



Baltic Countdown: A Nation Vanishes

Peggie Benton

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"A soldier emerged from the turret of the tank and motioned to the policemen to step back. There was a moment's hush, and then someone waved a red flag and the masses surged forward once more. With an angry rattle the gunner swung his weapon, sending a swathe of bullets into the densely-packed crowd. There was a moment of total silence and then screams as the onlookers struggled to push past the dead and dying and escape. The soldier watched dispassionately, his hand on the trigger.

Within moments the square was empty but for the bodies on the ground, some still, some writhing. The policemen slipped their revolvers into the holsters. The turret of the tank closed as it drew off, and we hurried through the gathering dusk in the direction of home. As we reached our part of the town not a soul was to be seen on the streets."

In 1938, diplomats Peggie and Kenneth Benton were posted to Riga, Latvia. While Peggie processed visa applications to the Commonwealth as Europeans fled German and Soviet aggression, Kenneth worked in secret, decrypting covert messages for the British Secret Service. Their posting coincided with an extraordinary and horrifying period in the nation's history when the Soviet Union invaded two years later.

With troops pouring into Riga and Second World War battle fronts cutting off escape routes to the west, the Bentons embark on an epic, eventful journey back to London on the Trans-Siberian Express, through the heart of Communist Russia – bureaucratic, intriguing and often simply bizarre.

Baltic Countdown is an extraordinary and unique tale of a pivotal period in the history of the Baltic states, by turns travelogue, memoir and social history.

"A British diplomat's wife's beautifully observed eye-witness account of the Soviet occupation"

-- *Condé Nast Traveler*

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