

On 14 August 1941, Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill issued the Atlantic Charter, where they made known certain principles of the Western Allies to be applied in the event of their potential victory. They declared in the Charter that they recognise each nation's right to establish their public order and to determine their destiny.

This declaration was very important for the occupied peoples. It gave them hope to restore their lost independence. It kindled the belief that the Western Allies would support them.

Already in September 1941, representatives of the United States and Great Britain had hinted to the members of the Foreign Delegation of Estonia that it would be a good idea to form some kind of government or committee that would represent Estonia's interests outside the occupied territory.

As a result, nationally-minded Estonians formed the National Committee of the Republic of Estonia in February 1944. The Committee comprised representatives of former political parties of independent Estonia, as well as representatives of resistance groups formed during the period of occupation.

In September 1944, when Tallinn – as it had happened earlier in history – was caught as a no-mans-land between a retreating and an advancing army, the lawful Government of the Republic of Estonia, led by Otto Tief, assumed office.

The fate of the members of the National Committee and Otto Tief's Government is a most eloquent example of the situation at the time. First, they were arrested by the German authorities. Later, those who had been unable to escape were arrested by the NKVD. They were all repressed: some were murdered, the rest imprisoned. Those who returned from Siberia alive suffered restrictions of their civic rights.

Let us, for a moment, recall their names:

Otto Tief, Deputy Prime Minister– sentenced to ten years of hard labour, later banished to the Ukraine and Latvia.

Arnold Susi, Minister of Education – eight years of hard labour and five years of banishment. Was allowed to return to Estonia in 1960.

Rudolf Penno, Minister of Trade and Industry, Johannes Klesment, Minister of Justice, and August Rei, Minister of Foreign Affairs – were fortunate enough to escape the Soviet occupation, unfortunate never to see their country again.

Hugo Pärtelpoeg, Minister of Finance, and Johannes Pikkov, Minister of Transport – died in hard labour camp in Siberia.

Voldemar Sumberg, Minister of Social Affairs – released from hard labour in 1954, without

permission to return to Estonia.

Minister Juhan Kaarlimäe – in hard labour camp up to 1954, arrested again in 1969.

Kaarel Liidak, Minister of Agriculture – Chairman of the Board of the National Committee died in early 1945.

And senior public servants:

Jaan Maide, Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces – was sentenced to death on 3 July 1945 by the Military Chamber of the Supreme Court of the USSR. Executed on 10 July in Butyrka Prison.

Oskar Gustavson, Auditor General – as Deputy Chairman of the National Committee, he hid from the German and later Russian occupying powers. Committed suicide in December 1945, jumping out of a window of the NKGB building in Pagari Street during an interrogation.

Juhan Reigo, Head of Internal Defence – arrested and sentenced to death by an extraordinary counsel in August 1945. Executed in Tallinn on 4 October.

Endel Inglist, Deputy State Secretary – imprisoned in December 1944. Sentenced to death by extraordinary council in August 1945, executed in Tallinn on 4 October.

How to evaluate Tief's government now, 63 years later? Stoically and without complaint, those responsible men, who had already accomplished much in life, decided that democratic, independent Estonia was a cause to fight for. Even when the struggle is hopeless, one has to stand up and risk all. Fighting for the freedom of one's people is never pointless, even if it seems hopeless.

The actions of Tief and the government he formed have been ridiculed as pointless and hopeless. It must be admitted that the ridiculers were partisans of the repressors and murderers of the members of Tief's Government.

Naturally, in the Soviet time, Tief's Government had to be surrounded with silence. It is a well-known fact that Tief's government was preceded by several years of resistance movement directed both against the German occupation and the possible return of the Soviet occupation. The goal of the resistance movement led by the Nationalist Committee was to restore the democratic Republic of Estonia. This is why they were persecuted by both the German and later the Soviet occupying powers.

What other conclusions to make? First and foremost, that when we look at the fate of Estonian democrats, we see no difference between the Nazis and the Communists. The Germans arrested those they could lay hands on, and when the Russians came, the same men were arrested once again. Neither the Nazis nor the Communists could tolerate democracy or Estonia.

So much has been written about this matter, and there have been so many discussions, that I need not go through it all again. Yet at the opening of this exhibition, I would like to ask: what is it that we ought to think, ought to do today?

It is to remember and commemorate, respect and thank those men that is the most important, because their fate exposes all the lies of Stalin's followers – they exist, even today. The Red Army and the NKVD "liberated" Estonia just as much as the Wehrmacht and the Gestapo before them.

I am proud, immensely proud, of Otto Tief's Government. In the name of democracy and freedom, they faced their predestined fate, so that in the future, no one would be able to say that Tallinn had been "liberated" in September 1944. The flag torn by the Red Army from the Tall Hermann tower was Estonia's own blue, black and white, and not the Nazi swastika.

Everyone living in Estonia and not nurturing in their bosom a covert sympathy for totalitarianism and terror, should on such days bow their heads and commemorate all those who fell victim to two violent regimes.

Today, we should concentrate on the ways for the Estonian state and people to perpetuate the memory of those men who remained faithful to their oath of office or their soldier's oath, the ideals of the nation, freedom, democracy, and independence, and who were repressed for their resolve.

I would like to repeat my appeal to erect a worthy memorial to the tens of thousands of victims of Communism. Not only the victims of Stalinism – that would deny the sufferings of those who were imprisoned, repressed and persecuted in 1953-1988. Unfortunately, we still do not know the names of all the victims. It is our duty to discover them, to chisel them into stone. All their names.

I know this is an extensive undertaking. But the victims deserve it. It would perhaps be appropriate to build the memorial at Maarjamäe, where those fallen in World War II are commemorated already today. But there may be an even more appropriate location. I do not wish to assume the role of a decision-maker in this matter.

The memorial has to be built by our joint work and efforts. This task can only unite us; never, under no circumstances, can it divide us. I hope that the Estonian Government and the municipal authorities of Tallinn will have the goodwill to get on with this task as soon as the Monument to Freedom is finished.

This would be a dignified way to perpetuate the memory of the members of Otto Tief's Government, and the ideas cherished by tens of thousands of our fellow countrymen who suffered innocently under two criminal regimes.