

**FOREST HISTORY IN THE BALTIC STATES FROM
THE MIDDLE AGES UNTIL PRESENT
-ESTONIA AND LATVIA-**

by

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Short introduction to the history of the Baltic States

The territory of present Estonia and Latvia, called "Livland" until the 17th century was organised as a "Ordensstat" dominated from a German upper class. This territory was divided into "Estonia" in the North and "Livland" in the South, due to a change in social order because of the Reformation in the 16th century. Both regions became Swedish provinces.

At the end of the 18th century, the Baltic provinces were annexed to Russia. These changes influenced political organisation, ethnic, cultural and social conditions as well.

The breakdown of the Russian and German Empires after the First World War created a basis for an independent development of the Baltic provinces in the future as free states, which existed from 1918 until 1940 (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania).

As a result of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the Baltic states were integrated to Russian interests in 1939, and allocated to the Soviet Union in 1940. From 1941 to 1944, the Baltic states were under German occupation. However, after the Second World War they were assigned to the Soviet Union again.

Development of forests from the Middle Ages until the 18th century

In the 13th century the Baltic states were nearly completely covered with forests. The main species at this time were spruce and pine, oak, alder, and birch.

The oak forests, growing on the most fertile soils, were cut preferably for agricultural use. However, the use of timber started to increase, causing a ruinous exploitation in the existing forests. This phenomenon occurred in many other regions in Western and Central Europe, as well. Besides this intensive use of wood, wars (e.g. "Livland War", 1558-1583) also had detrimental effects on the forests.

At the end of the 16th century the timber industry started to develop. Trade with wood products, first sawmills and export of wood resulted in an increased decline in forests. This decline pursued in the 17th century without any protective or reforestation measures. Devastation and clearing of the forests resulted first in a decline in oak forests. The oak was nearly exterminated in the Baltic states until the end of the 18th century and conifers became the dominating species in this area.

First laws concerning protection of the remaining forests were settled during the 17th century. The proclamation of Absolutism (Absolutist Monarchy), which gained popularity at the end of the 17th century induced major changes in the legislature and the executive, even in forest administration. During this time, expropriations and taking possessions were carried out by the Swedish government. Also trade of wood was used as a source of money. This unsustainable cultivation obviously leads to a further decline in forests.

Instructions and ordinances settled by the Swedish general governor, affecting the forests, did not have any legislative consequences at this time. The main focus was to protect the forest as a source of income, not for its sustainability.

In conclusion, at the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century, the forest in this special area was about to decline due to a severely intensive use of timber, fuel and wood in general, and due to a need of agricultural land.

The time among 1710 and 1762.

The opening of the Russian period.

Czar Peter I. until Czar Peter III.

The "Nordic War" (1700-1721) had disastrous effects to the woods, as every war used to destroy the forests.

In 1710 and 1712 the Baltic provinces Estonia and Livland became Russian. In 1721 they were annexed to Russia after 100 years under Swedish government.

Peter the Great continued the policy of state centralisation initiated by the Swedish government. His interest was to make the forests more profitable. Laws of protection were settled to keep the forest as an economic branch of industry. At this time, sustainable treatment of forests was not a priority.

Peter I., was particularly interested in navigation and shipbuilding. Therefore, his interest in forestry, or at least in wood helped him to create a number of laws concerning the forest. After he died (1725) the economic policy changed. The export of wood increased dramatically in the next years, especially to Great Britain, Portugal, and France. Thus, in the late 1730s, Czarina Anna Ivanovna (1730-1740) decided to enact laws that set a limit for timber export from the Baltic provinces. Further regulations followed which dealt with forest protection in these two provinces, which secured revenues. The domestic requirements were high and the woods still declining. Subsequently, Czarina Elisabeth Petrovna (1740- 1761) instructed an embargo on wood exports from a special area in the Baltic states once again in 1742. Wood scarcity was deteriorating. In the period under the reign of Czar Peter III in 1761/62 under Katharina II (1662-1696) the economic policy changed again. The relations to Western Europe were intensified which had a major influence on the way of dealing with forestry.

1762-1783.

The reign of Czarina Katharina II.

In this period influential changes in general policy were occurring. There was a concern for economical reforms in agriculture and forestry. Actually, forest decline seemed to persist and the Baltic forest was totally depressed. Subsequently, in the

1780's, first measures of reforestation began so that total devastation of the remaining forests was avoided. These steps created a basis for further development in forestry. A real, "concrete forestry" rose. At this time, sustainable ideas evolved.

1783-1918.

Further development of Forestry

At the beginning of the 19th century, the situation of the forests was still awful. Even if a number of forestry institutions existed in this area, uncontrolled and arbitrary clearings were made. In the middle of the 19th century, the wood industry started to increase. Forest Exploitation was going on and over-cutting could be realised.

But in the 1860s and later, reforestation was intensified. The wood industry became increasingly important and exports were increasing. Even agricultural land was planted with trees. The use of domestic and foreign seeds gained popularity.

At the end of the 19th century, 45% of the area in Estonia and 64% in Livland were still covered with forests.

Forestry was strongly influenced by general policy because wood was always a source of income for the government. An attempt was made to change the privately owned land to state owned land.

Moreover, a problem was the application of theoretical knowledge in practice. Forest education developed quickly and became more and more important in the following years. The most popular educational institution was Tharandt (now a part of Technical University of Dresden). The understanding of forestry and forest interests improved.

1918-1945.

The free states Estonia and Latvia (1918-1940)

The Soviet Republics (1940/41)

The occupation by the Germans (1941-1944)

In 1918, after the First World War, the Russian Empire broke down and the Baltic provinces became free states. In 1919, expropriations without compensation of private owned agricultural and forest land had taken place in the newly found Republic of Estonia and in the Republic of Latvia. Reforms and new organisations caused a drastic change in the present situation. The total forested area became state-owned. In the next years, forest management districts were established as an authority to govern. In Estonia, these management districts were subordinated to the Ministry of Agriculture. New forest management planning developed. In 1920/21, the first forest surveys and inventories were made. However, clearings were once again performed due to the failing economic and the settling of land.

A problem was still to find personnel with a high educational level. In Estonia, in 1920, for instance, there were merely eleven people with an education in forestry. In Latvia, the situation was quite similar.

After 1920, small areas of land was started to be given back to the people, but the amount of private-owned land never reached the level as it was before. Because the private forests were treated rather carelessly, an association was founded to control this land.

The repeated increase of wood export led to ruinous exploitations again. Also the importance of wood industry rose. But in time, the situation became better. The use of seeds improved. Furthermore, forestry changed more and more into an intensive branch of industry.

In 1939, the Hitler-Stalin Pact entailed the annexation of the Baltic republics to Russia in 1940. This caused far-reaching changes in forestry once again, even if the German occupation came next in 1941 until 1944. A part of the expropriations made by the Russian government were returned to the previous land owners by the German government during this period. The policy adopted by the Germans in the Baltic states was understood by the Baltic population as a liberation in general.

Forestry in Estonia and Latvia after 1945

At the end of the Second World War, the Baltic states were allocated to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Consequently, forestry in the Baltic provinces was strongly influenced by the Russian economy and administration. In 1945, after the re-establishment of an equal situation to 1940, the forest was treated in the same way as before.

For the past 50 years, Estonia turned from an agricultural to an industrial country. Still, agriculture and forestry are depressed. Currently, Estonia contains 33% forest land. Two thirds of the forested area is coniferous, (mainly pine and spruce). Today, the most dominating species is pine. Approximately 46% of the total forested area consists of pine. Spruce covers about 20% and birch 28% of this area. Still, further species are aspen, alder, ash and oak. At one time, oak was the most important tree species in the Baltic states, but careless cutting and clearings are responsible for its decline.

The Baltic forests had to pay an enormous tribute to the years of war and the post-war years (First World War) and subsequent expropriations. Furthermore, the need of foreign currencies led to increased wood exports until 1939. The former devastations during the Second World War and the cuttings in the following years exhausted the forest tremendously and it will take many years to regenerate and return to its original potential.

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