

Introduction

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At the end of May 2019, the Estonian War Museum – General Laidoner Museum and Estonian Military Academy organised the conference *Independence Wars in North-Eastern Europe and Beyond* in Tartu. The conference commemorated the 100th anniversary of the Estonian War of Independence. In addition to Estonia, several other nations were fighting their wars of independence at the same time, but the majority of them were unable to break away from the crumbling empires and establish national statehood. First and foremost, Soviet Russia, the successor of tsarist Russia, was able to consolidate itself after a bloody civil war, but in doing so releasing its grip on the Baltic countries, Finland and Poland.

Soviet propaganda claimed until the end of the communist empire that the workers, poor peasants and progressive intellectuals of the national minorities of the Russian empire achieved proper self-determination and independence only in the brotherly family of the Soviet nations. However, neither the Byelorussian SSR, the Ukrainian SSR, the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, comprising Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia established in the early 1920s, nor the Central Asian Soviet republics, which were established a little later, became internationally recognized statehoods. In 1945, Ukraine and Belarus became founding members of the United Nations due to the international situation at the time, but they only gained actual statehood after the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

Hence, the conference agenda did not only include the issues related to the Estonian War of Independence. The speakers came from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Sweden, Denmark, Poland, Germany, Russia, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. The presentations covered events in all the Baltic states and Poland, as well as in Central Asia and Transcaucasia in those turbulent years. Several presentations focused on the fate of soldiers, including foreign volunteers fighting in the Baltic countries, prisoners of war in

Germany and also on relations between soldiers and civilians during wars of independence.

Although the presentations were to be published in the Estonian Yearbook of Military History in 2020, their publication was postponed for various reasons. Meanwhile in 2020, a new two-volume comprehensive study of the Estonian War of Independence was completed at the initiative of the Estonian War Museum – General Laidoner Museum, financed by the ministry of defence and compiled by Lauri Vahtre,¹ replacing the two-volume publication of the late 1930s.² An abbreviated version of this study will be published in English in the near future. Therefore, the lack of a contemporary comprehensive study of the history of the Estonian War of Independence has been addressed and it will be further refined by keeping in mind an international readership.

Some of the conference speakers did not want their presentations to be published, mostly because they were based on the studies which had been published before. This yearbook comprises the articles written on the bases of four presentations. Research Professor Vasilijus Safronovas of the University of Klaipėda, Lithuania, writes about the formation of the Lithuanian army and the experiences of the soldiers who had participated in the World War I in the Armed Forces of Tsarist Russia, as well as about the distinctions of volunteers and the conscripted. Emeritus Professor of Military History Lars Ericson Wolke of the Swedish Defence University, Stockholm, writes about a small unit of Swedish volunteers which fought in the Estonian War of Independence in 1919 and about the fate of its members. Research Assistant Thomas Rettig of the Chair of East Euro-

¹ *Eesti Vabadussõja ajalugu (History of the Estonian War of Independence)*, I, *Vabadussõja eelugu. Punaväe sissetung ja Eesti vabastamine (The Prelude to the War of Independence, Invasion of the Red Army and Liberation of Estonia)*, written by Peeter Kaasik, Lauri Vahtre, Urmas Salo et al., compiled and edited by Lauri Vahtre; II, *Kaitsesõda piiride taga ja lõpuvõitlused (Defensive War Beyond the Borders and Final Fights)*, written by Peeter Kaasik, Lauri Vahtre, Urmas Salo, compiled and edited by Lauri Vahtre, Eesti sõjamuuseumi – kindral Laidoneri muuseumi toimetised (Proceedings of the Estonian War Museum – General Laidoner Museum) 10 (1–2) (Tallinn: Varrak, 2020).

² *Eesti Vabadussõda 1918–1920 (Estonian War of Independence 1918–1920)*, parts I and II, compiled by August Traksmäe, edited by Mihkel Kattai jt (Tallinn: Eesti Vabadussõja Ajaloo Komitee, 1937 and 1939).

pean History of the University of Greifswald, Germany, analyses the role of warlords in the continuation wars and wars of independence in the aftermath of World War I using the example of Pavel Bermond-Avalov West Russian Voluntary Army, active in Latvia. Professor Khachatur Stepanyan of the Chair of World History and its Teaching Methods of the Armenian State Pedagogical University after Khachatur Abovyan, Yerevan, Armenia writes in his article about the failure of Armenia's independence aspirations between the Soviet Russia of Vladimir Lenin and the Turkey of Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk) and about the Armenian uprising of February 1921.

In recent years, the repressions and terror of both sides during the Estonian War of Independence have caught the attention of a number of Estonian history researchers. This is not a new topic, as it was touched upon already during the war of independence and later. Memorials were set up in memory of the victims of the Red Terror after the War of Independence, whereas the White Terror was one of the leading topics of the Soviet propaganda and the official approach to history in the studies of the Estonian War of Independence throughout the Soviet era. It goes without saying that for the Soviets, it was not Estonia's independence war but a class war as a part of the Russian civil war and struggle against foreign intervention.

In both cases, it was stigmatizing the enemy to a greater or lesser extent which is obvious during and after the war. Even a century later, an impartial view on the issue may cause misunderstanding and resentment. Unlike in the past, today it is possible to use the materials of both sides as far as they have survived, as well as memoirs and historical research of the topic is possible. In addition, the researchers have at their disposal the studies of historians on the Red and White Terror in Estonia's neighbouring countries.

Toivo Kikkas's studies are based on the proceedings of the penal institutions of both sides – the field courts martial of the Estonian army and the Extraordinary Commissions (so-called Cheka) of the Soviet Russia. Ants Jürman tries to identify the victims of terror of both sides in the eastern part of Viru County, in Narva and Ivangorod. He concludes that this was one of the regions with a large number of victims, suffering the

most between the bolshevist revolution of 1917 and the end of the Estonian War of Independence at the beginning of 1920.

Regardless of the publication of a comprehensive study of the Estonian War of Independence and a biographical reference book of the cavaliers of the Estonian Cross of Liberty³ as well as a review of the monuments of the Estonian War of Independence⁴ and a number of other smaller studies on the history of the War of Independence, the research of this field is far from being complete. The war ended more than a hundred years ago but yet more and more sources become apparent in the archives of Estonia and other countries, whose digitization in the last decades makes them more available. An opportunity to process large volumes of information fast brings out new interconnections, unnoticed so far and puts new fields of research on the agenda. Last but not least, the birth of each new generation of historians brings along a new look at the past influenced by the knowledge which has been saved earlier as well as the different view created by the present and the future. Hence, the current yearbook makes for an interim conclusion in the research of the Estonian War of Independence, but it is definitely not the last time when the Estonian Yearbook of Military History writes about the Estonian War of Independence.

³ Jaak Pihlak, Mati Strauss and Ain Krillo, *Eesti Vabaduse Risti kavalerid (Cavaliers of the Estonian Cross of Liberty)*, compiled by Jaak Pihlak (Viljandi: Vabadussõja Ajaloo Selts, Viljandi Muuseum, 2016).

⁴ Mati Strauss, Ain Krillo and René Viljat, *100 aastat Vabadussõja mälestusmärke (100 years of the War of Independence Monuments)*, compiled by Mati Strauss (Keila: Vabadussõja Ajaloo Selts, 2023).