

Scarborough, Ontario

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1941 was the year that I first experienced the cruelty of Soviet totalitarianism and repression. During that particularly warm July, my wife was expecting our twin sons as I struggled to feed our family after a year of Soviet occupation.

By threatening my family with torture and death, regional NKVD "Terror Battlions" coerced me into joining the Estonian mobilization in Haapsalu where we were herded into cattle cars and shipped to a remote GULAG slave labour camp. The Estonians, along with many other nationalities, were deemed untrustworthy and criminal by Soviet authorities and our captors made sure that we were constantly reminded of this.

At the camp, nearly 1/3 of my countrymen lost their lives due to either illness or intentional malnourishment. Another 1/3 died en route to the Red Army base to which we were assigned after our release from the camp in 1942.

Unlike many of my country men who were forced to serve in the Red Army, I was able to escape Stalin's cycle of terror by running across the front lines to the German side at the battle of Velikie Luki and was sent home to my twin sons shortly thereafter.

Having returned to the camp where I was forced to watch so many of my fellow Estonians die from intentional neglect and over work, I realized that this dreadful system affected people of so many nationalities, ethnicities and religions. The suffering experienced under Stalin and the Soviet was both tragic and universal.

Recent events in Tallinn and the aggressive rhetoric emerging from the Kremlin have shown that the Russian government has not recognized its dark history and may be susceptible to repeating mistakes of the past.

I was surprised by the Canadian Government's silence during Estonia's recent crisis, and believe that Canada should encourage and support Estonia's sovereignty in the face of Russian aggression.

Ultimately, we must continue to raise awareness of Soviet crimes and remind future generations of this so that such crimes are never allowed to happen again.