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THE BALTIC WAY 30
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Photo 1 (cover photo)

*The Baltic Way on Pleskava highway.
The photo was taken from the helicopter
on 23 August 1989.*

*Photographer Aivars Liepiņš.
Archive of the Latvian Institute.*



The Baltic Way Towards Freedom

Latvia 100 

At 19:00 on 23 August 1989 approximately two million people of the Baltic states joined hands forming a live, continuous chain on the road Tallinn-Rīga-Vilnius (660-670 km). Church bells sounded in the Baltic states. Mourning ribbons decorated the national flags that were banned a year ago. The participants of the Baltic Way were addressed by the leaders of Rahvarinne - the Estonian Popular Front, the Lithuanian movement Sąjūdis and the Popular Front of Latvia. The following words were heard – 'laisvē', 'svabadus', 'brīvība' (freedom). The symbols of Nazi Germany and the Communist regime of the USSR were burned in large bonfires. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania engaged in collective action against the non-assault agreement between Hitler and Stalin of 23 August 1939 and its secret protocols or the "devil pact". The Baltic states demanded the cessation of half-century long Soviet occupation, colonisation, russification and communist genocide. The Baltic Way became the crucial application by the Baltic states' civil society for independence and return to Europe. It was the first dice in the domino effect that disrupted the totalitarian regime in Eastern Europe - the first step towards regaining national independence of Latvia.

Photo 2

Participants of the Baltic Way on the Stone Bridge
(at that time the October Bridge).
Rīga. 23 August 1989.

Photographer Uldis Briedis.
Collection of the National History Museum of Latvia.

Causes and consequences

After World War II, all the USSR leaders – starting from dictator Joseph Stalin, including Mikhail Gorbachev, categorically denied the existence of secret protocols to the Molotov-Ribentrop Pact. This topic could not be debated in the occupied Baltic states. Any explanation of historical events that did not comply with Moscow's doctrine of voluntary accession of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia to the USSR and the socialist revolution was criminally punishable anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda.

The situation changed when Mikhail Gorbachev, Secretary-General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, declared a course of openness and democracy in 1985. The truth that played decisive role for the existence of the USSR quickly and spontaneously broke into the public space and people's minds. On 18 November 1986, at the Chautauqua conference in Jūrmala, Jack Metlock, Senior Advisor to the US President, announced for the first time on the Latvian television that the United States had never recognised the incorporation of Latvia. It undoubtedly encouraged the Latvian human rights and national resistance movement Helsinki-86 to organise a meeting on 23 March 1987 that was devoted to the 48th anniversary of the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribentrop Pact. Before this event, the National Security Committee of the Latvian SSR detained the group's leaders in an apartment. There were arrests. A couple of thousands of people, following the call on the Western radio, met to see what was happening. However, they could not see anything because of the public transport buses placed around the Freedom Square.



Photo 2

The Soviet press declared the members of Helsinki-86 enemies of the nation. On 18 November, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Latvia held a meeting on the Latvian Red Riflemen Square in Riga, in support of Soviet Latvia. The Freedom Monument, at the foot of which both the members of Helsinki-86 group and the patriots of free Latvia were ready to lay flowers, was besieged by chains of militia, army and KGB staff. The events reached a new peak on 1-2 June 1988 at the extended Plenary Assembly of the Latvian SSR Writers' Union. When moderating direct broadcasting from the Riga House of Political Education (Riga Congress Centre), the television journalist Ojārs Rubenis decided not to interrupt it when the permitted broadcasting time expired.

It was then that Mavriks Vulfsons, Professor of the State Academy of Arts said, "You should learn to face the truth, no matter how difficult and even unbearable it is," – and, word by word and fact by fact proved that Article 1 of the Secret Protocol to the Molotov-Ribentrop Pact was the cause of violent occupation of Latvia and invasion of the Red Army in 1940. Boris Pugo, First Secretary of the Communist Party of Latvia, and thus the chief person of the Latvian SSR, did not expect anything like that from the party's senior member and said in surprise, "Mavrik, you killed the Soviet Latvia!"

It was followed by the proposal of the poet and publicist Viktors Avotiņš to establish the Popular Front of Latvia (PFL), following the example of the Estonian support movement Rahvarinne. The formation of the largest and most influential public political organisation began with two manifestos signed by the people respected and prominent in Latvia. On 18 June, Boris Pugo spoke sharply against it and against discrediting of the Ribentrop-Molotov Pact in the General Assembly of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Latvia: "Talks about the so-called secret annexes to the Molotov-Ribentrop Pact of 1939 have become active. The idea was insistent (...) that this was the reason for forcing Latvia and the Baltic Republics to join the Soviet Union. A hand has been placed on the most valuable – the tree of people's friendship."

Everyone had to choose either the side of truth or lies about the 1939 Hitler-Stalin agreement. People had to choose whether to go down the path of freedom of the Baltic states or to remain trapped in the Soviet empire of evil.

Photo 3

*Participants of the Baltic Way on the Stone Bridge
(at that time the October Bridge).
Rīga. 23 August 1989.*

*Photographer Pēteris Karkovskis.
Collection of the National History Museum of Latvia.*

People's Movement and the Unity of the People

In support of “rebuilding the USSR”, the Estonian Rahvarinne, the Popular Front of Latvia and the Lithuanian Sajūdis were convened almost simultaneously in October 1988. On November 11, the first meeting of their elected leaders took place in Rīga, in the House of Benjamin. The decision was taken to coordinate future political action and to participate in the first joint campaign, the collection of signatures against the amendments to the Constitution of the USSR planned by Gorbachev. They would make the almost impossible withdrawal of the compounded republics from the Soviet Union completely impossible. As a result, the Popular Front of Latvia submitted 647 555 signatures of protest to the Supreme Council of the USSR in less than two weeks. In the light of the number of population, slightly fewer signatures were collected in Estonia, while slightly more in Lithuania. On November 18, when the Latvian National Independence Movement (LNNK) and the Popular Front of Latvia were invited to celebrate openly the country's proclamation day for the first time since the occupation of Latvia at the Freedom Monument, the first talks on the independence of the Baltic states were held in Moscow between Anatoly Lukyanov, President of the Supreme Council of the USSR and Dainis Īvāns, Chairman of the Popular Front of Latvia, Ilmārs Bišers, Chairman of the Governing Board of Popular Front of Latvia and Anatolijs Gorbunovs, Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Latvian SSR. The USSR leaders, upholding the ‘divide -and -rule’ policy, rejected the demand of the leaders of the Popular Front of Latvia, Rahvarinne and Sajūdis to conduct further the dialogues with representatives of all three countries - Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia. However, such action by Moscow further reinforced the conviction of the Baltic states that they need to cooperate and demonstrate solidarity.

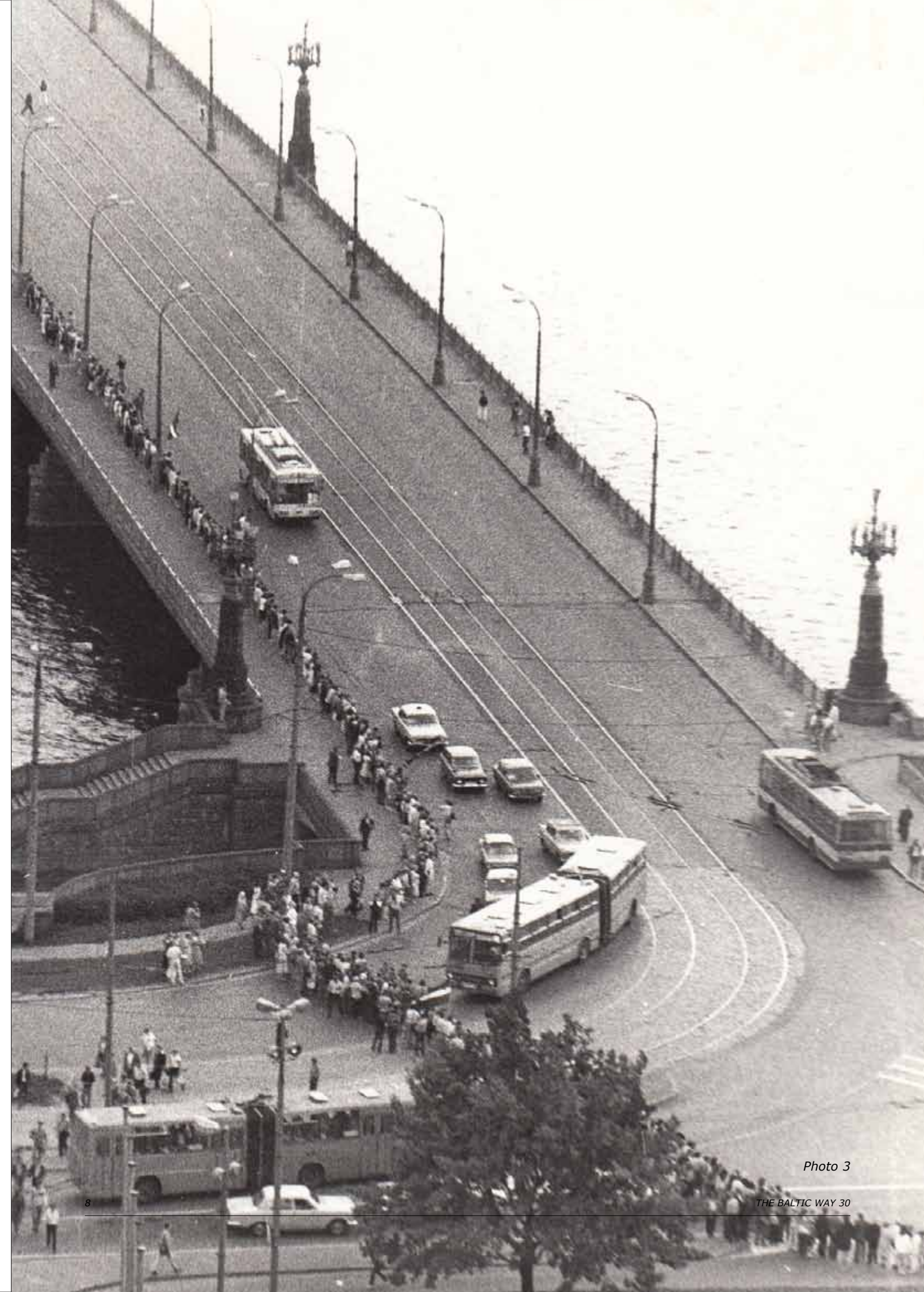


Photo 3

Photo 4

Participants of the Baltic Way on Vidzeme highway.
23 August 1989.

Photographer Irēna Caunīte.
Collection of the National History Museum of Latvia.

Baltic Assembly

Following the strategic decision to restore independence in a non-violent parliamentary manner and to participate in the elections of members of the people of the USSR on 26 March 1989, despite the illegitimacy of the USSR power in the Baltic states, the Popular Front of Latvia, Rahvarinne and Sajūdis convened the Baltic Assembly in Tallinn on 13-14 May 1989. It was attended by delegations from all three organisations, as well as by all members of the Congress of the People's Deputies of the USSR, elected with the support of the Popular Front of Latvia, Rahvarinne and Sajūdis.

On the eve of the Assembly, the Latvian composer Boriss Reizņiks composed "Baltic Awakening". Later it became an informal anthem of the Baltic states. It was first performed in Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian languages in the evening of 13 May at the Baltic Assembly's manifestation in Tallinn, repeated on 14 May at the time of signing the final resolutions of the conference and the cooperation agreement in the concert hall "Estonia". The Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of the Baltic states, the Declaration on the Economic Independence of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the Resolution on Stalinist Crimes and the Call to the Heads of State of the European Security and Cooperation Conference, the UN Secretary-General and the President of the Bureau of the Supreme Council of the USSR. Western politicians were invited to finally apply the international law also to the Baltic states. The coverage of the Baltic Assembly in the international press contributed to the worldwide raising of awareness of the Singing Revolution in the Baltic states.

"The Baltic Way is Europe's path", said Mati Hint, one of the Rahvarinne leaders and a promoter of the Livonian culture in Estonia, during the manifestation on Tallinn Town Hall Square, and was accorded a standing ovation. "Only Europe that is multi-faceted in terms of languages, cultures and nationalities is able to preserve and carry on all the rich cultural heritage of Europe... (..) The Baltic Way is the path of seeking fair agreements between the East and the West, the path towards the right to self-determination of peoples. Getting on this path would restore hope for the Baltic and Europe as a whole. The Baltic nations are ready to go."

Although, the members of the Baltic peoples' movements had not yet considered at the Tallinn Summit creating a word-famous live chain, the Baltic Way, as the term for the pursuit of solidarity and freedom in Latvia,

Lithuania and Estonia, strengthened within the URRS and abroad.

The Baltic Assembly established the Baltic Council of the leaders of the Popular Front of Latvia, Rahvarinne and Sajūdis, which should have been meeting no less than once a month in Panevėžys, Pärnu or Cēsis. However, the most important outcome of the Assembly was the development of a common strategy for the forthcoming Congress of the People's Deputies of the USSR in early June. The establishment of the Parliamentary Investigation Committee on the Molotov-Ribentrop Pact, the annulment of Article 6 of the USSR Constitution on the leading role of the Communist Party, the announcement of free elections and the opening of negotiations with the Kremlin on the peaceful separation of the Baltic states from the USSR were set as an overarching objective.



Photo 5

*Meeting in Estonia.
23 August 1989.*

*Photographer unknown.
Collection of the National History Museum of Latvia.*

Congress of the People's Deputies of the USSR

For the first time in the history of the USSR, 2250 members were elected in the first semi-free elections of the Congress of the People's Deputies of the USSR. About half of the representatives were not elected directly but nominated from various organizations of the Soviet regime, including the Communist Party. 40 deputies of Latvia out of 52 supported the independence programme of the Popular Front of Latvia. Together with the representatives of Sajūdis and Rahvarinne, they submitted a request during the first session of the Congress to set up an investigation commission for the German-USSR Agreement of 23 August 1939. The majority of the Congress opposed it. However, several démarches of the Baltic nations, perseverance and the power of reasoning succeeded. The Congress could only appoint Alexander Yakovlev, adviser to Gorbachev and the architect of "rebuilding", to the chairmanship of the commission. M. Vulfsons, Board Member of the Popular Front of Latvia, was particularly active in the commission. His statements and interviews with the last living witnesses to the signing of the Pact were sensational in both the USSR and in the West. However, Gorbachev, who, as revealed later, had seen the originals of the secret annexes, continued to deny their existence. The inclusion of interim and final reports of the Commission on the agenda of the Soviet Parliament was delayed.

The overall reactionary stance of the Congress of the People's Deputies of the USSR, not only regarding this, but also regarding many other democratization- related issues, and, particularly,



Photo 5

full disregard of the Baltic sovereignty claims in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, led to disappointment.

The propaganda organized by the Kremlin against the Baltic "extremists", "bourgeois nationalists" and "fascists" intensified in the Western press. Many Western politicians being captivated by Gorbachev still more supported the Kremlin than the Baltic nations. The Baltic nations had to act swiftly and decisively. Therefore, during the first meeting of the Baltic Council in June 1989, the leader of Rahvarinne and Vice-President of the

Estonian SSR Council of Ministers, Edgar Savisaar made an offer to the Popular Front of Latvia and the Sajūdis to consider the possibility of marking the 50th anniversary of the Hitler-Stalin agreement by joining hands and making a live chain through the territories of all republics. Latvia and Lithuania had to assess their capability to support this idea within two weeks.

From the idea to the moment of joining hands

During the period of colonisation by the USSR, Latvia had transformed into the most heavily militarized, industrialized and sovietised Baltic state with the largest contingent of the Soviet army, with the headquarters of the Baltic War District in Rīga and about 700 military sites of the USSR in its territory. Opponents of the independence of the Baltic states were hoping for the extraction of Latvia, as the weakest part, from the chain.

In order to secure the success of the Baltic Way campaign, the Popular Front of Latvia had to ensure that at least 250 000 patriots of Latvia join their hands. Will the organisation be able to do this? Since 31 May, all departments and groups of the Popular Front of Latvia had been discussing in depth the call by the Duma Board of the Popular Front of Latvia to develop a programme for the full restoration of national independence of Latvia. The Baltic Way campaign, organized together with Estonians and Lithuanians, had to become the decisive statement of Latvians that they would fight for independence to an end. At the next meeting of the Baltic Council of 15 July, the representatives of each movement signed the Memorandum of the Baltic Way in Pärnu.

Organizing such a campaign under circumstances of fixed-phones and no Internet connection was not an easy task. To coordinate masses of people, the permission had to be obtained from the Soviet authorities to use radio broadcasting and to close traffic for at least 10 minutes on the live chain route. The LTF administration split the distance from Pasvāle in Lithuania to

Nuija in Estonia into smaller stages. One person in charge was appointed for each stage. It was calculated which local governments would best fill them with people in the shortest time possible. The co-ordinators met with the representatives of each district's militia and local authority on the live-chain route.

In order to bring the participants to specific sites at the same time, either 8,000 medium-sized buses (there were not so many cars in the fleet of the Latvian SSR) or 50,000 cars were needed. The organisers considered the ways of bringing people to the right place at critical moments. One possibility could even be the interception of conventional en route buses and redirection to the Baltic Way. However, the authority of the Popular Front of Latvia was so great that the heads of state and Soviet authorities did not deny the transport they had for the grandiose campaign. Vilnis Bressis, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Latvian SSR and his deputy, Alfrēds Čepānis, who supported the path of the Popular Front of Latvia towards independence were rather supportive (and this was not of minor importance).

Among the difficulties there was the provision of visas for foreign journalists to enter the USSR. Their issuance was still controlled by the National Security Committee. However, both the Information Department and the Foreign Affairs Department of the Popular Front of Latvia ensured the arrival of a record high number of Western press representatives on the eve of the campaign.

At the meeting of the Baltic Council of 16 August near Cēsis, the boards of national

movements discussed the final text of the call, the Baltic Council's Pärnu and Cēsis communique on organizing the Baltic Way and action in the event of possible provocations by the USSR Army and the National Security Committee. They also adopted the Baltic Council's call "The Baltic Way – a Path Towards the Release of Last Colonial Territories in Europe".

The morning of 23 August brought the worst surprise. The Communist Party of Latvia unexpectedly banned the previously agreed coordination of the Baltic Way on the Latvian radio broadcasting. The live chain could be successful in Latvia at the scheduled time, route and scope, only based on self-discipline, self-organising capacity and courage of the participants of the campaign. Latvia did not disappoint its members of fate in Lithuania and Estonia. Everything happened as expected. Members of the live chain did not even know that the speech of the President of the Popular Front of Latvia was not broadcasted during the minutes of joining hands, but thanks to the self-indulgence of radio journalists, was recorded a few hours before the campaign.

A miracle took place in the evening of 23 August 1989 - the whole of the Baltic joined hands on the road from Tallinn through Rīga to Vilnius, like on the road of eternity, thus clearly declaring its return to Europe.

Photo 6

The Baltic Way in Toronto (Canada)
on 23 August 1989.

Photographer Ilmārs Znotiņš.

Photo 7

Document of the Baltic Council
"Address to the World's Nations" adopted during the
meeting of the Baltic Council on 12 August 1989.

Collection of the National History Museum of Latvia.

Document of the Baltic Council "Address to the World's Nations"

*The BALTIC WAY is a
parliamentary way for the
peaceful restoration of our
statehood.*

*The BALTIC WAY does not
represent a threat to anyone.*

*The BALTIC WAY will guarantee
social security, civil rights and
economic progress to all the
people in the Baltic republics,
regardless of their nationality.*

*The BALTIC WAY is a way to
democracy.*

*The BALTIC WAY is the only way
to freedom, brotherhood and
equality on the shores of our
common Baltic sea.*



Photo 6

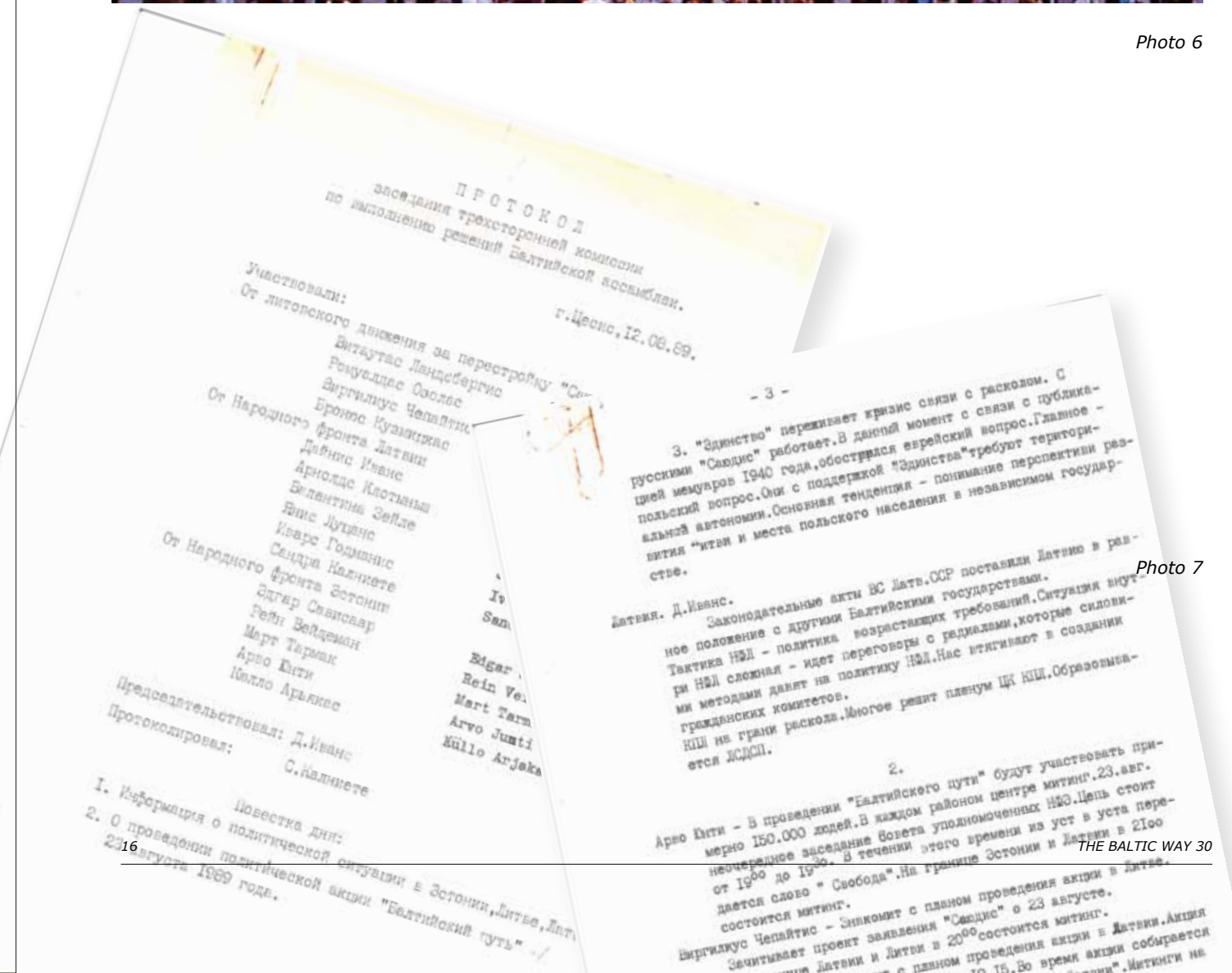


Photo 7

Results and significance of the Baltic Way

The Baltic Way didn't only join the hands, but also the hearts of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians. It turned the day of mourning into the birthday of a new world. The Baltic Way brought not only the Baltic States but the whole of Europe into the future of new expectations.

The Kremlin looked at it against different background. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) immediately issued a threatening statement: "The organisers of the events of 23 August 1989 attempted to stir the mood to genuine national hysteria. Slogans raised by thousands of people express hatred towards the Soviet regime, against the Russians, against the CPSU, against the Soviet Army. (...) The fate of the Baltic people is in danger. (...) Their viability itself could become questionable."

Everything pointed to the fact that Moscow was considering acting like the Chinese Communists in June 1989, when they bloodily suppressed the democratic reform claimants at Tiananmen Square in Beijing. As soon as possible, 24 USSR deputies from Latvia and 22 deputies of the Soviet Supreme Council of Latvia signed a response statement of the Popular Front in the headquarters of the Popular Front of Latvia on Vecpilsētas iela 24, Rīga: "We have felt the warmth of each other's hands, we have witnessed that we can stand on and, if necessary, stand up for a piece of the Latvian land, we have no other way but the freedom of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia."

When 204 085 signatures of protest from Latvia reached Moscow in two days, the aggressive tone of the Kremlin communists subsided, in the light of the warning of the US president that the United States do not regard the issue of the Baltic as an internal matter of the USSR. Gorbachev put the report by the Parliamentary Inquiry Commission of the Molotov-Ribentrop Pact on the agenda of the Congress of the People's Deputies of the USSR. On 24 December, following two dramatic votes and a bright speech by M. Vulfsons, the majority of the Congress of the People's Deputies of the USSR finally confirmed that the secret protocols were real; that they were criminal and should be denounced. Consequently, it was recognized de jure that the Baltic was the part of the USSR.

It is undeniable that the effect of the Baltic Way was soon felt throughout the territory of the USSR, including Russia. Gorbachev called it "the export of revolution" as he grumbled at the Baltic people. Inspired by the Baltic Way, the live chain was also realized in Kishinev by Romanians of the Soviet-occupied (1940) Bessarabia or Moldova, while in January 1990, Ukrainians joined hands on the road from Lviv to Kiev.

Just after the Baltic Way campaign, the Berlin Wall fell, the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia began, and the Ceausescu regime in Romania fell. A rapid response to the democratisation chain began in all countries under dictatorship of the USSR after World

War II. The Baltic Way would not be able to take the Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians to Europe without it. On the other hand, it would not be possible to unleash other Eastern European countries from Moscow without the Baltic Way.

The importance of the Baltic Way as a symbol of non-violent resistance to the world has been greatly appreciated by the researcher of the non-violent resistance movements Jean Sharpe, "Your success and experience gained with the same principles of fighting in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine and elsewhere, have soon demonstrated to the world that the oppressed nations are capable of freeing themselves."

Photo 8

*Meeting at the border of Latvia – Lithuania (Saločiai)
on 23 August 1989.*

*Photographer Vitālijs Stīpnieks.
Archive of the Latvian Institute.*



8. attēls

Photo 9

Address by Dainis Īvāns, leader of the Popular Front of Latvia on the radio.

23 August 1989, 19.00: (..)"

At this point, our joined hands demonstrate only the fact that the spite and determination of the Baltic people to fight for free and dignified life in restored Baltic states cannot be destroyed. Any injustice and oppression will once come to an end. The spirit of freedom is stronger than any slavery. Any lies are illuminated sooner or later by the truth (..) (p. 1)
Collection of the National History Museum of Latvia.

We would like to extend gratitude to Dainis Īvāns, publicist and the first Chairman of the Popular Front of Latvia, and Anna Zeibārte, Head of Department of the Popular Front Museum at the National History Museum of Latvia, for contributing to the preparation of the fact sheet "The Baltic Way - 30".

ceļš
ne atdodam
tai ilgi

nav uzveicama ar varmācības un tumsonības papēmieniem. Tapēc mēs
Baltijas ceļš pirmām kārtām ir mīrmilības ceļš. Vienīgais
katra tās pilsona

