

Commemoration of the mass deportations in the Baltic States: 14 June 1941

16 June 2019, Latvian House, Strathfield, Sydney

Speech by Lembit Suur

We are here to commemorate the victims of a particular event.

An event that has been largely lost in the sweep of history: lost in time; lost in the mix of other, possibly more horrid and vivid events that have taken place since 14 June 1941.

In the early hours of that morning over 50,000 civilians in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania were awoken by armed people pounding on their doors.

These civilians, shouted at and shoved, beaten with the butts of rifles, were arrested or detained and taken to be deported.

Deported by the design of an occupying force, the Soviet Union.

Seized by a hostile, immoral and repressive foreign government that, until its very end in 1991, never admitted culpability or regret for its actions, and whose political beneficiaries have similarly refused to acknowledge the murderous enterprise for which they were responsible.

Men, women and children were taken on that night.

Across the generations: some babies, some infirmed and in the final phases of their lives.

Ripped from their homes.

Herded into railway trucks that had been classified, by hand-painted letters of the alphabet on their wooden sides for the human cargo assigned to them, to be taken east into a foreign land.

Very few survived.

The goal of the deportations was to remove so-called political opponents of the occupying Soviet government.

Those targeted were the political and social elite of the Baltic countries; at least, those who had not already been deported or murdered by this time – political leaders, intellectuals, professionals, bureaucrats, journalists, artists, business and religious leaders.

Free thinkers, democratically minded, high achieving people of high principle.

And their families.

Some 10,000 Estonians were arrested and deported on this early summer morning, one per cent of the total population of the country.

5,100 of these were men; most ended up in Siberia, and only around 100 returned alive.

When I first came to these solemn commemorations, in this same place and over 50 years ago, there were people here who were victims of that evening's events.

A very few were themselves deportees.

Others were family members or ordinary folk who saw their loved ones, neighbours and friends disappear in motor vehicles into the hazy, indistinct grey of a northern summer's early morning light to the awaiting trains.

If there are those here today who remember the events of that evening, I extend to you my heartfelt sympathies and acknowledge that your pain is something I cannot even imagine.

The events of the morning of 14 June 1941 were only one of a series of horrific events that were suffered by the people of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia in the 1940s and early 1950s.

These countries, which had fought for an independence that barely lasted for twenty precious years, were to be ravaged by the war of others.

They were to be occupied, in turn and in return, by two of the most horrific, amoral, repressive and murderous regimes the world has ever seen.

The German occupation saw 187,000 people exterminated in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, amongst millions of others throughout Europe and beyond.

In Lithuania, 100,000 of its Jewish population was killed in Nazi concentration camps.

Only 20,000 of Lithuania's 150,000 pre-war Jewish citizens survived the Second World War.

These acts have rightly and properly been cast by history and by international law as an act of genocide.

The regime responsible, and many of the perpetrators, were held to immediate account.

It is estimated that by the time of Stalin's death in 1953, around 15 per cent of the population of the Baltic States had been arrested, deported or executed by the organs of state of the Soviet Union and people acting on their behalf.

This included 33,000 Estonian men forcibly conscripted into the Soviet army in July 1941 and 25,000 Lithuanian forest brethren killed over many years fighting the occupying Soviet forces.

In Latvia, it is estimated that under Stalin, 139,700 people were deported, 51,973 arrested and at least 1,986 were executed.

In 1940 and 1941, the victims had been largely political, military, community leaders and high profile nationalists.

By the time of the mass deportations of 1949, the victims were small land holders, people whom local party officials had taken a set against, and those seen to be supporters or suspected to members of the armed resistance movement known as the forest brethren.

The new enemies of the Soviet state were often farmers and woodsmen.

And their families.

Taken together, these were terrible times, abnormal times that touched ordinary people.

Many, like my family, saw arrests, interrogations, deportations, forcible conscription, betrayal and murder among their number.

Bodies in the mud or trussed into chairs in their own homes.

History and time has largely robbed us of the opportunity to hold to account the regime and people responsible for these outrages, in the way that the Nazi regime and those acting in its name were held to account for their acts.

Shockingly and surprisingly, there is still an unresolved legal debate about whether the crimes of the Soviet Union, under Stalin, against Baltic civilians, are also a genocide like the crimes of Hitler.

Or whether, as a widespread and systematic attack against a civilian population, they are properly characterised a crime against humanity.

Or, indeed, whether they are even a matter appropriate for international law, as they occurred within a, purportedly, single Soviet state.

I acknowledge that this is a question of jurisprudential significance, but it is also somewhat irrelevant.

For the actions of murder; of forcible deportation, imprisonment and starvation; of press-ganging civilians into a foreign uniform to fight a war on the side of the unrighteous, of destroying families and communities; of diminishing people and crushing their aspirations and dreams: these actions in their common understanding, in their doing and consequence are criminal actions, no matter what other legal rubric is cast around them.

These actions speak of a profound lack of integrity, human values and basic morality on the part of the Soviet state, and of the people who acted in its name.

They are, put simply, morally repugnant and symptomatic of a sick society.

Since the Baltic States regained their independence in 1991, there have been a small number of court cases in each of these countries that have held some of the participating individuals to personal account for their actions at the time.

But the state responsible for the crimes has escaped any real consequence.

Not for want of evidence – for there are copies of decisions taken by the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union, organs of state like the MGB and MVD, and officials at the local level – but largely because the Soviet Union, as the responsible state has ceased to exist.

And, disturbingly, its inheritor state, Russia, has no interest in engaging with historical truth, let alone acknowledging any responsibility or culpability.

So what can we do, those of the many of us who are here today as a consequence of this time; whose forebears fled the oncoming onslaught of a reoccupying Red Army in 1944 – some by foot, many by sea, all in fear of what they had lived through and seen – what can we do to ensure that the suffering of the Baltic peoples was not in vain?

My proposition is that we talk of these times, tell our personal stories, the story of our community and the nations of our forebears, so that they are not lost, so that are not eclipsed by more recent horrible or vivid events.

This is our history, and if that history is diminished or forgotten, then so are we as individuals.

If we tell the stories of what took place, and how they impacted on us, then we have some basis for drawing out our own views and beliefs, and explaining them to others.

I accept that these views and beliefs can be as varied as the number of people in this room, but let me share with you how these events speak to me, as one who has reflected on them, in terms of what I hold true.

Without appropriate accountability, without a strong, empowered and free civil society, state structures can behave with arrogance and impunity.

The Soviet State had none of these countervailing balances, and it behaved accordingly.

Arrogant, totalitarian regimes that behave with impunity can call into the service of the state amoral people who act with self-seeking interest and criminal alacrity.

These individuals are rarely held to account, or are held to account with difficulty.

So it was in Soviet times.

The tragic events in the Baltic States could not have unfolded except for the collaboration of individuals.

One way of tempering the risk of the repetition of such events is to ensure that civil society across the world is empowered and emboldened, and individuals everywhere are equipped and supported to stand against repressive, non-democratic states.

While we may not be able to rectify the past, we can at least ensure that the mistakes of the past are not repeated into the future.

We can act as good citizens, hold true to good and decent values, and hold to account those who do not share these values.

We can do this in our own community, in our own country, and, by joining up globally, in support of other communities in other countries.

This is a proper way to mark the legacy of those who disappeared into the hazy grey of the early morning of 14 June 1941.

For they were earmarked as victims of an unjust, repressive, immoral state in large part because they were they were just, democratic and moral individuals.

Their very presence in Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian societies was a challenge to Soviet arrogance and hegemony, and, in Soviet eyes, they needed to be eliminated.

In early 1990, in Vilnius, I found myself in the Lithuanian parliament building which was blockaded by Soviet tanks.

With a colleague, I had meetings with Vytautas Landsburgis, who, as the Chairman of the Supreme Council of Lithuania, had presided over a session of the newly elected body that had unilaterally declared independence from the Soviet Union.

I also met with senior members of Sajudis, the political movement that Landsbergis led.

These were men of intellect – philosophers, poets, Landsbergis himself was an ethnomusicologist – who had found themselves at the forefront of political events they had barely conceived.

They were Lithuanian patriots, not professional politicians.

On 14 June 1941, they would have been on the list of deportees.

In our discussion with them, we focussed the challenges of re-establishing a free Lithuanian state in the face of the requirements of international law and reflected on the unpredictability of Mihhail Gorbachev and the Soviet state.

One of our interlocutors, an older, grey haired man with the hands of a pianist, waved us into silence.

Re-establishing a Lithuanian state was a minor problem, he said.

Reclaiming the integrity of a free Lithuanian spirit from within the moral squalor of Soviet man was an altogether more complex problem.

He was right.

Nation states are only as good as the values of the people who inhabit them.

Bad nation states can create and succour bad people.

Eliminate good people, and the quality of society diminishes.

It disappears into the early morning mist for future generations to mourn.