



Arguably, the context of a world-wide commemoration of an important anniversary gives a needed perspective. On 30 January 1948 or 75 years ago, a militant Hindu nationalist assassinated Mahatma Gandhi. There are many meaningful words and expressions, which can immediately appear to be directly associated with the process – ‘together’, ‘unity’, ‘future in the past’, ‘international’, ‘on the same page’, ‘common understanding’, and many others. Usually, when the anniversary’s connotation is about being truly ‘world-wide’, there is also a unique philosophical mixture of multiple tragedies and triumphs to be easily detected in each and every nation’s historic memory, and this factor gives a special significance to the moment that unifies many.

During the initial part of a new year, the Republic of Estonia has plenty to commemorate. To a surprise of those who are not familiar with the field of international relations (or, for that matter, social anthropology), the Northern European country of 1.3 million people has already grown up in an imaginary league of national endurance. Having celebrated its centennial in February 2018, Estonia is now fully entitled to use big numbers to ‘craft’ a decent history-bound strategic narrative for itself. For example, apart from the independence-related big anniversary, the nation of the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea proudly organised the XXVII Song Festival (in the Estonian language – *Laulupidu*) in July 2019 to maintain a 150-year tradition. Back in June 1869, the initial event was organised for 51 male choirs and brass bands with 845 singers and musicians to be performing in the south-eastern Estonian city of Tartu¹ (then, the locality was an integral part of the Russian Empire’s Governorate of Livonia). These days, the Song Festival Grounds or *Lauluväljak*, can accommodate up to 100,000 people², so it could become a temporary ‘residence’ for about 8% of the country’s population. This is when ‘together’ receives its true meaning and, objectively, one of the most beautiful appearances – the nation sings in one voice, celebrating its language, national development, historic memory, and, ultimately by now, existence as a sovereign state.

In fact, the singing dimension of the Estonian identity narrative is strongly linked with the fact of re-gaining independence from the dramatically collapsing Soviet Union – from about 1988 until 1991, Estonia (together with Latvia and Lithuania) successfully ‘performed’ the ‘Singing Revolution’, a myriad of illustrious politico-cultural happenings, which eventually led to the three Baltic counties’ comeback to the international system after their independence had been re-gained. As a direct consequence of the Treaty of Non-aggression between Germany and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as well as the document-linked secret protocol (all remembered by history as the so-called ‘Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact’), signed on 23 August 1939, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were forcefully ‘incorporated’ into the Soviet Union by 3, 5 and 6 August 1940 correspondingly.

The brutal occupation was associated with and/or led to executions and deportations of tens

¹ ‘Song Celebration’ in *Eesti Laulu- ja Tantsupeo SA*. Available from [<https://2019.laulupidu.ee/en/song-celebration/>].

² *Tallinna Lauluväljak*. Available from [<https://lauluvajak.ee/et>].

of thousands, nationalisation of economies, suppressing personal and collective freedoms, and destruction of societal interlinkages in the three Baltic states. For example, in May-June 1941, Moscow issued an authorisation to commence mass deportations of people from some of the lands controlled by the Soviet Union by then – predominantly, from Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Karelia, Moldova, and Ukraine. In Estonia, the deportation was carried out on 13-14 June 1941, during the night-time, initially allowing two hours for a family to pack their household items up to 100 kg per person, but even these limits were not observed, and many people were getting sent to Siberia in summer clothing and almost without any substantial household items taken with them to the unknown lands³. The aforementioned Soviet-German Pact's secret protocol, which was hidden by the Kremlin in its top-secret archives, became an invisible symbol of atrocious injustice for the Baltic states, when the world's major powers decided to play a 'game' of geo-strategy at the expense of their much smaller neighbours' independence. Intriguingly, history had the last laugh – both the Soviet Union and the Third Reich disappeared from the political map, but Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania continue solidifying their statehoods as sovereign states.

However, it would have never occurred, if millions of citizens had not 'assisted' the former USSR to



Photo: Heidi Maasikmets/ERR

keep proceeding into a politically pre-determined self-destructive mode. The finale was historically spectacular, and, in 1991, the Soviet Union faded away. In the direct context of Mahatma's legacy, there was one particular event, which made a crucial difference for Estonia and the other two of the Baltics to regain their independence, while also pushing the totalitarian Soviet empire to its enervation. On 23 August 1989, equally 50 years after the signing of the 'Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact', the Gandhian philosophy inspired many inhabitants of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to create something extraordinary, an unbroken 'human chain' of about 2 million people that linked Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius and spanned over 675 kilometres⁴. The Baltic Way was created! Was it the longest 'human chain' in history or was it not, it was definitely a powerful as well as peaceful protest of the three countries' civil societies, demanding the Soviet authorities to publicly acknowledge and

³ 'The June deportation, 1941' in *Estonica, Encyclopedia about Estonia*. Available from [http://www.estonica.org/en/The_June_deportation,_1941/#].

⁴ Helen Wright and Silver Tambur, 'Estonia commemorates 30 years since the Baltic Way – the longest unbroken human chain in history' in *Estonian World*, 23 August 2019. Available from [<https://estonianworld.com/life/estonia-commemorates-30-years-since-the-baltic-way-the-longest-unbroken-human-chain-in-history/>].

denounce the document that, in the particular case of the Baltic states, led to the annexation of sovereign Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania by the Soviet Union.

Certainly, in 1980s, the Soviet regime was much softer than it was in the dark era of Stalinism. With Mikhail Gorbachev and some his ground-breaking political initiatives like perestroika or glasnost being under way, the situation was not to be described as grim for/by an outsider. But for those who then lived in the USSR, regardless of their titular republic, it was still the same totalitarian imperial entity, which was very reluctant to openly answer a high number of important historical questions. For Estonia, the 'Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact' was not only associated with the fact of annexation – the secretly concluded 'deal' also ruthlessly interrupted the country's economic development and destroyed its society-building process.

The dark anniversary was fast approaching, and the people of the Baltics knew that any kind of an



Photo: Ülo Josing/ERR

armed uprising would not be an option – militarily, the Kremlin was still very strong, and a revolt would have been brutally suppressed, significantly delaying a perspective to regain independence. Therefore, a peaceful, respectful, and non-violent protest was needed to deliver a strong message to the Soviet regime. On the day, many busses took people all the way along the line, forming the 'chain'⁵ – the event was well documented, and many citizens in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania treasure those pictures taken then. Standing in the line across the three countries, people were singing songs and waving national flag, which were banned by the Kremlin since the time of occupation. The finale was memorable – at 7 p.m., everyone held hands or linked arms for 15 minutes⁶. The Gandhian meaning of 'together' received its classic Baltic dimension!

Within seven months since the Baltic Way, on 11 March 1990, the ancient Lithuanian state was to declare the restoration of its independence, intending to leave the Soviet Union. Latvia made the same announcement on 4 May 1990, and Estonia completed the process with regaining its full independence on 20 August 1991 (having previously held a referendum in March 1991). Thinking about the Baltic Way's upcoming 34th Anniversary in 2023, it could be argued that it was one of the

⁵ 'Thirty years since Baltic Way joined Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania' in ERR, 23 August 2019. Available from [<https://news.err.ee/973049/thirty-years-since-baltic-way-joined-estonia-latvia-lithuania>].

⁶ 'Thirty years since Baltic Way joined Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania'.

most memorable mass protests in the world. For the Republic of Estonia, it became an integral part of a revolutionary movement, which was carried out without a single drop of blood. In a metaphorical way, as noted by Keiu Telve, “the Baltic Way made some of the first cracks in the Berlin Wall”⁷. This kind of interconnectedness makes the Gandhian philosophy’s universal significance simply unmatched. “Elagu Eesti!” or “Long live Estonia!” is a patriotic greeting that is often heard in the country on an Independence Day, in February. “Elagu Mahatma Gandhi!” was written on a placard (in fact, it was a piece of plywood), which was held by two Estonian ladies who were about to join the Baltic Way. It is needless to add anything else.



Photo: Raivo Tiikmaa/ERR

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⁷ Keiu Telve in ‘Thirty years since Baltic Way joined Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania’.