
Few heroic acts can upstage the feat of the 133-member Estonian Communist Party (ECP) in the classic epic retold in this book on “The 1940 Revolution in Estonia.” With their bare hands, like Hercules strangling the Lion of Nemea, they seized power, in a single day of bloodless demonstrations, from a regime disposing of more than ten thousand troops. In further similarity with the Greek heroes, the ECP also enjoyed the favor of some higher powers (like that of the hundred thousand Soviet troops spread all over Estonia). Such stage props are carefully tucked away from sight in Kuuli’s book. Why spoil a good fairy tale with boring technicalities?

The basic features of the legend are well known to the educated public and do not have to be retold. The points of interest are those where the book adds new details to the frequently cursory earlier versions. Thus, the issue of the number of political prisoners at various times receives some clarification. The Republic of Estonia seemed to have up to 250 of them in 1937. Allegedly harboring “the desire to release the imprisoned vaps” extreme rightists (p. 36), the government amnestied, in 1938, “nearly 200” prisoners, but more than half of them (104) were communists and sympathizers. What an inept cost-benefit ratio if the release of the vaps was the true motive! Prior to the communist takeover of June 1940, only 43 allegedly political prisoners remained: 30 were released in Tallinn, and 13 elsewhere in Estonia; it is remarkable that only three of them were ECP members (pp. 80 and 47). Even those were small fry since two of them (Kristjan Seaver and Alfred Sein) do not even figure in the index of the Estonian Soviet Encyclopedia and do not reappear in the book reviewed. The book includes in the political prisoner count cases like that of N. Trankman (p. 107) who sold the Soviets the plans of the Narva fortifications.

The number of political prisoners in Estonia never dropped to zero since the first arrests of former police officials were made by the communists already on June 21 (p. 80). The author claims that “during the first month no extensive arrests of bourgeois figures occurred”
(p. 119), but his evidence remains spotty. He asserts only 27 persons were fined (up to 3000 kroon), banished, or arrested ("up to 90 days") from June 28 to July 20. The term "banished" may refer to those people only who were exiled to locations within Estonian territory in contrast to those dispatched to Russia. The statement carefully leaves open the first week after the June 21 takeover, when a major wave of arrests is likely to have occurred. Nor does it say what happened to those arrested for "up to 90 days," to the officials dismissed, and to many other citizens after July 20. The dismissal of General Laidoner on June 22 is reported (pp. 120 and 198), but his deportation to Russia is not. No more comprehensive figures (and definitions of terms) have been released by the Soviets; Kuuli's carefully patchy evidence clearly suggests that comprehensive imprisonment figures for the period are awkward from the Soviet viewpoint. Their regime rapidly became far more "fascist," in term of oppressiveness, than was the regime they replaced.

Speaking of fascism, the book's review chronicle of the 1939-40 events mentions Germany nine times, and in eight instances the epithet "fascist" or "Hitlerite" is included in the sentence (pp. 195-197). The only exception occurs for August 23, 1939: "A non-aggression pact was concluded between the USSR and Germany." Estonia's non-aggression pact, of course, was concluded with "fascist Germany."

For reasons not explained by the author, the ECP did not have a central organ in early 1938, and its communications with the Comintern were broken. Some of the prisoners released in the 1938 amnesty created an "Illegal Bureau." Its secretary H. Allik is proudly characterized as "ruthlessly intolerant," with "uncompromising ire" as the main trait of his political activity (p. 37). The ECP became more active in fall 1939 (p. 39), but no connection is drawn to the establishment of Soviet army bases in Estonia with "limited troop contingents" (p. 32) of unspecified size. The vague expression used is exactly the same the Soviet press currently uses regarding Afghanistan.

By April 1940, the ECP members even became so uncharacteristically active that they distributed a thousand copies of an underground publication, Kommunist, containing one proclamation and two articles (pp. 39 and 43-45). It remains unclear from the book why more was not done since repression was limited. An ECP member (V. Jaanus) and four other extreme leftists actually were elected to the national assembly and were allowed to take their seats (pp. 35 and 41). In April and May, 29 persons were fined or banished for subversive activities (p. 67); the book avoids specifying separate numbers for light and heavy penalties. For reasons Kuuli does not explain, Kommunist had not been printed in Estonia since 1931, and by 1938 even its publication in Scandinavia ceased (p. 43).

The ECP size in June 1940 has been set at "about 150" in many Soviet sources, but in recent years the even lower figure of 133 has appeared. Kuuli’s book has the great merit of specifying the origin and meaning of this figure (pp. 47-51). The number seems to have been as low as 105 after the 1938 amnesty. Later six new members came from abroad, and 22 were recruited in Estonia. In addition to those 133 (of whom only three remained in prison), the book claims active support for the ECP by "hundreds" of other people (p. 50) - - yes, hundreds, not thousands. The ECP was of such a limited size that only four local party organizations existed, all created in 1938-39 (p. 46). Internal animosities flared high between the ex-prisoners and K. Säre who returned from Scandinavia in 1938 with Comintern instructions (pp. 42-43 and 45-46). Such was the size, cohesion, and energy level of the organization which was supposed to have carried out a revolution in June 1940.

The first success came on June 15 when the communists expelled the moderates from the leadership of the Tallinn Joint Sickness Fund Society (p. 67) on the very day that "supplementary Soviet army formations" of unspecified size entered Lithuania (p. 69). On June 16, Soviet notes were presented to Latvia and Estonia. In the "early morning" of June 17, the "supplementary Red Army formations" entered Estonia (p. 70), and after that event the ECP started to set up meetings everywhere. On June 19, A. Zhdanov arrived in Tallinn "to control the execution of the agreements between the USSR and Estonian govern-
ments,” but this is only a later incidental footnote for Kuuli (p. 79). Much later in the text (pp. 87-88), it is acknowledged that “the presence of the troops of the first socialist state on Estonian territory, of course, contributed in an essential way to the revolution’s victory” (p. 87) by discouraging countermeasures by the Estonian authorities. The appearance of “Soviet Army representatives” at some meetings is acknowledged (p. 88), but there is no mention or discussion of the claim by eyewitnesses (and photos) that some of the Soviet Army representatives came in armored cars.

The assertedly crucial meeting of June 21 in Tallinn is estimated by the author to have involved 30,000 to 40,000 people (p. 78), but his photo of the partly empty city square (Photo 7, after p. 96) allows for a count of 7,000 at the very most. It does not really matter. I remember one such meeting in Tartu. My father was marching along, unusually somber. So were other marchers. So were the onlookers. Red Army units were included in the procession. The only desperate cheers were heard when an Estonian army detachment marched by, somber-faced. Once the “supplementary army formations” were in Estonia, the 133-member ECP could make anyone march, or else.

The formation of the “People’s Government” on June 21 at 10:15 P.M. rates a single sentence in the book (p. 81, repeated on p. 86). It just pops up like a jack-in-the-box. The intense behind-the-scenes meetings, starting with Zhdanov’s arrival two days earlier (as reported in detail in several non-Soviet accounts), visibly are too sensitive for even a partial description.

Of the 11-man new government, the author considers two (T. Rotberg, B. Sepp) strangers to the interests of the “working people,” and a third (M. Unt) was sentenced in May 1941 “for crimes committed during the Civil War” (p. 89). The author does not discuss the fate of J. Narma-Nichtig, deported in 1941, or of prime minister J. Vares who committed NKVD-assisted suicide in 1946.

A major concern of the new powerholders was to “prevent arms from reaching the hands of uncertain elements” (p. 89). The book leaves unclear what distinguishes “broad masses” from “uncertain elements.” With plenty of arms still in the hands of the Estonian police and army, why be concerned about civilians receiving arms if one feels certain about broad civilian support? Even the workers’ guard formed in June was disarmed soon after (p. 109), and a new People’s Self-Defense was organized on a different basis. After June 21, “the presence of the Soviet army units in Estonia protected the new rule against attempts of foreign intervention as well as internal counter-revolution” (p. 91). Foreigners were protecting the new administration against everyone, including the Estonians.

On July 14-15 elections were carried out. Among various arbitrary changes in the electoral law, the number of signatures needed for nominations was reduced from 150 to 50 (p. 134), as if 150 signatures were hard to collect for the communist front candidates. Non-front candidates (78 in all) were nominated in 66 of the 80 districts (p. 137). Of these the new powerholders disqualified 57, about twenty withdrew without formal disqualification, and one candidate (J. R. Liivak) was maintained (p. 138). Kuuli correctly concludes that the takeover was not by parliamentary means (pp. 185-186).

The book’s last chapters describe the external forms of the annexation ritual and of the reorganization of the ECP. The demand for Soviet power was not part of the election platform of the Communist front (p. 135), but two days after the elections, it claimed to have a popular mandate for Estonia’s incorporation into the USSR (p. 140). The new assembly included six members who had been members of the previous parliament (p. 142). To varying extents, they had been able to function and have an input in a rightist-dominated body. The new assembly did not have a single rightist, centrist, or social democrat since they had not been allowed to compete in the elections. A national regime hesitating between democracy and authoritarianism had been replaced by a foreign-imposed front expressing a fascist degree of intolerance.

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