

Estonian Units in the Wehrmacht, SS and Police System, as well as the Waffen-SS, During World War II

Recruitment and Establishment of the Units

Toomas Hiio

In the course of the Second World War, Estonia was occupied by two totalitarian states. In 1940–1941, and again, from 1944 on, the occupier was the Soviet Union, but during the years 1941–1944, it was Nazi Germany. And Estonians fought in the security and military forces of both occupiers. Plus, Estonians who had fled to Finland, also fought in the ranks of the armed forces of that nation.

When Germany at first attacked the USSR, in June 1941, it wasn't interested in recruiting the inhabitants of the freshly conquered lands into its armed forces. But already in July, the Germans realized that they needed additional manpower, especially for securing the rear of their army; for transporting the large numbers of Soviet prisoners of war; as well as for guarding roads, railroads, bridges, military bases, etc. At first, the Germans began to organize units of auxiliaries recruited from amongst anti-Communist Soviet prisoners of war, and later, also made use of volunteers from amongst the civilian population of the occupied territories. And many Estonians were ready to join the German armed forces, so as to help free their homeland of the Communist occupiers, and to fight on the front against the Soviet Union. The German *Wehrmacht* (unified armed forces of Germany from 1935 to 1945) was, at first, greeted in Estonia as a force freeing the country of the hated Communist regime. It was believed that the Germans would restore Estonian independence, and that fighting in their armed forces would help this process along.

Until December 1941, Estonia was under the direct control of the *Wehrmacht*, being, at first, part of the official rear area of the 18th Army, and then, of Army Group Nord (North). On 5 December 1941, Estonia was put under the control of civilian occupation authorities, with

General-Commissioner Karl-Siegmund Litzmann at their head, who, in turn, answered to the Ostland (Eastern Territories) State Commissioner. But, as opposed to Latvia and Lithuania, Estonia, due to its nearness to the Leningrad Front, continued to be part of the official rear area of Army Group Nord.

The number of men that could potentially be recruited into the German army was influenced by preceding events. In 1939-1940, and again in 1941, a great many Baltic-Germans, and with them, also, many Estonians of German background, left for Germany. All together, more than 20,000 people. In 1940-1941, during the year of Soviet occupation, thousands of people became victims of Soviet repressions, culminating with the deportation of 10,000 people, in June, to Soviet forced labour camps. In addition to this, in July and August of 1941, up to 7,000 men were taken away as part of the Red Army's 22nd Territorial Corps. About 25,000 civilians were evacuated to the Soviet Union, more than 32,000 men were taken to the Soviet Union as draftees, and about 2,000 people were killed in the course of combat operations. During the German occupation, up to 8,000 people were murdered for political or racial reasons. In addition to this, there were those who had been imprisoned by the German authorities, and thus, could not be recruited for military service. So, on 1 December 1941, there were a little less than 1 million people living in Estonia. Thus, 130,000 people less than there had been on 1 January 1939. And this number consisted, to a great extent, of men suitable for military service.

Estonians ended up in the German military forces in three basic ways – by volunteering, by being forcibly conscripted due to their job, by being drafted. So, the ethnic Estonian units in the German military forces have been categorized here in accordance with this system of classification.

Volunteer units. Volunteers were recruited into the *Wehrmacht* by the commands of both the 18th Army as well as Army Group North. In accordance with an agreement concluded between the commander of the SS, *Reichsführer* Heinrich Himmler, and the High Command of the Army (OKH), the recruiting of volunteers in the rear of army groups was in the competence of the SS and the police system, which, in State Commission

Ostland and the rear of Army Group North was represented by the high commander of the SS and police. Until the summer of 1942, units no bigger than a battalion could be formed from these Eastern volunteers.

The *Wehrmacht* was the first to start recruiting. From August 1941 to January 1942, six battalion-sized Security Groups, No. 181–186, were recruited in Estonia, with about 4,000 Estonians having joined up by May 1942. One-year contracts were concluded with these men. The groups operated in the rear of the 18th Army, but sometimes also ended up on the front. After the contracts of some of the men had ended, and they had either gone back into civilian life, or had transferred into the Estonian *Waffen-SS* Legion, the groups were reorganized, in autumn 1942, into three Eastern Battalions (No. 658–660), which fought in the rear of the 18th Army, until the beginning of 1944. Thereafter, the remaining men were merged with the 20th Estonian *Waffen-SS* Division.

The high commander of the SS and police began recruiting, in Estonia, in September 1941. Using mostly men recruited in Southern and Central Estonia, four Infantry Defence Battalions, No. 37–40, as well as the Reserve Battalion and the Sapper Battalion, No. 41–42, were formed, and were since 1943 called Police Battalions. Six month contracts were signed with the men, which were later extended. Administratively, the battalions were under the jurisdiction of the SS and police system, but, operatively, under the Security Divisions of the *Wehrmacht*, in the rear of Army Group North, in the area around the Russian city of Pskov. At the beginning of 1942, there were about 3,000 men in these battalions. The 39th Police Battalion was disbanded in the spring of 1943, and, in 1944, the others were merged into two infantry battalions. These were evacuated to Germany in the fall of 1944, where they were transferred to the 20th Estonian *Waffen-SS* Division. The Sapper Battalion did not manage to leave Estonia.

If the aforementioned battalions were formed for use outside of Estonia, then, in the fall of 1941, began the recruitment for Battalions No. 29–36, which, at first, were to be used for security and coastal patrol duties. But not enough men were recruited for fully manning all of the battalions, so that the forming of Battalions No. 30–32 was never fully

completed. Battalion No. 35 served as a reserve battalion. When conditions at the front got worse, Battalions No. 29–33 were, nevertheless, sent into combat on the Leningrad front. Battalion No. 36 had been established to actually be a combat unit, and finally arrived at the front in the Stalingrad area, but was returned to Estonia at the beginning of 1943. Battalions No. 29, 33, and 36 were disbanded in 1943. Battalion No. 35 remained the reserve unit of the Police Battalions, until it was evacuated to Germany in September 1944. And Battalion No. 34 was under the jurisdiction of the paramilitary construction organization Todt. It is not known how many men served in these battalions.

On 28 August 1942, the Estonian *Waffen*-SS Legion was established as a voluntary unit. The formation and training of the new unit took place in a large military base in Debica, Poland, near Krakow. At the beginning of 1943, there were about 1,000 Estonian volunteers there. Most of them had transferred to the unit from the Security Groups or Defence Battalions. About 800 of these men were used to form the motorized *Waffen*-SS battalion designated as “Narva,” which, in spring 1943, was deployed to Ukraine.

Units formed from men conscripted on the basis of their service. The line between volunteers and draftees is not always very clear. For instance, the 4,000 Estonians who, in the summer of 1941, defected from the Red Army to the German side, or had been taken prisoner, were released from prisoner of war camp on the condition that they voluntarily join the German armed forces. As a result, many of these men could, primarily, be found in the Defence Battalions. The Estonian Self Defence force (*Omakaitse*), a nationalist militia that was created spontaneously in the summer of 1941, was disbanded by the Germans after the Soviet occupiers had been driven out. But the Germans soon re-established it, giving it the status of an auxiliary police force. This paramilitary organization had more than 40,000 members, including more than 4,000 salaried positions, mostly officers, but also full-time units, some even as large as a military company. In the fall of 1942, the voluntary *Omakaitse* fell under the jurisdiction of the *Wehrmacht*, while the full-time paid units were re-organized into Security and Defence Battalions under the control

of the SS and police system. Five such battalions were formed, and were given the numbers 29–33, the numbers of the battalions that had just been disbanded. In April of 1943, there were more than 2,600 men in these new units.

Plus, in the spring of 1943, Defence Battalions No. 286–290 were established as compulsory military service units connected with an occupation. Battalion No. 286 was organized from regular Estonian police officers who, at first, were sent to serve in the battalion for four months, but whose term of service was extended to half a year. Battalion No. 287 consisted mostly of men who, in 1942/1943, had, at Velikije Luki, defected to the German side, from the Red Army's Estonian Rifle Corps, and was used to guard prison camps. Battalions No. 288 and 289 consisted of men from several reserve battalions, and Battalion No. 290 of Estonian ethnic Russians. Battalions No. 286, 288, and 289 were established for anti-partisan operations in Belarus, in the fall of 1943. At the beginning of 1944, they were brought back to Estonia and disbanded. Police Battalion No. 287 was evacuated to Germany in September 1944.

Units consisting of conscripts. By the beginning of 1943, the number of Estonian volunteers had greatly dwindled. For instance, after the forming and deployment of Battalion “Narva,” there were practically no men left at the Estonian *Waffen*-SS Legion training camp. Therefore, in February 1943, compulsory conscription was implemented for Estonian men born in the years 1919–1924. They were actually given the choice of going to work in the German war industry, of serving in a *Wehrmacht Hilfs-williger* (auxiliary) unit, or of joining the Estonian *Waffen*-SS Legion. The Legion alternative was primarily promoted. Thus, over 5,000 men officially “volunteered” to join the Estonian *Waffen*-SS Legion. After basic training, the Legion was reorganized as the 3rd Estonian *Waffen*-SS Brigade (Regiments 45 and 46, each consisting of two infantry battalions; plus, artillery and anti-aircraft units, etc.). At the beginning of October 1943, the brigade was sent to Belarus to fight against partisans, but was soon deployed to the Nevel Front.

From then on, direct conscription was implemented. And this was used to, primarily, fill the ranks of the ethnic Estonian *Waffen*-SS units. In

October 1943, men born in 1925 were conscripted, and in January 1944, those born in 1924. Of the former, about 3,300 men arrived in Debica. On 30 January 1944, a general conscription was implemented – all the men born in the years 1904–1923 were being called up. The reason for this general conscription was the Red Army's breakthrough at Leningrad, and the subsequent arrival of the front at the Estonian-Russian border. Therefore, as the result of German pressure, Estonia's last prime minister at that time, Jüri Uluots, supported the general conscription with a radio speech to the nation. By April 1944, 38,000 Estonian men had been called up. This was followed by those who had, earlier, received deferments. In August 1944, about 2,600 boys, who had been born in 1926, were drafted.

On 24 January 1944, the 3rd Estonian *Waffen-SS* Brigade was renamed the 20th Estonian *Waffen-SS* Division. But the unit did not reach its required size, more than 15,000 men, until the early summer of 1944. But the number of men that had been conscripted was much greater. The younger men were channelled into the *Waffen-SS*, while the rest were used to establish six Border Defence Regiments and four Police Fusilier Battalions, No. 286, 288, 291, and 292, which were used for coastal defence. Plus, units that had been fighting outside of Estonia were brought home, and merged with the 20th Estonian *Waffen-SS* Division. These battle-hardened units were used as the cores for new units being formed from conscripts.

In the 3rd Estonian *Waffen-SS* Brigade there had been four infantry battalions, while in the 20th Estonian *Waffen-SS* Division there were ten. The cores of the new battalions were created out of existing ethnic Estonian units, which were transferred into the *Waffen-SS*. The 658th Eastern Battalion became the 47th Estonian *Waffen-SS* Regiment's 2nd Battalion; and the 659th Eastern Battalion, the 1st Battalion; while the 660th Eastern Battalion became the 3rd Battalion of the 46th Estonian *Waffen-SS* Regiment. Battalion "Narva," which was brought back to Estonia from Ukraine, became the core of the 20th Estonian *Waffen-SS* Division's Single Reconnaissance Battalion (Fusilier Battalion). Thus, only the 45th Estonian *Waffen-SS* Regiment's 3rd Battalion and the 47th Estonian

Waffen-SS Regiment's 3rd Battalion were established as completely new units. At the same time, the majority of the division, except for the Reconnaissance Battalion and the aforementioned unit cores, consisted of conscripts.

The conscriptions that began in 1943 caused many young Estonian men to flee to Finland. There, the majority of these men were channelled into the Finnish military, with most of them ending up in the 200th (Estonian) Infantry Regiment. All together, there were 3,500 Estonians in the Finnish armed forces. In August and September 1944, the majority of them returned to Estonia, having been promised, by the German authorities, that they would not be persecuted for having avoided the draft and fleeing to Finland. Both of the regiment's battalions were merged with the 20th Estonian *Waffen*-SS Division.

In September 1944, the German forces withdrew from continental Estonia, and, by the end of the month, most ethnic Estonian units had been evacuated to Germany. But many Estonians wearing German uniforms, including men from the 20th Estonian *Waffen*-SS Division, did not leave. Some remained in Estonia due to force of circumstance, while others remained in their homeland voluntarily. In Germany, the 20th Estonian *Waffen*-SS Division was refitted, and reinforced with many Estonians who had been serving in various other units. At the time, there were about 15,000 men in the division, which kept fighting, until the end of the war, in Silesia and Czechoslovakia.

Nazi Germany capitulated, unconditionally, in 1945. Service in the German armed forces, especially in any branch of the SS, was now looked upon with disdain. Especially those men who had remained in Estonia, or had been captured by the Red Army in Czechoslovakia, were in a very awkward situation. The Soviet authorities treated, especially harshly, those who had served in the *Waffen*-SS or police units, as well as officers and volunteers. Those who managed to remain alive in the Soviet prison camps were not released until the late 1950s. But, by the late 1940s, the British and American authorities had declared the former Baltic members of the *Waffen*-SS to be draftees, who had been forcibly conscripted, and were, thus, eligible for emigration out of Germany. Many of these men ended up in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States.

Unfortunately, few actual documents dealing with ethnic Estonian units in the war-time German armed forces have survived. Therefore,

accurate statistics concerning the exact number of men in various units, and their losses, do not exist. There are also no accurate statistics dealing with those men who were imprisoned, for years, by the Soviets, for serving in the German armed forces.

After the restoration of Estonia's independence, the men who served in the German armed forces have been treated as honest war veterans. Due to the aforementioned radio appeal to support conscription, by former Prime Minister Jüri Uluots, the embodiment, at the time, of Estonia's legal continuity, the Estonian men who were drafted in 1944, and fought against the onslaught of the Red Army, are now regarded as freedom fighters. Especially respected are the "*soomepoisid*" (Finnish boys), the Estonian men who had looked for a "third choice," an alternative to the two totalitarian regimes tormenting Estonia, and had, thus, gone and served in the Finnish military. This attitude is, perhaps, a bit unfair towards those men who, already in 1941, volunteered for service in the German armed forces, falsely hoping that this would help to restore Estonian independence. But, those are the inevitabilities of history and fate.