# Preparing for War in the 1930s

## The myth of the Independence War and Laidoner's "active defence"

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The ability to draw the right lessons from the First World War has been pinpointed as a key factor in the military effectiveness of armed forces in the inter-war period. Estonia can be seen as another case of a country leaning on the concepts and practices that had brought success in the previous war but rendered anachronistic by the rapid social and military developments preceding the Second World War. However, as the Estonian leadership chose not to fight in 1939-1940, estimates of the Estonian army's fighting power rest on indirect evidence and will always remain speculative. The decision to capitulate before the overwhelming power of the Soviet Union can even be interpreted as a sign of prudence and recognition of the limitations of a small country. On the other hand, the trumping up of the myths and the spirit of the Independence War, questionable operational and tactical ideas displayed by the army commanders, and the unimaginative and overoptimistic scenarios at army manoeuvers that were noted by foreign military attachés, do call for a critical analysis of the Estonian imaginations and preparations for future war in the 1930s.

For more than two decades since *glasnost* and the end of Communist historiography, Estonian historians have been studying the country's readiness for war in the autumn of 1939. The focus of researchers has been directed at two problems. First, why did Estonia not resist? In this respect, Estonia's decisions have been compared to those of Finland. The northern neighbour was in a comparable political-strategic situation (although it was a larger country), but decided to resist the Soviet Union militarily, while Estonia, and also Latvia and Lithuania, chose to sign mutual assistance pacts allowing Moscow to establish military bases on their territory.

*President Konstantin Päts (to the right) and General Johan Laidoner (with the cigarette) inspecting manoeuvres. Courtesy: The Society of Estonians in Sweden, Estonian Film Archive*

This compromised Baltic defences and made their later annexation by the USSR, completed in August 1940, a much easier prospect. Finland, however, fought two wars and remained independent.

The difference from Finland has raised questions about the military effectiveness of the authoritarian regime that Estonia (and also Latvia and Lithuania) had established after the coup d'état of 1934. Historians have asked about the "moral right" of the authoritarian leaders, primarily President Konstantin Päts and the Commander-in-Chief (C-in-C) General Johan Laidoner, to take decisions affecting the fate of the entire nation without consulting the people.[1] This has been the grounds for criticism by the Finnish historian Martti Turtola, but also for example from the Estonian political scientist Rein Taagepera. Taagepera notes among other

[1] According to most authors these were "authoritarian regimes," Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 111–2. However, the political scientist Rein Taagepera uses the term "dictatorship," Rein Taagepera, *Maa ja laul: Sada aastat Eesti poliitikat* (manuscript in author's possession).

things that Estonia had not been abandoned by potential allies in September 1939, as has been claimed, but decided to act alone even before anyone could offer assistance. From 1918 to 1919 Estonia had been a pillar of strength, on which Latvia could lean. Now, in 1939, Estonia proved to be the "weak link whose capitulation also demoralised the southern neighbours". For Taagepera, Päts was not a dictator fostering militarism; Laidoner worried about defence, but in reality economised on defence in the 1930s. The purge of internal enemies was more important than building fortifications and purchasing new armaments for the army, Taagepera claims.[2]

The second important line of enquiry has concerned military affairs, but not primarily the art of war, but the technical side of warfare and systems of mobilization. As a result of this research, we know the structure and the organization of the Estonian defence forces in peace time, and their likely wartime deployment. Historian Toe Nõmm began researching the armaments of the Estonian army and the development of the Estonian defence industry already at the end of the 1980s.[3] Largely due to Nõmm's prolific work we have ample data about the equipment of the Estonian army. In the 1930s, the main effort was not directed at procuring new weapons, but at updating old ammunition neglected in the 1920s. As a result of these largely invisible efforts, the Estonian situation in terms of ammunition was probably the best among the Baltic countries (including Finland), at least relative to the number of soldiers. Stocks were large enough to wage a war the size of the Finnish–Soviet Winter War, 1939–

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[2] Martti Turtola, *President Konstantin Päts: Eesti ja Soome teed*; transl. by Maimu Berg (Tallinn: Tänapäev, 2003); Martti Turtola, *Kindral Johan Laidoner ja Eesti Vabariigi hukk 1939–1940*; transl. by Maimu Berg (Tallinn: Tänapäev, 2008); Taagepera, *Maa ja laul*. But compare with Seppo Zetterberg, *Eesti ajalugu* (Lohkva: Tänapäev, 2009), 418, 478–479.

[3] Toe Nõmm, "Eesti Vabariigi kaitseväest 1939–1940," *Akadeemia* 3 (1989): 585–599; "Eesti kaitseküsimusest," *Postimees* (9. oktoober 1991), 4; "Browning 1903 ja Eesti sõjaväepüstolid 1918–1940," – *Laidoneri Muuseumi aastaraamat 2001*, ed. Leho Lõhmus (Tallinn: Laidoneri muuseum, 2002), 102–114; "Arsenali püstolkuulipilduja," – *Laidoneri Muuseumi aastaraamat 2002*, ed. Leho Lõhmus (Tallinn: Laidoneri muuseum, 2003); 129–142; "Eesti tankitõrje 1940. aastani," – *Laidoneri Muuseumi aastaraamat 2003*, ed. Leho Lõhmus (Tallinn: Laidoneri muuseum, 2004), 106–133; "Eesti sõjaväe varustus, sõjatööstus ja relvastuspoliitika," – *Sõja ja rahu vahel I. Eesti julgeolekupoliitika 1940. aastani*, ed. Enn Tarvel, Tõnu Tannberg (Tallinn: S-Keskus, 2004), 226–264.

1940.[4] However, weapons were mostly old, originating from the period of the First World War. For example, there were 234,000 shells, but artillery pieces were obsolete. The modern howitzers that Estonia ordered were never delivered, and would have needed new shells anyway.

Estonia had probably the best anti-tank gun parks in the Baltics, but almost no mortars. Air defence was considered the weakest link: twelve new Bofors 40mm AA-cannons that were acquired before the war were literally a drop in the ocean. The new German 20mm, 75mm and 37mm cannons were delivered too late, in 1940, to have an impact on the Estonian defence policy, which had by the time become entirely dependent on the USSR.[5] But perhaps the greatest weakness was the fact that the Estonian army had not been able to standardise its weapons systems, so by the end of the 1930s it had an extraordinary mixture of different types and calibres. Lack of resources had prohibited the transition to British weapons in the 1920s. When the government eventually began modernising its armaments in the latter half of the 1930s, it was already too late.[6] For too long the country had tried to live on the stocks assembled in the victorious Independence War of 1918–1920.

Urmas Salo has researched Estonian defence planning in the 1930s. He emphasises the importance of the coup d'état of 1934. Assuring the army's support for the authoritarian regime, General Laidoner in return received a free hand to organize defences.[7] He immediately began a fight against pessimism toward the Estonian capability for defence, which had taken root during the economic depression, and began to nurture a new fighting spirit drawing on the experience of the Independence War.

Salo also shows that already in the first year of the authoritarian regime, Laidoner introduced new operational concepts, which however were never clearly systematized and codified, but voiced either orally or

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4 Toe Nõmm, "Eesti relvad Teise maailmasõja eel," *Tehnikamaailm* 8 (2008): 62–64; "Eesti relvad 1918–1940," *Tehnikamaailm* 6 (2008): 116–119.

5 Mika Raudvassar, "Õhukaitse Suurtükiväegrupp 1928–1940," *KVÜÕA Toimetised* 3 (2004): 208–234.

6 Nõmm, "Eesti relvad".

7 The British Foreign Office thought that the new constitution of 1938 confirmed the position of the army as a pillar of support for the regime, "Estonia. Annual Report, 1938," FO 371/22226, National Archives, United Kingdom (hereafter: NA).

in stray writings by Laidoner and his confidants. In 1934, battle tours were organized for senior officers to border regions close to Russia. These were the areas of operations of the 1st and the 2nd division, near Narva in the North-East and in the border districts of South-East Estonia, respectively. Laidoner referred to the smallness of the Estonian territory, to the advantageous geography at the borders, and emphasised that Estonia must not abandon even an inch of its land without a fight. Defence had to be active, because the enemy could be defeated only by offensive action.

In November 1936, Laidoner gave an order to stop practicing the tactics of withdrawal. In a directive issued on 14 September 1938, the C-in-C ordered that war operations were to be transferred to enemy territory immediately after the start of the war, just as had been done in the War of Independence nineteen years earlier.[8] Urmas Salo suggests that these plans were unrealistic. Because Estonia had no allies, it would have been impossible to deliver successful counterattacks or to push the line of defence into the territory of the Soviet Union. Salo concludes that Laidoner's ideas may have had a positive impact on morale, but they were impossible to implement in practice. The will to fight for the country's independence was probably strong, but in the final analysis was of little use in 1939.[9]

The critique of Urmas Salo is to the point. However, it is important to distinguish levels of war: it is one thing to deliver counter-attacks, another matter to push the enemy back to enemy territory by a general counter-offensive. The first is primarily in the realm of tactics, the other an operational and a strategic matter. From the tactical point of view, counter-attacks are perfectly reasonable and in case of enemy incursions even necessary.[10] For example, Finnish success in the Winter War could be partly explained by the ability to counter-attack an enemy's exposed

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[8] Laidoner's diary for 18 September 1938, cited by Urmas Salo, "Eesti kaitse üldised põhimõtted," – *Sõja ja rahu vahel*, 168–170.

[9] Salo, "Eesti kaitse üldised põhimõtted," 170.

[10] About executing counter-attacks, see the current Estonian manual, Enno Mõts, *Eesti kaitseväe maaväe lahingutegevuse alused: maaväe ohvitseride ja staabitöö väljaõppejuhend* (Tartu: Kaitseväe Ühendatud Õppeasutused, 2010), 108, 121.

flanks with small but mobile units. This allowed the Finnish army to encircle and destroy, by the so-called *motti*-tactics, much larger Red Army groupings.[11] At the same time, one should agree with Salo that a counter-offensive on the entire front would have been beyond the ability of the Estonian army.

Urmas Salo rightly notes that currently there are no studies about the mentality of the Estonian army in the 1930s.[12] Nevertheless, there are studies on officer education and training,[13] and a start has been made on researching Estonian theories of war.[14] Because of the lack of studies on mentality, war theory, and operational concepts, analysis of the Estonian defence capability have remained superficial. We may know the number of rifles and cannons, estimate *potential* firepower, but without knowing tactical methods and operational concepts it is impossible to assess military effectiveness in a meaningful way.

The objective of this article is not to speculate about the possibilities of defending Estonia in 1939–1940, or to present another scenario and likely outcome of the "autumn war" of 1939, which is now a popular topic in "alternative history" books.[15] Rather, this article will explore the role of historical experience in the visions of war of the Estonian high command, especially of General Laidoner. What were the effects of the Independence War on the mentality and the operational thinking of senior officers? The article will analyse the core ideas of Laidoner's doctrine of "active defence".

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[11] Pasi Tuunainen, *Finnish Military Effectiveness in the Winter War 1939–1940* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2016), 99–115.

[12] Urmas Salo, "Kaitseväe korralduse areng," *Sõja ja rahu vahel*, 179. The exception is Igor Kopõtin, "Reichswehri identiteedikriis: selle mõjud ja kajastamine Eestis aastatel 1919–1934 [The identity crisis in the Reichswehr: its influence on and reflection in the Estonian Army in 1919–1934]," *Ajalooline Ajakiri. The Estonian Historical Journal* 1 (2016): 103–132.

[13] Andres Seene, "Eesti sõjaväe ohvitseride ettevalmistamise süsteemi kujunemine ja areng 1919–1940" (Unpublished PhD Dissertation: University of Tartu, 2011); Taavi Urb, "Eesti merejõudude ohvitseride väljaõpe aastatel 1919–1940" (Unpublished MA Thesis: University of Tartu, 2015).

[14] For Estonian ideas on sea power, see Liivo Laanetu, "Eesti meresõjalise mõtte kullafond," ENDC Occasional Papers, 3 (2015): 9–95.

[15] Mart Laar, *Sügissõda 1939. 1. osa, Punane torm tõuseb* (Tallinn: Read, 2014); Mart Laar, *Sügissõda 1939. 2. osa, Käsi mõõgaga* (Tallinn: Read, 2016); Hanno Ojalo, *1939: kui me valinuks sõja* (Tallinn: Grenader, 2010).

The article will also study the exercises of the Estonian armed forces, focusing on two larger manoeuvers in 1937 and 1938. Those manoeuvers have been chosen for the reason that, by coincidence, summaries of reports by British military attaches on those exercises have been preserved in the National Archives of the United Kingdom. In addition, there is a survey and an analysis of the reports of Swedish military attaches by the Swedish military historian Fredrik Eriksson.[16] This way it is possible to compare the assessments of Estonian army commanders with the assessments of foreign observers, which will give a more objective ground from which to judge on the tactical and operational effectiveness of the Estonian army.

One should add that unavoidably these estimates will remain quite speculative, because the true test for military effectiveness always remains war itself, not exercises.[17] At the same time, one should not underestimate the importance of training. According to some theorists, the military effectiveness of the "West" has throughout history been based on professionalism based on rigorous and long drills. The Roman army remained unbeaten almost for a thousand years, and not because of superior technology, but primarily due to harsh training; the advances of the Wehrmacht in the initial stages of the Second World War were not the result of some technological edge but of realistic training.[18] Therefore, one may presume that also the Estonian army exercises reflected actual combat capabilities. But first one should look at the military culture in more general terms. Was Estonia, as a result of the victory in the Independence

[16] Fredrik Eriksson, "Coping with a New Security Situation – Swedish Military Attachés in the Baltic 1919–1939," *Baltic Security and Defence Review* 15:2 (2013): 33–69.

[17] Williamson Murray, *Military Adaptation in War: With fear of change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 1–36.

[18] About Western superiority, Geoffrey Parker, "The Western Way of War," – *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare: The triumph of the West*, ed. Geoffrey Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2–9; and a more modest assessment: John France, *Perilous Glory, The rise of Western military power* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2011). For the Roman army a useful overview is Murray, *Military Adaptation in War*, 38–45. About *Blitzkrieg*, Robert M. Citino, *The Path to Blitzkrieg: Doctrine and training in the German Army, 1920–1939* (Boulder; London: Lynne Rienner, 1999); and more precisely about training, James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg: Hans von Seeckt and German military reform* (Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 68–96.

War, affected by a mentality of satisfaction and conservativism characterising other victorious powers after the First World War?

## Defence will and morale

There are many studies on the inability of Britain and France, the main victorious powers, to draw adequate conclusions from the experiences of the First World War, to make accurate predictions and adopt the right tactics and organization for new technological possibilities. Admittedly, some of the British and French mistakes can be explained by pacifism caused by the heavy losses in the war, but others were clearly the result of the confidence and conservativism grounded in victory.[19]

Was this a problem in Estonia? It is evident that the Independence War had much influence already for the fact that a large part of the officer corps developed and matured in that war. Estonian historian Liisi Esse has shown that the memory of the Independence War overshadowed memories of the First World War.[20] *Sõdur* (Soldier), the main military journal in Estonia, devoted considerable space to the Independence War, whereas the Great War was almost entirely forgotten.

At the same time it seems that because of Estonia's geography, feelings of insecurity and fear before the Soviet Union were great and this factor never allowed Estonia to rest on the laurels of victory. This is confirmed by a testimony from a British observer, lieutenant general Sir Francis Poitiers Nosworthy, who visited the Baltic region from 9 May to 2 June 1924. The British general stayed in the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian capitals for two days each. His impression was:

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[19] About the French military innovation, Robert A. Doughty, "The French Armed Forces, 1918–1940," – *Military Effectiveness. Volume II, The interwar period*, ed. Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1988), 39–69; and British developments, Brian Bond and Williamson Murray, "The British Armed Forces, 1918–1940," – *Ibid.*, 98–130.

[20] Liisi Esse, "Suure sõja mäletamine: kirjad, päevikud ja mälestused eestlaste sõjakogemuse avajana," – *Sõdurite kirju, päevikuid ja mälestusi Esimesest maailmasõjast*, ed. Tõnu Tannberg (Tartu: Rahvusarhiiv, 2015), 21–29.

> ... in spite of the success which had so far attended their efforts to get their armed forces efficiently organized and trained and in spite of their present financial stability and apparently sound economic position, there was still a strong undercurrent of uneasiness concerning their ability to continue their state of independence indefinitely. They appear to live in perpetual fear of RUSSIA [here and elsewhere emphasis in original], and ... it seems certain that as soon as RUSSIA begins to settle down, we shall have to deal with constant alarms and appeals for aid from these states.[21]

It is somewhat surprising that the fear of Soviet Russia was already so great even before the communist attempt at coup d'état in December 1924.[22] The insecurity of the 1920s increased with the Great Depression and the impressive Soviet program of industrialisation and military modernisation in the early 1930s. According to Urmas Salo, the prognosis of the general staff of the Defence Forces in 1933 was pessimistic. It was thought that without strong resistance the newly established "moto-mechanized" units of the Red Army could advance as much as fifty to a hundred of kilometres a day. It was feared that even in case of strong defence, in the South-East the enemy would be able to capture Petseri in the first day, Võru in the second or third day, and Põlva (about fifty kilometres from the border) in the fourth day. In case of a surprise attack at the Narva front in the North East, Narva was expected to fall in the first day (some ten kilometres from the front line), Vaivara in the second. The enemy would reach the line of the Pühajõe River in Toila region in the fourth day, so some forty kilometres inside friendly territory.[23]

The domination of pessimistic estimates is confirmed by the reports of Swedish military attachés for the early 1930s. The Swedish representative captain Juhlin-Dannfelt met the Estonian chief of staff Major General Juhan Tõrvand in February 1933. Tõrvand did not place much hope in

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[21] "Visit to the Baltic states, 9 May – 2 June 1924," WO 106/1573, NA.

[22] Nosworthy's report from 1925 tells that the Bolshevik attempt at coup d'état had further increased feelings of insecurity, "Report on Tour of Baltic states and Scandinavia, July–August 1925," WO 106/1574, NA.

[23] Salo, "Eesti kaitseväe valmisolek sõjaks," 95.

*Estonian officers on manoeuvres near the cemetery of Old Izborsk looking toward the Estonian-Russian border in the East. The village is now in Russia. Courtesy: Estonian Film Archive*

the Estonian ability to resist if the Russians attacked, and he considered a Russian attack inevitable. The general tone of Tõrvand was characterised by hopelessness and even despair. According to the historian Fredrik Eriksson, Tõrvand thus confirmed the Swedish strategic perception that after a respite the USSR would solve the Baltic problem with a mathematic certainty.[24]

Because of the existential fears dominating in the region, it is difficult to believe that the Estonian army was complacent about the future. It is noteworthy that the journal *Sõdur* was zealous to observe the development of the military systems of other European countries and to learn from not only the first-class militaries of the great powers but also from the experience of smaller countries. *Sõdur*, which since 1924 was appearing once a week, had considerable impact on the mentality of officers and

[24] Eriksson, "Swedish Military Attachés," 36.

soldiers.[25] At the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s a lot of attention was paid to small nations like Switzerland and Belgium that had comparable defence systems. Constantly there appeared surveys and analyses of the doctrines, technologies, exercises and war theories of the military heavy weights, France, Britain, the USSR, Poland and others.[26]

From the point of view of military thought, Estonia was part of overall European trends. How effectively those ideas were implemented should be further researched, however. At this stage it suffices to say that Estonian officers were not ill-educated or unintelligent as inferred by Swedish attachés accredited to the Baltic states.[27] Perhaps the Swedish conservative officers considered all Baltic soldiers of peasant stock as *a priori* less educated than their European colleagues of a higher social class. Cultural prejudices were strong. For example, Swedish observers considered the Finnish army as better than the Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian armies, primarily because the Finnish officer corps still included a high number of Swedish noblemen. It needs to be mentioned, though, that peasant origins could in some context also be regarded as a mark of quality. In general, the Poles, Lithuanians, Latvians, Estonians, and Finns were highly regarded as good soldiers for their strong physique and stamina unspoilt by an urban environment.[28]

Reports by Swedish attachés confirm that the morale of the Estonian army leadership was low in the beginning of the 1930s. Hopelessness and uncertainty are not the best grounds for successful resistance against a stronger enemy. In military history there are many examples about the importance of morale on the outcome of war. The Argentinian contingent on the island of East Falkland was defeated by a considerably smaller but

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[25] Kopõtin, "Rahvuslus ja lojaalsus Eesti sõjaväes," 109–110. It is likely that after the coup only those articles that the regime approved of could be published in *Sõdur*, as the journal was censored by the political police.

[26] J. Tõrvand, "Riigikaitse muredest" (1930), appeared in numbers 14–16, 19–20, 23–24, 25–26 and 50–52; A. Traksmann, "Riikliku julgeoleku küsimusi," *Sõdur* 1-2 (1930), 1–10 and *Sõdur* 3-4 (1930), 69–78. In some units, foreign military journals were available even in soldiers' libraries (Mika Raudvassar's information to the author).

[27] Eriksson, "Swedish Military Attachés," 41.

[28] Ibid., 58. It appears that contemporary concerns about the fragile physique of youngsters from urban environments are not so new.

motivated British expedition force in 1982. The Battle of Thermopylae of 480 BC belongs to the canon of military classics. In Estonian military history one could refer to the collapse of the Russian defence of Saaremaa in the German operation *Albion* in 1917, or the retreat of the Estonian army from Tartu before the invading Red Army in the Estonian Independence War in 1918.[29]

One can therefore agree with General Laidoner that low morale was a dangerous tendency and had to be purged from the army. In 1939, Laidoner presented a report about his activities in the past five years, emphasising that before assuming responsibility as the C-in-C, the "operational thinking of the responsible leadership of the army… had become unhealthy". According to Laidoner, resistance against the Red Army had been considered essentially hopeless, and two "peculiar psychoses" had paralyzed the armed forces, the "tank psychosis" and the "withdrawal psychosis". Due to the underrating of the possibility to fight at borders, the emphasis was placed on delaying defensive tactics and on trading space for time. It was assumed that the Soviet offensive would begin without pre-warning and that Soviet tank and moto-mechanised units would easily overrun the Estonian infantry. If Laidoner's description of the situation before 1934 was true – and we saw above that it was at least partly true – it was sensible to try to overcome the excessive pessimism.

One has to emphasize, however, that military morale does not rest as much on abstract ideas or values, factors that can collapse quickly under combat stress, but most importantly on professionalism, which is grounded in years of drill, and on the cohesion of units resulting from hard and realistic training as a group. The British military historian Hew Strachan notes that political or ideological indoctrination is important when the soldier is recruited, but it loses its importance at the front.

[29] Antonius CGM Robben, "Combat Motivation, Fear and Terror in Twentieth-Century Argentinian Warfare," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41:2 (2006): 357–377, here 369–370. France, *Perilous Glory*, 55. Apart from the favourable landscape, morale and discipline obviously played a key part in the Greek performance at Thermopylae. About operation Albion, Nikolai Reek, *Saaremaa kaitsmine ja vallutamine a. 1917* (La Défense et la conquête de l'île Saaremaa en 1917) (Tallinn, 1937), about the fall of Tartu, Reigo Rosenthal, *Laidoner – väejuht: Johan Laidoner kõrgema operatiivjuhi ja strateegia kujundajana Eesti Vabadussõjas* (Tallinn: Argo, 2008).

In extreme battle stress, involving fear and fatigue, training is far more important than ideological commitment, as it allows soldiers to fall back on drills and procedures instilled through years of training. The psychological readiness to kill is no less important.[30]

In a study on the motivation of Argentinian soldiers in the Falklands War, the Dutch cultural anthropologist Antonius C.G. Robben has reached conclusions similar to those of Strachan: one should separate battle motivation from reasons why men go to war. Robben cites an Argentinian conscript: "All the English soldiers had received at least three years' training. And however much patriotism you put in, you can't fight that." And an Argentinian special-forces combatant observed: "One only fights because one has confidence in one's own ability and that of one's comrades".[31] Applying these observations and experiences to the conditions in Estonia in the 1930s, one could argue that the Estonian defence will may have been high, but this does not by itself say much about the actual readiness to fight the enemy in combat.

To sum up, Estonia had existential fears before Soviet Russia and was not resting on the laurels of the victorious Independence War. The problem was that the rise of the military might of the USSR and its attack on the Baltic states seemed inevitable, and this seemed to paralyze the thinking of the Estonian military authorities. Laidoner's effort to instil self-confidence was reasonable. But the question is whether it was correct to draw on the experience of the Independence War to raise the morale and develop defence doctrines?

## The legacy of the Independence War

There were several motives for nurturing the myth of the Independence War in the Estonian armed forces in the inter-war period. Facing an uncertain future people often seek comfort in memories of the glorious

[30] Hew Strachan, "Training, Morale and Modern War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 41:2 (2006): 211–227. The last problem beset Ukrainian soldiers in the beginning of the Ukrainian-Russian war in 2014.

[31] Robben, "Combat Motivation," 76–77.

past. There were also practical advantages in nourishing the experience of the Independence War. It had been fought on the Estonian territory against the enemy that was the expected adversary also in the next war, thus many tactical lessons could be drawn.

The problem was that the Independence War had not been particularly modern. Estonian officers were outraged when a professor of tactics at the Estonian War Academy, former general of the Russian imperial army Gleb Vannovski noted that this had been a "gypsies' war".[32] The context of the quip is unknown and therefore one can only speculate about its intent but probably this was a graphic way of saying that in comparison with the First World War the Independence War had not been a "real" war. Leaving aside the racist undertone, the general was probably right. For the nature of the tactics and operations, troop concentrations, and the technology used, the Independence War was far inferior to the First World War, particularly to operations on the Western front. It was not a modern conventional war but a mobile partisan war of the pre-First World War type (despite the use of some modern technologies, like aircraft; tanks never reached the front).

Toward the end of the 1930s, the leading revisionist powers Germany and the USSR developed new operational doctrines and made a qualitative leap in new technologies in mechanised forces, air forces and communications. As a result, it was questionable how much one could rely on the experience of the First World War. The pitfalls of sticking to obsolete tactical and operational models were clearly shown in the defeats of the French and the British forces by the Wehrmacht in 1940. In the same year, the Estonian general staff estimated that the Estonian regiment was too weak to fight a modern regiment, and that the standard equipment of an Estonian regiment was roughly equal to that of the First World War regiment of 1916.[33] Factoring in tactical and operational methods, the assessment could have been even more pessimistic.

Despite all this, the Estonian armed forces continued to cultivate the myth of the Independence War throughout the inter-war period. General

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[32] Vannovski's quote was from 1921, Nikolai Reek, "Võrdlevaid jooni Prantsuse sõjaväe kasvatusest," *Sõdur* 52 (1925), 1107–1109.

[33] Salo, "Eesti kaitseväe valmisolek sõjaks," 48.

Laidoner's right hand, the chief of staff General Nikolai Reek had always emphasised the importance of the Independence War in military education and war doctrines. In 1925 he intervened in polemics about the teaching techniques of the Russian emigres who had been used as military experts as long as Estonia lacked the necessary expertise. Former Russian officers were commissioned with the task of beginning higher military education in Estonia. Besides Vannovski, one of the notable professors was Lieutenant General Aleksey Baiov, who had taught several future Estonian senior officers at the Nikolai General Staff Academy in St. Petersburg before the war. Soon, however, the teaching practices introduced by the Russians were subjected to vigorous critique. Aleksey Baiov was forced to leave in 1926.[34] Many people had voiced the concern that their teaching methods did not meet modern standards. Reek cited patriotic education at the École Supérieure de Guerre (where Reek had studied from 1923 to 1925) in Paris as a model, and came out decisively against attempts to belittle the Independence War, which he said had been a "turning point" for the whole nation. "The education of our armed forces should first and foremost be the responsibility of people who have belief in the existence of our country, and whose burning patriotism enlivens all the subjects [taught in the academy]," Reek wrote.[35] In other words, Reek thought that ideology and indoctrination trumped military professionalism and competency.

In the journal *Sõdur* there were lively discussions about the importance of patriotic education. The general staff officer Aleksandr Jaakson thought, for example, that Estonia had to draw on the example of the Red Army and institute ideology as the basis of education, in which Communism would be replaced by the national ideal.[36] This was a dangerous tendency for the development of the Estonian army, even as the scepti-

[34] Kopõtin, "Rahvuslus ja lojaalsus Eesti sõjaväes," 226–230. One of the reasons for conflict was also the openly monarchistic and anti-Estonian views of Baiov.

[35] Reek, "Võrdlevaid jooni".

[36] Aleksandr Jaakson, "Rahvusline aade kui meie sõjaväe kasvatuse alus," Sõdur 51-52 (1924), 5–6, cited by Igor Kopõtin, "Rahvuslus ja lojaalsus Eesti sõjaväes aastatel 1918–1940 vähemusrahvuste näitel" (Manuscript of the Phd Thesis, University of Tallinn, 2017), 113 (I am grateful to Igor Kopõtin for permission to cite the manuscript of his dissertation).

cism about the Russian professor's teaching practices was probably well grounded.

Along with the emphasis on nationalism and patriotism, history was used for ideological purposes. This could be seen in *Sõdur*, in handbooks and regulations. In lectures on military pedagogics, Lieutenant Colonel August Kasekamp, the commander of the War Academy, emphasised that national consciousness should be at the core of the moral strength of Estonians as soldiers. The Independence War, he pointed out, was the most heroic period in the nation's history and especially "healing" for the sense of nationality. The war had to be taught to soldiers and officers. Moreover, in company reading rooms there had to be "corners for the War of Independence," modelled on Lenin's corners in the Red Army.[37]

Alfred Luts, editor in chief of *Sõdur* and a close comrade of Reek, was keen to create an image of the Estonian man as an archetypical and racially suitable soldier since the "freedom struggles" of the 13th century:

> The ancient troops and navies of the Estonians were able to organize themselves in battle so that they could *achieve miracles* [this and the next emphasis by author] despite their inferiority in numbers.... The superior military spirit, which developed already in the ancient times of freedom and which was hardened in the Independence War, is the *main basis* of our current army. This factor is the guarantee that the Estonian armed forces will be able to defend the independence of Estonia in the future and is prepared to fight for it until the last breath.[38]

In this writing, historical consciousness is regarded as the key component of military effectiveness. As noted earlier, however, "high spirits" or memory of earlier victories is hardly helpful in battle. One cannot hope for miracles – even as miraculous stories about Aleksandr Matrossov were promoted in the Soviet Union – and should emphasise training that allows one to keep a cool head even in close combat.

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[37] August Kasekamp, *Sõjapedagoogika. Loengukonspekt Sõjakooli kadettide vanemklassis 1930/31. a.* (KVÜÕA: Tallinn, 1931), 36–41, cited by Kopõtin, "Rahvuslus ja lojaalsus Eesti sõjaväes," 119–121, 189.

[38] Major Alfred Luts, "Eesti sõjavägi minevikus ja kaasajal," *Sõdur* 7-8 (1938), 180–186; Juhan Vasar, "Eestlaste ülivõim Baltimerel 12. sajandil," *Sõdur* 30-32 (1930), 952–55.

The importance of the Independence War also lied in the fact that it helped legitimize the rule of President Konstantin Päts and the C-in-C General Laidoner after the coup d'état of 1934. Both had been key actors in the Independence War, Laidoner as C-in-C and Päts as prime minister and minister of war. The Independence War was also the pillar propping up the authority of Nikolai Reek, who had distinguished himself as the chief of staff of the 3rd Division. Immediately after the coup d'état, the new leaders instituted the Victory Day as a national holiday, marking the victory over the Germans in the battle of Cecis in June 1919. Reek had served as the operational commander in that battle. After 1934, work on collecting recollections and compiling an official history of the war, as well as propaganda among the population at large, was intensified; monuments were erected all over the country. Soldiers had to complete tests on the history of the Independence War to prove their loyalty.[39]

However, let us return to the influence of the Independence War on tactical and operational thinking. There is little doubt that the war represented the "horizon of expectations"[40] from which Laidoner and his associates viewed the future. In a lecture at the graduation ceremony of the War Academy on 1 September 1938 General Laidoner said: "Everything develops so fast. Where should one look for the right principles. The only and the greatest source is the history of wars and history in general. Those we have to study."[41] Military history but especially the Independence War

[39] Karsten Brüggemann, "Võidupüha. Võnnu lahing kui Eesti rahvusliku ajaloo kulminatsioon," *Vikerkaar* 10:11 (2003): 131–142; Kopõtin, "Rahvuslus ja lojaalsus Eesti sõjaväes," 214, 220.

[40] The term originates from Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the semantics of historical time*; translated and with an introduction by Keith Tribe (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2004), 259–75.

[41] Laidoner at the graduation ceremony of the War Academy, 1 September 1938, Diary of the Commander-in-Chief, 1 September 1938, Eesti Riigiarhiiv [Estonian State Archive, part of Estonian National Archives, Tallinn, hereafter: ERA].2553.1.2. In his five-year report of 1939 Laidoner underlined the including of history in the tests for entrance to War Academy, and the more thorough study of past wars at the courses of the Academy among his achievements. The C-in-C also noted that in order to support the spirit of the Independence War, more veterans had been accepted in the Academy than in previous years, "Report on National Defence 1934–1939," ERA.2553.1.12.

took centre stage in Laidoner's strategic and tactical thinking. For example in January 1937 Laidoner gave the following instructions to his subordinates:

> From the point of view of war doctr[in] we cannot withdraw, we must defend on the border. The 1st Div[ision] – defend River N[arva], which is a formidable barrier even in winter. Foch a[fter] the war: "Push the border to Rhein and I will guarant[ee] that not a single Ger[man] will come through". Despite this we will take care of posit[ions] also in the rear.
>
> The 2nd D[ivision] up front in the mountains; pos[itions] the same as in I[independence] War…. Also here – to protect every step. At Võru – our position in I[independence] War was the hardest. We need to know every hill. The position at Petseri is good. There is no position at Võhandu. We must carry the str[ategic] doctrine over to tactics. We must not retreat.[42]

In these cryptic notes Laidoner repeatedly referred to the experience of the Independence War and the First World War. Considering the catastrophic defeat of the French in 1940, taking the model of static defence was quite unfortunate, and comparing River Narva to Rheine was like comparing a rifle to a howitzer.

Interestingly, Laidoner wanted to use the same principle of "active defence on the border" in tactics as well as in strategy. Probably he did not distinguish the operational level of war, even as this had been defined in the USSR already in the mid-1920s and codified in the doctrine of deep operations.[43] The key idea in Laidoner's thinking was a stiff defence in forward positions. Attack was to be used in case of enemy incursions: "In case of an enemy breakthrough the neighbouring unit will have a new

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[42] Notes, 14 January 1937, Excerpts from documents about the work of subunits used to compile the diary of the C-in-C, ERA.2553.1.61, 2.

[43] The operational level of war was defined by Aleksandr Svechin at the Soviet General Staff Academy in the mid-1920s. His main treaties, which appeared in 1926, has been translated to English: Aleksandr A. Svechin, *Strategy;* edited by Kent D. Lee (Minneapolis, Minn.: East View Publications, 2004). Laidoner's ignorance about the operational level is strange, because journals and dissertations at the War Academy had discussed the development of the Soviet doctrine, e.g., Lt. Col. Johannes Vellerind, "Õhuoperatsioonid ja nende teostamine Nõukogude Vene ametliku doktriini ja sõjakirjanduse seisukohalt," ERA.495.12.825.

task – to cut off the unit that had penetr[ated]."[44] This was quite an optimistic plan, as it assumed that the Red Army would not engage and tie-up also the neighbouring units as was foreseen in the Soviet doctrine and would be seen in the Second World War practice.[45] According to Laidoner, after local blows on the tactical level, there had to be an overall counter-offensive on the strategic level carrying the war to enemy territory, as had happened in 1919.[46]

At other times Laidoner contradicts himself: "The state border [line] has no tactical or strategic importance. But it is politically very important".[47] Nor did Laidoner think that everything had been perfect in the Independence War. On a battle tour to the Latvian border in May 1938 the C-in-C said: "We must always nurture the mentality of enveloping the enemy, in order to avoid the mistake of the Independence War, where we tried to plug holes rather than to make a small raid in the enemy's rear."[48] He stressed envelopment also at the tactical games of the 3rd Division in March the same year.[49]

Defence in forward positions was dangerous, because in contrast to Finland, Estonia had no border fortifications to speak of. Following French examples, the Finns had begun constructing a 130-kilometre Mannerheim Line at the Karelian Isthmus already in the early 1920s. There were problems. Not all of the sections had been completed and not all of the firing positions were supporting each other. Tank obstacles were largely obsolete. The line could be compared to the French Weygand Line rather than to the famous Maginot' Line.[50]

Estonia did not have even this. Moreover, the Estonian landscape was much better suited for tanks. No reserve positions were planned and constructed, leaving Estonian units on the border in danger of being encircled.

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[44] Notes, 14 January 1937, Excerpts, ERA.2553.1.61, 3.

[45] *Polevoi Ustav RKKA (PU-39)* (Moskva, 1939); David M. Glantz, *The Soviet Conduct of Tactical Maneuver: Spearhead of the offensive* (London: Frank Cass, 1991), 80–94; "Vene punaväe uue välieeskirja ilmumise puhul," *Sõdur* 6-8 (1937), 187–8.

[46] The Diary of the C-in-C, 18 September 1938, ERA.2553.1.2.

[47] The Diary of the C-in-C, 29 May – 4 June 1938, ERA.2553.1.2.

[48] Ibid.

[49] The Diary of the C-in-C, 26 March 1938, ERA.2553.1.2.

[50] Tuunainen, *Finnish Military Effectiveness*, 95

Estonians had not recognised the strengths of the Sinimäed position, which would be later used by the Germans in 1944. According to the analysis of the 1st Division, it was impossible to organise defence west of the River Narva and in case of a breakthrough, the enemy was supposed to be pushed back behind the river.[51] Again, we see that officers were overconfident in their ability to liquidate enemy breakthroughs, but it is also possible that they reported what the C-in-C chief expected them to write.

Considering the Soviet doctrine of deep battle and deep operations, Laidoner's instruction of 20 January 1939 to move the headquarters of the Võru-Petseri military district from Võru in the rear to Petseri on the border was highly dubious. Laidoner's reasoning was as follows: "The pushing up of our forces closer to the border is a significant part of the general plan of state defence, which demands strong and courageous active defence throughout the war as well as in the beginning."[52] The capturing of Petseri and the headquarters of the military district would have immediately jeopardized the mobilization of reservists from the border regions.

Even more dangerous was Laidoner's order from 1936 not to practice delay and withdrawal on tactical manoeuvers. Discussing deficiencies of the exercises of the 2nd Division with General Reek, Laidoner ordered: "Defence of each position is the duty to be carried out and the abandoning of that position is a crime. We speak about fighting until the last drop of our blood but in exercises we do just the opposite."[53] This was probably meant as another means to instil morale in the troops, but in war, the idea that one should accept one's encirclement rather than withdraw in time is suicidal. The same mentality allowed Hitler to encircle millions of Red Army troops, who had been ordered "Not a single step back!", but Hitler's own dilettantish leadership doomed the Sixth Army of General Paulus in 1942.[54]

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[51] "The operational and tactical assessment of the 1st Division of the (Narva) front. Syllabus," ERA.515.1.825, 5.

[52] "Notes about the official and diplomatic duties of General Laidoner," 20 January 1939, ERA.2553.1.62.

[53] The Diary of the C-in-C, 18 November 1936, ERA.2553.1.2, 137–38.

[54] A classical treatise is John Erickson, *Stalin's War with Germany. Vol.1, The road to Stalingrad* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975).

The tactics of the German Army Group *Nord* at the Narva front in 1944 showed that the River Narva was not as formidable a barrier as Laidoner imagined. At some places the geography even favoured the attacker, for example near Riigiküla, where the eastern bank dominated over the western bank of the river. It was in that section in February 1944 where the Red Army crossed the river virtually on the march.[55] The summer of 1939 was extraordinarily dry, so that marshlands carried foot soldiers. At certain places the River Narva was only 1.5 metres deep, thus it was passable without special equipment.[56] In winter time it was even easier to cross the river and operate in the large Krivasoo marshes next to it, as the winter of 1944 demonstrated. The German 1944 operations FLAMINGO and SEEADLER further showed how important it was to trade space for time. With those retrograde actions the German army group laid the basis for further successful defensive operations on the Tannenberg (Sinimäed) Line in July 1944.[57] There was at least one similarity with the Germans, however. Laidoner had recognised the importance of holding a bridgehead on the other side of the river, but this may have been the invention of the German army at the start of the Independence War, in November 1918.

To sum up this part one should say that the Estonian army had done well to train delay and withdrawal in the early 1930s. Laidoner forbade this in 1936. This is a speculation, but most probably many Estonian units would have faced encirclement by mobile Red Army units if war had started in 1939. It appears that Laidoner would have ordered them to defend rigidly their positions rather than delay, withdraw, reorganise and redeploy (which is of course not easy in practice).

Cultivating the legacy of the Independence War had negative consequences for Estonian military effectiveness. Patriotism and nationalism may influence attitudes in a positive way, but these aspects are of secondary importance in terms of military capability. Training and discipline

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[55] Andrew Michael Del Gaudio, "Operational Art and the Narva Front 1944, Sinimäed and Campaign Planning" (Unpublished PhD Thesis: University of Liverpool, 2012), 177.

[56] Salo, *"Eesti kaitseväe valmisolek sõjaks,"* 130.

[57] Del Gaudio, "Operational Art and the Narva Front 1944," 217. The German grouping in Narva and Jaanilinn was in danger of being encircled from the North and the South.

are more important. It was not correct to prohibit practicing withdrawal. It was positive that Laidoner favoured aggressive tactics even in defence, but carrying offensive tactics over to the strategic level was overly optimistic, and even reckless, considering the kind of enemy Estonia was facing. What the Estonian army really practiced in manoeuvres and what the exercises can tell us about its military effectiveness is the focus of the next chapter.

## Manoeuvres

The purpose of exercises is to simulate combat situations, in order to train leaders, staffs and units for war time duties.[58] It seems that theoretically Estonian army leadership had understood that purpose. For example, the journal *Sõdur* emphasised that future war would present a lot of surprises and leaders should learn to orient quickly in ever changing circumstances.[59] However, in reality exercises rarely met those requirements. An issue of *Sõdur* of April 1937 ended with the blunt critique:

> If both sides in the manoeuvres time and again act according to pre-prescribed plans – today – approach, attack, seizure of enemy positions, exploitation, etc., and accordingly we send baggage trains to the respective points in advance, – tomorrow – defence and retreat and accordingly we load machine guns to sleighs already in the morning, so that later it would be easier and more comfortable to withdraw, then such manoeuvres hardly help develop resourcefulness and quick thinking and hardly give teams and leaders those lessons, which they really need.[60]

Despite such critical comments, nothing changed. In February 1940, the chief-of-staff Colonel August Kasekamp wrote a memo about organizing exercises:

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[58] *FM 25-4, How to Conduct Training Exercises* (Headquarters, Department of the Army, 1984).

[59] K.L., "Manöövrite korraldamisest," *Sõdur* 14-15 (1937), 346–353.

[60] Ibid., 353.

> Our manoeuvres and tactical exercises are always organized according to the same model and are dominated by bureaucratic paper work. The schemes, situations and other material on manoeuvres and tactical exercises are often expanded to files of several dozens of pages. The course and the actions in those manoeuvres are often prescribed to the tiniest detail... In some cases, situations have been pre-planned for the entire manoeuvre and for all days in advance. This manner of envisaging the course of actions makes the directing of manoeuvres much easier, but this has also the result that the commanders do not need to have initiative, manoeuvres become inflexible and uninteresting. In consequence, such predetermined manoeuvres do not give the necessary experiences and lessons for leaders...[61]

According to a US training manual, Estonian exercises were conducted according to controlled-play scenarios, in which leaders had to take specific actions in response to pre-determined events. Such scenarios give commanders less freedom of action than the so-called free-game scenarios.[62] This was not good for the Estonian military effectiveness. Let us now study in more detail the two Estonian exercises, the manoeuvre of the 2nd division in 1937 and the exercise of the 3rd division in 1938.

From 21 to 27 September 1937 the 2nd division organised a larger multiservice tactical exercise in the region between Tsirguliina and Võru in the South-East. The objective of the manoeuvre was to give the services the experience of cooperating in battle situations; leaders could acquire leadership experience, soldiers practical experience. Units could train fighting against armoured forces and air forces, and experiment operating with a "moto-mechanised" team.[63] According to the scenario, the Blues blocked the advance of the attacking Greens invading from the east at the general line of Hargla-Karula-Urvaste-Kanepi. The Blues were aware that the Greens had had many losses and were exhausted, and could not bring enforcements from other sections of the front as they were advancing

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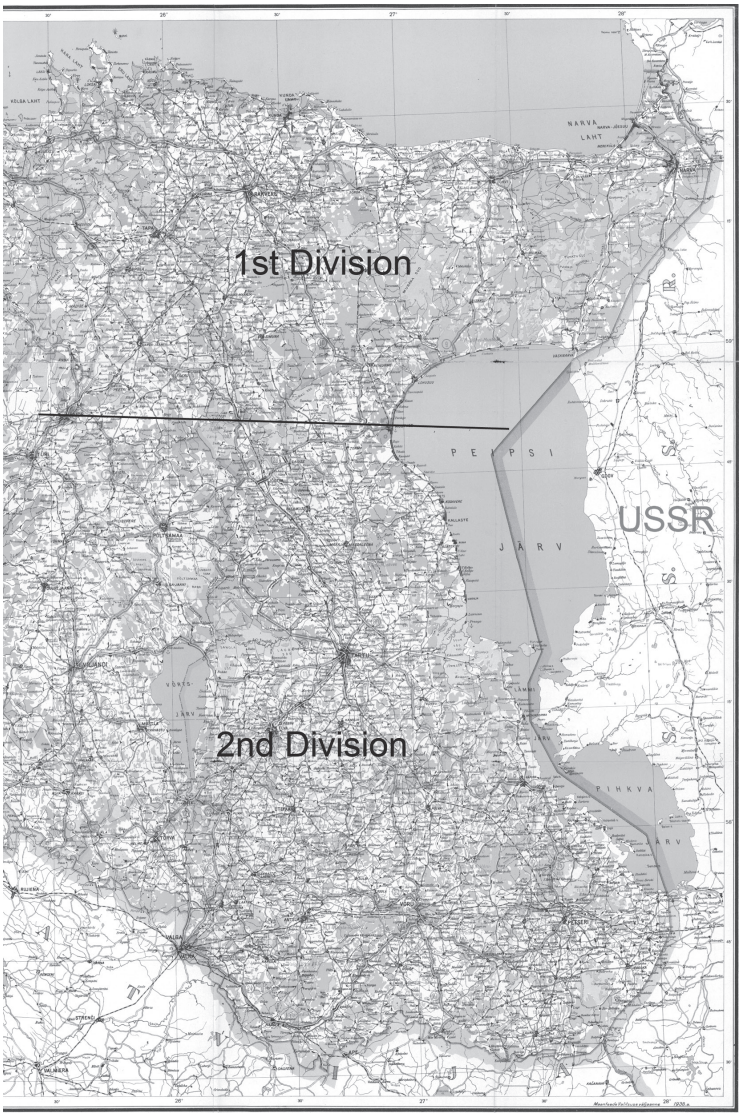
61 Memorandum, chief of staff Col. A. Kasekamp, 15 February 1940, ERA.515.1.825.

62 *FM 25-4, How to Conduct Training*.

63 The plan of the tactical manoeuvre of the 2nd Division for September 1937, 3 September 1937, ERA.518.1.695.




*The first division was responsible for the defence of the North-Eastern section of the front, while the second division defended in the South-East against the Soviet Union. Besides the 1st and the 2nd, there was also the 3rd division defending the western parts of the country. The formation of a fourth division was under way when Estonia was occupied by the USSR in 1940*

toward Tartu and Valga. Taking advantage of the favourable situation, the Blues launched a general counter-offensive in the morning of 22 September. The scenario gave the Blues precise orders for seizing the districts of Võru, Väimela and Leevi.[64] The scenario can therefore be read as a confirmation of Laidoner's vision of the future: the enemy attacking from the east is successfully punched back. The Blues do not delay or withdraw. There is a meeting engagement and the Greens are pushed successfully toward the east.

The summary of the exercise, preserved in the archive, describes the actions of units in detail and assesses their performance.[65] One of the mistakes that were noted was the inflexibility of delivering operational orders. The drafting of orders took so much time that subunits had no time for reconnaissance in daylight. One can infer from this that orders were given for the next morning. As a solution to the problem it was recommended that tasks be delivered by oral fragmentary orders. "In conditions of manoeuvre warfare the delivering of fragmentary orders is unavoidable," noted lieutenant colonel Lukas.[66] This was very reasonable.

In the context of the need for faster leadership, the utility of radio communication was noted. However, this had been viewed with "some suspicion" by the commanders.[67] The Greens had four, the Blues five D-type radios. The Greens were able to set up communications, but the Blues had not trained to operate the equipment and could therefore not establish radio communication. The transport of the radios was also a problem, because radios transported by horses and foot soldiers tended to fall behind combat units. It should be noted that radio was a key part in the conception and methods of the German manoeuvre warfare in the 1920s and the 1930s.[68] Those developments were followed keenly by Soviet military theoreticians, who considered radio as a force multiplier that had given an edge to the German army in the campaign in

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64 The initial situation for the Blues, September 1937, ERA.518.1.695.

65 Summary of the tactical exercise of the 2nd Division, 21–27 September 1937, deputy chief of staff of the 2nd Division Lt. Col. J. Lukas, 17 December 1937, ERA.515.1.794.

66 Ibid., 269.

67 Ibid.

68 Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, 107–8; Citino, *The Path to Blitzkrieg*, 116–118, 208–211, 206.

France.[69] At the same time one should note that Germany was clearly ahead of other countries: like Estonia, Britain went into war without a developed radio network.[70]

Next, lack of the mobility of the artillery was underlined. It was impossible to tow the 47-mm anti-tank gun by horses and foot soldiers and keep up with other units; the cavalry lacked integrated artillery entirely. Moreover, units were unable to engage the enemy inside defensive positions in attack or in defence. According to the Estonian doctrine, defensive efforts had to be concentrated at the forward edge of the main battle position: all fire had to be concentrated onto that line.[71] The exercise showed that units gave up the fight and the exercise was sometimes even adjourned when the enemy managed to penetrate the forward edge of the main defensive position. This was worrisome. It was rightly observed that the use of mechanised units by the enemy meant that penetrations of the defensive line had become unavoidable. Even so, there was no mention of the worst possible scenario for the defending Estonians – a break-through by enemy forces into the rear and the achievement of operational freedom.[72]

It was also noted that subunits were not following fire-and-movement principles: infantry advanced without the support of machine guns. As usual in Estonian exercises, cooperation with artillery left much to be desired. The experiment with the moto-mechanised grouping was a failure. Vehicles were used only for movement, in battle, soldiers left the vehicles behind and fought on foot. Leaders lacked experience in motorisation and because of slowness and hesitation in decision-making,

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[69] V. I. Usov, P. D. Kisliakov, "Upravlenie I sviaz' po opytu vtoroi imperialisticheskoi voiny," *Voennaia Mysl'* 11-12 (November-December 1940): 77–85, cited by Jacob W Kipp, "Barbarossa, Soviet Covering Forces and the Initial Period of War: Military history and AirLand battle," *The Journal of Soviet Military Studies* 1:2 (1988): 188–212.

[70] Chad G. Clark, "Radio to Free Europe: Armored force radio development, Great Britain and the United States 1919–1941" (Unpublished MA Thesis: Nebraska University Lincoln, 1999), 53.

[71] *Lahingueeskiri, Kaitsevägede staabi VI osakonna väljaanne* (Tallinn, 1932), 51, 56.

[72] Considering that an Estonian infantry platoon, which had to defend a front of 450–500 meters, was armed only with rifles and two light machine guns, penetration by the enemy was more than likely. About platoon's armaments, Salo, "Eesti kaitseväe valmisolek sõjaks," 54.

motorised units fell behind enemy units moving on foot. There was also a general "apathy" toward danger from the air.[73]

As we can see, the chief-of-staff of the division, who wrote that assessment relying on referees' reports and after-exercise discussions, was quite critical. Surprisingly, foreign military attachés were even more disapproving. The British attaché noted in his correspondence with the Foreign Office that the overall objective of the exercise seemed to be "confirming one's general opinion of the poor value of the Estonian army." Equipment was not modern and even if the Estonian army acquired some new systems, units needed time to get used to them. The attaché noted individual marksmanship as one of the strengths of the Estonian army. At the same time, the use of crew-served weapons and fighting against those weapon systems was neglected.[74]

The German attaché Colonel Rüssing reportedly agreed with the assessment of the British colleague, but the former predicted that due to recent procurements from Germany, Poland, and England the quality of the Estonian army would start improving fast. The German attaché agreed, however, that presently the Estonian army was much weaker than the Lithuanian army. The German attaché also noted that the purchases of armaments did not depend on the quality, or bilateral trade relations, but entirely on bribes, which everyone took, even President Päts, but not General Reek. The British representative, however, did not think Estonia was able to improve its military capability much in the future.[75]

A slightly more detailed British assessment has been preserved about the autumn manoeuvres of the 3rd division near Rapla on 6–10 October 1938.[76] This was the largest exercise of the 3rd division over the past several years. In the summary it was noted that the manoeuvre could be regarded as "entirely successful," as it had demonstrated the steady rise of the quality of the training of units compared to previous

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[73] Summary of the exercise of the 2nd Division from 21 to 27 September 1937, deputy chief of staff of the 2nd Division Lt. Col. J. Lukas, 17 December 1937, ERA.515.1.794. See also Salo, "Eesti kaitseväe valmisolek sõjaks," 64.

[74] "Estonian Army," Consul Gallienne in Tallinn to Secretary of State, 28 December 1937, FO 371/22226, NA.

[75] Ibid.

[76] For a short description see "3. diviisi sügismanööver," *Sõdur* 41-42 (1938), 1011–1015.

years.[77] There were also deficiencies: the staff of the task force had no telephone communication with the air force staff; the motorised company lacked the means of communication; radio was seldom used because the cipher was regarded as too complicated (even though a counter-intelligence unit decoded it in five minutes). Despite the relatively large number of radios, communication could be established only in very few cases. Units lacked their own baggage trains, so logistics support was provided by hired transport. Infantry performance was considered as good, but the coordination of the artillery and other arms was, again, weak. Commanders of indirect fire support batteries did not seek contact with infantry and did not send forward observers up front. Just like at the exercise of the 2nd division, motorised units performed "essentially as motor transport."

The assessment of the British representative was crushing. It was observed that this was an exercise in which the entire military district practiced mobilisation, and as usual defence and attack was learned. We can infer from this that Laidoner's orders were followed and there was no practice of withdrawal. The attaché considered the overall quality of troops as "very low;" the level of the training and capabilities of senior officers as "low." The quality of armaments was considered as "very bad." The problem was the disparity of weapons; in order to reach even a satisfactory level of standardisation, a lot of new armaments were needed. The British observer also noted the weak physique of conscripts born during the First World War, which left a mark on combat strengths. Despite the strong will to defend the country, the Estonian army "will not have any great fighting value," the attaché concluded drily.[78]

Although Estonian exercises should be studied more thoroughly in the future, one can already conclude on the basis of those two exercises that there were important deficiencies in Estonian tactics. This view was shared by foreign military observers. It was natural that Estonian own summaries were not excessively negative, trying to remain constructive and optimistic. The quality had certainly improved over the years. Nevertheless, exercises were surprisingly rigid and unimaginative, which

[77] Summary of the excercise, 3 December 1938, commander of the division Major General Herbert Brede, ERA.521.1.416.

[78] The British Attaché to the Foreign Secretary, 20 October 1938, FO 371/22226, NA.

was not the best way to practice manoeuvre warfare.[79] The problem was also that enemy qualities were presented unrealistically, which allowed the strengths of one's own troops (the Blues) to be seen in a more favourable light. It is impossible to say at this stage of research whether the reason for this was the wish to strengthen the morale, wrong analysis of Red Army capabilities, or the eagerness to comply with the wishes of the high command of the army.

## Summary

This article was able to offer only a cursory perspective on the ideas of the Estonian army leadership on future war. Evidence showed that C-in-C Laidoner considered the experience of the Independence War as important and was keen to draw on that experience not only to instil confidence before an uncertain future, but also to find practical lessons for future war.

In this respect, it is illuminating to draw some parallels with the experience of another small country, Holland. Historians Frederic S. Pearson and R. E. Doerga have analysed the preparations of the Dutch army and reached the following conclusion:

Here was a case in which leaders perceiving threat were immobilized by a lack of perceived alternatives, by the existence of historical precedents that enabled them to engage in wishful thinking, and by an inability to comprehend fully the extent of the adversary's ambitions.[80]

The Dutch were in a similar situation to the Estonians. Whereas Estonia had won the last war, Holland had been able to stay neutral and keep its territory untouched. Similar to Estonia, the Dutch could not imagine that the adversary would act as unpredictably and vigorously as it did, in

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[79] "Summary of the major deficiencies found in the performance of the leaders at the military game of the 1st Division (13–15 March 1940), commander of the 1st Division, 1 May 1940, ERA.515.1.825.

[80] Frederic S. Pearson, R.E. Doerga, "The Netherlands and the 1940 Nazi Invasion," – *Studies in Crisis Behavior*, ed. Michael Brecher (New Brunswick, New Jersey: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1978), 25.

1940. Until the last moment the Dutch were engaging in wishful thinking, hoping that Germany would simply not attack. Like Estonia, the Dutch did not seriously consider foreign assistance.[81]

This article has not dwelled on the deliberations of the Estonian general staff in August and September 1939. But the analysis of Laidoner's ideas on tactics and strategy demonstrated that wishful thinking was the order of the day.[82] The roots of the naivety are not difficult to find. It was the myth of the Independence War cultivated vigorously by the Päts-Laidoner regime. The spirit of the Independence War was propagated not only at the political level to assure the public's support for the regime, but also in military strategy and tactics. On Laidoner's orders the army adopted the concept of "active defence" on the borders, which prescribed attack and offensive action as the chief methods on the tactical and the strategic levels. Even while aggressiveness could be justified at the tactical level, Estonia did not have the technical means and the ability to develop aggressive manoeuvre warfare on the operational level. The analysis of the two major exercises showed that the Estonian army had insufficient firepower, protection (air defence and anti-tank) and the mobility necessary to conduct large scale counter-attacks and counter-offensives.[83]

At this point it makes sense to draw on the assessment of foreign observers. According to Swedish military attachés, the common mistake of the Baltic states was their over optimism about their ability to beat the Russians. The Swedes thought that this misconception was based on incorrect analysis of the Baltic independence wars: in particular, Baltic officers did not understand the great difference between the well organised modern Red Army and the chaotic Bolshevik units who had fought at the fronts of the Civil War.[84]

The views of the Swedish attachés therefore confirm the findings of this study. It seems that the myth of the Independence War was often

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[81] Ibid., 40.

[82] Another example: "Vene punaväe uue välieeskirja ilmumise puhul," *Sõdur* 6-8 (1937), 187–188.

[83] For current doctrinal requirements for executing successful manoeuvers, see Mõts, *Maaväe lahingutegevuse alused*, 95.

[84] Eriksson, "Swedish Military Attachés," 42.

more important than military professionalism and competency. The spirit of the Independence War had to compensate for shortfalls in technology and training. But as August–September 1939 demonstrated, these misconceptions were not as deep as to persuade the Estonian high command to decide for mobilisation for war against the Soviet Union (of course, this also depended on the decisions of politicians). It is very likely, however, that Laidoner's concept of "active defence" would have caused great and unnecessary losses during the initial stages of the war and the Estonian army would have been forced to re-orient and adapt very quickly. However, time is a precious commodity in war.[85]

One can thus conclude that the Estonian army was weakened not only by the belated procurement of modern weapons and the small firepower of its units – factors that have been analysed in earlier studies – but also by incompetent leadership, which particularly hurt effectiveness on the operational level of war. The inter-war period can be seen as a warning lesson for present and future senior officers, whose task is to develop operational plans that meet realistic threat scenarios and match the capabilities of one's own units.

Because of limited space, the article could not study several important aspects that would throw additional light on the military mentality and operational concepts of the Estonian military. It focused on the ideas of General Laidoner, about which there are a few fragmentary pieces of evidence in the archives. Hopefully, future studies will help further elaborate Laidoner's ideas.[86] There are still no specialised studies on Estonian military exercises, or theories of war developed in Estonian military academies, staffs, and by the journals *Sõdur* and *Sõjateadlane* (Military Scientist).[87] Another interesting topic, which needs further research, is the influence of the military thought of other countries on Estonian

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[85] According to Carl von Clausewitz, it is the third law of war, Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*; edited and translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton (N.J.): Princeton University Press, 1989); see also Nikolai Reek, *Aja kaotus – on surm: sõjaväe juhtivkoosseisu ettevalmistusest* (Tallinn, 1921).

[86] Urmas Salo, *Kui Laidoner juhatas väge… Kindral Johan Laidoner Eesti sõjavägede ülemjuhatajana 1934–1940* (manuscript in author's possession).

[87] But see Laanetu, "Eesti meresõjalise mõtte kullafond".

doctrines. It would be interesting to know, for example, what was the impact of French ideas on the Estonian military, as several Estonian senior officers had been educated at schools in France.[88]

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[88] For some thoughts about this, Kaarel Piirimäe, "Sõjaväelised kirjutised samas reas ülejäänud Eesti mõttelooga," *Diplomaatia* 153 (2016).

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