their objective. Against existing Election laws, only Communist party candidates were allowed, during the so called free elections in July 1940. The pseudo Parliaments resulting from these elections (where the TASS news agency announced election results 12 hours prior to closing of polls) asked for admittance to the Soviet Union. This occurred although Soviet Union had promised to respect the Baltic States' constitution and territorial integrity in the peace treaty after WW1 and in the 1939 pact of mutual assistance.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were degraded from open states to closed Soviet republics. Banks, factories and businesses were nationalized. Mass media was regemented under communist control. Every suspicion of free debate was choked - and those who tried to oppose belonged to those who disappeared in the daily terror.

But that was not enough. The Baltic people were also forced to

the degradation of honouring their oppressor. They were forced to thank the Big Russian Sister nation for its unselfish help to liquidate the bourgeoisie class oppression. They were forced to deny and falsify history. They were forced to slander the two decades of national freedom that they had enjoyed - and which rightly was their pride. In short, they were forced repeatedly into degrading rituals to lick the occupiers boots and assure that nothing was dearer to them than the shackles of the oppressor.

Those were the experiences from the first year of Soviet occupation, which the Latvians call "The Year of Horror". Nothing pointed towards better circumstances under the expected renewed Soviet occupation.

To leave ones country, maybe forever, to leave for the unknown, and with great danger to ones life. These are the hardest and most painful decisions a person can face. That so many Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians chose to flee, says all about their well founded abhorrence and dread of Stalin's Soviet.