

RESEARCH ARTICLE

From an 'Army of Historians' to an 'Army of Professionals': History and the Strategic Culture in Estonia

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Experience is a key element in the development of strategic cultures. Estonian strategic culture is affected by the traumas of the Second World War and the Cold War, which resulted in the end of independence and the loss of a quarter of the population. Open discussion of the history was impossible under the Soviet regime. The 'rebirth of history' at the end of the 1980s affected the restoration of the Estonian defence forces and the development of the strategic culture of the restored Republic of Estonia. In particular, narratives about the 'Summer War' of 1941 and about the Forest Brothers, who fought against the Soviet regime from the 1940s to the early 1950s, instilled confidence in Estonia's ability to re-create the total defence system of the pre-war era. When Estonia shed ideas of neutrality and began integrating into Western security organizations, the controversial history of the Summer War became a burden rather than an advantage, however. With the new pragmatism and future-oriented military culture of the 2000s, dwelling on history was discouraged by the Defence Forces even as history remained an important component of the training and the thinking of the military profession.

Keywords: Strategic Culture; History; Estonia; Second World War; Cold War

The article studies the influence of the past, particularly the Second World War (WWII) and the Cold War, on the development of the strategic culture in Estonia. It looks at the ideas and persons involved in the restoration of defence institutions and analyses discourses on history in the Estonian Defence Forces in the 1990s. As historians played a disproportionately important role in the Estonian national movement since the late 1980s, the hypothesis is that the influence of history and memory politics was felt not only in state-building in general, but also in the development of the national defence system and the strategic concepts of the 1990s. Paraphrasing historian Marek Tamm's notion of the 'Republic of Historians' (Tamm 2016), it suggests that the Estonian armed forces was an 'Army of Historians' rather than an army of professionals at this stage. Not only were there a great number of historians in key positions in the military establishment, knowledge of history, historical examples as well as personal life experiences obtained special value as Estonia began rebuilding its defence system largely on the basis of the pre-WWII experience.

The strong influence of the past on the Estonian strategic culture has been noted before. Erik Männik has argued in his analysis that due to the prevailing restorationist mentality of *re-establishing* the pre-war republic, the Baltic states' 'initial strategic visions proceeded precisely from the point where they had ended before the Second World War' (Männik 20–21). Männik is right about the importance of historical continuities, but his approach leaves the question about the impact of the intervening ca. fifty years of foreign occupations. How were the historical continuities re-established, who carried those continuities (individuals, groups), and to what extent those continuities could be purified from the effects of half a century of foreign rule remains problematic.

Obviously, building a 'bridge' from one era to another and wiping out the effects of fifty years of foreign occupation would require a magician's trick. Therefore, I think the political scientist Holger Mölder is on the right path as he considers the influence of foreign models, particularly Finland, in explaining the contours

of the Estonian strategic culture since the 1990s (Mölder 105–107). However, by neglecting the influence of Estonia's own historical experience (he seems to dismiss that influence by remarking: 'Soviet military culture thus had less impact on Estonian military culture than it did in the other Baltic states') he ends up throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

This article will show that the development of the Estonian strategic culture was based *primarily* on Estonia's own national experience. I agree with the Lithuanian scholar Kęstutis Paulauskas, who has argued for the importance of historical narratives and memory for understanding the Baltic states' foreign and security policy choices (Paulauskas 2013, 48, see also Piirimäe, Grönholm 2016). In that historical experience, it will be argued, the period of the Soviet occupation from 1944 to 1991 (or 1993/1994 when the last Russian army units were withdrawn) played an important role even if that role was overwhelmingly negative, people wanting to overcome and negate rather than emulating it. Indeed, it owed its importance precisely to this fact.

From the point of view of the literature on strategic culture, the Estonian case is interesting as it represents a deep rupture with the past. The restorationist ideology of the Estonian state-builders presented a difficult challenge: how to 'go back' in time and restore the traditions and practices of a bygone era? Perhaps uniquely in history, it required the efforts of an 'army of historians' to make that leap into the past. History became a reservoir for examples and identity, but this was not sustainable in the long run, as historians lacked the qualifications to direct the building of modern armed forces. By the second half of the 1990s there was a shift of focus from the past to the future and a more pragmatic strategic culture began to emerge: the 'Army of Historians' was becoming an 'Army of Professionals'.

Speaking of 'strategic culture', a short introduction into the strategic-culture approach in Security Studies is required at this point. Analyses of strategic culture usually focus on two aspects:

- 1) domestic sources of security policy,
- 2) how the past has impacted and shaped policy behaviour.

The emphasis on the word 'culture' in this approach means that it is interested not in the 'objective' but subjective sources of security policy, exploring how collective historical experiences shape defence policy. As Kerry Longhurst reminds us, the approach makes sense only as long as the historian is able to indicate how a particular strategic culture influences strategic behaviour (Longhurst 2005, 1–3). Otherwise, one would have to resort to other models of explanation – for example to the neorealist notion that, resulting from systemic factors, decision-makers across different cultures resort to the same *realpolitik* calculations of interests and capabilities (Johnston 1995). This would lead us to expect, for example, that all three Baltic states adopted similar defence policies in the 1990s, which was not the case (Männik 2013; Paulauskas 2013, Mölder 2013).

Another problem is the oft-neglected role of agency in the strategic-culture approach. For example, in Alastair Johnston's model of strategic culture causality moves in one direction only – from culture to behaviour. This leads one to wonder what or who causes strategic culture to emerge? It would be quite ahistorical to assume that there was a 'founding moment' when a particular strategic culture emerged and that this strategic culture would direct the behaviour of later generations who possess no capacity to alter it. Thus, I will draw on Bradley Klein's and Edward Lock's idea of the mutually-constitutive nature of strategic culture: strategic culture constitutes certain strategic behaviour as meaningful but at the same time allows strategic behaviour to also constitute the identity of security communities (Lock 2010). Strategic culture and strategic behaviour are essentially interwoven; 'human strategic actors and their institutions [...] make culture' (Gray 1999b, p. 130).

Following Edward Lock, I define strategic culture as an 'intersubjective system of symbols that makes possible political action related to strategic affairs' (Lock, 696–697). By assuming the interconnectedness of the politics of identity and the politics of strategy, this approach studies not only decision-making but also how strategic communities are constituted in the first place (Ibid, 697). Following this definition, I am going to study not only Estonian decisions regarding military-strategic matters, but also the symbolic world of identity-creation in the Estonian military. In fact, the emphasis will be on the latter rather than the former, as I will underline the interconnectedness of behaviour and identity by analysing practices that carried a strong symbolic meaning – like the Erna sporting event. Needless to say, identity is much more difficult to pin down than politico-strategic decisions.

In this study, 'military establishment' includes not only the command of the armed forces but also the Ministry of Defence, defence commission of the parliament, other civilian authorities overseeing defence

policies, and military experts. The article studies the influence of WWII and the Cold War on the beginning and the development of the Estonian strategic culture in the 1990s. The hypothesis is that because Estonia decided to return to pre-WWII models, discarding the Soviet experience as not worthy of emulation, historians assumed an important role in the initial stages of the development.

The plan of the article is the following. In the first section 'Revenge of the Past' I will introduce the context for the beginning of the Estonian strategic culture in the late 1980s, when Gorbachev's policy of glasnost triggered the rediscover of national histories in the Soviet Union. In the second section I will introduce the heuristic concept of 'Army of Historians' and bring examples of the importance of historians in the rebuilding of the Estonian armed forces. In the third chapter I will explain the important connection between the ideology of Restorationism, the idea of state continuity, the narratives about 'Forest Brothers' and the building of the Estonian defence system. The fourth section will discuss the difficulty and impracticability of combatting all aspects of the Soviet legacy in the restored Defence Forces. The fifth and the sixth sections will demonstrate changes in the dominant historical narratives and analyse how these changes reflected Estonia's strategic choices and policy shifts since about the mid-1990s.

1. The Revenge of the Past

The Estonian strategic culture began to develop in the late 1980s and the early 1990s in the context of the rediscovery of the nation's past and the construction, and re-construction, of a 'national view of history' that comprised of certain key narratives about the nation's past. In this period of national re-awakening, historians became important political agents. The restorationist ideology that they represented dominated not only state building at large but also the building of a national defence system.

One of the important narratives and pillars of the Estonian identity has been the narrative of victimhood, as many scholars have noted (Lehti, Jutila, Jokisipilä 2008; Wulf 2010; Wezel 2016). Since the late 1980s, the traumas of WWII and the Soviet occupation have become prominent in the national historiography. Scholars working on memory politics have stressed the subjective aspects of the phenomenon, but here I would like to emphasise 'objective' aspects. Despite some tendency to inflate numbers, it is still clear that the Estonian population suffered great losses. According to the official government report, the *White Book* of 2004, population losses totalled 48,000 during the first Soviet occupation from 1940 to 1941, and 32,000 during the German occupation from 1941 to 1944. During the second Soviet occupation from 1944 to 1991, ca 56,500 people were arrested and deported, of whom 16,000 perished. According to the official estimate, from 1940 to 1945 Estonia lost twenty five percent of its population. It is quite probable that most Estonian families experienced the physical loss of family members or relatives either as war casualties or through Soviet and German occupation policies (Salo et al. 2005: 16, 19, 32, 37).¹ Considering this, it is quite natural that narratives of victimhood have featured prominently in the national discourse and also influenced strategic culture (Männik, 48).

Beside physical losses, Estonian people had to endure several decades of rule by a repressive Soviet regime, and even as the nature of the regime changed considerably over time, the constant element was the persecution of individuals who supported national sovereignty. The idea that Estonia had been illegally annexed in 1940 was treated as a subversive and criminal anti-Soviet act directed against the 'Soviet motherland'. Memories of the inter-war were harshly suppressed, and the official Soviet historiography was actively promoted. The Estonian toilers enslaved by foreign capitalism were supposedly freed by the brotherly nations of the Soviet Union, but primarily by the brotherly Russian nation. All other thoughts about the nation's history were banished from the public sphere (Wulf, Grönholm 2010; Lipinsky 2004). Cultural expression more generally had to support the building of a new Soviet culture, which according to the Stalinist principle had to be 'national in form and socialist in content'. Censorship and the suppression of the freedom of thought was a heavy burden on the nation, and it was clear that the memories and traumas could not be silenced indefinitely, especially when the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev introduced 'democratisation' and 'openness' in the society. The rebirth of memory and history in the late 1980s would be reflected in the ideas and individuals involved in the re-creation of national defence in the 1990s.

The democratisation and glasnost introduced by Gorbachev in the second half of the 1980s triggered the start of an open discussion of the past, focused primarily on revealing official falsifications and filling in 'blank spots' in the national history. Fittingly (and in contrast to the end-of-history thesis), Gregory Suny has called the national awakenings in the Baltic republics and throughout the Soviet Union as the 'revenge

¹ The percentage includes the ca 60,000 who fled to the West, 70,000 who were lost through territorial changes made by Stalin, and an estimated 15,000 unborn children.

of the past' (Suny 1993). Arguably, Estonia in particular stood out among the Soviet republics, and also the Warsaw Pact countries, for the prominent position that historians would occupy in the national movement (Tamm 2016) and the building of the national defence system.

Starting in 1987, history became a means to delegitimize the official ideology and soon also the political regime. The best example is probably the campaign to establish the truth about the Hitler-Stalin Pact (also known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, MRP) of 23 August 1939. When the Soviet Congress of People's Deputies declared the pact as legally invalid, in December 1989, the Baltic countries interpreted it as an acknowledgement of the illegal nature of the Soviet rule over the Baltics. Soon all three countries declared independence (Lindpere 2009).² Moscow's interpretation was different, Gorbachev and his team claiming that there was no connection between the MRP and the Soviet annexation in August 1940, and therefore the Baltic states had no 'automatic right' to independence (Russia sticking to this interpretation even today). It took another year and a failed coup d'état in Moscow in August 1991 before Baltic independence was achieved de facto and recognized internationally. The Estonian armed forces were re-established immediately thereafter, in September 1991.

The Russian Federation, which follows the Soviet historiography, continues to promote the point of view that the MRP had virtually no effect on the fate of the Baltic countries and that Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined the USSR by their free will in August 1940. Resulting from this interpretation, Russia has refused to recognise the legal continuity of the Baltic countries, and has consistently criticised laws and practices, such as citizenship policies, that rest on the doctrine of state continuity. Needless to say, this narrative struggle has put a strain on Baltic-Russian relations for the entire post-Cold War era (Lipinsky 2004, Lipinsky 2018).

The late 1980s and the early 1990s was thus a period when the past was important in people's lives and all eyes were on the historian to provide not only for identity but also practical guidance for the future. The time was ripe for an 'Army of Historians' to emerge.

2. The 'Army of Historians'

The rebirth of the memories and the reconstruction of national historiography affected developments in politics, foreign relations (for example Estonian-Russian relations), and in strategic culture. Historian Marek Tamm has referred to the period in general terms as the 'Republic of Historians', noting the large proportion of historians among the new political elites. 'The Estonian independence movement as a whole proceeded very much under the guidance of historians,' Tamm observes. That influence began to wane only after 1994, when the government of Mart Laar, the leading politically engaged historian, fell. Tamm also refers to the Estonian efforts to integrate into the Western political, economic and security systems as an important factor that shifted attention from the past to questions concerning the future (Tamm 2016). Looking at the development of the armed forces, one should complement the term 'Republic of Historians' with another, the 'Army of Historians'. In the following, I will bring examples of historians who were prominent in the construction of armed forces and the strategic culture.

The first draft conception of the future structure of the armed forces was compiled by Hannes Walter, an historian at the Estonian History Museum, on 1 September 1991 – just over a week after the failed coup d'état in Moscow. Walter was one of the first historians who began writing about the hitherto forbidden topics, such as the Independence War of 1918–1920, the inter-war Estonian army and the Defence League, Finnish-Estonian military co-operation in the 1930s and related subjects (Walter 1989; 1991a; 1991b; 1992). He was not only an influential publicist but would also occupy top positions in the Ministry of Defence (MD) from 1992 to 1994 and from 1997 to 2001.

In the draft conception for defence of 1 September 1991, Walter did not regard military defence of the country with or without allies in the existing circumstances as feasible, and concentrated on the police and border guard duties of a future 'army'. However, the influence of pre-WWII models was clearly recognisable, as among other things he suggested one-year general conscription for male population. General conscription would be enshrined in the Estonian constitution passed in a nation referendum ten months later, and has remained a pillar of the Estonian strategic culture ever since, even after Lithuania and Latvia abandoned that concept in the early 2000s. Other than conscription, Walter stressed partisan warfare in case of war, which was probably a reflection of the influence of the pre-war Defence League, and the training of officers in Finnish and Swedish military schools (Lill 2009: 1741–1742).

² Lithuania declared independence on 12 March 1990. Estonia and Latvia followed with declarations about the beginning of transition periods toward independence.

In the background of the general lack of experience about strategy and grand strategic questions among the political elites, historians could offer advice resting on their knowledge of military history. Rein Helme, who had made his name as an expert of the Napoleonic Wars (Helme 1990), is an excellent example. According to Hellar Lill (another historian working at the MD), Helme drafted the next fundamental concept of the future defence system, in April 1992, and as the Chairman of the Defence Commission of the parliament since 1992 and later an adviser at the MD, he exerted a lot of influence on the building of the national defence system.

The first Minister of Defence after the adoption of the new constitution was also an historian – Hain Rebas, history professor at the University of Kiel. Under Rebas' leadership starting in October 1992, the first attempt was made to systemize previous ideas and conceptions about state defence and pass a bill, the 'Basic principles of national defence', in the Parliament, but the bill fell victim to domestic political squabbles and the prevailing ignorance about security and defence matters (Rebas 2014).

Beside Rebas, who remained minister until August 1993, many MD officials had been educated at the History Department of the University of Tartu, including Margus Kolga, Tiit Noormets, Lauri Vahtre; while Leho Lõhmus was not a professional historian but a member of the Academic Society for Military History. From 2011 to 2012 historian Mart Laar briefly served as the Minister of Defence and supported, among other initiatives, the sponsoring of historical research from the MD budget.

In addition to historians who had become politicians, parliamentarians or officials, dissidents with a strong interest in and sense of history were also prominent in the early stages of the development of the defence system and military strategy, especially among the activists who restored the Defence League (DL). Indeed, the DL, disbanded by the Communists in 1940, was the first pre-war institution to be restored, on 17 February 1990 (Tarto 2009). The restorers included Kalle Eller (the first Commander), Enn Tarto and Valdur Raudvassar. Tarto and Raudvassar were prominent former dissidents, who had served long prison sentences under the Soviet regime. Tarto, who was born in 1938, claims that the DL had been part of his childhood (more probably he remembered the Home Guard organised during the German occupation from 1941 to 1944), and during his long imprisonments in the Soviet camps he began discussing possibilities to re-create the pre-war organization with Raudvassar, a fellow inmate, once Estonia got free. They even tried to imagine that the imprisonment was a substitute for service in the Estonian army – this probably helped to alleviate their hardships mentally (Ulmiste 1994).

The dissidents were eager to revive pre-war traditions of the Estonian national defence, but there was an important exception, namely that Tarto and his colleagues wanted to make sure that the capitulation of September 1939 would never re-occur, and would in fact be impossible. In 1939 the Estonian government had decided not to fight against the Red Army and had signed agreements that compromised their defences and paved the way to Soviet annexation in 1940. Now Tarto promoted the idea that resistance against the aggressor should be made automatic: it had to be a spontaneous act by people in arms without the possibility of interference by politicians, who could be spoilt, corrupt or treacherous. 'If we act exactly as our fathers and grandfathers did, we will be mistaken. /.../ Life has proven that when you surrender, you will be beaten even more severely,' argued Tarto, probably referring not only to 1939–1940 but also to his personal experience in the Soviet camps (Ibid).

But even the professional soldiers, used to following orders, could not be entirely trusted, according to Tarto. The dissidents' interpretation of the events of 1939–1940, which the historian Magnus Ilmjärv popularly coined as the 'silent submission' (Ilmjärv 2004), helps explain the distrust of the activists of the DL toward the Defence Forces (EDF) in the 1990s. It also helps explain the rebellion by a volunteer *Jäger* company, which had been encouraged and supported among others by activists of the DL (i.e. Kalle Eller) against the EDF and the government in 1993 (Rebas 2006). Tarto would have a distinguished career: member of the Defence Commission at *Riigikogu* (the Parliament) from 1992 to 2003, and chairman of the Council of Elders of the DL from 1993 to 2003. He was the prime example of a former dissident, who helped preserve the continuity with the pre-war republic but also re-interpreted the past based on the national, and also deeply personal, traumatic experiences of WWII and the Cold War, and put history into use for practical purposes in the present. To put it in other way, there was no simple going back to 1939. The past was reinterpreted on the basis of the intervening ca. 50 years.

As we have seen, history as a discipline and as a reservoir of identity, ideas and practical lessons became an extremely important element in state-building processes, including in security-related fields, in the early 1990s. Next we will analyse the influence of the history-oriented paradigm, which we will call 'restorationism', on perceptions and attitudes toward the legacies of WWII and the Cold War. One of the key questions

that had to be decided was how to assess and treat military professionals who had made career in the Soviet armed forces.

3. Restorationism, State Continuity and the 'Forest Brothers'

The mind-set characterizing Tarto, the dissidents and historians engaged in re-creating the national defence system can be captured by the term 'restorationism' (Taagepera 1989; Pettai 2004; Kaplan 2006; also 'restorationism' – Männik 2013, 21). The paradigm rested on the notion of the legal continuity of the Estonian state: the annexation of 1940 had been illegal, it had not been recognised by most of the Western countries, and therefore the legal continuity of the Estonian state had not been broken (Mälksoo 2003). Beside the formal restoration of state institutions, i.e. the EDF and the DL, restorationism was visible in the symbolic world – the armed forces would take over the flags, coats-of-arms, insignia, unit names, oaths and other symbolic practices of the pre-war army.³ This would become an important part of the identity of the military establishment.

Restorationism was rooted in the idea that the Soviet regime had been resisted actively and passively by the majority of the population. This was certainly true, as suggested for example by the first post-war free elections organized by the Communists, in 1990, which ended in their immediate defeat. However, in order to prop up the idea of state continuity, the narrative of the continued resistance and 'freedom fighting' throughout the Cold War years became an extremely important element in the national discourse and often promoted without regard to the actual facts, for example that the dissidents had been a marginal social group and armed resistance had by and large ended by 1956 (Laar 1992).

Restorationism was a legalist way of thinking that prescribed a return to the norms, laws and institutions of the pre-war era. Typically, restorers argued that in order to undo the social, cultural, and moral damage caused by the Soviet occupation, the *status qua ante* 1940 had to be restored as much as possible. The strongest political mass movement that championed the idea were the Estonian Citizens' Committees established in 1989. The Committees organized elections to an alternative parliament, the Congress of Estonia, which was active from 1990 to 1992. Probably the most important effect of the movement was on Estonia's citizenship policy: only citizens before July 1940 and their descendants could become citizens automatically, newcomers would have to apply (Lauristin 1997; Agarín 2010).

Restorers tended to look toward the past as guidance for the present and the future. Many restorers were active historians engaged in restoring national memory and re-creating national history writing. Probably the most important part of their work was to establish the truth about the Soviet annexation of 1940, the political murders of 1940–1941, and the mass deportations from 1944 to 1952 (Tamm 2016). The history of the 'Forest Brothers' – people who had been hiding in the forests or fought against the Soviet regime – was significant. Soviet propaganda had branded the Forest Brothers as 'bandits'; now Estonian historians showed them as part of the nation's long-lasting struggle for independence. Mart Laar, a prominent historian of the Forest Brothers, gathered much political capital from the 'memory work', becoming one of the most important politicians in the 1990s and the 2000s (Laar 1992). His niche has later been filled by other politicians, like Urmas Reinsalu and Erik-Niiles Kross. Their narrative tends to focus on those Forest Brothers who fought actively against agents of the Soviet regime, discarding those who were carrying no arms and were just hiding from Soviet authorities. There is also an attempt to re-interpret the mostly spontaneous process as an organized movement initiated by residual structures of the Estonian state, thereby rebranding the Forest Brothers as 'soldiers' fighting Estonia's war against the USSR.⁴

In the early 1990s, several cases involving former Forest Brothers, who had been sentenced by the Soviet regime, were brought to the Estonian Supreme Court, which decided that, actively or passively, the men had been involved in the Estonian 'independence struggle'.⁵ The judiciary has thus indirectly supported the official narrative that there was an almost continuous independence struggle against the Soviet regime.

In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, memories of the 'war in the woods' became an important pillar in the soldiers' and officers' identities, particularly for the members of the DL, thus affecting the Estonian strategic culture considerably. The memory of the Forest Brothers has been nurtured for the purpose of supporting the defence will of the officers, soldiers and volunteers. For example, *Kaitse Kodu*, the official journal

³ Interview with Tiit Noormets, 20 September 2017, Tallinn (tape in author's possession).

⁴ Erik-Niiles Kross, presentation on the forest brothers at the Estonian Student Society, 14 September 2017, Tartu. It should be noted that this thesis would directly challenge the idea of legal state continuity.

⁵ The case of Jakob Vahtra on 8 November 1994 (<https://www.riigikohus.ee/et/lahendid?asjaNr=III-1/3-88/94>) and Julius Linamets on 24 January 1995 (<https://www.riigikohus.ee/et/lahendid?asjaNr=III-1/3-2/95>).

of the DL, often features articles about the Forest Brothers even today.⁶ After the Russian-Ukrainian war of 2014 and the building up of tensions along the Baltic states-Russian borders, NATO has also discovered the concept of the Forest Brothers as a tool to support defence will and to deter Russian aggression.⁷

Restorationism was challenged by another political mass movement, the People's Front, whom scholars have called 'reformers' (Pettai 2004). The People's Front was established in 1988 as a mass movement supporting Gorbachev's reforms, but under the cover of perestroika it began pushing for greater autonomy and later for independence. The reformers' approach was gradualist rather than revolutionary, as they wanted to reform Soviet institutions and considered the restorers' idea of returning to pre-1940 institutions as impracticable and naïve (Ibid).

The restorers-reformers cleavage caused considerable antagonisms during the establishment of the armed forces. The people who restored the DL in February 1990 were associated with the restorers. The Congress of Estonia, which had a commission on state defence chaired by Enn Tarto, even tried to subordinate the DL institutionally to itself, but the League avoided this by swearing allegiance to the Estonian government-in-exile. The authority of the government-in-exile was negligible (L'Hommedieu 2011: 134), but it proved useful for some groups struggling for influence in Estonia. It was noteworthy that the DL did not subordinate itself to the official power in the country, the democratically elected Supreme Soviet and the Government. This boded anarchy at best, civil war at worst.

In March 1990, the reformers won the elections and took power. In order to balance the influence of the Defence League, Prime Minister Edgar Savisaar established another paramilitary organisation, Home Defence (*Kodukaitse*), which competed with the DL for influence, complicating the development of national defence until it was formally disbanded in 2004 (Jürjo 2019).⁸

More importantly, the competition reflected the fundamental disagreement between restorers and reformers about how to judge the Soviet past. Restorers' wished to cleanse the nation and the country of the contaminating effects of the Soviet past; politics and state institutions had to be rid of former Communists and their mindset. The same applied to the Soviet army and the Estonian officers who had served there. For example, Rein Helme thought that the 'usage of the former Soviet higher officers had to be brought to a minimum'; and for cleansing the new institutions of Soviet practices, the MD had to be staffed with civilians only (Helme 1992). As late as 2002 defence minister Jüri Luik expressed the view that the former Soviet officers should be used as sparingly as possible (Soidro 2002).

The question of the utility of the experiences of former Soviet officers was linked to the larger question about how to deal with the legacies of the Soviet occupation. The restorationist ideology seemed to suggest that Estonia could be purified of the unfortunate effects of foreign rule, but this was possible only at the cost of wiping out the experiences and memoirs of entire generations. This was neither possible nor practical, as will be shown in the next section.

4. Coming to Terms with Soviet Legacies

The question of the utility of the experiences of the Estonians who had risen in the ranks of the Soviet army was an important litmus test for the direction that the development of the Estonian strategic culture would take. Was it going to be restorationist – heavily focuses on history and the restoration of pre-1939 traditions and practices – or reformist, trying to build a new defence system borrowing not only from pre-1939 traditions but also taking account of the developments in military affairs after 1939. This was a choice between the idealism of the 'Army of Historians' and the pragmatism of the 'Army of Professionals' – the latter included not only the former Soviet officers who were able to switch from the Soviet army to the Estonian army but also the new generation of officers who were emerging from the Finnish but by the late 1990s also from the Estonian officer schools. In this section I will show how the 'Army of Historians' gave way to the 'Army of Professionals' and how that change was reflected in attitudes toward the former Soviet officers.

Suspicion toward the former officers of the Soviet army was justified by common Soviet malpractices, such as heavy drinking and corruption, the hazing of soldiers (*dedovshina*), practices that the Estonian army did not want to inherit. It cannot be denied that many former Soviet officers had internalised such social patterns (Einseln 1993; 1994a), but the suspicion was also amplified by the efforts to purge former 'collaborators'

⁶ For the year 2017, see *Kaitse Kodu* no 2 and no 3.

⁷ NATO film 'Forest Brothers – Fight for the Baltics', see a comment in <http://estonianworld.com/life/film-forest-brothers-fight-for-the-baltics>; and the Russian official point of view, <https://www.rt.com/politics/396208-historical-perversion-russian-officials-blast>.

⁸ Commission of State Defence, meeting of 30 May 1990, ERA.R-2.13.365, Estonian National Archives, Tallinn.

fostered by the electoral victory of the Fatherland Front in 1992 and the government headed by Mart Laar. The Fatherland Front had campaigned under the slogan 'Clean up the place!' and won the elections.

It fitted the *Zeitgeist* that the first defence minister was brought from abroad. Hain Rebas had been born in Estonia in 1943 but grown up in Sweden. His father had enlisted as a volunteer for the Finnish army to fight in the Finnish Continuation War (Rebas 1999). Rebas had continued the family tradition becoming a captain in reserve of the Swedish army, beside working as history professor in Kiel. Rebas promoted the program of returning to the West and integrating Estonia into the Western security system (Rebas 1992).

Also, typically, an American Estonian was brought to take command of the EDF. The choice fell on Aleksander Einseln who had been born in Estonia in 1931 but grown up in the United States, where he had reached the rank of colonel (served from 1950 to 1985). The purpose of these decisions was to foster the Western mind set in the Estonian armed forces to balance against Soviet influences. Einseln, who shared Minister Rebas' conviction that 'the main enemy for the Estonian defence forces is a neo-Soviet mentality among the Estonian people',⁹ began eradicating the still lingering abuse of conscripts, Soviet-style business scheming and drunkenness among the officers (Einseln 1994b).

At the same time, it was clear that Estonia could not cope without using the expertise accumulated under the Soviet regime. In spring 1992, the MD listed 421 cadre officers of Estonian origin, among whom only sixteen came from the Western countries and the rest from the Soviet Union (Lill 2009: 1740). Although none of the former Soviet officers had served on the strategic level, they had the training and the valuable experience of leading troops up to the level of division. Moreover, many of them were at least as patriotic and national-minded as their colleagues from the West or civilian 'experts' back home. The most prominent representative of the group was Ants Laaneots, who had served in the Soviet army from 1966 to 1991, had reached the rank of *polkovnik* (colonel), served as chief of staff of a Soviet tank vision, but after the start of the Singing Revolution had chosen to be transferred to a more modest position in Estonia in 1989.

Laaneots had been influenced not only by the Soviet past but profoundly also by the experience of Stalinist terror. In 1949, Laaneots was a fourteen months old baby when he was deported to Siberia along his mother and uncle. His mother died in the region of Krasnoyarsk in central Siberia in 1952 when Laaneots was four. In 1958, after Nikita Khrushchev amnestied many victims of terror, Laaneots returned to Estonia with his uncle. In 1966 he chose the quite unusual path of making career in the Soviet army. When he returned to Estonia in 1989 he had quite a heavy Russian accent, but had not neglected his Estonian roots. He joined the national movement and soon took part in the most important discussions about the future armed forces. In September 1991 he became the first chief of the general staff – before any units or even the MD existed. However, due to lingering suspicions against him, his career was far from linear: he was dismissed from active duty from 1994 to 1996, sent to diplomatic service in 2002, and became the Commander in Chief only in 2006, when Estonia was already part of NATO. He served in that position until 2011 (Sildam 1999). The example of Laaneots showed that the restorers' prejudices against former Soviet officers were often misplaced: people of different backgrounds could share the same basic goals, even as they could differ over details.

Under the leadership of Laaneots, even as Estonia was seriously considering the option of becoming a neutral country in world affairs – on the model of Finland – the EDF early on began Westernizing its organizational culture. Starting in 1991, the EDF decided to adopt NATO standards in staff work, equipment, etc, despite the fact that many former Soviet officers, including Laaneots himself, remained in top position. Although joining NATO was not an option in the early 1990s, at least not until 1994 when the last Russian troops left the Baltic states, and neutrality coupled with strong independent defence posture was popular, through the adoption of NATO standards Estonia was in fact laying the basis for moving closer to NATO when this became possible in the second half of the 1990s.

The shift from the restorationist to a reformist and pragmatic strategic culture is reflected not only in defence policy decisions but also in the construction of the identity within the armed forces, as will be demonstrated on the example of discourses on history in the journal *Sõdur* and the Erna sporting event.

5. Discourses on history: the 'Summer War' of 1941

The journal *Sõdur* is another example of the workings of the mentality of restorationism. It had been a weekly military journal published by the Estonian general staff from 1919 to 1940, the audience being chiefly the officer corps. In 1992 the journal was re-established by the Academic Society for Military History

⁹ Hain Rebas at *Riigikogu*, 16 March 1993, <http://stenogrammid.riigikogu.ee/et/199303161000> (last accessed 1 September 2017).

(ASMH), an organisation formed in 1988 by historians interested in military affairs. Many former officers had joined the club. The objective was to continue the traditions rooted in 1919, and the editors frankly acknowledged that the main focus would be military history, not contemporary military affairs, at least in the near future. Members of the ASMH had been researching and writing on military history but publishing possibilities had hitherto been limited (not least because of Soviet censorship). This was now made possible by *Sõdur*. However, editors promised that in the future the journal would also begin illuminating problems associated with the development of modern armed forces.¹⁰

The focus on history was symptomatic for the state of the armed forces at this stage. There was lack of knowledge about current military affairs, and the few professionals had little time to contribute to the journal. They were working frantically to rebuild the Estonian Defence Forces. This would change after 1997, when the officer corps had grown in numbers and editors could start asking contributions from officers more actively.¹¹

From 1992 to 1995 the journal was edited by historian Tiit Noormets. While the magazine's overall purpose was to educate the readers about the Estonian military tradition in general terms,¹² one of the most popular topics proved to be the 'Summer War' of 1941. The 'Summer War' was a term coined to describe the activities of the Estonian irregular armed militias during the German campaign "Barbarossa" in the Estonian territory from July to October 1941. The Summer War and the history of the Forest Brothers would become the main research interest of Noormets also (Noormets 1999).

The fact that in July 1941, when the German 8th army entered Estonia, many Estonians hiding in the woods began an armed struggle against the Soviet security forces and 'destruction battalions' had naturally been suppressed throughout the Soviet period. The main reason for the armed resistance against the Soviets – political executions and the mass deportation on 14 June 1941 – had been carefully covered up. Of course, facts about the Summer War contradicted the official Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic War and supported the narrative of the continuous and consistent Estonian independence struggle.

The Summer War narrative was also potentially controversial because it raised questions about possible collaboration with Nazi Germany. This problem was not thematised by *Sõdur*. In the second issue, there was a story about Karl Talpak, a former Estonian captain and notable leader in the Summer War. The article stated that the 'red year' of 1940–1941 had been so difficult that the German-Soviet war was welcomed as a possibility to free oneself of the Communist yoke. Moreover, the Soviet deportation of 14 June had left little alternative but to try to defend the population from further terror, so Talpak organized the activities of around 200 men and freed some of the territory from Soviet occupation even before the Germans arrived. Nevertheless, co-operation with German authorities proved impossible because of Germany's lack of support for Estonian independence, so the paramilitary groups were disarmed (Noormets 1993).

For Talpak and many others, the way out of the impasse was to try to restore 'Estonian Defence Forces' in Finland, so he fled to Finland in April 1943 and began recruiting other Estonian refugees to the 200th Estonian infantry regiment as part of the Finnish army. The unit was not deployed in battle in the Continuation War, but in August 1944 was sent back to Estonia to organize defences against the invading Red Army, but Talpak soon understood the resistance to be futile and emigrated again, to Sweden (Ibid). In this discourse, Talpak's life showed that true Estonians patriots had difficulty co-operating with the Germans, as they 'could not support one occupier against the other', and therefore relied on Finland to struggle for Estonia's future. The question whether Finland co-operated with the Nazis in war against the USSR was avoided.

What to make of the Summer War narrative? What was its purpose? Why was the story promoted in the journal *Sõdur*? The narrative about the Summer War and Karl Talpak seems to fit in the Estonian strategic culture as it was developing in the early 1990s. At the time, Estonia was receiving a lot of assistance in know-how and military hardware from Finland; same as Finland, Estonia was beginning the decade declaring neutrality in international affairs, as the prospect of integrating into Western security organisations seemed unreal until the mid-1990s (Mölder 2013; Lill 2000). Therefore, discourses on history promoted in the journal seem to fit with the Estonian strategic culture of the time – just as the Erna sporting event that would become part of the identity construction of the military establishment around the same time.

¹⁰ Sõduri taassünd ja Eesti Akadeemiline Sõjaajaloo Selts, *Sõdur* 1 (1992). This was the editorial of the first issue.

¹¹ Interview with Major (res.) Ivar Jõesaar, 23 May 2017 (tape in author's possession).

¹² Interview with Tiit Noormets, 20 September 2017 (tape in author's possession).

6. The Erna Sporting Event and the Relaunching of *Sõdur*

Among other important aspects of the Summer War, the activities of the 'Erna' reconnaissance group were discussed on the pages of *Sõdur*. The group had been formed by the Finnish military intelligence of the Estonian volunteers who had fled to Finland in 1940–1941. The group was trained by the Finns, wore Finnish uniforms and gave an oath of allegiance to Finland. On the night of 10 July 1941 the platoon made a landing on the northern coast of Estonia, made a daring march through enemy territory and set up a base in the Kautla marshes 60 km south-east of Tallinn. The other part of the team was parachuted on 28 July (Jõgi 2006; Hiio 2006).

Again, the controversial aspect of the group's activities was the involvement of the German intelligence *Abwehr* in its formation and training. Moreover, 'Erna' was operationally controlled by the Army Group North, as its task was to undertake reconnaissance and subversive operations behind the Red Army lines. In *Sõdur*, co-operation with the Germans was obviously not considered a problem, because Soviet troops were regarded as the more dangerous national enemy. *Sõdur* merely noted that, devoted to the struggle for independence, the Erna group had to reconcile its objectives with the need of wearing Finnish uniforms and subordination to the army group *Nord* (Raidla 1994: 7).

The focus of the narrative was on the group's combat against the Soviet security forces and destruction battalions rather than on their work as a recon and sabotage team. The unit's base area in the Kautla swamps was flooded with refugees, up to 2000 in total, who had escaped from the Soviet security forces searching for deserters and 'anti-Soviet' elements. Among women and children there were several hundred men armed with small arms. In July, the NVKD employed up to six battalions in the area to liquidate those Forest Brothers, burning down several farm houses with families inside. In this situation, according to the narrative, the Erna group had to intervene by engaging the Soviet troops in combat, allowing civilians to escape the encirclement and disperse. The team lost ca. twenty of its members (Ibid). After the Kautla battles, the recon group took part in the liberation of Tallinn and was disbanded immediately thereafter.

The story of the Erna group became an important part of the national narrative and a pillar for the identity of the armed forces in the 1990s. In 1994 the ASMH started to organize a military sporting event, the 'Erna raid', in order to commemorate the Erna group and to test the military training and physical fitness of the members of the armed forces. The idea to organize such an event originated from Finland, showing the strong links between Finland and the Estonian military establishment at the time. Yrjö Uusi-Heikkilä, a reserve captain of the Finnish pioneer forces, had established a club called 'Forest Brothers'. Uusi-Heikkilä had read about the Estonian Forest Brothers and thought that the Finnish military had much to learn from the Estonian experience. He contacted a former Estonian Forest Brother, Aarne Kukk, and later also Ülo Jõgi, a member of the 'Erna team', who showed their warpath of 1941. This allowed the Finnish captain to plan the military sporting event that would follow the exact course of the original Erna (Noormets 1994).

According to Noormets, the ASMH took the initiative in organizing the event because Erna had for a long time been associated with Fascism and war crimes, so it would have been 'silly' to leave the headquarters of the EDF and the DL, or the MD, under fire. 'The ASMH does not fear such things and, moreover, historians know best what "Erna" really was', Noormets wrote (Ibid). The following years, Erna developed into an international military-sporting event, organized by the Erna Society but funded entirely by the MD. Beside its value for training, the MD saw it as a tool in the international image management of Estonia, the number of international teams taking part becoming an indicator for Estonia's success in becoming a respected partner for other nations, especially for Western countries and NATO. For example, in April 2008 Minister of Defence Jaak Aaviksoo said: 'The Erna raid is not only a sporting event, but an event contributing to our co-operation with foreign partners. The Erna raid has an important place in our annual political calendar'.¹³

However, as indicated by Noormets, the Erna raid came with an historic burden – the difficult history of the German-Soviet war. Soon, the Russian Federation, following the traditional Soviet narrative of the Great Patriotic War, began protesting in each year against the commemoration of the Erna group and the participation of international teams. For example, in 2004 the Russian Foreign Ministry (MID) issued an announcement condemning the glorification of the 'feats of the sabotage group "Erna" as an example of

¹³ 'Defence Minister Jaak Aaviksoo greets teams starting the ERNA raid, 3 April 2008', see also: Estonian and Italian delegations discussed the expansion of NATO and the future, 9 April 2003; the Estonian Minister of Defence visits Great Britain, 9 April 2003, Defence Minister Margus Hanson opened the Erna Raid, 16 September 2004, Defence Minister Jaak Jõeriüt opened the Erna Raid, 5 December 2005: Aaviksoo: In Kautla, the Erna raid met NKVD destruction battalions, 3 April 2008 – all to be found at the MD website <http://www.kaitseministeerium.ee>.

Estonia's attempts to rewrite the results of the Second World War' and 'heroization of Nazi criminals'.¹⁴ In 2008 the MID noted again that the event could not be perceived but as an attempt to popularize Nazism.¹⁵

Russian remonstrations did not have much international resonance. There is only one known example of a European politician supporting the Russian point of view publicly. In 2007, the chairman of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, René van der Linden, visited Russia and promised to put pressure on Estonia to abandon the tradition, producing a small international scandal (Socor 2007). Nevertheless, it is possible that the participation of some of the teams was uncertain due to Russia criticism. For example, in 2008 it was reported that the Finnish team failed to join the competition as a result of 'political reasons', hinting at Russian influence. The difficulty of accommodating the Estonian narrative with the prevalent WWII narratives among the Estonia's main partners in the West was noted by Estonia's own scholars and critics.¹⁶

The Erna Raid was discontinued in 2011 and in 2013 rebranded and reorganised as the 'Admiral Pitka Recon Challenge', which continues to this day. Although international-political reasons cannot be excluded as background for the decision, practical considerations were more important. The track of the Erna Raid had remained the same for twenty years, giving an advantage to Estonian teams. The DL, which is now responsible for organizing the new event, has denied that the reorganisation was linked to Russian international propaganda.¹⁷ Nevertheless, it is probably a relief for the EMD and the Estonian Foreign Ministry that the sporting event has ceased to be a yearly irritant in Estonian-Russian relations and a troublesome question requiring public-diplomacy efforts among the Western partners. It has probably escaped the MID's attention that Admiral Johan Pitka (1872–1944), who has given his name to the former 'Erna' sporting event, also fought against the Red Army in 1944.

The abandoning of the Erna Raid reflected a more general trend away from the past and an increased focus on the present and the future, as demonstrated also by developments in the journal *Sõdur*. Launched and edited by historians until 1995, it was relaunched by the EMD with a new editor, Ivar Jõesaar, in 1997 with an entirely new orientation. According to Jõesaar, it was decided that debates on historical subjects, especially on the controversial WWII, had reached an impasse, were leading nowhere, and were turning the attention away from the present and the future needs of the armed forces. History was abandoned and after 1997, the *Sõdur* has rarely featured articles on historical questions (Jõesaar 2017).

Sõdur has become a much more practical and useful magazine for military professionals, but the decision to avoid history altogether has resulted in other kinds of problems. History has always been an important component in officers' education (Piiromäe 2016), and many officers, being conscious of the importance of historical knowledge in their profession, are avid readers of military history. The history of WWII has been particularly important for the thinking of officers as tactical and operation leaders, but many are also excited about political aspects of the war. For example, the 'icebreaker thesis' by Viktor Suvorov, which claims that the Soviet Union planned and intended to attack Nazi Germany in 1941, has been popular among Estonian officers.¹⁸ The neglect of history by *Sõdur* has by no means abated interest in history, merely contributed to the popularity of myths, conspiracy theories or just unbalanced interpretations that are readily available in popular history books and on the internet.¹⁹ The teaching of history at the Estonian Military Academy has not been able to improve the situation much (Piiromäe 2016).²⁰

Conclusion

Following Edward Lock and other scholars of the second-generation strategic-culture theory, strategic culture is a dynamic structure that is repeatedly reconstituted through the very practices that it enables and constrains; the existence of long-term patterns – a more or less static strategic culture – must not be assumed.

¹⁴ Announcement of 13 February 2004 'About the participation of the Estonian SS Legion in military crimes in 1941–1945 and attempts of revision in Estonia of the Nuremberg tribunal sentence', http://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/485512.

¹⁵ Roundup of events, 6 August 2008, 'Estonia and NATO will hold a military game in memory of the Abwehr saboteurs', <https://rusk.ru/newsdata.php?idar=177882>.

¹⁶ *Postimees*, 8 August 2008; Ruutsoo, Rein 2007, 'Erna – ajalugu ja propaganda', *Eesti Päevaleht*, 16 August 2007.

¹⁷ Urmas Reitelmann, the headquarters of the Defence League, e-mail to the author, 18 August 2017.

¹⁸ This is based on my personal experience in teaching the course 'History of the Art of War' to officers at the ENDC from 2010 to 2015.

¹⁹ Interview with Veiko Dieves, 18 May 2017, Tartu (tape and transcript in author's possession).

²⁰ History courses are mostly focused on tactics. There have also been problems with keeping up the quality of history teaching because of the constant rotation of personnel.

Strategic culture is a system of symbols that constrains and enables communication and politics related to strategy. Those symbols must be reproduced for that particular strategic culture to persist, and therefore they are also subject to change (Lock, 700–701).

This research corroborates the view of strategic culture as a phenomenon in flux. Thus it proved impossible to 'reveal' a particular Estonia strategic culture or even to discover a 'founding moment' that would shape the actions of future policy-makers and strategists, because the Estonian strategic culture, like any strategic culture, is constantly reproduced through cultural practices. We have seen that the development of the Estonian strategic culture has been affected by the traumatic past of the Second World War and the Cold War and the restorationist ideology of the state-building period of the late 1980s and the early 1990s.

In order to characterise the Estonian strategic culture of the 1990s, I used the concept of the 'Army of Historians', which paraphrases Marek Tamm's term 'Republic of Historians' as a point of reference for the period more generally. 'The Army of Historians' promoted an identity that relied heavily on historical narratives about the pre-1939 Estonian Republic, narratives about the Forest Brothers that symbolised Estonia's continuous freedom struggle and supported claims of state continuity and the paradigm of restorationism, and about the Summer War of 1941. The significance of the Summer War narratives can be explained by the desire to champion the notion of 'people in arms' at the same time as Estonia was reinstating pre-1939 conscription and a total defence system. The story of the Erna Raid of 1941 was also fittingly connected to Finland, which had become Estonia's most important partner and role model in the 1990s.

In the mid-1990s the focus on the past started to give way to discussions about the present and the future. A more pragmatic strategic culture began to take root and the influence of the historians began to wane. The purge of former Soviet officers had proved counterproductive. Ants Laaneots, who had reached the rank of colonel in the Soviet army and who had been dismissed from active duty in 1994, became the Commander in Chief in 2006, demonstrating that many of the restorers' prejudices against former Soviet officers had been misplaced. Moreover, by the mid-1990s Estonia had definitely shed the idea of neutrality and had started to integrate into Western security organizations. With the new pragmatism and an orientation toward the future, dwelling on history was increasingly discouraged by the Defence Forces. Moreover, some aspects of the history that had been promoted by the 'Army of Historians', particularly cooperation with Nazi Germany during the Summer War of 1941, were problematic and potentially embarrassing before Estonia's Western partners.

Sõdur, the official journal of the Defence Forces, has abandoned historical topics since 1997 but this has caused other kinds of problems, as discussions on history have been transferred to internet forums and smokers' corners. This has contributed to the popularity of myths and conspiracy theories concerning history, particularly the Second World War, among the officers for whom history remains an important source not only for their identity as citizens and soldiers of Estonia, but also for the necessary knowledge about the nature of their profession.

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