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ESTONIA IN WORLD WAR II

1. DESTRUCTION of the STATE

World War II began with the unexpectedly fast and total destruction of an important regional ally of Estonia - Poland, during the joint operation of Germany and the Soviet Union.

The collapse of Poland together with the total external political isolation caused a moral shock to the political leaders of Estonia. On September 24, 1939, Moscow demanded Estonia to hand over the bases to the Red Army and the government of Estonia accepted the ultimatum signing the corresponding agreement on September 28. Officially, it resulted in 25,000 Red Army soldiers being brought into Estonia on October 18. In reality, the Estonian side lost control over the strength of the Red Army and the activities on the territory of the bases. In April 1940, over 30,000 members of the army and 10,000 members of the labour battalion were situated on the territory of the bases and the influx continued.

On June 14, 1940, Wehrmacht marched into Paris. The western allied forces completely lost control over the European continent and on June 16, Moscow presented the ultimatum to Estonia that a new government is appointed and the occupation of the whole country is allowed. On June 17, Estonia accepted the ultimatum and the statehood of Estonia de facto ceased to exist. There is no consensus in the Estonian society about the decision that the leadership of that time made. The armed forces of Estonia are trained in the spirit that the capitulation was a mistake and at every case should have had to be resisted by force. The undersigned is of the same opinion. It is interesting that still in 1940, the Soviet army command was afraid of moving against the Estonian (Latvian, Lithuanian) army despite of the capitulation of the political leaders. The occupation of the Baltic States was carried through as a regular military operation (according to the plan, which would have been carried out at the time of the war). 160,000 men, supported by 600 tanks were concentrated for the invasion into Estonia. 5 divisions of the Air Force with 1150 aircraft blockaded the whole Baltic air space against Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia. The Baltic Navy blockaded the operation from the sea. The KGB was ordered to be ready for the reception of 58,000 prisoners of war. In June 1940, shortly after the occupation of the territory of Estonia, there were 130,000 Soviet soldiers, workers of the KGB and the so-called specialists engaged in establishing the new administrative apparatus of Estonia.

2. The TOUCH of the WAR

Although the Estonian country and nation didn't take part in the war until the summer of 1941, the war touched Estonia and Estonians directly. At the outbreak of the Winter

War, the Russian aircraft took off from the Estonian bases to bomb Finland. There were false blitzes against the Estonian objects. The warnings about movements of the Russian aircraft were broadcasted to Finns secretly. An unknown number of men went to Finland to fight voluntarily against Russians. Officially, there were 58 Estonians in the International SISU brigade, but the real number exceeded it remarkably.

On December 10, 1939 the Russian Navy submerged the Estonian steamer "Kassari" near Hiiumaa. Up to July 1940, when Estonian ships still sailed under their flags, 18 Estonian cargo ships (total 30,000 BRT) together with 100 seamen were wrecked at North Sea, the Baltic, the Norwegian Sea and at the Atlantic Ocean during the hostilities. 13 ships (15,000 BRT) were privateered. 45,000 BRT meant the loss of a quarter of ship's hold. When Estonia was proclaimed the Soviet Republic, the crews of 42 Estonian ships in foreign waters refused to return to homeland (40% of our pre-war ship's hold)? These ships were brought into requisition by the British powers and were used in the Atlantic convoys. So, during the time of the war, approximately 1000 Estonian seamen served at the British militarised merchant marine, 200 of them as officers. A small number of Estonians served in the Royal Air Force, in Land Forces and in the US Army, altogether no more than two hundred.

3. VICTIMS OF THE OCCUPATION

The first loss for Estonia was the repatriation of the Baltic-Germans (12,000 people) to their country of origin. During the year before the entry of the German Forces, the Soviet occupation powers arrested ca 8000 people and over 10,000 were deported on June 14, 1941. Approximately 2200 local people were executed. Later, about a half of the deported returned to homeland, of the arrested even less.

When the war broke out, over 33,000 men were deported to Russia and 2000 more under the cover of working duties. Of the mobilized, 10,700 people starved to death and died in illnesses in the so-called labour battalion and 8000 fell at front. In "8th Estonian Rifle Corps" 13,000 men of the 27,000 perished or were wounded only at Velikije Luki. This number contains non-Estonians and Russian-Estonians who made up about a half of the corps. Over a thousand people disappeared in 1940/41. The total loss of the year reaches 60.000 people, in addition 25.000 escaped to Russia in 1941. From those at least a half perished before the end of the war. 23.000 perished or disappeared during the Winter War in Finland. The Estonian Army was also the victim of the occupation, especially the officer corps, as they were not allowed live up to their oath. Before the war broke out, 800 Estonian officers i.e. about a half of the total were executed, arrested or starved to death in prison camps. The Estonian Army, where in June 1940 there were 16,800 men, was changed into "22nd Territorial Rifle Corps", which was totally russified at the beginning of the war (only 9 000 previous Estonian soldiers stayed to 20,000 Russians). Thousands of men escaped from the corps when sent to Russia at the outbreak of the war. 5 500 Estonian soldiers served in the corps during the first battle. 4 500 of them went over to the German side. In September 1941, when the corps was liquidated, there were still 500 previous Estonian soldiers. A number had

fallen and evacuated as injured. At maximum, 900 previous Estonian soldiers stayed on the Russian side (calculations by E. Laasi).

4. SUMMER WAR, 1941

On June 22, 1941 Germans took the forward offensive in the east at last. On June 26, Finland shouldered Germany. On July 2, Germans reached Riga and the occupants and those connected with the Soviet regime started to escape from Estonia. On July 3, Stalin made his public statement over the radio calling for "scorched earth" policy in the areas to be abandoned. In Estonia with this aim the destruction battalions were compiled mostly of the lower classes (by official data of July 8, 1941 13 battalions with 2 600 men).

In Balticum, the German Army Group North took an offensive (Field Marshal Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb) with 20 infantry, 3 motor- and 3 armored divisions in total. The Red Army had the Baltic Group (Marshal Voroshilov) with 19 infantry, 7 mounted divisions and 5 armoured brigades in the occupied Balticum. After the siege of Riga, 18th Army of the Group North (Field Marshal Georg von Küchler) took forward fast and crossed the Estonian southern border with wide front on July 7-9. The Russian 8th Army (Major General Ljubovtsev), thoroughly destroyed in Latvia, retreated in panic in front of the 2nd corps of the German Army behind the Pärnu River- the Emajõgi line to July 12.

Now the Germans stopped marching forward, waiting for parts moving from the east of the Lake Peipus. The idea was to reach first to the water east of the Narva River in order to surround the whole of the Red Army forces in Estonia. Many of the Estonian authors have interpreted this great strategical decision narrowly and wrongly as hostile towards Estonia. The German plan was a success. The command of the Red Army grouped the forces to defend the naval bases of Tallinn. Germans engaged one additional corps and with crossing defeats from the Emajõgi line to the north and northeast near Omedu, surrounded the Russian corps, which defended the Emajõgi line to July 31. 10,000 Russians were executed or taken prisoner.

During the attack directed straight to the north with the siege of Tap, the railway line Tallinn -Narva was broken off and reached the seashore near Kunda on August 6. The 8th Russian Army was cut into two parts. One of the German corps then turned east and liberated Narva on August 17, taking 6000 prisoners during the operation. The second corps together with the one coming from the Pärnu direction surrounded the circle closer around Tallinn. As the 8th Army had been destroyed, the corps staying near Tallinn was put under the command of admiral Tributs, commander of the Baltic Navy. Including the navy, there were 70,000 Russians at the defence of Tallinn. 3 defensive zones were built around Tallinn, with the help of approximately 50,000 convicts from the town. In addition to the artillery, the cannons of the naval fortresses and man-of-wars standing at the port were used. Altogether, 224 cannons and 195 anti-aircraft pieces. The Germans drafted the XLII corps of 3 divisions

(Lieutenant General Baron Raitz von Frenzt) for the siege of Tallinn.

During the battles on August 20-25, Germans broke down the resistance. Russians lost 7500 men. On August 28, 1941 the III battalion of the 505th German regiment invaded Tallinn first, the commander of whom, Oberstleutnant Gottfried Weber, was awarded the Knights Cross, the first man in the battles of Estonia. 11,500 Russians were taken prisoners, over 90 mounted machines; approximately 300 guns and mine throwers were gained.

Russians escaped on ships to the direction of Leningrad but ran into mine barriers near Juminda point. One of the biggest convoy battles of the history began, where Germans wrecked approximately 60 ships with 60,000 people of the 200 that had started their way. The second man awarded the Knights Cross for victory in the battles on the Estonian territory was the commander of the German miners, corvette captain Fridrich Brill.

Estonian islands were being cleaned from September 14 to October 21 during which over 15,000 Russians were taken prisoners and approximately 300 guns and mine throwers were gained. A great help to the German Army were the activities of the Estonian "forest brothers" (partisans). Taking advantage of the enemies losing head, the "forest brothers" liberated South Estonia almost with their own forces. Of course, we have no exact data of the number of the "forest brothers". In general it is taken into account approximately 25,000-35,000 of whom 12,000 were armed to a certain extent and fought actively. On the liberated territories the Home Guard was formed on the basis of the "forest brothers", where over 14,000 by August 1st and up to 25,000 men by September 1st were listed.

In addition, the first improvised units of the army were formed (the greatest of them the battalions of Major Hirvelaan with 300 men, Captain Talpak with 300 men and the ERNA battalion with 400 men compiled on the bases of reconnaissance unit, arrived from Finland). The part of Estonians in the activities of war grew all the time. The most important was the role of the Home Guard which had reached 40,000 men, in cleaning out any remaining troops of the Red Army from the forests in autumn-winter, 1941. Nevertheless, the Estonians played secondary role in the activities of the war, which, unfortunately, has been romantically overestimated. The "forest brothers" and the Home Guard managed to destroy approximately 3 000 members of the Red Army and about a thousand members of NKVD and militia and the destruction battalion (in fact 2428).

The "forest brothers" and the Home Guard took over 25,000 prisoners.

The data about the Estonian losses is also uncertain. Approximately 800 men of the "forest brothers" perished, were executed as prisoners or disappeared, up to 600 men of the Home Guard perished in battles and combing operations.

5. NATIONAL ARMY UNITS in 1941- 1944

Immediately after the arrival of the German troops the formation of the Estonian national army units started. First single battalions under different names were formed (Security,

East, Defence and Police Battalions), also single companies. Initially, they mostly served in the rear of the Army Group North security, fighting against partisans. Up to March 1942 there were 16 Estonian battalions and companies with 10,000 men in Russia and 1500 men in depot battalion in homeland. Altogether, 54 battalions were formed of Estonians, simultaneously of these 24 battalions and 10 companies served the total maximum of 15,000 men. Most of them fought at the front line in 1942.

On August 28, 1942 the German powers announced the legal compilation of the Estonian SS Legion within the SS-Armed. Oberführer Frans Augsberger was nominated the commander of the legion. Up to the end of 1942 1280 men volunteered into the training camp (the so-called Heidelager) in Poland, Debica. On the bases of them the later SS armoured grenadier battalion "Narva" was formed, which fought under the command of the 5th SS armoured division "Wiking" from July 1943 to March 1944.

In March 1943 the partial mobilisation was carried out in Estonia during which 12,000 men were called into service. Of them 5300 were sent to the legion, the rest to the other units of the army. On May 5, 1943 the 3rd Estonian SS voluntary brigade was formed and sent to front near Neveli.

When the front approached Estonia in the autumn and winter of 1943, over 5000 men were mobilised additionally. On January 24, 1944 it was decided to change the Estonian brigade to the voluntary SS division. As the front reached the Narva River at the beginning of February, the division was brought closer to Narva. By general mobilisation on February 1, 45,000 men were additionally called into service. Of them approximately a half were sent to the freshly formed 6 borderguard regiments and 10,000 to their reserve regiment (div.300 generalmajor Höfer and div.207 oberst Callas). All single battalions (Schutzmannschaft pataillon 29 – 42 and Estnische Polizei Front Bataillon 286 – 293) were assembled to homeland, a part of them were added to the SS division. Altogether, ca 60,000 men served in the national units of the army in February 1944. In the Estonian SS division there were about 10,000 men of them. The Inspection General of the Estonian Forces was formed as a leading organisation (but not in the operative field). The chief position was given to Oberführer Johannes Soodla (chief of staff Obersturmbannführer Alfred Luts). Approximately 37,000 men were left in internal defence based on Home Guards (Colonel Arnold Sinka) when the others went to front. At the time of the important battles, in autumn 1944, battalions were compiled from the members of the Home Guard with 10,000 men in total. The number of men grew over 15,000 in the Estonian division in September. 3000 youngsters were mobilised into air defence (auxiliary service of the Air Force). The compiling of the Estonian units of the Air Forces had started already in 1942. In 1944 the groups of night bombers and navy reconnaissance and the Navy School had been formed. In the Air Forces there served ca 1000 Estonians, of them 140 pilots flying on 100 aircraft. 300 Estonians served in the German Navy.

When a critical time arrived in the fate of Estonia, ca 2000 men returned to homeland, 3400 came back from Finland. 400 Estonians served in the Finnish Navy, of most of them the infantry regiment 200 was compiled on February 8, 1944. In August the

regiment returned to homeland by the Finnish- German agreement and became a part of the Estonian division. In autumn 1944 at defence of homeland there was the same number of Estonians as at the time of the War of Independence, in total 100,000 men.

6. AT the DEFENCE of HOMELAND

On February 1, 1944 the Red Army reached the border of Estonia as a part of the great offensive which began on January 14. Field Marshal Walter Model was nominated the leader of the much-suffered Army Group North. His 18. Army had 14 dead tired battalions against the 4 corps of the Soviet 2. Striking army. The Russians crossed the river and stroke several bridgeheads. The troops landed in Meriküla. The decisive attack based on violent fire of 3000 guns and mine throwers began on February 13. On February 13 the improvised Estonian regiment "Tallinn" was let extend into Auvere (Major Richard Rubach). One Estonian battalion destroyed the landed troops (514 were executed from 525) and the remains cut to pieces the assault reached to Narva - Tallinn railway line. The situation was saved. In addition Russians brought the whole corps but in the meantime the Germans had strengthened. The Estonian SS division also arrived near Narva. On its way one of the battalions (I/45 Hastuf Harald Riipalu) of the division broke the Russian landed forces which had crossed the Lake Lammijärv during February 14 - 16 near Meerapalu. 2000 Russians were destroyed, much loot gained.

On February 24 (!) the counterattack of the Estonian division to break the Russian bridgeheads began. The battalion of Hastuf Rudolf Bruus (II/46) destroyed the bridgehead of Riigiküla. The battalion of Ostuf Ain - Ervin Meri (I/46) liquidated the bigger bridgehead of Vaasa-Siivertsi-Vepsaküla, where a young Uscha Harald Nugiseks was awarded the Knights Cross as first of the Estonian soldiers. On March 6, the task was fulfilled.

The raged leadership of the Red Army draw 9 corps under Narva against 7 divisions and one brigade of Germans. On March 1, a new aggressive offensive began in the direction of Auvere. The assault was stopped by the 658th battalion of the first Estonian awarded the Knights Cross Major Alfons Rebane and by the 659th. East battalion of Captain Georg Sooden, fighting in the area of Putki-Sirgala surrounded until the counterattack of the Germans. The attacks continued. Only the lying of pressure changed. On March 17, Russians attacked in the direction of the main offensive with the forces of 20 divisions against 3 defensive, but could not break the defence no matter of the mass of the perished. Up to the end of March the Russians had run out of strength: 70,000 men had perished (on the German side 20,000). On April 7, the leadership of the Red Army ordered to go over to defence. Before that the counterattack of the Germans began. The Russian forces on the Auvere bridgehead were destroyed and the remains were let extend to Krivasoo marsh. In the battles during April Russian lost 50,000 men against 20,000 Germans. The huge battle lasted for three months, one of the greatest in the world history of war (!), cost Russians 120,000 fallen and for 40,000 Germans. The part of the Estonian army units could not play decisive part in this giant struggle but the Estonian soldier showed himself among the best volunteers of the world (German, Walloon, Flemish and Scandinavian) worthily. Russians barbarized of the

defeat, organised many terrorised, bombing attacks towards the towns of Estonia in March, incl. bombing of Tallinn on March 9. In June 1944, because of the strategical problems elsewhere, 5 German incomplete divisions and the Estonian division stayed at the front of Narva, in total 27,000 men. Russians had 2 armies with 205,000 men. The superiority of the fire force was 8-, of the air force 9- and in tanks 3 times. On July 24 the Russians began an attack in the direction of Auvere to surrender the unit of the army of Narva (III German SS-mounted corps of Obergruppenführer Felix Steiner). They were stopped by I battalion (Stubaf Paul Maitla) of the 45 regiment (Riipalu) and the fusiliers (previous "Narva") under the leadership of Hatuf Hando Ruus (Ruus was the only Estonian who was awarded the German Cross-in gold).

The evacuation of Narva was organised and settled on the line of "Tannenberg" in Sinimäed. There were unimaginable hard battles from July 26 - August 10; the regiment of Riipalu defended where the key point lay on Grenadiers which. On July 29, the uplands were lost but fighting against overwhelming majority, Estonians took the uplands back on the next day. There was a Russian division against each Estonian battalion here; still the enemy was destroyed. In the 109 corps of army 255 men survived. 102 Russian tanks were destroyed. Riipalu and Maitla were awarded the Knights Cross. On August 10, the command of the red Army stopped the attacks having lost 11 divisions and 2 brigades. By their own data, 12,000 Russians fell in Sinimäed.

When the break-through in Sinimäed failed, the main struggle was carried to the south of the Lake Peipus, where on August 11, Petseri was taken and Võru on August 13. The Russian tanks approached Sangaste on their way beating the borderguards regiments and battalions consisting mainly of Estonians. To prevent the cutting off of the battalion of Narva Germans hurriedly brought the dangerous mounted group of the Count von Strachwitz. With the counterattack, which started on August 16, the German tanks destroyed 3 Russian divisions and saved the situation. Near Tartu the enemy was stopped by the military groups sent from Narva under the command of Ostubaf Rebane and Paul Vent and Walloons of Ostubaf Leon Degrelle.

The "Finnish boys" who then fought as the III battalion of the 46th Estonian SS-regiment (Hastuf Voldemar Pärlin) reached into offensive in the region of Tartu and stroke Russians heavily near Pupastvere-Ovi. 34 men fell, 136 were wounded and 44 were awarded the Iron Cross - which could be the record of all times.

The front then ran at the range of Sinimäe, along the Emajõgi to the Lake Võrtsjärv and further along the Väike-Emajõgi southwards. As Finland left the war on September 4, 1944 according to the peace agreement with Russians the defence of the mainland became impossible and the command of the German Army decided to evacuate from Estonia. From the point of view of Germans, the manoeuvre was a success. 43,000 Estonian soldiers and 24,000 civilians left from Estonia to Germany. Some of the units made a defence effort at their own risk. It gave a political chance to symbolically restore the Republic of Estonia in Tallinn for September 20/21, 1944. From the military aspect, the idea was naive and failed totally.

Estonian islands showed resistance until November 23, 1944, when Sõrve was evacuated

According to the Russian data, the conquering of the territory of Estonia cost them 126,000 casualties, in the German data the number is 170,000. On the German side, their own data shows 30,000 dead which is probably underrated, the more realistic number would be 45,000.

The soldiers who left homeland were all gathered to the Estonian division honoured with the title of grenadiers. The division last fought near Oppeln, at the front of Schönau and at last in the region of Hirschberg. The last commander of the division was Staf Rebane, the only Estonian to be presented the Knights Cross with the oak leaves at the end of the war.

7. LOSSES of the WAR

During the war against the eastern enemy in World War II, 14.600 men perished on the German and Finnish sides (of these 6 666 known by name). According to different data, 6000 - 12 000 Estonians fell in prison, of these 3000 - 4000 during the fights of the autumn battles in homeland (2749 men of the Estonian Division fell in

Prison, of these 500 in Chechia). Probably by errative data, 1200 - 1500 men died in different prison camps. In addition, Check bandits killed 1300 Estonian prisoners of war after may 9-th 1945, before the arrival of the troops of the Red Army.

In 1944, 80,000 people fled from homeland by sea, at least 5 000 of them perished on the sea while Russians were wrecking the ships of the fugitives. In addition, 5 000 remained lost at sea, some of them probably remaining in the German Eastern Zone. 25,000 Estonians reached Sweden and a further 42,000 Germany. During the war, 8 000 Estonian Swedes and their Estonian family members had emigrated to Sweden. Altogether, 75,000 people left homeland and established in the West.

During the German occupation, 6600 Estonian citizens were executed, including 929 Jews and 243 Gypsies.

8. AFTER the END of the WAR

After the retreat of Germans, at least 30,000 soldiers remained in hiding in the Estonian forests, further on leading a massive guerrilla war. In 1949, still, 27.650 Soviet militaries led the war against the local partisans. Only the 1949 mass deportation (21,000 people were taken away) broke the basis of the guerrilla movement and, further on, the failure of the Hungarian uprising broke the moral resistance of the 700 men still remaining under cover.

According to the Soviet data, up to 1953, 20,351 partisans were disarmed. Of these,

1 510 perished in the battles. During that period, 1 728 members of the Red Army, NKVD and the militia were killed by the "forest brothers". Considering the 6 600 partisans who gave themselves up to the November of 1949, the above mentioned number 30,000 can be regarded as modest.