

# Estonia Today

## Year 1944 in Estonian History

*In 1944, Soviet and German forces fought fierce battles on Estonian soil in which both sides suffered heavy losses. Thousands of Estonians, who were mobilised by either the German or Soviet command, were drawn into the conflict and often were forced to fight each other on opposite sides of the battlefield.*

*Estonian men went to war hoping that it would end with the restoration of Estonia's independence.*

*Estonia lost over one fifth of its population as a result of World War II.*

*This fact sheet will introduce some key dates and events that took place in 1944.*

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### Soviet and German occupations in Estonia

- The Soviet Union annexed Estonia in June 1940. In summer 1941, the Soviet regime carried out mass repressions in Estonia. In June 1941, over 10 000 people, including the majority of the elite along with Jews and Russians, were deported to Siberia. Democratic countries never recognised the Soviet occupation.
- Following the outbreak of war between the Soviet Union and Germany, the Soviet authorities mobilised up to 50 000 conscription-age Estonian men. While some managed to escape, approximately 32 000 were sent to labour camps in Russia where they were kept against their will until the end of 1942. Thousands died in the camps of hunger, hard labour and epidemics. In 1942, the Red Army 8<sup>th</sup> Rifle Corps was formed consisting of men who had either been sent to the Soviet Union or already lived there.
- In the summer of 1941, thousands of Estonians escaped to the Estonian forests to avoid deportation and later forced mobilisation. Thousands of men also fled to Finland where they joined the Finnish army. During the Soviet withdrawal, over 2 000 Estonians were murdered by organs of the Soviet NKVD.
- The Soviet occupation was followed by Estonia's occupation by Germany in July 1941. German occupation lasted until 1944. It is estimated that during this period approximately 8 000 Estonian citizens or residents were killed. More than 20 000 citizens of other European countries, numerous Jews and Soviet prisoners of war were brought to Estonia and were either killed or died in Nazi prison camps, which were established by the German occupation regime on Estonian soil.
- In August 1942, the German leadership sanctioned the formation of an Estonian Legion as a part of the Waffen SS. In violation of the international law of war, conscription for Estonians was introduced. As during the Soviet occupation, some Estonian citizens decided to co-operate with the German occupying forces.
- In January 1944, the Red Army launched its Baltic offensive and began moving westward towards Estonia from Leningrad. At the end of January, the active mobilisation of Estonian men into the German

Army began. On 7 February 1944, Estonia's last Prime Minister Jüri Uluots called upon Estonians to comply with the mobilisation. Along with other Estonian politicians, Uluots saw fighting against the Red Army as a means of preventing a new Soviet occupation and restoring Estonia's independence once the war was over.

- By spring 1944, approximately 32 000 men were mobilised into the German army. Seven so-called Border Defence Regiments were formed as well as the 20th Estonian Division consisting of 15 000 men who were recruited for military action on the front lines. In August 1944, youths born in 1926 were conscripted and mostly placed in the Estonian division. 3 000 16-17 year olds were conscripted into the Air Force auxiliary service. In total, it is estimated that approximately 38 000 men were mobilised into the German army in 1944.

### Battles on the Front

- On 2 February 1944, the Red Army crossed the Narva River and set up several bridgeheads in preparation for further attacks. The Soviets captured a completely destroyed Narva on 26 July 1944. On 9 March 1944, the Soviets bombed Tallinn Old Town inflicting serious damage.
- Following the fall of Narva, the German army retreated to the so-called Tannenberg line, situated about 20 kilometres west of Narva in the Sinimäed in North East Estonia. For almost three weeks, fierce battles were fought in the surrounding hills ('Sinimäed'). Both sides suffered heavy losses. Many Estonians, who fought on both sides of the front, lost their lives.
- In mid-August, the Red Army launched a new offensive in South East Estonia. In September, the Soviet leadership sent fresh forces to the front, including the 8th Estonian Rifle Division. Hitler ordered the evacuation of Estonia on 16 September 1944. On the next day, 17 September 1944, the Red Army began a fresh offensive. From 17 until 22 September 1944, Estonian units serving in the two different armies came face to face in clashes resulting in patricide.



### **Attempt to restore Estonia's independence**

- On 23 March 1944, an Estonia-wide coordinative body - the National Committee of the Republic of Estonia - was formed. Numerous political groups lent their support to the National Committee including both government-minded representatives as well as members of the opposition, who had been active in Estonian politics in the second half of the 1930s and had escaped Soviet and German repression. The Committee's aim was the restoration of Estonia's independence on the basis of legal continuity and the Atlantic Charter that provided for the restoration of the independence of those states that were occupied during the Second World War.

- **On 1 August 1944, the National Committee pronounced itself Estonia's highest authority.**

**On 18 September 1944, acting President Jüri Uluots appointed a new government led by Otto Tief.**

The aim was to make use of the brief window of opportunity, which presented itself amidst a situation of general disorder as the German's were departing from Estonia and the Red Army was arriving.

- 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 in Pikk Hermann Tower.
- There few military units who were formed by the national Government clashed with both – retreating Nazi and advancing Soviet troops in September 1944.
- The government left Tallinn prior to the Red Army's arrival. Most cabinet members were later arrested by the Soviet authorities and sent to labour camps in Siberia. Acting President Uluots managed to escape to Sweden where he died shortly after his arrival. The

President of Estonia Konstantin Päts was arrested by NKVD already in 1940.

### **The Second Soviet occupation**

- On 22 September 1944, units of the Red Army captured Tallinn. The National tricolour was again replaced by the red Soviet flag. Fatal battles raged on the islands off the west coast of Estonia until the end of November.
- Approximately 70 000 Estonians were forced to flee their homeland. Tens of thousands went to Sweden and Germany, where they were placed in refugee camps.
- The Soviet administrative authority arrived in Tallinn on 25 September 1944. It started to abolish any reminder of the Estonian statehood, including its national elites. In 1944-1953, tens of thousands of Estonians were either sent to labour camps or deported.
- Estonia lost over 200 000 citizens over 20% of its pre-war population due to World War II.
- Despite the Soviet occupation of Estonia, democratic countries continued to recognise the Republic of Estonia and its foreign representations in the United States and the United Kingdom.
- According to the decision of the Estonian Parliament from 15 February 2007, 22 September is celebrated as Resistance Fighting Day, to commemorate the Otto Tief Government and its overthrow on that date by the invading Soviet forces.

### **Further information:**

**Max Jakobson:** *The past, a burden on our shoulders* [http://www.vm.ee/estonia/kat\\_399/pea\\_172/4510.html](http://www.vm.ee/estonia/kat_399/pea_172/4510.html)  
**Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity** [www.historycommission.ee](http://www.historycommission.ee)