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DOCUMENT

Testimony of Estonia's Foreign Minister Karl Selter

(Translated, from Estonian)

[See also: "Negotiating in the Kremlin: The Esotnian Experience of 1939".]

After the conclusion of the Peace Treaty between Estonia and the RSFSR on February 2, 1920, the establishment of diplomatic and economic relations between Estonia and the RSFSR were exploited by the Moscow government for organizing the Communist Party and underground commandos in Estonia. Under the protection of diplomatic mail and passports it sent to Estonia bolshevik propaganda pamphlets, instructions of the Communist Party, arms, organizers of the Party and shock troops, and shock troop members. The Russian trade organization in Estonian ports (where the Estonian government had offered to the RSFSR special concessions and prerogatives) developed into a center of agitators and a nest of militant bolsheviks.

During the first years of the Estonian Republic, because of a continuous threat of intervention in internal matters of Estonia by the RSFSR, an extraordinary state of defense (martial law) prevailed in Estonia according to which crimes against the state (espionage, attempts to overthrow the government by force, etc.) were subject to military courts. From 1920 to 1923 I was employed as a vice-secretary of the military court and aspirant for judgeship, later, until 1927, as juridical consultant to the Ministry of War, and therefore I can testify to the following: propaganda and subversive activities of Moscow agents, their espionage and terror started immediately after the hostilities ended at the front and the first official representatives of the RSFSR appeared in Estonia. The Estonian police was able to uncover step by step the underground groups of Moscow agents and to arrest their members. But the experience soon showed that the destroyed cells were replaced by new and larger ones. These bolshevik agitation, espionage and commando groups consisted mainly of: 1) specialists in revolution smuggled from the RSFSR and 2) specialists engaged in Estonia. Among the latter, as a more conspicuous group, retarded or unsuccessful workers, some members of the so-called semi-intelligentsia and 15 to 20 year old students of some schools should be mentioned. The agents of Moscow paid them small sums for delivering mail, collecting information and other small services.

I remember a Russian Communist, Bogdanov, born in Estonia, who, at the age of 24, had clandestinely entered Estonia as an organizer of commandos. He was caught together with an accomplice, and, because they had fatally wounded a policeman, they both had been sentenced to death. After the court session he came to me in haste and asked: "Will we be executed already this night?" I answered that they have the right to appeal to the higher court and this will take many months. He calmed down and said smiling: "My dream has been to ride through the cities of Europe and to take from the rich their wealth. It would be a pity if that dream would end already in Tallinn". He was not executed because, on the demand of the Russian Legation, he was exchanged for Estonians who had been arrested in Soviet Russia.

In 1924 a bolshevik commando group was detected, of which 149 members were seized and indicted by a military court. Some of the organizers of that group acted under the protection of diplomatic passports as officers or employees of the RSFSR Legation or Trade Representation. To others, guarantees had been issued by Moscow that in case of need they will be rescued from jails or courts by exchange against Estonians arrested in the RSFSR. It was the custom of the Kremlin to hold permanently in jails, or to arrest, a certain number of Estonians who either resided in Russia cr traveled to Russia as businessmen, diplomatic messengers, etc. As soon as some of the bolshevik organizers had been arrested and convicted, the Soviet Legation in Tallinn started negotiations about the release and exchange of the arrested against some Estonians arrested in Russia.

The power test came on December 1, 1924. The night before some 500 agents from Russia, who were specialists in street fighting, had summoned about 1,000 fellow travelers from all over the country, mainly from Tallinn, to secret meetings. After they had been informed by Moscow's agents that the next morning they have to overthrow the Estonian government by armed force and establish a Soviet regime, many wavered. Several of them wanted to go home to say good-bye to their families or to make some arrangements. But nobody was allowed to leave the meetings.

At 5.15 A.M. on December 1, 1924, groups organized at these meetings started to seize power according to prefixed battle directives, i. e., by occupying government offices, railway stations, were replaced by new and larger ones. These bolshevik

agitation, espionage and commando groups consisted mainly of: 1) specialists in revolution smuggled from the RSFSR and 2) specialists engaged in Estonia. Among the latter, as a more conspicuous group, retarded or unsuccessful workers, some members of the so-called semi-intelligentsia and 15 to 20 year old students of some schools should be mentioned. The agents of Moscow paid them small sums for delivering mail, collecting information and other small services.

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At 5.15 A.M. on December 1, 1924, groups organized at these meetings started to seize power according to prefixed battle directives, i. e., by occupying government offices, railway stations, and that "they were developing favorably". As at the :ame time negotiations continued in Moscow between the English-French delegation and V. Molotov regarding the so-called collective guarantee treaty, I advised the representative of the United Kingdom in Tallinn about the fact mentioned above, supposing that his government might be interested in getting better acquainted with the USSR with whom his government tried to achieve such an important agreement.

The Baltic States were at that time between the devil and the deep sea. Up to 1939 we based our calculations on the assumption that war between Germany and Russia was unavoidable. Our endeavors were aimed at keeping Estonia and Latvia, if possible also Lithuania (if Poland had supported this), away from that conflict as neutrals, while presuming that some kind of collaboration between Germany and Poland had to take place. We were sure that Hitler could not satisfy his aspirations without a victory over Russia. To conquer Russia by methods practised by Hitler seemed to us impossible. We assumed a drawn - out war during which the perfect German war machine would come to stagnation in the immense territory of Russia. Western Europe would get a rest and could recover, and, as an arbiter, could negotiate peace between Germany and Russia. For the Baltic, a peace by compromise would have meant the elimination of the USSR as well as of the German hazard. We were anxious to have contact with Berlin and Moscow and to persuade them of the usefulness of our neutrality also to their interests, and further to secure from them some kind of guarantees.

However, the picture changed in 1939 when information about the Hitler-Stalin negotiations started to arrive.

In the spring of 1939, President Roosevelt had approached a number of states with the proposition to conclude non-aggression pacts. Soon after that Hitler offered such pacts to the Scandinavian countries, Finland, Estonia and Latvia. The offer was accepted by Denmark, Estonia and Latvia, the others declined the offer. We had no reason to refuse as we had concluded an analogical pact with the Soviet Union already in 1934. This pact seemed to give us also an opportunity to influence the Hitler-Stalin negotiations in the sense that Estonian and Latvian independence would not be harmed by these negotiations. At the signing of the pact the Estonian, Latvian and German foreign Ministers issued a communique in which the representative of the German government confirmed and once more underlined his interest in the continuance of Estonian and Latvian independence.

At the end of August, however, the events took a quick turn toward a catastrophe and at the beginning of September the war broke out.

Certain suspicions as to the behavior of the Hitler government in regard to the Russo-German negotiations struck me at the end of 1938. At a meeting with a German diplomat the latter pointed out that Estonia and Latvia should take a decisive stand against the so-called guarantee treaty draft which the British-French delegations were negotiating with Molotov in Moscow. To my explanation that the negative attitude of the Baltic States as to the wishes of Moscow was known to everybody, my guest answered that our silence could impress the German government in a sense that our standpoints might have changed. And then he added: "The governments of Britain and France will not reach an agreement with

Russia. If they should relinquish the Baltic States as a prey for Stalin, the latter will ask for Poland and to that London cannct agree". I asked: "I have heard that you, too, are conducting negotiations with Moscow. Have you any hopes to come to an agreement? And the main thing is, are you remembering the obligations of non-aggression treaties which you have undertaken to observe in regard to Estonia and Latvia?" "I cannot tell how much truth is in it", was the answer, "but I could imagine that the German government could act in a more liberal way to satisfy the appetite of Moscow. Naturally, it would not give to Moscow more than what is inevitably necessary, i. e., not much more than what has been already offered to Moscow by the Western Powers".

It should be noted that the British government, headed by Sir Neville Chamberlain, often in defiance of public opinion tried to protect the interests of the Baltic States. His last offers to Moscow, about which the British representatives in Tallinn advised me, implicated only an overall European collective guarantee regarding the countries situated to the east and west of Germany, without naming these countries, whereby the guarantee was not an automatic one, but help had to be rendered by common agreement or on a request of the country to be helped. I had no reason to protest against the draft of such a declaration. I have the impression that, contrary to the above statement, Hitler had promised Stalin more than the "inevitably necessary".

Already in the summer of 1939 the Estonian government received information about larger movements of red army units in the district of Leningrad. Gradually the direction of their placement emerged: these units concentrated in the direction of Estonia and Latvia. In the middle of September the number of Soviet forces concentrated against Estonia and Latvia in the area of Le-ningrad-Narva-Pihkva were, as estimated by General Laidoner, a-bout 250,000 men, including at least six armored divisions and five hundred aircraft. To this must be added the red navy, preparations of which were not estimable.

During the night of Sunday, September 17th, the Polish submarine "Orzel", interned in the Tallinn port, succeeded in escaping the guard, proceeded to sea, and disappeared. On Monday I was visited by the German minister who asked for information. He resented the fact. He accepted my explanations as satisfactory, but warned: "In Berlin this event is not being taken seriously: interned ships and soldiers have escaped neutral countries also before, without any serious consequences. But I am troubled about the reaction of the Soviets". I expressed my astonishment saying that Moscow is not even a belligerent party and, according to international law, it could not acquire any rights derived from our neutrality and make us any reproaches on account of a mistake in exercising our neutrality. The minister said: "We fear that because of that incident you could have trouble with Moscow. You can speak about international law with the Soviets if you are backed by force". About noon of the next day (September 19th) the Estonian minister in Moscow, Mr. A. Rei, was invited to the Kremlin where he was told by Molotov: "As the Estonian government cannot guarantee its neutrality, the Soviet Baltic navy will engage in the protection of the Estonian waters' region (Estonian aquatorium)." In the evening of the same day the red navy appeared in the Finnish Bay up to the Baltic Sea, overshadowing the whole Estonian north coast. From that time on Estonian communication by sea with the outside world was under control of the red navy. USSR aggression against Estonia and the whole Baltic had begun.

In the fall of 1939, Estonia could hope for no help from any overseas country. Germany was a friend of Moscow, Finland had its own troubles and Britain was politically far from us. Communication by sea could be useful for us only for trade, for keeping up connection with the Western world and for escape if necessary. The fact that Moscow moved its Baltic navy in order to get that connection under its control seems to indicate that the plan had been prepared long in advance, at a time when Moscow still had to fear that its victim of aggression, Estonia, could have some military help from overseas.

During the following days the red navy moved into Estonian waters in such a demonstrative way that nobody should have been left in doubt as to who was there the unopposed overlord. On September 20, 1939, at 6. A. M„ three Russian destroyers ("Engels", "Volodarsky", "Artem") approached the Estonian island Muhu from the north. They entered Estonian territorial waters until the Pakri meridian was reached where they turned back to sea. On the same day at 7.45 A. M., the Russian ship "Minsk" and two "G" type destroyers passed the Estonian island Ristna and entered our waters at the bay of Pidura. On September 22 from 8.12 A.M. until 10.45 A.M. three "S" type torpedo boats strayed in Estonian waters at Narva-Joesuu. The night before a Russian destroyer had entered the bay of Lcksa and had opened fire by shooting a salvo against the coast. The same day, from a passanger ship on her way from Tallinn to Helsingfors, a torpedo was observed, which almost hit the ship. Immediately after that a Russian submarine emerged, passing the ship. On September 24, 1939, the USSR expanded its aggression also over the air space of Estonia. On that day, at 7.18 A. M., three Russian aircraft appeared at the Esoonian Keri lighthouse and cruised over Kuressaare for about 20 minutes. At 9.35 A. M. they appeared over the Sorve lighthouse. On September 26, at 8.33 A. M. the Russian ships "Leningrad" and "Stremitelny" arrived at the mouth of the Muhu strait from which they turned back after a short stay. At 10.47 A. M. three Russian aircraft flew over Estonian territory from east to west and about half an hour later from west to east along a line approximately three klm. south of Narva Joesuu. At 11.23 A. M. three Russian bombers cruised over the island Muhu. At 11.50 A. M. three Russian bombers flew over the district of Tallinn and Naissaare, remaining over Estonian territory for about 30 minutes. At 12.40 A. M., and later, three Russian aircraft circled over the districts of Oru and Toila. On September 27, at 1.16 P. M. Russian aircraft were cruising over West-Estonia. Entries of the red navy into Estonian waters, nor Russian aircraft flights over Estonian territory, during nights, which were many times more numerous and which began on September 20, 1939, were not registered.

On September 22, 1939, I received Nikitin, USSR minister in Tallinn, who informed me that, as the Estonian trade delegation in Moscow had ended its negotiations and the new trade agreement with the government of the USSR was

completed, the question arose, who should sign the new agreement for Estonia. I told that for this we can authorize our minister in Moscow. Nikitin revealed that the government of the USSR would like to have a member of the cabinet go to Moscow, whereupon I answered that the minister of economics, Leo Sepp, could go. After two hours the minister came back and related that the Soviet government would like the foreign minister to go to Moscow for signing the trade agreement. I reported this to President Pats in the presence of Prime Minister K. Eenpalu. At this conference it was agreed that the foreign minister should go to Moscow where he could have a possibility to learn about the objectives pursued by the Soviet government through more and more frequent offences against the integrity of the Estonian territory and that it has become necessary to try to end these aggressive acts and to put some limit to these entries of the USSR into Estonian territory.

I left Tallinn in the night of September 22/23. The next morning I reached the USSR border station Kingissepp. In that town I saw Russian troops everywhere. Our coach which, according to the usual plan, should have proceeded at once to Leningrad, was unhooked and left waiting in Kingissepp. This delay showed us the concentration of troops. We saw three military trains passing by and two troop columns moving on the road with supply and arms. At the Leningrad station we were received by the commander of the local garrison, the local Party secretary and others whom I do not remember. In the afternoon of September 24, 1939, we arrived at the Moscow station. I was asked at once to the Kremlin where I went together with Minister Rei. We were received by Molotov in the presence of Mikojan. Regarding this meeting and the ultimatum presented to us by the Soviet government a special protocol was drafted.

In reply to the ultimatum of the government of the USSR I answered that I am not authorized to negotiate in this matter and that I have to go back to inform my government and parliament. After a prolonged and tenacious argument I succeeded in convincing Molotov (who in the meantime consulted somebody by phone) that I cannot discuss his demands, neither can I procure by telephone the authorization of our government and parliament.

After return to Tallinn I advised the government regarding the ultimatum of the Soviet Union, which was accompanied by threats of military force. The next day I informed the parliamentary committee on foreign affairs and state security about the same matter. According to an agreement between the government and presidium of the parliament, a delegation for conducting the negotiations with the government of the USSR regarding the ultimatum and proposed pact of mutual assistance and bases was composed as follows: chief of the delegation — Foreign Minister Karl Selter, members — the president of the first chamber of parliament (Riigivolikogu) Prof. Jiiri Uluots (died in Sweden in li)45), former minister for foreign affairs and member of the first chamber of parliament Prof. Ants Piip (deported to the USSR in 1940), and the Estonian minister in Moscow August Rei (at present in Stockholm, Sweden). The delegation left Tallinn on the next day and arrived in Moscow in the evening of the same day. The Estonian government and parliament had no other possibility than to yield to the ultimatum and to try to negotiate for easier conditions. After I had reported at the cabinet meeting on September 25, 1939, about all what the USSR government was asking form us while backing up its demands with an ultimatum. Konstantin Pats, President of the Republic, said: "A world war has started. During that war tens of millions of people will die. After Poland's collapse, because the Baltic States are isolated from the south and the sea, a war with Russia would mean the physical destruction of our nations. Our only aim should be to do all we can to keep our nation alive. There is much more we will still have to swallow, but we should do all that is possible for achieving this end: to help our nation, whose fate has been trusted into our hands, and to survive this catastrophy". When President Pats signed the blackmail document and when after that he had to look on, without any possibility whatsoever of interference from his side, how his life's work, the Estonian state, was destroyed, he, as well as other Estonian politicians, military men and the whole leadership of the Estonian people did this in order to attain the main goal: to save the Estonian nation from final destruction.

Soon after our arrival in Moscow we were asked to the Kremlin where a surprise awaited us. As an introduction, V. Molotov informed us that yesterday, i. e., on September 26, 1939, an unidentified submarine had attacked and torpedoed in Estonian and Russian waters the USSR ship "Metallist". Together with the sunken ship, a large number of USSR seamen had lost their lives. For that reason the government of the USSR cannot be satisfied anymore with demands presented by Molotov at the meeting of September 24th, but is compelled to demand the right for USSR troops to enter into the inner regions of Estonia, into various towns, in order to protect Estonia from inside and outside enemies. I answered by pointing out that 1) we have no information regarding the torpedoing of "Metallist", that it is necessary, according to procedure provided in the Estonian-USSR Non-Aggression Pact, to establish facts to that event and to try to find an agreement according to the provisions of that pact; 2) that the Estonian delegation and myself have been authorized by the Estonian government and parliament to conduct negotiations only on the basis of demands as presented by Molotov on September 24th, 1939; 3) that we are not authorized to negotiate new demands as presented by Molotov.

After about one hour of arguing back and forth Molotov asked me whether I would not like to speak to "comrade Stalin" myself. I answered affirmatively, whereupon Molotov stood up and advised Stalin by phone: "Selter does not want to accept. I request you to come here if you can". Stalin arrived soon. He appeared to be very reserved, cold and pretentious. He repeated the new demands and arguments of Molotov and stressed that the government of the USSR has categorically decided to insist on these demands. A discussion followed during which all former arguments were repeated by both sides. J. Stalin made repeated attempts to start reading the draft of a pact, prepared by the government of the USSR, which contained all the new demands. The Estonian delegation succeeded in thwarting these attempts only because the text had

been written in such an unclear and defective way that on several occasions even Stalin had to concede that this or other matter could be supplemented.

Finally I made the proposition to postpone the conference un-till the next morning; meanwhile we would prepare our own draft for a pact, which would be better suitable as a basis for negotiations. Stalin agreed and the Estonian delegation left for its legation. Further progress of negotiations will appear in the protocols of respective meetings.

At this point I wish to direct your attention especially to an important fact involved in the ultimatum of June 1940, presented by the Soviet Union. In this ultimatum we were accused of having violated the pact. The pact forbids to "conclude treaties which would be directed against one of the parties of the pact". During discussions I pointed out that this regulation could not be considered as valid for treaties and pacts which had been concluded already earlier, e. g., the Estonian-Latvian treaty. Stalin and Mo-lctov agreed to this provision which was included accordingly in the pact. When the Soviet Union accused Estonia of having concluded treaties with the other Baltic States against the Soviet Union, this could mean only treaties concluded after September 28th, 1939, but no treaty was concluded after that date.

During the night of September 28, 1939, at 12 midnight (Moscow time) an agreement had been reached, the discussions were ended and the pact was given for re-writing. While I was still talking to Stalin at the end of the table, Molotov hurried to the telephone, I heard him call up somebody and say: "Klim (Voro-shilov?), give the command: otstavitj (the Russian military command — ground arms!), immediately." On my return to Estonia I was informed that our army on the Estonian-Russian border, while expecting attacks, had seen during the same night at 22.30 (Estonian time), half an hour after I had listened to Molotov's telephone conversation, rocket signals on the Russian side, after which tanks, hidden in bushes, started to roll back to the East. Stalin had told me that same night: "I can assure you that you made a great service to your country, you don't know what danger and disaster you kept away from it", and I understood that these words were not an overestimation.

When I left for Moscow a second time on September 27, 1939, via Riga, Latvia, I met our minister there, Hans Rebane, (now in Sweden), whom I asked to inform the Latvian government about the Soviet demands concerning Estonia and accordingly the standpoint of the Estonian government, and I asked him to find out the Latvian, our ally's, standpoint in this matter. Mr. Rebane sent a special courier to Moscow who gave me the following information: 1. Last night I informed the Latvian Foreign Minister about our situation, our relationship with the Soviet Union and the demands as presented by them, as well as our standpoint. The Foreign Minister promised first to inform only their President. 2. On the question as to what would be Latvia's reaction if under Soviet pressure we are forced to conclude that kind of a treaty, he answered that Latvia understands this very well and if that kind of demands should be presented to Latvia by the Soviet Union, there would be hardly any other solution but to conclude the treaty.

The Latvian Foreign Minister was asked to Moscow on September 30, 1939, and he simultaneously was forced to sign a pact of the same contents under the threat of war and an ultimatum.

New trouble arose in Tallinn. On October 2, 1939, the military delegation arrived in order to plan the realization of the Mutual Assistance Pact. The following persons belonged to the delegation: Army Commander Meretzkov (Commander of the Leningrad military district), Isakov, Commander of armored forces, Corps Commander Pavlov, Airforce Chief Corps Commander Pe-tuchin, Cavalry Brigade Chief Kalmokov, Division Commander Tjurin, Commander of the Baltic Navy and of Red Army units to be located in Estonia. To our surprise the Soviet delegation demanded for bases besides the places foreseen in the pact (the islands Hiiumaa and Saaremaa and the coastal town Paldiski) further bases for the red army in Paide, Valga and aerodromes for the Soviet air force in Middle- and West-Estonia. The President decided to appoint me as chairman of the Estonian delegation. I assigned to our minister in Moscow the task to go to Molotov and to inform him about the changed demands of the Soviet delegation, unforeseen in the Pact, and to ask Molotov to give his delegation instructions which would be according to the text of the Pact. V. Molotov, after consulting Stalin in this matter, gave us the answer that he has asked his military delegation to give up the claims on the Estonian central districts (Paide and Valga), but not to renounce claims, unforeseen in the pact, on the town Haapsalu and districts, nor places for aerodromes in the West of Estonia because "Paragraph 3 of the Pact provides for naval and military bases of the USSR only in certain places on Estonian territory (the islands Hiiumaa and Saaremaa and the coastal town Paldiski), whereas it is not said that aerodromes can not be situated in other places in Estonia". This argument meant that, although the Pact had foreseen these three places as bases for the Russian navy and army, the USSR had the additional right to demand, according to Molotov's interpretation, aerodromes on Estonian territory to whatever places they wanted, although there had not been any mentioning of the same during the conclusion of the Pact.

We had to give in also to these new demands.

On October (i, 1939, German representatives from the German Foreign Office in Berlin arrived in Tallinn in order to .¡¡3-cuss the evacuation to Germany of German nationals who were Estonian citizens. The day before Hitler had mentioned in his speech that he "had achieved an agreement with Moscow that all Germans from the East would be brought back home, to the Reich". The majority of Estonian citizens of German descent followed the "Fiihrer's call", though many of them against their own will. Most of them would not have gone at all if the Soviet danger had not been a threat to the whole Balticum.

On October 4th, 1939, the Government of the Estonian Republic tendered its resignation, and on October 12, 1939, the President appointed the new government with Prime Minister Prof. Juri Uluots. As I, too, had resigned from the government. Prof. Ants Piip was assigned to the post of foreign minister. I was nominated permanent delegate to the League of Nations and Minister to Switzerland. I left Tallinn on January 2, 1940.

In June, 1940, when the red army had marched into Estonia, Foreign Minister Piip sent me a message asking me to be representative to Berlin. In the beginning of July I was informed by an Estonian in Berlin that he had tried to promote an interest toward the fate of the Balticum among his business associates and the German middle and upper class, and that he had been able to win their support and, further, that they had expressed their preparedness to recommend to their government the undertaking of certain diplomatic steps in Moscow to ask Stalin and Molotov to hold back from strangling and bolshevizing the Baltic States. I sent the information to Estonia that I am immediately ready to leave for Berlin as soon as the German Legation advises me that a visa has arrived for me from Berlin, wherefrom it would be obvious that the German Foreign Office was willing to see me. At the same time Vares' puppet government asked me to return to Estonia when simultaneously I received secret orders from President Pats not to return to Estonia but to go to Berlin. I did not receive a German visa and at the same time I was informed from Berlin that the German Foreign Office was not in favor of a demarche in support of the Baltic States.

Geneva, Switzerland
November 9, 1953

(Signature)
Karl Selter