HISTORY OF ESTONIA

1918–2017

A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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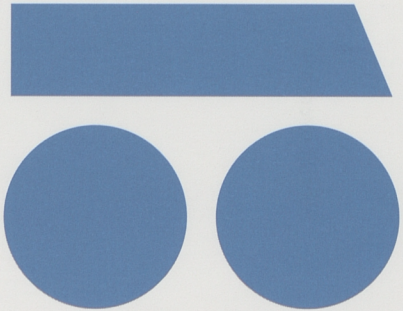
A brief overview

ESTONIA



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SÄILITUSEKSEMPLAR

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AKADEEMILINE
RAAMATUKOGU

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ESTONIA IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

By the beginning of the 20th century, the Estonian territories had already been under Russian supremacy for two hundred years, and there was nothing to indicate an end to Russia's domination. The Estonian people were too few in number (one million) to independently shake themselves loose from Russia, nor was such an aim ever formulated. However, in a few generations the situation had quickly changed for the Estonians. The national awakening that began in the second half of the 19th century shaped a more self-aware nation from the thus far inert Estonian country folk. In terms of education and cultural development, Estonians were significantly ahead of the average levels in the Russian Empire, so they were gradually better and better prepared for having a say in the economic development of their homeland.

Administratively, the native land of the Estonians was divided between several governorates. Northern Estonia comprised the Estonian Governorate (Tallinn being the centre), while southern Estonia together with northern Latvia formed the Governorate of Livonia (with its centre in Riga). Estonia and Livonia together with the Courland Governorate (Southern Latvia) formed the Baltic provinces of the Russian Empire. In addition, some smaller areas of Estonia were part of the St Petersburg Governorate and Pskov Governorate. Governorates were divided into counties, of which there were nine on Estonian territory, and counties were in turn subdivided into districts (about 350). There were ten towns in Estonia, the biggest of them being Tallinn (131,000 inhabitants in 1914). In spite of the rapid industrial development occurring during World War I, which resulted in an increase in the number of city-dwellers, Estonia remained an agrarian country. More than 80% of the population lived in villages and was involved in farming.

Ants Laikmaa's painting "Läänemaa talu"
("A farmstead in Läänemaa"), 1918
Art Museum of Estonia, EKM j 4953 M 2794

The modernisation of society was hindered by the circumstances prevailing in Russia. This was due to the fact that Russia continued to be a semi-autocratic state led by 'God's anointed' Tsar and officials executing his will. There was still no constitution, and the State Duma — the people's assembly formed as a result of the Russian Revolution in 1905 — was not comparable to the parliaments of democratic countries. The civil rights that were proclaimed under pressure from the revolution were also established only partially, being limited by various further regulations. The activity of political parties was subordinated to police surveillance (Socialist parties were banned), and the printed word, to censorship; political dissidents were persecuted and repressed.

In national regions, overall political underdevelopment was coupled with the unification policy (i.e. Russification) of the central government, leading to national inequality, namely prerogatives for the Russians and the exclusion of minorities. Among other things, this meant official procedures only in Russian in all of the State agencies and courts, school education in Russian, and barriers against non-Russian intellectuals finding suitable employment in their home country.

Eestimaa kubermang = Governorate of Estonia, Liivimaa kubermang = Governorate of Livonia, Peterburi kubermang = St Petersburg Governorate, Pihkva kubermang = Pskov Governorate

Estonian administrative division in early 20th century

Eesti ajalugu V, pp 58–59

Nicholas II, the Tsar of Russia reaches Toompea Castle during his visit to Tallinn
National Archives of Estonia, EFA.0-99601

The Baltic provinces lacked any local government whatsoever, either at governorate or county level, and all spheres of life were governed by appointed Russian civil servants. Elected authorities acted only in rural districts and cities, and even there both the suffrage and local government decision-making powers were limited. While the management of districts was in the hands of the Estonians, the city governments were dominated by Baltic Germans. Only in 1904 did Estonians manage to take control of the Tallinn City Government, and later still of some other town governments.

In addition to the dominance of the Russian executives, Estonians (and Latvians) also suffered under the supremacy of the historically established local ruling class, the Baltic German nobility. The Baltic Germans, who accounted for only a marginal part of the population (3.5%), attempted to govern all aspects of local life, thus causing dissatisfaction among the Estonians (90% of

the population). The confrontation between the Estonians and the Baltic German nobility was most escalated by the fact that the Baltic German nobility owned 58% of the land, while two-thirds of the Estonian country folk were entirely without land, supporting themselves mainly as hired hands for the manors or farms. Consequently, acute 'hunger for land' was predominant among the Estonians. Because the Baltic nobility did not want to hear anything about land reform or the redistribution of land, the chronic 'hunger for land' caused the emigration of Estonians from their homeland. Emigrants headed to Russia, where they hoped to get land or find a better-paying job. Before World War I, up to 200,000 Estonians or almost one-fifth of the Estonian people were living outside Estonia. Of these, up to 50,000 had relocated to the empire's

Members of the local government of the municipality of Tarvastu
National Archives of Estonia, EFA.3-8757

capital, St Petersburg, and 10,000 to Riga, while the rest were spread out over the entirety of Russia, forming hundreds of agricultural settlements. In the long term, emigration threatened the Estonian people with physical extinction.

Maximilian Maksolly's painting "Eesti Vabariigi väljakuulutamine Päästekomitee poolt" ("The announcement of independence of the Republic of Estonia by the Salvation Committee"), 1920s
Tallinn City Museum, TLM_23692 G 1879

INDEPENDENCE

Autonomy and secession from Russia

World War I proved fatal for the Russian Empire. Widespread dissatisfaction, caused by exhaustion from war and a rapidly declining economy, ignited the February Revolution in February 1917. The Emperor was forced to step down, power was transferred to the Russian Provisional Government, and Russia saw an opportunity to take a democratic path for the first time in history. The government's goal was to democratise and modernise society.

Among other changes, all former administrators and officials were replaced, which granted local authority to the representatives of the peoples of ethnic regions. The Estonian Jaan Poska was appointed Commissar of the Governorate of Estonia. Estonians also took charge of all Estonian towns and provincial local governments that had been established after the revolution.

The Estonians began to take steps to accomplish a goal that was proposed during the 1905 Russian Revolution – Estonian autonomy. The Provisional Government gave in to pressure, and on 30 March signed a decree regarding the reform of the Estonian government. The decree merged South and North Estonia into one national governorate, which was ruled by the Commissar, the democratically elected Provincial Assembly, and its executive body, the Provincial Government. Autonomy was thus basically achieved, and Estonia's nationalist politicians were initially satisfied.

In spring and summer of 1917 there was talk of needing to transform the Russian unitary state into a federation, which would have included Estonia among other equal states. However, the accomplishment of this new goal did not depend on the goodwill of the Estonians or other ethnic minorities of Russia, but on the will of the future Russian Constituent Assembly. Because of this, the idea of establishing an Estonian state was put on hold.

On 29 September 1917, German troops arrive in Saaremaa (Operation "Albion")
National Archives of Estonia, EFA.3-641

The objective changed by the end of 1917. The main reason was the Bolshevik coup in St Petersburg, which brought Lenin's government to power in Russia. Because communist activity threatened to cause a civil war that could have proved fatal to small nations, the question of declaring Estonia's independence from Russia, so that the people could take the fate of their country into their own hands, became inescapable. On 15 November 1917 the Estonian Provincial Assembly declared that the Estonian Constituent Assembly should decide the future of Estonia, and that the highest authority in Estonia would belong to the Provincial Assembly until the Constituent Assembly is elected. These decisions have been described as necessary conditions for gaining independence, and as the secession of Estonia from Russia to establish nationhood. However, this was merely theoretical, since Estonia was under Bolshevik rule. Because the

Bolsheviks relied on Russia's military presence in Estonia, the Estonians were unable to put the Provincial Assembly's decisions into practice.

Furthermore, the growing threat of German occupation forced politicians to start thinking about independence. The Germans exploited the decline of the Russian army after the February Revolution, and in October 1917 they occupied the islands of western Estonia (Saaremaa, Hiiumaa, Muhu); no Oracle of Delphi was needed to predict their imminent arrival on the Estonian mainland. Besides, the German army was openly invited. After the overthrow of the Emperor, the Baltic German nobility had concluded that their obligation of loyalty to the Russian state had come to an end. The knighthoods of Estonia and Livonia turned to Berlin and asked for German troops to liberate Estonia and Latvia from the Bolsheviks. Most Estonians found this unacceptable, and on 1 January 1918 a council of representatives of nationalist political parties decided: "It is necessary to declare independence in the near future."

Declaration of independence

The decision on 1 January was followed by cautious steps towards independence. Newspapers published an appeal from political parties to the people, which explained the need for independence and attempted to prove that even small nations can be sustainable. Contact was established with Russian democratic parties to gauge their opinion on the possibility of Estonian independence (the results did not meet expectations), as well as with diplomats from the Triple Entente nations, who resided in St Petersburg. At the end of January, an Estonian delegation travelled to Stockholm to seek recognition of independence. In May 1918, they were able to gain *de facto* recognition from Great Britain, France and Italy.

It was much more difficult to achieve success at home, where the Bolshevik dictatorship grew stronger. The Bolsheviks banned all public political action, blocked the work of political parties, took over the opposition's newspapers

Nikolai Kalmakov's painting "24 February 1918". Members of the Estonian Salvation Committee (from the left) Konstantin Konik, Konstantin Päts and Jüri Vilms

Eesti Pank Museum

and arrested nationalist politicians. At the same time, the Estonian Constituent Assembly elections were cancelled, preventing the Constituent Assembly from declaring Estonia independent. The leading nationalists had only one vague hope left: the next great German offensive could force the remnants of the Russian army, and the Bolshevik rulers who relied on it, to flee the country, thus creating the opportunity to declare independence during the subsequent interregnum. It was decided that an independence manifesto addressed to the people of Estonia should be written in preparation for this event, the reading of which would mark the establishment of a republic.

The feared and awaited German offensive began on 18 February 1918[1], and on the very next day a special temporary governing body – the Estonian Salvation Committee – was established in Tallinn to coordinate the necessary steps for independence. The events unfolded as was hoped. The Russian Army and the Bolsheviks fled, leaving a power vacuum that lasted a few days before the arrival of German troops. Within a week (20–26 February), Estonian politicians took power in all county towns (except Võru) and surrounding parishes with the help of Estonian national brigades that had been part of the Russian Army. The declaration of independence was read to the public for the first time on the evening of 23 February in Pärnu and later in Viljandi, Paide and Tallinn. However, Independence Day is celebrated not on the day of the first reading, 23 February, but on 24 February, when the Salvation Committee took power in Tallinn and formed the Estonian Provisional Government (led by Prime Minister Konstantin Päts).

The democratic Republic of Estonia declared itself independent in February 1918. However, the actual development of the nation was prevented by the German occupation. German troops occupied the mainland of Estonia and

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[1] *From here on, all dates are based on the new calendar, because on 1 February 1918 Russia, including Estonia, switched from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar.*

established a military dictatorship. Estonia's independence, the Provisional Government, the Provincial Assembly and the Salvation Committee were not recognised. Estonian national brigades and democratically elected local governments were broken up. National political parties were not tolerated, public political events were banned, publications were subjected to wartime censorship and Estonian political leaders arrested or forced to flee the country. German military rulers relied on the Baltic German nobility, who wanted to turn the former Russian Baltic Sea provinces into one autonomous Baltic Landesstaat within Germany. The plans to create a Landesstaat were dashed by the November Revolution in Germany, the Armistice of Compiègne and the end of World War I and the German occupation.

The practical development of Estonian nationhood was restarted thanks to the November Revolution. Exploiting the confusion of the German occupying power, the Estonian Provisional Government convened in Tallinn on 11 November 1918 and began the transfer of power. Representatives of the Provisional Government soon signed an agreement with the chief representative of Germany in the Baltics, which transferred all authority in Estonia to the Provisional Government, effective from noon on 21 November. By this time, the Provincial Assembly, having become the parliament of the Republic of Estonia, had also reconvened.

War of Independence

But on the eastern border, the young nation was already facing a new threat in the shape of communist Russia. Lenin's government was quick to exploit the collapse of Germany to launch an offensive in the west. The Bolsheviks dreamed of a communist world revolution. They were convinced that it would begin as soon as Russia's and Germany's revolutionary powers were united. In order to unite these powers, it was imperative to destroy the nations (Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine) that had emerged from the rubble of empires.

Battle lines during the War of Independece

Eesti ajalugu VI, pp 30–31

Officers of the British squadron of light cruisers that arrived in Tallinn on 12 December 1918, pictured with the top officials of Estonian national defence.
From the front left: the leader of the British squadron, Admiral Sir Edwyn Alexander-Sinclair; the PM and Minister of War of the Republic of Estonia, Konstantin Päts; the Commander in Chief of the Estonian Army, colonel Johan Laidoner
National Archives of Estonia, EFA.4-3481

Two assault groups were assembled on Estonia's eastern border. A group that was formed in Yamburg (Kingisepp) was tasked with capturing Narva and continuing the offensive on Tallinn; a supporting attack would move along the northern shore of Lake Peipus to Central Estonia. The second group's primary objective was to capture Pskov and invade southeast Estonia. The main attack would move through Võru and Valga and then head to Latvia to capture Riga; supporting attacks were to strike from Võru towards Tartu and from Valga

towards Viljandi and Pärnu. The Provisional Government began assembling the Estonian Army no sooner than on 16 November, and faced great difficulties. It seemed that the Red Army's offensive in Estonia would be a walk in the park.

The War of Independence began on 28 November 1918 with the Battle of Narva. The Estonian and German units were able to jointly fend off the first attack, after which the Germans headed for home, and the Estonians, left without help, were forced to retreat, surrendering Narva to the Red Army.

Since Lenin's government was trying to portray the Red Army's invasion as a class struggle between the local proletariat and the bourgeoisie, the Estonian Bolsheviks, having entered Narva with the Red Army, established the Estonian Worker's Commune. In accordance with the principles of class warfare, this entity was to be an independent nation of Estonian workers, but in practice, the leaders of the commune were receiving their orders from Moscow.

A few days later the Red Army entered Estonia from Pskov. German troops in southeast Estonia refused to fight, which meant that the Red Army was able to capture Võru and Valga without meeting resistance. Estonian units attempted to beat back the enemy near Tartu but failed. By the end of the year, the Reds had completely captured Viru, Võru and Tartu counties, as well as parts of Harju, Järva, Viljandi and Pärnu counties. The front line was approaching Tallinn, Paide, Viljandi and Pärnu. The initial failure was mainly due to the lack of war supplies and low morale. The people were exhausted from the four year world war and were reluctant to take up arms again. Furthermore, the small Estonian nation's ability to defend itself against the Russian giant was underestimated. The situation seemed so hopeless that the Provincial Assembly contacted the government of Great Britain on 27 December, and asked them to make Estonia its protectorate and to send British troops to fight the Red Army in Estonia.

London was unwilling to make such a drastic step. However, British warships entered the eastern part of the Baltic Sea, brought weapons for the Estonian Army and took over the maritime defence of Estonia's coastline, including

Armoured trains built in Tallinn played a key role in the War of Independence. Pictured: armoured train no. 2 during the Landeswehr War, on the bridge of the Rauna River
National Archives of Estonia, EFA.A-308-120

Tallinn. Even more important was the British squadron's positive effect on the morale of Estonian troops. The arrival of Finnish volunteers in Estonia on New Year's Eve had a similar effect. In addition, the Estonian Army fought alongside or included Russian, Latvian, Ingrian, Baltic German, Danish and Swedish units at various stages of the War of Independence.

The turning point in the War of Independence came during the most depressing days in December 1918. It was then that people who valued nationhood realised that they needed to protect their homeland, and to cast aside the fear of Russia's might and size that had been instilled in them for centuries. One after another, volunteer battalions were formed, which replenished existing units with personnel and improved their will and readiness to fight. The

volunteers included many schoolboys, university students and young intellectuals. On the first week of 1919, the Red Army's advance was halted in many small "breakthrough battles", after which the Reds were resisted everywhere. By the beginning of February the Red Army was pushed back beyond the Estonian border.

The War of Independence did not end there, of course. On the contrary, the leaders of the Red Army, who did not believe that the Estonians could mount a defence, began to take the war more seriously and amassed far more powerful forces against Estonia. From February to May 1919, fierce battles were fought on the southern front. The Estonians were forced to protect themselves against the overwhelming Red Army by periodically retreating and attacking. The Red Army was finally exhausted in May, having been involved in battles on the front lines of the Russian Civil War. In accordance with the plans of the Estonian commander-in-chief (Major General Johan Laidoner), the fighting moved into enemy territory (Russia and Latvia), and Estonia escaped further destruction. However, the battles continued.

In June 1919, the Estonians met a new foe: the Baltic German volunteer army Landeswehr, and several German Freikorps that were active in Latvia. These units were under German command (Major General Rüdiger von der Goltz) and were assembled to prevent the Red Army's advance into East Prussia. In spring 1919, when the Red Army's offensive was stopped, the volunteers, especially members of the Landeswehr, started expressing political ambitions. The most conservative part of the Baltic German nobility had not abandoned their dream of creating an autonomous Baltic Landesstaat within Germany. To accomplish this goal, members of the Landeswehr staged a coup in Latvia, replaced the legitimate Latvian Provisional Government with a German-minded cabinet and attempted to expand this new government's sphere of influence. Because of this, the Germans came into conflict with Estonian forces that were active in northern Latvia, which sparked the Landeswehr War. The Germans saw some initial success and captured the city of Cēsis, but their

luck soon changed, as the Estonians pursued the retreating Germans to Riga. The turning point in the Landeswehr War – the liberation of Cēsis from the Germans on 23 June – is celebrated in Estonia as Victory Day.

Tartu Peace Treaty

The Landeswehr War inspired an unprecedented enthusiasm for war among Estonians. While the Red Army was fought out of a sense of duty to protect the homeland, the war against the (Baltic) Germans was driven by a desire for payback for imagined and real injustices that had lasted for centuries. However, after the Landeswehr War, enthusiasm turned to fatigue. Estonia was cleared of all enemies, and ordinary soldiers were yearning to return to their families and daily lives. The war continued for the time being. Estonians participated in the defence of Pskov alongside the Russian White Army in August, supported the grand offensive of General Nikolai Yudenich's Northwestern Army on St Petersburg in October, aided the Latvians in their battles against Pavel Bermondt-Avalov's Western Army in November and so on. Meanwhile the people waited and hoped for an end to the war.

The possibility of ending the conflict mainly depended on the opposing side, Russia. After General Yudenich's defeat at St Petersburg, Lenin's government for the first time expressed serious intent to make peace with Estonia. Peace negotiations began on 5 December 1919 in Tartu and proved difficult due to several crises and interruptions. The situation was made more complicated by the fact that heavy battles were taking place near Narva against the Red Army's fierce offensive. An agreement was reached in spite of everything, and a cease fire was signed on 31 December 1919. It ended a war that had cost the Estonian side over 6,000 lives. A permanent peace treaty was signed on 2 February 1920, whereby Russia recognised Estonia's independence and promised to respect it. The treaty also determined the Estonian–Russian border and arranged future diplomatic and economic relations.

The last meeting of the Tartu negotiations before signing the Peace Treaty
National Archives of Estonia, EFA.6-15

REPUBLIC OF ESTONIA

Democratic Estonia

The manifesto of independence declared that Estonia would be a democratic republic, and so the powers that be began building such a nation. Authority initially belonged to the Provincial Assembly and the Provisional Government, but on 23 April 1919, the leadership functions were taken over by the Constituent Assembly, which was chosen in a general election. Because society remained left-leaning, the biggest group in parliament consisted of socialists, who chose the chairman of the Constituent Assembly – August Rei.

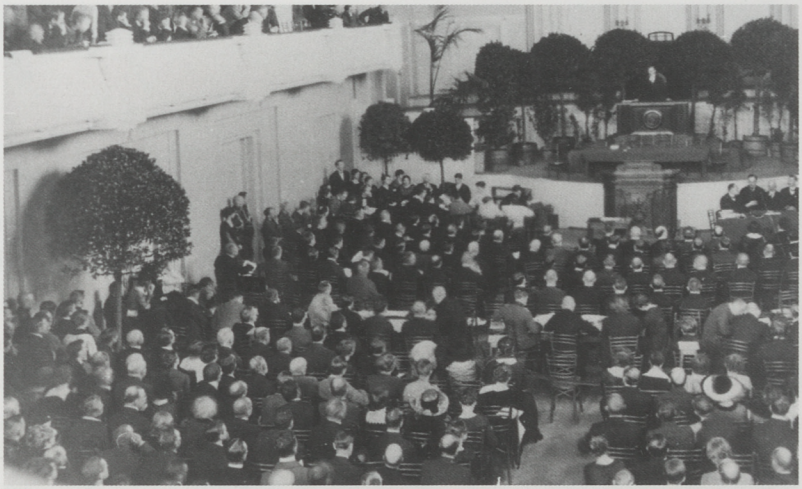
The Constituent Assembly's main task – writing the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia – was completed on 15 June 1920. The constitution was one of the most democratic at the time, stipulating the fundamental rights and complete equality of all citizens. However, democratic freedoms did not extend to the entire republic in practice. Martial law was in effect in many parts of the country (near railroads and the eastern border, as well as in the capital), allowing the authorities to curtail people's rights and freedoms. These restrictions were used to fight the illegal Communist movement, which wanted to topple the legitimate government, impose a dictatorship of the proletariat, and force Estonia to join Soviet Russia. The Communist movement was getting its orders from Moscow. On 1 December 1924, the Communists staged an attempted coup in Tallinn. The attempt failed miserably, and society, having been somewhat tolerant towards Communists, now turned its back on the terrorists, who had exposed their true intentions. However, the danger of Communism remained along with martial law.

Equality was not so much dependent on the stipulations of the constitution, as on the dominant attitudes in society, which at that time was largely patriarchal. Women were guaranteed equal rights and achieved success in a

Oskar Sädek's painting "Raekoja plats" ("Town Hall Square"), 1940
Tartu Art Museum, TKM TR 2112 M 390

number of fields (doctors, lawyers, professors, artists, etc), but their participation in politics was not considered entirely "normal". There were no women ministers in the government and no women mayors or county governors, and the percentage of women in parliament was usually only 1–2%.

The system of government, established by the constitution, was shaped by the views of leftist parties and the result was somewhat unusual. Estonia lacked a head of state (president). The president's representative functions were carried out by the head of the government (called *riigivanem* or State Elder), who was



On 23 April 1919, the Constituent Assembly gathered in Tallinn, at the theatre hall of the Estonia Society
National Archives of Estonia, EAA.2073.2.12.1

basically the prime minister and always left office with the government. There was therefore no balancing mechanism between the parliament (*Riigikogu*) and the government, and the *Riigikogu* played an unusually important role in leading the nation. Leftists believed that the *Riigikogu* needed to be checked by the people, so the right to launch popular initiatives and plebiscites was included in the constitution. It was emphasised that whenever the result of a plebiscite differs from the decision of the *Riigikogu*, an early parliamentary election would be triggered. This principle was only applied once (1923), and the people did not act as a balancing mechanism.

Another problem emerged in the young republic's political life – there were many political parties – 26 parties participated in the 1923 parliamentary election, 14 of which got their representatives elected to parliament. Most political parties were not based on one particular worldview, but represented the interests

Government meetings took place in the White Hall of Toompea Castle. Pictured: Jaan Teemant's Cabinet, which governed the country from December 1925 until July 1926
National Archives of Estonia, EFA.5-52

of a specific social group. Parties were created by farm owners, tenant farmers, landlords, tenants, former soldiers and so on. Such parties made many campaign promises and, having been elected to the *Riigikogu*, began looking for ways to fulfil them, forming short-term alliances with one or another political force. Party diversity was therefore associated with factionalism and political instability.

The latter was manifested in frequent government crises. In 1924–34, Estonia had 16 governments, each lasting 10 months on average. Most cabinets left office due to the collapse of their coalition because the parties sought better combinations to make good on campaign promises. That said, government crises usually did not cause significant changes. Usually, only two or three previous coalition partners were replaced, and people often complained that there

was no difference between the old and the new government's plans. Nevertheless, the Constituent Assembly's constitution, and the political system that was based on it, functioned without serious issues. There was criticism, but whenever politicians attempted to change the constitution, blaming the problems on the absence of a president and the parliament's excessive authority, their proposals failed to gain support. They were told that a parliamentary system relies on the dominance of the *Riigikogu*, and that the system of government can be improved under the existing constitution.

Crisis years

The situation changed at the start of the 1930s, when Estonia was hit by the worldwide economic crisis (the Great Depression), which rapidly lowered the standard of living and caused dissatisfaction to fester. Those who suffered began looking for people to blame and found them among politicians. Support for the parliament, the government and the political parties fell to unprecedented levels. This increased political instability, which included frequent government crises and the birth of new political forces.

One very influential movement that entered the political arena was the Union of Participants in the Estonian War of Independence (known as the Vaps Movement). This league had taken shape in the 1920s as an apolitical association of veterans of the War of Independence. As the economic crisis deepened, a political current appeared within the league, which accused the "old parties" of being selfish and sought solutions to the crisis. The members wanted to change the constitution, create a presidential post and rein in the power of the *Riigikogu*. To give weight to their demands, the union began accepting so-called supporting members, which mostly included people who were suffering from the effects of the economic crisis (ruined entrepreneurs, the unemployed and others), and young people with radical views. The league of war veterans was thus transformed into a broad political movement, which was similar to a number of far-right movements active in Europe at the time.

Blessing the flag of the Jõgeva Faction of the Estonian Vaps Movement.
National Archives of Estonia, EFA.A-249-104

In October 1933, a new draft constitution, proposed by the Vaps, was massively supported in a referendum by 72.7% of the voters. Formally, these were amendments to the Constituent Assembly's constitution, but it was in essence a new constitution that changed the principles of how Estonia would be governed. From that point on, Estonia would be ruled by the head of state, who needed a mandate from the people, and by the government, which would do the head of state's bidding. The parliament's size and jurisdiction were significantly reduced. The parliament could pass a motion of no confidence in the government, but the head of state could then choose whether to replace the cabinet or call an early parliamentary election.

For the new constitution to take effect, presidential and parliamentary elections needed to be held. The presidential candidates were Konstantin Päts, who was State Elder at the time, Johan Laidoner, who had been commander-in-chief during the War of Independence, August Rei, leader of the Socialists,

and retired General Andres Larka, leader of the Vaps. The biggest competitors in the election were the Vaps and the "old parties", and the campaign was unprecedentedly fierce. Many fist fights broke out during meetings before the election, and the political tension threatened to split society in half.

Authoritarian Estonia

Two of the presidential candidates (Päts and Laidoner) reached a mutual agreement and, with the approval of the third candidate (Rei), staged a coup on 12 March 1934. The coup's main objective was to eliminate the Vaps Movement. Nationwide martial law was declared for six months, public political meetings were banned, the league of veterans and its publications were closed and hundreds of active members were arrested. The presidential and parliamentary elections were soon after postponed, and the Vaps were stripped of their mandates in local governments. Parties and the press were warned not to continue their political machinations. The official pretext was the discovery that the Vaps Movement was planning to topple the government, which forced the government to take preventative measures. The existence of such a plot has never been proven.

The *Riigikogu*, which consisted of representatives of the "old parties", gave its approval to the coup and went into summer recess. But this mutual understanding did not last long. In September 1934, when the State Elder extended martial law to 12 months, people demanded that the *Riigikogu* be asked to reconvene. After some hesitation, the government agreed, hoping to gain majority approval in parliament. This did not happen, and a number of influential politicians sharply criticised the government's actions. In response to this, Prime Minister Kaarel Eenpalu, who had become the third pillar in the new triumvirate of power (alongside State Elder Päts and commander-in-chief Laidoner), ended the parliament's session and did not give permission to summon further sessions, thereby placing the *Riigikogu* incommunicado.

On 24 April 1938, the parliament elected Konstantin Päts as the President of the Republic of Estonia
National Archives of Estonia, EAA.5355.1.158.130

This was followed by the establishment of an authoritarian regime. The nation was still under all the restrictions associated with martial law, which was renewed every autumn. All political parties were banned and replaced by the Pro Patria Union, which was practically the only party in the nation, and the vocational chambers, which divided people according to their line of work (farmers, entrepreneurs, labourers, fishermen, schoolteachers, etc). The press and all other publications were censored, many popular movements (labour unions, youth organisations, etc). were put under government control and society in general was suppressed. For over three years, Estonia was ruled by decree by the State Elder and the government without elected representatives.

The National Assembly convened in 1937 to write a new constitution. Because elections were not free, the National Assembly was obedient to the government and wrote the constitution based on guidelines given personally by the State Elder. The new constitution went into effect on 1 January 1938, which marked Estonia's return to the rule of law. The government had freely interpreted and sometimes violated the constitution of the Vaps, but this was no longer relevant under the new constitution. The return to the rule of law did not mean the restoration of democracy. Even after the National Assembly's constitution took effect, the nation remained under martial law, which Prime Minister Eenpalu called the "universal tool of government". Political parties were not restored, publications and key aspects of life remained under government censorship and control, the scope of which was in some cases expanded. The constitution allowed the restriction of the fundamental rights of citizens. The only positive change was the restoration of the parliament (*Riigikogu*). The *Riigikogu* now consisted of two chambers: the State Assembly (*Riigivolikogu*), which was elected by the people, and the State Council (*Riiginõukogu*), which was assembled under a complicated system. But because the elections were anything but democratic, both chambers of parliament were loyal to the government.

Opposition to the authoritarian regime proved weak and mostly included seasoned politicians, who had been stripped of their power, and

democratically-minded intellectuals. The opposition's ineffectiveness was worsened by division into the democratic group, former members of the Vaps Movement, and a leftist group that included Communists. A large part of the population did not consider the restrictions on freedoms and democracy to be all that significant; instead, they focused on the need to improve the standard of living after the Great Depression. Moreover, compared to other contemporary European nations, Estonia's authoritarian regime remained relatively moderate and did not develop into a dictatorship.

Key foreign policy objectives

When the Republic of Estonia was established, the nation's main foreign policy goal was to secure *de jure* recognition. This turned out to be more difficult than expected, and the results were only seen as late as 1921: the high council of the Triple Entente nations recognised Estonia on 26 January, and Estonia was accepted into the League of Nations on 22 September.

From then on, the primary foreign policy objective was to protect national independence from external threats. Potential threats included Germany and Russia, but particularly the latter. To ensure security, Estonia strived for good relations with all countries, especially those that represented a potential threat. For this reason, non-aggression pacts were signed with Russia and Germany. Diplomats sought friends and supporters, albeit fruitlessly, among democratic Western and Nordic countries. Other nations considered Estonia's geopolitical situation to be unpleasant and therefore dangerous, and steered clear of everything that could draw them into an armed conflict in Eastern Europe.

At the start of the 1920s, Estonia and her neighbours endeavoured to establish a Baltic alliance. According to initial plans, the Baltic alliance was to be a political and military defensive alliance between Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. A serious border dispute between Poland and Lithuania (over the ownership of Vilnius) made a five-country alliance impossible,

On 7–8 June 1929, Gustaf V, the King of Sweden, was on a state visit to Estonia. He was received in official circles with grand celebrations, and a very warm reception from the public. The State Elder August Rei is seen greeting the King
National Archives of Estonia, EFA.5-241

and governments were forced to look for new combinations. These did not work out for various reasons (Finland's distant relationship with the Baltics; Moscow's sharp response). The only outcome of the Baltic alliance policy was a mutual defence treaty signed by Estonia and Latvia on 1 November 1923 in Tallinn. A treaty between two small nations was not nearly as significant as a great Baltic alliance would have been. Estonian-Latvian political and military cooperation was rare in the following years. Since the second half of the 1920s, the Baltic alliance was only mentioned as an ideal, not as a realistic objective. In autumn 1934, the Baltic Entente treaty was signed – a pact of mutual

understanding and cooperation between Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, but it only concerned diplomatic cooperation between the three small Baltic nations.

As the Baltic alliance took a back seat, hopes were set on the League of Nations. The end of the 1920s and the start of a new decade were in some sense a peak time for the League of Nations, as serious efforts in Geneva centred on securing world peace and building a collective security system. These steps included the Locarno Treaties (1925), the Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928) and the World Disarmament Conference (1932–34). It was therefore only natural that Estonia desired close cooperation within the League of Nations and associated its security with this organisation in particular.

Unfortunately, the international situation became significantly more hostile to small nations in the 1930s. Both potential threats to Estonia – Germany and the Soviet Union – became increasingly belligerent, and the democratic nations became more submissive. The League of Nations turned out to be incapable of preventing military conflicts and imposing joint sanctions on aggressors. Under these conditions, Estonia's national leaders could only attempt to make the best of a bad situation and follow the lead of Scandinavia by declaring Estonia neutral (1938). This unilateral declaration of neutrality had no international backing and was thus practically worthless. It would only work until an aggressive superpower decided to disregard Estonia's neutrality.

Economic growth

When independence was declared and work on building up the nation began, Estonia's economy was in a dire state. It was negatively impacted upon by the underdevelopment of the Russian Empire's economy compared to advanced European nations, as well as by World War I, the Russian Revolution, the German occupation and the War of Independence, all of which decimated the existing economic structure. Estonia needed thorough reforms including economic reforms to endure. The most crucial economic reforms began during

the War of Independence. On 10 October 1919 the Constituent Assembly adopted the Land Act after some heated debate. The act nationalised all privately owned manor estates. Estate owners were forced to give up their agricultural machinery, livestock, seeds, manors, farm buildings and production enterprises (distilleries, dairies, flour mills, sawmills, brickworks, etc). The land was confiscated without compensation, while other assets were compensated. The nationalised land was measured, mapped, divided into plots and given out as new farmland to people who wanted it. In total, about 35,000 new farms were created (in addition to 54,000 previously purchased and 23,000 rented farms). Because there were more applicants than available farms, the authorities prioritised veterans of the War of Independence and families of fallen soldiers. Initially, the new farms were under a perpetual lease, but they were later sold at the request of the settlers. The payments were used to compensate the former estate owners. The former Baltic German estate owners thought that the land reform was incredibly unjust and broke the principle of the sanctity of private ownership, and they repeatedly complained to the League of Nations. The complaints of the Baltic Germans were largely justified, but the Republic of Estonia required a radical solution to the problem of land ownership to ensure a sustainable future, just as it was necessary to keep the Baltic German nobility away from the new republic's political and economic power. The land reform eliminated large-scale farming, relations between land owners and farm workers were normalised, and farmers became firm supporters of Estonian nationhood. Thorough reforms also took place in other industries. Large factories, which were unsuitable for the small Estonian nation, relied on imported raw materials and produced goods for the Russian market, were liquidated or reorganised. A number of new manufacturing industries were established, such as footwear, hosiery, chocolate, etc. The most successful were in the food and the oil shale industries, which used local raw materials.

Industrial development initially went too far because Estonia's actual demands and resources had not been taken into consideration. Entrepreneurs

A modern company in Kohtla-Järve – processing Estonia's most important natural resource, oil shale, was the pride of the nation
National Archives of Estonia, EFA.A-110-30

were inspired by the new opportunities that were opening up in Russia and stormed onto the Russian market, trying to outperform Western companies. It soon became clear that Moscow was using the economy to accomplish political goals, and the risks on the Russian market were too great for a small nation. The industrial orientation and Russia-inspired approach caused a temporary setback in 1923–24, which was deepened by the Bank of Estonia's liberal lending policy.

A new economic policy was adopted in the mid-1920s to overcome the crisis. The economy was reoriented in two ways: geographically – from the Russian market to Western Europe, where Estonia's biggest partners were Great

Britain and Germany, and structurally – from industry to agriculture. Estonia remained an agricultural nation, where dairy cattle, pigs and poultry were especially important. By the end of the decade, Estonia had proven that it could endure and succeed economically as an independent country. Economic conditions and the people's standard of living improved significantly. This was partly possible thanks to a foreign loan given by British banks through the League of Nations, which was used to reorganise the monetary and banking system (the new gold-backed national currency was the Estonian kroon).

At the end of 1930, the first effects of the Great Depression spread to Estonia. The crisis shook Estonia's economy, and agriculture was hit the hardest. The economic downturn bankrupted thousands of farms, as well as many industrial companies, trading companies and banks. Unemployment rose and the standard of living declined. The government took the usual measures, cut public spending, raised customs duties, supported local producers and organised emergency employment for the jobless. These measures brought only temporary relief. Lasting progress was finally made in 1933, when Jaan Tõnisson's government got parliament to approve its decision to devalue the Estonian kroon. This created the conditions for economic recovery.

Authoritarian Estonia proved to be economically successful, though the secret to its success was not authoritarian rule, but a favourable world economy. These years saw fast growth in agriculture, industry and trade, a surplus was achieved in the national budget, the foreign trade balance became positive, and the standard of living improved. The government interfered with the economy more frequently, the number and reach of state-owned companies grew, and some special restrictions from the time of the economic crisis remained in place. The tax burden was deliberately kept high and wages low. Farmers received support through the national budget at the expense of other strata of society.

Economic success was reflected in demographic trends. Contemporaries thought that the natural population growth rate was too low for sustainability,

Estonian administrative division in 1938

Eesti ajaloo atlas (Avita 2006), p 109

but some growth did occur. In 1920, the population of Estonia was 1.06 million, but in 1939 the population approached 1.14 million. The growth rate was positive throughout the independence period, while net migration was especially high in 1920–22, when approximately 35,000 Estonians returned home from Russia in accordance with the Tartu Peace Treaty.

Urbanisation continued, and about one-third of the population lived in towns and cities before World War II. This process was boosted by granting town rights to several large rural settlements, which increased the number of towns (or cities) to 33. The largest city was still Tallinn with 145,000 residents

(1939). According to the 1934 census, Estonians made up 88.2% of the population. The largest minorities were Russians (8.2%), Baltic Germans (1.5%), Swedes (0.7%), Latvians (0.5%) and Jews (0.4%). Members of the country's largest nationality, which had suffered from Russification before independence, understood the fears of their fellow citizens of other ethnic backgrounds. From the beginning, the state supported the cultural endeavours of ethnic minorities and funded their schools. In 1925, a law regarding the cultural autonomy of ethnic minorities was passed. This law allowed minorities to elect self-governing bodies, which could establish schools, societies, theatres, libraries, etc, and discuss other issues concerning culture and education. The law regarding cultural autonomy received international recognition, and the Republic of Estonia was included in the Golden Book of the Jewish National Fund.

Culture

Independence had the largest positive effect on the national culture. The danger that Estonians could lose their culture, and therefore their national identity due to Germanisation or Russification was gone for the first time ever. Moreover, the government, which had previously been considered a vehicle of foreign power and spirit, was now helping to advance Estonian culture. Cultural contacts became much more diverse. In the past, Estonians were mainly influenced by German and Russian culture, but now the people became more deeply acquainted with the Romance, Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian and other cultures. All modern cultural phenomena, art styles and fashion trends arrived in Estonia after only a slight delay. The number of professional writers, artists, composers, musicians and actors grew quickly. Universities, having become centres of research, were preparing a national cadre of researchers. Particular attention was paid to the advancement of previously neglected subjects of study (Estonian language, literature, poetry, history, geography, etc).

The 11th Song Festival, dedicated to the 20th anniversary of the Republic of Estonia, was held in Tallinn in the summer of 1938, and became especially festive – 569 choirs and orchestras with more than 17,000 performers participated in the festival

National Archives of Estonia, EAA.5355.1.156.80

The people's thirst for knowledge, which had already existed for some time, was satisfied by introducing a mandatory 6-class education, modernising the curriculum and the textbooks, building new schools and improving the learning conditions in existing schools. People remained interested in reading, and hundreds of thousands of new books (both classics of world literature as well as Estonian works) and hundreds of press publications were published. Cultural activities were in fashion, and the country built up a dense network of community centres. Societies, choirs, orchestras and acting troupes were active everywhere. Song festivals were held every five years, which brought together tens of thousands of music lovers. Theatres, concerts, art exhibitions and cinemas had masses of visitors. Sports, travel and summer vacations quickly gained popularity. The practice of religion, however, gradually declined. An absolute

majority of the population belonged to a denomination (mainly the Estonian Evangelical Lutheran Church, and to a lesser extent the Estonian Apostolic Orthodox Church), though not due to strict religious belief, but to preserve good customs and traditions.

The era of military bases

World War II interrupted Estonian statehood for half a century. The secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact concluded on 23 August 1939 left the Baltic states in the 'sphere of interest' of the Soviet Union, and by the second half of September, huge numbers of the Red Army were gathered just beyond Estonia's eastern border. The Kremlin was only waiting for a good excuse. This was provided by the Polish submarine Orzeł that was docked at the port of Tallinn. According to the Neutrality Acts, the Orzeł should have been interned, but upon hearing about the invasion of Poland by the Red Army, the submarine escaped. The Kremlin accused Estonia of breaching neutrality and depicted the escape of the Orzeł as a threat to their security.

Estonia's Foreign Minister, on travelling to Moscow, was presented with the demand to allow Soviet naval and air force bases to be established in Estonia. The demand was seasoned with a threat – if Estonia refused, the country would face war. To avoid war, the Estonian government decided to accept the demands and on 28 September 1939, the Soviet–Estonian Mutual Assistance Treaty was signed. In accordance with this document, Red Army bases were established on the islands of western Estonia and along the western coast, and 25,000 Soviet soldiers were brought into Estonia for their "protection". Formally, Estonia retained its independence, but in essence the country lost part of its sovereignty and instead became a Soviet protectorate. This became more evident during the Winter War, when the Soviet planes that blitzed Finnish cities took off from bases situated in Estonia.

Rudolf Sepp's painting "Maarja kiriku varemed" ("Ruins of Maarja Church"), 1941

Estonian National Museum, ERM K 4515

The Soviet occupation

For some time Stalin was happy with what he had achieved, but in the summer of 1940 he decided to become more active. On 14 June Lithuania and 16 June Latvia and Estonia received ultimatums demanding the admission of additional units of the Red Army into the territory of these countries and the replacement of existing governments with 'Soviet-friendly' ones. To avoid war, the Baltic states gave in once again.

On 17 June 1940, Estonia was occupied by the Red Army; four days later a new 'government' was inducted at the Embassy of the Soviet Union and 'Soviet' elections were held in mid-July. The 'people's assembly' formed as a result of

On 18 October 1939, columns of the Red Army crossed Estonia's eastern border, heading towards the sites of future military bases
National Archives of Estonia, EFA.0-146768

these elections declared the Estonian Soviet Republic and 'requested' for it to be accepted into the Soviet Union.

All this had nothing to do with the people's actual wishes, the whole show was organised in order for Moscow to hide their conquest politics from the world and to depict the events that took place as the 'working people's revolution'. At the same time, there were those among the Estonians who were prepared to assist the occupying power. They were mainly Communists, left-wing extremist labour activists and careerist collaborators, as well as left-minded intellectuals, who could not comprehend the true nature of the Soviet regime.

The subsequent years were characterised by Estonian statehood being replaced by a Soviet dictatorship and mass terror. If initially the arrests mainly concerned the former elite (by the end of 1940, more than a thousand people had disappeared without a trace), the repressions soon spread across all social levels, creating an atmosphere of fear, where no one could be sure of what tomorrow may bring. The repressions culminated on 14 June 1941, when simultaneous mass deportations were carried out in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. As a result, 10,000 people were violently deported from Estonia without any kind of trial (a total of 50,000 from all three Baltic states). Male deportation victims were placed under arrest and sent to labour camps, where most of them died or were killed, while women and children were forcefully exiled to Siberia.

German occupation

The Soviet occupation collapsed in the summer of 1941, when Germany attacked the Soviet Union. The Red Army, badly defeated in battles near the border, soon surrendered Lithuania, Latvia and southern Estonia, but was able to organise resistance again in central Estonia, thus turning Estonia into a battleground that had to withstand considerable damage. The Estonian mainland fell under the control of the German troops in early September; the western Estonian islands did not follow before October.

A group of forest brothers reach Pärnu, which was cleared of the Red Army
National Archives of Estonia, EFA.0-172785

The vast majority of Estonians welcomed the German troops as liberators from the Communist dictatorship and terror. It was hoped that after the country was freed of the Red Army, the restoration of the Estonian Republic would follow. Thousands of men took up arms and fought against the Red Army under the blue, black and white flag – initially as the *metsavennad* or Forest Brothers, who organised guerrilla attacks behind the Red Army lines, and later fighting on the front, side by side with German units.

It quickly became clear that the German leaders' plans did not include restoring Estonian independence, and that the Soviet occupation had been replaced by the German occupation. It was equally brutal and terrorist, even if somewhat easier for most people. The latter did not apply to the Jews and the Roma, because both ethnic groups were intended to be destroyed as far as the Nazis were concerned. Already by 1942, all (about a thousand) Estonian

Jews and several hundred Roma had been killed. After that, Jews began to be brought to Estonia from other European countries, and most of them were subsequently murdered.

Although the occupation regime was unacceptable for the Estonians, active resistance was avoided. It was feared that this would damage the German war machine and thus favour the USSR or even result in Estonia falling under the Soviet occupation. Admittedly, the national forces secretly conspired with the democratic Western countries, providing them with information about Estonia's circumstances, and were waiting for the opportunity to restore statehood, but that was the only opposition to Germany that existed. And just as during the Soviet occupation, there were, of course, collaborators who were prepared to offer their services to Germany.

The Red Army returns

Early in 1944, the Red Army crushed the German Army Group *Nord* and in early February the hostilities shifted to Narva. Battles over Narva became extremely violent and lasted on and off for half a year. On 26 July, the ruins that remained of the historic city of Narva fell into the hands of the Red Army, while twenty kilometres from Narva the Soviet offensive towards Tallinn was stopped again. In August however, the Red Army managed to invade the entire southeastern part of Estonia (the regions of Võru and Tartu), and in mid-September, when a complicated military situation had developed around Riga, the German High Command ordered their forces to leave northern Estonia and Latvia behind. On 22 September, the Red Army took over Tallinn and then the entire mainland of Estonia. Fierce battles on the island of Saaremaa lasted until the end of November.

The Red Army invasion of Estonia led to a mass exodus from the country. True, most of the refugees only departed temporarily and returned to their homes after the frontline shifted, but about 80,000 people, including numerous

On 9 March 1944, the Soviet Air Force carried out an extensive attack on Tallinn, demolishing whole blocks of buildings. More than 800 people were killed during the attack, and more than 1,500 buildings were destroyed; a total of more than 5,000 buildings were damaged
National Archives of Estonia, EFA.0-19817

intellectuals, found a way to escape over the Baltic Sea. Their preferred destination was Sweden, but in the last days before the fall of Tallinn, escaping to Germany increased as well. It was essential to escape the new Soviet occupation.

Right before the fall of Tallinn an attempt was made to restore the Estonian Republic. On 18 September, the last lawful (pre-occupation) Prime Minister of the Republic of Estonia, Jüri Uluots, acting as the President, who had been taken to an unknown destination by the Soviet regime, appointed a new government of the Republic. The government drew up a plan of action, declared Estonia's neutrality in the war and attempted to organise the defence of the

capital. A few hours before the arrival of the Red Army tanks, the government had left Tallinn with the blue, black and white flag waving over the city. Most of the ministers fell into the hands of the Soviet secret police; the few who managed to escape to the West later formed the Estonian government-in-exile.

Estonian involvement in World War II

Estonians participated in the battles of World War II in the armed forces of a number of foreign countries. In 1941, the Red Army was aided by destruction battalions consisting of a few thousand Soviet-minded volunteers, who carried out Stalin's 'scorched earth tactics' and engaged in battles with the Forest Brothers. The soldiers who were appointed to the 22nd Rifle Corps, on the basis of the former Estonian army, were forced to fight for the Red Army. Most of them defected to the German side at the front and got a chance to return to their homeland. In the summer of 1941, the Soviet occupation ordered general mobilisation in Estonia, taking more than 30,000 men over to Russia. Almost one-third of them perished in the winter of 1941/42 in labour battalions, which were essentially forced labour camps. Those that remained formed the 8th Estonian Rifle Corps, which participated in the Velikiye Luki operation at the turn of 1942/43, fighting in Estonia in 1944 and in Courland in the spring of 1945.

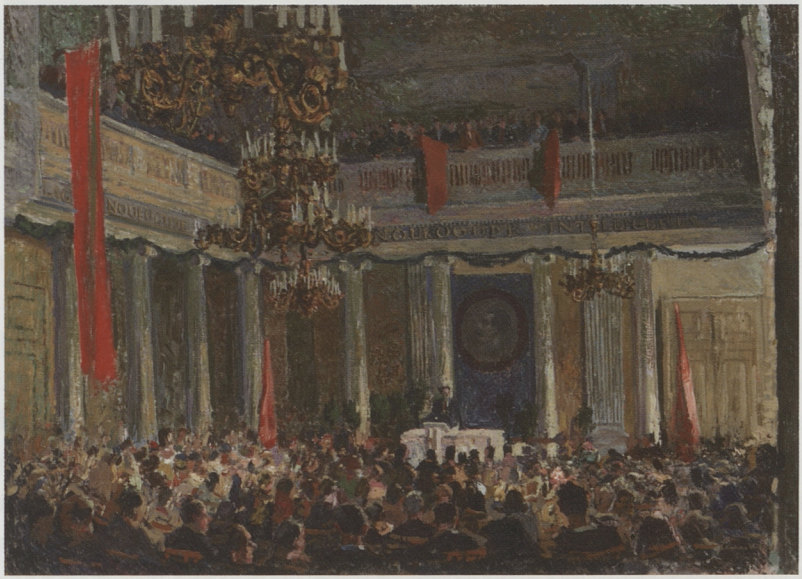
After the Red Army was ousted from Estonia, there were numerous volunteers who joined the German army to avenge the Soviet crimes. The auxiliary and police battalions formed from them were used both for fighting at the front and also in battles with the Russian partisans. In the summer of 1942 the occupying power declared volunteer recruitment to the Estonian legion (later the 20th Waffen SS Division). Because the attitude of the Estonians towards Germany had changed by then and there were not enough volunteers, in 1943, the assembly of the legion turned to partial forced mobilisation. In January 1944, the occupation power ordered general mobilisation and the conscripts were assembled in Border Guard Regiments. Both the Estonian Legion and the

An exhibition at the Estonian War Museum, showing Estonians who fought in the Russian, Finnish and German armies
Estonian War Museum

Estonian Border Guard Regiment were destroyed in September 1944, but a new 20th Estonian division was formed of the Estonian soldiers who had escaped to Germany, which fought in the Opole (Oppeln) region in early 1945, and later in Silesia. By the end of the war, most of these men had fallen into the hands of the Red Army, while some of them had escaped to the West.

But there were Estonians also in the Finnish army. These were the men (known as *soomepoisid*, i.e. 'Finnish boys') who tried to escape mobilisation into the German army, but were ready to fight against the Red Army together with the neighbouring Finns. In 1944, the Finnish Infantry Regiment 200 was formed from these men, and these participated in battles in the Karelian Isthmus in the summer and turned back to their home country in September, where they participated in the final battles in Estonia's defence.

World War II brought major changes to the Estonian population. The population fell by 280,000 people – nearly a quarter. The decrease in the population reflected both war casualties and victims of the repressions, as well as those who had fled in 1944. Of the four major groups of pre-war national minorities, three were completely obliterated: the Baltic Germans were forced to head to Germany between 1939–41 ('at the invitation of the Führer'), the Jews were killed at the beginning of the German occupation, and the Swedes were evacuated to Sweden in 1943–44.



Painting by Elmar Kits, "1. mai aktus Tartu Riikliku Ülikooli aulas" ("1 May assembly at the Tartu State University"), 1945
Tartu Art Museum, TKM TR 2353 M 400