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 forcibly 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 Sajūdis, 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.

#actbalticway
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.

June 16, 1940. The USSR occupies Lithuania.

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

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

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


August 27, 1989. 204,085 protest signatures against the CPSU CC statement are collected in Latvia.
2004
February 9, 1991. In Lithuania, 93.2% of voters vote in favour of Lithuania’s independence.


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.


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


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

2008

2009

1989

November 9, 1989. The Berlin Wall falls.

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

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

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


Barricades are set up in Vilnius and Riga.


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


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

The Soviet Union ceases to exist.

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

2008

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