

THE BALTIC WAY 30

The day holding hands changed history

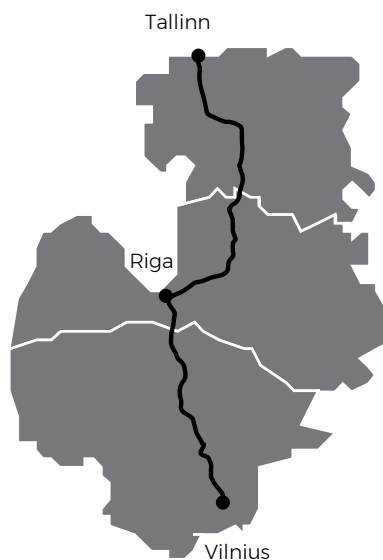


On 23 August 1989, approximately two million people stood hand in hand between Tallinn (Estonia), Rīga (Latvia) and Vilnius (Lithuania) in one of the most unique expressions of non-violent protest the world had ever seen.

The ~670 km long live human chain was the peak in a series of manifestations during the Awakening or Independence Movement of the Baltic states (1988-1991) who, after being incorporated in the Soviet Union in 1940 due to the evil Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, sought to regain their sovereignty.

The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was a secret agreement between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany that envisaged the division and occupation of Eastern Europe between the two powers. The Pact was signed on 23 August 1939. A week later the Second World War began, and inherently, after a short period under the Nazi regime (1941-1944), Latvia was

doomed to be forcedly incorporated into the Soviet Union until 1991. The Soviet Union claimed that the Baltic states joined voluntarily. The protesters who took part in the Baltic Way wished to remind the world what had actually happened: the



occupation and annexation of the Baltic states was illegal, and against the wish of the respective nations.

So at 19:00 on 23 August 1989, 50 years after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed, church bells sounded in the Baltic states. Mourning ribbons decorated the national flags that had been banned a year before. The participants of the Baltic Way were addressed by the leaders of the respective national independence movements: the Estonian Rahvarinne, the Lithuanian Sąjūdis, and the Popular Front of Latvia. The following words were chanted - 'laisvė', 'svabadus', 'brīvība' (freedom). The symbols of Nazi Germany and the Communist regime of the USSR were burnt on large bonfires. The Baltic states demanded the cessation of the half-century long Soviet occupation, colonisation, russification and communist genocide.

The Baltic Way was a significant step towards regaining the national independence of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, and a source of inspiration for other regional independence movements. The live chain was also realised in Kishinev by Romanians of the Soviet-occupied Bessarabia or Moldova, while in January 1990, Ukrainians joined hands on the road from Lviv to Kyiv. Just after the Baltic Way campaign, the Berlin Wall fell, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia began, and the Ceausescu regime in Romania was overthrown.

Recognising the documents of the Baltic Way as items of documentary heritage of exceptional value, UNESCO included the event in the Memory of the World Register in 2009.

COMPARE

The Baltic Way was similar to distance between



1939

August 23, 1939. A non-aggression treaty between the USSR and Germany (the Molotov-Ribbentrop or the Hitler-Stalin Pact) with its secret protocols on the division of spheres of influence in Europe is signed.

September 1, 1939. World War II begins. Germany invades Poland, September 17, the USSR invades Poland.

1940

June 16, 1940. The USSR occupies Lithuania.

June 17, 1940. The USSR occupies Latvia and Estonia.

1941

July 23, 1940. The United States declares that it does not recognize the occupation and annexation of the Baltic States by the USSR. The declaration is signed by US Secretary of State Sumner Welles.

June 14, 1941. Mass deportations. More than 15,000 people are deported from Latvia, 17,500 from Lithuania and 10,000 from Estonia.

1945

June 22, 1941. Germany occupies Latvia and Lithuania, July 7 - Estonia. The Holocaust and repressions.

February 1945. The Yalta Conference. The Allies allow the annexation of the Baltic States within the USSR. Latvian diplomatic missions continue to operate in Washington and London.

1949

March 25-28, 1949. Mass deportations. 42,149 people are deported from Latvia, 31,917 from Lithuania and 20,713 from Estonia.

1953

June 17, 1953. More than 700 cities in East Germany rebel against the existing regime.

1956

October 23 - November 10, 1956. Hungarian Revolution (Uprising) against the Moscow regime. November 10, Soviet tanks invade Hungary and the revolt is suppressed.

1968

January 5 - August 20, 1968. The Prague Spring. On August 20, the Warsaw Pact's armed forces invade the country under USSR leadership and suppress the rebellion.

1980

September 17, 1980. Solidarity (Solidarność), the first labour union in the Warsaw Pact countries not controlled by the Communist Party, is established in Poland.

1985

March 15, 1985. The Central Committee of the CPSU elects Mikhail Gorbachev, Secretary General. A course of partial liberalization begins in the Soviet Union.

1987

July 25-31, 1985. Voyage of the Baltic Peace and Freedom Ship in the Baltic Sea to protest the Soviet regime of occupation.

August 23, 1987. On the anniversary of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the Helsinki-86 group holds a protest rally at the Freedom Monument in Riga. The militia beats and arrests demonstrators.

1988

June 3, 1988. Founding congress of the Reform Movement of Lithuania Sąjūdis.

October 1, 1988. Founding congress of the Popular Front of Estonia *Rahvarinne*.

1989

October 8-9, 1988. Founding Congress of the Popular Front of Latvia.

March 26, 1989. The Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR elections in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. *Sąjūdis*, the Popular Front of Latvia and *Rahvarinne* gain majorities.

May 2, 1989. In Hungary, after mass demonstrations, the barbed wire border fence with Austria is demolished.

May 13-14, 1989. In Tallinn, the Baltic Popular Movements establish the Baltic Assembly and the Baltic Council.

June 4, 1989. In Poland, the Solidarity movement led by Lech Wałęsa wins parliamentary elections.

August 16, 1989. US President George W. Bush addresses the Baltic nations, endorsing the freedom efforts and condemning the Hitler-Stalin Pact.

1989

August 23, 1989. In Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, approximately 2 million people join hands to create the 660 km long Baltic Way.

August 26, 1989. Statement by the CPSU Central Political Bureau "On the situation in the Baltic Soviet Republics", threatening the aspirations of Baltic independence.

August 27, 1989. 204 085 protest signatures against the CPSU CC statement are collected in Latvia.



1989

October 23, 1989. Hungary adopts a constitution guaranteeing free elections and democracy.

October 1989. Mass demonstrations in Leipzig, East Germany.

November 9, 1989.
The Berlin Wall falls.

November 17 – December 29, 1989. The Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia; November 28. The Communist Party of Czechoslovakia renounces power.

December 16, 1989. In Romania, the regime of Nicolae Ceaușescu falls.

December 24, 1989. The Congress of People's Deputies of the USSR declares the secret protocols of the Hitler-Stalin Pact invalid from the moment of signing.

1990

February 24, 1990. The semi-free elections in Lithuania are won by Sąjūdis.

March 11, 1990. The Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian SSR proclaims the independence of the Republic of Lithuania.

March 17, 1990. In the partially free elections in Latvia and Estonia the Popular Front wins.

March 30, 1990. The Supreme Soviet of the Estonian SSR decides on a transition period to an independent state.

May 4, 1990. The Supreme Soviet of the Latvian SSR adopts the declaration "On the Restoration of the Independence of the Republic of Latvia".

October 3, 1990.
The German reunification.

January 1991.
Barricades are set up in Vilnius and Riga.

1991

February 9, 1991. In Lithuania, 93.2% of voters vote in favour of Lithuania's independence.

August 19, 1991. Soviet coup d'état attempt. A state of emergency is introduced in the USSR.

March 3, 1991. A referendum on independence is held in Latvia and Estonia. In Latvia 73.68% and in Estonia 78.4% vote in favour.

August 20, 1991. The Supreme Council of the Republic of Estonia adopts the Constitutional Law on the full restoration of independence.

August 21, 1991. The Supreme Council of the Republic of Latvia adopts the Constitutional Law on the full restoration of independence.

August 22, 1991. Latvia's independence is ratified by Iceland, Lithuania and Estonia.

August 24-31, 1991. Latvia's independence is recognized by Hungary, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Poland, Canada, Sweden, Australia and 36 other countries worldwide.

August 24, 1991. President of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin signs a decree recognizing the national independence of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia.

September 2, 1991. Latvia's independence is recognized by the United States.

September 6, 1991. The State Council of the Soviet Union decides to recognize the independence of the Baltic States.

September 17, 1991. Latvia becomes a member of the United Nations.

December 25, 1991.
The Soviet Union ceases to exist.

2004

March 29, 2004. Latvia becomes a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Alliance (NATO).

May 1, 2004.
Latvia becomes a member of the European Union.

2008

September 23, 2008.
The European Parliament declares the 23rd of August the European Day of Remembrance for the Victims of Stalinism and Nazism.

2009

July 30, 2009. UNESCO inscribes the joint nomination of the Baltic States *The Baltic Way. Human Chain Linking Three States in Their Drive for Freedom* on Memory of the World International Register.



The Latvian Institute

The Latvian Institute deals with promoting awareness and providing a wide range of information about Latvia. It works closely with local and foreign dignitaries, diplomats, academics, students and international media in developing an understanding of Latvia, its branding and its people.©

latvia.eu
lv100.lv

For further information please contact the Latvian Embassy or Consulate in your country, or the Latvian Institute: Latvijas Institūts Pils iela 21, Rīga LV 1050, Latvia. Phone: (+371) 6750 3663 info@li.lv

Materials from the The Popular Front Museum at the National History Museum of Latvia in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture Latvia 100 Office and State Chancellery ©

Photos: Uldis Briedis ©

The Latvian Institute ©, 2019.
Not for sale.