

INTRODUCTION

Restoration of the National Defence in Estonia – from Scrambled Eggs Back into the Shell

Trivimi Velliste

I compare the three Baltic States to three eggs. Colourful metaphors are sometimes necessary to gain a better understanding of historical events. It is easy to make scrambled eggs from an egg, but it's a lot more difficult, seemingly impossible, to unscramble the eggs and put them back into a living egg inside a protective shell. But that's exactly what happened with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the 20th century.

The three small Eastern European countries born – or reborn in the case of Lithuania – from the ashes of the First World War found themselves in a hopeless situation at the threshold of the Second World War, just like an egg before it hits the frying pan. Hindsight is of no help here at all: what someone should have done or what they shouldn't have done. We could still demand today: why were Stalin, Hitler or Chamberlain born at all? Or if they had to be born, why did the three societies concerned let them grab power the way they were? Whose fault is this? These are the questions we keep wanting to ask.

As we now know, history treated the three countries by the Baltic Sea without mercy but didn't destroy them altogether – not as nations and not even as states. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania came out of a seemingly impossible situation. You can destroy a country's government and the entire political and other elite, and you can execute large numbers of the country's citizens, but you cannot destroy the state itself – not so long as the majority of the citizens are still alive, so long as the country is internationally recognised within its legitimate borders, so long as it has its diplomatic representations and even a constitutional government, even if

it is in exile. Most importantly, however, not so long as the majority of the state's citizens remember who they are.

Even before the Berlin Wall came down in autumn 1989, the people of Estonia were facing a difficult choice. The challenge seemed next to impossible – we had to transform ourselves from scrambled eggs into eggs that were alive again. Many fast and contradictory changes were taking place in the soul and consciousness of Estonians from 1988–1991. Society was deeply split between two attitudes, two understandings, two mutually exclusive paradigms. Everyone wanted freedom! But what kind of freedom? And how?

Many said: half an egg is better than an empty shell. By saying this, they declared: let's make the Soviet Union more democratic, let's recognise the Soviet Constitution and let's act within the scope of Soviet laws. Let's demand more and more rights and freedoms for ourselves, let's demand more self-economy – the kind of autonomy that Finland had in the Russian Empire in the 19th century. And later, who knows, we might get the chance to secede from the Soviet Union.

But there were others who said: how is it possible to secede from something when you never joined it in the first place? Many listened to the Voice of America, and the annual greetings of Consul General and Ambassador Ernst Jaakson on the 24th of February were ringing in their ears. Neither Jaakson nor the US President or Secretary of State, who often joined him, greeted us as citizens of the Soviet Union, but always as citizens of the occupied Republic of Estonia.

Of course, not everyone listened to the Voice of America or Radio Liberty. Also, a lot of time had passed since the start of the occupation. And time, as we know, is merciless. Everyone carried the red Soviet passport in their pockets or handbags. The fight in the souls of the Estonian people was between 'truth and justice' on one side, and the knowledge that 'beauty is skin deep' on the other. Back then it was unclear which of these would prevail. The question we have sometimes asked ourselves is: when was Estonia facing bigger difficulties, from 1917–1920 or from 1988–1991? There is no clear and simple answer.

Every beginning is difficult. The start of independence is usually no exception. Back then, we really had to break away from an empire –

and we needed war for it. But there was civil society. There were farms and businesses, there was a market economy. And on top of all this, we received a peace treaty, which promised to respect our independence and freedom always and forever.

However, civil society had been destroyed by the time of perestroika and the Singing Revolution. The more aware and stronger part of the population had either been murdered, killed in war or forced to flee to the West. We needed an effort like Münchhausen's to drag ourselves out of the swamp. On the other hand, we didn't have to start a new state – it had always existed, even if it had been dormant. We didn't need to separate or secede from anything. What we had to do was to get the troops of the conquerors to leave our country. Things were in our favour: the conqueror itself was tired and our Western supporters took advantage of this and forced it to leave faster by offering it the carrot of the perestroika days.

So, our first start more than 95 years ago was more difficult in the sense that we had no previous experience of our own state. The autonomy in the Russian republic that had preceded it had been very brief. There was no understanding of our own state or faith in it. At the start of the War of Independence, wise old Estonian men even shook their heads: "Only stupid boys would go to war against the great Russia! This will never end well!"

On the other hand, however, we had approximately one hundred thousand men who'd had a sniff of gunpowder, who'd fought for the emperor and crawled through the trenches of the world war. These men knew how to fight in a war – all they needed was the faith declared by poet Juhan Liiv a long time ago: "One day, Estonia will be a state!"

Our second start a quarter of a century later was easier in the sense that it was the second. We didn't have to create a new state, we had to carry on from where we left off in 1940. But it proved to be very difficult, because the fabric of society had been torn to pieces; there was a lack of skills and sometimes of attitude.

Speaking of the military defence of our country, we had a lot of luck. This time we didn't have to fight a war. In fact, our armed forces were non-existent. The Defence League was restored slowly and with much

difficulty. Restoring the Defence Forces was paradoxically even more difficult than the creation of the people's army in the War of Independence. When our state was born, we had many well-educated and trained officers. There was no shame in serving in the Tsar's army. The attitude toward Soviet officers who were Estonians by nationality, however, was rather ambivalent. As there were very few of them, they were often regarded as some strange creatures – look, they even speak Estonian! But they were also seen as the representatives of the Soviet occupation. The latter circumstance offers an at least partial explanation of why so few Estonians decided to become professional military servicemen. Also, Estonians were not so welcome among Soviet officers anyway, as there was more than enough reason to not trust them.

However, when the time for the restoration of the armed forces of the Republic of Estonia arrived, we found ourselves facing a number of difficulties, some of them practical, others ideological. The Estonians who had served in the Swedish, US or Canadian forces helped a lot. But their burden back at home was not easy to bear – they had to adapt to entirely unknown circumstances and a distrustful culture and mentality. The officer culture of many countries, incl. the former Soviet Union, had to be blended into a new whole – the culture of the Estonian Defence Forces, which today has achieved a very high level.

We often use the expression “we restored the state of Estonia”. This is actually confusing. How can you restore something that never ceased to exist? Distinguishing different levels helps here – are we speaking about the Republic of Estonia *de iure* or only *de facto*. Distinguishing between the two guarantees both clarity of expression and content. But spicing up your language with Latin loans is of course a little clumsy. However, we still have to admit that the restoration of the state of Estonia a generation ago is a metaphor and figurative. We are a European state preparing for our 100th birthday.

The fall of the Berlin Wall was a breakthrough in world history and its meaning will intrigue us for many generations. When a piece of this wall will be brought to Toompea in autumn 2014, by the 25th anniversary of the fall, its influence will be permanently binding.