



THE POWER OF FREEDOM

CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE AFTER 1945

Mart Laar

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CREDITS

CENTRE FOR EUROPEAN STUDIES

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The Power of Freedom

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*Cover image: © Antanas Sutkus,
Good bye Party Comrades, Vilnius, 1991*

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AUTHOR



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Scores of books have been written on topics related to the Cold War, the Fall of Communism and the transition of captive nations into democracies. Most of these books have been written by people from the side of the Iron Curtain that enjoyed freedom and prosperity. But considering the events of 1989 and the ensuing developments, a different perspective is in order. It is important to understand what the citizens of Central and Eastern Europe felt and thought under Communism and how they brought the Evil Empire to its long overdue end.

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FOREWORD

'I trust that these times will vanish like a horrible nightmare. It gives me strength to stand here and breathe. Our nation has suffered much and therefore we will survive these dark times,' announced the Latvian freedom fighter Gunārs Astra, on 15 December 1983, to the Supreme Court of the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic sentencing him for the second time to the GULAG prison camps in Siberia for anti-Soviet activities.

Astra was right. The dark times of totalitarian Communism really did vanish and today, in 2009, Europe can celebrate the 20th anniversary of freedom in Central and Eastern Europe, which ended the 50-year division of Europe by the Iron Curtain. On one side of this curtain, there was freedom, democracy, the rule of law and a market economy ruled. On the other people had to live under terror, violence, totalitarianism and the socialist command economy. Under the Communist dictatorships, millions of people were killed, arrested, tortured and sent to labour camps. These countries were cut off from the rest of the world and the peoples' rights were taken away from them. This resulted in the destruction of the economy, civil society and the environment in these countries. Most destructive of all were the wounds inflicted on human souls.

It all ended in 1989. During peaceful revolutions, Central and Eastern Europe freed itself from Communism and took its first steps on the road back to a common civilisation of freedom, law and democracy. Revolutions are usually bloody affairs; violent transfers of power. But revolutions need not be violent in order to qualify as such. When Nicolaus Copernicus analysed the position of stars in the sky, he formulated the first scientific definition of revolution as a process whereby the stars return to their original positions. Hannah Arendt applied this observation to politics and concluded that revolutions are actually a return to the original freedom of man.

So in 1989, Central and Eastern Europe was free again and it was only then that its populations discovered what Communism had really done to their countries and people over the previous 50 years. Communism culminated in total economic failure, the collapse of social networks, poverty and the rapid growth of criminality. New democratic governments elected to power during the first free elections had to lead their countries out of these crises, build democratic institutions and establish the rule of law and market economies. There was no textbook available to guide such an undertaking, nobody had done it before. It was certainly not an easy task, but the results have been better than anybody expected during the difficult times of the final years of Communism.

Now, 20 years on, it is time to draw the first conclusions and look at what we have achieved and what we have not. It is hard to deny that it has been a real success story; Europe has been united and there is now far greater stability and prosperity. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe have changed beyond recognition, although it has not been possible to overcome all of the problems created by 50 years of Communist rule, however. Compared to Western Europe, the new Member States are still poor even though they have moved closer to matching average European standards of living.

Unfortunately, the 20th anniversary of freedom in Central and Eastern Europe coincides with the biggest global economic crisis since the Second World War and, indeed, this crisis has hit many Central and Eastern European countries hard. This has raised certain questions: have democratic and market reforms been at all successful? Was life not better under Communism? These questions must be answered quickly. Now, during the 20th anniversary of the peaceful revolutions and the fall of Communism, is the best time to do so. Unfortunately, we have not given due credit to this success story, with the result that the enlargement of Europe has more often been regarded as a problem than a success. It is at last time to put events in Central and Eastern Europe into perspective, demonstrating to all how freedom works.

This is especially important as the developments in Central and Eastern Europe during the bloody twentieth century are often misunderstood and misused. One such misunderstanding, for example, is the way in which totalitarian Communism is evaluated by many scholars and by public opinion across the world. The magnitude of Communist crimes, the level of violence and the total number of victims of Communist terror are all underestimated. Communism is perceived as a political system that is only slightly different to our own, one that is associated with limitations on political freedom, but which nonetheless helped to modernise backward Central and Eastern European countries, achieving literacy, economic development, full employment and social guarantees such as free health care and education to their populations.

In reality, however, Communism was a complete failure. To understand this, rather than compare the level of development in Central and Eastern European countries' in 1989 not with their level in 1945, it should be compared with the level of development in Western countries in 1989: countries such as West Germany, Greece, Finland, Spain and Portugal. Such a comparison clearly demonstrates that West European countries, starting from the same or an even lower level at the end of World War II, had achieved markedly more success in all areas than the countries that found themselves trapped under the Communist yoke.

This is a book about Communism, about what it really accomplished and about the destruction it caused during its decades in power. Without this, it is not possible to understand the problems and challenges of transition.

The second misunderstanding is the answer to the question of what made the fall of the Soviet system possible. The main reason for the USSR's collapse is often understood to be perestroika and the goodwill of its initiator, Mikhail Gorbachev. It is true that most of the revolutions in 1989 were peaceful, but these years were actually only the final steps on the long road of the fight for freedom that had in fact lasted for decades. Freedom was not restored in Central and Eastern Europe without blood and fierce fighting, during which thousands of freedom fighters died. Perestroika, which led to collapse of the Soviet system, was not started because Gorbachev liked democracy and freedom; rather, the

victory of Western civilisation in the Cold War pushed the Soviet Union into a corner from which it had no option other than to try to reform the system. The Central and Eastern European nations played an important role in this victory, fighting the war as brothers in arms on the side of the West. The battles of this war were fought on the streets of Berlin in 1953, Poznan and Budapest in 1956, Prague in 1968, Gdansk in 1970 and 1980, and in the Baltic forests and swamps during the long partisan movement against the Soviet invaders. The Soviet system was weakened by civil resistance to Communism and by the will of the people wanting to live as free men and women. It would not have been possible for the Western world to win this war alone; the victory came through a common struggle.

This is a book about courage—about how fear was overcome step by step. How, in the beginning, there were always only small groups of brave people who risked everything and were often crushed by totalitarian regimes for doing so. Their courage nevertheless paved the way to continued resistance—and, in the end this resistance crushed the Evil Empire. This is also a story of solidarity: without the West's success in the Cold War, the Soviet empire would not have been defeated.

The third misunderstanding lies in an underestimation of the achievements of Central and Eastern Europe's transition to democracy and a market economy. This transition is often associated with economic misery, social tensions, the rise of inequality and unemployment. Developments in Central and Eastern Europe and their achievements are compared with the current economic and social conditions in Western welfare states, rather than with the situation in transition countries at the fall of Communism. The magnitude of the failure of the Communist command economy and the social experiment is underestimated, with the collapse of the economy and social structures being linked instead to reforms introduced during the transition period that were considered 'too liberal'. In fact, the misery had more to do with the chaos created by the collapse of Communism, the reforms were a response to this collapse. They did not cause it, rather, they were intended to lead Central and Eastern Europe out of crises.

This path was, of course, not an easy one. A number of mistakes were made, while the speed of development and the achievements of transition have varied significantly. Some countries have failed badly resulting in even more misery than they had experienced under Communist rule. In Central and Eastern Europe, the results have nevertheless been excellent. An important role in this success was played by the desire of Central and Eastern European countries to 'return to Europe' and by the willingness of Western Europe to accept the countries that had been cut off from it for 50 years. Nineteen eighty-nine opened the doors that had been slammed shut by the forces of a tragic history. It was the beginning of a homecoming.

This is a book about the power of freedom and democracy. The achievements of the transition of former Communist countries have often been underestimated and the success of the enlargement of the European Union, neglected. Hopefully, such an understanding will encourage Europe today to continue its enlargement, bringing greater stability to its borders.

The experience of the new Member States demonstrates clearly that freedom really works. This is the main reason why this book concentrates on telling the stories of the new EU Member States: Estonian, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the former East Germany, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania and Bulgaria. This area is also known as Central and Eastern Europe.

Developments in Russia, the Ukraine or the Balkans are also touched upon in order to put events into context. Separated from Europe by the Iron Curtain and subjected to the processes of Sovietisation, the captive nations of Central and Eastern Europe continued their fight for freedom and eventually won a decisive victory, liberating their countries from Communist dictatorship. Their journey back to Europe has not been easy, it demanded a lot of hard work and sacrifice, but ultimately this goal was achieved.

This book is dedicated to the road to freedom of the former captive nations of Europe and to all those who sacrificed their lives to make this dream come true.

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CURTAIN

The old New Europe

The first time that Emperor Charles IV entered the eastern capital of his empire, Prague, in 1355, he was so impressed by what he saw that he established a permanent court there. According to the Emperor, Prague had the ‘most beautiful women and the best beer in the world.’ Today, the experience of foreign visitors on their initial trips to the ‘new’ European countries is similar. Before their arrival, visitors expect to see onion-shaped domes, Russian *matrjoshkas* and orthodox icons. But to their surprise, they are greeted by Gothic castles, Renaissance palaces, and baroque churches. Old cities such as Prague or Tallinn appear more ‘European’ than some of the capitals of Western Europe. This is no miracle—Prague is actually farther West than Vienna.

In order to understand the history of Europe, we must remember that Europe is a cultural rather than a geographical entity derived from common historical experience and a shared system of values. Countries in both Western and Eastern Europe have faced the same historical challenges: Christianity, feudalism and rivalry, the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, the Enlightenment, the birth of the nation-state and democracy. Despite this shared historical legacy, national and cultural diversity run deep within Europe. Indeed, no area of the world of comparable size has so many fully developed national cultures and languages. Europe has never been a ‘melting pot of nations’ and has, in fact, resisted attempts throughout history to blur its separate ethnic identities.

Central and Eastern Europe, as we now know it, started to develop during the collapse of the Roman Empire when successive waves of migrating warrior peoples—the Vandals, Goths, Huns and Avars among others—made their way from the Eurasian steppes to the Atlantic. Over the next few centuries, parts of these tribes converted to Christianity and Polish, Hungarian, Lithuanian and other states were created. The people of Central and Eastern Europe were divided not only in terms of language and culture, but also by different forms of Christianity as well. Central Europe and the Baltics remained loyal to Western Christianity, while Eastern and South-Eastern Europe adopted Eastern Christianity.¹

Soon after the beginning of their modern history, the Central and Eastern European nations served as a barrier by opposing onslaughts from the East. The

¹ Davies 1996.



The Baltic Sea has united Central and Northern Europe through history.

history of Central and Eastern Europe is replete with battles against invading forces trying to march to the West. Estonian and Finnish tribes halted attempts by Kievan Rus to move farther west in the 11th and 12th centuries. During the 13th and 14th centuries, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania played a major role in the fight against a Mongol-Tatar invasion. Finally, in the 16th century, Hungarians fought to the death against the Turkish Ottoman Empire, the same role that was played by the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, 'Rzeczpospolita', in the 17th century. Jan Sobieski, one of the most outstanding kings of Poland, was forced to choose an enemy against which to marshal Polish forces. It would have been in the Polish national interest for him to choose to fight Poland's main enemy, namely, the emergent Russia. However, fighting the Turks served European interests better and Sobieski made his choice for Europe. On 12 September 1683, he led his cavalry in a decisive attack against a powerful Ottoman army of 200,000 men during the siege of Vienna, achieving a crushing victory. The Ottoman retreat, which began that day in Vienna, continued in stages for the next 200 years.

While Central and Eastern European nations successfully protected Europe from Mongolian, Ottoman and Russian invasions, they were weakened in this fight. One after another, the independent states of Central and East Europe disappeared from the map, were divided up among their neighbours or, indeed both. The Czechs lost their independence after the Hussite wars and the Hun-

garians, in the 16th century. Poland was conquered by and then divided among its bigger neighbours during the 18th century. The loss of political independence was followed by cultural and linguistic takeovers. German culture and language were especially significant in assimilating the local nobility and intelligentsia in many Central and Eastern European countries. The more successful and educated segments of local societies were Germanised and consequently lost to their nation. The elite in most Central European states was destroyed and the countries themselves started to resemble 'peasant nations'. At the end of the 18th century, the nations of Central and Eastern Europe seemed to have disappeared from the map.

At this point, their future looked bleak. But then an era of nationalism began in Europe. England is considered to be the first modern nation in Europe, dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries. In the 17th and 18th centuries, France, Spain, Sweden, Denmark, Portugal and the Netherlands became the next countries to establish nationhood founded on political independence. The Italians and Germans had also acquired a remarkable cultural homogeneity by that time, but had not been able to develop a nation-state. The emerging nation-states served as examples for at least twenty other European nations that had not achieved or restored independence, but which desired comparable levels of political development and modernisation. In this way, national movements began in most of Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the 18th century. These movements were influenced by the ideas of Rousseau and Herder, that embodied a faith that smaller nations could be reborn with identities of their own. Neither had those nations with earlier traditions of statehood forgotten their lost independence. The Poles defended the Polish cause on battlefields across Europe, at the same time helping to promote the independence of other nations. Both uprisings in Poland—in 1830-1831 and 1863-1864—failed, however. A wave of uprisings spread over Central Europe in 1848, culminating in the Hungarian revolution (1848-1849) that was thwarted with the help of Russian forces.

Despite these failures, new, modern nations emerged in Central and Eastern Europe, that successfully resisted all attempts at denationalisation. Common losses and sacrifices united nations, sometimes more so than victories. New social structures developed as societies were modernised and energised. Within a short period of time, political parties were organised with clear goals for the national movement: initially, mostly striving for autonomy, finally demanding full independence. These dreams long appeared unrealistic. But then World War I broke out and the realities of the situation breathed life into these dreams. Soon after the war began, both sides in the conflict realised that the support of local nations was essential for victory. Thus, ideas about greater autonomy were floated and there were suggestions of some kind of independence. In many cases, Central and Eastern European countries allied themselves with both sides in the conflict, trying to ensure the best outcome for their nations. For example, various Polish politicians worked with Russia, Great Britain and France, as well as Germany and the Habsburg monarchy. National units were raised in the Central and Eastern European nations. For many of these nations, such military units provided a foundation for national armies afterwards and also helped to garner international support for their independence movements.

With the collapse of Austro-Hungary and Czarist Russia at the end of the war, the nations of Central and Eastern Europe seized the opportunity to declare their independence in 1917-1918, often relying on autonomous structures—mostly

Map 1

Central and Eastern Europe at the end of the 19th century



regional councils—created by different rulers during the war. These developments were consistent with the Wilsonian ideal of national self-determination which, unfortunately, was not applied either uniformly or fairly. Nations fighting for the ‘wrong side’ were punished by the winners. For example, as a result of the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, Hungary lost two-thirds of its former territory and nearly half of its population. At the same time, Czech territorial claims on Austria and Hungary were fully supported. Polish demands for the restoration of its old frontiers were incompatible with the idea of the restoration of the White Russian Empire—which actually never materialised—and were condemned by France and Great Britain as ‘extreme nationalism’.

At the same time, a new threat arose from the East. From the ruins of Czarist Russia there grew a real totalitarian power—Communist Russia. This totalitarian power threatened the very foundations of European society, including Christianity, individualism and private property. It was natural that the Communists liked to be called the ‘new Huns’. The leaders of the Communist takeover wanted not only to rule Russia but the entire world, a goal they planned to achieve by means of world revolution.² In the beginning, Western Europe clearly underestimated the threat of Communism. Although it provided some support to the nations fighting against the Reds and supplied provisions to the White Russian army, decisive steps were not taken to destroy Communism. The warnings made by Winston Churchill, probably the first leading Western politician to understand the Communist threat, were ignored.³ In 1918, the Communists believed that the time was ripe for the invasion of Western Europe. After the collapse of Germany at the end of World War I, Lenin ordered the Red Army to move to the West and ignite the fire of worldwide revolution. Exporting the Communist revolution to Germany meant that the Red Army first had to con-



Victims of Red Terror in Valga, Estonia 1919.

² Pipes 2001.

³ Gellately 2007.

quer the newly independent Baltic States and to reach East Prussia. By December 1918, the Red Army had captured most of Latvia and Lithuania and was advancing on Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. Confident of victory, the Red Army did not deploy many forces against the Estonians. Consequently, the Estonian forces—mostly young schoolboys, students and other volunteers—stopped the Red Army's advance 30 kilometres from the capital and thereafter pushed it out of Estonia, much to the surprise of both groups of combatants. Most Estonians were not sure that their tiny country could win a war against Russia. Nevertheless, those young volunteers threw the Red Army back. Supported by British naval units and Finnish volunteers, the Estonian forces successfully breached the Red Army's western flank. Communist leaders panicked: the holy city of the revolution—St Petersburg—appeared to be threatened. On Lenin's orders, elite Red Army units that had been moving towards the borders of Germany were stopped and redeployed against Estonia. This did not help. The increasingly confident Estonians destroyed one Red Army unit after another and even forced the Communists out of Northern Latvia. Crucially, Lenin's first attempt to export the revolution to Europe was defeated.⁴

But the Communists refused to abandon their goal of dominating Europe. They tried to encourage the Germans to revolt against the 'capitalists' but this ploy failed after some attempts. The Communist Republic of Hungary was destroyed by rebelling Hungarians and neighbouring nations. After these failures, Communist Russia decided to mass its forces and launch a long-postponed offensive against Poland and then to Europe. To interrupt the enemy's preparations, Pilsudski decided to attack first. His surprise attack in the spring of 1920 captured a large part of Ukraine and in doing so, won time for Poland. In July, the Red Army launched its counter-offensive with the order 'to the West! Over the corpse of White Poland lies the road to world-wide conflagration!' The commanders of the Red Army boasted of 'clattering through the streets of Paris before the summer is over.' The Poles were pushed back, fighting for their lives. Western governments watched the Red Army's march on Berlin with considerable interest, but did not send reinforcements or any real help. A young adviser to the French military mission in Warsaw, Colonel Charles de Gaulle, observed these events with great interest.⁵ Poland and Europe were saved by the 'Miracle on the Vistula', a furious Polish counter-attack on 15–16 August 1920. Remembered as the last great cavalry battle in European history, the Red Cavalry was defeated and Lenin asked for peace. The British ambassador to Berlin, who had watched the battles near Warsaw from his Rolls-Royce coupé, wrote: 'If Charles Martell had not checked the Saracen conquest at Tours, the Koran would now be taught at the schools of Oxford. Had Pilsudski and Weygand failed to arrest the triumphant march of the Soviet Army at the Battle of Warsaw, not only Christianity would have experienced a dangerous reverse, but the very existence of Western civilisation would have been imperilled.' In reality, the Poles had not won more than breathing space: the Soviets' advance into Europe had been repulsed, but not abandoned. Unfortunately, in 1920 this was not understood.⁶

The first decade of independence was not easy at all for Central and Eastern Europe. While struggling to establish stable political regimes, Central and Eastern European countries were also forced to bear the economic consequences of

⁴ Laar 2006, pp. 112–123.

⁵ Zamoycki 2008.

⁶ Davies 2003b, pp. 29–60.

Map 2

Central and Eastern Europe after World War I



the collapse of the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires. Their largely agrarian economies were burdened by the loss of former markets, hyperinflation, and post-war recession. Consequently, nearly all of the Central and Eastern European states experienced economic collapse during the first years of independence. Lodz, the largest textile city in the region, suffered a 75% drop in production when it lost its traditional Russian market. Losses in the Baltic countries were even bigger, as Russia had been the natural market for their industrial and agricultural products. Subsequent to their independence, they had to make inroads into hostile European markets that were themselves in recession.⁷ Nevertheless, significant reforms were introduced in all of the Central and Eastern European countries. Land reforms were passed, some of which were quite extensive, resulting in the break-up of large estates and the redistribution of their property. The first difficult years were followed by a decade of rapid growth in the economy, especially agricultural production, both in terms of quantity and quality. Monetary reforms were introduced in the 1920s and inflation was suppressed. Although Hungary and Poland experienced hyperinflation, other Central European countries stabilised their economies with less economic disruption. The pace of economic growth in Central and Eastern Europe gathered speed chiefly during the second part of the 1930s.

This created good conditions for the overall modernisation of Central and Eastern Europe. The region was urbanised, some countries more than others. Industrialisation assumed a more important economic role, although as most countries in the region remained agricultural. Significant and important steps were taken in the field of education: new schools were opened and the quality of teaching improved. As a result, illiteracy in Central Europe decreased quickly. Science and culture developed in quantum leaps. Despite the number of problems requiring a solution, achievements were clearly visible. Proof of these accomplishments is reflected in the fond remembrances of these years by people who, during subsequent decades, were forced to live under Communist rule that renounced these past achievements. At the end of the 1930s, Central and Eastern European countries lagged somewhat behind Finland and Austria, on a par with Greece and Italy, but clearly ahead of Spain and Portugal on GDP per capita.⁸

Unfortunately, such successes could not cover failures in other important areas. Democracies in Central Europe were weak and did not last long. Participation in politics was granted to new groups in society. Sadly, however the political parties representing them were often weak and inexperienced. This led to perpetual political fighting, instability and growing uncertainty. Liberal democracy did not appear to be a very attractive model in this situation. People dreamed of 'law and order' and this was promised by different authoritarian rulers. Political liberties were restricted, while parliaments and political parties were dissolved. The first coup of this kind was organised in Poland in 1926 by J. Pilsudski. Shortly thereafter, a coup was staged in Lithuania and, in the 1930s, many other countries moved from democracy to autocracy. In some Central and Eastern European countries Western democracy was actually never founded. One shining exception to this was democratic Czechoslovakia, although it also had national problems to resolve. The authoritarian regimes in Central and Eastern Europe cannot, of course, be compared with Fascism in Italy or Nazism in Germany. There were no concentration camps, no mass

⁷ Janos 2000, pp. 125–201.

⁸ Romsics 1999, p. 349.

Table 1

Economic development levels in the world in 1937

Countries	National income \$/head (at 1937 \$PPP) (USA = 100)
USA	100.0
Great Britain	77.2
Sweden	70.2
West Germany*	59.6
Denmark	59.6
Belgium & Luxemb.	57.9
Switzerland	56.1
Netherlands	53.7
Norway	52.6
France	46.5
Finland	37.5
Austria	33.3
Ireland	31.6
Czechoslovakia	29.8
Italy	23.7
Japan	23.7
Hungary	21.1
USSR	18.4
Poland	17.5
Spain	16.7
Portugal	16.3
Greece	16.1
Romania	14.2
Yugoslavia	14.0
Bulgaria	13.2

* Figure for 1937 is for undivided German Third Reich.

Source: Eva Ehrlich: *Országok versenye 1937–1986*. Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Kiadó, 1991, 69.

terror and society was not entirely controlled by the state. Moreover, although some political leaders used Fascist rhetoric, the masses were not influenced by it. Compared to the real totalitarian states in East or West, Central and Eastern Europe remained safe and stabile, continuing to live under the rule of law and basic civic freedoms.⁹

The other failure of the Central and Eastern European countries was their inability to coordinate their defence and foreign policies. The concept of the '*cordon sanitaire*', conceived of as a belt of states holding off Soviet Russia, was not consistently pursued. First, the danger of Communism was underestimated. The world passively looked the other way as the Communist regime waged massive campaigns of terror against its own people, annihilating most of the educated class in Russia, transporting peasants to Siberia during forced deportations, starving to death six to seven million people in the Ukraine during 'Golodomor' and repressing millions of people, including entire national groups, during the

⁹ Schöpflin 1993, pp. 5–56.

'Great Terror' of 1937–1938.¹⁰ All this would also happen in Central and Eastern Europe. Hitler and the Nazis were similarly underestimated. The immediate consequence of this failure became apparent in the 1930s, when Eastern and Central Europe found itself in the eye of a gathering storm. With Hitler on one side and Stalin on the other, its leaders tried to find ways to protect their independence. This was particularly difficult due to Western Europe's lack of interest in anything situated east of Germany. In the end, East European countries were considered 'faraway countries about which we know little' by Western leaders like Neville Chamberlain.¹¹

All these misgivings and problems were not very different from the problems of the 'old' European states. Public opinion often tends to consider the 'first' period of independence of the Central and Eastern European states to have been a failure. This is unfair. Western democracies also collapsed under the onslaught of totalitarian powers. Internal problems and mistakes were not the main reasons for the loss of independence of the Central and Eastern European states. Rather, the tragedy of Central and Eastern Europe was the result of the establishment of totalitarian dictatorships and the inability of European nations to curtail their expansion. Thus, Central and Eastern Europe followed the path of most other European countries in the interim between the wars. During the 1930s, hardly a year passed when one country or another did not see its democratic constitution violated by a dictator or authoritarian leader. It should be remembered that, prior to the Second World War, even the least democratic countries in Central and Eastern Europe were more democratic than Western European countries like Germany, Italy or Spain. So there was unity in good and in bad. Mentally and culturally, Central and Eastern Europe was a normal part of Europe. Unfortunately, the political divisions did not respect the region's cultural roots. During the Second World War Europe was cut to pieces and divided for the next half century.

Between Two Evils—Central and Eastern Europe during the Second World War

One of the tragedies of the modern world is that, after the First World War, European democracies were in poor shape to meet the challenges presented by two totalitarian systems: Communism and Nazism. Although these two systems differed in some ways, their ideologies were similar and, crucially, they had a common enemy—Western democracies.¹² Both Nazism and Communism lacked any semblance of ethics and morality, as was evident in the unscrupulous tactics employed in their attempts to destroy democratic governments in the West. Unfortunately, European states were absorbed with their own affairs after the First World War, thus providing dictators with the time and space to expand their influence. This laid the groundwork for the policy of appeasement that began in the 1920s and accelerated with each new concession to the dictators. The 1938 Munich agreement was the culmination of this policy. To achieve 'peace for our time', the democratic state of Czechoslovakia was urged to disarm and cede a part of its territory, the Sudetenland, to Nazi Germany.

¹⁰ Gregory 2009; Conquest 1992; Conquest 1986.

¹¹ Hiden and Salmon 1991.

¹² Geyer and Fitzpatrick 2008.

Map 3

Central and Eastern Europe in World War II



At this time, the European democracies could have stood their ground against Hitler's territorial demands and negotiate iron-clad agreements for Czechoslovakia's security. Instead, they bowed to the Nazis' claims on a free country. Also, the Czechoslovakian President Eduard Beneš had no right to compromise his country's territorial integrity, yet he did so. One year later, Czechoslovakia had ceased to exist.¹³

Even though at this time the Soviet dictator, Josef Stalin, appeared to be the main opponent to Hitler, the Munich Treaty convinced him that the West could not stand strong against aggressive behaviour. If Stalin and Hitler joined forces, the West would be powerless to stop them. Throughout the spring and summer of 1939, Stalin carefully signalled that he was ready to entertain a German proposal for more extensive cooperation.¹⁴ Stalin was convinced that a Communist revolution in Europe would not succeed as long as there was peace. To ignite worldwide revolution Stalin needed a war, and Hitler was just the man to start such a war. It is not surprising, then, that Stalin named Hitler 'the icebreaker' of the world revolution. To mask his intentions, Stalin negotiated with British and French delegations, thereby decreasing their interest in fashioning a peace agreement with Hitler. Because Stalin wanted Europe to be enveloped in war, he used all of his guile and influence to undermine peace initiatives. In the end, Hitler cast aside his suspicions and agreed to Stalin's proposals. After secret negotiations, the Foreign Minister of Nazi Germany, Joachim von Ribbentrop, was invited to visit Moscow on 23 August 1939, at which time he signed a non-aggression pact with Vyacheslav Molotov, Stalin's Foreign Minister.¹⁵ The treaty was supplemented by a secret protocol that contained an agreement between Hitler and Stalin to carve up Eastern Europe into spheres of influence. Finland, Estonia and Latvia (and later Lithuania) were incorporated into the Soviet sphere, Poland was divided between Hitler and Stalin and the Soviet interest in Bessarabia was recognised.

The so-called 'pact of non-aggression', or the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, was a perfect blueprint for aggression that constituted a license for Hitler and Stalin's war against much of Europe. Each of the signatories was now free to assault its neighbours without hindrance from the other. In his speech to the Politburo on 19 August 1939, Stalin admitted that without a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union, Hitler would be reluctant to begin a war in Europe. According to Stalin, a war in Europe was in the Soviets' interests, especially since at its conclusion both sides would be exhausted and the Soviet Union could intervene at the opportune moment to pursue its own territorial ambitions. This was the best route to world revolution. In retrospect, it is clear from the outset of his dealings with Hitler that Stalin intended to outmanoeuvre his new partner, preparing the way for a complete Communist takeover of Europe.¹⁶

On 1 September 1939, Hitler invaded Poland and the Second World War began. The German army advanced quickly and destroyed the main forces of the Polish army. On 17 September, Red Army troops poured across the Polish border and completed the conquest. Poland capitulated on 4 October 1939, and was divided between the two aggressors. Looking at footage from the common 'victory' parade arranged in Lvov, we see the satisfied faces of Soviet and Nazi officers—their common historical enemy Poland had been wiped from the map. The occupation

¹³ Ferguson 2006, pp. 312–385.

¹⁴ Nazi-Soviet relations. The Department of State 1948.

¹⁵ Read and Fisher 1988.

¹⁶ Weeks 2002.



Line dividing Central and Eastern Europe with the signatures of Stalin and Ribbentrop on 28 September 1939.

of Poland by both the Nazis and the Soviets provided the rest of the world with stark evidence of the terror that totalitarian powers were capable of inflicting. Between 1939 and 1941, the Gestapo and the Russian secret police, (NKVD) cooperated with each other, actively exchanging information and arresting suspects wanted by their partner in crime. The Nazis commenced the Holocaust that killed millions of Jews. Other Poles were murdered in order to suppress the remainder of the population controlled by the Nazis. The brutality of the Soviets matched that of the Nazis. In 1939, the Soviet Union took control of over 52.1% of the territory of Poland, with over 13.7 million people. Initially, the Soviet occupation gained support among some members of the non-Polish population, but their enthusiasm quickly faded as it became clear that Soviet repressions were aimed at all national groups equally. There were four major waves of deportations from the conquered territories between 1939 and 1941. Older Polish sources estimate that altogether as many as 2 million people were lost due to deportations, conscription and arrests. According to the Soviet documents the number of people deported is lower —320,000—to which 43,000 interned POWs can be added. The Soviets arrested and imprisoned 107 140 Poles between 1939 and 1941, including former officials, officers, and natural ‘enemies of the people’, such as the clergy, executing about 65,000 Poles during two years of occupation.¹⁷ During the early stages of the war the Soviets killed thousands of Polish prisoners of war. In 1940, the NKVD systematically executed 21,768 former Polish officers, political leaders, government officials, and intellectuals, imprisoned in 1939 war. Some 4,254 of these were uncovered in 1943 in mass graves in Katyn Forest.¹⁸ The intention of the Soviets was to kill as many members of Poland’s intelligentsia as possible in order to weaken any future Polish state. The fact that most imprisoned officers were from



Victims of Soviet terror in Kuressaare, Estonia. Autumn 1941.

¹⁷ Gross 2002, pp. 144–225.

¹⁸ Sanford 2005.

all these professional groups is a consequence of the fact that they were reservists. Even today, Russia's leaders do not want to acknowledge this crime, attacking the Polish director Andrzej Wajda's film about the Katyn massacre claiming it to be 'anti-Russian' propaganda. Wajda's father was also killed in Katyn and throughout the entire Soviet period, he was unable to talk publicly about what had really happened to him.¹⁹

In late September 1939, the Soviet Union began exercising the liberties it had been granted by Hitler in the Baltics. First, it issued an ultimatum to Estonia to sign a treaty allowing the deployment of Soviet military troops on Estonian soil. Although most of the population wanted to reject the Soviet demands, Estonian political leaders decided in favour of a peaceful solution. After signing the treaty, the Red Army marched into Estonia in October 1939, occupying bases allotted to it and promising not to violate Estonia's independence. In the following months, the Soviet Union signed similar pacts with Lithuania and Latvia. Finland, however, rebuffed Soviet demands and heroically defended its decision in the Winter War of 1939–1940. Despite heavy territorial and human losses, Finland succeeded in retaining its most cherished treasure—its national independence. Finland thereby avoided the fate of the Baltic States and kept its place in the Western world. In June 1940, the Baltic countries were completely occupied. They were cut from the rest of the world by the Soviet forces and pressed to surrender. On 14 June, a Finnish passenger plane, the 'Kaleva' was shot down over the Estonian territorial waters by the Soviet airplanes, killing everyone on board.²⁰ Under Soviet orchestration and the protection of Soviet tanks, legal governments were replaced by Soviet puppet governments. After Soviet-style 'elections', in which all candidates except the Communists were removed from the ballots, the Baltic countries 'voluntarily' joined the Soviet Union.²¹

During the first year of occupation, the Baltic countries were forcefully Sovietised. A massive terror campaign was launched, with arrests in the Baltic countries starting just before the countries officially 'joined' the Soviet Union. During the first year of Soviet occupation, about 8,000 people were arrested in Estonia. In Latvia and Lithuania too, the prisons filled up with prisoners. Many of those arrested were interrogated in the cruellest way and then killed—often without court ruling. The names are known of 2,199 Estonians murdered by the Soviets between 1940 and 1941. Eighty-two minors, including three infants, were among them. The most extensive act of genocide was the deportation of whole families to Siberia in the course of the "June deportations" that started on 14 June 1941.²² According to the 'final report' prepared by Merkulov, the People's Commissar of the USSR State Security Office, a total of 9,146 people were deported from Estonia, 3173 of whom were arrested, 15,500 Latvian citizens were sent to Siberia and a further 17,730 people were deported from Lithuania.²³ The majority of them never saw their homeland again. Among the children deported to Siberia in those terrible days was Lennart Meri, son of the Estonian diplomat Georg-Peeter Meri. In 1992 he became the first democratically elected President of free Estonia. Many other children were not so lucky. Several reminiscences

¹⁹ Wajda 2007.

²⁰ Johnson and Hermann 2007.

²¹ United States 1954; Smalkais and Vējiņš 2007.

²² Mälksoo 2001; Mälksoo 2007.

²³ Crimes of the Soviet totalitarian regime in Lithuania. Vilnius 2008; Forgotten Soviet War Crime. Vilnius 2007; Estonia 1940–1945. Reports of the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity. Tallinn 2006.

and documents testify to the difficult fate of the deportees the most shocking of which is the diary of ten year old Rein Vare covering the years 1941–1944. It speaks about deportation, the journey to Siberia and the things that he experienced there. With the gravity of an adult, Rein Vare draws tombstones for his playmates in his diary. A large part of the diary is dedicated to his beloved father, Rein Vare, a schoolteacher from Sausti who by that time had already died of hunger in Isaroskino prison camp. Yet, he lived on in his son's diary. The family's history took a happier turn in 1946 when Rein and his sister were given permission to return to their relatives in Estonia. At that time, their mother's yearning for her children overruled her common sense—she fled from Siberia and tried to follow them, but unfortunately only got as far as Leningrad. Her attempt was followed by arrest and three years in a labour camp. In 1951, Rein Vare, who meanwhile had finished school in Estonia, was arrested again. He was kept in Patarei prison for a few months and then sent back to Siberia. This finally broke him. Although the family managed to return to Estonia by the end of 1958, its members were no longer the people they had been. Rein Vare was utterly embittered and the sunny side of life had disappeared for him. His inability to hold down a job gave way to excessive drinking and, eventually, death in George Orwell's year 1984 in Viljandi where his body was only recovered several days after he had died. His diary, however, was preserved until the day came when this document, which can be compared to the one written by Anne Frank, was published in Estonia.²⁴

The people in the countries occupied by the Nazis or the Soviets continued their fight for freedom during first years of the Second World War. They created exile governments that sustained diplomatic activity and organised resistance movements in their occupied homelands. Western countries did not recognise



Remembering Estonian Day of Independence. From Rein Vare's diary.

²⁴ Laar 2005.

the occupation of the Baltic states and allowed their diplomatic representatives to continue their work in Western capitals.²⁵ All this appeared to be consistent with the tenets of the Atlantic Charter approved by Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill at Placentia Bay in August 1941. The Charter affirmed 'the right to restore self-government to nations who have forcibly been deprived thereof.' Four months later, the *Prince of Wales* (the flagship used by Churchill during the summit) was sunk by Japanese dive bombers off the shore of Singapore. The principles of the Atlantic Charter were scuttled only a short while after.²⁶

During the first years of the Second World War, Hitler and Stalin cooperated closely.²⁷ Deliveries and military assistance from the Soviet Union helped Hitler to conquer Western Europe. Stalin even rallied the Communist parties of Western countries against their own governments, in this way supporting Hitler's aggression. Cooperation between two dictators went so far that the Gestapo and the NKVD began to exchange detainees. Stalin delivered German Communists who had escaped to the Soviet Union in the 1930s to Hitler. In 1940, tensions nevertheless began to develop between Hitler and Stalin. Stalin became jealous of Hitler's success in Europe, while Hitler was displeased about Stalin's plans to start a new war with Finland at the end of 1940 and his plans to swallow Romania and take control of Turkey.²⁸ As a result, both sides started to make secret preparations for war. Hitler prepared his 'Barbarossa' plan, while Stalin began preparations for his attack plan 'Groza' (Thunder) to launch a surprise attack against Hitler, with the aim of conquering and subsequently Sovietising all of Western Europe. Overwhelming numbers of Soviet troops, tanks and planes were concentrated on the Western borders of the Soviet Union.²⁹ However, Hitler was faster and attacked at dawn on 22 June 1941. The war between Russia and Germany had started. The German attack took Stalin by surprise: the Soviet forces were surrounded and destroyed moving Hitler to the gates of Moscow.³⁰ The German attack opened the way for Great Britain and later for the United States to join the Soviet Union and restore a modified version of the World War I 'Entente'. Churchill explained Great Britain's decision to support Stalin thus: 'If Hitler invaded hell, [he (Churchill)] would make at least a favourable reference to the devil in the House of Commons.' Massive Western help allowed Stalin to restore the strength of the Red Army faster than Hitler had anticipated.

Early in the war Stalin was clearly eager for an arrangement based on the 1941 borders. He would probably have been willing to trade recognition of these for acceptance by the Eastern European governments in exile with the caveat that the Baltic States remain under Soviet dominance. Unfortunately, the United States had other ideas. Roosevelt preferred to concentrate on the war effort rather than stand against Soviet expansionism. This gave Stalin the opportunity to delay political discussions and seize as much booty as he could. He was not asked to make any concessions as long as the German army was still in the field. Although Churchill understood what was taking place, Great Britain alone was not strong enough to oppose Stalin's creation of a Soviet sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe. Consequently, Stalin took what he wanted. Using

²⁵ Mälksoo 2003.

²⁶ Renwick 1996.

²⁷ Davies 2006.

²⁸ Musial 2008, pp. 408–429.

²⁹ Pleshakov 2005.

³⁰ Meltjuhov 2002.

Western support to great effect and overlooking enormous losses, Stalin built the Red Army up into the fighting machine that by 1942–1943 crushed the German army and then pushed it back to the West.³¹

At the Yalta Summit in February 1945, the Western allies accepted Russia's conquests prior to 1941 and put their stamp of approval on the new ones. For the countries that were thus absorbed into the Soviet bloc, this sentence was to last 45 years. Stalin's concession to his allies was a Joint Declaration on Liberated Europe that promised free elections and the establishment of democratic governments in Central and Eastern Europe. As the weeks passed after Yalta, it became increasingly evident that Stalin did not intend to honour the terms of the agreement. Governments in countries conquered by the Red Army were appointed by the Soviet authorities.³² In February 1945, when King Michael of Romania refused to remove the national government from office and replace it with pro-Communist forces, Stalin's representative Vyshinsky arrived personally in Bucharest, hinting bluntly to the King that refusal might mean the end of Romania. The Communists got what they wanted.

The realities of this new order were soon clearer to the captive nations of Central and Eastern Europe than they were to the Western world. For the nations now under the control of the Red Army, the Soviet advance constituted a change from one totalitarian ruler to another. In Central and Eastern Europe, the Red Army was received with mixed feelings at best. In countries that were taken by the Soviet Union as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the first year of Soviet rule with its brutal terror was such a shock to the people that the traditional hatred of Germans was forgotten and the German army was welcomed as a liberator in West Ukraine and the Baltics in 1941. National armed units were formed to fight the Red Army and national governments declared. These were, nevertheless, crushed by the Germans and people quickly found that there was no difference between Nazis and Communists: both kill people, burn books and are against the independence of smaller nations. So the national resistance movement started, now targeted against both Nazis and Communism. In 1944, when the Red Army was advancing to the West, tens of thousands of men in the Baltics were mobilised by the German Army, including Waffen-SS units, to stop the Red Army's advance to their territories. Under the decisions of the Nuremberg Tribunal, these soldiers were not treated as war criminals and after the end of the war they had the opportunity of staying in the West. So although the Soviets liberated people from the hated Nazis, they also brought subjugation to Stalinism. Looting, rape, violence and terror took place on a horrific scale in the wake of Communist domination. Such acts seriously undermined the authority of the Soviet Union and Communism, giving even local Communists cause for complaint. A report written by Hungarian Communists in Kőbánya and presented to the Soviets in 1945 states that when the Red Army arrived, the soldiers committed a series of sexual crimes in an outbreak of 'mindless, savage hatred run riot. Mothers were raped by drunken soldiers in front of their children and husbands. Girls as young as 12 were dragged from their fathers and raped in succession by 10-15 soldiers and often infected with venereal disease.'³³ The Soviet leadership, however, did not react to these reports. Stalin is reported to have said to the complaining Yugoslav Communist, Milovan Djilas 'Can't he

³¹ Rees 2008; Kissinger 1994, pp. 394–422.

³² Dallas 2005.

³³ Reed and Fisher 1988, 327.



Vae victis! Red Army in conquered Germany. 1945.

understand if a soldier who has crossed thousands of kilometres through blood and fire and death has fun with a woman or takes some trifle?³⁴

Various Central and Eastern European states attempted to free themselves from the Nazis and restore their own independent governments. Since the beginning of 1944, Estonian soldiers had fought alongside the German army to halt the Red Army at the borders of Estonia. When the Germans decided to withdraw their troops from Estonia in September 1944, an independent Government of Estonia was established by the Estonian national resistance movement in Tallinn. The new government declared its neutrality in the German-Russian conflict and turned to the Western powers for help. Estonia never received a reply. They pushed the Germans out, but within three days Soviet tanks arrived and, after hopeless fighting, defeated all efforts to win the country's freedom. Very few members of the government were fortunate enough to escape the country. Once more, the Soviet occupation swallowed up Estonia and the other Baltic countries.³⁵

A similar attempt to win freedom was made in Poland where the prospects for success were even better. A legal Polish government-in-exile and an underground Home Army hoped to crush the Nazis and restore an independent Polish government and administration in Warsaw before the Soviet takeover. As Soviet military units re-entered the suburbs of the capital on 1 August 1944, the Home Army started an uprising against the Nazis. Assailed from all sides, the Germans began to withdraw. Victory seemed within the grasp of the Home

³⁴ Djilas 1962, p. 76.

³⁵ Estonia since 1944. Reports of the Estonian International Commission for the Investigations of Crimes against Humanity. Tallinn 2009.

Map 4

Divided Europe



Army, but Stalin refused any assistance. Instead, the Red Army halted and watched passively from across the river Wisla while the uprising was crushed. Moscow radio, which had urged the Varsovians to revolt, now denounced them as a 'gang of criminals'. Churchill tried to persuade Stalin to help the uprising, but his pleas fell on deaf ears. Moreover, the Soviets were not even ready to support the Western allies who were willing to help the uprising. On 18 August, for example, the Soviets declared that they 'object[ed] to British or American aircraft, after dropping arms in the region of Warsaw, landing on Soviet territory, since the Soviet Government [did] not wish to associate itself either directly or indirectly with the adventure in Warsaw.' Warsaw resisted for 63 days, appealing for help that never came. Then it was over. The surviving inhabitants were evacuated by the Germans and Warsaw was 'razed without a trace.' The Home Army was destroyed with the result that no one was left to challenge the Communists; the Nazis had done the Soviets' work for them. Poland's pre-war Republic was not restored; the surviving leaders of the uprising were hunted down by the KGB, arrested and then killed.³⁶

In 1945, the Red Army moved west seizing new territories. Stalin soon acquired his Western allies' acquiescence to his retention of the territories and countries awarded to him under the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact: the Baltic States; the Eastern part of Poland; Karelia; the region conquered from Finland and Bessarabia. But his goal was to rule as much of Europe as possible so Stalin pressed the Red Army to the West as quickly as possible, paying no attention to the enormous losses incurred. In April 1945, Churchill advised Eisenhower to take Berlin, Prague and Vienna ahead of the advancing Soviet armies. The Americans refused, still entertaining unrealistic hopes about the possibility of post-war co-operation with Stalin. Concomitantly, Stalin was effectively implementing what he had privately told the Yugoslavian Communist leader, Milovan Djilas 'this war is not as in the past, whoever occupies a territory also imposes on it his own social system. Everyone imposes his own system as far as his army can reach.'³⁷ The Soviet age was arriving in Central and Eastern Europe.

Back to the shadow: the Communist takeover and the Red Terror

The sacrifices made during the Second World War did not bring freedom to Central and Eastern Europe. As Stalin predicted, the social and political systems of the East and West were destined to follow the positions of the occupying army. Military force has in fact been the key to success in almost every Communist takeover in history. Of a total 22 Communist takeovers after 1917, the Red Army played a decisive role in 15 of them, while in the other cases native Communist military forces were used. In this, the Soviets followed the statements of Lenin, Stalin and Mao, according to which 'political power grows out of the barrel of the gun. Anything can grow out of the barrel of the gun.'³⁸ In fact, looking at the fate of Central and Eastern Europe, it may safely be argued that the transformation of the Central and East European countries into totalitarian Communist

³⁶ Davies 2003a.

³⁷ Djilas 1962, pp. 76–80.

³⁸ Legters 1992, p. 3.