Estonian military diplomacy during the War of Independence

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Celebrating historical anniversaries always puts the historian in an odd situation. On the one hand, he of course shares the feeling of taking part in society looking back into the past, and he likes the attention that is paid to his profession in times of those anniversaries. On the other hand, as a professional he must be aware of the simple fact that it’s society that obviously is in need of this sort of orientation with the past. A historical event, however, cannot be seen as isolated, like a human being whose birthday we usually celebrate in the same manner. Historical events are not simply ‘born’, they do not die. They don’t actually have birthdays. Still, the ‘great tales’ of the 20th century often use the semantic power of such metaphors, like for instance in Eduard Laaman’s classic Eesti iseseisvuse sünd (1936/1964). From an anthropologic point of view, it’s obvious why we like to look at a state or a nation as a living organism, a vision that in times of real danger may be exploited symbolically in order to construct unanimity among a given group of people. According to the laws of nature, however, everything that was born sooner or later will die. But I guess that’s not why we’re here... From a scientific point of view, the approach to celebrating anniversaries is at best selective and it becomes in itself an object of research, for it forms an important part of the so called Geschichtspolitik, the politics of history. So let’s take part in this approach.¹

Today we are looking back to the period when Estonian independence was established in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and the Great War. This is basically the story of a young Estonian political and military elite that managed to introduce discursively and defend practically the idea of national self-determination in quite a short period of time. Exactly 90 years ago, however, in October 1918, this idea was only one of the possible future solutions. Nevertheless, it had already had begun to materialise. As has been stated by Marko Lehti, by mid 1918 there had been ‘quite a uniform Estonian discourse on national sovereignty’ among a core group of young intellectuals of various political convictions.\(^2\) While the country was occupied by the German Reichswehr, the acceptance of the idea of national independence also grew in military circles. Colonel Johan Laidoner, who began his career in the Czar’s Army and was later to become Estonian commander-in-chief at the age of 34, was typical for his generation. He was convinced that Estonia, like other countries, had to fight for its independence. Indeed, the victorious Estonian War of Independence (Eesti Vabadussõda) was the key event in establishing the national state and became a basic factor in the population identifying with the new statehood. Thus I will speak today about military politics during the War of Independence; during this time, Laidoner also proved his diplomatic skills.

From an Estonian perspective, we tend to read the chain of events in a teleological manner: November 1917, February and November 1918, and again February 1920. In this reading, there is of course no place for the multivocality of history. Allow me to give an example of what I mean. If, for instance, the Peace Treaty of Tartu with Soviet Russia is interpreted as the end of the War of Independence, we traditionally overlook that a Soviet victory in Poland just a few months later could have changed the course of history dramatically. Contemporaries in Estonia might have seen this possibility as well. So what we term the end of the war might have been understood quite differently by contemporaries. Thus, many of our interpretations are in fact just a result of our broader knowledge of the past. For instance, in November 1918 the Provisional Government’s premier Konstantin Päts suggested his ministers not to sleep at home, for he obviously did not feel safe. The power of his government, which has been interpreted in the Estonian narrative as the only just solution, actually remained quite contested for the next months, especially when it failed to organise the front in December 1918.\(^3\)


With the collapse of German occupation, Estonia had to gain independence from the new masters in Russia who just declared the clauses of Brest-Litovsk to be null and void. Yet Russia itself was divided primarily on social issues by a bloody civil war between ‘Whites’ and ‘Reds’. While these were not the only fighting ‘colours’, every Russian force basically wanted to re-establish ‘one and indivisible’ Russia within her pre-1914-borders, with Poland being perhaps the only territorial exception. Where the various fronts of the Russian civil war touched nationalities’ territories, this social war necessarily became national in quality, a war of secession.

Estonia’s war of secession was characterised by the somewhat dazzling fact that it initially fought the Red Army side by side with the Russian Whites. As a consequence, at the peak of the military action on the Petrograd front of the Russian Civil War in October 1919, when General Nikolai Iudenich led his Northwestern Army to the gates of Petrograd, there were also some Estonian troops engaged in this attack. The emergence and development of this contradictory military co-operation is of primary importance in providing an answer to the question of why Estonian independence in fact succeeded, and it was of course a question of military diplomacy. Without the Russian military effort skilfully used by the Estonians against the Red
Army, it would have been much harder for Estonia to survive. This has been shown recently by Reigo Rosenthal. Moreover, without this military co-operation on anti-Bolshevik terms, Estonian foreign policy would have been deprived of the slightest chance to present Estonia as an ally of the Allied Powers.

Gaining sympathy from some of the powers decreeing the terms at the Paris Peace conference also became possible thanks to the democratisation process in Estonia, which I would like to call an ‘integrative revolution’. As a result of the election to a Constituent Assembly in April 1919, Estonia got a democratically legitimised government that declared the war of secession to be a bilateral defensive war against Soviet Russia. Yet actually it was Estonia’s performance in the war that determined the country’s future and Laidoner was for sure concerned about the growing danger of Estonia’s international isolation. As long as the victorious powers continued to show unanimous loyalty to the Whites, their former allies, there didn’t seem to be any hope for a *de jure* recognition of Estonian independence. But without Allied physical support, the Whites remained their only military ally. Politically, however, it was not desirable to leave this Russian unit on Estonian territory any longer.

The war obviously had to go on, although the left parties’ slogan during their victorious election campaign had been ‘Land and Peace’. However, in spring 1919 Estonia could not afford to conclude a peace without taking into consideration the position of the Entente, although unofficial peace talks with Moscow took place as early as April. A continuation of the war corresponded with the official policy of the victorious powers that eventually came to terms with the White Kolchak administration in early June. In May, the Estonian army together with the Whites launched their first attack towards the East. We might call the Estonian army’s participation in this attack a ‘diplomatic’ offensive, executed in order to prove loyalty to the Allies’ cause and the capability to defend their own borders.

This engagement was to be controlled by an Allied military mission under the command of Lieutenant-General Hubert Gough. Gough had to square the circle in Estonia, for he had to meet a ‘private’ demand from Winston Churchill to organise the Petrograd front. Thus Gough was responsible for the reconciliation of the old Imperial General Iudenich with the secessionist government in Tallinn. But Gough was more and more annoyed at White incompetence and disloyalty. The open sympathy in some Russian officers’ circles for the Germans provoked a severe protest note from Gough. Iudenich answered by blaming the Estonians for all failures and accusing them of seeking peace with Moscow. After Gough had confronted the Estonians on this issue, Laidoner defended himself in a memorandum that was used by the government in an answer to Gough. In fact, it was

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indeed Laidoner who now orchestrated Estonia’s foreign policy. The Estonian commander-in-chief claimed that he had supported the Whites to the extent that Estonia’s political and military situation allowed. Once more, he demanded the unconditional recognition of Estonian independence as a measure to build up mutual confidence. But, according to Laidoner, a recognition carried out by single persons such as General Iudenich seemed to be ‘of relatively little importance, especially if such individuals are not backed by any important political organisations which have received official recognition by the allied Governments’. Here Laidoner suggested a political solution for the ‘Baltic tangle’: A local Russian government backed by the Allies that could recognise Estonia.

A Russian buffer to secure the Estonian borders, created by Allied diplomats – the Estonians’ wishful thinking seemed likely to become reality. But, unfortunately, they had to admit their failure very quickly. The British diplomats, who, in a colonial-style performance, carried out the idea of founding a local Russian government, didn’t pay much attention to the Estonian idea of a democratically legitimised political body. In many memoirs, this act of democratisation from above is described by Russian politicians who searched for appropriate words to characterise their feelings on being pushed to form a government in some forty minutes under the threat of being abandoned by their Allied partners. Of course, neither London nor Paris nor Washington was prepared to support their respective representatives after they consciously had exceeded their authority. In fact, the newly founded Northwestern Government never had a chance of being recognised by the Allied powers as long as they were well aware of Kolchak’s refusal to do so. Politically, this Russian cabinet, after having recognised the unconditional independence of Estonia, was isolated not only on the Petrograd front but also within the White movement as such.

As far as the Estonians were concerned, they finally had to admit that their plan to construct a Russian *cordon sanitaire* had failed. In any case, Foreign Minister Jaan Poska, coming home from Paris without gaining a guarantee for independence, resignedly recommended that one needed to search for ‘new directions’ in foreign policy. In fact,

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6 Ibid.
this meant coming to terms with the Soviet government at Estonia’s own risk. When the Estonian Government received a peace proposal from Soviet Foreign Commissar Tchicherin on 31 August, it decided to risk a double game: in claiming to just play for time, it tried to first receive a *de jure* recognition from Moscow. Under the sharp protests of the Allied diplomatic representatives, Estonia was to open negotiations with Soviet Russia. It was just in time that a new course in British Baltic policy gave them the necessary political support. In London, Lloyd George eventually succeeded in getting Great Britain out of Russian and Baltic affairs. Of course, he laid the *de jure* recognition of the Baltic states aside for the time being, passing it on instead to the League of Nations. But on the other hand, in late September he entitled them to ‘make any arrangement, and if so of what nature, with the Soviet authorities’\(^7\). Thus, only the White Northwestern Army stood between Tallinn and Moscow.

Now Poska began to play cat and mouse with the Whites. To Iudenich, the consequences of an Estonian peace with Moscow must have been clear: it was his turn if he wanted to have any chance left. To spend the winter passively would have meant the end of his army anyway. In this situation, Laidoner realised that there was no chance of setting up a Russian buffer state and he changed his mind in favour of Poska’s peace policy. He invited his Latvian and Lithuanian colleagues to discuss the military preconditions for a peace with Moscow. However, Estonia, in searching for peace with Moscow, was isolated among her neighbours.

Thanks to Lloyd George’s changing attitude on the matter, Tallinn could now play out the White card. Poska assured the White regional government that he would not betray the White cause in negotiating with Soviet Russia. The Russians asked for just ten days to prepare for attack. When the Baltic prime ministers nevertheless decided to let peace negotiations start ‘no later than on 25 October’\(^8\), the deadline for Iudenich was definitely fixed. If the White offensive was to fail, the Estonians could easily start peace talks with Soviet Russia. Nobody really seems to have expected a White victory anyway. On the other hand, if the White attack was to be a success, there was no doubt that Iudenich would have declared Estonia to be a Russian province and turned his soldiers’ bayonets against Tallinn.\(^9\) In this situation, only a small minority in the circles around former premier Päts demanded full Estonian military support for the Whites, claiming this to be a question of loyalty to the Allies. But, as we have seen, even London had decided to minimise engagement in favour of the Whites.

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Estonia’s diplomatic high-wire act wasn’t carried out in the somewhat naïve hope that after a victory Kolchak (followed by the Allied powers) would have granted recognition, like it has been stated in older literature. In fact, the only chance for a quick peace was a pact with the revolutionaries in the Kremlin, whose power, in the autumn of 1919, hung by a single thread and who were eager to conclude a peace at any price. If Moscow really wanted peace, there was no reason for Tallinn to maintain a White border guard. Thus, for the Estonian part of the game it was of striking consistency to let the Whites begin the campaign: in any case, it could be expected that the White and Red troops would weaken each other at the gates of Petrograd. At this particular point, the Russian Civil War was skilfully instrumentalised by the Estonians for the sake of their own War of Independence.

After initial success, the White attack was crushed and defeat seemed to be a matter of days away. But the break-down of Iudenich’s army wasn’t in Estonia’s interest, and once more its fate depended on Laidoner’s diplomacy. He mistrusted the Soviet declarations of peace and planned to use the Whites again as a border guard. This option materialised in December, when the White soldiers under Estonian command again defended Estonia’s borders against the Red Army.

To sum up, for Estonia, anti-Bolshevism was not the cause, national independence was. Moscow took the chance and gave Tallinn the desired de jure recognition. For Lenin, the Estonian situation was just another case of bourgeois independence, not at all crucial for the time being. Peace on at least one front was badly needed and it was for this purpose that the clauses of the Tartu Treaty were especially favourable for Estonia. For Tallinn, this Soviet recognition was by no means useless, because it was Estonia that at least in a sense paved the way for Lloyd George’s government trying to come to terms with Moscow as well.

Nevertheless, it was a very confused situation: While the Estonians were fighting side by side with the Russian party that openly refused to recognise their independence, they, indeed, were fighting the Reds who repeatedly claimed to be ready for this diplomatic step. It is not surprising at all that this war was quite unpopular even among the army because of Moscow’s early peace proposals and, particularly, because of the decid-

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edly anti-Estonian attitude of the Whites. But Laidoner, with his authority as the victor against the German Landeswehr, declared the partial co-operation with Iudenich to be a matter of national security and managed to prevent a broad engagement in the Russians’ war. The battles of ‘Eesti Verdun’ in December proved, on the one hand, that he had been right in his mistrust of Red promises and, on the other, that he had formed a national army the young state could rely on. It should be pointed out that although in times of governmental crisis Laidoner had at his disposal nearly full authority, the Estonian military command felt obliged to handle its own state on democratic grounds. This was a sharp contrast to the almost anarchic events on Russian soil with independent war-lords on every edge of the country.

Of course, without Allied materials and Finnish financial help, gaining independence would have been a much more burdensome task. But, on the contrary, the revolutionary motto ‘Land and Peace’ was carried out against the common plans of the Entente powers: there was a thorough expropriation of the landed elite and a peace with the Bolshevik regime in Moscow. All in all, the integrative national revolution that took place in Estonia during the crucial years 1918–1920 was a purely local development dependent on local diplomatic and military capability.