

## Herbert Hoover Comes to Tallinn



*Former U.S. President Herbert Hoover is met by Tallinn Deputy Mayor Anton Uesson (in glasses) on his arrival at the Baltic Station on March 14, 1938. (Eesti Filmiarhiiv)*

While George Bush was the first sitting U.S. President to visit Estonia on November 27-28, 2006, many people believe that Bill Clinton was the first former president to come to Tallinn. But President Clinton's June 11, 2002 visit was not the first. That distinction belongs to President Herbert Hoover. During his whirlwind 1938 European tour, former President Hoover spent about an hour in Tallinn on March 14 – just enough time to meet with State Elder Konstantin Päts at Kadriorg Palace and to visit Town Hall as an *Honorary Citizen of Tallinn* – an award he received back in March 1921. Before World War II, Herbert Hoover was one of only nine people to receive such an honor. When the Tallinn city government heard that their honorary citizen had been elected U.S. President on November 6, 1928, Mayor Anton Uesson sent off a congratulatory telegram on November 10. On December 4, Vaba Maa reported on President-elect Hoover's gracious response from California.

### **The Briefest of Visits**

During the first part of his 1938 tour, Hoover visited France, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Poland, and Latvia. Everywhere he went, he was greeted by huge crowds. Hoover was a hero for his monumental efforts to feed hungry Europeans caught in the devastating chaos caused by the Great War. As the Program Director for the U.S. Government's American Relief Administration, Hoover and his staff of more than 4,000 men oversaw the

distribution of over \$7 billion dollars in food to forty five countries across Europe. This sum would be worth more than \$70 billion today if adjusted for ninety years of inflation. While this assistance was originally extended in the form of credits, almost every country stopped making interest payments during the Great Depression. As Hoover explained in the third volume of his memoirs *An American Epic* (1961), “the American public realized that the impoverishment of the borrowers by war and the economic impossibility of transferring such huge sums into either gold or goods made repayment of these sums impossible. In this volume, I refer to these loans as gifts, which they were.”

On March 12, 1938, *Uus Eesti* reported how Päts ordered a special train car sent to Riga to pick up Hoover. Two Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials – Edgar Kõrver and Albert Tattar (who was to oversee Estonia's participation in the 1939 World Fair in New York) – escorted Hoover on his overnight trip. The *New York Times* (April 9) featured a summary of the President's European tour with a note that: “Mr. Hoover traveled by train in the night to Tallinn, the capital city of Estonia. No longer is it necessary for passengers to alight at the border town (called Walk) and make their way to the other side of the barrier. The little Baltic States are now the best of friends as well as neighbors, and travelers may pass from one to the other without change. President Hoover's visit was a fit preface for the happy celebration which he did so much to make possible.” After eating breakfast on board, Hoover arrived in Tallinn at 08:23 on the morning of Monday, March 14.

Tallinn Deputy Mayor Anton Uuesson, Estonia's Chief of Protocol Elmar Kirotar, Kadriorg's senior military adjutant Lieutenant Colonel Herbert Grabbi, U.S. Chargé d'Affaires Walter Leonard, and other officials met Hoover on arrival. Several reporters including a newsreel team provided coverage of Hoover's visit. From the Baltic Station, the delegation was whisked to City Hall where Hoover met with Tallinn's Mayor Jaan Soots and other city officials. After signing Tallinn's guest book and receiving several gifts, Hoover was off to Kadriorg Palace for a quick courtesy call on State Elder Päts. While Hoover was originally schedule to visit the U.S. Legation at Kentmani 20, it's unlikely he had time on such a brief visit.

Hoover made it to Tallinn Harbor just in time for the 09:30 departure of the Finnish ferry *Ilmatar*. On March 14, the *New York Times* reported from Helsinki that: “Former President Herbert Hoover and his party arrived here today from Tallinn after a pleasant crossing of the almost ice-free Gulf of Finland. All municipal and many private buildings were beflagged and a huge crowd gathered at the wharf to cheer Mr. Hoover.” After his visit to Finland, Hoover made stops in Sweden and England before returning to the United States.

### **Hoover's Baltic Ode**

While his stop in Tallinn was brief, Hoover's admiration for the Baltic States was vast. In his memoirs, Hoover described his fascination: “Never in history had there been an emancipation of nations to freedom under such appalling difficulties or with such courage and sacrifice as in these three little Baltic States. Theirs was a heroic and tragic epic of man striving to be free. And

this struggle should be part of the story of freedom for mankind." Hoover was impressed with Estonia for a number of different reasons.

Firstly, Hoover admired the Estonian work ethic, so similar to America's. His memoirs include the following note: "Estonia, the northernmost state, with its port of Tallinn, was the smallest of the three. It had an area of 18,358 square miles (about half the size of Indiana) and a population of about 1,100,000, half of which were farmers.... The people had little mineral resources, but they possessed two great economic assets: fertile soils and devotion to hard work."

Secondly, Hoover admired Estonia's courage. While several Americans described General Johan Laidoner as the "Estonian George Washington," Hoover took the comparison even further when he linked Estonia's War of Independence to the harsh winter of 1777-1778 during the U.S. Revolutionary War when it seemed that everything might be lost. Hoover commented: "On November 22, 1918, the Soviet Army invaded Estonia, not only in an effort to spread Communism, but also to regain the major Russian outlets to the Baltic Sea which had been cut off when the Baltic States secured their independence. The Estonians, with a makeshift army composed mainly of peasants, assisted by Finnish, Swedish, White Russian, and Latvian volunteers, defeated and drove the Communists out by the first of February 1919. Our staff reported that George Washington's army at Valley Forge was better clothed, better fed, and better armed. There can be no doubt of the Estonians' heroism. One division alone sustained 50 percent casualties in a single action. But they held their country."

Thirdly, Hoover believed that all three Baltic nations loved their freedom just as much as America. Hoover wrote: "The people of these three little states had a common pattern in their migration from Asia to the rich lands on the Baltic in the dim past: 1) constant oppression from the more powerful nations for more than a thousand years; 2) a determination to hold their own racial mores and culture of all these years; and 3) their break for freedom at the Armistice." Hoover went on to explain: "During all of these centuries, they had never been allowed a semblance of self-government, but they had maintained an extraordinary intellectual independence. They had withstood Russianization, and they had clung to a determination that freedom would come to them some day." And come it did: "The Estonians declared their independence at the same time as the Communist Revolution in November 1917."

Hoover admired Estonia's refusal to be discouraged in their fight for freedom even when faced with seemingly insurmountable odds. The Estonians "created a provisional government and adopted a provisional constitution providing for basic freedoms and the British form of parliamentary government. They formally elected a parliament on April 13, 1919." And while Estonia's parliamentary system was not perfect and included about a dozen different political parties, all the parties "agreed on certain things: they would maintain their independence, they would be free men, and they would divide the landholdings of the Balt and Russian overlords."

In describing all the problems faced by the Balts, Hoover expressed his frustration with the Paris Peace Conference: "Obviously, the real solution to these problems was a recognition by the

Supreme Council in Paris of the independence of these states. But the French stopped it under the theory that the Communist Government of Russia would fall under the impact of the “White” armies and that the new government of Russia should have the privilege of determining the fate of these states. All of this was utterly foolish because the people of the Baltics had already demonstrated their willingness to die rather than lose their independence.” By paraphrasing Patrick Henry's legendary rallying cry from the American Revolution – “Give me Liberty, or Give me Death!” – Hoover put Baltic freedom fighters in the best American company.

## **U.S. Food Aid**

But even a free people cannot survive without food. Freedom alone can not feed them. After the harsh winter of 1918-1919, the situation in the Baltics was critical. Hoover writes: “These states were fighting for freedom on many fronts, and their struggle did not end with the creation of free governments. The Germans, during their short period of occupation of the three peoples, had plundered them of their cattle, their farm machinery, their food, and their household goods.” After Hoover received the first field reports, the American Relief Administration (ARA) classified Estonia as suffering “wholly or in part [from] acute famine.” The situation was so desperate that Estonia no longer had enough rye for its spring planting. And so in April 1919, the ARA went to work.

At Hoover's direction, the ARA “set up a central administration of the official United States relief agencies in the Baltic States – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. As problems developed, we secured forty-seven officers and men from the Army and Navy.” These men on the ground were supported by U.S. Navy ships at sea. Hoover writes: “I determined that if we were to give relief to these peoples we had to have military protection. I requested Admiral Benson to place American destroyers at the various ports to give moral support to the people and to protect our staff, which he did.” While Hoover was unhappy with the overall Allied blockade designed to cut German and Soviet access to the Baltic Sea, Hoover reached an understanding with Admiral William Shepherd Benson, the U.S. Navy's first Chief of Naval Operations. “Under Admiral Benson's interpretation of what constituted a righteous blockade, we were sending food, medicine, and clothing into areas which were free of Communist invaders.” Elsewhere Hoover remarked that: “Except for a few cracks, the blockade of the Baltic States was not removed until the signing of the Peace.”

Thanks to the information provided by his network, Hoover became one of the first Americans to lobby on behalf of the Baltics at the Paris Peace Conference. As Hoover explains: “We of the American Government relief agencies were the major contact of these states with the outside world. We were eyewitnesses on the ground, and members of our staff were often participants in their struggles for freedom. We repeatedly presented their difficulties to the Supreme Council in Paris and at times secured some aid for them. We alone knew their story.”

And Hoover told the Baltic story to everyone he knew. On May 9, 1919, Hoover wrote President Woodrow Wilson: “My Dear Mr. President: I feel that the time has come when it is necessary to

take some more definite action with regard to the situation in the three Baltic States of Esthonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.” He went on to explain that “the food conditions in these states are simply terrible. From a shipping, finance, and food point of view, we could overcome this if some kind of order can be established. We are gradually extending our distribution along the coastal fringe.” With the full support of Samuel Elito Morison at the American Peace Commission, Hoover got the green light for a rapid expansion of U.S. assistance programs.

### **Putting Children First**

As famine inevitably hits the youngest hardest, the ARA paid particular attention to children through its Children's Relief program. As Hoover explained: “The needs of the children were particularly acute. The invaders not only plundered the food in general but they also drove off the cattle so that there was little milk available.”

The first reports arriving at the ARA's main office from Estonia painted a disturbing picture of a country where “the people were bordering on starvation.” In Tallinn, “every house in the city was visited, and conditions were found which were really deplorable. Children were without clothing, and had to be kept indoors because they had no warm things to protect them against the cold winter weather. Most of the schoolboys fourteen years and older were at the front with the army. The cupboards were empty of even the bare necessities of life. The people were living almost entirely on a diet of bread made from potato flour, oat flour and sawdust.” Things were no better in other cities like Tartu where “children in school in the city numbered some 7,000 out of which 50 per cent were ill due to underfeeding. 2,000 have not sufficient money to purchase clothing so can not attend school regularly but stay at home. The food for the children is practically nothing.”

The ARA's first task was to deliver regular food shipments to Estonia's children as quickly and efficiently as possible. Their next job was to provide clothing. But even before the first shipments of clothes started to arrive, “American Relief Association flour sacks were in great demand. Many an Esthonian youngster went to school in blouses and trousers decorated with the trademark of an American flour miller.” Until it shut down in August 1922, the ARA Children's Relief fund focused its efforts on feeding and clothing Estonia's many war orphans.

John A. Gade, the first U.S. Commissioner to the Baltic States (1919-1920), aptly summed up the ARA's work in his memoirs *All My Born Days* (1942). The Estonians, he wrote, “understood that it would take a few years before they could make both ends meet in their economic life, particularly as the Germans and the Bolsheviks had left the little country in such a sorry mess. That my country's interests were purely altruistic was a card in our favor, and that my countryman Hoover was feeding the mothers and children an even greater one.” As *Vaba Maa* reported on November 9, 1928, after Tallinn's honorary citizen was elected U.S. President, “Hoover was for Estonia truly that 'American uncle,' whose assistance we didn't have to wait for, who came and helped us in our time of need.”

## **Estonia Thanks**

The three U.S. Army officers responsible for coordinating ARA assistance programs in Estonia were Colonel John Groome (Chief of Mission to the Baltics), Captain John Miller (Chief of Mission to Estonia), and Lieutenant John Thors (Children's Relief). The Estonian Government awarded these three men – plus Lieutenant Colonel R.G. Dawley, Major B.B. Powers, and Lieutenant A.A. Grandstedt – the Cross of Liberty First Class in 1920. Mr. Durrell Noyes, who took charge of the ARA's programs in 1920, received the Cross of Liberty Third Class in 1922.

## **The ARA at Work**

Between the arrival of the first shipments in late April 1919 and the signing of the Paris Peace Treaty on January 10, 1920, President Hoover's staff calculated that the ARA shipped over 46,000 metric tons of food to Estonia – an average of 41 kilos for every Estonian. This food (mainly flour and grain) arrived by ship from the United States and England as well as from stockpiles in Europe meant to feed U.S. troops. The ARA also coordinated Estonia's purchase of 462 metric tons of rye from Denmark to insure that there was enough seed for the spring plantings of 1919 and 1920. With the help of the American Red Cross, the ARA organized the distribution of 4,846 metric tons of clothes. The ARA also shipped 312 metric tons of medical supplies on behalf of the American Red Cross.

The total value of this assistance designed to keep Estonia going until the 1920 harvest was more than \$17,000,000. From February 1920 until August 1922, the ARA shipped an additional 5,847 metric tons of food and clothing to Estonian orphans valued at more than \$1,600,000 – including a contribution from the Estonian Government of almost \$300,000. The purchasing power of a U.S. dollar back in 1920 was at least ten times what it is today.



*Former President Herbert Hoover signs the Tallinn city guest book while Mayor Jaan Soots looks on. (Photo by A. Kalm - Eesti Filmiarhiiv)*

*In appreciation and high esteem*

*Herbert Hoover*

*March 14 1938*

*Former President Herbert Hoover's inscription in the Tallinn guest book. (Image courtesy of Tallinna Linnaarhiiv: TLA 82, 2, 452)*



*Tallinn's Mayor Jaan Soots (with handkerchief in pocket) shows former President Herbert Hoover various historical artifacts. (Photo by A. Kalm - Eesti Filmiarhiiv)*