

Estonia Today

23 AUGUST 1939: THE EUROPE-WIDE REMEMBRANCE DAY FOR THE VICTIMS OF ALL TOTALITARIAN AND AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

On 23 August 1939, the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany concluded a treaty of non-aggression known as Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (hereinafter the MRP) after its signatories, the Soviet Union's People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs Vyacheslav Molotov and Foreign Minister of Nazi Germany Joachim von Ribbentrop. In the secret protocols that accompanied the treaty of non-aggression, the two totalitarian powers divided Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Romania in violation of international law into respective spheres of influence, which led to Nazi Germany starting the Second World War on 1 September 1939 with its attack on Poland. The MRP and its three secret protocols resulted in comprehensive military and economic co-operation between Nazi Germany and the USSR from 1939 – 1941. The USSR's significant political and economic support for Nazi Germany allowed the leadership of Nazi Germany to occupy a great part of Europe and begin the widespread persecution and murder of Jews in its occupied territories. Nazi Germany's support for the USSR made it possible for the USSR to carry out wide-spread oppression in territories occupied by the USSR.

On 22 June 1941, Nazi Germany attacked the USSR—until now its partner—after disagreements between the two totalitarian powers intensified. Although at the beginning of the Second World War the USSR had been acting in co-operation with the aggressor, in the end of the war the USSR was one of the victors. And the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact essentially remained in effect: The lasting occupation of the Baltic states by the USSR went on.

Although the MRP and its secret protocols were well-known to democratic Western nations, the USSR denied the existence of secret protocols to the MRP until 1989, because the secret protocols were considered evidence of the annexation of the Baltic states. Upon the changing international and domestic situation, on 24 December 1989 the Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union declared the secret protocols of the pact to be null and void as of the moment of their signing.

Remembering the MRP as well as its aftermath, the European Parliament on 2 April 2009 approved the resolution "European conscience and totalitarianism". The resolution suggests that member states of the European Parliament declare 23 August as the European Day of Remembrance for the victims of all totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, to be observed with dignity and impartiality. The Estonian Parliament approved its support of the resolution on 18 June 2009 and declared 23 August as Remembrance Day.

***Divide et impera* – MRP and Nazi – Soviet co-operation 1939–1941**

In the spring and summer of 1939 the USSR was playing a two-faced game, holding public negotiations for establishing allied relations with Great Britain and France

while secretly holding negotiations with Germany. Under the guise of trade negotiations between the USSR and Germany, the agreement uniting the states in political co-operation was prepared in the summer of 1939. On 21 August 1939 the USSR ended negotiations with Great Britain and France and chose a side, commencing to split Central and Eastern Europe into spheres of influence between the USSR and Nazi Germany.

On 23 August 1939 the German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop arrived in Moscow and signed together with the Soviet Union's People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs the non-aggression treaty and its secret protocols, Clause 1 of which states: "In the event of a territorial and political rearrangement in areas belonging to the Baltic States (Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania), the northern boundary of Lithuania shall represent the boundary of the spheres of influence of Germany and the U.S.S.R."



Jossif Stalin and Joachim von Ribbentrop.
Moscow, 23 August 1939

With "rearrangement" thus built in to the document, the MRP and the secret protocols changed the entire international situation and promoted the outbreak of World War II.

On 1 September 1939, Germany launched the Second World War with its attack against Poland.

The Estonian Government declared its complete neutrality at the beginning of World War II.

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. On 28 September 1939 the Soviet Union coerced Estonia, through the intimidating presence of its units on the border and with direct military threats, into concluding a so-called mutual military assistance pact, which allowed the USSR to establish 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 is demonstrated by the fact that when Finland refused to conclude such a treaty with Moscow, the USSR launched a war against Finland, which is known as the Winter War. The international community reacted to this Soviet act of blatant aggression by expelling the USSR from the League of Nations. The USSR's ally Germany had already left the League of Nations after Hitler came into power in 1933.

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. The Soviet authorities immediately implemented a reign of terror that also persecuted Estonia's ethnic minorities like the Jews and the Russians. Special stress was placed on the elimination of the nation's cultural, business, political, and military elite. In June 1941, over 10 000 people were deported to Siberia, where they were imprisoned in concentration camps.

Estonia's losses from the war between Nazi Germany and the USSR and the ensuing occupation (1941-1991)

Following the outbreak of war between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in June 1941, the Soviet authorities mobilised as many as 50 000 Estonian men into their armed forces. Of these, they forcibly sent over 30 000 to labour camps in the Soviet Union, where a great many of these men perished. At the end of 1942, the survivors were sent to a Red Army combat unit that fought on the Eastern Front.

The Soviet occupation was followed by Estonia's occupation by Nazi Germany in July 1941. This German occupation lasted until the late summer of 1944. It is estimated that during this period approximately 8 000 Estonian citizens or residents were killed by the Nazis. More than 20 000 citizens of other European countries, among them numerous Jews and Soviet prisoners of war, were brought to Estonia. These people were either killed or died in Nazi prison camps, which had been established in Estonia by the German occupation regime. By the spring and summer of 1944, approximately 38 000 Estonian men had been mobilised into the German armed forces. Seven so-called Border Defence Regiments were formed, as well as the 20th Waffen SS Division. Even 3 000 youngsters, aged 16-17, had been conscripted into the German air force auxiliary service.

According to the "[White Paper](#)" compiled by a special commission established by the Estonian parliament, direct human losses during the occupations (1940 – 1991) reached 180 000, which is 17.5 per cent of the nation's population. 90 000 of these people were killed, while the other 90 000 left Estonia, either as deportees or as refugees or émigrés. As a result of the two Soviet

occupations, more than 33 000 people were deported from Estonia to the Soviet Union. Traditional Estonian ethnic minorities like the Baltic Germans, Swedes, Jews, and Romans either left or were wiped out. Approximately 80 000 Estonians of the pre-war population fled to either Sweden or Western Europe and did not return to Estonia (including approximately 7 000 ethnic Swedes). Approximately 20 000 Baltic Germans settled in Germany. In 1941, the Soviet regime deported 400 Jews to Siberia (10% of the Jewish community in Estonia). From 1941-1944, the 1 000 Jews living in Estonia, practically all those who had not been able to escape abroad, were killed by the German occupiers. The Nazi regime also brought in and killed large numbers of citizens of other countries, primarily Jews, in its concentration camps in Estonia.

The revealing and condemnation of the MRP

The occupied Baltic States were the only countries that had been invaded during the course of World War II whose independence was not restored at the end of the war. It must also be noted that the Atlantic Charter's points concerning territorial adjustments and self-determination were not applied to the Baltic states, even though the Soviet Union, too, had acceded to the Charter. The Baltic states were the only members of the League of Nations that did not become members in the new post-war world organisation, the United Nations. But fortunately, there was an exile government to embody the de jure continuity of the Republic of Estonia during the subsequent period of almost half a century.

Despite the Soviet occupation of Estonia, which lasted until 1991, democratic countries continued to recognise the Republic of Estonia as well as its diplomatic representations in the United States and the United Kingdom.

On 23 August 1979, 45 Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian citizens sent a public letter – the Baltic Appeal – to the general secretary of the UN as well as the Soviet Union, the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic, and the governments of the states that had signed the Atlantic Charter. The appeal demanded the public disclosure of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocols, the invalidation of the pact from the moment of its signing, and the restoration of the independence of the Baltic states. Mart Niklus, Endel Ratas, Enn Tarto, and Erik Udam signed on behalf of Estonia.

The Baltic Appeal was published in the international press and constituted the basis for the decision of the European Parliament of 13 January 1983 in support of the demands of the memorandum.

On 23 August 1987 a demonstration organised by MRP-AEG (Estonian Group for the Public Disclosure of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact – an organisation active from 1987–1988) took place in Tallinn's Hirvepark demanding the disclosure of the various secret protocols and the elimination of the MRP's consequences. On 23 August 1989, around two million individuals linked hands in the Baltic Way – a human chain that stretched from Tallinn through Riga to Vilnius. This demonstration again drew attention to the need to disclose the MRP and liquidate its result. Hope sprang in the society that a renunciation by Germany and the Soviet Union of the secret deal would

result in new opportunities for development and hopes of restoring the sovereignty lost so many years ago.

Historians of various countries devoted efforts to studying the MRP. Increasingly thorough illumination of the topic demonstrated that the three Baltic States had indeed been coercively removed from their historical path of development, occupied by military force and annexed by the Soviet Union. The entire process was completely null and void by the standards of international law.

The Soviet leadership had for decades denied the very existence of any secret protocols to the MRP. It was only after the Baltic Way demonstrations of 23 August 1989, when two million people from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania created a human chain set on the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Pact, that a special Soviet commission examining the Pact admitted its existence.

On 24 December 1989 the Congress of People's Deputies of the Soviet Union, with a decision entitled "Political and legal assessment of the 1939 Soviet-German non-aggression pact", declared the secret protocols to the pact to be null and void. The Congress stated that the demarcation of the Soviet and German spheres of influence in the MRP and other secret protocols signed with Germany between 1939-1941 legally contravened the sovereignty and independence of a number of other countries. "During this period, the Soviet Union's relations with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were governed by a system of treaties. Pursuant to the peace treaties of 1920 and the non-aggression pacts signed from 1926-1933, the parties to these agreements undertook to honour each other's sovereignty, territorial integrity and inviolability

under all circumstances. The Soviet Union had similar obligations to Poland and Finland." With its decision, the Soviet legislature condemned the MRP and the signing of other secret agreements with Germany. The Congress declared the secret protocols to be without legal basis and null and void as of the moment of their signing.

In May 2005 in Washington, the security adviser to US President George W. Bush, Stephen Hadley, called on Russia to abrogate the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed in 1939 that had led to the occupation of the Baltic States. Hadley harked back to the 1989 decision of the Congress of People's Deputies, and stressed: "Obviously it would be an appropriate thing for Russia, now having emerged out of the Soviet Union, to do the same thing."

23 August: Europe-wide Day of Remembrance

Remembering the MRP as a cautionary example of the agreement made between two totalitarian regimes and its aftermath, the European Parliament on 2 April 2009 approved the resolution "European conscience and totalitarianism". The resolution calls on the member states of the European Union to declare 23 August as the European Day of Remembrance for the Victims of all Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes, to be observed with dignity and impartiality. The Estonian Parliament approved its support of the resolution on 18 June 2009 and declared 23 August as Remembrance Day.

Additional reading:

Nazi – Soviet Relations 1939 – 1941: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/nazsov.asp

Text of the Molotov – Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocol: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1939pact.html>

The Baltic Way: <http://www.balticway.net/index.php?page=baltic-way&hl=en>

European Parliament resolution of 13 January 1983 on the situation in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania: http://web-static.vm.ee/static/failid/358/eup_resol_1983.pdf

European Parliament resolution of 2 April 2009 on European conscience and totalitarianism: <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2009-0213+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>