

Estonia Today

24 February – Independence Day

The Republic of Estonia was founded on 24 February 1918, when the Salvation Committee (*Päästekomitee*) declared the independence of the Republic of Estonia. This date was celebrated as Independence Day until the Soviet occupation of Estonia in 1940.

During the Soviet occupation, Independence Day was celebrated in Estonian communities around the world. Every year, the US Secretary of State honoured this day by sending greetings to the chief diplomatic representative of the Republic of Estonia to the United States Ernst Jaakson.

On 24 February 1989, the red flag of Soviet Estonia was replaced by the blue-black-white Estonian national flag on Toompea, and since that time Independence Day has been celebrated once again as a public holiday. This year Estonia will celebrate the 91st anniversary of the declaration of state independence.

A Quest for Independence

For centuries, the Estonian people dreamed of establishing a state free from foreign domination. The 1917 revolution and the generally unstable situation in Russia created the opportunity for Estonia to gain its independence. The impetus for independence was provided by the National Front, Estonia's main ideological movement, which based its ideas on US President Woodrow Wilson's principle of self-determination.

On 8 April 1917, Estonian organisations and military personnel totalling 40 000 people held a demonstration in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) in support of Estonian self-government. The peaceful demonstration achieved its goal when, on 12 April, the Russian Provisional Government signed the Law on Estonian Autonomy, which united the Livonian counties of Tartu, Võru, Viljandi, Pärnu and Saaremaa with Estonia. For the first time an Estonian, Jaan Poska, was appointed as a Provincial Commissioner of Estonia.

A six-member Provisional National Council, the *Maapäev*, was formed. The *Maapäev* appointed a national executive that began to organise and modernise local government and educational institutions. Prior to its forceful dissolution by Bolshevik authorities and the impending invasion by German forces, the *Maapäev* took a decisive step toward sovereignty by declaring itself the supreme authority in Estonia on 15 November 1917.

Independence Proclaimed

The Estonian Constituent Assembly elections were held on 3–4 February 1918. The parties that supported the idea of national independence gained two-thirds of the popular vote. With Soviet forces hastily retreating and German forces advancing, the *Maapäev* elected a three-member Salvation Committee (*Päästekomitee*) and granted it full decision-making powers to ensure the continued activity of the *Maapäev*. The *Päästekomitee* drafted a declaration of independence.

On 19 February 1918, the elders of the *Maapäev* approved the manifesto and on 24 February 1918, the *Päästekomitee* publicly proclaimed Estonia an independent and democratic republic.

After declaring its independence, Estonia was forced to fight a war of independence against Soviet Russia and German forces. During this war, Estonia secured its borders and signed the Tartu Peace Treaty with Soviet Russia on 2 February 1920.

Independence Restored

As the hope of restoring the nation's independence grew stronger in the late 1980s, the people began to celebrate Independence Day publicly before the end of the Soviet occupation. Since the restoration of independence on 20 August 1991, Independence Day continues to be a day of celebration and a day of reflection for the Estonian people.

Celebration of the 91st Anniversary of the Proclamation of the State Independence of the Republic of Estonia

Monday, 23 February (Tallinn)

- 10.30** Awarding of national science and cultural awards by Prime Minister Andrus Ansip at the Academy of Sciences
- 12.30** "Estonia thanks you"- Handing out of state decorations by President of the Republic Toomas Hendrik Ilves at the Kadrioru Art Museum

Tuesday, 24 February (Tallinn, Narva, Jõhvi)

- 07.18** Flag-raising ceremony in the yard of Narva Castle

- 07.33** Formal flag-raising ceremony on Pikk Hermann tower Tallinn
- 09.15** Placing of wreaths at the base of the memorial to the War of Independence at the Narva Garrison cemetery
- 10.00** Independence Day ecumenical church service at Alexander church in Narva
- 11.00** Defence Forces parade at the Peetri Square in Narva
- 18.00** Independence Day concert and formal reception hosted by the President of the Republic and Mrs Evelin Ilves at the Jõhvi Concert Hall

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