

The Politics of Popular Initiative:
The Radical Right in Interwar Estonia

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ABSTRACT

The thesis examines the development of the Estonian Veterans' League and its profound impact on Estonian political life during the 1930s, which resulted in the demise of liberal democracy and the emergence of authoritarianism. Founded in 1929 as an association of veterans of the War of Independence (1918-20), the League became increasingly involved in politics during the economic depression of the early 1930s. It attacked corruption, Marxism, and the weakness of parliamentary democracy and advocated the establishment of a strong executive and an integrated national community. Through the means of popular initiative the Veterans were able to present their constitutional amendment proposal introducing a powerful presidency and reducing the authority of the parliament. The result of the referendum on the Veterans' constitutional amendment in 1933 was a landslide victory and the League appeared set to triumph in elections, but was thwarted by acting president Konstantin Päts' imposition of martial law in 1934. Though Päts claimed to have acted to save democracy from the threat posed by the radical right, his authoritarian regime appropriated many of the more popular ideas of the Veterans. The League continued its activities underground and attempted to overthrow the government in 1935. The uncovering of the conspiracy led to the imprisonment of the Veterans' leaders and the effective crushing of the League. Some former Veterans later played a prominent role in the collaborationist administration during the Nazi occupation 1941-1944. The dissertation also compares the Veterans with radical right-wing movements in neighbouring Finland and Latvia. The thesis questions whether the Veterans could be deemed a fascist movement and concludes that the Veterans, despite many similarities, differed significantly in important characteristics and could not be considered a fascist movement.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In his ground-breaking study of fascism which first stimulated renewed scholarly interest in the phenomenon in the early Sixties, Ernst Nolte noted the significance and uniqueness of the Estonian Veterans' League (*Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Liit*):¹ "the only one of all the fascist groups to succeed in legally obtaining the absolute majority vote of the people, but which the government nevertheless brought to its knees by means of a coup d'état."² No other radical right-wing party ever achieved a success of such magnitude. Though Nolte stressed that the Estonian case "must not be overlooked," that is in fact what has happened, largely because the source material on the movement was inaccessible to Western scholars while Estonia was still a part of the Soviet Union.

This thesis examines the development of the Estonian Veterans' League and its profound impact on Estonian political life during the Thirties, which resulted in the demise of liberal democracy and the emergence of authoritarianism. Founded in 1929 as an association of veterans of the War of Independence (1918-20), the League became increasingly involved in politics during the economic depression of the early Thirties. The Veterans attacked corruption, Marxism, and the weakness of parliamentary democracy and advocated the establishment of a strong executive and an integrated 'national community'. Through the means of popular initiative the League was able to present a constitutional amendment proposal introducing a powerful presidency and reducing the authority of the parliament. The result of the referendum on the Veterans' constitutional amendment in 1933 was a landslide victory and the League appeared set to triumph in the parliamentary and presidential

¹ This study uses "Estonian Veterans' League" as the most practical translation of the *Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Liit* (the Estonian War of Independence Veterans' League). The popular term for a Veterans' League member was *vaps* (plural: *vapsid*), alternatively *vabs*, derived from *vabadussõjalane* (War of Independence veteran). This often appears mistakenly capitalized as *VAPS*. However, to use this term in scholarly discourse is equivalent to using "commie" instead of communist. A misleading name for the Veterans frequently found in historical literature is "Freedom Fighters" which is the direct translation of the German *Freiheitskämpfer*. Another unsatisfactory translation which appears in older literature is "Liberators". It should be noted that until 11 August 1933 the organization was formally called *Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Keskliit* (The Estonian War of Independence Veterans' Central League).

² Ernst Nolte, *The Three Faces of Fascism* (London, 1965), p. 12.

elections in 1934, but was thwarted by acting President Konstantin Päts' imposition of martial law. Though Päts claimed to have acted together with General Johan Laidoner to save democracy from the threat posed by the radical right, his authoritarian regime appropriated many of the more popular ideas of the Veterans. The League continued its activities underground and attempted to overthrow the government in 1935. The uncovering of the conspiracy led to the imprisonment of the Veterans' leaders and the effective crushing of the League. Some former Veterans later played a prominent role in the collaborationist administration during the Nazi occupation 1941-44. The dissertation concludes with a comparison of the Veterans with radical right-wing and fascist movements in the neighbouring countries of Finland and Latvia.

Sources

Documents on the Veterans' movement are found primarily in the *Eesti Riigiarhiiv* (Estonian State Archive) located in Tallinn, mostly in the files of the Ministry of the Interior. They comprise two types of material: material confiscated by the Political Police and material compiled by the Political Police, with the bulk belonging to the latter category. Since the leaders of the League were arrested, a rich cache of interrogation minutes and materials from their court trials in 1935 and 1936 exists. Little of the League's own material has survived: its leadership was aware that the Päts government was preparing measures to outlaw the organization and therefore ordered the removal and destruction of most of its records, especially membership lists.

The *Valtionarkisto* (Finnish National Archive) in Helsinki also contains significant holdings pertaining to the Veterans not only because the Finns had the closest cultural and linguistic ties with Estonians, but also since the Finnish radical right was actively involved with the Veterans. Artur Sirk, the leader of the Veterans, was an exile in Finland in 1934-35 from where he directed the underground activities of the League, including a conspiracy to overthrow the Estonian government with the assistance of the Finnish radical right. The Finnish security service (*Valpo*) monitored the activities of the Veterans closely and their files comprise the bulk of the material on the Veterans in the Finnish National Archive. Further useful archival sources on political developments within Estonia are the reports of the German embassy in

Tallinn (Reval) and the Political Department of the German Foreign Ministry held in the *Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes* in Bonn, as well as reports of the Northern Department of the British Foreign Office held in the Public Records Office, London.

Official publications, notably the minutes of the *Riigikogu* (State Assembly) sessions, *Riigi Teataja* (The State Gazette) in which all new legislation was published, and *Eesti statistika kuukiri* (The Monthly Bulletin of Estonian Statistics) are important primary sources for this study.

The most essential printed source is the Veterans' newspaper *Võitlus* (The Struggle) which appeared from 1931 to 1934. Other major sources are Estonian dailies, such as *Vaba Maa*, *Kaja*, and *Rahva Sõna*, reflecting the spectrum of public opinion. The Finnish press also reported and commented regularly on Estonian political developments. In addition, occasional reports and commentary are found in Russian, German, Latvian, and British newspapers.

Few of the Veterans wrote memoirs; the only one of the leading figures to do so was Hjalmar Mäe, the Veterans' propaganda director and later head of the collaborationist administration during the Nazi occupation. Mäe's memoirs need to be used with caution because of his tendency to exaggerate the importance of his own role, as well as his blatant self-justification, illustrated by his claim that his actions were always motivated by a concern for the welfare of the Estonian people, not opportunism. More reliable information can be obtained from the prison diary of diplomat Kaarel Pusta, not a Veteran, but nevertheless arrested, which records the trial of the conspirators of the Veterans' aborted putsch; a view from a conspirator's perspective is given in Hans Meret's memoirs.³

Commentary on the Veterans and political developments in Estonia in the interwar period is available in memoirs written by men of all political stripes: Karl Ast, a Socialist leader, illuminates the negotiations that led to the formation of the Päts dictatorship; Arno Raag, an editor of the Tartu newspaper *Postimees*, the organ of Päts' great rival Jaan Tõnisson, describes events from the perspective of the 'Tartu spirit'; Elmar Tambek, Päts' chief of staff, offers insights into Päts' character and his private views on the Veterans; Jaan Lattik, leader of the Christian People's

³ Hjalmar Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostas. Minu mälestusi* (Stockholm, 1993); Kaarel Robert Pusta, *Kirjad kinnisest majast* (Stockholm, 1966); Hans Meret, *Teremi jutustus "Estonia mässust", sõjast, Berliinist, KZ-laagrist ja muust* (Toronto, 1984).

Party, writes about the activities of the *Riigikogu* and the personalities involved; Johannes Mihkelson, a leader of the Central Council of Labour Unions, provides the only account of the experiences of the working class and the Socialists' battle against the Veterans; Ilmar Raamot, Chief Secretary of the Settlers' Party, sheds light on the behind the scenes dealings of the political campaigns of 1933-4; and, Oskar Loorits recounts his role in influencing Päts' decision to seize power.⁴

Historiography

The history of the Veterans' League has always been a contentious issue. The prevailing interpretation of the politics of the interwar era in Estonian history was heavily influenced by the writings of Eduard Laaman (1888-1946), the editor of *Vaba Maa*, the newspaper associated with the Labour Party, confidant of Päts, and a staunch opponent of the Veterans. His monograph on the establishment of Estonian independence is undoubtedly the finest piece of contemporary history written during the interwar period.⁵ Much of the standard interpretation of the Veterans' movement stems from his writings: a study of Estonian political parties and an essay on dictatorship, both written at the height of the political struggle in 1933-34, and an essay on the development of the 'constitutional crisis'.⁶ Laaman described the League as an ex-combatants' interest group, void of any clear ideas of its own except self-interest, which, after losing its more experienced leaders, came under the influence of the Finnish extreme right and German National Socialism and embarked on a course towards a fascist dictatorship. The opportunity for the Veterans to achieve such great success was created by the economic depression and by the weakness of the democratic parliamentary parties which were organized on the basis of interest groups rather than ideology. In his sycophantic biography of Konstantin Päts, written during the authoritarian regime,

⁴ Karl Ast, "Demokraatliku Eesti loojakul," *Akadeemia* 3 (1989), pp. 610-6 (first published in *Vaba Eesti*, no. 1, 1955); Arno Raag, *Kõuepilvede saatel* (Lund, 1971); Elmar Tambek, *Tõus ja mõõn*, vol. 1 (Toronto, 1964); Jaan Lattik, *Teekond läbi öö*, vol. 1 (Toronto, 1950); Johannes Mihkelson, *Vastu tuult* (Stockholm, 1985); Ilmar Raamot, *Mälestused*, vol. 1 (Turku, 1975), vol. 2 (Stockholm, 1991); Oskar Loorits, *Eesti ajaloo põhiprobleemid* (Stockholm, 1955).

⁵ Eduard Laaman, *Eesti iseseisvuse süünd* (Stockholm, 1964; first published Tallinn, 1936-1938).

⁶ Eduard Laaman, *Erakonnad Eestis* (Tartu, 1934), pp. 54-62; Eduard Laaman, *Demokraatia ja diktatuur* (Pärnu, 1991), first published in Tallinn, 1933, pp. 83-101; Eduard Laaman, "Põhiseaduse kriisi arenemine 1928-1933," in *Rahvuskogu üldkoosoleku juhatus, Põhiseadus ja Rahvuskogu* (Tallinn, 1937), pp. 29-45.

Laaman expounded the idea that Päts used the powers given to him by the new constitution to thwart a coup by the Veterans.⁷

A variety of contemporary commentary provides insight into the debate on constitutional reform and political developments,⁸ though works written in Estonia after the establishment of the authoritarian regime in 1934, such as Friido Toomus' monograph on Päts and his reforms, are less rewarding since their main function is to praise the wise leadership of Päts and Laidoner and portray the Veterans as bogeymen.⁹ In the émigré community the evaluation of the Veterans established by Laaman and less sophisticated propagandists of the Päts regime was continued in studies by Märt Raud, Artur Mägi, and Osvald Viirsoo, several of whom had served as officials of the regime.¹⁰ This was true even of some historians like Evald Uustalu, who did not glorify Päts but admired his rival Jaan Tõnisson.¹¹ This 'democratic' perspective is critical of the restrictions on civil liberties and the stifling of political debate by the authoritarian government, but nevertheless shares the view of the Veterans established by the Päts regime.

A challenge to this viewpoint did not come until 1961 with William Tomingas' *Vaikiv ajastu Eestis* (The Era of Silence in Estonia), a book that rocked the émigré community.¹² Tomingas himself was involved with the Veterans and was imprisoned during the Päts dictatorship. He claims that Päts' rhetoric about saving democracy was a sham, and that the Veterans were honest patriots. Tomingas argues that the accepted version of Päts having acted in the interests of the state was simply government propaganda, and claims that Päts was motivated by purely selfish reasons.

⁷ Eduard Laaman, *Konstantin Päts. Poliitika- ja riigimees* (Stockholm, 1949; first published Tallinn, 1940).

⁸ Relevant contemporary commentary on constitutional reform is available in the law journal *Õigus*, and in Juhan Vilms, *Erakondadeta ühiskonna poole. Eesti kui korporatiivne riik* (Tallinn, 1933); Eugen Maddison, *Parlamentarism ja Eesti põhiseadus*, Elav Teadus nr. 17 (Tartu, 1933); Valter Nõges, *Ettepanekuid Eesti Vabariigi 1920.a. põhiseaduse muutmiseks*, Eesti Rahvuslaste Klubi toimetised nr. 1 (Tartu, 1932).

⁹ Friido Toomus, *Konstantin Päts ja riigireformi aastad* (Tartu, 1938); Rahvuskogu üldkoosoleku juhatus, *Põhiseadus ja rahvuskogu* (Tallinn, 1937).

¹⁰ Märt Raud, *Kaks suurt: Jaan Tõnisson, Konstantin Päts ja nende ajastu* (Toronto, 1953); Märt Raud, *Riigiehitaja Konstantin Päts* (Stockholm, 1977); Artur Mägi, *Kuidas valitseti Eestis* (Stockholm, 1951); Artur Mägi, *Das Staatsleben Estlands während seiner Selbständigkeit. I. Das Regierungssystem* (Stockholm, 1967); Osvald Viirsoo, *Eesti Põllumeeste poliitika* (Lund, 1956).

¹¹ Evald Uustalu, *Eesti Vabariik 1918-1940* (Lund, 1968). Uustalu's earlier, *The History of Estonian People* (London, 1952), was not critical of the Päts regime, which is a good example of the tendency of émigré authors to portray the leadership of the Republic of Estonia in the best possible light for a non-Estonian readership.

¹² William Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu Eestis* (New York, 1961).

Although Tomingas' book offered an overdue counterpoint to the prevailing view of Päts as the saviour of Estonia from fascism, it has serious shortcomings, in that it is a melange of memoirs and scholarship, contains numerous inaccuracies and occasionally relies on unsubstantiated rumours.¹³

Western academic scholarship basically adhered to the dominant émigré interpretation. Georg von Rauch, Toivo Raun, and V. Stanley Vardys can be loosely grouped together as the main representatives of a standard interpretation.¹⁴ This view maintains that the factor primarily responsible for the political crisis of the Thirties (in addition to the depression) was the ultra-liberal constitution whose flaws resulted in a 'plethora' of political parties and frequent cabinet crises. A lack of democratic tradition and experience is also seen as a contributing factor. Päts' coup d'état is justified as having been 'preemptive' or 'preventive intervention' against the danger presented by the extreme right, and his 1937 constitution is judged as a positive step back on the road towards democracy.¹⁵ The 'mildness' of the Päts regime is emphasized, while the Veterans are seen as imitators of the German Nazis, an indigenous form of fascism. Alvin Isberg, and John Hiden and Patrick Salmon concur in this view of the Veterans, but offer a considerably more critical analysis of the Päts regime.¹⁶

Attempts to move beyond these explanations are made by Imre Lipping, Rein Taagepera, and Tõnu Parming who strive to re-evaluate the traditional explanation of the emergence of Estonian authoritarianism. Lipping focuses on the pressure exerted by two powerful vested interest groups, the military and business circles, and the personal ambitions of

¹³ Other examples of this interpretation are August Ots, *Miks kaotasime iseseisvuse* (Stockholm, 1981); Hamilkar Mengel, ed., *50 aastat* (USA, 1987).

¹⁴ Georg von Rauch, *The Baltic States: The Years of Independence 1917-1940* (London, 1974); Toivo U. Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians* (Stanford, 1991); V. Stanley Vardys, "The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Baltic States," in V. Stanley Vardys and Romuald J. Misiunas, eds., *The Baltic States in War and Peace* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1978), pp. 65-80.

¹⁵ More general accounts by non-Baltic specialists follow the same interpretation of Päts' actions constituting a "preemptive coup" against a possible "fascist takeover", though they are more critical of the Päts' subsequent actions, R. J. Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century* (London and New York, 1994), p. 99; Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars. A History of East Central Europe vol. IX* (Seattle, 1974), p. 373.

¹⁶ Alvin Isberg, *Med demokraten som insats. Politisk-konstitutionellt maktspel i 1930-talets Estland*, *Studia Baltica Stockholmiensia* 4 (Uppsala, 1988); John Hiden and Patrick Salmon, *The Baltic Nations and Europe: Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1991).

Päts and Laidoner.¹⁷ Taagepera sees the demise of democracy as the result of an underdeveloped civic culture.¹⁸

American sociologist Tõnu Parming examines the interaction of economic and political forces with the social structure, reaching the conclusion that the key factor in the collapse of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism was the failure of the democratic parties as 'crisis mediators'. The urban middle class, fearing the threat to their status posed by the depression, abandoned its ineffectual political representatives who were unable to provide stability and embraced the extra-parliamentary right.¹⁹ Parming's study, however, does not specifically focus on the Veterans, but uses Estonia as a case study to support Juan Linz's hypothesis on the breakdown of democratic regimes.

Soviet Estonian historians had the advantage of access to archival sources, but were blinkered by a dogmatic Marxist-Leninist ideological perspective. In Soviet historiography, the Veterans are seen as agents of German fascism, and the events of 1934 are characterized as a power struggle between two rival groups of fascists. The Veterans and the Päts-Laidoner clique are viewed as essentially the same in having as their aim the suppression of the working class, the only difference being that one were the lackeys of British capital, and the other, German. Thus Olaf Kuuli's monograph on the Päts regime is entitled *Six Years of Fascist Dictatorship in Estonia*. Soviet historiography does not focus on the Veterans, but on the history of 'anti-fascism' in 'bourgeois' Estonia, i.e. the activities of the Communist Party. The whole political development of the Thirties is treated simply as a prelude and justification for the 'revolution' of 1940.²⁰

The works of Estonian historians in recent years are very much the products of their political environment. During the drive to restore national independence (1988-91) writings by *glasnost*-era younger historians portrayed the leaders of the interwar republic as inspirational

¹⁷ Imre Lipping, "The Emergence of Estonian Authoritarianism," in Arvids Ziedonis jr., William L. Winter, and Mardi Valgemäe, eds., *Baltic History* (Columbus, 1974), pp. 209-16.

¹⁸ Rein Taagepera, "Civic Culture and Authoritarianism in the Baltic States, 1930-1940," *East European Quarterly* 7 (1973), pp. 407-12.

¹⁹ Tõnu Parming, *The Collapse of Liberal Democracy and the Rise of Authoritarianism in Estonia*, Sage Professional Papers in Contemporary Political Sociology (London, 1975).

²⁰ Olaf Kuuli, *Vapsidest Isamaaliiduni. Fasismi ja fasismivastase võitluse ajaloo kodanlikus Eestis* (Tallinn, 1976); a shorter English language version, Olaf Kuuli, *Six Years of Fascist Dictatorship in Estonia* (Tallinn, 1975); *Eesti NSV ajalugu*, vol. 3 (Tallinn, 1971); V. A. Maamägi and H. T. Arumäe, "Fasismi Baltiassa," *Historiallinen Arkisto* 72 (1977), pp. 93-112.

figures.²¹ Thus the interpretation of given events did not differ much from the idealization of Päts and Laidoner developed by émigré authors, with the Veterans still viewed from the old Päts or Soviet perspective. Their articles were intended as popularizations and as such contained little or no new research. Estonian historians investigating the first republic have been interested primarily in its foreign relations rather than internal politics. However, in the past few years since the restoration of independent statehood, historians have become increasingly critical of the Päts regime and correspondingly more positive about the Veterans. This re-evaluation is more concerned with the events of 1939-40 than those of 1934 and is highly critical of Päts and Laidoner's capitulation to the Soviets. There is an underlying assumption, though not explicitly stated, that had the Veterans been in power, they would not have given in to Soviet demands, but resisted militarily.²²

All of the authors discussed above have touched upon the Veterans only in passing as one aspect of a broader overview of Estonian history or as pertaining to a specific topic. None have made the movement itself the subject of their inquiry. The only study that actually focuses on the Veterans is by Rein Marandi.²³ Marandi argues that the inability of the parliamentary parties to successfully deal with the economic depression resulted in the creation of the "pseudo-problem" or panacea of constitutional reform, a completely unrealistic response to the crisis. Marandi navigates judiciously between the simplistic historiography which sees the Veterans as either villains or idealists and victims, and brings out the complexity and contradictory nature of the movement. He rejects the validity of a generic concept of 'fascism' altogether, though he allows that the Veterans were part of the general "bourgeois anti-democratic radical right" phenomenon of the interwar era. For Marandi, the determining factor is the particular national context and the specific Estonian political developments. Although this is the most extensive and

²¹ Hannes Walter, ed., *Ausalt ja Avameelselt. Eesti suurmeestest* (Tallinn, 1990); Silvia Õispuu, ed., *Eesti ajalugu ärkamisajast tänapäevani* (Tallinn, 1991).

²² Evald Laasi, "Riigijuhid ajaloo ees," *Looming*, no. 3, 1990, pp. 368-74; Magnus Ilmjärv, *Nõukogude Liidu ja Saksamaa vahel. Balti riigid ja Soome 1934-1940* (Tallinn, 1993); Magnus Ilmjärv, "Veel Balti liidu moodustamisest ja Eesti välispoliitilisest orientatsioonist," *Looming*, no. 8, 1993, pp. 1107-19.

²³ Rein Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all. Vabadussõjalaste liikumine Eestis 1929-1937. I. Legaalne periood (1929-1934)*, *Studia Baltica Stockholmiensia* 6 (Uppsala, 1991). Marandi's second volume dealing with the underground period 1934-1937 is under preparation.

recent study, it was written while the Soviet Union still existed, and Marandi was not able to get access to archival and other sources in Estonia.

In order to gain a better understanding of the Veterans' League, this thesis will compare it with radical right-wing movements in Estonia's two closest neighbours, the *Perkonkrusts* in Latvia and the Lapua movement and the *Isänmaallinen kansanliike* (IKL) in Finland. As the Latvian and Finnish radical right-wing organizations were also eventually banned, the records of the political police in the *Latvijas Valsts Vestures Arhivs* (Latvian State History Archive) in Riga and the *Valtionarkisto* (Finnish National Archive) in Helsinki are the main sources.

Like the Estonian case, that of the Latvian radical right, the *Perkonkrusts* (Thunder Cross), has received negligible scholarly attention. The only serious scholarly survey of Latvian history to have appeared in English in the last forty years, Andrejs Plakans' *The Latvians: A Short History*, inexplicably makes no mention of the *Perkonkrusts*.²⁴ The only non-Latvian language study of the politics of the interwar period remains Jürgen von Hehn's *Lettland zwischen Demokratie und Diktatur*, published in 1957.²⁵ The most thorough account of the first Latvian republic is by Adolfs Silde, himself a prominent former member of the *Perkonkrusts*.²⁶ Aivars Stranga has been concerned with aspects of Latvian political life in the interwar era, particularly the authoritarian regime.²⁷ Research on the *Perkonkrusts* has been done by Karlis Kangeris and the late Haralds Biezais, but their publications have been concerned with collaboration during the Nazi occupation, rather than the movement during the Thirties.²⁸ Recently, the first study on the *Perkonkrusts* itself

²⁴ Andrejs Plakans, *The Latvians: A Short History* (Stanford, 1995).

²⁵ Jürgen von Hehn, "Lettland zwischen Demokratie und Diktatur," *Jahrbücher für die Geschichte Osteuropas*, Beiheft 3 (Munich, 1957).

²⁶ Adolfs Silde, *Latvijas vesture 1914-1940* (Stockholm, 1976).

²⁷ Aivars Stranga, "Das Regime von Karlis Ulmanis in Lettland 1934-1940: Genesis, Entwicklung, Inhalt," in Erwin Oberländer, Rudolf Jaworski, Hans Lemberg, and Holm Sundhaussen, eds., *Autoritäre Regime in Ostmitteleuropa 1919-1944* (forthcoming).

²⁸ Karlis Kangeris, "Kollaboration vor der Kollaboration? Die baltischen Emigranten und ihre 'Befreiungskomitees' in Deutschland 1940/1941," in *Europa unterm Hakenkreuz. Okkupation und Kollaboration (1938-1945)* (Berlin, 1994), pp. 165-90; Haralds Biezais, "Gustava Celmina Perkonkrusts dokumentu gaisma", *Latvijas Zinatnu Akademijas Vestis*, nos. 1-2 (534-5), 1992, pp. 39-43 and 40-3; Haralds Biezais, *Latvija kaskrusta vara: svesi kungi, pasu laudis* (N.p., 1992).

has been written by Armands Paeglis.²⁹ Paeglis has basically chronicled political police reports on the activities of the *Perkonkrusts*, providing valuable source material, but woefully little analysis. Disturbingly, Paeglis is clearly sympathetic with their goal of “Latvia for the Latvians” and takes the patriotic sloganeering of the *Perkonkrusts* at face value.

The Finnish case is much better studied than either the Latvian or Estonian one. There is also a general consensus that the Finnish fascism was a continuation of the civil war by political means, a striving to recreate lost national unity by crushing Marxism. The first scholarly study of the Finnish extreme right was by the American historian Marvin Rintala who used the concept of political generations.³⁰ His study remains the only monographic overview in English.³¹ In Finland, the pioneering work was done by Lauri Hyvämäki,³² who is also noteworthy as the only author who has attempted to compare the fascist-like movements in the North-East Baltic region.³³ The most comprehensive accounts of the IKL and the Finnish Veterans’ League (VRL) have been written by Mikko Uola.³⁴ Juha Siltala, whose work on the kidnappings in 1930 is the most detailed study of the Lapua movement, has taken a psychohistorical approach, concluding that Lapua was a reaction against modern culture and an attempt to control the complex modern world by subjective means.³⁵ Martti Ahti has been particularly interested in the nature and extent of the Civil Guard’s involvement with the radical right.³⁶ Sociologists Risto Alapuro and Lauri Karvonen have both attempted to demonstrate correlations between various socio-economic factors and support for Finnish fascism. While Alapuro has emphasized the decisive importance of the social structure, particularly the position of the

²⁹ Armands Paeglis, *“Perkonkrusts” par Latviju 1932-1944* (Riga, 1994).

³⁰ Marvin Rintala, *Three Generations: The Extreme Right Wing in Finnish Politics* (Bloomington, 1962); Marvin Rintala, “Finland,” in Hans Rogger and Eugen Weber, eds., *The European Right. A Historical Profile* (London, 1965).

³¹ A brief overview in English is Anthony F. Upton, “Finland,” in Stuart J. Woolf, ed., *European Fascism* (London, 1968), pp. 184-216.

³² Lauri Hyvämäki, *Sinistä ja mustaa. Tutkielmia Suomen oikeistoradikalismista* (Helsinki, 1971).

³³ Lauri Hyvämäki, “Fasistiset ilmiöt Baltian maissa ja Suomessa 1920-luvun lopussa ja 1930-luvulla,” *Historiallinen Arkisto* 72 (1977), pp. 113-37.

³⁴ Mikko Uola, *Sinimusta veljeskunta. Isänmaallinen kansanliike 1932-1944* (Helsinki, 1982); Mikko Uola, *Rintamamiesten Liito. Vapaussodan Rintamamiesliito. Rintamamiesliito 1929-1944* (Tampere, 1988).

³⁵ Juha Siltala, *Lapuan liike ja kyyditykset 1930* (Helsinki, 1985).

³⁶ Martti Ahti, *Kaappaus? Suojeluskuntaselkkaus 1921, Fascismin aave 1927, Mäntsälän kapina 1932* (Helsinki, 1990).

farmers,³⁷ Karvonen found very weak correlations which led him to argue for the primacy of ideological and political factors rather than socio-economic ones.³⁸

Most of the authors discussed above have employed the concept of fascism very loosely in regard to the Veterans, and have worked with the assumption that the Veterans represented the Estonian variant of the European interwar trend of fascism, heavily influenced by Italian and German models. However, students of fascism, with only a few exceptions,³⁹ have not included Estonia or the Baltic states in their analyses. This has been the case largely because of a lack of information, linguistic inaccessibility, or simply because they discounted small countries that had disappeared off the map. This thesis will seek to rectify this neglect.

³⁷ Risto Alapuro and Erik Allardt, "The Lapua Movement: The Threat of Rightist Takeover in Finland, 1930-32," in Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stephan, eds., *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (Baltimore, 1978), pp. 122-41; Risto Alapuro, "Mass Support for Fascism in Finland," in Stein Ugelvik Larsen, Bernt Hagtvet, Jan Petter Myklebust, eds., *Who were the Fascists. Social Roots of European Fascism* (Bergen-Oslo-Tromsö, 1980), pp. 678-86; Risto Alapuro, *State and Revolution in Finland* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1988).

³⁸ Lauri Karvonen, *From White to Blue and Black: Finnish Fascism in the Interwar Period*, Commentationes Scientiarum Socialium 36 (Helsinki, 1988).

³⁹ Ernst Nolte, *Die Krise des liberalen Systems und die faschistischen Bewegungen* (Munich, 1968), p. 284; Stanley G. Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition* (Madison, 1980), p. 125; Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London, 1991), p. 119; Roger Griffin, ed., *Fascism*, Oxford Readers (Oxford, 1995), p. 215; Stanley G. Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914-1945* (Madison, 1995), p. 323.

CHAPTER 2

THE EMERGENCE OF INDEPENDENT ESTONIA

The Development of a National Movement

The second half of the nineteenth century was a time of major changes in the lives of the peoples of the North-East Baltic region. Perhaps the most significant development was the acquisition of a national identity by the indigenous peoples. The dominant elites of the Baltic Provinces were the Baltic German landowners, descendants of the crusaders who subjugated the pagan Latvians and Estonians in the thirteenth century. Though Estland and Livland, the territory inhabited by the Estonians, passed under several different rulers, political, social and economic hegemony remained entrenched in the hands of the Baltic German nobility until 1917.¹ The privileges of the Baltic *Ritterschaften* (corporations of the nobility) were upheld by the Russian Tsars upon conquering Estland and Livland from Sweden in 1710. The peasants (interchangeable with 'the Estonians') were emancipated from serfdom in 1816-1819, but were not given the ability to purchase their own land. Only as a result of the series of agrarian reforms that began in 1849 and continued into the 1860s did a native Estonian landowning class come into being.

Interest in the culture of the indigenous people initially involved only a few German-speaking intellectuals who established the *Gelehrte Estnische Gesellschaft* (Estonian Learned Society) in 1838 as a base for their activities. Folk poems provided the basis for Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald's compilation of an Estonian national epic, *Kalevipoeg* (1857-1861), inspired by Elias Lönnrot's Finnish national epic, *Kalevala* (1835). The first undertaking involving broader strata of society, not just intellectuals, which helped transform national awareness into a national movement, was the campaign to establish an Estonian language secondary school, initiated by two Viljandi county schoolteachers in 1862. By creating a network of subcommittees across Livland and Estland, the secondary school movement spread the ideas of the national movement throughout

¹ The province (*guberniya*) of Estland covered the northern part of present-day Estonia and the northern part of the province of Livland (Livonia) covered southern Estonia. Estonia was united into a single administrative unit only in 1917.

the population.² The 1860s and 1870s also witnessed the rapid growth of various voluntary associations such as choral, orchestral, temperance, and agricultural societies.

The budding Estonian intelligentsia consisted mainly of rural schoolteachers and parish clerks who were mostly sons of peasants.³ The intelligentsia, however, split into two currents. The initial leaders of national movement in the 1860s and 1870s were Lutheran pastor Jakob Hurt and Johann Voldemar Jannsen who with his newspaper *Perno Postimees* (The Pärnu Courier), founded in 1857, established Estonian language journalism on a permanent footing. They saw Estonian national development in the context of Herderian national romanticism and argued that Estonians should strive for cultural greatness, rather than challenge Baltic German political domination.⁴ Hurt's and Jannsen's gradualist ideas were challenged by a more radical current led by Carl Robert Jakobson, the editor of *Sakala*, who did not believe that compromise with the Baltic German elites was attainable and therefore advocated an overtly political struggle against their dominance. Jakobson turned the Baltic conception of history on its head: the German crusaders had not brought enlightened civilization to the pagan Estonians, but quashed their ancient liberty and imposed a 'dark age' of serfdom.⁵ Jakobson appealed to the Tsar to bring a 'new dawn' to the Estonians by reforming the administration of the Baltic Provinces.

The aims of the national movement were most clearly expounded in the petition presented by Jakobson to Tsar Alexander III in 1881. Among its demands were the replacement of the Baltic *Landtage* with the Russian *zemstvo* in which Estonians would have equal representation, the extension of Russian police and judicial systems into the Baltic Provinces in order to eliminate the partiality of the Baltic institutions to Germans, the compulsory sale of land to the peasants by the large estate owners at state-controlled rates, and the reorganization of the Baltic Provinces into two administrative units corresponding to the territory inhabited by the Estonians and the Latvians.⁶

² Hans Kruus, *Eesti Aleksandrikool* (Tartu, 1939), p. 209.

³ Ea Jansen, "On the Economic and Social Determination of the Estonian National Movement," in Aleksander Loit, ed., *National Movements in the Baltic Countries during the 19th Century*, Studia Baltica Stockholmiensia 2 (Stockholm, 1985), pp. 48-9.

⁴ Toivo U. Raun, "The Estonians," in Edward C. Thaden, ed., *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914* (Princeton, 1981), p. 298.

⁵ Carl Robert Jakobson, *Kolm isamaa kõnet* (Tallinn, 1991).

⁶ Toivo U. Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians* (Stanford, 1991), p. 65.

In the mid-1880s the Imperial government initiated a campaign of russification to reduce the privileges and autonomy of the Baltic Provinces and bring its laws and practices in line with the rest of Russia. By challenging the entrenched position of the Baltic Germans, russification in the administrative sphere actually benefited Estonians, for example, property-owning Estonians were enfranchised by municipal reforms which eventually enabled Estonians to win control of several city councils in the first decade of the twentieth century.⁷ Russification inadvertently increased awareness of an Estonian identity by detaching Estonians from German influence.

In the final decades of the nineteenth century great social and economic changes continued to transform the Estonian nation. The pace of industrialization accelerated with the opening of the Tallinn-Narva-St. Petersburg railway line in 1870. Migration to the cities increased exponentially.⁸ One of the most significant developments was the formation of an Estonian urban bourgeoisie. Assimilation into the German or Russian speaking world was no longer necessary for upward mobility.

The national movement was revitalized at the close of the nineteenth century by a new self-confident university educated generation. Two new figures emerged who would become the most important statesmen of independent Estonia, Jaan Tõnisson and Konstantin Päts, both graduates of the law faculty at Tartu University and active as newspaper editors. The national liberal group, centred around Tõnisson's *Postimees* (The Courier) in Tartu, emphasized the common interest of Baltic Germans and Estonians in ensuring that the Baltic Provinces should continue their unique and separate development. In 1905 Tõnisson formed the first Estonian party (the only legal one until 1917), the Estonian Progressive People's Party (*Eesti Rahvameelne Eduerakond*), allied with the Cadets in the Russian *Duma*, which espoused gradualism and moderation. A rival and more radical current coalesced around Päts' *Teataja* (Herald) in Tallinn. They were primarily concerned with social and economic issues, and therefore looked hopefully toward the all-Russian liberation movement to help end the dominance of the Baltic German elite. Revolutionary ideals arrived in Estonia through the

⁷ Raun, "The Estonians," pp. 307-8.

⁸ *Eesti NSV ajalugu*, vol. 2 (Tallinn, 1963), p. 116.

Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party, established in Tallinn in 1902.⁹

The 1905 revolution in Russia had a strong resonance in Estonia. In November, Tõnisson convened a national congress in Tartu, but the delegates split into separate meetings of moderates and radicals. Both demanded a Russian constituent assembly elected by universal suffrage, unification of Estland and northern Livland with autonomous self-government, Estonian language instruction in schools, abolition of agrarian privileges, and redistribution of state and church lands to the landless. While the moderates sought to achieve these goals through legal means, the radicals called for revolutionary action and the overthrow of the Tsarist regime.¹⁰ Following the Latvian example, peasants and workers from Tallinn pillaged and burned down manor houses. Brutal retribution was meted out by Tsarist punitive expeditions.¹¹ Although the 1905 Revolution failed, it marked a great 'watershed' for Estonians. Ordinary Estonians became engaged in active political debate for the first time and Estonian social and political aims were radicalized.¹²

The Establishment of Estonian Independence

The idea of independence had never been contemplated by Estonians before the Tsarist regime crumbled in 1917. The unexpected simultaneous collapse of the Russian and German empires at the end of World War One provided the nations of the eastern Baltic the opportunity to establish their own sovereign states. The Bolshevik seizure of power which plunged Russia into civil war and the threat of German military occupation impelled Estonian national leaders to declare independence.¹³ The eventual defeat of Germany by the Entente created a power vacuum in the region that was skilfully exploited by the Estonian national leadership

⁹ Toomas Karjahärm, "The Political Organization of Estonian Society and the Political Parties in Estonia in the Years 1900-1914," in Aleksander Loit, ed., *The Baltic Countries 1900-1914*, Studia Baltica Stockholmiensia 5 (Stockholm, 1990), pp. 133-4.

¹⁰ Toivo U. Raun, "Estonian Social and Political Thought, 1905- February 1917," in Andrew Ezergailis and Gert von Pistohlkors, eds., *Die baltischen Provinzen Russlands zwischen den Revolutionen von 1905 und 1917*, Quellen und Studien zur baltischen Geschichte 4 (Cologne, 1982), pp. 63-5.

¹¹ Toomas Karjahärm and Raimo Pullat, *Eesti revolutsioonitules 1905-1907* (Tallinn, 1975), pp. 144-53.

¹² Toivo U. Raun, "1905 as a Turning Point in Estonian History," *East European Quarterly* 14 (1980), p. 332.

¹³ Karl Aun, "The 1917 Revolutions and the Idea of the State in Estonia," in Ezergailis and von Pistohlkors, eds., *Die baltischen Provinzen Russlands zwischen den Revolutionen von 1905 und 1917*, p. 288.

The overthrow of the Tsarist regime in February 1917 met a rapid response from national leaders in the western borderlands of Russia who immediately began to press for autonomy, their general demand during the 1905 revolution. A conference of representatives of Estonian organizations and societies in Tartu in March drew up a proposal for governmental reorganization within Estland and Livland. The Russian Provisional Government approved the proposal and issued a decree which required the Baltic German governing institutions to relinquish their authority to a temporary commissar and united the Estonians into a single administrative unit corresponding to their ethnic boundaries for the first time in their history.¹⁴ The Provisional Government's commissar Jaan Poska, the Estonian mayor of Tallinn, immediately proclaimed elections to the new institution of self-government, the *Maapäev*, which were carried out in May and June by universal, but indirect suffrage.¹⁵

Soviets, supported mainly by Russian soldiers, sailors, and workers, were formed in Tallinn, Tartu and Narva immediately after the February Revolution.¹⁶ The Soviets denounced the *Maapäev* elections as undemocratic, and opposed the establishment of national military units which began to be organized on the initiative of Estonian soldiers, inspired by the Latvian example.¹⁷ Initially, the Socialist Revolutionaries were the dominant party in the Soviets, but by October the Bolsheviks were in control.

After the Bolshevik takeover in Petrograd, the Bolsheviks in Estonia took power in Tallinn. In the Russian Constituent Assembly elections held in November the Bolsheviks' demand for an immediate end to the war proved popular, yielding them the largest bloc of votes, with 40% of the Estonian total.¹⁸ The Bolshevik-controlled Soviets,

¹⁴ Mati Graf, *Eesti Rahvusriik. Ideed ja lahendused: ärkamisajast Eesti Vabariigi sünnini* (Tallinn, 1993), p. 132.

¹⁵ Representatives elected to the *Maapäev*: Rural Union 13, Labour 11, Social Democrats 9, Socialist Revolutionaries 8, Populists 7, Bolsheviks 5, Radical Democrats 4, non-party representatives 3, national minorities 2; total of 62 seats, Artur Mägi, *Kuidas valitseti Eestis* (Stockholm, 1951), p. 6.

¹⁶ Olavi Arens, "Soviets in Estonia, 1917/1918," in Ezergailis and von Pistohlkors, eds., *Die baltischen Provinzen Russlands zwischen den Revolutionen von 1905 und 1917*, p. 301.

¹⁷ Vabadussõja Ajaloo Komitee, *Eesti Vabadussõda 1918-1920*, vol. 1, (Heidenheim, 1951; first published Tallinn, 1935), p. 59; August Rei, *Mälestusi tormiselt teelt* (Stockholm, 1961), p. 153.

¹⁸ Percentage of votes in Estonia in the Russian Constituent Assembly elections on 12-14 November 1917: Bolsheviks 40.2, Democratic Bloc 22.6, Labour 21.5, Radical Democrats 5.8, Socialist Revolutionaries 5.8, Social Democrats 3.0, Russian Socialist Revolutionaries 1.1, Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians*, p. 103.

confident of their victory, dissolved the *Maapäev* and proclaimed elections for an Estonian Constituent Assembly. In response, the *Maapäev* met on 15 November and prepared to go underground by delegating its authority to a Council of Elders, issuing its own call for the convening of an Estonian Constituent Assembly, and declaring that since central authority had collapsed that it was the sole bearer of supreme power in Estonia.¹⁹ Thus two political institutions claimed legitimacy. The Executive Committee of Estonian Soviets was in control, but was unable to assert authority throughout the whole country as the Estonian military units remained loyal to the leadership of the *Maapäev*.

The *Maapäev* had initially favoured a democratic federation of Russia's nations, but the unexpected fall of Riga in August 1917 and the subsequent occupation of Estonian islands by German troops at the end of September, had first prompted it to consider independence as a means for Estonia to opt out of the German-Russian war and thus possibly avoid German occupation.²⁰ By the end of 1917, the fear of a further German military advance and the desire to avoid the fate of Russia where civil order had disintegrated, fostered a consensus for independence among the bourgeois parties. As the *Tallinna Teataja* wrote in November:

We have finally buried all our hopes that the Russian nation can improve our situation - it is no longer even capable of governing itself . . . At present we have been left at the mercy of anarchic armed masses, in the future our life and death will be decided by the desires of the European great powers.²¹

While the Estonian Social Democrats and Socialist Revolutionaries also soon came to accept the idea of independent statehood,²² the Estonian Bolsheviks rejected any suggestion of independence because they believed that world revolution was imminent and independence was therefore not only unnecessary, but would also weaken the chances of success for a dictatorship of the proletariat. In doing so, they underestimated the strength and genuineness of nationalism, and miscalculated in hoping

¹⁹ Olavi Arens, "The Estonian *Maapäev* During 1917," in V. Stanley Vardys and Romuald J. Misiunas, eds., *The Baltic States in Peace and War, 1917- 1945* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1978), p. 29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

²¹ Eduard Laaman, *Eesti iseseisvuse süünd* (Stockholm, 1964; first published Tallinn, 1936-1938), p. 158.

²² Ants Piip, *Tormine aasta* (Stockholm, 1966), p. 65; Gustav Suits, "Tagasivaade Eesti Vabariigi sünniaegadele," *Tulimuld*, no. 1, 1973, pp. 34, 37.

that the Germans would not occupy Estonia.²³

The close relationship between class and nationality in Estonia had important consequences in determining the outcome of the struggle for power. The fact that the upper class was composed almost exclusively of non-Estonians meant that it could not form an alliance with the Estonian middle class to combat socialism, and that the latter was a proponent of radical change, rather than stability. The Bolsheviks, however, failed to realize the significance of the interconnection between class and nationality, and dogmatically focused solely on the former. By lumping together in their attacks the emergent native middle class with the old political regime and the Baltic German elite, the Bolsheviks alienated democratically oriented socialists who consequently shifted toward the political centre and embraced elements of nationalism. Thus the Bolsheviks helped to create an alliance between the proponents of nationalism and the democratic proponents of class struggle.²⁴ The loss of support for the Bolsheviks was revealed during the January 1918 election for the Estonian Constituent Assembly. When it became clear after two-thirds of the ballots had been cast that the absolute majority would be anti-Bolshevik, the Executive Committee of Estonian Soviets discontinued the elections.²⁵

Bolshevik rule in Estonia lasted only a few months before German troops occupied the country. On 24 February, the day after the Bolsheviks cleared out of Tallinn and the day before the Germans occupied the capital, the *Maapäev's* three-member Salvation Committee (*Päästekomitee*), headed by Päts, declared an independent democratic Republic of Estonia and appointed a provisional government. The preamble of the independence manifesto stated that the step was taken in order to defend Estonia from both the German army and the chaos and anarchy which reigned within the borders of the former Russian Empire.²⁶ The Salvation Committee's declaration may have appeared as only a symbolic gesture

²³ *Revolutsioon, kodusõda ja välisriikide interventsioon Eestis, 1917-1920*, vol. 1 (Tallinn, 1977), p. 44; Laaman, *Eesti iseseisvuse süünd*, pp. 203, 219, 224.

²⁴ Tõnu Parming, "Population and Ethnicity as Intervening Variables in the 1905/1917 Revolutions in the Russian Baltic Provinces," in Ezergailis and von Pistohlkors, eds., *Die baltischen Provinzen Russlands zwischen den Revolutionen von 1905 und 1917*, p. 9.

²⁵ Uncompleted Estonian Constituent Assembly election results 21-2 January 1918 (percentage of votes): Bolsheviks 37.1, Labour 29.8, Democratic Bloc 23.3, Left Socialist Revolutionaries 3.5, Social Democrats 1.7, Right Socialist Revolutionaries 1.0, others 3.6, *Revolutsioon, kodusõda ja välisriikide interventsioon*, vol. 1, p. 302.

²⁶ Elmar Järvesoo, "Estonia's Declaration of Independence in 1918: An Episode of Collision Between National-Revolutionary and Bolshevik Ideologies," in Arvids Ziedonis Jr., William L. Winter, and Mardi Valgemäe, eds., *Baltic History* (Columbus, 1974), pp. 170-2.

lacking any practical significance, but the manifesto did yield important results in the diplomatic arena. The German occupation made Estonia an international question, no longer just an internal Russian issue. Wanting to deny German hegemony, the British and French governments granted *de facto* recognition on 20 March. The future status of Estonia was to be decided at the peace conference in accordance with the principle of national self-determination.²⁷

Though the German occupation was a time of hardship for Estonians, without it they would never have been able to establish their own state. The Germans separated Estonia from Russia before the Bolsheviks had established their control over the entire country and thus prevented them from consolidating their power. The Bolshevik decision to evacuate to Petrograd rather than go underground meant that when the Germans withdrew in November 1918, the Estonian Provisional Government was in place and the Bolshevik challenge was external. Lenin's order to evacuate factories to Russia before the German troops arrived meant that the number of industrial workers in Tallinn in November 1918 was only ten per cent of what it had been a year earlier.²⁸ One pillar of Soviet power in Estonia, the Russian soldiers, sailors, and war industries' workers posted in Tallinn, was removed. Anger over the German occupation also influenced the Estonian political parties to radicalize their previously conceived programs for land reform which was to be a key factor in the Republic successfully competing with the Bolsheviks for the support of the masses.²⁹

The German authorities relinquished power to the Estonian Provisional Government headed by Päts on 19 November. A week later Bolshevik troops attacked Narva and reentered Estonian territory forcing the Provisional Government to declare mobilization. Few men, however, responded to the call to arms as the Estonian forces retreated. People were tired of war and economic deprivation, and the majority of the population initially lacked the faith that it was possible to win a confrontation with Russia.³⁰ Student volunteers were among the few who were initially willing to risk their lives for the patriotic cause. One of them was the 18 year old Artur Sirk, later the driving force of the Veterans' movement. Among the main organizers of the Estonian forces at this chaotic time

²⁷ Piip, *Tormine aasta*, p. 106.

²⁸ Vabadussõja Ajaloo Komitee, *Eesti Vabadussõda*, vol. 1, p. 164.

²⁹ Laaman, *Eesti iseseisvuse sünd*, p. 630.

³⁰ Heinrich Laretei, *Saatuse mängukanniks* (Lund, 1970), p. 101.

were the future leaders of the Veterans' League, Generals Andres Larka, Ernst Põdder, and Captain Johan Pitka.

At Narva on 29 November the Estonian Revolutionary Committee declared Estonia a soviet socialist republic, formally known as the Estonian Working Peoples' Commune (*Eesti Tööraha Kommuun*). During its brief existence, the Commune, headed by Jaan Anvelt, failed to gain any significant support among the populace. The Commune attempted to rush headlong to socialism faster than the Bolshevik leaders in Moscow. Its cardinal mistake was on the land question. Instead of satisfying the peasants' great hunger for land by dividing confiscated estates into individual farms, the Commune attempted to organize the land into collective farms.³¹ The Commune's assault on religion and the use of political terror were also counterproductive.³²

By 6 January 1919 the Red Army was only 30 km from Tallinn, and the Provisional Government's demise seemed imminent. The next day, however, an Estonian counterattack began which resulted in the clearing of the Red Army from Estonian territory by early February. A number of factors were crucial in saving the Provisional Government from disaster: the appointment of a Supreme Commander, General Johan Laidoner, and his decisive actions; aid from Finland in the form of matériel, loans, and volunteers; the arrival of a British naval squadron at Tallinn in mid-December.³³

Once the Bolshevik forces had been expelled from Estonian territory, it was decided to hold elections for an Estonian Constituent Assembly in order to demonstrate that the Republic, not the Commune, was carrying out the will of the people, and to gain international *de jure* recognition of the Republic's legitimacy. The results of the elections held in April 1919 showed that the key issue for the majority of the electorate was land. The parties which won the most seats, the Social Democrats and Labour, were those which favoured swift and radical land reform - the

³¹ *Revolutsioon, kodusõda ja välisriikide interventsioon Eestis, 1917-1920*, vol. 2 (Tallinn, 1982), p. 204.

³² Laaman, *Eesti iseseisvuse sünn*, p. 403.

³³ August Kasekamp, "Ülemjuhataja ja vastupealetung jaanuari esimesel poolel 1919. a.," in *Johan Laidoner. Mälestusi kaasaeglasilt* (Tallinn, 1934), pp. 134-40; Vabadussõja Ajaloo Komitee, *Eesti Vabadussõda*, vol. 1, p. 282; Seppo Zetterberg, *Suomi ja Viro 1917-1919. Poliittiset suhteet syksystä 1917 reunavaltio-politiikan alkuun*. Historiallisia Tutkimuksia 102 (Helsinki, 1977), ch. 5; Stanley W. Page, *The Formation of the Baltic States* (New York, 1970), p. 128; *Revolutsioon, kodusõda ja välisriikide interventsioon*, vol. 2, pp. 235, 249-50.

immediate liquidation of the estates through division of the land.³⁴ The quick resolution of the land question was of crucial importance for the successful conclusion of the war. Without the promise of a just redistribution of land it is unlikely that the common soldier at the front would have been motivated to risk his life for the Republic.³⁵ As an inducement, the government promised soldiers preferences in obtaining land and employment after the war.³⁶

Events in Latvia had great significance for Estonia. German troops had remained in Kurland under the provisions of article twelve of the Armistice. They were supplemented by *Freikorps* recruited in Germany with the promise of receiving land in Latvia. The Entente powers formally sanctioned the Baltic German *Landeswehr* and the Iron Division, which consisted of Reich Germans, in order to support the Latvian Provisional Government against Bolshevik forces. General Rüdiger von der Goltz, the commander of the Iron Division, however, envisioned a land connection between Germany and a White Russia, enabling the latter to support the former's defiance of the peace treaty imposed by the Entente.³⁷ The *Landeswehr* carried out a coup d'état against Karlis Ulmanis' Latvian Provisional Government in March 1919 and formed a puppet Latvian government. In May the Germans captured Riga from the Bolsheviks and began to advance northward. At the same time, Estonian forces, allied with the Ulmanis government, advanced southward deep into Latvian territory pursuing the retreating Bolsheviks. The Estonians and Germans met at Cesis (Wenden) in June, both sides demanding that the other withdraw. The Estonians suspected von der Goltz of wanting to occupy Estonia. Negotiations failed, and in the ensuing battle, Estonian and Latvian forces, commanded by General Pödder, routed the Germans. Consequently, the Germans had to abandon Riga, and Ulmanis government took control. The victory over those perceived as their

³⁴ Artur Mägi, "Asutav Kogu maareformi otsustamas," *Tulimuld*, no. 10, 1959, p. 305. The results of the Constituent Assembly elections were as follows: Social Democrats 41 seats, Labour 30, Populists 25, Agrarians 8, Socialist Revolutionaries 7, Christians 5, ethnic minorities 4, Artur Mägi, *Das Staatsleben Estlands während seiner Selbständigkeit. I. Das Regierungssystem* (Stockholm, 1967), p. 321.

³⁵ Evald Uustalu, *Eesti Vabariik 1918-1940* (Lund, 1968) p. 43.

³⁶ *Riigi Teataja* 42 - 1919, art. 89.

³⁷ John Hiden, *The Baltic States and Weimar Ostpolitik* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 17; Bernhard Sauer, "Vom 'Mythos eines ewigen Soldatentums': Der Feldzug deutscher Freikorps im Baltikum im Jahre 1919," *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 43 (1995), pp. 869-902.

oppressors of 700 years had great symbolic significance for the Estonians.³⁸

Reaching a peace settlement with Soviet Russia was complicated by the existence of the White Russian Northern Corps which consisted of a few thousand troops who had withdrawn into Estonia after the Red Army offensive in November 1918. When the Northern Corps was re-established on Russian soil east of Narva in the early summer of 1919, it was enlarged and renamed the North-Western Army under the command of General Nikolai Iudenich. Considerable friction existed between the White Russians and Estonians who resented the former's slogan "Russia, one and indivisible."³⁹ The White Russians short-sightedly refused to offer the border nations anything more than autonomy. Realizing that Estonian cooperation was necessary for an attempt to conquer Petrograd, but that the Estonians were not interested in the venture unless it resulted in the recognition of their independence, the British pressured the White Russians into forming a North-Western Government which half-heartedly recognized Estonian independence.⁴⁰ The Estonians supported Iudenich in the vain hope that the Allies would grant Estonia *de jure* recognition in return.⁴¹ When the retreating remnants of the North-Western Army crossed into Estonia after failing to capture Petrograd they were disarmed and interned.

With the defeat of Iudenich and the termination of Allied aid to Estonia, no obstacles remained in the way of concluding a peace with Soviet Russia. Failure to receive *de jure* recognition from the Allies or the White Russians helped drive the Estonians to a separate peace with Soviet Russia.⁴² The peace treaty (the Treaty of Tartu) signed on 2 February 1920, was territorially quite advantageous for Estonia.⁴³ All ethnically Estonian territory was included in the new republic as well as strategically valuable land east of the Narva river and part of the Pskov *guberniya*. The Allies persisted in their hope that the White Russians would defeat the Bolsheviks and were committed to preserving the territorial integrity of

³⁸ Hannes Walter, *Landeswehri sõjast, Riia operatsioonist, Võnnu lahingust* (Tallinn, 1989).

³⁹ Karsten Brüggemann, "Kooperation und Konfrontation: Estland im Kalkül der weißen Russen 1919," *Zeitschrift für Ostforschung* 43 (1994), pp. 541-2; Page, *Formation of the Baltic States*, p. 176.

⁴⁰ Brüggemann, "Kooperation und Konfrontation," pp. 545-7.

⁴¹ Page, *Formation of the Baltic States*, p. 180.

⁴² Uustalu, *Eesti Vabariik*, p. 57.

⁴³ Putting a positive gloss on military failure, Lenin stated that the Tartu peace treaty was of great historical significance since it broke the blockade of Soviet Russia and heralded the beginning of the end for intervention, Edgar Mattisen, *Tartu rahu* (Tallinn, 1989), pp. 24-5.

Russia, and therefore refused to grant *de jure* recognition to the Baltic States.⁴⁴ By the beginning of 1921 the British and the French had realized that there was no hope left for a White victory and therefore granted Estonia *de jure* recognition.

While the establishment of an independent Estonia was made possible by the profound changes in the international balance of power caused by the simultaneous collapse of Russia and Germany, Estonians were keenly aware that no state had been in favour of the formation of an independent Estonia. Thus they saw their own efforts and resolve as having been decisive. The War of Independence with its motifs of self-sacrifice, solidarity, and triumph over seemingly insurmountable odds provided the founding myth of the Republic and was central to the project of nation-building. The war was seen as the most glorious chapter of Estonian history and its heroes were respected and honoured. In the Thirties the Veterans' League would capitalize on their unquestionable patriotic credentials to build a powerful political movement.

⁴⁴ John M. Thompson, *Russia, Bolshevism, and the Versailles Treaty* (Princeton, 1966), p. 307; Royal Institute of International Affairs, *The Baltic States. A Survey of the Political and Economic Structure and the Foreign Relations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania* (Westport, Connecticut, 1970; first published London, 1938), p. 27.

CHAPTER 3

THE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

The constitution adopted by the Constituent Assembly in 1920 is often referred to as “ultrademocratic”, meaning that the executive branch of government was dependent on the powerful legislature. Its most peculiar feature was the absence of a head of state. The functions of the head of state were assumed by the *Riigivanem* (State Elder), the prime minister, who was chosen by the *Riigikogu* (State Assembly). The composition of the cabinet was established by the coalition partners in the *Riigikogu*, hence the *Riigivanem* could not dismiss or replace ministers at will.¹ Election by proportional representation led to a fragmentation of the political system, with at one point fourteen parties being represented in the *Riigikogu*. The formation of a coalition that could command a majority in the *Riigikogu* in practice required at least three parties.² This resulted in frequent government crises which led to the impression of instability. Between 1921 and 1934 the average life span of a cabinet was nine and a half months, and the formation of a new cabinet took on average three weeks.³ The situation in Estonia, however, was not notably worse than in neighbouring countries during this period: in Finland the average life of a cabinet (1919-1932) was just under eleven months and in Latvia (1919-1933) just over eleven months.⁴ Indeed, this record was slightly better than that of Weimar Germany or the French Third Republic during the same period.⁵

A noteworthy feature of the constitution which would have great consequences in the Thirties was the provision for popular initiative. The drafters of the constitution in the Constituent Assembly in their egalitarian idealism wished to emulate the model of Swiss-style direct democracy. This was reflected in the requirement for a referendum to be mandatory for any amendment of the constitution. Any group of citizens could submit a bill to the *Riigikogu*, provided they had collected 25 000 signatures to support their initiative. The *Riigikogu* had the choice of

¹ Mägi, *Das Staatsleben Estlands*, pp. 149-50.

² *Ibid.*, p. 180.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁴ Uustalu, *Eesti Vabariik*, p. 76.

⁵ Mägi, *Das Staatsleben Estlands*, p. 202.

passing the bill or putting it to a referendum.⁶ In practice, popular initiative proved to be a rather clumsy and time-consuming instrument that was ill-suited to influence the political process. In the first decade of the Republic, popular initiative was only used once.⁷ After the *Riigikogu* rejected a bill to reintroduce religious instruction in the schools in 1923, the Christian People's Party organized a popular initiative to force the *Riigikogu* to pass the bill, resulting in a vote repudiating the position of the *Riigikogu*.⁸ This forced new elections because of the unique provision in the Estonian constitution that stated if the people voted against a law passed by the *Riigikogu* or in favour of one rejected by it, the *Riigikogu* would have to dissolve itself and proclaim new elections.⁹

Table 1. Composition of the Constituent Assembly and *Riigikogu*¹⁰

| | 1919 | 1920 | 1923 | 1926 | 1929 | 1932 |
|-------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| <i>Agrarians</i> | | | | | | |
| Farmers | 8 | 21 | 23 | 23 | 24} | |
| Settlers | - | - | 4 | 14 | 14} | 42 |
| <i>Centre</i> | | | | | | |
| House owners | - | 1 | 2 | 2 | 3} | |
| Christians | 4 | 7 | 8 | 5 | 4} | |
| Populists | 25 | 10 | 8 | 8 | 9} | |
| Labour | 30 | 22 | 12 | 13 | 10} | 23 |
| <i>Left</i> | | | | | | |
| Socialists | 41 | 18 | 15 | 24 | 25 | 22 |
| Indep. Socialists | 7 | 11 | 5 | - | - | - |
| Communists | - | 5 | 10 | 6 | 6 | 5 |
| <i>Minorities</i> | | | | | | |
| Germans & Swedes | 3 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 |
| Russians | 1 | 1 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| <i>Others</i> | - | - | 6 | - | - | - |
| Number of Seats | 120 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| Number of Parties | 8 | 10 | 14 | 10 | 10 | 6 |

⁶ Matters of finance, war and peace, and treaties with foreign powers were excluded from popular initiative, § 34 of the Estonian constitution.

⁷ Mägi, *Das Staatsleben Estlands*, p. 249.

⁸ See the memoirs of the head of the popular initiative campaign, Christian People's Party leader Jaan Lattik, *Teekond läbi öö*, vol. 1 (Toronto, 1950), pp. 233-8.

⁹ § 32 of the Estonian constitution; Mägi, *Das Staatsleben Estlands*, p. 247.

¹⁰ Royal Institute of International Affairs, *The Baltic States*, p. 46; Mägi, *Kuidas valitseti Eestis* (Stockholm, 1951), p. 104.

Agrarian Parties

The most revolutionary social and economic development in independent Estonia was the land reform of 1919.¹¹ At the end of the Tsarist period 58% of the land had belonged to only 1149 large estates. The Republic expropriated nearly all the estate lands and created 55 104 new farms. The land reform affected two-thirds of the rural population and thus had far reaching political, social, and economic consequences.¹² The proclamation of land reform at the time of the War of Independence gained crucial support for the cause of independence while denying the Bolsheviks a potential source of appeal. In one stroke the hegemony of the Baltic Germans was overturned, and the predominately peasant society was transformed into a property owning one. Politically, the land reform initiated a steady shift to the right, away from the Socialists and Labour, the two parties which had been responsible for the land reform legislation in the Constituent Assembly.¹³

Ironically, the main political beneficiary was the Farmers' Party (*Põllumeeste kogud*) which had originally opposed the land reform proposals.¹⁴ The party's ideology attributed to the farmers the virtues of hard work, morality, faith, and patriotism, whereas the towns were held to be the carriers of unhealthy, corrupt, and decadent values, infected by unnatural and foreign influences. At a time when nearly three quarters of the population lived in rural areas, the individually owned family farm embodied the ideal of the nation's wealth produced by the small farmer.¹⁵ The party represented those farmers who had acquired their own land prior to independence. It was the staunchest defender of the principle of the inviolability of private property and thus attracted a considerable

¹¹ Anu-Mai Köll, *Peasants on the World Market. Agricultural Experience of Independent Estonia 1919-1939*, Studia Baltica Stockholmiensia 14 (Stockholm, 1994), pp. 40-57.

¹² Tiit Rosenberg, "Agrarfrage und Agrarreform in Estland 1919: Ursachen, Voraussetzungen und Folgen," *Proceedings of the Estonian Academy of Sciences* 43 (1994), p. 333.

¹³ Tõnu Parving, *The Collapse of Liberal Democracy and the Rise of Authoritarianism in Estonia*, Sage Professional Papers in Contemporary Political Sociology (London, 1975), pp. 24-5.

¹⁴ The Farmers' Party was formed in 1920 as a successor to the Rural Union (*Maarahva Liit*), Osvald Viirsoo, ed., *Eesti Põllumeeste poliitika. Ülevaade Eesti põllumeeste liikumisest 1917-1955* (Lund, 1956), pp. 59-68.

¹⁵ Toivo U. Raun, "Agrarian Parties in Interwar Estonia," unpublished paper presented at the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies conference at Toronto, 10-13 June 1992, p. 2. A condensed version of this paper is to be found in Toivo U. Raun, "Agraarparteidest Eestis 1917-1925," *Proceedings of the Estonian Academy of Sciences* 41 (1992), pp. 23-7.

portion of the urban bourgeoisie.¹⁶ In the early Twenties the party looked as if it might evolve into a conservative party, but the challenge of the newly established Settlers' Party ensured that the Farmers' refocused their efforts on their rural constituency.¹⁷ Thus a true conservative party never came into being in Estonia.

The land reform created a new class, the settlers or homesteaders, who by 1922 had begun to mobilize politically in order to advance their interests. The settlers were not satisfied with their original sponsors, the Labour Party which held to the idea of land leased from the state rather than private ownership, nor with the Farmers' Party position of paying compensation to estate owners for their expropriated land.¹⁸ Thus in 1923 the settlers began to participate in *Riigikogu* elections under their own banner, becoming the third largest party by 1926. The Settlers' Party, being an almost purely occupational interest lobby, lacked the ideological pretensions of the Farmers' Party. In differentiating themselves from the Farmers' Party, they portrayed the later as not truly representing those who toiled on the land, but as associated with business interests. They saw their position as analogous to that of Finnish Rural Union (*Maalaisliitto*) which they perceived as being centrist.¹⁹

Intense rivalry existed between the two agrarian parties. This rivalry extended beyond the purely political competition to control the processing of farm produce, the best examples being the dairies and slaughterhouses built with state loans. Typically, a dairy was managed by members of one agrarian party, causing members of the excluded party to establish another one nearby. Between 1923 and 1928 the number of dairies nearly trebled. In effect, two parallel networks were created which duplicated each other's tasks and made little economic sense. At the same time the boards of farming co-operatives also became politicized.²⁰

Yet despite their tense relations, the concerns of the two agrarian parties began to converge from 1925-26 onwards after the settlers were given the right of ownership to their land and they in turn acceded to the payment of compensation for expropriated land.²¹ It took the depression,

¹⁶ Hellmuth Weiss, "Bauernparteien in Estland," in Heinz Gollwitzer, ed., *Europäische Bauernparteien im 20. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 1977), p. 212.

¹⁷ Raun, "Agrarian Parties in Interwar Estonia," p. 3.

¹⁸ Toivo Jullinen, "Maaerakondade suhetest Eestis Jaan Tõnissoni valitsuse päevil (1927-1928)," in Jüri Ant, Eero Medijainen, and Ago Pajur, eds., *Tundmatu Eesti Vabariik* (Tallinn, 1993), p. 61.

¹⁹ Eduard Laaman, *Erakonnad Eestis* (Tartu, 1934), pp. 79-80.

²⁰ Jullinen, "Maaerakondade suhetest," pp. 66-8.

²¹ Raun, "Agrarian Parties," pp. 7-8; Jullinen, "Maaerakondade suhetest," p. 62.

however, to force the two parties to close ranks in order to defend the interests of the 'country' against the 'towns'. The two agrarian parties formed the United Agrarian Party (*Põllumeeste kogud ja põllumeeste, asunikkude ning väikemaapidajate koondis*) in January 1932 (three days before the National Centre Party was formed). In the 1932 *Riigikogu* elections the party fell eight seats short of the goal of an absolute majority set by their leader Karl Einbund. The marriage, however, was an uneasy one and soon split over the devaluation of the kroon in July 1933.²²

Parties of the Left

The Communists, having taken up arms against the Republic and setting up an alternative government, the Estonian Working People's Commune, which for most of its six months of existence was forced to operate outside Estonia, naturally could not participate in the Constituent Assembly elections.²³ After the signing of the Estonian-Soviet peace treaty in 1920, the Estonian Communist Party (ECP) was formed. Previously, it had simply been a section of the Russian Communist Party. Being committed to the overthrow the Republic and its incorporation into Soviet Russia, the ECP was an underground organization and its members were often prosecuted for conspiracy, espionage or other crimes. Nevertheless, the ECP took part in *Riigikogu* elections through the use of front organizations, such as the Central League of Tallinn Labour Unions (*Tallinna Ametiühisuste Keskuhisus*) in 1920. After the front was banned, the ECP created the Estonian Working People's United Front (*Eesti Tööraha Ühine Väerinne*) which managed to win over most labour unions.²⁴ In the 1923 elections the Front received 9.5% of the vote, which was especially impressive considering that the Front had been taken off the ballot in Tallinn and in some other areas of the country. Extrapolating from the results of the Tallinn municipal council elections that followed in which the Front received 36% of the vote, Parming suggests that the Front would have been the second largest party in the *Riigikogu*.²⁵

The growing support for the ECP, the economic crisis in Estonia and the mass trial of 149 Communists in November 1924 convinced the ECP

²² Laaman, *Erakonnad Eestis*, pp. 73, 79.

²³ Tõnu Parming, "The Pattern of Participation of the Estonian Communist Party in National Politics, 1918-1940," *Slavonic and East European Review* 59 (1981), p. 403.

²⁴ *Ülevaade Eestimaa Kommunistliku Partei ajaloost*, vol. 2 (Tallinn, 1963), pp. 62-3.

²⁵ Tõnu Parming, "The Electoral Achievements of the Communist Party in Estonia, 1920-1940," *Slavic Review* 42 (1983), p. 439.

leadership, with the prodding of Grigorii Zinoviev, the head of the Communist International, that the situation was ripe for revolution. In the early morning of 1 December 1924 key communications and military installations in the capital were seized by about 300 conspirators. The insurrection plan hinged on Tallinn workers rising up in support of the action, but as this did not occur the revolt was swiftly crushed.²⁶ The failure of the putsch attempt was a blow from which the ECP never recovered. Many of its leaders were arrested or killed and those, such as Jaan Anvelt, who managed to flee to the Soviet Union were later murdered in Stalin's purges. The putsch attempt left an indelible mark on Estonian political life. The immediate response was the formation of the only 'wall-to-wall' cabinet including members of all parties, the reestablishment of the *Kaitseliit* (civil guard), and the impetus for the first attempts at amending the constitution in order to establish a presidency. The coup attempt was also used as a powerful symbol in political discourse during the Thirties.

In the *Riigikogu* elections of 1926 and 1929 the ECP operated through a new front organization, the Estonian Workers' Party (*Eesti Töölise Partei*), and in 1932 through the Leftist Workers and Poor Peasants (*Pahempoolsed Töölised ja Kehvikud*). The steady improvement in economic conditions ensured that the ECP never received more than six seats in the *Riigikogu* elections. The Thirties were the low point for the ECP. At the beginning of the decade the ECP had roughly 150 members, but that number was continually diminished by arrests, recovering its previous level only after the amnesty of political prisoners in 1938.²⁷ The centres for the ECP's activities were of necessity abroad in the Soviet Union and Scandinavia. Thus, unlike other European countries where authoritarian regimes were erected during the Thirties, an internal communism threat did not play a significant role in Estonian politics.

The other party descended from the Russian Social Democrats was the Estonian Social Democratic Workers' Party (*Eesti Sotsiaaldemokraatlik Töölise Partei*). Initially, in 1917-18, it could not match the appeal of the Bolsheviks. It supported Estonian independence and to that end

²⁶ On the 1924 uprising see J. Saar, *Enamlaste riigipööre katse Tallinnas 1. detsembril 1924* (Tallinn, 1925); A. Neuberg, *Armed Insurrection* (London, 1970), pp. 61-80; A. Sunila, *1. detsember 1924* (Tallinn, 1974); Hain Rebas, "Probleme des kommunistischen Putschversuches in Tallinn am 1. Dezember 1924," *Annales societatis litterarum Estonicae in Svecia IX. 1980-1985* (Stockholm, 1985).

²⁷ Olaf Kuuli, "EKP arvuline koosseis ja kohalike parteiorganisatsioonide võrk aastail 1930-1940," in *Töid NLKP ajaloo alalt XIV* (Tartu, 1977), pp. 57-64.

cooperated with the bourgeois parties in the *Maapäev*. Its abandonment of a dogmatic Marxist approach to the land question in early 1919 was of crucial importance for the success of the Republic.²⁸ The Social Democrats became the largest party in the Constituent Assembly having received 33% of the vote. In this capacity, they were responsible for much of the progressive legislation which shaped the Republic. After peace was concluded in 1920, the party quit the government and went into opposition in accordance with the guidelines of the Second International which urged socialist parties not to prop up the bourgeois system.²⁹

In the first half of the Twenties the Social Democrats were in continuous retreat in the face of an onslaught by the extreme Left. The Independent Socialist Workers' Party (*Eesti Iseseisev Sotsialistlik Tööliste Partei*), successor to the Social Revolutionaries, received eleven seats in the 1920 elections while support for the Social Democrats tumbled.³⁰ The Independent Socialists advocated the line of the Communist International, but did not call for the overthrow of the Republic. Their cooperation with the Communists led to their organization being taken over by the latter in 1922.³¹ In response to the Communist putsch attempt in 1924 the Social Democrats briefly joined the government. The remnants of the Independent Socialists joined the Social Democrats in 1925 and the party was renamed the Estonian Socialist Workers' Party (*Eesti Sotsialistlik Tööliste Partei*).

The Socialists subsequently won back the positions they had lost to the Communists in the trade unions and in the *Riigikogu*. August Rei became *Riigivanem* for seven months in 1928-29, the only time the Socialists headed a government. The onset of the economic depression, however, intensified the disagreements which constantly racked the party. While the right wing of the party believed in the necessity of constructive cooperation with bourgeois parties in order to improve conditions for the working class, the left denounced them for helping postpone the imminent collapse of capitalism. The split finally came to a head at the February 1934 congress. Younger members, led by Nigol Andresen, dissatisfied with the executive's reformist course and lack of revolutionary

²⁸ Laaman, *Erakonnad Eestis*, p. 24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

³⁰ The best known leader of the Independent Socialists was the pathbreaking historian Hans Kruus (1891-1976).

³¹ Olaf Kuuli, "Sotsiaaldemokraadid ja Kommunistid Eesti Vabariigis," *Poliitika*, no. 10, 1990, pp. 61-3.

action, left the party.³²

Parties of the Centre

The Labour Party (*Tööerakond*) was a radical democratic party preaching non-Marxist evolutionary socialism, originally inspired by the Russian *Trudoviki*.³³ Nationalization of land and the redistribution of estate lands was at the heart of its program. Its great achievement was the enactment of land reform. The Labour Party's success in the first years of the Republic, however, led to the decline in its support. The new farmers or settlers whom they had championed formed their own party. From thirty seats in the Constituent Assembly Labour saw its support continually dwindle eventually down to one third of that number ten years later. The party perceived itself as the place where the intellectual and the 'little man' could work hand in hand. Among its supporters the party counted teachers, state officials, craftsmen, shop clerks. The party provided three *Riigivanem*: Otto Strandman (1919 and 1929-31), Prof. Ants Piip (1920-21) and Juhan Kukk (1922-23). In face of their declining support and the ascendancy of the agrarian parties, the Labour Party united with the Populist Party in January 1932 to form the National Centre Party (*Rahvuslik keskerakond*).³⁴

The Populist Party (*Rahvaerakond*) was the successor to the first Estonian political party, the Populist Progressive Party (*Rahvameelne eduerakond*), founded in 1905 and allied with the Cadets in the Russian *Duma*. More than any other party it was identified with one authoritative individual, Jaan Tõnisson, the preeminent leader of the national movement. Tõnisson declared his three ideological pillars to be 'nationalism, social justice, and liberalism.'³⁵ Though the party fought against narrow sectional and class interests, it was, nevertheless, primarily the representative of the urban middle class, though it also attracted some prosperous farmers from southern Estonia.³⁶ Being at the centre of the political spectrum, the Populists participated in nearly every government coalition. The party's regional base was centred in Tartu and its organ was the influential Tartu daily *Postimees* (The Courier) of which Tõnisson was

³² *Rahva Sõna*, 7 February 1934; Johannes Mihkelson, *Vastu tuult* (Stockholm, 1985), pp. 315-9.

³³ Mati Graf, *Poliitilised parteid Eestis 1917-1920* (Tallinn, 1982), p. 98.

³⁴ Laaman, *Erakonnad Eestis*, pp. 25-7, 41-5.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 46-8.

³⁶ Parming, *The Collapse of Liberal Democracy*, p. 22.

the proprietor.

A noteworthy feature of Estonia's political geography was that, in a sense, it had two capitals. Tallinn was the governmental, administrative and commercial centre, but Tartu was the cultural and intellectual heart of the country. As the largest Estonian city in the former province of Livland, Tartu was also the centre of southern Estonia. Tartu's claim to cultural superiority stemmed from its position as the seat of Estonia's only university. The term 'Tartu spirit' meant a free-thinking opposition to the governmental apparatus and materialism of the business world in Tallinn. The conflict was symbolized in the opposing concepts of *vaim* and *võim* (*Geist und Macht*). The reaction from Tallinn to the manifestations of the Tartu spirit was alternately bemusement and exasperation with the idealistic pretenses of the provincials.

From university days in Tartu came another element which played a considerable role in Estonian politics: fraternity affiliation. Derived from the German *Burschenschaften*, the fraternities were apolitical, but were nevertheless strongly conservative and nationalist in outlook. Most importantly, the fraternities served as an old boys network which provided jobs for graduates and smoothed the paths of their careers.³⁷ This was an increasingly important function because by the Thirties Estonia was producing an overabundance of university graduates.

The Christian People's Party (*Kristlik rahvaerakond*) represented the interests of the Lutheran church. The party's high point came in 1923 when its bill for state supported religious instruction in schools was approved by an overwhelming majority in a referendum.³⁸ Since this meant a defeat for the government, the *Riigikogu* was dissolved and new elections were held in which the Christian People's Party received eight seats, their highest number. The Lutheran church otherwise did not succeed in exerting much political influence and its attempts to do so were undermined by internal disputes. After several years of decline in their support, the Christian People's Party reunited with the Populist Party in 1931.³⁹

The Landlords or Houseowners' Party (*Majaomanikkude rühm*) stood for a libertarian agenda based on the sanctity of private property and

³⁷ The fraternities could lay claim to spheres of influence, e.g., *EÜS* dominated positions in the judiciary while *Rotalia* held sway over jobs in agricultural institutions, August Ots, *Mehed sündmuste kurvidel. Läbielamisi ja mälestusi* (Stockholm, 1976), p. 112.

³⁸ Lattik, *Teekond läbi öö*, vol 1, pp. 233-8.

³⁹ Laaman, *Erakonnad Eestis*, p. 52.

the reduction of government interference. It functioned, however, mainly as lobby group with most of its energy focused on obtaining the repeal of the rent law. However, their program also did call for the creation of a presidency. The party never received more than three seats in the *Riigikogu*, and in 1932 joined the National Centre Party, but split again after the devaluation of the kroon.⁴⁰

One of the largest organizations in interwar Estonia was the *Kaitseliit* (civil guard), established by the Provisional Government in November 1918. The *Kaitseliit*'s primary responsibility was internal security, but during the War of Independence it also performed other tasks assigned by the Supreme Commander of the Army for which the military lacked manpower. After the war, the *Kaitseliit* was disbanded, but was reestablished in response to the 1924 Communist putsch attempt. According to its statutes, the purpose of the *Kaitseliit* was "to assist the legal authorities in defending the constitutional order, state and public institutions and buildings, and to guarantee the security of citizens." Other functions included "deepening patriotic feelings in the citizenry", as well as providing military training to its members (ten days a year) and emergency assistance during natural disasters.⁴¹

At its peak in 1940, the *Kaitseliit* had 42 600 members plus 16 000 women's auxiliaries (*Naiskodukaitse*) and nearly 20 000 boys (*Noorkotkad*) and 20 000 girls (*Kodutütred*).⁴² The *Kaitseliit* was headed by an active service General, Johannes Roska (Orasmaa), and was organized territorially. The *Kaitseliit* enjoyed a respected status in Estonian society. Its social composition included members of all classes; unlike with the Finnish civil guard (*Suojeluskunta*), Socialists were not excluded from serving in the *Kaitseliit*. Though farm owners and their sons formed the largest single group (34.3%) and state employees (8.6%) figured prominently in the *Kaitseliit*, there was also some working class participation, i.e. farm labourers (7.0%) and factory workers (2.4%).⁴³ The success of the *Kaitseliit* can be accounted for by the fact that it was not

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁴¹ *Kaitseliidu põhikiri*, ERA, f. 1, n. 6, s. 8, lk. 74.

⁴² Uustalu, *Eesti Vabariik*, pp. 231-2.

⁴³ The social composition of the 32 600 men in the *Kaitseliit* in 1933 was the following: farm owners and their sons 34.3%, settlers 9.3%, state employees 8.6%, students 7.5%, farm labourers 7.0%, craftsmen 6.7%, shop clerks 4.2%, land renters 3.4%, local government employees 2.5%, factory workers 2.4%, businessmen 2.4%, day workers 2.3%, teachers 1.9%, landlords 1.4%, cottagers (*popsid*) 0.9%, industrialists 0.7%, others 4.5%; *Kaitse Kodu!* no. 11/12, 1933, p. 341.

simply an instrument of class domination and its resurrection in 1924 had been the result of popular reaction against the Comintern's attempt to destroy Estonian sovereignty.

Ethnic Minorities

The Republic of Estonia was a fairly homogeneous country with 88% of the population being ethnically Estonian.⁴⁴ The largest minority group, 8.5% of the population, was formed by the Russians. They were concentrated along the shores of Lake Peipus and in the eastern border areas of Petseri and trans-Narva acquired by the Treaty of Tartu in 1920.⁴⁵ White Russian refugees added to their numbers during and after the Russian Civil War.⁴⁶ The great majority of Russians were peasants, though some were merchants in Tallinn, Tartu and Narva. The small Swedish community, 0.7% of the population, consisted mainly of fishermen and peasants inhabiting the northwestern coast and islands. The Jews, of whom there were only about 4500 in Estonia, were predominantly urban and had no significant presence until the nineteenth century.⁴⁷

The ethnic group whose position was most affected by the establishment of independent Estonia were the Baltic Germans. They had been the political, social and economic elite for nearly seven centuries prior to 1917. Much of their wealth and status had been based on their ownership of estates which the state expropriated in 1919. Although they were not the most numerous minority in Estonia, they were the most significant. They remained influential in business and industry, e.g. Scheel's Bank was the largest private bank in Estonia,⁴⁸ though they were increasingly excluded from high positions in public life.

⁴⁴ According to the 1922 and 1934 censuses respectively, the ethnic composition of the population of Estonia in percentages was the following: Estonians 87.7, 88.2; Russians 8.2, 8.2; Germans 1.7, 1.5; Swedes 0.7, 0.7; Jews 0.4, 0.4; Others (mostly Latvians and Finns) 1.3, 1.0. H. Reiman, "Rahvused Eestis," *Eesti statistika kuukiri*, no. 164-5 (1935), pp. 353-5.

⁴⁵ For a study of Petseri in interwar Estonia see Toivo U. Raun, "The Petseri Region of the Republic of Estonia," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 39 (1991), pp. 514-32.

⁴⁶ The enormous cultural contribution made by the émigrés can be gleaned in Temira Pachmus, "Russian Culture in the Baltic States and Finland, 1920-1940," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 16 (1985), pp. 383-402.

⁴⁷ Emanuel Nodel, "Life and Death of Estonian Jewry," in Ziedonis, Winter, and Valgemäe, eds., *Baltic History*, pp. 227-36; Kopl Jokton, *Juutide Ajaloost Eestis* (Tartu, 1992; first published in Yiddish in 1926).

⁴⁸ Vesa Vasara, "Die deutschbaltische Minderheit in Estland in der Zwischenkriegszeit: Wirtschaft und Finanzen," *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropaforschung* 44 (1995), pp. 578-89.

The Estonian constitution guaranteed equal rights for all ethnic minorities, education in their mother tongue, and allowed them to establish their own autonomous social and cultural institutions. However, it took some years before a law on cultural autonomy was passed in the *Riigikogu*. In the debates on the issue, the Social Democrats and Tõnisson's Populist Party were its fiercest opponents, while the right-wing, led by Päts, supported the idea.⁴⁹ The principal author of "The Law on Cultural Self-Government and National Minorities" of 12 February 1925 was the Baltic German deputy Werner Hasselblatt. The law was inspired by the ideas of Austrian Socialists Otto Bauer and Karl Renner for a personal rather than a territorial solution.⁵⁰ Individuals determined their own national identity and those who enrolled their names in a nationality register elected a Cultural Council, the executive and legislative organ of the Cultural Self-Government.⁵¹ The Cultural Council was responsible for schools and cultural institutions and had the power to raise taxes from its members.⁵² Cultural autonomy in such a form was unprecedented at the time, and its success was internationally recognized as one of the greatest achievements of the Republic of Estonia.⁵³

Politically, the German minority was represented in the *Riigikogu* by the Baltic German Party (*Deutsch-Baltische Partei*), whose leader from 1925 was Axel de Vries, the editor-in-chief of the *Revaler Bote*. The Baltic German Party led the campaign for cultural autonomy. Having unsuccessfully opposed the land reform, the party fought for satisfactory compensation, even going so far as to petition the League of Nations.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Michael Garleff, *Deutschbaltische Politik zwischen den Weltkriegen. Die parlamentarische Tätigkeit der deutschbaltischen Parteien in Lettland und Estland* (Bonn-Bad Godesberg, 1976), pp. 107-9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 104; von Rauch, *The Baltic States*, pp. 140-1.

⁵¹ The German Cultural Council was established on 1 November 1925 and the Jewish Cultural Council on 6 June 1926. The Russians and Swedes had no need to establish their own cultural self-governments since they resided in compact territorial areas where they controlled the local governments already, Garleff, *Deutschbaltische Politik*, p. 113.

⁵² Karl Aun, "The Cultural Autonomy of National Minorities in Estonia," in *Yearbook of the Estonian Learned Society in America* 1 (New York, 1953), pp. 26-41.

⁵³ E.g., "Estonia has a well-earned reputation for the model treatment of her national minorities", Royal Institute of International Affairs, *The Baltic States*, p. 37; "Estonia's record in the treatment of minorities is generally regarded as one of the best in eastern Europe in the inter-war period," Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century*, p. 100.

⁵⁴ The Baltic Germans petitioned the League of Nations in 1926 for compensation for their expropriated estates. The League of Nations, however, rejected their appeal because the "agrarian reform constituted a social, and not a minority, question", Royal Institute of International Affairs, *The Baltic States*, p. 30.

The Swedes did not secure a seat in the *Riigikogu* until 1929 when the Swedish National League formed an electoral coalition with the Baltic German Party.⁵⁵ The Russians were less well organized politically than the other minorities, and as a consequence were underrepresented in the *Riigikogu*, never being able to win more than five seats. Many Russians voted for Estonian political parties, especially the Socialists.⁵⁶ The chief Russian political party was the Russian National Union, supported by the Orthodox church and Tallinn businessmen.⁵⁷ The Jewish minority was too small to ever have any representatives of its own in the *Riigikogu*. The community itself declined during the Thirties as the split between the Hebrew-speaking Zionists and Yiddish-speaking Jews became increasingly bitter.⁵⁸ The minority parties never played an important role in the *Riigikogu* and were never asked to participate in any cabinet. Nevertheless, they were quite active in the *Riigikogu* committees.⁵⁹

The relative ethnic homogeneity of the population undoubtedly contributed to Estonian magnanimity towards the national minorities. The success of the Estonian cultural autonomy policy and the low degree of inter-ethnic animosity was certainly an important factor in precluding the radical right from developing into a genuine fascist movement in the Thirties.

⁵⁵ The initiative to form an alliance came from the Baltic German Party which had been reduced to two seats in the 1926 *Riigikogu* elections and thus lost their eligibility to be recognized as a parliamentary faction. Prior to 1929, the Swedes had supported the Christian People's Party, apparently because many of the Swedish community's political activists were Lutheran pastors, Garleff, *Deutschbaltische Politik*, pp. 168-70.

⁵⁶ The Russian National Union's vote decreased by more than one-quarter between 1923 and 1929 largely because the Socialists ran Russian candidates in the Russian populated districts, *Ibid.*, p. 170.

⁵⁷ The Russian National Union's chief rival was the smaller left-wing League of Cultural Educational Associations, Laaman, *Erakonnad Eestis*, p. 85.

⁵⁸ Nodel, "Life and Death of Estonian Jewry," p. 233.

⁵⁹ Michael Garleff, "Ethnic Minorities in the Estonian and Latvian Parliaments: The Politics of Coalition," in V. Stanley Vardys and Romuald J. Misiunas, eds., *The Baltic States in Peace and War 1917-1945* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1978), pp. 89-90.

CHAPTER 4

THE ORIGINS OF THE VETERANS' LEAGUE AND THE ESTONIAN RADICAL RIGHT

Precursors

The first right-wing protest organization set up in independent Estonia was the *Eesti Walwe Liit* (Estonian Guardian League), founded in April 1920 by Admiral Johan Pitka, a charismatic war hero. Its stated goal was to ensure that Estonian citizens would enjoy "the rule of law". The *Walwe Liit* directed its energies towards ensuring that "all manner of deeds against the interests of the state and nation, such as defrauding the state and bribery etc., would be exposed and punished," and secondly, it would "engage into battle against all manner of state and societal abuses and defects."¹ The sense of disillusionment that reality did not conform with their ideals and high expectations is evident in their question, "Is the state in which we live the 'Republic of Estonia' which was supposed to be founded on justice and law?" The *Walwe Liit's* two prime targets of attack were political corruption and the Minister of Defense, General Jaan Soots. The *Walwe Liit* fiercely criticized Soots' policies of favouring professional officers (some of whom returned to Estonia only after the Peace Treaty with Soviet Russia or were not ethnically Estonian) over War of Independence veterans and of terminating the giving out of decorations to those who had distinguished themselves in the war.² Slanderous attacks against government agencies, however, soon led to the banning of the organization.³

In its place, Pitka created the *Rahvuslik-wabameelne partei* (National Liberal Party) which held its first congress on 17 March 1923. The National Liberal Party reiterated most of the themes of the *Walwe Liit* (i.e., the fight against political corruption and for the rights of war veterans). A significant addition was the demand for a directly elected head of state.⁴ Pitka's foreign policy outlook coincided with mainstream Estonian strategic thinking of the day: the closest possible ties with Finland, maintenance of

¹ *Walwe*, September 1921.

² *Ibid.*, 1 September, 20 October 1922.

³ Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 12.

⁴ The National Liberal Party program in *Eesti*, 14 April 1923.

good relations with Britain, creation of a wider Baltic entente, and the strengthening of the League of Nations. The National Liberals won four seats in the 1923 general elections, making a particularly strong showing in Tallinn. Pitka, however was left without a mandate. Embittered, he emigrated to Canada. The party did not survive the departure of its prime mover; it failed to win a single seat in the next *Riigikogu* elections.

While the ideological ancestry of the Veterans' League can be traced to Pitka's endeavors, its direct organizational predecessor was the *Eesti Demobiliseeritud Sõjaväelaste Liit* (Estonian Demobilized Soldiers' League). The EDSL was founded in Tartu on 8 February 1921 and its first national congress was held there on 8-9 May.⁵ Tartu remained the headquarters of the EDSL's leadership and the centre for its activities. Reserve Captain Heinrich Laretei, then a student, later a successful diplomat, was elected chairman.⁶ The goal the new organization set for itself was to ensure that the government fulfilled its promise made at the height of the War of Independence that veterans would be the first to receive land and positions.⁷ The EDSL also sought to "preserve the feeling of solidarity" of the War of Independence days.⁸

The EDSL expanded rapidly: by the Autumn it had over 100 chapters and by its second congress on 7-8 May 1922, 131 chapters, the greatest number being in Tartu county.⁹ At its zenith, the EDSL claimed to have 143 chapters and 44 000 members.¹⁰ At the beginning of 1922 the EDSL began publishing its own newspaper *Waba Eesti* (Free Estonia).

The problem faced by demobilized soldiers was that, although the government had promised them preference in acquiring land and employment, these decrees were in declarative form and did not provide a mechanism to implement this intention. The EDSL took a number of practical steps to prod the government into action. The first, undertaken with the support of the Ministry of Defense, was to compile a registry of those veterans who wanted land. Their survey established that 16 405

⁵ Eesti Riigiarhiiv (ERA), f. 4231, n. 1, s. 2, lk. 1. See Andres Kasekamp, "Eesti Demobiliseeritud Sõjaväelaste Liit," *Kleio: Ajaloo ajakiri* 9, 1994, pp. 42-3.

⁶ The rest of the leadership consisted of Deputy Chairman G. Hango, Secretary K. Pahk, and Treasurer L. Konnov. Another leading figure was reserve Captain August Nieländer, the director of the Tartu Music School, who discusses his involvement with the EDSL in his memoirs, *Taktikepi ja relvaga. Mälestusi* (Stockholm, 1982), pp. 150-1.

⁷ Decrees granting privileges to veterans can be found in *Riigi Teataja* 42 - 1919, art. 89 and 75/76 - 1920.

⁸ *Waba Eesti*, 2 January 1922.

⁹ ERA, f. 4231, n. 1, s. 1, lk. 4; *Waba Eesti*, 2 June 1922.

¹⁰ *Sõdur*, 46/47 (1926), p. 1015.

veterans were interested in obtaining land.¹¹ The EDSL also worked out a draft bill outlining the procedures for hiring civil servants and sanctions against those who failed to follow them. The *Riigikogu* commission, however, deemed this to be “too radical”.¹² The EDSL did not always run up against a stonewall of official indifference as it claimed. Since “a lot of grumbling” about jobs could be heard from the ranks of the EDSL, on 2 November 1921 the Army’s Chief of Staff ordered that the local EDSL chapter should be asked to provide a suitable candidate for any vacancies that arose.¹³

Appeals and petitions did not suffice to bring about governmental action. To achieve the desired results, the EDSL was ‘forced’ to take a greater step, namely, participation in the 1923 *Riigikogu* elections. The EDSL campaigned on a platform of fulfillment of promises to the veterans, elimination of excessive government agencies, knowledge of the state language by civil servants, elimination of corruption, an independent judiciary, rights of ownership for settlers of all natural resources found on their land, state employment insurance and an eight-hour work day.¹⁴

The EDSL received fewer than 6 000 votes in total and only one seat in the *Riigikogu*.¹⁵ The EDSL’s representative, Laretei, formed a bloc with the Settlers’ and Renters’ representatives in order to qualify for participation in parliamentary commissions.¹⁶ In the next elections in 1926 Laretei appeared on the Settlers’ Party list. At the end of 1923 the EDSL participated in local elections on joint lists with the Settlers in the countryside and the Renters in the towns.¹⁷ The EDSL’s lack of success was attributed by the leadership to a lack of campaign funds.¹⁸ There was, however, a least one other significant reason: Pitka’s National Liberal Party which succeed in winning four seats attracted the votes of many veterans.

By 1924 the EDSL had started to disintegrate. Involvement in politics had destroyed the EDSL’s unity, but the main reason was that its role was exhausted. *Waba Eesti* wrote: “Four years have passed since the war. The economic hardships which gave rise to the EDSL have abated . . . With the improvement in the economic situation the EDSL’s work has diminished,

¹¹ *Waba Eesti*, 2 January 1922.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2 June 1922.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2 January 1922.

¹⁴ ERA, f. 4231, n. 1, s. 2, lk. 143.

¹⁵ *II. Riigikogu valimised* (Tallinn, 1923).

¹⁶ Heinrich Laretei, *Saatuse mängukanniks. Mällu jäänud märkmeid* (Lund, 1970), p. 128.

¹⁷ *Waba Eesti*, 7 December 1923.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14 June 1923.

the EDSL's task has more or less lost its importance."¹⁹ Land reform had been accomplished, estates parceled out, and the employment problem was no longer acute. Since the EDSL's interests in many respects overlapped with those of settlers (a large number of demobilized soldiers being settlers), the establishment of the Settlers' Party and its rapid expansion impacted negatively on the EDSL.²⁰

Nevertheless, *Waba Eesti* argued that grounds still existed for the EDSL to continue since it had an idealistic purpose as well, namely, "propagating the necessity of defending the homeland and the military training of citizens."²¹ The argument was developed that "since our state is economically weak, the compulsory military service period too short to include modern technical innovations, and since we can not afford to maintain a large standing army . . . in the interest of cost-saving, part of the responsibility for the training of the defense force should be given to public organizations."²² This was the task foreseen for a reorganized EDSL to be renamed *Vabadussõjalaste Liit* (the War of Independence Veterans' League) which it was hoped would enjoy semi-official status.²³ An EDSL delegation introduced this plan to the Minister of Defense, Ado Anderkopp, in 1924 and asked him for financial support.²⁴ A few months later, the delegation was received by *Riigivanem* Friedrich Akel, who was supportive and pledged to find means for assistance.²⁵

In the Spring of 1924 a new charter stating the League's new goal, "To bring together Estonian veterans, soldiers, and citizens, on a democratic basis, to strengthen the idea of independent statehood, encourage patriotism, national consciousness and honour, to develop military training and devote all its energy to defend and advance free Estonia", was completed.²⁶ This new direction, however, came too late to save the EDSL. It had already begun to deteriorate rapidly since most of its members had overcome economic difficulties and post-war life had become a normalized. At the same time, it could be said that the new direction of the EDSL was premature. It was almost identical to the goal that Veterans' Central League would set for itself five years later, but by then the political

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1 February 1924.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 17 March 1922; Laaman, *Erakonnad Eestis*, pp. 53-4.

²¹ *Waba Eesti*, 1 February 1924.

²² *Ibid.*, 5 April 1924.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 23 February 1924.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 17 April 1924.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 17 April 1924.

situation in Estonia would have changed considerably and the ideas would prove to be quite popular.

In 1926 it was decided to terminate the EDSL. Its property was given over to local veterans' associations. Some chapters of the EDSL renamed themselves Veterans' Leagues and ratified the new charter, but these did not succeed in continuing to function and before long went out of existence.²⁷ At the beginning of the Thirties Veterans' League chapters were often founded by these same men, but continuity in the higher ranks of the central leadership was lacking.

Unlike the EDSL, the National Liberal Party did provide the Veterans' League with some of its future leaders: the hot-headed Pitka, war heroes Captains Jaan Klaar and Johannes Holland, but also one of the League's bitterest opponents, the liberal pastor Theodor Tallmeister.²⁸ Thus the political organizations and ideas of the early Twenties provided the framework expanded and elaborated on in the early Thirties by the Veterans' League. The EDSL provided the organizational form, an interest group of ex-combatants, while Pitka's *Walwe Liit* and National Liberal Party developed the political themes.²⁹

Organizational Development of the Veterans' League

The Tallinn *Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Liit* (Estonian War of Independence Veterans' League) (TEVL), founded as a successor to the defunct EDSL, had as its stated goal:

To assemble all veterans of the War of Independence who stand on the basis of democracy and independent statehood, to strengthen the idea of independence, duty and national consciousness, to preserve and spread that spirit, unity and friendship which governed in the days of the war, to propagate the worthy remembrance of the Estonian people's fight for liberty and the memory of fallen heroes, and dedicate all our strength for the welfare and defense of independent Estonia.³⁰

The TEVL held its first general meeting on 10 October 1926 and elected Captain August Tõnishof as chairman of the first executive and

²⁷ ERA, f. 3632, n. 1, s. 11, lk. 6.

²⁸ *Eesti*, 14 March 1924.

²⁹ Laaman, *Erakonnad Eestis*, p. 61; Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 13.

³⁰ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 124, lk. 1.

Artur Sirk as one of his two deputies.³¹ With the exception of Sirk, none of the members of the TEVL's first executive would later occupy any positions of importance.³² Evert, the secretary, was the only one who had previously been a leading figure in the EDSL. In the first two years of its existence the TEVL had modest ambitions, illustrated by the fact that its "baptism of fire" was on the question of whether to take over the EDSL's bar, inherited upon its liquidation. Since the bar was of ill-repute, the TEVL's executive made the unpopular decision to close it.³³ The first couple of years were dedicated to building up the organization, contacting veterans and persuading them to join the League. In 1928 the TEVL succeeded in recruiting a number of well-known senior officers: Generals Andres Larka, Ernst Põdder, Johannes Roska (Orasmaa), and Colonel Karl Parts.³⁴ Põdder was elected chairman of the TEVL.

The TEVL also took upon itself the task of organizing veterans across the country. Its representatives went to provincial towns to propagate the idea and soon veterans' leagues were formed in other towns.³⁵ In 1929 the TEVL launched a campaign to form a nation-wide veterans' organization to co-ordinate the activities of the local associations. The statutes for a new Estonian War of Independence Veterans' Central League (*Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Keskliit*) were drawn up by Sirk.³⁶

General Põdder, chairman of the TEVL, in his call for the establishment of the Central League appealed foremost to patriotism and idealism:

We have achieved independent statehood, but the internal struggle continues - the battle for economic and cultural independence. Here we must also win, we must free ourselves from foreign influences . . . The hard-won freedom must be defended otherwise it will slip out of our hands.³⁷

³¹ *Võitlus*, 28 November 1931.

³² The other members of the five man executive were Maasik and Taar, *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 124, lk. 1p.

³⁶ The Central League's stated aim was nearly identical to that of the TEVL: "To organize War of Independence veterans and to assemble all War of Independence veterans' organizations which are based on democracy and independent statehood, to help strengthen and renew in citizens the idea of independence, duty and national consciousness, to maintain and to spread that spirit which governed in the days of the War of Independence, to propagate the worthy remembrance of the Estonian people's fight for liberty and the memory of fallen heroes, and to assist in the consolidation of Estonian independence", ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 124, lk. 1p.

³⁷ ERA, f. 3632, n. 1, s. 9, lk. 14.

“The sacred flame in the soul of the people” could not be allowed to go out. He stressed that veterans must set a high example for Estonian youth. These “worthy national tasks” demanded that veterans unite. Põdder also appealed to their self-interest: the fulfillment of promises of land and preference in jobs given to the veterans during the war could be achieved only when they have formed a strong organization.

1929 was the year of the tenth anniversaries of most of the battles fought in the War of Independence, providing added impetus and publicity for the efforts of veterans to join together. The founding meeting of the Veterans’ Central League on 2 June 1929 was attended by representatives of Tallinn, Haapsalu, and Tapa Veterans’ Leagues. The first Veterans’ Central League national congress was held in Tallinn on 26 January 1930 and was attended by around 60 delegates representing 11 regional veterans’ leagues.³⁸ The congress elected an eight member executive of whom Roska, Põdder, Larka, Sirk, and Eduard Kubbo would be crucial figures in its further development.³⁹ The executive chose Larka as its chairman.

Most of the initial leading figures in the League were sons of peasants who made careers as officers in the Tsarist army. All were highly decorated veterans of the War of Independence.⁴⁰ The best known figure was General Ernst Põdder (b. 1879) who had a distinguished career in the Tsarist army serving as a company commander in the Russo-Japanese war and rising to regimental commander by the end of World War One. Põdder was one of the most-loved and popular leaders of the War of Independence who commanded the battle against the Baltic German *Landeswehr* in 1919, celebrated later as Victory Day, historic revenge for 700 years of German domination. Põdder later served as a member of the State Defense Council and was chairman of the Tallinn Veterans’ League from 1928 to 1931. The other active service General in the League was Johannes Roska (later Orasmaa) (b. 1890) who was an artillery battery commander during the War of Independence. From 1925 he served as head of the reorganized *Kaitseliit*, a post that gave him a high public profile.

³⁸ Sirk’s speech at the 17 December 1933 Veterans’ League congress, *Võitlus*, 19 December 1933; *Vabadussõjalaste sõna poliitilise momendi kohta*, cited by Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 18.

³⁹ The other members of the executive were Helmut Veem, J. Sepp (likely an error, probably Major Jaan Lepp), and Kont, ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 3, lk. 5.

⁴⁰ Biographical details below from *Eesti Vabadusristi kavalerid* (Stockholm, 1984; first published Tallinn, 1935); Fred Limberg, *Isamaa eest. Eesti Vabariigi sõjajõudude organisatsioon ja juhtkond* (Cardiff, 1980); *Eesti Biograafiline Leksikoni Täiendusköide* (Tartu, 1940).

The chairman of the League from its founding to its liquidation was Andres Larka, born in 1879 in Pilistvere parish, Viljandi county, son of a miller. He joined the Tsarist army in 1899, fought in the Russo-Japanese War as a junior lieutenant, and advanced to the rank of lieutenant-colonel in the First World War. Larka returned to Estonia at the end of 1917 and was appointed the first Minister of War in the Estonian Provisional Government on 24 February 1918. Promoted to the rank of General, he commanded the Estonian forces in the chaotic first days of the War of Independence until Laidoner returned to Estonia and was made Supreme Commander. Larka was appointed Deputy Minister of War, a post which he held until his retirement in 1925 because of ill health. Subsequently he operated a farm and flour mill at Saue near Tallinn. Though he was the most senior officer in the League, he was not one of the more popular leaders of the War of Independence, such as Põdder or Pitka. His character was austere and reserved, and he certainly lacked the charismatic personality typically associated with leaders of radical populist movements.

The charisma and dazzling oratorical skill which Larka lacked was more than made up for in the person of his deputy, Artur Sirk, born in 1900 in the village of Pruuna, Järva county, the son of a farmer. He fought as a volunteer in the War of Independence and rose to the rank of Junior Lieutenant. After demobilization he studied law at Tartu University. Sirk reenlisted in the army 1923-1926 while continuing his study of law. Upon graduation from the law faculty in 1926 he worked in Theodor Rõuk's law firm. Sirk was keenly interested in politics, being active in the Settlers' Party. Sirk's mentor, Theodor Rõuk (b. 1891) received a law degree from Warsaw University in 1915. During the War of Independence he served as head of the Tallinn *Kaitseliit*. After the war he worked as an assistant public prosecutor in Tallinn and briefly served as Minister of the Interior in Friedrich Akel's 1924 cabinet. After the collapse of the Akel government he left public service to establish a law practice.

The central figure of the Tartu Veterans' League and its chairman was Eduard Kubbo (b. 1887) who fought in the First World War as a company and battalion commander. In the War of Independence he served as a regimental commander and was promoted to Colonel. After the war he served as a deputy divisional commander until 1930 when he graduated from Tartu University law faculty and left the army to become a lawyer in Tartu. A leading figure of the Tallinn Veterans' League and its deputy chairman was Aleksander Seiman (b. 1886) who fought in the First

World War, rising to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He served as a regimental commander during the War of Independence and continued as a career officer until he went into the reserve in 1927.

The first Veterans' Central League congress concerned itself primarily with the economic well-being of the veterans, as can be seen by the number of resolutions (four out of nine) which dealt with their material interests.⁴¹ These resolutions were in essence a continuation of the demands first voiced by the Demobilized Soldiers' League in the early Twenties. The Veterans' League demanded that the government provide veterans with land and employment and that veterans must without exception be the first ones to receive land and jobs. Not only should veterans "not be dismissed or demoted" from their jobs, but veterans should also be given some higher positions occupied by non-participants in the War of Independence. These preferences for veterans needed to be "guaranteed by law and in practice." Other demands for the betterment of their material situation were an increase in veterans' pensions and better care for war invalids. A second group of resolutions dealt with according due respect and proper remembrance of their contribution to the establishment of the republic. These were a defense of the veterans' honour, criticism of the War of Independence memorial committee which the League claimed had not done its work and wasted its money, and a recommendation to the government that it should publish a history of the War of Independence. A third group of resolutions touched upon principles of organization, calling for "all veterans' organizations to unite under one central leadership", i.e. the Veterans' Central League, and also defining the League's relationship to the political parties: "the Veterans have been and in the future must also be completely neutral." Notably missing from the resolutions of the congress was any incursion into the realm of politics.

The steps taken by the League's central executive to carry out the resolutions of the first congress included presenting a draft bill on favouring the employment of veterans to *Riigivanem* Otto Strandman in Spring 1930. According to *Võitlus*, Strandman was in agreement with the principles. The proposal was then rewritten by the Ministry of Education and Social Affairs and presented to the government, but was rejected because it was "inadequately prepared".⁴² The League's efforts to resuscitate

⁴¹ Resolutions of the first League congress in *Võitlus*, 1 May 1931 (the first issue).

⁴² *Võitlus*, 1 August 1931.

the bill came to naught and the issue died in the wheels of bureaucracy. Nevertheless, the League continued to address memoranda to the government, and presented another draft bill on the employment of veterans to the *Riigivanem* in November 1931.⁴³ Having failed to receive any support from the government, the only practical measure the Tallinn Veterans' League succeeded in undertaking was the setting up of a job centre for its members.⁴⁴ The *Riigikogu*, however, did eventually take a step toward recognizing their grievances by passing a law on preferences for Liberty Cross holders in February 1933. This step only had significance for the small minority of the veterans who held this decoration (awarded for bravery or exceptional services), though almost all of the League leadership belonged to this elite.⁴⁵ This measure, however, came too late to appease the League which had blossomed into a powerful opposition movement.

The League had better results from its exertions on the issue of land allocation. The Ministry of Agriculture allowed a representative of the Tallinn Veterans' League to participate in the land distribution commission's meetings every Spring.⁴⁶ The ministry received 366 applications from veterans in 1930, a minority of which had come through the League. Seventy veterans were granted land and the Minister of Agriculture stated that in two or three years most of the applications could be satisfied.⁴⁷ The League conducted its own survey in November 1931 to find out how many veterans still wanted land or needed a job.⁴⁸ At the third League congress in March 1932, Sirk was able to report that "in general, the Ministry of Agriculture has tried to be accommodating", high praise from a man who made his name bashing government institutions.⁴⁹ That was the last time this question was taken up and by then it had long ceased to be of any significance. It had been the burning issue for the Demobilized Soldiers' League, but most veterans had received their grant of land by 1924.

The second League congress held on 22 March 1931 was significant for raising political issues for the first time, particularly the proposal for the amendment of the constitution which subsequently became the Veterans'

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 16 November 1931.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 17 September 1932.

⁴⁵ *Riigi Teataja* 19 - 1933, art. 132.

⁴⁶ *Võitlus*, 28 November 1931.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1 August 1931.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 2 November 1931.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 11 April 1932.

main demand.⁵⁰ The political themes which would dominate the future of the League were first introduced in two speeches by Pitka and Rõuk. Pitka's performance at the podium was a return not only from the political wilderness, but also from the actual wilderness, since he had gone to Canada to build a pioneer settlement after having failed to win a seat in the 1923 *Riigikogu* elections. At the congress, Pitka picked up where he had left off with the principal themes of his previous political ventures during the first half of the Twenties, the *Walwe Liit* and the National Liberal Party. Pitka painted an extremely negative picture of Estonia's economic development during the period of statehood, alleging that the wastefulness and corruption of the politicians and the parties were to blame for the country's troubles.⁵¹ His forceful speech was received well enough for him to be elected deputy chairman of the League. Rõuk placed the responsibility for the country's difficulties on a structural fault - the constitution's failure to provide a strong executive. To remedy the situation, he called for amendment of the constitution to strengthen the executive by creating a presidency.⁵² Thus for the first time, the question which would have fateful consequences for the League, as well as for the entire country, was broached. Rõuk's ideas were spelt out in the first two resolutions of the congress: 1) creation of a presidency 2) reduction of the *Riigikogu* to fifty deputies elected by personal mandates, not proportional representation. The third resolution addressed the deteriorating economic situation by calling for fiscal restraint, and the final resolution repeated the demands of the first congress for privileges for veterans, especially in government employment. A memorandum encapsulating these resolutions was presented to *Riigivanem* Päts.⁵³

In the Spring of 1931 after the second congress, General Roska of the central executive and General Põdder of the Tallinn Veterans' League executive resigned from their positions (though they remained members of the League) because of a Ministry of Defense circular prohibiting active service officers from holding positions in political parties.⁵⁴ In fact, such a law had existed for a number of years, but the government felt only at this

⁵⁰ The second congress elected a new executive consisting of Larka (chairman), Roska (deputy chairman), Pitka (2nd deputy chairman), V. Fiskar (secretary), Lepp (deputy secretary), Seiman (treasurer), Sirk (deputy treasurer), pastor Friedrich Stockholm (administrator), ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 124, lk. 3.

⁵¹ *Vabadussõjalaste sõna poliitilise momendi kohta*, cited in Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, pp. 24-5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 25-7.

⁵³ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 124, lk. 2p.

⁵⁴ *Võitlus*, 28 November 1931, 11 April 1932.

point in time that the definition of a political organization applied to the League. Põdder, who had been one of the most inspirational leaders of the League, had little left to contribute to the League as he lost his long battle with gangrene and died on 24 June 1932.⁵⁵

The third congress on 20 March 1932 made a significant decision with far-reaching consequences for the future development of the organization. An acrimonious argument erupted over whether to expand the membership to include non-veterans. Non-veterans were already supporting members but they had no vote. The proponents of the idea argued that it was necessary to enlarge the organization, especially by attracting younger members. A more cynical calculation might also have been the need to attract new members who would contribute financially.⁵⁶ A number of delegates argued against the resolution because to them it meant becoming actively involved in politics and diluting the League's exclusive character.⁵⁷ Most of these men belonged to the *Lahinguvendade klubi* (Battle Comrades' Club) founded by Pitka in 1931. Their five delegates, including Pitka, then the deputy chairman of the League, and William Tomingas, walked out of the congress and the League when they were defeated by an overwhelming majority (219 to 30).⁵⁸ Criticizing Pitka's group, Põdder wrote in *Võitlus* that "the Veterans are united by an idea, not by status . . . the Veterans' idea [according to Põdder, patriotism and the welfare of the nation] can be extolled even when no actual veterans are any longer alive." He argued against "making this idea the monopoly of individuals," asserting that "all persons sharing our views have a right to participate."⁵⁹ Supporting the decision to expand the membership, Seiman observed that only a fraction of the combatants in the war had actually been idealists who had volunteered for service.⁶⁰ The Battle Comrades' Club replied by sending a circular to all the League chapters urging them to avoid politics and to "remain the nation's conscience."⁶¹ A sore loser, Pitka became a vehement opponent of the League. During the referenda, Pitka and his Battle Comrades' Club vigorously fought against

⁵⁵ Limberg, *Isamaa eest*, p. 32.

⁵⁶ Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 77.

⁵⁷ Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, pp. 24-5.

⁵⁸ The congress re-elected the same executive minus those who had resigned because they were on active military service and those who walked out of the congress and chose Kubbo, Hans Leesment, Karl Podrätšk, Paul Telg, and B. Martin as new members, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 124, lk. 4.

⁵⁹ *Võitlus*, 11 April 1932.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ ERA, f. 3632, n. 1, s. 9, lk. 40-1.

the Veterans' constitutional proposal alleging that their proposed president would become a dictator.⁶² In his further political activities Pitka allied himself with the Centre Party against the League. However, through his aggressive rhetoric while deputy chairman of the League, Pitka had done much to set the radical tone and direction of the organization.⁶³

The resolutions of the third congress had a more specific political content than those of the previous congresses. It was clearly evident that the worsening economic situation and the deepening depression had made a strong impression on the delegates. The Veterans demanded the canceling of Estonian war debts, termination of compensation of the owners of expropriated estates who left the country and became German citizens, a cap on the salaries of directors of private companies subsidized by state credit, an end to state support for enterprises owned by political parties and "class undertakings", e.g., workers' sports clubs and theatres.

Regarding employment, on top of reiterating their long-standing demand that veterans should be given preference in the civil service, they also demanded that both spouses should not be employed in the civil service, the dismissal of those who had served in the Red Army, and that cuts in military personnel should be directed against those who transferred to the White Russian North-Western Army in 1919 to avoid having to fight the *Landeswehr* (i.e. primarily Baltic Germans). In addition, the Veterans condemned Marxist influences on the education of Estonian youth, and mandated the League's central executive to carry out the resolutions of the previous congress on constitutional reform.⁶⁴

It is often alleged that the League transformed itself into a political party at this point,⁶⁵ but that moment really came half a year later at the League's fourth congress on 27 November 1932.⁶⁶ Until then the League had been an umbrella organization which embraced men of varying political persuasions. The fourth congress, however, by deciding that League members could no longer belong to political parties, placed the

⁶² *Ibid.*, lk. 71-2.

⁶³ Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 91.

⁶⁴ ERA, f. 3632, n. 1, s. 9, lk. 42.

⁶⁵ Eduard Laaman, "Põhiseaduse kriisi arenemine 1928-1933," in *Rahvuskogu üldkoosoleku juhatus, Põhiseadus ja rahvuskogu* (Tallinn, 1937), p. 38; Olaf Kuuli, *Vapsidest Isamaaliiduni. Fasismi ja fasismivastase võitluse ajaloost kodanlikus Eestis* (Tallinn, 1976), p. 75.

⁶⁶ The executive elected at the fourth congress consisted of Larka (chairman), Sirk (deputy chairman), Kubbo, Rõuk, Seiman, Telg, Podrätsik, Martin, Oskar Luiga, Andres Raudsepp, Aleksander Vaher, Rudolf Joonits, Arnold Jaks, and Edgar Neggo, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 124, lk. 5p.

League unambiguously into the political arena. One of the League's deputy chairmen Colonel Dr. Hans Leesment (founder of the Estonian Red Cross) resigned, choosing to remain on the central committee of the Centre Party instead.⁶⁷

Other Radical Organizations

A protest movement which arose contemporaneously with the Veterans' League in the summer of 1930 was that of the farmers of Karksi, a fertile area in Southern Estonia that had been a cradle of the national awakening in the nineteenth century. Commentators soon dubbed this new movement the "Karksi Lapua" after the events occurring in Finland at the time. A threatened march on Tallinn to press their demands was a direct imitation of the Lapua-led farmers' march on Helsinki in July 1930.⁶⁸ The comparison with Lapua, however, was a superficial one. Karksi was closer to the other Finnish protest movement of that period, the so-called "crisis movements" of farmers, and had little in common with the anti-communist reaction of Lapua. Its demands centred on economic relief, lowering of the interest rate, provision of long-term credit, implementing tariffs on all imported grains, reduction of the state expenditures by halving the number of deputies in the *Riigikogu*, cutting civil servants' wages, and the elimination of state pensions.⁶⁹ To ensure the fulfillment of their goals, they also demanded the creation of a presidency. The movement remained a regional one, failing to find support nationally, and was shunned by both agrarian parties, the Farmers and the Settlers, who feared the establishment of a new rival agrarian party.⁷⁰

The Veterans' League was not the only nationalist organization propagating amendment of the constitution. The Tallinn Patriotic Association (*Tallinna Isamaalik Ühing*) founded on 14 April 1932 had as its primary goal the establishment of a strong presidency. It was banned by the Minister of the Interior on 1 December 1932 because material in their organ *Isamaa* (Fatherland) "threatened public order and peace," but was succeeded shortly by a national organization, the Estonian Patriotic Association (*Eesti Isamaalik Ühing*).⁷¹ The Association's constitutional amendment proposal

⁶⁷ *Võitlus*, 3 December 1932.

⁶⁸ *Vaba Maa*, 18 July 1930.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 1 August 1930.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 3 May 1933.

⁷¹ *Postimees*, 14 January 1933.

was similar to that of the Veterans, but went even further by calling for the reduction of the *Riigikogu* to 25 deputies and the creation of a permanent anti-corruption commission.⁷² It even criticized the League for not moving fast enough in organizing a referendum on constitutional amendment. The Association called on the Veterans in the Spring of 1932 to create an inter-organizational co-ordinating body to administer the campaign for the constitutional referendum.⁷³ The Association saw itself as a partner of the League, but this view was not reciprocated. Sirk and the League received their suggestions for co-operation politely at first, but soon came to ignore this marginal organization.⁷⁴

A more respectable society, with a distinctly intellectual bent, was the Estonian Nationalist Club (*Eesti Rahvuslaste Klubi*) founded in Tartu on 31 March 1931.⁷⁵ By the beginning of 1933 the Club had 126 members.⁷⁶ Nationalist Clubs were formed in other cities as well and that year an Association of Nationalist Clubs (*Eesti Rahvuslaste Klubide Liit*) was established. The two leading figures of the Club were both lecturers at Tartu University: Edgar Kant, later rector of the university during the German occupation, and Ernst Ein, briefly Minister of the Interior in October 1933. Of all Estonian political figures, Ein was the only one to have first-hand experience of Italian fascism, having studied Roman law in Italy.⁷⁷

The Club was the only nationalist organization to have worked out a national ideology and a program for its propagation. The Veterans never defined such a program, but undoubtedly theirs would have been quite similar and therefore the Club's is worth examining. The "world-historical" mission of the Estonian nation, as defined by the Club, was the development of a culture corresponding to the Estonian spirit and character and the dissemination of this culture to Estonian kinspeople (i.e. the Finno-Ugrians), creating a greater Estonian cultural space which would enrich mankind. This program was predicated on a strong independent state with an economic order and system of government ensuring social justice and the well-being of the Estonian nation. Individuals and classes would be required to subordinate their activities to the interests of the nation. The propagation of Estonian nationalism rested on three pillars:

⁷² *Isamaa*, 23 April 1932.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 28 May 1932.

⁷⁴ *Võitlus*, 26 November 1932, 25 February 1933; ERA, f. 416, n. 3, s. 3, lk. 15, 30.

⁷⁵ ERA, f. 2698, n. 1, s. 1, lk. 1.

⁷⁶ ERA, f. 2698, n. 1, s. 1, lk. 30.

⁷⁷ *Eesti Biograafiline Leksikoni Täiendusköide*, p. 51.

“the awakening and deepening of national consciousness, national solidarity, and national duty.” The first goal, to convince the people of the necessity of the existence of the Estonian nation, reveals the yet fragile and underdeveloped nature of Estonian national identity. To combat the sense of inferiority and smallness, stress was to be laid on the great capabilities of the Estonian nation, the Estonianization of names, and a national interpretation of Estonian history, as well as combating any tendencies towards germanization or russification. Constructing a sense of solidarity meant instilling the idea of the nation as an organic, integral unit and the concept of national duty which required cooperation among individuals and classes in serving the nation.⁷⁸

Not surprisingly, the Club became heavily involved in the politics of the constitutional debate.⁷⁹ The Club proposed its own constitutional amendment, worked out by Ein. It not only provided for a strong president, but also sought to introduce corporatist institutions. Two innovations in the Club’s project were an economic council to increase the state’s involvement in the economic life and a cultural council to stimulate the development of national spirit.⁸⁰ The Club sought to work together with the Veterans for this aim, but the League suspected that the Club was under the influence of the Centre Party, while the Club was annoyed that the League ignored their proposals.⁸¹ The Club ended up nominating Päts for president in 1934 and was able to continue its existence under his authoritarian regime.

The only organization which claimed to be fascist was the Estonian National Fascists’ Assembly (*Eesti Rahvusfasistide Kogu*), but it remained extremely obscure and insignificant. Joosep Meibaum, its leader until he was expelled by the executive council because of his “dictatorial ambitions” in January 1933,⁸² was closely involved with the Veterans. Meibaum was the author of two exposés of political corruption under the pen name of Meig which were widely distributed by the League.⁸³ These were often used by Veterans’ agitators as source books for details on the alleged degeneration of public life. Because of the libelous claims contained in

⁷⁸ *Eesti rahvusliku ideoloogia põhimõttelised alused*, ERA, f. 2698, n. 1, s. 1, lk. 43.

⁷⁹ See Valter Nõges, *Ettepanekuid Eesti Vabariigi 1920.a. põhiseaduse muutmiseks*. Eesti Rahvuslaste Klubi toimetised nr. 1 (Tartu, 1932).

⁸⁰ ERA, f. 2698, n. 1, s. 2, lk. 27-8.

⁸¹ ERA, f. 2698, n. 1, s. 2, lk. 34; *Võitlus*, 25 April 1933.

⁸² *Herold*, 15 January 1933.

⁸³ J. Meig, *Meie elu raskused, nende põhjused ja kõrvaldamise võimalused* (Tartu, 1932); *Põlevaist nähtusist meie elus: Meie olukorra paremale järjele tõstmise küsimuste selgitamiseks* (Tartu, 1933).

them, the books were banned and Meibaum was imprisoned for two months.⁸⁴ Meibaum later resurfaced as a chief conspirator in the alleged plot to assassinate Päts and Laidoner in 1935. For his role in the so-called “Veterans-terrorists” conspiracy, he was sentenced to six years imprisonment.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ The books were banned by the Tartu-Võru criminal court in November 1933 and January 1934 and Meibaum was imprisoned in October 1934, ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 3, lk. 25.

⁸⁵ ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 11, lk. 6-11.

CHAPTER 5

THE CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDA

Within a space of little over a year, from August 1932 to October 1933, Estonians voted three times in referenda on the question of fundamental constitutional reform. It was the issue of constitutional reform that brought the Veterans to the fore and almost propelled them into power. The use of popular initiative allowed an extra-parliamentary group to achieve an extraordinary amount of influence on the course of events. This period witnessed unprecedented political activity and instability which shook the republic to its foundations and led to the greatest crisis of its existence, resulting in the demise of democracy and the establishment of an authoritarian regime.

The yearning for strong government, or in the Veterans' folksy phrase, *peremees majja* (to put a master in the house), was not a new phenomenon, but was undoubtedly fuelled by economic crisis. The world-wide depression first made its full force felt in Estonia in September 1931 when Britain left the gold standard, which led to a catastrophic fall in the foreign exchange reserves of the Bank of Estonia, held in sterling.¹ This resulted in a sharp decline in the value of Estonian goods in foreign markets.² The economic difficulties were compounded when Britain and Germany, Estonia's two chief trading partners, placed restrictions on their imports from Estonia. The value of Estonian exports fell by nearly two-thirds between the 1929 and 1932.³ The principal consequences felt by Estonians were a sharp rise in unemployment,⁴ growth in farmers' indebtedness, and a drop in the state's revenue, resulting in the reduction of expenditure in the public sector.⁵ In response to this dire situation, demands were made for the devaluation of the Estonian currency, the kroon. The value of the kroon would become an extremely divisive issue in Estonian public life, pitting different groups in society against each

¹ Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA), *The Baltic States*, pp. 143-4, 171-2.

² The chief Estonian exports were timber, butter, flax, paper-making materials, and textiles, Eesti Pank, *Eesti majandus 1935 a. Eesti Panga aastaraamat* (Tallinn, 1936), p. 87.

³ In the same period the value of imports was reduced by 70% which meant the Estonia was able to maintain a favourable balance of trade, *Ibid.*, p. 82; RIIA, *The Baltic States*, p. 155.

⁴ The twelve month average of registered unemployed rose from 3 600 in 1930 to 9 000 in 1933, Eesti Pank, *Eesti majandus 1935 a.*, pp. 33, 73.

⁵ RIIA, *The Baltic States*, pp. 145, 176-8.

other. The government's inability to respond effectively to economic distress led to the emergence of constitutional reform as the panacea.⁶

Amendment of the Constitution

The Veterans were not first to demand the amendment of the constitution and the creation of a presidency. The cause of constitutional reform was championed by two of the largest parties, the Farmers and the Populists and their leaders, Päts and Tõnisson, the two most senior Estonian statesmen (also the only obvious candidates for president). Päts had been the most persistent critic of the 1920 constitution and had first raised the question of reform in the wake of the failed communist putsch in December 1924. Päts and the Farmers' Party presented a proposal to the *Riigikogu* for the amendment of the constitution in 1926 which contained as its most significant feature a directly elected president. At that point, however, none of the other parties were convinced of the need for such a change. The momentum for constitutional reform began to build in 1929 when the Farmers once again presented their proposed amendments to the government and the Populist Party followed suit with a similar proposal a few months later in 1930. The main feature of these were the introduction of a presidency along Finnish and German lines and the reduction of the number of deputies in the *Riigikogu*. These proposals, however, received an unenthusiastic response from the other parties.⁷

A good example of the type of criticism levelled at the 1920 constitution is General Laidoner's comment in a 1929 *Kaja* interview:

as a result of our revolutionary spirit and our lack of practical experience, we created a poor constitution, worse than ones elsewhere. It is not the composition of the *Riigikogu* which is at fault, but our constitution in which we made the *Riigikogu* the all-powerful ruler. A hundred-headed council with unlimited authority cannot govern any state well. We did not wish to create another authority which would act as a balance against the *Riigikogu's* power. The executive authority, i.e., the government, be it right- or left-wing, is the plaything of the parties in the *Riigikogu* and it has no chance to realize any long-term program before it is brought down.⁸

⁶ Rein Marandi, "Riigivõimu tasakaalu otsingul. Põhiseaduse parandamisepüüdlused Eestis 1929-1933," *Mana* 56 (1987), p. 18.

⁷ Laaman, *Konstantin Päts*, pp. 219-21.

⁸ *Kaja*, 10 March 1929, quoted in Gustav Utuste, "Kindral Laidoner ja põhiseadus," in *Johan*

The first step in the process of constitutional reform was initiated by the Farmers' Party in November 1930, when it presented a bill to change the procedure for amending the constitution. For a referendum on the amendment of the constitution to be successful, the consent of a majority of all registered voters was required. The Farmers' bill lowered this hurdle by reducing the requirement to only a simple majority of those who cast a vote. The *Riigikogu* committee responsible for preparing the bill, however, was unable to attain a consensus on the issue.⁹

It was at this point that the Veterans were first brought into the constitutional debate. According to Laaman, Päts and Tõnisson (then *Riigivanem* and Foreign Minister) approached the senior active service officers of the League, Generals Põdder and Roska, shortly before the League's second congress in March 1931 to enlist their support for their own amendment plans which had stalled in the *Riigikogu*.¹⁰ It was hardly a coincidence that the demand for constitutional reform was first raised at the League's congress by Rõuk who was a close personal friend of Päts.¹¹ On a more general level, measures aimed at buttressing the authority of the state were entirely consistent with the Veterans' patriotic goal of strengthening the state which they had fought to create.

The Veterans, having decided at their congress to push for constitutional reform, also realized the crucial importance of lowering the quorum as a prerequisite for successfully reaching their goal. Seeing that the Farmers' Party initiative had stalled and was in danger of failing, the League joined the campaign to lower the quorum. Thus, the Veterans' first foray into the political arena was the proposal submitted to the *Riigikogu* by Sirk and Larka on 24 April 1931, almost identical to the bill submitted by the Farmers' Party some five months earlier, that only a simple majority of those who cast a vote should be required.¹² The League's threat of popular initiative should the bill fail, prodded the committee into action. The *Riigikogu* passed the Farmers' bill, but as a compromise added a clause making voting mandatory, thus considerably offsetting the intent of the original proposal.¹³

After the success of their first effort in the political arena, the

Laidoner. *Mälestusi kaasaeglasilt* (Tallinn, 1934), p. 398.

⁹ Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 48.

¹⁰ Laaman, *Konstantin Päts*, p. 222.

¹¹ Marandi, "Riigivõimu tasakaalu otsingul," p. 25.

¹² *Võitlus*, 1 May 1931.

¹³ *Riigi Teataja* 50 - 1931, art. 380; Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 49.

Veterans attempted informally to sound out the *Riigikogu* parties as to whether they were willing to work for the amendment of the constitution, but since that was “without results” the League sent a letter on 26 June 1931 to the political parties requesting them to state their position on the question of amendment of the constitution: 1) Is it necessary? 2) Do they support the principles put forward by the League for constitutional change?¹⁴ Replies were received from the Farmers, Populists, Christians, Landlords, and Socialists. The Farmers were the most positive, stating that they “favour and support all initiatives which help to achieve the above-mentioned goal” and pointing out that they had already taken steps to amend the constitution. The Populists sent the League a copy of their own constitutional amendment proposal. Favourable replies were also received from the Landlords and the Christians.¹⁵ Only the Socialists were against the amendment of the constitution, arguing that “during the present economic crisis steps should not be taken which would call forth sharp arguments and instability” and quoting the opinion of legal scholars who found that there was no necessity to change the constitution.¹⁶ The next issue of *Võitlus* (16 September 1931) published the full texts of the Populists’ and Farmers’ constitutional amendment proposals.

The League’s letter probably influenced the formation of an unofficial inter-party commission to discuss amendment of the constitution convened by the Farmers’ Party in the beginning of July.¹⁷ A working group, headed by Tartu University law professor Jüri Uluots, a member of the Farmers’ Party, was chosen to draft an amendment proposal, using the Farmers’ and Populists’ proposals as a basis. All the parties with the exception of the Socialists, Communists and the Russian minority accepted the need for changing the constitution. The Socialists, nevertheless, participated in the commission’s work in order to ensure that the bill was as much to their liking as possible.¹⁸

Impatient with the slow pace of the commission’s work, the League sent a second memorandum to the *Riigikogu* parties in December 1931, asking whether they desired a referendum to be held before the

¹⁴ *Võitlus*, 1 August 1931.

¹⁵ The Christian People’s Party, however, did not support the replacement of the system of proportional election, evidently because they feared for the future prospects of their small party, *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ An overview of the process which led to the drafting of the *Riigikogu*’s constitutional amendment bill is provided by Jüri Uluots, the chief author of the bill, in his presentation to the *Riigikogu* on 18 March 1932, *Riigikogu IV kooseis täielikud protokollid*, pp. 3877-78.

¹⁸ August Rei, 22 March 1932, *Riigikogu protokollid*, p. 3962.

convocation of the new *Riigikogu* and if so, whether they were willing to take the lead in steering the required legislation through the *Riigikogu*. Coupled with these questions was the threat that if the replies were negative, then the Veterans would be “forced to take the initiative into their own hands.”¹⁹ Both the Farmers and Populists regarded it as a “pressing” matter and pointed out that they had started the process and were willing to take the lead in enacting legislation together with others, but only the Populists stated that it should be addressed before the mandate of the present *Riigikogu* expired. The other parties to reply were the German-Swedish Party and the Labour Party, both of whom favoured constitutional change, but did not think that it could be carried out before the next *Riigikogu* convened nor were they willing to take the initiative upon themselves.²⁰ Having received these replies, the League set a deadline of 20 January for evidence that these words would become deeds.²¹ After the deadline had passed without any signs of action, the League’s executive ran out of patience and on 26 January decided to forge ahead with their own amendment proposal.²²

This pressure from the Veterans evidently had some effect in speeding up the process since a few days later the result of the commission’s work was finally presented to the leadership of the *Riigikogu*. Päts remarked privately to Laidoner and Laaman that “pressure from the Veterans was the only thing which made the party representatives hurry up with the constitutional bill. Only when they presented their deadline did the parties achieve an agreement.”²³ The *Riigikogu* then elected an official constitutional amendment committee, again headed by Uluots, to prepare a bill. In his presentation of the bill to the *Riigikogu* on 18 March, Uluots was remarkably unenthusiastic about the product of his own labour. Indeed, he defended the 1920 constitution which he believed had demonstrated itself as being “strong and flexible enough and suitable for its purpose”²⁴ According to Uluots, the need for a constitutional amendment bill had only arisen in response to a great deal of public criticism, and a referendum enabling the people to have their say would help resolve the issue. As for the specific benefits of the bill, Uluots offered only one: the people would enjoy “a greater possibility of

¹⁹ *Võitlus*, 21 December 1931.

²⁰ *Vaba Maa*, 22 December 1931; *Võitlus*, 11 January 1932.

²¹ *Võitlus*, 11 January 1932.

²² *Ibid.*, 29 January 1932.

²³ Laaman’s diary, 17 August 1932, ERA, f. 827, n. 1, s. 1a.

²⁴ Jüri Uluots, 18 March 1932, *Riigikogu protokollid*, p. 3879.

controlling their representatives" because they would have two representatives - the president and the *Riigikogu* - instead of one, and this innovation would bring more "flexibility" into the system.²⁵

Debate in the *Riigikogu* on the bill did not evoke much interest among the deputies. Those who spoke most passionately on the issue were the Socialist leaders August Rei and Karl Ast who opposed any change. Rei found no reasons for altering the constitution and alleged that the reform plans were "simply cheap demagoguery" intended to entice voters at election time.²⁶ Nevertheless, the *Riigikogu* passed the bill on 24 March and a referendum was scheduled for August. The amendment's most important features were the creation of a presidency and the reduction of the number of *Riigikogu* deputies from one hundred to eighty. The Farmers' and Populists' proposals had called for fifty and sixty deputies respectively, but the committee feared that too many deputies might vote against the reform package if their numbers would be too drastically reduced, and that with any less than the eighty deputies the *Riigikogu* might have difficulty in performing all its duties.²⁷

The Veterans were not pleased with the *Riigikogu's* bill. An acerbic article in *Võitlus* entitled "The political parties' game of deceit" complained that "simply tacking on a president to the old system is as good as nothing" and protested that the League's "most important demand" - "the majority election principle" - was not incorporated into the amendment.²⁸

May 1932 saw the fifth *Riigikogu* elections of interwar Estonia. The League did not participate because it was not yet prepared to enter the fray and realized that it would likely fail to obtain more than a couple of seats; the disastrous foray of the Demobilized Soldiers' League in the 1923 elections also served as a warning. Furthermore, as an extra-parliamentary pressure group they could influence the course of events through popular initiative without compromising their freedom of action. The Veterans therefore adopted an attitude of studied indifference to the elections. In answering the question of whom to vote for, *Võitlus* complained that there was no one to vote for: "we cannot elect a living individual, we vote only for something, we choose something, a so-called

²⁵ *Ibid*, p. 3890.

²⁶ August Rei, 22 March 1932, *Ibid*, p. 3961.

²⁷ Jüri Uluots, 18 March 1932, *Ibid*, pp. 3882-83.

²⁸ *Võitlus*, 11 April 1932.

party.”²⁹ The Socialists and Farmers’ Party were both condemned for waging a class struggle pitting town against country, and the Centre Party which claimed to represent national interests was derided for “not realizing what those national interests are.” *Võitlus*’ verdict on the election campaign was that it was nothing more than “hollow phrasemaking.”³⁰

The results of the elections altered the complexion of *Riigikogu* only slightly. The United Agrarians and the Russian minority party both gained a few seats at the expense of the Centre Party and the Socialists.³¹ This *Riigikogu* was to experience the sharpest of crises, and the greatest turnover of cabinets, four in a space of two years. The new government was formed by Karl Einbund, the man behind the unification of the two agrarian parties, and also supported by the Centre Party, thus the same coalition as the previous Teemant cabinet which had to make way for the elections. The formation of a new cabinet was made difficult by contention over the question of whether to uphold or devalue the currency, an issue which would continue to heat up political passions for the following year.³²

The Summer of 1932 was a period of great activity for the League, and the time when it first came to attract widespread public attention. A series of open-air rallies of Veterans were held all over the country. The exact nature of these mass meetings was ambivalent. On the one hand these were reunions of old comrades, on the other, a series of political rallies. On the whole, these occasions were perceived by the public at large more as general patriotic manifestations honouring the Veterans for their role in the struggle for independence, rather than demonstrations supporting the League’s constitutional politics. The first, the largest, and most significant of these was the Northern-Estonian Day held at the railway junction town of Tapa on 17 July. Nearly 2000 Veterans, together with their families, 3700 people, descended on Tapa, the largest group of whom travelled from Tallinn by special train.³³ At an assembly point near the station the men were organized into columns and military parade

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15 May 1932.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 31 May 1932.

³¹ As a result of the mergers in January 1932 of the Farmers and Settlers into the United Agrarians and of the Populists, Christians and Labour into the Centre Party, the *Riigikogu* was reduced to six parties. The composition of the fifth *Riigikogu* was as follows: United Agrarians 42, Centre Party 23, Socialists 22, Communists 5, Russians 5, German-Swedish Party 3, Mägi, *Das Staatsleben Estlands*, p. 321.

³² *Vaba Maa*, 21 July 1932.

³³ *Võitlus*, 23 July 1932.

formation. The townspeople greeted them with flowers as they marched to the cemetery where wreaths were laid at the War of Independence memorial. Accompanied by several brass bands, they paraded through the flag-bedecked town where they were reviewed by Larka, the mayor of Tapa, and Colonel Karl Tallo, the commander of the armoured train regiment stationed there. They then marched on to Männiku hill where they heard speeches by Paul Telg on the League's opposition to the *Riigikogu's* constitutional amendment and by Sirk, who blasted the political parties which he held responsible for economic decline, corruption and fragmentation of the nation. The remainder of the program entailed a visit to the armoured train regiment stationed at Tapa, and an open-air party in the evening. By all accounts it was a day full of genuine enthusiasm and emotion for both the Veterans and the townspeople.³⁴

The success of the Northern-Estonian Day, however, was marred by uninvited guests, the fifty men of the Socialist gymnastics groups, including "several heavyweight wrestlers and accomplished sportsmen" who had come in several lorries from Tallinn.³⁵ These "disciplined workers" were instructed by their leader, Socialist *Riigikogu* Deputy Erich Joonas, to disrupt the meeting and to create a negative mood against the League.³⁶ A fracas broke out during Sirk's speech as Socialist hecklers were driven away by Veterans. The brawl involved the Socialist *Riigikogu* deputy Eduard Pesur and resulted in the arrest of two Socialists.³⁷ Though the Socialists were forced to retreat and the responsibility for the instigation of violence lay with them, they achieved their aim by ensuring that the event received negatively coloured press coverage. Not only did the headline in the Socialist organ *Rahva Sõna* scream "Civil war threatened at Tapa. Dress rehearsal for a bloodbath", but most other newspapers also reported the sensational "battle of Tapa" in juicy headlines.³⁸ Comparisons were made with events in Finland, and fears were expressed of political violence in Estonia á la Lapua, especially as that night, in retaliation, a trade union headquarters in Narva was trashed.³⁹ These fears, however, proved unfounded as the Veterans' Southern-Estonian Day held at Valga two weeks later passed without incident with

³⁴ *Päevaleht*, 18, 19 July 1932; *Võitlus*, 23 July 1932; *Maaleht*, 21 July 1932.

³⁵ Mihkelson, *Vastu tuult*, p. 235.

³⁶ *Rahva Sõna*, 20 July 1932; Mihkelson, *Vastu tuult*, p. 235.

³⁷ The brawl and its circumstances are described in the memoirs of one of the chief protagonists on the Socialist side, Johannes Mihkelson, *Vastu tuult*, pp. 237-8.

³⁸ *Rahva Sõna*, 19 July 1932.

³⁹ *Päevaleht*, 20 July 1932.

1000 Veterans participating, joined by fifty Latvian veterans from across the border in Valka.⁴⁰ These rallies, the last of which, Western-Estonian Day held at Pärnu with 2000 Veterans in attendance, took place on 14 August in the midst of the referendum,⁴¹ served as an effective campaign to propagate and publicize the Veterans' opposition the *Riigikogu's* constitutional amendment bill.

A month before the referendum scheduled for 13-15 August, leaders of the Centre Party attempted to convince the Veterans to drop their objections to the bill. Sirk, Larka, and ex-naval Captain Jaan Klaar were invited to Defense Minister August Kerem's office where they had a meeting with Tõnisson (then Foreign Minister) and *Riigikogu* deputy Mihkel Juhkam. Sirk, however, was not prepared to compromise; he insisted that first past-the-post elections had to be included in the package of constitutional reform. Juhkam rebuffed Sirk by stating that the country was not yet ready for that.⁴²

While the Veterans and the Socialists both campaigned vigorously against the proposed amendment, none of the parties responsible for the bill made any special effort to convince the voters of the utility of the amendment. The result of the referendum was extremely close: 333 979 (49.2%) in favour, 345 215 (50.8%) against. Had a few thousand voters changed their minds, all the political troubles which rocked the Estonian state might never have occurred, and the League might have remained simply an ex-combatants' association.

A Second Attempt

A few days after the defeat of the *Riigikogu's* proposal, Päts came out with his own personal proposal for amendment of the constitution which he circulated confidentially. According to Laaman, Finnish President Svinhufvud's visit to Päts in the summer had blown wind in the sails of the latter's constitutional reform ideas. Päts had a great affinity with Svinhufvud and very much valued his opinion that "the weakness of the new states was the absence of an upper chamber."⁴³ According to Päts' plan, a bicameral *Rahvuskogu* (National Assembly) would be elected to draft a new constitution following Päts' guidelines of a directly elected

⁴⁰ *Võitlus*, 6 August 1932.

⁴¹ *Vaba Maa*, 16 August 1932; *Võitlus*, 20 August 1932.

⁴² *Vaba Maa*, 16 July 1932.

⁴³ Laaman's diary, 14 October 1932, ERA, f. 827, n. 1, s. 1a.

president, a reduction in the number of deputies, and personal mandates.⁴⁴ Päts obviously aimed at winning the support of the Veterans by including fully twelve representatives of the Order of the Liberty Cross in the upper chamber of his planned *Rahvuskogu*.⁴⁵ He asked Laidoner to appeal to the Veterans for “honest conduct” in the matter of constitutional reform. Laidoner agreed with Päts that pressure by the Veterans would be quite effective, and went on to say that “if the Veterans were to demonstrate at the Toompea [the seat of the *Riigikogu* and government] then everyone there would soil their breeches.”⁴⁶ Laidoner, however, judged that the public mood was not right for a new attempt, and suggested waiting “until the tension grows and brings it [constitutional reform] back onto the agenda.” Prophetically he added that “the problem, however, is that our tensions could grow too great for our present state apparatus to contain.” The Director of the Police Friedrich Kuusekänd warned Päts that talk of a new attempt to reform the constitution has “the effect of poison on the public mood.”⁴⁷ Päts presented his proposal to the League’s leadership through his friend Rõuk, but it immediately met with an unfavourable response.⁴⁸ Päts’ bicameral scheme found no support even among his closest political associates. It was out of touch with the political reality of the day, but would nevertheless be put into practice five years later.

On 3 October Einbund’s cabinet fell after the Centre Party withdrew its ministers because it disagreed with the government’s economic policies, specifically those which favoured the farmers to the detriment of other sectors.⁴⁹ Einbund’s cabinet had only lasted two and a half months, and the crisis which followed was one of the most prolonged in the Republic’s history. The economic crisis and the sharp divisions over the currency caused great difficulties in forming a government. Kalbus, Einbund, Teemant, Päts, Konik, Einbund for a second time, and Uluots all in turn attempted, but failed to form a new cabinet.⁵⁰ This bickering

⁴⁴ Text of Päts’ proposal in Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, pp. 39–41.

⁴⁵ Almost all the leaders of the League were cavaliers of the Liberty Cross. The first sentence of the preamble of the document is also a blatant attempt to enlist the support of the Veterans - “The constitution of the Republic of Estonia was drafted in the Constituent Assembly elected during wartime and in which the founders of our state - the *vabadussõjalased* [soldiers] - could not participate.”

⁴⁶ Laaman’s diary, 17 August 1932, ERA, f. 827, n. 1, s. 1a.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 14 October 1932.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 18 August 1932.

⁴⁹ Policies such as the government subsidies on rye, butter and milk prices, and the farm debt moratorium law, *Vaba Maa*, 5 October 1933.

⁵⁰ *Eesti kroonika* 1932, p. 29.

further reduced the prestige of the *Riigikogu* and the parties in the eyes of the public. This gave the League the opportunity to look statesmanlike, with its calls for national interests above factional ones. A new cabinet was finally formed by Päts on 1 November, a month after the previous government resigned. Unlike previous cabinets, the ministers had been chosen by Päts personally rather than as a result of bargaining between coalition partners, the United Agrarians, the Socialists, and the Centre Party. The *Riigikogu* granted the government extraordinary powers to combat the economic depression and maintain the value of the currency. Päts immediately set about implementing unpopular measures: reducing the salaries of civil servants, increasing taxes on industry, increasing income tax, and appointing a commissioner to regulate prices to counter inflationary tendencies which the new taxes might foster.⁵¹

The prolonged cabinet crisis, already the third of that year, and the patent ineptitude of the parties in all likelihood provided the catalyst for the Veterans to finally come out with their own constitutional amendment bill.⁵² Though it had been on the agenda since the League's second congress in March the previous year and the third congress had given the central executive the go ahead to produce a proposal, nothing had been done. Even after the August referendum Sirk had told the press that the League's next steps would not be alone, but in cooperation with the non-Marxist parties, and the League's proposal would not diverge from the Farmers' and Populists' original demands.⁵³ Thus, it came as somewhat of a surprise when the League presented its constitutional amendment proposal to the *Riigikogu* executive on 10 November 1932.⁵⁴

The central principle of the League's proposal was the creation of a strong presidency and a corresponding reduction in the powers of the *Riigikogu*. The president (*Riigivanem*) would be directly elected for a term of five years and would be able to appoint and dismiss the government. The cabinet would be responsible to the *Riigikogu* as well as to the president. The proposal granted the president the use of a suspensive veto, the right to issue laws by decree in the case of "immediate state necessity" and the right to dissolve the *Riigikogu* before the end of its four year term.⁵⁵ The *Riigikogu* would be reduced to fifty deputies.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁵² Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, pp. 214-5.

⁵³ *Vaba Maa*, 18 August 1932.

⁵⁴ *Võitlus*, 12 November 1932.

⁵⁵ The ambivalently worded § 53 was open to conflicting interpretations, leading several commentators to allege that it gave the president an absolute veto (e.g., Mägi, *Das*

Though the Veterans had consistently demanded first past-the-post elections, in their proposal they settled for *Riigikogu* deputies being chosen by proportional representation, “though allowing the elector to vote for individuals.”⁵⁶ First past-the-post elections might have eliminated the fragmentation of the *Riigikogu* into many parties, but the League evidently compromised on its demand because it was afraid that the determined opposition of the parties to that one point might doom its entire proposal.⁵⁷ The *Riigikogu* deputies had a vested interest in maintaining such a system as election of an individual rather than a party list would certainly have resulted in many deputies losing their seats. At the same time this would have presumably benefited the Veterans’ leaders, many of whom were popular war heroes, but who would not have made it into the *Riigikogu* at the bottom end of a party list. First past-the-post elections would also presumably have led to the domination of the rural-based Farmers’ Party which the other parties feared.

The proposal faced a barrage of hostile criticism from political opponents and constitutional experts, who alleged that it was quickly slapped together by incompetents and contained a number of internal contradictions.⁵⁸ It was attacked primarily for diverging from previous proposals by giving the president near dictatorial powers. However, as Marandi demonstrates, though the League’s proposal was hurriedly written by non-experts and its wording was imprecise, it did not depart greatly from preceding discourse, but was closely modelled on the Soots-Kukk proposal, i.e., the original proposal drafted by the *Riigikogu*’s unofficial constitutional committee in January 1932.⁵⁹ The intention behind the League’s proposal was democratic, not dictatorial - extensive powers were given to the president to counteract cabinet instability and to chastise the parties, not to smooth the League’s way to power. At this point in time that was not even a remote possibility and the Veterans did not have an obvious presidential candidate of their own.⁶⁰

On 4 January 1933 the *Riigikogu* executive gave conditional approval for the League to proceed. For the Veterans’ proposal to be put to

Staatsleben Estlands, p. 271), but Marandi demonstrates that the League’s intention must be understood as a suspensive veto, Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 195.

⁵⁶ § 36; Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, pp. 183, 190.

⁵⁷ Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 184.

⁵⁸ Though uttered later, the best known characterization is Päts’ quip about the League’s proposal being “written down on a knee”, Laaman, *Konstantin Päts*, p. 229.

⁵⁹ Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, pp. 211-3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

a referendum 25 000 signatures were required to be collected. By the 28 February deadline the League had managed to collect over twice the required number.⁶¹ However, while the Veterans were preparing to present their proposal, the *Riigikogu* moved swiftly to preempt them. On 22 November 1932 the *Riigikogu* elected a committee to prepare a new constitutional amendment proposal. The committee's bill was presented to the *Riigikogu* on 14 January 1933 and passed on 14 February.⁶² Jaan Soots (Farmers' Party) of the *Riigikogu*'s constitutional committee explained the rationale for pressing ahead with a second constitutional amendment bill after the failure of the first. He claimed that since a strong public demand existed for amendment of the constitution, then the *Riigikogu* was the "appropriate institution to provide the people with a bill." But, as Soots noted, the League was collecting signatures for its own rival proposal. Comparing these two proposals, he stated that they were of "one and the same type", both having the creation of a presidency as its central feature. He argued that "if the *Riigikogu* does not provide the proposal which could draw the majority of the people to its side, then it will force those who favour amendment of the constitution to vote for the other proposal" and it would not be "appropriate to the prestige of the *Riigikogu*" if it did not take a position on the issue and left it "to be resolved outside the *Riigikogu*."⁶³

The Socialists remained adamantly opposed to any amendment of the constitution, stubbornly insisting on interpreting the results of the referendum as a "no" to any change. Karl Ast refuted the claim that broad strata of society had demonstrated their desire for change. The only proposals heard by the *Riigikogu* constitutional amendment committee, of which he was member, had been from the League and the Nationalist Club, both of which he deemed to be fascist. Ast claimed that amendment of the constitution was not an end in itself for the Veterans, but a first step towards following the path of Hitler.⁶⁴ The view of the Communist deputies was that constitutional amendment was deemed "necessary for the suppression of the interests of the working class."⁶⁵ The Russian minority representatives were also against the reduction of the number of deputies and the restriction of the authority of the *Riigikogu* by the

⁶¹ *Postimees*, 5 January 1933; *Vaba Maa*, 1 March 1933.

⁶² *Postimees*, 16 February 1933.

⁶³ Jaan Soots, 24 January 1933, *Riigikogu V koosseis täielikud protokollid*, p. 483.

⁶⁴ Karl Ast, *Ibid.*, pp. 445-47, 474.

⁶⁵ Priidik Kroos, *Ibid.*, p. 457.

establishment of a presidency because they felt that this would reduce their influence. The leader of the Russian minority party, Ivan Gorshkov, flatly stated that the only reason the *Riigikogu* was rushing ahead with a second constitutional amendment bill was “to get ahead” of the League.⁶⁶

In the meantime, however, on 21 February the *Riigikogu*, in an obvious attempt to place obstacles in the path of the Veterans, had altered the provisions of the law on referenda to stipulate that if a constitutional amendment bill were accepted in a referendum then another proposal could not be voted on until one year later.⁶⁷ And in a blatant attempt to smooth the path of its new proposal, the *Riigikogu* abolished mandatory voting, and replaced it instead with a new provision requiring only 30% of registered voters for a referendum.⁶⁸

The Veterans were highly critical of the *Riigikogu*'s new proposal which, they alleged, was a product of panic on the part of the parties, hurriedly produced in order to preempt the League's proposal and having the purpose of a “smokescreen” that would “continue to ensure political corruption”.⁶⁹ The main item singled out for criticism was the continued maintenance of one hundred *Riigikogu* deputies, claimed by the League to be an excessive drain on the state's treasury. The Veterans also objected to the proposed method of the election of deputies which did not guarantee the election of individual candidates other than by party list. The League alleged that a president whose decisions would be valid only with the countersignature of the prime minister or the responsible minister would be “bound hand and foot by the tethers of the parties”, unable to undertake anything against their wishes, a “puppet of the parties who must dance to their string pullers.” The Veterans also criticized the provisions which allowed the *Riigikogu* to change the constitution without resort to a referendum, and potentially made the supreme court open to political influence. Rather than curtailing the *Riigikogu*'s powers in relation to the people, the League claimed that the new proposal would actually expand its power and would make it “impossible for the people to get the political parasites off their backs in the future.” The fate of the Estonian people, should the second *Riigikogu* proposal be enacted, was illustrated by a cartoon in *Võitlus* which pictured a sturdy Estonian farmer harnessed by

⁶⁶ Ivan Gorshkov, *Ibid*, p. 459.

⁶⁷ *Riigi Teataja* 71 - 1933, art. 133.

⁶⁸ *Postimees*, 23 February 1933.

⁶⁹ *Arvustavaid märkusi erakondade uue põhiseaduse kava kohta, missugune riigikogu poolt 14.II.1933.a. vastu võeti ning rahvahääletusele otsustati panna*, ERA, f. 3632, n. 1, s. 4, lk. 37-44.

the 'S' of the constitution to a cart in which the politicians rode.⁷⁰

April and May witnessed a further prolonged cabinet crisis after the Centre Party withdrew its ministers from Päts' cabinet.⁷¹ The crisis led to the split in the ranks of the United Agrarians. Seventeen members of the Farmers' wing led by Päts quit the unified party and resumed their activities under the Farmers' Party banner. Eight deputies from the Farmers' Party led by Einbund remained in the United Agrarian Party, which in effect reverted to the Settlers' Party.⁷² Successive attempts to form a government were made by Tõnisson, Einbund, Uluots, Einbund again, Rei, Päts, Kerem, Einbund once again before Tõnisson, the initiator of the crisis, finally succeeded on 18 May in constructing a cabinet supported by the Centre and the remaining United Agrarians.⁷³ During the seemingly interminable cabinet crisis some urged the Veterans to use the opportunity to enter the government. *Võitlus*, however, retorted that the League would not let itself be provoked and be equated with the political parties.⁷⁴ Like its predecessor, the Tõnisson cabinet was to last only five months, but those months would be full of high political drama.

On 1 June *Riigivanem* Tõnisson gave a speech in the *Vanemuine* concert hall in Tartu. Members of the local Veterans' League and other opponents of the government were out in force to try to disrupt Tõnisson's speech with heckling and throwing of firecrackers. The noisy demonstrations continued outside as Tõnisson left the building.⁷⁵ Several rowdy protesters, some of whom were associated with the League, were arrested. Such disrespect for a *Riigivanem* was unprecedented, and the demonstration must have infuriated Tõnisson all the more for having taken place in his own hometown and power base. In response, Tõnisson decided to crack down on the League. On the following day the government declared a state of emergency in Tartu county and on 3 June the Minister of Justice and the Interior ordered the closure of the Tartu county Veterans' League because its activities "threatened public safety and peace."⁷⁶

⁷⁰ *Võitlus*, 10 June 1933.

⁷¹ *Postimees*, 27 April 1933.

⁷² Laaman, *Erakonnad Eestis*, pp. 73, 79.

⁷³ *Eesti kroonika* 1933, p. 19; *Postimees*, 19 May 1933.

⁷⁴ *Võitlus*, 11 May 1933.

⁷⁵ *Postimees*, 3 June 1933; Arno Raag, *Kõuepilvede saatel* (Lund, 1971), p.162.

⁷⁶ *Postimees*, 7 June 1933. The Minister of the Interior's decision of 3 June by which the Tartu Veterans' League was closed was later annulled by the Supreme Court (*Riigikohtu*) on 6 October on the grounds that insufficient evidence existed to prove that the Tartu Veterans' League as an organization had planned the public disorder, *Vaba Maa*, 7 October 1933.

The referendum on the *Riigikogu's* second constitutional amendment bill held on 10-12 June resulted in an overwhelming defeat for the *Riigikogu* proposal, 161 595 (32.7%) in favour, 333 107 (67.3%) against. The League hailed the result as its victory over the *Riigikogu*. *Võitlus* declared that "The parties' game is over. They have been beaten by the Estonian people."⁷⁷ It interpreted the result to mean that "the people condemned the entire political party system" and that "the government and *Riigikogu* should be dissolved since they clearly lack the trust of the people." *Võitlus* went even further, claiming that "the people have given their trust to the new movement." While there was certainly a good deal of truth in the assertion that voters were dissatisfied with the politicians, and the Tõnisson government in particular, the claim that they gave their support to the League was a gross exaggeration. The magnitude of the defeat was at least partly due to the lack of support of the Farmers' Party, which chose not to campaign actively in favour of the proposal because it could not forgive Tõnisson's recent toppling of the Päts cabinet.⁷⁸

The Veterans' Referendum

Two weeks after the referendum, the most divisive political issue in Estonia over the previous year, the question of whether to maintain or devalue the *kroon*, came to a head. In an acrimonious late-night vote, the Centre Party and the Settlers, against the fierce opposition of the Farmers and Socialists, narrowly carried the motion in favour of devaluation. The Veterans had deftly managed to play both sides of the question without being pinned down to an unambiguous position of its own.⁷⁹

Devaluation laid the foundation for the recovery of the economy, though the benefits were only reaped later by the Päts regime, but in the immediate aftermath it was a source of considerable bitterness.⁸⁰

Support for the government was further eroded in July when it was revealed that two old War of Independence era warships (Estonia's only two) had been sold to Peru. This transaction came as a complete surprise to the public and caused an uproar of bitter criticism. The story received extensive front page coverage by the opposition newspapers and by *Võitlus*

⁷⁷ *Võitlus*, 15 June 1933.

⁷⁸ Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 227.

⁷⁹ "Halvasti hoiti - veel halvemini langetati [Poorly maintained, even more poorly devalued]," *Võitlus*, 1 July 1933.

⁸⁰ *Kaja*, 1, 2, 6 July 1933 etc.

which ran screaming headlines suggesting that Estonia was now left practically defenseless.⁸¹ The sharp tone of criticism in the press, particularly in *Võitlus* and in the Farmers' organ *Kaja*, eager to get back at Tõnisson for devaluation of the currency, pushed Tõnisson to respond.

On 11 August, the government, under intensifying attack from the *Riigikogu* opposition and from the increasingly confident Veterans, unexpectedly decided to take firm action to stem the rising tide of criticism against it by implementing a state of emergency and banning the League. The government claimed that this action was necessary to counter "the movement aimed against the democratic order existing in the Republic of Estonia and the spread of the irresponsible agitation which is creating anxiety among broad strata of citizens and is dangerous to democratic order and public safety." The state of emergency was needed so that the government could employ the means necessary "to ensure the peaceful development of public life."⁸² Further decrees restricted the right of assembly, imposed censorship, and ordered the closure of groups whose activities could be a threat to public safety. The last measure was aimed not just at the League, but also at other organizations affiliated with the political parties "whose members wear uniforms or other distinctive insignia and are subject to military discipline."⁸³ The activities of these organizations were deemed to be "mutually hostile, leading to open physical violence and thereby creating public anxiety and threatening public security."

The action did not have the desired result - instead of respect for its firm actions, the government experienced public ridicule. In protest against the imposition of censorship the major newspapers began a press boycott of the government. For one week most of the large papers did not publish any news of the government's activities nor any editorials on politics. The opposition parties, especially the Farmers' Party, were outspoken in the *Riigikogu* against the state of emergency. Despite being banned, the League, nevertheless continued its activities and *Võitlus* continued to be published. The first issue after the ban contained exhortations to continue the struggle such as Captain Holland's "every

⁸¹ *Kaja*, 9, 13, 14, 15 July 1933, etc.; *Võitlus*, 11 June, 3, 5, 10 August 1933.

⁸² *Riigi Teataja* 69 - 1933, art. 531.

⁸³ In addition to the League, the Minister of the Justice and the Interior ordered the closure of the Young Socialists' League, the Socialist Party's gymnastics groups, as well as rival veterans' organizations set up by the other parties: the Settlers' Northern Riflemen's Legion, the Farmers' National Veterans' Association, and the Socialists' Democratic Frontline Soldiers' Association, *Sisekaitse ülema otsus nr. 1193*, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 69, lk. 1.

man is a unit", and Paul Telg's "the idea will not die".⁸⁴ Such melodramatics, however, proved unnecessary as the League continued to function largely unhindered. On 24 August Veterans' leaders presented a draft bill to amend the state of emergency law by popular initiative so that a state of emergency could only be proclaimed in response to a threat of war.⁸⁵

The Tõnisson government made a last ditch effort to prevent the League's constitutional amendment proposal from being voted on by quickly offering its own alternative scheme for a strengthened executive. The plan drafted by law professor Ants Piip, the Foreign Minister, was discussed and accepted by the cabinet on 7 August and then submitted to the *Riigikogu*. The guiding principle of the plan was to substantially increase the power of the *Riigivanem* "in the direction of the American presidency" through ordinary legislative means (i.e. without a referendum). According to Piip's plan, the *Riigivanem* would be elected by the *Riigikogu* for a three year mandate and could only be toppled by three-quarters of the *Riigikogu*. The *Riigivanem* would be able to freely choose and replace his ministers and also be given the right to issue decrees. Other significant changes included modifying proportional representation to allow personal mandates and transforming the chairman of the *Riigikogu* into a non-partisan figure like the speaker of the British parliament.⁸⁶ The plan met stiff opposition in the *Riigikogu* and scepticism of its legality by a committee of legal experts.⁸⁷ The draft got no further than the *Riigikogu* committee stage.

Having failed to preempt the League's amendment proposal with the Piip bill, the government and the *Riigikogu* resorted to one last ditch measure. In order to prevent the League's proposal from succeeding at the polls, the *Riigikogu* voted to raise the quorum of registered voters required for the acceptance of a constitutional amendment to 50%, as it had been two years earlier.⁸⁸ The Centre, the Socialists and the ethnic minority parties all pushed for the bill while the Farmers strenuously opposed.⁸⁹ The passage of the quorum bill on 4 October, just ten days

⁸⁴ *Võitlus*, 17 August 1933.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 26 August 1933.

⁸⁶ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 78, lk. 1-5. Piip's draft was obtained by the League and copies sent to Veterans' leaders so they could familiarize themselves with it in order to effectively criticize it.

⁸⁷ Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 231.

⁸⁸ *Riigi Teataja* 81 - 1933, art. 593.

⁸⁹ *Päevaleht*, 5 October 1933.

before the referendum did more harm than good to the *Riigikogu's* cause since such a transparent attempt to manipulate the outcome caused considerable public indignation.

The League launched its campaign on 10 September and on the following Sunday held 100 meetings across the country. In Tallinn 2000 people jammed into the *Marina* cinema to hear Sirk speak, while another 1000 who could not get in stood outside.⁹⁰ The month preceding the referendum witnessed frenzied campaigning. According to *Kaja* "Referendum excitement has conquered town and country. Tallinn has already for some time been in a fever, one meeting follows another."⁹¹ *Päevaleht* reported that "We have never before seen campaigning of such intensity. Never previously have there been so many people at campaign meetings."⁹² The agitation was mostly on the part of the League and its staunchest opponents, the Socialists. There were several instances of clashes between the Veterans and the Socialists, mostly taking the form of Veterans breaking up Socialist meetings, especially in small towns, such as in Keila where eighty Veterans drove in from Tallinn and made so much noise that the Socialist meeting was broken up, or in Rapla where a lorry full of Veterans "took over" a Socialist meeting.⁹³ A similar tactic was one used in Kohila where eighty Veterans occupied the town hall before a Socialist meeting and thus succeeded in preventing it from taking place.⁹⁴ The themes of their agitation are illustrated by their campaign posters. The Veterans' poster featured a sturdy Estonian farmer on whose shoulders sat the politicians and an inscription stating that the people would shake themselves free of them on 14-16 October [the referendum days]. The Socialists' poster pictured a Baltic German baron riding in a carriage with a black-bereted Veteran in the coachman's seat.⁹⁵

The League was not without allies in the campaign, the most significant being the Farmers' Party. Their leader, Päts, asked: "The Farmers have long demanded the amendment of the constitution . . . must the third attempt also fail? And if that occurs, what follows?"⁹⁶ *Kaja*, The Farmers' Party organ, stressed that the referendum and the Veterans' movement were two different things. The amendment

⁹⁰ *Võitlus*, 12, 19 September 1933.

⁹¹ *Kaja*, 13 October 1933.

⁹² *Päevaleht*, 14 October 1933.

⁹³ *Päevaleht*, 14 October 1933; *Vaba Maa*, 10 October 1933.

⁹⁴ *Vaba Maa*, 13 October 1933.

⁹⁵ Described in *Kaja*, 13 October 1933.

⁹⁶ *Kaja*, 24 September 1933.

proposal, though having a few shortcomings, was basically sound and acceptance would not have any negative consequences. The direction the new system evolved in would depend on the personality of the president, and the Farmers knew that they had a strong candidate in Päts.⁹⁷

Adding his prestige to the scale, General Laidoner told *Kaja* that he would be voting in favour of the amendment.⁹⁸ The Settlers' Party decided to allow their members a free individual choice, a stance which on the whole benefited the 'yes' vote as the Einbund wing of the party was quite vocal in its support of the amendment. Centre and liberal opinion was reflected in *Päevaleht* which asserted that "acceptance of the new constitution will not improve the people's lot by even the smallest measure, because the most important thing in governing is not paragraphs on paper, but the people who govern."⁹⁹ On the left, the Estonian Workers' Central Association received financial aid from Scandinavian and Dutch trade unions to support the fight against "fascism".¹⁰⁰

The result of the referendum was 416 879 to 156 891, or 72.7% in favour. The magnitude of the victory was truly stunning. Even the Veterans' leadership had not expected to win by such a huge margin. The announcement of the result of the referendum occasioned unprecedented scenes of celebration in the streets of Tallinn on the night of 16 October. Crowds gathered in defiance of the state of emergency restrictions in the Town Hall Square, in front of the League headquarters, and elsewhere, sang patriotic songs and chanted "long live free Estonia".¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22 September 1933. Interestingly, the district which had the highest vote in favour (95.6%) in the October referendum was Päts' birthplace of Tahkuranna in rural Pärnu county, Anatol Tooms, "Rahvahäälused põhiseaduse muutmiseks," *Eesti statistika kuukiri*, no. 145 (1933), p. 606.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 7 October 1933.

⁹⁹ *Päevaleht*, 14 October 1933.

¹⁰⁰ The Estonian Workers' Central Association received donations of 1000 kroons each from the Norwegian and Dutch Trade Unions Central Associations and a more substantial donation of 5000 kroons from the Swedish Trade Unions Central Association, Mihkelson, *Vastu tuult*, pp. 292-3.

¹⁰¹ *Päevaleht*, 18 October 1933.

Table 2. Results of the constitutional referenda¹⁰²

| | Aug. 1932 | June 1933 | Oct. 1933 |
|--------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Votes in favour | 333 979 | 161 595 | 416 879 |
| Votes against | 345 212 | 333 107 | 156 891 |
| % in favour | 49.2 | 32.7 | 72.7 |
| % of voter participation | 90.5* | 66.5 | 77.9 |

* participation was mandatory in the first referendum

The League portrayed the triumph of its constitutional proposal as a victory against the political establishment, and claimed that the people having rejected the present system had implicitly given the Veterans a mandate to speak for the nation, to govern. According to *Võitlus*, the Veterans triumphed because they represented the true desires of the nation:

The secret of the League's success is simple. The Veterans worked hand in hand with the people for the people's rights and freedoms. The political parties worked against the will of the people for their own personal and factional interests. The League carried in this battle an honest desire to establish the correct foundation for our state's life so that the Estonian nation can become internally strong. The greatness of the idea inspired and gave courage and strength to those thousands of Veterans and sympathizers who worked tirelessly, who hurried through rain, night and cold from district to district, from village to village, to encourage the people and explain the situation. . . Only thanks to the self-sacrificing work of those thousands of comrades could the people's desire triumph, regardless of obstacles, pressure, and restrictions.¹⁰³

Yet, the success of the League's proposal in the referendum can to a large extent be attributed to the unpopular actions of the Tõnisson government and the *Riigikogu*, and can be interpreted as a vote of no confidence against an unpopular government, rather than an endorsement of the League. There was a great deal of residual anger and polarization at the government's devaluation of the currency. The

¹⁰² Tooms, "Rahvahääletused põhiseaduse muutmiseks," p. 608.

¹⁰³ *Võitlus*, 19 October 1933.

unexpected sale of two warships to Peru caused public indignation. The banning of the League and the state of emergency completely backfired as the measure was perceived by the public as an unfair attempt by the government to eliminate its opponents. The League, seen to be an innocent victim, greatly profited from the public sympathy which the government's measure against it evoked.¹⁰⁴ In the final week and a half before the referendum, the government suffered a further blow to its credibility when Vladimir Rooberg, the Minister of Justice and the Interior, was forced to resign after being implicated in alcohol smuggling. Any remaining respect for the *Riigikogu* dissipated when, as a last desperate attempt at preventing the League's proposal from prevailing, it raised the required quorum of registered voters back up to 50% only a little more than a week before the referendum.¹⁰⁵ As *Päevaleht* concluded:

The result of the last referendum should not be seen as a show of support for the League, but rather as a vote of no confidence in our political parties *en bloc*. The results of the voting were a show of support for the Veterans only in the sense that the Veterans provided an opportunity for the people to express their opinion, but no more.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Elmar Tambek, *Tõus ja möön. Mälestusi kodumaalt*, vol. 1 (Toronto, 1964), pp. 107-10.

¹⁰⁵ Johannes Klesment, "Sisepoliitiline kriis ja põhiseadus," in *Põhiseadus ja Rahvuskogu*, pp. 49-50.

¹⁰⁶ *Päevaleht*, 20 October 1933.

CHAPTER 6

'A BLOODLESS NATIONAL REVOLUTION'? THE 1934 ELECTION CAMPAIGNS

The triumph in the referendum vindicated the League and, as *Võitlus* commented, had a much wider meaning for the Veterans than just an amendment of the constitution:

The political parties have not yet correctly evaluated the significance of the 14th, 15th and 16th October. The parties wish to devalue the significance of those days to the changing of a few paragraphs. In fact, those days mark the beginning of the rebirth of the Estonian nation in the moral, political as well as economic spheres. On those days the people put an end to the prevailing political party system based on profiteering and avarice. On those days the people initiated a bloodless national revolution corresponding to the Estonian character, to our people's sensible and considered way of acting.

The Veterans, however, did not feel that their mission was complete and began to advance more far-reaching goals:

Now the question arises: how to implement the new constitution properly in actual life so that its ideas will be achieved . . . We must be actively involved in scaring away the old dissolute spirit. We must ensure that the new constitution will be put into practice in the sense and spirit that it was conceived . . . The Veterans do not think of stopping half way, but from our newly won positions will continue to work and struggle for the high ideals of the movement . . . The Veterans' movement will win or die fighting for our beliefs. A third way - surrender or compromise - does not exist for us.¹

Indeed, there was no alternative as they were to find out five months later.

The immediate result of the League's triumph in the referendum was the resignation of the Tõnisson cabinet and the lifting of the state of emergency. The Centre-Settlers government coalition nevertheless still had a majority and wanted to remain in office, but with a new untainted

¹ *Võitlus*, 19 October 1933.

non-party *Riigivanem*.² According to one source, Tõnisson offered to form a government with the League in order to prevent his old rival Päts from forming a new cabinet.³ Some hot-heads among the Veterans even suggested that the League, having triumphed in the referendum, had secured a mandate from the people and should take over power immediately.⁴ The leadership, however, was not prepared for such a step since they were also surprised by the magnitude of their victory, and saw no need to deviate from their strategy of legality that had finally paid off and now appeared to clear the path to power through new elections. *Riigikogu* chairman Einbund dashed the hopes of the coalition by offering Päts, the most experienced statesman to have supported the Veterans' amendment proposal, the opportunity to form a cabinet, even though it was clear that he could not command the support of the majority.⁵ Päts speedily managed to form a new cabinet of 'non-party experts'. It was only supposed to be a 'transitional' government until the elections required by the new constitution were held. Though no party took formal responsibility for the government, it was supported by the Farmers, the Socialists and the Russian minority (a total of only 49 deputies). The Veterans were displeased with the new government, having hoped that it would be truly non-partisan, and were especially annoyed that it was supported by their staunchest enemies, the Socialists.⁶ The immediate task for the *Riigikogu* was the working out of legislation on the implementation of the new constitution, particularly regarding the forthcoming elections.

With the lifting of the state of emergency, the Veterans' League was refounded and registered by the Ministry of the Interior on 28 October.⁷

² The coalition's preferred candidate for *Riigivanem* was Peeter Kann, a supreme court judge and colonel in the War of Independence. *Riigikogu* chairman Einbund, however, offered the position to General Laidoner, but he declined, Laaman, *Konstantin Päts*, p. 241.

³ Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, pp. 303-5. An alternative scheme suggested to Sirk by Mäe was that they should reach an accord with the Farmers' Party who had been their allies in the referendum campaign to participate in a Päts government. Sirk, however, rejected the idea of becoming a minister in Päts' cabinet because he feared losing his freedom of action, Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, p. 94.

⁴ Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, p. 73.

⁵ Einbund, having given Päts the chance to form the government, changed parties himself by leaving the United Agrarians (Settlers) to rejoin Päts' Farmers' Party. This paid off handsomely for Einbund as Päts made him prime minister during his dictatorship, Oskar Mänd, "Pingerikas ajajärk Eesti sisepoliitilises elus," in Evald Blumfeldt et al., eds., *Jaani Tõnisson*, p. 231.

⁶ *Võitlus*, 24 October 1933.

⁷ The new organization was registered as the *Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Liit* (Estonian War of Independence Veterans' League) rather than as previously the *Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Keskliit* (Estonian War of Independence Veterans' Central League).

The practicalities of relaunching the League were dealt with at a secret 'extraordinary congress' at Võru on 12 November.⁸ Though in name a 'congress', it was actually a meeting, in a private flat, of 17 men - the provisional central executive and leaders of the county towns.⁹ In addition to making preparations for a regular congress, the meeting also decided that the League would participate in the forthcoming elections. The month of November was a boom period for the League as all across the country local branches were ceremoniously re-established. The most impressive of these was in Tallinn on 19 November when between two and three thousand new members gave an oath on the premises of a factory (the only space large enough), followed by an impressive parade through the city centre.¹⁰ The victory in October had brought a flood of eager new recruits. By the beginning of December over 400 chapters had been registered.¹¹

New horizons had opened up for the League which now believed it had a mandate from the people:

The Veterans' popular movement was blessed and consecrated by 416 000 citizens as the only true and rightful leader of the Estonian people . . . the Veterans' movement wants to work tirelessly so that the Estonian people, not only in form, but also in content, can achieve the second republic so fervently desired by all classes, the republic which is truly based on justice and fairness as it is written in our constitution. That republic, however, can only be led by the War of Independence Veterans' spirit. The first republic belonged to the political parties. The second republic, however, belongs to the War of Independence Veterans' spirit.¹²

The direction in which the League was headed was spelled out more forcefully by Sirk in his speech at the reopening of the Tallinn Veterans' League on 19 November:

⁸ ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 3, lk. 7-8.

⁹ The fact that this ad hoc body of men had not been formally designated to make these decisions was to be a point in the prosecution's case against the leaders of the League at their trial in 1935, *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Võitlus*, 21 November 1933.

¹¹ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 74, lk. 164.

¹² *Võitlus*, 21 November 1933.

We would be naive fools if we hoped that by remaining observers we could persuade the parties through newspapers, memoranda, or meeting resolutions to govern in a new spirit under the new constitution. No, if we allow the political parties to seize power under the new constitution we will not be able to break that with memoranda. We can defeat the existing system only by attaining power . . . The failed political parties must make way for the Veterans' popular movement which must lead and govern the state. We do not believe that the same party system which led the state to the edge of bankruptcy could perform better under the new constitution. We would make a fateful and unalterable mistake if we entrusted the leadership of the new second republic to the old party system.¹³

However, despite their rising fortunes and rapidly building momentum, the Veterans suffered setbacks as well. The most damaging was the 26 November speech by the new national socialist chairman of the Baltic German Party, Viktor von zur Mühlen, in which he expressed his 'entire sympathy' for the Estonian 'renewal movement'.¹⁴ This unsolicited expression of support for the Veterans inadvertently played right into the hands of the League's enemies. If there was one thing that could unite all shades of Estonian opinion, it was hostility towards their former German overlords. The Veterans were damned by association. A great outcry arose in the press and the *Riigikogu* and accusations of the League's ties with the Nazis flew fast and furious.¹⁵ This was a great blow against the League and a deadly weapon in the hands of their opponents who could now reverse fire on the super-patriots. The government's swift action against the Baltic German Nazis, the banning of their organization and the arrests of several of its members, served to emphasize the seriousness of the threat to the Estonian state from the Nazis.¹⁶ *Võitlus* reacted immediately by unequivocally condemning von zur Mühlen's speech as a provocation and categorically stating that the Veterans could never have anything to do with the Baltic Germans. This was to little avail. Even though the League went further in disassociating itself by

¹³ Sirk's speech at the refounding of the Tallinn Veterans' League, *Võitlus*, 21 November 1933.

¹⁴ *Baltische Monatshefte*, no. 12, 1933, p. 696.

¹⁵ *Kaja*, *Postimees*, *Päevaleht*, *Rahva Sõna*, *Vaba Maa*, from 29 November to 8 December 1933; Karl Ast, 5 December 1933, *Riigikogu V koosseis täielikud protokollid ja stenograafilised aruanded*, pp. 1081-6.

¹⁶ *Päevaleht*, 7 December 1933; *Kaja*, 3 January 1934.

calling for restrictions on Baltic German cultural autonomy, it was forever tarnished.¹⁷

Further damaging accusations of the League's ties with the Nazis were made at this same time in regard to their purchase of a printing press from Germany.¹⁸ The allegation that the Nazis had given a printing press to the Veterans for well below cost stuck more than any other, and was more damaging because it had some material basis. As *Võitlus* had reached the maximum circulation possible with its old equipment, it was decided after the success of the October referendum to go ahead with the purchase of a rotary press with a much greater capacity with which the League planned to launch a new daily newspaper.¹⁹ Through an agent in Helsinki, Eduard Klaas, who had previously provided machines for other Estonian publishers, the Veterans' were offered a twenty year old press from Hamburg that cost only one fifth of the price of a new machine.²⁰ The fact that it had been confiscated from the socialists by the Nazi regime certainly did not help the Veterans' image. The matter was raised in the *Riigikogu* where Ast's old accusation of the League's ties with the Nazis now appeared to have some substance with the purchase of a confiscated printing press from Germany "so cheap that it was a gift."²¹ Finance minister Karl Selter, was forced to justify why he gave permission for the import of the press.²² The Veterans' counter-accusation that publishing competitors (especially Aleksander Weiler, the owner of *Vaba Maa*) and political rivals had stirred up the storm because they were worried about the negative effects *Võitlus*' increased potential would have for them probably contained an element of truth. Though the issue of the rotary press remained a focus of attack which the League could not effectively counter, the correspondence of the *Võitlus* publishing company with *Norddeutsche Polygraphika GmbH* Hamburg confirms the legitimacy of the transaction.²³ The printing press that had caused the Veterans so much trouble arrived from Hamburg in Tallinn in February 1934, but had not been set in operation before the League was banned a month later.²⁴

¹⁷ *Võitlus*, 2, 5, 7, 8 December 1933.

¹⁸ *Rahva Sõna*, 15 November 1933; *Vaba Maa*, 8 December 1933.

¹⁹ ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 88a, lk. 64.

²⁰ The total bill for all costs and installation was 30625.97 RM; the press itself cost 18500 RM, ERA, f. 3983, n. 1, s. 3, lk. 7; *Võitlus*, 21 December 1933.

²¹ Karl Ast, 5 December 1933, *Riigikogu V koosseis täielikud protokollid ja stenograafilised aruanded*, pp. 1084-6.

²² Karl Selter, 5 December 1933, *Ibid*, p. 1099.

²³ ERA, f. 3983, n. 1, s. 3, lk. 46-9.

²⁴ ERA, f. 3983, n. 1, s. 3, lk. 32.

To deflect attention away from the disastrous von zur Mühlen affair, and to get back at the Socialists for their recent fierce attacks against the Veterans in the *Riigikogu*, the impulsive reaction of the League leadership was to propose a 'Law to Combat Marxism'.²⁵ On 7 December the League presented a memorandum to the *Riigivanem* and a proposed bill to the *Riigikogu* executive that called for the banning of the Socialist Party and other socialist organizations, the confiscation of their property, and the revocation of the mandates of Socialist *Riigikogu* deputies.²⁶ The accompanying explanation attempted to equate the Socialists with the Communists by arguing that they both had the same goal of a proletarian dictatorship, though employing different means to achieve this end. They would allegedly destroy the constitutionally guaranteed right of private property and were allied with international organizations which constituted a threat to internal security and national independence. The means selected to pass such a bill was once again popular initiative, though at the same time their memorandum had requested the *Riigivanem* to implement the measures immediately. The *Riigikogu* executive, however, rejected the proposed bill as unconstitutional and thus the League could not even begin to collect the signatures required for the bill to be put to a referendum. Taken at face value, this campaign was an utter failure, but in fact it was never more than simply a hastily planned propaganda exercise. However, even measured by that standard it was counterproductive as it served to illustrate the political immaturity of the League. Rather than distancing themselves from the Nazis, the campaign to ban their opponents only emphasized their kinship.

The event which capped off the rebirth of the League was the congress held on 17 December in the Estonia concert hall attended by 1019 delegates, and, of course, a big parade with nearly 5 000 marchers.²⁷ The resolutions of the congress are worth examining as these are the closest thing to a programmatic document that the League ever produced.²⁸ The bulk of the resolutions dealt with the economy. These were (like election platforms generally) populist and promised something for every sector of society. Significantly, the first and largest section dealt with agriculture, evidently realizing the need to attract supporters away from the agrarian

²⁵ The Anti-Marxism bill was also meant as a propaganda tool in case the League was once again banned which the League leadership had reason to fear in the aftermath of the von zur Mühlen affair, ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 88a, lk. 66-7.

²⁶ *Võitlus*, 7 December 1933 (*eritelegramm*).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 19 December 1933.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 21 December 1933.

parties. The first resolution began with the prosaic statement that Estonia is an 'agricultural state' and that agriculture had to be the foundation of the national economy. Farmers were promised that their ownership of their land was inalienable, i.e., they could not be forcibly removed from their land as a result of their debts. Furthermore, the League called for the reduction of the intermediary costs to the farmer before his produce reached the market, the procurement of stable export markets, and the elimination of those agricultural marketing enterprises which had been founded for party political ends.

Workers and the unemployed were other groups towards whom the League directed its appeal. Workers were promised an 'honourable' and 'equal' position in the national community. Their purchasing power would be raised and they would be provided with health, accident and unemployment insurance. A resolution calling for the establishment of *töökohtud* (labour courts) to protect the rights of employees was an obvious borrowing from corporatist thinking. Unemployment would be eliminated by the cessation of importation of all goods that could be produced in Estonia and by a program of internal settlement that would create new farms.

Though private property was guaranteed, natural resources were not to be owned by foreigners nor was 'national capital' to be in the hands of those who were 'hostile toward the Estonian nation'. The development of small industry was to be encouraged over that of large industry, and fisheries and shipping were to be promoted.

To combat corruption the League proposed a rather extreme resolution requiring those who had been in the government, the *Riigikogu*, or the higher ranks of the civil service to produce a detailed account of how they had acquired their personal wealth or property, if they were suspected of having enriched themselves through abuse of their office. If they were unable to do so, the property in question was to be expropriated by the state.

In regard to purely political issues, the congress asserted that the result of the October referendum meant that the *Riigikogu* should restrict itself to legislation that prepared the way for the implementation of the new constitution and should not attempt to prepare any other far-reaching legislation. The congress protested against the slander of the League by the press and denied that it had any ties with either the Nazis or the Baltic barons. While the need for the law to ban the Socialist Party was

reiterated, a proposed bill in the *Riigikogu* to ban civil servants and servicemen from participating in politics (in effect depriving the League of a large number of its members) was condemned. The Veterans also declared their intention of contesting the forthcoming elections.²⁹

The most fateful decision made by the congress was the endorsement of Larka as the League's candidate for the presidency. Though Larka was the chairman of the League, he was not the only one who had been considered, nor had the potential candidates been restricted to only League members.³⁰ The Veterans negotiated secretly with both Päts and Laidoner, both of whom had publicly supported the League's proposal in the referendum, about the possibility of one of them becoming their presidential candidate.

Päts approached Sirk first through his old friend, League central executive member Theodor Rõuk.³¹ Sirk entrusted negotiations with Päts to Dr. Gottfried Dunkel, a leading League activist, because he belonged to *Estica*, the same fraternity as Päts.³² The exploratory talks with Päts did not prove successful; Päts was not willing to take instructions from the League's executive. As Sirk told Elmar Tambek: "Päts simply doesn't understand that we, not he, are in the position to dictate the terms."³³ Larka, on the other hand, "would go along with everything." A further contributing factor in the failure of the talks was Dunkel's personal animosity towards Päts.³⁴

The Settlers' Party decided to explore the possibility of working together with the Veterans in the forthcoming elections. The chief secretary of the Settlers' Party, Ilmar Raamot, Sirk's schoolmate and war comrade, conducted discussions with Sirk (who had formerly belonged to the Settlers' Party). They quickly agreed to nominate a joint candidate for the presidential elections. Sirk first proposed Jüri Uluots, professor of legal history at Tartu University, but the Settlers' leadership rejected him because they believed that Uluots did not have the broad public appeal necessary to succeed.³⁵ Sirk then proposed Laidoner with whom the

²⁹ In addition, congress resolutions demanded that education be conducted in a 'patriotic spirit', and recognized the Lutheran church as an 'important factor' in national life.

³⁰ Sirk did not come under consideration because §58 of the amended constitution required candidates to be at least forty years of age.

³¹ Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, p. 68.

³² Dunkel's interrogation transcript, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 155.

³³ Tambek, *Tõus ja mõõn*, p. 147.

³⁴ Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, p. 95.

³⁵ Ilmar Raamot, *Mälestused*, vol. 1 (Turku, 1975), p. 288.

Settlers gladly agreed.³⁶ Sirk set two conditions: Laidoner would have to name Sirk as prime minister and Larka as chief of the armed forces. Sometime in the first part of November, Sirk and Johannes Zimmermann, Raamot's co-negotiator from the Settlers' Party, visited Laidoner and asked him to be their joint presidential candidate. Laidoner rejected the condition for the appointment of Larka, but agreed to name Sirk prime minister provided he had the backing of the majority in the *Riigikogu*. This did not prove a hindrance, and the deal was settled with a handshake.

One month later the agreement fell apart. The Settlers' Party proclaimed Laidoner as their candidate at their congress on 10 December and the Veterans were to have followed suit at their congress the following week. On the evening before the League's congress, however, Sirk unexpectedly told Zimmermann that the League's council had decided to nominate Larka instead. Zimmermann was stunned by the news and Laidoner, furious. The League's council had not been informed of Sirk's dealings with Laidoner and the Settlers, and evidently did not consider Laidoner because they felt that he would be too domineering.³⁷ In fact, Larka had all along been expected to be the Veterans' candidate, but Sirk had explained to Raamot that Larka would refuse the nomination for health reasons and the congress would then choose Laidoner.³⁸

In January 1934 elections to municipal and district councils were held for the entire country. In the situation after the October referendum, these had a much greater significance than previous local elections since they were seen as a crucial test of strength before the election of the new *Riigikogu* and president. The League, under the name of *Vabadussõjalaste Rahvaliikumine* (the Veterans' Popular Movement) contested elections for the first and only time. This was to be the only direct measure of the League's popularity ever made. The central executive's directive on campaign strategy instructed that no alliances be made with any parties, candidates were to be locally well-known and respected citizens who did not belong to any party and shared the principles of the Veterans,

³⁶ The negotiations between Sirk, Laidoner and the Settlers' Party are detailed by one of the participants in the talks, Ilmar Raamot, the secretary of the Settlers' Party, in his memoirs, *Mälestused*, vol. 1, pp. 289-310.

³⁷ Tomingas even suggests that Päts played a pivotal role in convincing Veterans' leaders that Laidoner's personality was dangerously domineering in order to prevent the League from nominating Laidoner as its candidate which would have meant certain defeat for Päts, Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, p. 68.

³⁸ Raamot, *Mälestused*, vol. 1, p. 302. The extraordinary League congress at Võru on 12 November 1933 had already decided on Larka as their candidate, ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 3, lk 8.

preferably actual War of Independence veterans and from all possible walks of life - farmers, workers, tradesmen, and civil servants.³⁹ The League's platform for the municipal elections called for fiscal restraint, reduction in the number of councillors and senior posts in the administration, finding work for the unemployed, and, of course, doing away with political corruption.⁴⁰ Campaign propaganda emphasized that by choosing the Veterans' candidate, the voter would secure "the people's victory over the parties" and ensure that the principles which the people had voted for in the October referendum would be put into practice.

In the rural district elections held on 7-8 January the League fielded candidates in only half of the constituencies and captured approximately 10% of the overall vote.⁴¹ In the countryside the League was unable to attract voters away from the parties that had traditionally defended their interests, the Farmers and the Settlers. The urban areas, however, were a different story. The municipal elections held one week later were a great triumph for the Veterans.⁴² As in October, the magnitude of the victory surprised even the League leadership. They received 41% of the overall vote and came in first place in the three largest cities: Tallinn 49%, Tartu 48%, and Narva 44%. Tõnisson's Centre Party, the Socialists, and the Communists were the big losers.⁴³

Along with the victory came a new responsibility - to participate in local government. The Veterans, however, did not have an auspicious start in office nor did they have much time to demonstrate their capability for administration. The League council made the decision on 22 January not to allow any coalitions with the political parties (though they would allow those who denounced their previous party political association to join the Veterans' fraction).⁴⁴ The first step of any administration headed by the Veterans was to carry out expenditure cuts from the top down. Though the League had now become a political party just like the others and could no longer claim to be a movement of outsiders, their political

³⁹ ERA, f. 953, n. 1, s. 36, lk. 147.

⁴⁰ ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 96, lk. 9, 29.

⁴¹ Percentually the results were as follows: the Settlers 28, the Farmers 26, other non-socialist lists 22, the Veterans 11, socialist lists 11, independents 2. A table of the results and an analysis of the figures is provided by Olaf Kuuli, "Parlamendi- ja kohalike omavalitsuste valimised kodanlikus Eestis 1930-ndatel aastatel ja Eestimaa Kommunistliku Partei taktika," *Töid NLKP ajaloo alalt XII* (Tartu, 1975), pp. 110-1; also in Kuuli, *Vapsidest Isamaaliiduni*, pp. 117-8.

⁴² Table of results in *Ibid.*, pp. 112-6; pp. 119-21.

⁴³ See further analysis in chapter eight.

⁴⁴ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 91, lk. 614.

inexperience was a disadvantage. In some cities such as Pärnu and Viljandi where the Veterans formed the largest party they were nevertheless unable to form the municipal government because they were kept out of power by bourgeois-socialist coalitions that reinstated the previous administrations. In Tallinn, where the League had an absolute majority on the city council and was expected to form the municipal government, the process dragged on for so long that the new council was not convened before Päts' coup d'état in March. The only notable success was in Tartu, where the Veteran Hans Ainson was elected mayor and the council immediately voted to reduce the salaries of the mayor and the councillors as the League had promised.⁴⁵

The new constitution came into force on 24 January 1934 and its implementation meant that elections for the presidency and a new *Riigikogu* had to be held within 100 days. These were proclaimed for 22-23 and 29-30 April respectively. Laidoner and Päts were nominated as presidential candidates, the former jointly by the Settlers' and Centre Party, and the latter by the Farmers' Party and the Nationalists' Clubs (*Eesti Rahvuslaste Klubide Liit*). Conspicuously absent from among the candidates was Tõnisson, the man with perhaps the most obvious presidential stature. No doubt that he would have dearly desired the position, but so great was his unpopularity after his fractious and ignominious spell as *Riigivanem* that even he understood that the time was inopportune for his ambition.

Larka did not have the stature of the other candidates. While Päts as Prime Minister had been the political leader of the War of Independence and Laidoner, the military Supreme Commander, the Veterans' promotion of Larka as "the leader of the constitutional battle" appeared rather pathetic in comparison.⁴⁶ Although Larka had held high posts during the war, this was overshadowed by an aura of failure and the lack of glamour of having served in the rear and not in the field. The League stressed that Larka had been Estonia's first Minister of War and had been in charge of the war effort in its first weeks; however, this simply served to remind people that the dramatic turnaround in the military situation coincided with the appointment of Laidoner as Supreme Commander and Larka's relegation to the post of Deputy Minister.

⁴⁵ Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, pp. 372-3.

⁴⁶ *Kindral A. Larka. Põhiseaduse lahingu juht* (Tallinn, 1934), the Veterans' presidential campaign brochure.

The last to enter the field and the most problematic was August Rei, the Socialist candidate, who had previously served as the only Socialist *Riigivanem*. As in countries where fascism was successful, the left in Estonia was also divided. The Socialist Party leadership was increasingly challenged by a left-wing opposition led by Nigol Andresen, head of the Young Socialists. The conflict came to a head at the Socialist Party congress on 3 February 1934 in Tartu. The opposition strongly criticized the Central Committee for not being sufficiently revolutionary and relying on co-operation with the bourgeois parties in combating the Veterans. Andresen argued that "the activation of the masses is especially important in fighting fascism, but the Central Committee's chosen means, coercion by the police and government, has done more to propagate fascism than to fight it."⁴⁷ Rei and the party leadership, on the other hand, emphasized the need to attract not only workers, but also farmers and the urban middle class who they saw as being the most susceptible to fascism.⁴⁸ The strife between the two wings of party erupted with protests against the *en bloc* re-election of the Central Committee. Dissatisfied with the proceedings, the opposition challenged order by singing the International. Seeing that events threatened to get out of control, Rei as chairman called an end to the congress, leaving its business unfinished and its rifts to grow.⁴⁹

The Central Committee, rather than the congress, decided to nominate party chairman Rei as the party candidate for president. The Socialists had no illusions about their chances of success in the presidential election. Rei's candidature was submitted to the electoral commission only on the last possible day and it was not certain that Rei would receive the 10 000 signatures required to be certified as a candidate. *Rahva Sõna* reminded Socialist supporters that if Larka should receive one more vote than Päts and Laidoner combined, he would be elected. The Socialist Party calculated that by fielding a candidate more people

⁴⁷ Kuuli, *Vapsidest Isamaaliiduni*, pp. 129-30.

⁴⁸ The program put forward by the Central Committee at the congress stated that the party "must also attract farmers suffering economic difficulties, broad masses of the the middle class in general . . . only as the backbone of such a large popular movement can the Socialist movement win." The main points of the program were the following: to end unemployment, raise purchasing power, a second land reform to create 10 000 new farms, the development of industry, state regulation of credit, and nationalization of big enterprises. It concluded uninspirationally that it was not a "wonder drug", but a "practical step towards socialism", *Rahva Sõna*, 14 February 1934.

⁴⁹ *Rahva Sõna*, 7 February 1934; Kuuli, *Vapsidest Isamaaliiduni*, pp. 129-32; Mihkelson, *Vastu tuult*, pp. 315-9.

would turn out to vote thereby decreasing the likelihood of a Larka victory. Thus, Rei's candidature was meant for the first round only; in the second round the Socialists intended to support either Päts or Laidoner against Larka.⁵⁰

A common front on the left against the threat from the right was never a real possibility. The Communists were weak and their activities were severely hindered in the early Thirties by arrests and the closure of their organizations by the police. The Estonian Workers' Central Association, closely allied with the Socialist Party, rejected Communist overtures for limited co-operation on the practical grounds that it would give the police a new opportunity to close down trade unions and that the Communists did not have much strength to put out anyway.⁵¹ Of course, co-operation was not fostered by the Communists' use of slogans such as "Down with the henchman of fascism - the Social Democratic Party which supports the government of hunger, misery and fascist reaction!"⁵² In any case, the distance between the Socialists and Communists who had been on opposite sides during what for the former had been a War of Independence and for the latter, a civil war, was too great.

The League made systematic preparations for the election campaign. On 9-10 February a speaker training course was held with over 200 participants.⁵³ The program included presentations by Klasmann on the structure of the organization, Sirk on the responsibilities of the leaders, Mäe on propaganda, Telg on the need for corporations to counter the fragmentation of the nation, and finally a 'model speech' presented by Sirk.⁵⁴ The participants were provided with a number of pages of details on 'corruption' which they could use to give concrete substance to their speeches and to assist in answering questions from the public. What were some of the specific charges of corruption emphasized by the League? Most of these had to do with the use of state funds to support enterprises associated with political parties: the seed import association run by the Farmers' Party owed the state 80 million kroons, but since the money

⁵⁰ *Rahva Sõna*, 28 February 1934.

⁵¹ Mihkelson, *Vastu tuult*, pp. 303-5.

⁵² Kuuli, *Vapsidest Isamaaliduni*, p. 114.

⁵³ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 629-34. During the campaign, the League relied mainly on six speakers: Sirk, Mäe, Telg (who, however, lost his nerve half-way through the campaign), and three representatives of the working class, Kreek, Tois, and Frank, Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, p. 92.

⁵⁴ Mäe gave the following guideline: "the weapon the parties use is slander; [but we shall] not answer with the same but be correct and present facts which are verified", ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 629-34.

could not be recovered, it was made a monopoly; a building for the political parties and a Workers' House for the Socialist Party were funded by cheap loans from the state; export markets were poorly organized; the excessive fees for the use of the cold storage facilities at Tallinn harbour went into the pockets of the partymen; before the rye monopoly was implemented large imports from abroad were allowed in; state agricultural capital was used to give loans to large enterprises associated with politicians rather than to farmers.⁵⁵ Perhaps the most striking thing about these charges are that they are in fact rather unspectacular and not particularly substantial. It is hard to believe that a great national protest movement could have grown out them. It could not be said on the basis of these charges that corruption was endemic in the Estonian political system or that it was noticeably more widespread than in other countries.

The campaign appeared to be a battle between the two retired generals. Hjalmar Mäe, the chief propaganda strategist for the League dismissed Päts' chances. Of Larka's opponents, Laidoner was considered the most serious threat and therefore the League concentrated most of its campaign propaganda against him.⁵⁶ Having been the Supreme Commander in the War of Independence, Laidoner was a greatly honoured public hero, and the League's propaganda wisely respected that. The approach used was to acknowledge his great deeds during the war, but to express 'disappointment' over his subsequent activities.⁵⁷ He was painted as a tragic figure who became enmeshed in the corrupt political system and lacked the strength and will to do anything about it; he was taken to task for having been aware of the rot, but not having lifted a finger to stop it. Laidoner was compared unfavourably with other ex-supreme commanders such as Marshal Pilsudski who did not remain an observer when Poland was in a political mess, but acted decisively to put the state in order. Rather than work for the national interest, Laidoner pursued personal profits by becoming a director on the boards of a number of companies. His business dealings, however, had not been particularly successful and he had incurred a number of debts. *Võitlus* published the details of Laidoner's business dealings which had brought losses to the state and how the Bank of Estonia had cancelled some of his debts.⁵⁸ This was the greatest propaganda coup of the campaign since unlike the usual

⁵⁵ ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 100, lk. 29-34.

⁵⁶ Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, pp. 99-100.

⁵⁷ *Võitlus*, 10, 13 February 1934.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 22 February 1934.

mud-slinging, this could be substantiated as Mäe had actually obtained accurate financial records from bank officials and tax inspectors.⁵⁹

Larka's opponents attacked him on the question of his health and his rank. Larka was pensioned from the army in 1925 because of tuberculosis and was certified unfit to work. In this regard he had taken the state to court over tax exemptions that he believed he was entitled to, but in December 1933 before he was officially proclaimed the League's presidential candidate, he had the army medical commission declare his fitness for service. His waffling over this and his being an 'invalid' led the press to question his suitability for the presidency.⁶⁰ Larka's opponents also challenged the legitimacy of his promotion directly from the rank of lieutenant-colonel to major-general by the Estonian Provisional Government in 1918, alleging that he had fraudulently represented himself as a colonel at that chaotic time.⁶¹

A common theme in the press was the negative transformation of the Veterans, contrasting previously positive features which had now degenerated: previously the League had been a 'patriotic' movement, now it was simply 'power hungry'; previously it been 'above politics', working for the national interest, now it was a mud-slinging, unruly political party; previously it had been led by 'respected' figures, now it was composed of 'unknown wreckers'.⁶² The last point, implying that with the League's success and expansion the dregs of society had also jumped onto the bandwagon, received a lot of commentary.⁶³ A negative image of the League was steadily being constructed and being implanted in public perception. A complete exposition of all the elements that comprised this negative representation can be seen in a speech by Jaan Hünerson, a leading figure at the Farmers' Party congress on 18 February 1934. The allegations can be grouped into three sets. The first emphasized the League's foreignness: the League was inspired by the German example, and thus it represented an ideology alien to Estonia, and its funds came from 'unknown sources' (implying Nazi Germany). The second pointed to the dangerous direction the League was heading: its activities were only 'negative', (i.e. critical of the achievements of the last 15 years) destructive,

⁵⁹ Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, p. 100.

⁶⁰ Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 380.

⁶¹ *Võitlus*, 20 February 1934; *Maaleht* 10 March 1934; Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, pp. 383-4; Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, p. 90.

⁶² *Postimees*, 7 March 1933; *Vaba Maa*, 3 March 1934.

⁶³ The best known comment was made by Päts: "Debris goes along with the floodwaters", Laaman, *Konstantin Päts*, p. 246.

rather than constructive, and its coming to power would result in dictatorship. The third stressed the dubious nature of the League's membership: it was an urban phenomenon (with the connotations of decadence, dishonesty and seekers of the easy life), its popularity was the result of the Centre Party's decline, and most ominously it had many Communists in its ranks (as could be seen from the takeover of committees of the unemployed).⁶⁴ The rooting of this last association was a particularly dangerous portent for the Veterans because there was no doubt in mainstream opinion that Communists were enemies of the state and should be arrested.

While the League tried to appeal to all sectors of society and especially to win over rural voters, the two agrarian parties used their well-developed networks in the countryside to promote the candidacies of Laidoner and Päts and did their utmost to portray the campaign as a conflict between two diametrically opposed milieux. The agrarian press drew a stark contrast between town and country. *Maaleht* asked "Which will win? Town or country?" and warned its readers, "Country folk beware, a new urban party is on the offensive."⁶⁵ Larka was portrayed as the candidate of the "booty-seeking malcontents of the city". The same implacable stance was echoed by *Kaja* which declared that "country people can't stand the Veterans" and told the "city men" to "go away."⁶⁶

An interesting insight into the tactics of the political battle at the local level in rural communities can be gleaned from the instructions issued by Alfons Rammo, chairman of Vaimastvere Veterans' League chapter in Tartu county. He instructed his men to participate in the election of the committees of rival presidential candidates in order to incite them to quarrel amongst themselves and to facilitate discord among opponents. Rammo intended that only Centre Party figures would be voted into the Laidoner committee and Settlers' supporters into the Päts committee. They were to "destroy their unity and incite them against each other personally." Veterans, however, were instructed to get along amicably with their opponents because Rammo realized that obstruction by the League at small meetings in rural circumstances was counterproductive because it produced "obstinate energy" in their opponents. They were not to fight against individuals (by that, he meant only voters, any means was justified against a candidate), but against their

⁶⁴ *Kaja*, 20 February 1933.

⁶⁵ *Maaleht*, 23 January, 27 February 1934.

⁶⁶ *Kaja*, 6, 10 March 1934.

political mood. The League's 'trump card' was "to demonstrate that their opponents' press conceals the truth and lies while they speak the truth."⁶⁷

The League's opponents were no angels either. One of the more aggressive and energetic campaign managers was Ernst Kirs of the Settlers' Party, head of the Laidoner committee in Võru county. He instructed his men to heckle, disrupt, and take over Veterans' meetings, using fisticuffs if necessary, and if some Veterans' supporters were 'walloped' in the process, then they surely 'deserved' it.⁶⁸

On the campaign trail, the Larka team was clearly the most energetic. This can be measured by the number of meetings on the campaign trail by the candidates.⁶⁹ Larka was by far the most active, having held roughly five times as many meetings as Laidoner and ten times as many as Päts (who however had the advantage of being *Riigivanem*). Rei held only one meeting. The League also introduced the novel campaigning method of using an airplane to fly speakers across the country which usually guaranteed a crowd of curious onlookers.⁷⁰

As in the referendum campaign, there were incidents of Veterans disrupting Socialist meetings, but unlike previously, the League was alone and now faced a much broader and more determined opposition. One illustrative incident was the blessing of the flag of the Kuusalu chapter of the League on 4 March which was attended by four busloads of Veterans from Tallinn (60 men and a band) and 100 local Veterans. They were met by 50-70 supporters of Laidoner and Päts led by a local agronomist plus ten Socialists who, with their shouting of "Down with Hitler! Down with Larka!" and singing of the national anthem, drowned out the Veterans' meeting.⁷¹

The Veterans' opponents took a leaf from their own book. As the Veterans' favoured tactic of disrupting Socialist meetings was singing their patriotic anthem *Mehemeel* over the International, their opponents now sang the national anthem whenever the Veterans sang *Mehemeel*.⁷² This was a clever and effective tactic which placed the Veterans in a difficult predicament - if they did not stand up and take off their berets, their loyalty to the state was shown to be in doubt. The ultra-nationalists were losing

⁶⁷ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 92, lk. 109.

⁶⁸ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 75, lk. 147.

⁶⁹ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 74, lk. 49-52.

⁷⁰ Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, p. 92.

⁷¹ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 72, lk. 73-6; *Kaja and Vaba Maa*, 6 March 1934. They also shouted *mütsivoodrid maha* [off with the hat linings]!, meaning the Veterans' black berets.

⁷² Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, pp. 91-2.

the issue of patriotism. As the campaign got more heated the Veterans were pushed to extremes. In reaction, they stated that since the blue-black-white national tricolour had become 'soiled' by the parties, the colours of the Veterans' flag, black and white, should be the national colours of a new, pure Estonia.⁷³ Angered by hostile reporting, the League declared a boycott of the *Vaba Maa* newspaper owned by Aleksander Weiler (supporting the Labour/Centre Party) and of everything produced by the *Vaba Maa* publishing house.⁷⁴ This simply reinforced the public perception of the Veterans as being intolerant and anti-democratic.

A unique feature of the campaign was the collection of signatures in favour of the candidates. In order to qualify as a presidential candidate, 10 000 signatures had to be given in support of the nominee during a three week period in March.⁷⁵ As this happened to coincide with Larka's 55th birthday, Mäe conceived the idea of making a great campaign out of giving signatures as a gift for Larka.⁷⁶ The collection was enormously successful: the required number was achieved on the very first day.⁷⁷ But because there was no cutoff point for terminating collection, the League did not stop there. The campaign took on a life of its own and became a popularity contest, an attempt to influence voters by demonstrating that Larka was the popular favourite. Indeed, Larka managed to garner more votes than the other three candidates combined.

Table 3. Signatures collected for presidential candidates:⁷⁸

| | Larka | Laidoner | Päts | Rei |
|----------------|--------|----------|--------|-------|
| Tallinn | 25 163 | 3 439 | 1 823 | 1 562 |
| Tartu | 10 039 | 1 627 | 505 | 223 |
| Entire country | 64 658 | 38 493 | 18 577 | 5 071 |
| Percentage | 51 | 30 | 15 | 4 |

⁷³ *Võitlus*, 23 January 1934.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 30 January 1934.

⁷⁵ The collection of signatures was foreseen for the period 5-27 March and the collection continued even after the state of emergency had been declared until 21 March when it was stopped by government decree.

⁷⁶ Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, pp. 98-9.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Postimees*, 23 March 1934; Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 393.

It would be wrong, however, to conclude from these figures that Larka would have certainly won the election. As in the local election in January, it is evident that support for the League was much greater in the larger cities than in the countryside. Because it was much easier to collect signatures in cities than in rural areas (where the majority of the population lived), these figures provided a skewed picture of the likely results of the election. Since an absolute majority was required to win in the first round,⁷⁹ a victory for Larka appeared unlikely, and in the second round the most plausible outcome would then have been a united front against the Veterans, resulting in the victory of Laidoner over Larka with support from backers of Päts and Rei. As events unfolded, however, the outcome of the election would remain a subject of conjecture.

⁷⁹ *Riigi Teataja* 5 - 1934, art 38.

CHAPTER 7

THE VETERANS' SPIRIT: THE IDEOLOGY OF THE LEAGUE

The Veterans believed that by virtue of their unique experience, of their sacrifices, and of having shed blood in winning independence for their homeland, they stood on a higher moral ground, on an elevated plane, and could claim to speak for the entire nation. They represented a moral elite, the best sons of the fatherland. They could claim to be more than simply ex-soldiers of an ordinary war: they were unique in being the 'creators of the state'. Theirs was a special *Vabadussõja vaim* (veterans' spirit) of heroic, selfless patriotism.¹ This was not just self-image, but a view located in the mainstream of national discourse. Veterans were regarded by many as bonafide national heroes. The idea and myth embodied by the War of Independence - solidarity, fraternity, and self-sacrifice - was central to the project of nation-building. The 'spirit', however, was not possessed by all ex-combatants; it was present especially in those who had volunteered to defend their homeland. Colonel Seiman, deputy head of the Tallinn Veterans' League, argued that the 'spirit' was present only in those idealists who had not been compelled into service.² Thus, central to the concept of the 'spirit' was an ideal of volunteerism, of whole-hearted, active commitment to the cause. The corollary was that the 'spirit' was not limited solely to ex-combatants. According to General Põdder, the Veterans were bound together by an 'idea', not by their 'status', and that all those who shared their views could participate in the League.³ Even Pitka, who objected to the League opening its ranks to non-veterans and wanted it to stay out of politics, believed the Veterans' proper role to be that of the 'nation's conscience'.⁴

Opposition to the Veterans' spirit was 'division', a product of party politics. This took the form of factional and class interests which opposed the fraternity, solidarity, and general welfare championed by the League. The Veterans were men of resolute principle, not of sordid compromise.

¹ For interesting discussions on parallel manifestations of 'veterans' spirit' or the 'front ideology' in other countries, see Antoine Prost, *In the Wake of the War. 'Les Anciens Combattants' and French Society 1914-1939* (Providence, 1992), pp. 98-9; James M. Diehl, *Paramilitary Politics in Weimar Germany* (Bloomington, 1977), pp. 212-6.

² *Võitlus*, 11 April 1932.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ ERA, f. 3632, n. 1, s. 9, lk. 40-1.

The inheritance which they had bequeathed to the nation through the War of Independence was allegedly being squandered by corrupt politicians. Moreover, this was not simply negligence on the part of the politicians, but wilful collusion with the old enemies against whom the Veterans had fought in the war, the German *Landeswehr* and the Communists. The Veterans were entrusted with a special duty to safeguard the welfare of the country as Larka stated:

We, the Veterans, have created the state and given the best we had for its sake. We can not remain indifferent while our state hangs on the edge of a precipice. We will have to fight battles again for the sake of Estonia.⁵

It was an image of strong resonance that those who had courageously risked their lives to create the state had to re-enter the fray in order to set things right again. It was this spirit which, having previously triumphed against all odds, formed the mythic core of the Veterans' creed and was now being called upon again to help them overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles in their new war against the political establishment. If the 'unshakeable faith' of the volunteers which "defeated an enemy a hundred times bigger" could be reconstituted then victory would be theirs.⁶

The War of Independence was constantly evoked in the rhetoric used by the Veterans, and the imagery of war was applied to the League's activities. General Põdder set the tone with his call for the establishment of the League in 1929: the external enemy had been beaten, but the veterans now had to regroup in order to win the "internal struggle - the battle for economic and cultural independence". The freedom for which they had shed their blood needed to be defended at all costs.⁷ *Võitlus* metaphorically described the referenda campaign as the first in a series of battles against the party system: the January 1934 local elections were the "conquest the middle line of trenches" and the "storming of the final bastion" would be the presidential and *Riigikogu* elections.⁸

The League defined itself as an activist movement and therefore rejected the need for a detailed program. The movement was to be understood on the basis of a 'general idea' - the *rahvuslik tervik*, the

⁵ *Võitlus*, 16 November 1931.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 15 July 1933.

⁷ ERA, f. 3632, n. 1, s. 9, lk. 14.

⁸ *Võitlus*, 2 January 1934.

'integral nation'.⁹ The aim was to create a *rahvusriik*, a 'national state', which would act in the interests of the nation, not favouring any classes or sectors of society over others - "a system which unites the Estonian nation into one organic whole where each class asserts itself only through the organic whole."¹⁰ The League stressed the importance of duty to the collective nation over sectarian interests and sought to overcome the restricted base of support of the established parties, which appealed only to certain sections of society, by directing its appeals toward all classes and occupations, guaranteeing each group a "worthy and equal position in the national society". From this core concept followed dissatisfaction with the constitution and the state structure. However, the creation of a strong executive power and its form was important only in its relationship to that which was vital - "the nation as a whole". For the Veterans, the concept of 'nation' was higher than the concept of 'state'; the state was only regarded as "one form of a nation's self-realization."¹¹

The League being a 'latecomer' to the political scene necessarily had a strong anti-character, defining itself against the established parties.¹² The Estonian parliamentary system was seen by the Veterans as breeding weak and unstable government manipulated by political parties, who were more concerned with dividing the spoils of office than with the interests of the state.¹³ The Veterans spoke of 'democracy without parties' and the need to replace the present 'false democracy', the oligarchy of party leaders, with a 'true democracy' in the form of a *rahvusriik*, a 'national state'. Their remedy was to 'put a master in the house' (*peremees majja*) who could rule with a 'firm hand'. Though the Veterans sought to amend the constitution to strengthen the power of the state by establishing a strong presidency, nevertheless, they did not aspire to erect a one-party authoritarian state, much less a totalitarian one.

The antithesis of the Veterans' *rahvuslik terвик* was fragmentation of the nation. Among the chief culprits responsible for the alleged erosion of patriotic values was the intelligentsia. *Võitlus* characterized the intelligentsia as "neurotic salon-socialists who play at being educators" and called for a 'positive nationalist ideology' to replace the 'internationalism'

⁹ *Ibid.*, 15 July 1933.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 11 January 1932.

¹² Juan J. Linz, "Notes Toward a Comparative Study of Fascism in Sociological Historical Perspective," in Walter Laqueur, ed., *Fascism: A Reader's Guide* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976), pp. 4-5.

¹³ *Võitlus*, 29 April 1933.

which permeated the works of Estonian writers and artists.¹⁴ Especially worrisome for the Veterans was the education children were receiving in schools. As a group, teachers were singled out for particularly harsh criticism by the League. They were allegedly responsible for 'poisoning' the minds of young people with their Marxist and atheist ideas.¹⁵ The need for a nationalist school curriculum which would instill patriotic values was one of the Veterans most persistent demands, as was the call to purge the school system of unpatriotic left-wing teachers.¹⁶

The class struggle and internationalism propagated by Marxists was anathema to the League's ideal of integral nationalism. The perception of a Marxist threat was often a key catalyst for the development of a fascist movement. Juan Linz postulates that fascism is more successful in states where Marxist revolutionary attempts have been made.¹⁷ The newly independent states of the Baltic region had more reason to fear than most other countries. Estonia had experienced Bolshevik rule in 1917-18, fought a war against the Red Army from 1918 to 1920, suffered a Communist coup attempt in 1924, and had Soviet Russia as its giant neighbour. Nevertheless, the rise of the League, unlike that of the Lapua movement in Finland, was not triggered by a perceived internal Communist threat since Communism in Estonia was quite weak - during most of the Thirties the Estonian Communist Party had no more than 150 members.¹⁸

Marxism was the enemy because it was seen to split the unity of the nation by dividing Estonians into mutually antagonistic classes. The Veterans sought to overcome this divide and restore the sense of solidarity and national togetherness which they perceived as having manifested itself in the days of the War of Independence. Sirk saw the problem in the following way:

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29 October 1932, 21 October 1933.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16 November 1931, 30 April 1932, 29 August, 21 October 1933.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1 August 1931.

¹⁷ Juan J. Linz, "Political Space and Fascism as a Late-Comer: Conditions Conducive to the Success or Failure of Fascism as a Mass Movement in Inter-War Europe," in Stein Ugelvik Larsen, Bernt Hagtvet, and Jan Petter Myklebust, eds., *Who were the Fascists. Social Roots of European Fascism* (Bergen-Oslo-Tromsø, 1980), p. 160.

¹⁸ Kuuli, "EKP arvuline koosseis ja kohalike parteiorgnaisatsioonide võrk aastail 1930-1940," pp. 57-64.

singleness of purpose and mutual understanding no longer prevail in our midst. The solidarity, the unity, which prevailed in our midst during the days of the War of Independence is dissolving. In its stead factions organized on the principle of self-gain attempt to demolish the people's unanimity. We see that one class no longer wishes to recognize another, that they are enemies.

Those whom he held responsible for this were the "red leaders" who sought to "implant the view in Estonian workers that the worker is not an equal member of the Estonian nation, they want to implant a sense of inferiority in order to make Estonian workers into a mass of rebellious slaves." However, for Sirk, the Estonian nation was "unthinkable" without the Estonian worker, and therefore workers had to be "won back from the red schemers" and "guaranteed a worthy place as a member of the Estonian nation." Work had to be given back its "moral worth" and workers had to be "respected". He also took to task the "bourgeois right-wing parties" who, oblivious to the national interest, were "always quarrelling amongst themselves, sowing discord and hatred amongst the people." The League would put an end to that and to party-political corruption in order to "win back the sense of national togetherness formed on the battlefields of the War of Independence."¹⁹

To entice workers, Sirk promised an eight hour day, organized labour unions, a fair and just wage, expansion of social insurance, the right to employment, and a healthy and corporative economy.²⁰ This was not simply all rhetoric. The League showed a genuine interest in luring workers away from Communist influence and managed to attract significant working class support. The Veterans even succeeded in taking over the Tallinn Committee of the Unemployed from the Communists.²¹ In the January 1934 municipal elections much of the League's support came from previously Socialist and Communist voters.²²

The Veterans' expressions of hostility were reciprocated by the Socialists, their most vociferous opponents. The Socialists were certainly not passive in their opposition to the Veterans. They were responsible for instigating the first big clash between the two camps when Socialists tried to disrupt the Veterans' rally at Tapa in July 1932. In the *Riigikogu*,

¹⁹ *Võitlus*, 9 May 1933.

²⁰ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 24.

²¹ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 72, lk. 72.

²² See chapter eight.

Socialist leader August Rei condemned the League as 'demagogic Black Hundreds', launched into a personal attack on Larka and his role in the War of Independence, and concluded the Veterans' movement had come about simply as a reaction to the reduction of officers' pensions by the government.²³ The Socialist daily *Rahva Sõna* called the Veterans' League "just as vacuous, meaningless, and stupid" as its "fascist and reactionary" proponents, motivated solely by "lust for spoils" and "personal greed", and predicted that it would "collapse like an empty bag."²⁴

Hitler's accession to power in Germany and his destruction of the world's foremost Social Democratic party increased the perception of the threat posed by the League and led to heightened militancy. For the Socialists, the Veterans represented the same phenomenon as the Nazis in Germany. Socialist propaganda portrayed the Veterans as lackeys of the despised Baltic German barons who in turn took orders from Hitler.²⁵ Hostilities reached a fever pitch at the beginning of December 1933 after the comments in support of the Veterans by the Baltic German Nazi leader. Ast fiercely denounced the League in the *Riigikogu* and accused it of having ties with the Nazis.²⁶ The League struck back at the Socialists by calling for the collection of signatures to support a proposal to ban all Marxist parties, including the Socialists. In retaliation, the Socialists tabled a motion to ban the use of the name *vabadussõjalane* (War of Independence Veteran) by any organization which included non-veterans in its membership, thus seeking to deprive the Veterans of the prestige of their name. Significantly, in the final showdown the Socialists were willing to collaborate with the bourgeois parties and endure the restriction of civil rights in order to eliminate the challenge from 'fascism'.²⁷

What influence did Italian Fascism have on the Veterans? The answer must be negligible, except for providing a successful example which encouraged radical nationalist movements all across Europe. The ideology and organization of the League had already crystallized when Italian Fascism was first featured in *Võitlus* in 1932 in a series of articles on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome, including

²³ August Rei, 27 July 1932, *Riigikogu V koosseis täielikud protokollid*, pp. 57-62. The Black Hundreds were a reactionary, extreme nationalist, anti-Semitic group in the last years of Tsarist Russia.

²⁴ *Rahva Sõna*, 19 July 1932.

²⁵ Karl Ast, *Landesvehri plaanid Eesti vallutamiseks. Kuidas Hitleri käsilased tasandavad teed parunite piitsavalitsusele* (Tallinn, 1933).

²⁶ Karl Ast, 5 December 1933, *Riigikogu V koosseis täielikud protokollid*, pp. 1081-6.

²⁷ Karl Ast, "Demokraatliku Eesti loojakul," *Akadeemia* 3, 1989, p. 615; first published in *Vaba Eesti* 1 (11), 1955.

Mussolini's *The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism*.²⁸ None of these articles about Fascism were written by Estonians, but were simply indirect translations from Italian propaganda. Not a single leading Veteran is ever known to have visited Fascist Italy. For Estonians, Italy was a very distant place indeed, and knowledge of developments there was at best second hand. Consequently, the Veterans' understanding of Italian fascism was extremely simplistic. They naturally focused on aspects of Fascism which they saw as providing a positive example for Estonia while ignoring the evils of the system, as can be seen by naive praise given by *Võitlus*, "Precisely this close, direct contact with all classes, the genuine representation in Fascism of the people's interest, gives Mussolini the right to call his regime democratic. Instead of factional interests, here stands the interest of the people as whole, i.e. the state."²⁹

Italian awareness of Estonia was minimal and misinformed. Interest in Estonian developments was first sparked by a *Reuters* bulletin which referred to the new constitution that had come into force on 24 January 1934 as fascist.³⁰ This led to reports in Italian newspapers of "*L'Estonia: Nuovo Stato Fascista*".³¹ Believing that a fascist party had come to power, the *Comitati D'Azione per la universalita di Roma*, an organization propagating the ideas of Italian Fascism abroad, wrote to the League requesting information about itself and a copy of the new constitution. Sirk obligingly sent the material requested as well as photographs of himself and Larka. The *Comitati* expressed its desire for further contact and sent some brochures on corporatism, but these arrived only after the League had already been banned.³² This fledgling correspondence was the entire extent of the Veterans' contact with Italian Fascism.

It is often assumed that the League was inspired by the German National Socialist Party, but the influence of the Nazis on the Veterans has been greatly exaggerated in contemporary commentary and later scholarly works.³³ The League's opponents were eager to portray it as a local imitation of the Nazis and allege a connection between them since that

²⁸ *Võitlus*, 13, 20 August, 1, 8, 15, 29 October 1932.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4 March 1933.

³⁰ ERA, f. 957, n. 13, s. 747, lk. 254.

³¹ *Il Lavoro Fascista*, 25 January 1934.

³² ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 33-5.

³³ E.g., Laaman, *Demokraatia ja diktatuur*, pp. 90-7; *Eesti kroonika 1934*, pp. 20-3; Royal Institute of International Affairs, *The Baltic States*, p. 49; Uustalu, *The History of Estonian People*, p. 204; Isberg, *Med demokratin som insats*, pp. 29-31.

was the most effective weapon to damage the positive public perception of the Veterans. Contrary to these allegations, the ideology and organization of the League had already fully emerged before the Veterans took any notice of the Nazis; the first article on the Nazis in *Võitlus* was published only after Hitler had been appointed Chancellor.

Hitler's ascension to power was greeted with enthusiasm.³⁴ *Võitlus* interpreted it as "definite affirmation that in the near future European peoples will one after another rapidly free themselves from the obsolete system of government which sustains political corruption, disorder, and avarice." Hitler's success in Germany was seen as significant for Estonia in the sense that it was "symptomatic for our near future: with the collapse of the power of the political parties, a genuine people's government will come to power."³⁵ This unstinting praise for the Nazis, as well as acclamation of the Veterans in some German newspapers, left the League open to accusations from its opponents.³⁶ *Võitlus* was forced to take a defensive tone and soon began to avoid commenting on developments in Germany in order not to provide ammunition for its enemies. *Võitlus* recognized the 'beneficence' of Hitler's 'recipe' for reviving Germany, but asserted that the League had developed its program completely independently, though they had some common principles - "no compromises, no bargains with Marxism nor political corruption." Finally, it felt compelled to declare that if Hitler's Germany should ever pose a threat to Estonia, then the Veterans would be the ones to defend the country and therefore called upon Estonians to have an 'even stronger patriotism' than the National Socialists.³⁷

³⁴ The Veterans were practically alone in viewing the 'National Revolution' in Germany in a positive manner. The German Minister found it necessary on several occasions to make demarches to the Estonian Foreign Minister and *Riigivanem* about the hostile reporting of the Estonian press on the situation in National Socialist Germany, Reinebach (Reval), 24 March, 10 October 1933, 13 April, 27 August 1934, Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (AA), Pol. Abt. IV, Po. 2.

³⁵ *Võitlus*, 11 February 1933.

³⁶ "The contact points between the Estonian Veterans' movement and German National Socialism are very considerable. The guiding idea of both movements is the principle: 'the common good before self-interest.' Both movements are anti-parliamentary, anti-liberal and opponents of formal democracy. Both movements lay claim to totality. And also in purely external things, such as uniforms, organization etc., the Veterans have learnt a lot from the Hitler movement. The next few months will determine whether the Veterans have as much success as the National Socialists. Germany will greet the victory of this young movement all the more since the Veterans, in contrast to all other Estonian parties, constantly strive, not to agitate against Germany, but towards understanding and trust of the new National Socialist German Reich," *Berliner Tageblatt*, 2 August 1933.

³⁷ *Võitlus*, 18 February 1933.

How did the Veterans understand the concept of fascism? *Võitlus* defined fascism as “the quintessence of patriotism, state interests, citizens’ morality and honesty which can only arise through a vital nation’s strength of will.”³⁸ Fascism was about rejuvenation of the nation. It was perceived as the modern, ‘twentieth century’ solution to the problem of political, moral and economic decline, the wave of the future as opposed to the outdated ‘nineteenth century’ doctrines of liberalism and socialism.³⁹ Clearly, the League recognized that it was part of the same trend as European fascist movements.⁴⁰ Yet, the Veterans adamantly denied that they themselves were fascist and insisted that its program was independently conceived without having derived anything from either fascists or Nazis.⁴¹ Every country, *Võitlus* asserted, had to find its own solution in accordance with its traditions, circumstances and national character.⁴² This trend, according to *Võitlus*, was not limited to Germany and Italy, but was also evident in the developments occurring in the old democracies. Ramsay MacDonald’s coalition National Government in Britain was seen as a case of national interest triumphing over factional interests and proclaimed as an example for Estonia to follow.⁴³ President Roosevelt’s New Deal in the United States was perceived as part of the same phenomenon.⁴⁴ The riot outside of the National Assembly in Paris on 6 February 1934 in which a major role was played by Colonel de la Rocque’s *Croix de Feu* was seen as a case of another veterans’ movement

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 4 March 1933.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 11, 18 March 1933.

⁴⁰ “The Estonian Veterans’ nationalist movement is not unique in the world. All European *Kultur* countries have been seized by the same phenomenon. It is different in every country . . . but the foundation is the same - a feeling of national unity,” *Võitlus*, January 11 1932. *Võitlus* 9 May 1933 reprinted an article from *The Daily Mail* entitled “The Rebirth of the World under Fascism.” “Rahvusriiklik Euroopa,” *Võitlus*, 8 June 1933 provided a survey of European radical nationalist and fascist movements.

⁴¹ Sirk’s most direct statement regarding fascism is in an interview given to the Riga Russian newspaper *Segodnja*: “It is necessary to know the psychology of Estonians to understand that fascism is pointless here. The Estonian people love freedom. They will never submit to dictatorship . . . We are not fascists. We do not recognize the leadership principle. We demand a people’s government. Thus we remain democrats, but in our own way. We recognize the existence of parties in the state’s institutional bodies. We do not deny freedom of the press. We do not need a Hitler or Mussolini; we need honest political leaders. That is the difference between us and the other new movements in other countries. It is entirely unique and not copied from anywhere . . . We also do not want to put a muzzle on the social democrats. After all, even they are Estonians. Moral or physical terror in Estonia is unthinkable”, cited in *Vaba Maa*, 5 December 1933.

⁴² *Võitlus*, 18 March 1933.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2 November 1931.

⁴⁴ “Ameerika teel rahvusriiklusele. President Roosevelt teostab rahva usaldusmehena plaanimajandust,” *Ibid.*, 31 October 1933.

acting against party-political corruption.⁴⁵

The Veterans understood the central concept of fascism to be a crusade against political corruption and Marxism which strove to overcome cleavages in society and unite the nation. The divisiveness which liberal democracy fostered was seen as dangerous for the survival of the Estonian state. In its exposed geopolitical position, at the "sentry post between East and West", Estonia had to be internally strong to meet the threat of Soviet Russia. While Italy and Germany had 'awakened' and escaped from the "poisonous quagmire of the political parties, factional interest, and class struggle", the Veterans could no longer allow Estonia to continue to 'slumber' and 'sacrifice' itself for an 'outmoded' form of government.⁴⁶

To find the strongest influence on the development of the Veterans' movement, it is not necessary to search as far as Italy or Germany, but only to look eighty kilometres to the North at Estonia's closest neighbour linguistically and culturally, and in a certain sense, big brother, Finland. From 1930 to 1932, the anti-Marxist Lapua movement mobilized popular opinion and practically dictated the agenda of the Finnish government. Lapua's resort to armed confrontation with the state authority, however, proved to be its downfall and also a cautionary tale on the need to proceed strictly through legal means. Estonians were well informed of developments in Finland. Every shade of the political spectrum had its own ties with corresponding Finnish organizations. Svinhufvud, the venerable conservative who as president quelled the Mäntsälä revolt in 1932, had a close friendship with Päts.⁴⁷

The organization with which the Veterans had the strongest ties, and most closely resembled, was the Finnish War of Independence Frontline Soldiers' League, *Vapaussodan Rintamamiesten Liitto* (VRL). There were great similarities between the two, and the history of the VRL shows an alternative path of development that the Estonian Veterans might have followed had they not developed ambitions for political power. Like the League, the VRL was founded in 1929 and defined two roles for itself: first, simply an association of veterans supporting one another and second, the maintenance and promotion of the patriotic spirit

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8 February 1934.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 25 March 1933.

⁴⁷ Mikko Uola, *Sinimusta veljeskunta. Isänmaallinen kansanliike 1932-1944* (Helsinki, 1982), pp. 246-8.

which prevailed during the War of Independence.⁴⁸ While the organization claimed to be apolitical, its sympathies were clearly with the extreme right. Leading figures were active in the Lapua movement and the IKL.⁴⁹ After the Mäntsälä uprising, it was temporarily banned from holding meetings and, like the IKL, disbanded under the terms of the Soviet-Finnish armistice in 1944.

A strong comradely bond existed with the Estonian Veterans because many of the Finns had fought as volunteers in the Estonian War of Independence. Representatives of the League were honoured guests at the VRL's annual national meeting and likewise representatives of the VRL at the League's congresses.⁵⁰ Badges were exchanged signifying honorary membership. Other special guests of the Finns were representatives of the *Stahlhelm*, the German nationalist veterans' organization. At the VRL's 1931 annual meeting in Viipuri, Emil Helle in his welcoming speech (given in Estonian) addressed to the representatives of the League (Sirk and Jalakas), stated: "We both have the same goal: the achievements of the War of Independence should not be left at risk, but an opportunity must be created for our peoples to enjoy the fruits of their freedom, to ensure them a secure and bright future."⁵¹ After the Päts' coup d'état in 1934, Helle, the liaison man between the VRL and the Veterans, was sent on a fact finding mission to Estonia and was received by Päts and Laidoner who explained their version of events to him as a result of which the VRL decided to terminate formal ties with the League.⁵²

The Estonian Veterans' League was itself a significant enough movement to attract attention abroad and influenced organizations in neighbouring countries. The Veterans' triumph in the referendum and the large degree of popular support served as a positive example. The news of the results of the referendum was received with jubilation by

⁴⁸ *Rintamamies - käsikirja*, Valtionarkisto (VA), EK-Valpo II: IX. A. 2a, p. 9. A further, specifically Finnish, factor leading to the establishment of the organization was the so-called 'workplace terror' (*työmaaterrori*), the intimidation of workers who had fought on the White side during the Civil War by 'Red' workers. A manifestation of 'workplace terror' were the coerced public apologies for having supported the White side in the Civil War. In 1929 there were 89 such incidences, Mikko Uola, *Rintamamiesten Liitto 1929-1944* (Tampere, 1988), pp. 20-2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 45-53; Martti Ahti, *Kaappaus? Suojeluskuntaselkkaus 1921, Fascismin aave 1927, Mäntsälän kapina 1932* (Helsinki, 1990), p. 127.

⁵⁰ *Vöitlus*, 1 August 1931, 31 May 1932, 23, 25 May 1933; *Vapaussodan Rintamamiesten Liiton Vuosikertomus vuodelta 1932, 1933*, VA, EK-Valpo II: IX. A. 2a1, pp. 23, 27.

⁵¹ *Vöitlus*, 1 August 1931.

⁵² *Vapaussodan Rintamamiesten Liiton Vuosikertomus vuodelta 1934*, VA, EK-Valpo II: IX. A. 2a1, p. 33.

radical right-wing organizations in Latvia and Finland. Congratulatory telegrams were sent to the League by the VRL and Lapua leaders Vihtori Kosola and General Wallenius.⁵³ The Helsinki University Finnish Academic Society convened a special meeting on the occasion of the victory of the Veterans' referendum and organized a march to the monument for Finnish volunteers who fell in the Estonian War of Independence.⁵⁴ A congratulatory telegram also came to "our northern comrades" from the *Perkonkrusts* who were encouraged by the Veterans' success and very much hoped that developments in Estonia showed the direction for Latvia. The front page of the *Perkonkrusts* newspaper was devoted to an article declaring "what the Veterans' League did in Estonia, the *Perkonkrusts* will do in Latvia."⁵⁵ The referendum was interpreted quite differently in the USSR and provoked an ominous response. *Izvestiya* wrote that the result "can only have a negative impact on the relations between Estonia and the Soviet Union" and alleged that the 'fascists' [the Veterans] were agents of Nazi Germany.⁵⁶ This report by the Soviet press was taken seriously enough by the Estonian government for Foreign Minister Seljamaa to issue a statement of rebuttal denying the charge of a change in the direction of Estonian foreign policy.⁵⁷

The Veterans' perception of nationalism and their views on minorities were closer to nineteenth-century Mazzinian idealism than to twentieth-century national socialist racism. Their brand of nationalism was more concerned with raising the national esteem and self-confidence of Estonians than in denigrating other ethnic groups. *Võitlus* warned that nationalism should never be allowed to slip into chauvinism: "Serious nationalism values and recognizes other nations just as positively as itself."⁵⁸ Racialist theories as expounded by the Nazis were alien to the Veterans' way of thinking. The issue of 'race' was brought up only once in the pages of *Võitlus* and even then the word 'race' was in quotation marks. The article in question criticized Hitler's anti-Semitic policy, "the Jewish problem in Germany is primarily a question of German spiritual crisis, where it is necessary to find a scapegoat on whom to lay blame for one's own misfortunes and on whom to vent one's anger." *Võitlus* dismissed the concept of a pure race as nonsense and argued instead that any

⁵³ *Võitlus*, 19 October 1933.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 21 October 1933.

⁵⁵ *Perkonkrusts*, 22 October 1933.

⁵⁶ *Izvestiya*, 18 October 1933.

⁵⁷ *Kaja*, 26 October 1933.

⁵⁸ *Võitlus*, 7 September 1933; 11 January 1932.

judgement "should be based principally on a sense of national belonging and experience, not on any anthropological or ethnographic curiosities."

Võitlus advanced its own alternative idea for the development of a healthy national spirit based on

the traditions of the War of Independence and the spirit of its veterans which does not associate the Estonian people's national feeling with any sort of impediment, the surmounting of which requires the abuse of others to resolve one's own morbid resentment, but associates it with a dynamic drive for self-fulfillment in the most noble spirit, the spirit of the warrior, who is prepared to fight for his comrade as for himself.⁵⁹

While it would be difficult to estimate the degree of anti-Semitism in Estonia during the interwar period, nevertheless it would be reasonable to assume that the level of anti-Semitism in Estonia was not much greater than that in the Scandinavian countries. The small 4 500 member Jewish community in Estonia did not face a significant tradition of overt (institutional) anti-Semitism⁶⁰ and the Estonian Cultural Autonomy Law of 1925 provided it with one of the most progressive pieces of legislation in the world at that time.⁶¹ It is noteworthy that Jews were not mentioned in the pages of *Võitlus* until after Hitler's seizure of power. The Veterans did not approve of Nazi actions against the Jews. In its report on the Nazi boycott of Jewish shops, *Võitlus* clearly stated that the "instigators of the present 'Jewish war' were not the Jews, as the National Socialists try to explain, but the National Socialists themselves." The article chillingly concludes with the question "what does Hitler plan to do with 800 000 Jewish citizens when he has taken the opportunity of employment and service away from them?"⁶² Anti-Semitism never had a strong enough appeal to feature prominently in the League's propaganda arsenal. When attacked, Jews were portrayed not as the primary enemy, but as allies of the Veterans' main enemies, the Socialists, the Baltic Germans, and the political parties. Characteristic is a cartoon from August 1933 entitled "The Jews help" showing a wealthy Jew putting money into the coffers of the

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 21 September 1933.

⁶⁰ Tõnu Parming, "The Jewish Community and Inter-Ethnic Relations in Estonia, 1918-1940," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 10 (1979), p. 256; Kopl Jokton, *Juutide ajaloost Eestis*, pp. 40-1.

⁶¹ See chapter three.

⁶² *Võitlus*, 6 April 1933.

political parties in their campaign against the League's constitutional amendment proposal.⁶³

Of all the ethnic groups in Estonia, the Veterans (like the majority of Estonians) reserved the most hostility for the Baltic Germans, who had been the ruling political, social and economic elite until 1917.⁶⁴ Apart from the former estate owners, the 'Baltic barons', the most reviled Germans were the so-called '*Landeswehr* men'. These were the men recruited into a Baltic German military force in 1918-19 to fight against the invading Red Army alongside General von der Goltz's Reich German *Freikorps*. In clearing territory of the Red Army, the Estonians and the German forces came face to face in Northern Latvia. Fearing von der Goltz's designs for resurrected German hegemony in the Baltic, the Estonians together with Latvian units engaged in battle with the Germans at Wenden (Cesis) and routed them.⁶⁵ This came to be celebrated as a Victory Day in Estonia, an emotional, symbolic triumph over their perceived ancient oppressors. A further category of villains were the 'half-*Landeswehr* men', those Baltic Germans fighting with the Estonian forces who temporarily transferred to Iudenich's North-Western White Army in order to avoid fighting against the *Landeswehr*.

The Baltic German community was politically divided in its attitude regarding the Republic of Estonia. Many of the older generation and of the nobility could not be reconciled to the land reform and the idea of Estonian statehood, while the younger generation and the bourgeoisie were more willing to accept reality and be loyal to the Estonian state. The rise of the national socialism in Germany naturally affected the Baltic German community. Those initially drawn to national socialism came mostly from the ranks of the younger generation, less well-off bourgeoisie and lesser nobles, while the older generation (which valued tradition above all) regarded its revolutionary aspirations with disdain.⁶⁶ The advent of national socialism in Estonia was intimately tied with the person of estate owner *Rittmeister a.D.* Viktor von zur Mühlen, who became an enthusiastic proponent of Nazism after meeting Hitler in 1928/29.⁶⁷ Von zur Mühlen's circle of like-minded Balts formed the

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 10 August 1933.

⁶⁴ Nevertheless, Baltic German veterans of the War of Independence were also members of the League, most notably reserve Colonel Arthur Buxhoevden, chairman of the Kuressaare chapter, *Ibid.*, 3 June 1933.

⁶⁵ See chapter two.

⁶⁶ ERA, f. 76, n. 1, s. 733, lk. 8; f. 1, n. 7, s. 146.

⁶⁷ Jürgen von Hehn, "Zur Geschichte der deutschbaltischen nationalsozialistischen

Deutsche Klub in 1932 and began to publish the weekly *Der Aufstieg*. Within the Baltic German Party they formed "The Baltic National Socialist Movement in Estonia". According to von zur Mühlen, the Movement was founded only on an 'ideological' basis and none of its members had any affiliation with the Nazi party.⁶⁸ Along with espousing such standard Nazi ideals as *Blut und Boden*, a *Volksgemeinschaft* and the *Führerprinzip*, the Movement's program, published in June 1933, also proclaimed loyalty to the Estonian state and the desire to cooperate with Estonians for the good of their common homeland.⁶⁹ Significantly, it also welcomed an Estonian 'renewal' (*Erneuerung*) movement along national socialist lines.

After Hitler's ascent to power in Germany, it was only a matter of time before the Movement took over the leadership of the Baltic German Party: von zur Mühlen became party chairman on 26 November 1933.⁷⁰ Having been the chief of staff of the Baltic Regiment in the War of Independence, von zur Mühlen naively envisaged cooperation with the Veterans, his former comrades. In his programmatic speech, he declared that "It is no accident that here, as in many other states, frontline soldiers have become active again, to establish a second republic based on a new healthy ideology. That our entire sympathy stands on the side of our war comrades is so self-evident that this does not need to be emphasized here."⁷¹ He went on to say that the Estonian "renewal movement" is not chauvinistic, but justified "healthy national feeling". That was a grave miscalculation which would cost both him and the Veterans dearly.

The nazification of the Baltic German Party was met with outrage in the Estonian press and the *Riigikogu*.⁷² The position of the Baltic German minority became the subject of a national uproar in early December 1933. Von zur Mühlen's expression of sympathy for the Veterans resulted in a furious barrage of criticism against the League and it was seized upon by its opponents as a perfect weapon to use against the Veterans. The League, coming under the most intense fire of its existence, decided that the best defense is a strong offensive. It sent a memorandum to the *Riigivanem*

Bewegung in Estland," *Zeitschrift für Ostforschung* 26 (1977), p. 600.

⁶⁸ *Baltische Monatshefte* no. 12, 1933, p. 698.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 9, 1933, p. 546.

⁷⁰ Hehn, "Zur Geschichte der deutschbaltischen nationalsozialistischen Bewegung," p. 603.

⁷¹ *Baltische Monatshefte* no. 12, 1933, p. 696.

⁷² *Kaja, Postimees, Päevaleht, Rahva Sõna, Vaba Maa*, from 29 November to 8 December 1933; Karl Ast, 5 December 1933, *Riigikogu protokollid*, pp. 1081-6.

complaining that discussion at the Baltic German Party Congress had gone beyond the limits of cultural autonomy into the realm of politics and demanding that restrictions be placed on German autonomy.⁷³ The Veterans also demanded a new 'cultural orientation', away from 'suffocating' German towards English and French culture.⁷⁴ Furthermore, the League called for the university to be fully Estonianized, and for Estonians with German family names to replace them with Estonian ones.⁷⁵ Though these ideas were blurted out in a spasm of reaction to press attacks as a desperate attempt to disassociate themselves from the Germans after the von zur Mühlen fiasco, they are nevertheless entirely consistent with the Veterans' fundamental nationalist views.

Realizing the magnitude of his blunder, von zur Mühlen and the entire new leadership of the Baltic German Party resigned after just one week in office when it became apparent that their actions had provoked a government clampdown. The reaction of the government was swift and decisive: the national socialist organization was banned and several of its members were arrested.⁷⁶ The National Socialist Movement disintegrated into rival groups in Tallinn and Tartu, the strongest being Oskar Lutz's *Selbsthilfe* (Self-help) organization.⁷⁷

For a radical nationalist movement, the Veterans harboured remarkably little hostility towards the largest minority ethnic group in Estonia, the Russians. Since the majority of Russians lived in the poorer, underdeveloped Eastern borderlands of the country and lacked the economic and social influence of the Baltic Germans, there was little cause for resentment by Estonians. Russians were not equated with Communism, and it was only after the brutal Soviet occupation of 1940-41 that Russians replaced the Baltic Germans as the primary object of fear and hate. The Veterans did not attack the Russian minority but made an effort to appeal for their votes in the referenda and elections. Naturally the Russian community was wary of Estonian nationalists, but the Veterans attempted to shape their message accordingly by basing their appeal for support on values which would appeal to the susceptibilities of the large

⁷³ *Võitlus*, 7 December 1933.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 5 December 1933.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 7, 21 December 1933.

⁷⁶ *Päevaleht*, 7 December 1933; *Kaja*, 3 January 1934. The trial of the Baltic German National Socialists in November 1934, however, resulted in no sentences higher than six weeks imprisonment, Hehn, "Zur Geschichte der deutschbaltischen nationalsozialistischen Bewegung," p. 606.

⁷⁷ Hehn, "Zur Geschichte der deutschbaltischen nationalsozialistischen Bewegung," pp. 607-9.

Old Believer community - anti-Marxism, and respect for religion, as opposed to the materialism of the political parties. A Russian language campaign poster addressed to citizens of Russian nationality stressed that the Veterans' movement is "free from chauvinism and respects each nation equally", recognizes all faiths, and that its constitutional proposal was a weapon to "fight against advancing communism and atheism."⁷⁸ On the campaign trail in Russian-populated areas, Larka addressed his audience in Russian.⁷⁹ These efforts at gaining support among the Russian population in Petseri (Pechory) county, however, were cancelled out by the chauvinism of local League activists.⁸⁰

A group associated with the Russians in the minds of the Veterans and many Estonians were the *optandid*, those Estonians from Russia who opted to return to Estonia under the terms of the Tartu Peace Treaty. *Optandid* were viewed as somewhat Russified and of questionable loyalty. This group included some military officers who had fought on the White side during the Russian Civil War. These individuals were viewed with suspicion by the Veterans as not having participated in the War of Independence and therefore lacking the proper 'spirit' and perhaps even loyalty. There was considerable resentment among the Veterans, as reflected in the congress resolutions, toward those career officers or other professionally qualified *optandid* who received positions ahead of veterans.

Fascist-type organizations tended to be imperialist and aggressive in their foreign policy or at the very least sought a reordering of relationships with other states and a substantially greater role for their nation.⁸¹ In the Estonian case, however, there were no grounds for such a position to emerge since Estonians had every reason to be well satisfied with the conditions of the peace treaty concluded with Soviet Russia in 1920. Thus, a sense of national grievance or irredentism which was often at the root of fascist movements did not exist. The Veterans did indeed call for a stronger Estonian state, but this was to safeguard its independence from external threats. It may seem axiomatic that for a small state living beside a giant neighbour an expansionist program was simply out of the question, but the example of the Academic Karelia Society and the IKL in Finland shows otherwise.

⁷⁸ ERA, f. 4433, n. 2, s. 5, lk. 6; f. 1, n. 7, s. 124, lk. 170.

⁷⁹ *Võitlus*, 23 January 1934.

⁸⁰ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 105, lk. 108.

⁸¹ Stanley G. Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition* (Madison, 1980), p. 10.

The Soviet Union was considered the greatest threat to Estonian security, whereas Nazi Germany was viewed as a bulwark against Communism. The Veterans believed that had Hitler not succeeded in uniting “nationally-minded citizens” then the Communist Party would have achieved power and Communist Germany and Russia would have combined to wipe away the border states.⁸² Close friendship with Finland was highly valued, though the Veterans did not share in the *Suur Suomi* (Greater Finland) ideal of the Finnish radical right. The other Baltic States hardly ever featured in the League’s thinking, in sharp contrast to the Latvian radical right which based its entire foreign policy on a political, economic and military union of the Baltic States.⁸³

After the second referendum in June 1933, *Võitlus* claimed that “all religious Estonian people and our evangelical Lutheran church feel particular joy from the defeat of the parties” because the political parties were supposedly in the service of socialism and free-thinking.⁸⁴ The Lutheran church’s relationship to the politicians was indeed mistrustful. Archbishop Konrad Veem has even described the early years of the republic as a *Kulturkampf*.⁸⁵ The church was separated from the state by the left-dominated Constituent Assembly and was denied legal status any greater than that of ordinary social organizations. Furthermore, the land reform had dealt the church a severe financial blow. In 1923, the church had its revenge against the politicians in the first and only referendum prior to 1932, overturning the *Riigikogu*’s negative stance on religious instruction in schools and forcing the *Riigikogu* to dissolve itself.⁸⁶ When the *Riigikogu* commission was drafting its constitutional amendment proposal, the head of the Lutheran church along with his Orthodox counterpart presented a proposal for the *Riigikogu* to amend the paragraph on religious organizations, but this was rejected. The church in turn rejected the request by the government and *Riigikogu* chairman to have their appeal regarding the constitutional referendum read from the pulpits.⁸⁷

Thus in this atmosphere of mutual recrimination, it is not surprising to find one cleric writing in *Võitlus* that the parties were “Satan’s instruments against the people’s soul, spirit, and purse.” From

⁸² *Võitlus*, 11 March 1933.

⁸³ *Kas ir? Ko grib? Ka darbojas? Perkonkrusts* (Riga, 1933), p. 36.

⁸⁴ *Võitlus*, 20 June 1933.

⁸⁵ Konrad Veem, *Eesti Vaba Rahvakirik* (Stockholm, 1988), p. 258.

⁸⁶ 71% were in favour, Mägi, *Das Staatsleben Estlands*, p. 249.

⁸⁷ Veem, *Eesti Vaba Rahvakirik*, pp. 300-1.

the League, he wrote, the church desired "recognition of its work and activities as necessary to the people's moral and spiritual life" and to again make religious instruction a mandatory subject in school. "Our new Estonia must tie itself to the church and provide it with the widest opportunity to disseminate Christ's gospel."⁸⁸

League meetings often began with a prayer by a Lutheran minister honouring the memory of their fallen comrades. Indeed this perception of partiality compelled the Veterans to deny allegations by the Socialists of a pact with the Lutheran church to make it the state church or give it other preferences.⁸⁹ The Veterans' rebuttal that they respect all Christian denominations equally had some truth to it since at a number of events Orthodox priests took part as well. Actually, it is somewhat surprising that the League supported the established church at all considering that until 1917 the Lutheran church in Estonia had served as an instrument of Baltic German domination. It was noteworthy that, unlike the German Nazis and the *Perkonkrusts* in Latvia who had close links with pagan revivalists, the Veterans did not get involved with the resurrection of ancient Estonian pagan beliefs propagated by the *Taara* movement.

After the triumph in the third referendum, thanksgiving services were held in numerous churches across Estonia. Sirk, Larka and other League leaders took communion at Tallinn's Toomkirik (Dom). The 29 year old pastor Reinhold Uhke, an active member of the League, stated that "God helped with the success of the referendum by providing good weather" which was especially important in encouraging voters in the countryside.⁹⁰ Pastor Friedrich Stockholm in St. John's (Jaani) church in Tallinn took as the text of his sermon I John 5:4, "For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith."⁹¹ *Võitlus* in all modesty claimed that "God sent the Veterans to cleanse through struggle and make anew the heart and spirit of man."⁹²

The Veterans did not directly link themselves with the church, but rather attempted to identify or associate themselves with certain positive moral values which the League claimed were shared by both the Veterans

⁸⁸ *Võitlus*, 1 August 1933.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 23, 26 September 1933.

⁹⁰ *Päevaleht*, 21 October 1933.

⁹¹ Pastor Boris Aareandi in Tallinn's St. Charles' (Kaarli) church took Genesis 1:3 "And God said, Let there be light: and there was light" and the saying *vox populi vox dei* as the texts for his sermon, *Võitlus*, 21 October 1933.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 9 November 1933.

and the faithful. This was done by equating faith with qualities which the Veterans supposedly possessed in abundance, such as “patriotism, self-sacrifice, honesty and readiness to suffer.”⁹³ The Veterans also claimed an affinity with the church on basic principles, such as no compromises with socialism or two-faced politicians.⁹⁴

In the Veterans’ conception of the relationship between the sexes in society women played a distinctly secondary role to men. The sphere of women’s activity was clearly delineated - women were to stick with their task “assigned by nature.”⁹⁵ Above all this meant being a “dutiful wife and a good mother”.⁹⁶ A woman’s primary task was to establish a “comfortable, good home for her husband and to raise able sons and daughters who will be of benefit to the fatherland.”⁹⁷ As the predominant principle of the League was the united national community, anything that threatened that unity was abhorred. The women’s movement was perceived as divisive force and strongly condemned for allegedly trying to “tear women out of the *rahva tervik*”.⁹⁸ The “fate of women” and the “fate of the nation”, *Võitlus* warned, “could not be separated”. Men and women had a common duty in life to “live, work, and struggle for the good of our people and nation.”⁹⁹ The women’s movement was blamed for having introduced decadent and immoral behaviour to young Estonian women, for having “put cigarettes in the mouths of our daughters, taught them the bodily contortions of the foxtrot and taken them into the atmosphere of café gossip.”¹⁰⁰ ‘The national movement’ claimed to offer a better alternative to women, bonding them together, raising them to a “worthy level” and giving them “sufficient activity in productive work.”¹⁰¹ The League’s harmonious vision of the relationship of the sexes pictured “Women and men together striding side by side, bearing equally worthy, though different duties, building their home, their state, their people’s and nation’s future.”¹⁰² Despite these examples, the dominance of the male principle, characteristic of right-wing politics, appeared to be no more prevalent in the views of the Veterans than in

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 22 April 1933.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 25 February 1933.

⁹⁵ *Vabadussõjalaste koduleht*, no. 1, p. 15.

⁹⁶ ERA, f. 4433, n. 2, s. 5, lk. 3.

⁹⁷ *Päevaleht*, 14 October 1933.

⁹⁸ *Võitlus*, 26 September 1933.

⁹⁹ ERA, f. 4433, n. 2, s. 5, lk. 3.

¹⁰⁰ *Päevaleht*, 14 October 1933.

¹⁰¹ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 112.

¹⁰² ERA, f. 4433, n. 2, s. 5, lk. 3.

society in general at that time.

The Veterans never delineated any specific economic policies - the fundamental belief underlining their economic thinking was the proposition that class conflict was the root cause of all economic problems. Thus all that was required to correct the situation were more patriotically-minded citizens (like themselves) who would co-operate for the sake of the general interest. Their simplistic understanding of economics and their quixotic search for a 'third way' between capitalism and socialism, characteristic of radical right-wing movements, was evident in the League's paradoxical vision of "not liberal anarchy with capitalist crises nor state socialism which recently has been favoured here, but complete freedom for every single individual as long as it is beneficial from the standpoint of general national welfare and immediate control and prevention if he attempts otherwise."¹⁰³ Their vague utopian idea of a 'national economy' (*rahvuslik majandus*) was to balance private enterprise and national interests whereby "capital and representatives of labour are not left in a suffocating competition with each other for their own interests, but are harnessed for co-operation and the general national interest."¹⁰⁴

Corporatism remained a particularly nebulous concept for the Veterans, as it did for fascists generally. The League propagated co-operation between all classes and occupations, but gave little thought specifically to economic issues and had only the vaguest notions of what corporatism might actually entail. Juhan Vilms, the author of a book published in 1933 advocating a system of corporatism for Estonia, even criticized the League for its lack of a corporatist program.¹⁰⁵ The Veterans had a very limited view of the possible applications of a corporate system for Estonia. Indeed, their position was quite cautious, following along the lines of development of the corporate institutions already established in Estonia (the Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Chamber of Agriculture). They gave their reserved approval to the idea of establishing further corporative bodies, but clearly stated that these could have no role in government.¹⁰⁶ In fact, the Veterans expressed concern that the

¹⁰³ *Võitlus*, 11 January 1932.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ Vilms alleged that Veterans were primarily interested in establishing a dictatorship. He claimed that his corporate principles devised for Estonia were unlike Mussolini's because they did not include militarism and dictatorship, Juhan Vilms, *Erakondadeta ühiskonna poole. Eesti kui korporatiivne riik* (Tallinn, 1933), pp. 37-8, 118-9.

¹⁰⁶ *Võitlus*, 3 March 1934; see also 8 July 1933, and 1 August 1931.

corporations must be developed in such a way that they are not drawn into the political fray and that the *Riigikogu* must be cleansed of 'factional machinations' and 'profiteering'.¹⁰⁷

The Veterans took populist positions on financial questions. The League claimed that the repayment of war debts to the USA was an "injustice" since Estonians had fulfilled a "pan-European mission" in repulsing Communism.¹⁰⁸ They raged against the law providing compensation for the estates expropriated by the land reform. They were particularly bitter that this included the 'new Germans', those Baltic Germans who had emigrated to Germany after the war.¹⁰⁹ Incensed that the 'oppressors of the Estonia nation', those whom the Veterans had defeated in battle in 1919, would be compensated. "Who won?" asked *Võitlus*, "the *Landeswehr* or us?"¹¹⁰ On the most heated question of the day, devaluation of the currency, the League did not spell out any position. In fact, the Veterans studiously avoided alienating potential supporters by maintaining that the currency was only a secondary matter to the real problem faced by the country: the lack of a government which would act in the national interest rather than for its own partisan reasons.¹¹¹

The Veterans' movement was more revolutionary than reactionary in its desire to reshape the Estonian nation. The League was a forward looking movement as its motto "struggle for a better future for Estonia" attests. The Veterans exalted youth and emphasized the conflict between generations. *Võitlus* characterized the movement as a "dynamic force" opposed to the "coagulated status quo".¹¹² The "stagnated" political party system was held responsible for blocking the path for the rise of younger men.¹¹³ In the newly independent state whose society had recently been reshaped by far-reaching land reform, a traditional conservatism which sought to preserve ancient institutions did not exist, nor did a mythical golden age which Estonians could harken back to. The Veterans aimed to develop a more patriotic citizenry and by actively generating national

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 17 June 1933.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 16 November 1931, 29 January, 11 April 1932. The government did, in fact, stop repayment of the war debt in 1932.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21 December 1931.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3 September 1932.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 15 July 1933.

¹¹³ "The false democratic system of political parties in its stagnated forms with its jaded figures isolated from the people whose selfishness has long pushed aside all other motives except power, has created a situation whereby the augmentation of new blood to the nation's leadership is hindered," *Ibid.*

spirit and eliminating all Marxist influences to create a “new, upright and honest Estonian”.¹¹⁴ This Estonian ‘new man’, however, was quite modest in comparison to the revolutionary new civilization envisaged by fascists.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22 October 1932.

CHAPTER 8

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE, MEMBERSHIP AND SUPPORT

Organizational Structure

This chapter examines the organizational structure, membership and the bases of support of the League in its final phase when it was unambiguously steering towards attaining political power. The new Veterans' League, refounded after the referendum victory and the subsequent lifting of the state of emergency in October 1933, was identical to the old organization, with the only noteworthy difference being a change from an umbrella organization to a centralized one, i.e., whereas previously it had formally been an association of regional leagues, now the local affiliates were simply chapters of the League.¹

One of the accusations that the authorities made against the League was that it operated along the lines of the 'leadership principle' copied from Hitler and Mussolini. This has been repeated uncritically in the secondary sources, for example, Parming describes the League as a "paramilitary organization" which "functioned under a highly centralized 'Führer' principle."² The League's statute, however, gives no indication of this, nor does it appear to differ much from that of other contemporary Estonian political organizations or even from that of many European social democratic parties.³ The supreme organ of the League was the congress which met at least once a year. Every chapter could send one deputy to the congress for every 25 members. The congress elected the central executive (*Keskjuhatus*) which consisted of at least six members, and in its final incarnation elected on 17 December 1933 included thirteen: 1) Larka, chairman; 2) Sirk, deputy chairman; 3) Eduard Kubbo, 46, lawyer, Tartu chapter chairman; 4) Oskar Luiga, 39, forester, Rakvere chapter

¹ *Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Liidu põhikiri*, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 71, lk. 9-19. The new organization was registered as the *Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Liit* (Estonian War of Independence Veterans' League) rather than as previously the *Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Keskliit* (Estonian War of Independence Veterans' Central League).

² Tõnu Parming, *The Collapse of Liberal Democracy and the Rise of Authoritarianism in Estonia*. SAGE Professional Papers in Contemporary Political Sociology (London, 1975), p. 40.

³ *Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Liidu põhikiri*, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 71, lk. 9-19.

chairman; 5) Karl Podrätsik, 43, police official, Narva chapter chairman; 6) August Klasmann, 36, journalist, secretary; 7) Leonhard Laast-Laas, 39, industrialist, Harju county chairman; 8) August Kook, 43, doctor, treasurer; 9) Aleksander Seiman, 47, reserve colonel, Tallinn deputy chairman; 10) Theodor Rõuk, 42, lawyer; 11) Johannes Holland, 34, Viljandi county chairman, businessman; 12) Paul Telg, lawyer; 13) Karl-Arnold Jalakas, 32, lawyer, chief editor of *Võitlus*.⁴ All of these men (with the exception of Telg) had been officers in the War of Independence and Seiman, Luiga, Holland, and Kubbo were amongst the most highly decorated.⁵ While the central executive was heavily dominated by members of the Tallinn chapter, most of the twelve reserve members for the central executive were from outside of Tallinn, many of the regional leaders of the League: Paul Laamann (Võru), Leonhard Pallon (Valga), Osvald Mitt (Pärnu), Andres Leppik (Paide), Andres Vaher (Tapa), Aleksander Raudsepp (Tartu), Hans Ainson (Tartu), Nikolai Kütt (Rakvere), Alfred Sampka (Narva) and three members of the Tallinn chapter executive, Friedrich Kapsi, Villem Daniel, and Eduard Saulep.⁶

The intermediary organ between the central executive and the chapters was the county executive which was elected at a conference of regional chapters and was subject to central executive approval. The county leaders plus the members of the central executive *ex officio* made up the council (*nõukogu*), an expanded forum for deciding questions which the central executive felt required more input or wider consensus. The chapter (*osakond*) was the basic unit of the League, and required eight founding members.⁷ Chapters in a few large cities were organized into companies.⁸ The Tallinn chapter had seven companies of between 300 and 700 men each who lived in the same neighbourhood.⁹ These in turn were divided into smaller groups (*rühmad*) and squads (*jaod*). This form of organization gave the impression of a 'paramilitary' nature, but was simply the most natural for war veterans. It was also a practical measure for more efficient and cheaper communications, as well as being good for parades, a favourite activity of war veterans.¹⁰

The League's stance on the *Führerprinzip* or 'leadership principle',

⁴ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 534.

⁵ See their entries in *Eesti Vabadusristi kavalerid*.

⁶ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 534.

⁷ *Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Liidu põhikiri*, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 71, lk. 9-19.

⁸ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 124, lk. 17-17p.

⁹ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 91, lk. 56.

¹⁰ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 45.

commonly identified as a key component of fascism, was contradictory. Publicly, the idea was rejected,¹¹ but in other places, for example, in the regulations of the League's security units, it was stated explicitly that "The Veterans' movement recognizes the leadership principle because the whole people cannot lead itself. Only the most suitable man whom the people trust can be the leader."¹² The League's elected chairman and the man on whom its propaganda focused as its presidential candidate, General Larka, however, was a lacklustre figure and an uninspiring personality. Sirk, the deputy chairman, a much more charismatic individual and the most captivating orator of his day, has thus been identified as the 'Führer' of the movement. While he had been a member of the central executive right from the beginning and played a key role behind the scenes, Sirk did not come into public prominence until the senior war heroes Põdder and Pitka left the leadership of the League after which he began to be increasingly seen as the face of the movement. Not only was he head of the largest and most important chapter, Tallinn, but as Larka was often on his farm in Saue, Sirk was left in charge of the central executive in Tallinn.¹³ In the final phase of the League's development, Sirk was entrusted with more and more power, including the newly created offices of chief of the Staff and campaign leader. Nevertheless, it is an exaggeration to label Sirk the 'Führer' of the movement as decisions were made by the League's central executive and not by him alone.¹⁴ The most striking example was the central executive's choice of Larka as the League's presidential candidate, ignoring Sirk's previous agreement with Laidoner regarding the latter's candidacy for the same position.¹⁵

At the extraordinary congress at Võru on 12 November 1933, the leadership of the League introduced two innovations in its organizational structure to allow a more effective running of their activities: the office of

¹¹ Sirk told the Riga Russian newspaper *Segodnja*, "We do not recognize the leadership principle," quoted in *Vaba Maa*, 5 December 1933.

¹² *K.Ü. sisekord*, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 641p.

¹³ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 28. In turn, Seiman ran the Tallinn chapter because Sirk was busy with the central executive.

¹⁴ Axel de Vries in a report for the *Volksbund für das Deutschtum in Ausland*, states that unlike the NSDAP or Italian Fascism, the Veterans' movement "did not arise as a result of the life and work of one leading personality, rather, if one can say so, was born out of the *Zeitgeist*." Furthermore, de Vries sees the the development of the *Führerprinzip* inhibited by the Estonian national character: "powerful selfishness, coupled with envy of the neighbour who possesses slightly more than oneself, and an extremely deeply-rooted distrust of its own national leadership," *Bericht über die Lage in Estland*, 7 November 1933, AA, Pol. Abt. IV, Po. 5.

¹⁵ See chapter six.

campaign leader (*aktsioonijuht*) and the Staff (*peastaap*).¹⁶ Both were appointed by the chairman of the central executive. Since neither of these new organs were foreseen in the League's statute, the prosecution at the Veterans' trial in 1935 was able to accuse the League's leadership of having created a secret and parallel organizational structure to direct the League's activities, bypassing the elected organs and instituting the "leadership principle."¹⁷ As campaign leader for the forthcoming elections Sirk was given authority over the entire League apparatus for the duration.¹⁸ Subordinate county campaign leaders were directly appointed by him. For the most part, these were the already elected county leaders.

The other newly created organ, the Staff, was envisaged as "the executive organ which actually directs the League's activities."¹⁹ It was to be responsible for the "practical implementation of the central executive's directives", but the Staff never had the chance to become fully operational. Headed by Sirk, it consisted of seven departments: propaganda, directed by Sirk, but effectively run by Mäe, was the most important department, charged with formulating the plans for the League's political activities; information, headed by Julius Palm, a 47 year old accountant, with the task of gauging public opinion and checking the background of new applicants; organization and communications under Klasmann primarily looked after the development of the network of League chapters across the land; finance, managed by Kook, sought to secure revenue; journalism, consisting of the editors of *Võitlus*, monitored other publications and aimed to ensure that the League's position was reflected in the press; a legal department was planned, but never formed.

The most ambitious department was the one for "sections" headed by Telg. Its task, to establish and develop occupational sections, demonstrates the influence of corporatist thinking. At least twelve sections were planned: workers, farmers, artists, railway workers, businessmen, youth, medium and small handicraft manufacturers, state and local government officials, landlords, teachers, women, and doctors.²⁰ The charters of these sections were all created alike and their stated purposes were identical:

¹⁶ *Süüdistusakt*, ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 3, lk. 8p-9p.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, lk. 10.

¹⁸ *Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Liidu kodukord*, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 91, lk. 53-6.

¹⁹ *Peastaabi sise- ja töökord*, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 73, lk. 59-63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*; ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 533; s. 91, lk. 780.

The task of the Estonian Workers' [or Farmers', etc.] League is to form a united workers' community and to ensure for it an honourable and equal position with other occupational groups in the national community (*rahvuslik tervik*), through which the worker can achieve the improvement of his living standard and receive a fair part of economic and spiritual wealth.²¹

These plans remained mostly on paper. Only the workers' and women's sections had begun to function by March 1934.²² The workers' section had representatives in 58 large enterprises and factories.²³ The women's sections, headed by the energetic Helene Johani, formerly secretary of the Women's Home Guard (*Naiskodukaitse*), were quite popular.²⁴ Women's sections were attached to many League chapters, for example the 150 man chapter in the town of Elva had a women's section of 50 members.²⁵ In February 1934 some 500 women, "a very impressive group in their reserved and pleasant gray dresses," took a membership oath in a Tallinn YMCA gym. According to *Võitlus*, the speaker's "heartfelt words about a woman's role in building a home and her purity of soul and spiritual beauty deeply touched the listeners."²⁶

Not surprisingly, women were departmentalized and kept away from any leadership role in the League. Extreme right-wing organizations are male-oriented, and this was especially the case with the League since it was by its nature an association of war veterans. The entire Estonian political scene was in any case heavily male-dominated, with only the Socialist and the Populist (later Centre) parties having any female *Riigikogu* deputies.²⁷ Their numbers dwindled steadily from the Constituent Assembly in which there were seven women, mostly from the Socialist Party, to the 1932 *Riigikogu* in which there were only two female deputies, both from the Centre Party. The popularity of the women's sections of the League reflects the Thirties' trend of the growth of conservative nationalist women's organizations. The progressive Women's League (*Naisteliit*) was increasingly overshadowed by the popularity of the Rural Women's Central League (*Maanaiste Keskliit*) and

²¹ The statutes of the *Eesti Töölise Liit* and *Eesti Põllumeeste Liit*, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 147, 229.

²² ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 27.

²³ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 539.

²⁴ The statute of the women's section, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 111.

²⁵ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 105, lk. 107.

²⁶ *Võitlus*, 13 February 1934.

²⁷ Helmi Mäelo, *Eesti naine läbi aegade* (Lund, 1957), pp. 216-7.

the Women's Home Guard (*Naiskodukaitse*), auxiliaries to the Civil Guard modelled on the Finnish *Lotta Svärd*.²⁸ Sirje Kivimäe makes sense of this development by suggesting that in a period of nation building for such a small society, conservatism was a natural defense mechanism for the national identity.²⁹

An important part of the Veterans' organization was their newspaper *Võitlus* (The Struggle), initially published under the full title of *Võitlus Eesti parema tuleviku eest* (The Struggle for a Better Future for Estonia). *Võitlus* started up in May 1931, appeared irregularly until it became a weekly in 1932, and began to appear three times a week in April 1933. The chief editor was Karl-Arnold Jalakas and the managing editor was Juhan Libe. By the end of the 1933 it had reached its ceiling with a circulation of between 25 000-27 000.³⁰ It was therefore decided to start a new daily and to expand printing capacity which necessitated the purchase of a rotary press.³¹ The planned daily, however, did not have time to appear before Päts' coup d'état.³² In 1934 a monthly magazine entitled *Vabadussõjalaste koduleht* (the Veterans' Homepaper) was also published, but only a couple of issues could be printed.

For the authorities and opponents of the League its most worrisome organizational development was the creation of security units (*korrupidajate üksused*). Enemies characterized these as stormtroopers and suspected them of being a paramilitary force preparing for the seizure of power. The security units were formed in response to the disturbance caused by the Socialists at the Veterans' rally at Tapa on 17 July 1932.³³ Their primary function was to ensure order at League meetings, prevent disruptions by opponents, and to accompany Larka and Sirk on their speaking engagements throughout the country. Reserve Captain Heinrich-Balduin Dunkel, a Civil Guard instructor, commanded the security units.³⁴ Members were expected to be prepared to defend the League's ideals "with their strength, health and life" and never to "submit

²⁸ Sirje Kivimäe, "Frauen und Frauenbewegung in Estland von der Jahrhundertwende bis zum Ausbruch des Zweiten Weltkrieges," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 34 (1994), pp. 219-221.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 88a, lk. 64.

³¹ On the purchase of the rotary press from Germany and the rumours surrounding its financing see chapter six.

³² For the plans regarding the new daily see Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 332.

³³ K.Ü. *sisekord*, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 640.

³⁴ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 91, lk. 189-94.

alive to an attacking enemy.”³⁵ Much was made of this hyperbole by the prosecution at the trial of League leaders in 1935, but in fact no one ever had to face a situation requiring such a sacrifice.³⁶ As their statute stated, the security units had a propaganda purpose as well: “Disciplined, dutiful columns of marching men win many more supporters than do speeches and articles because they show the bystander that there are enough men who dare openly to acknowledge that they are the carriers of the Veterans’ movement’s ideal.”³⁷ Though the security units were meant to intimidate the League’s enemies, they were required to behave “irreproachably” and “always be polite, courteous, and helpful towards fellow citizens” in order to “win the trust and respect of fellow citizens.”³⁸ Though the Tallinn security unit was initially composed of only 100 men and only chapters in three other cities formed such units,³⁹ the League had ambitious plans to expand these units, including supplementing them with motorcycle, bicycle, auto, and orchestra units.⁴⁰

The League’s security units were only one reflection of the European trend during the interwar years toward the militarization of politics. The first Estonian ‘paramilitary’ formation were the Socialists’ gymnastics squads, created in 1930 following the example of the Austrian *Schutzbund* to protect Socialist Party meetings against disrupters.⁴¹ The ‘gymnasts’ engaged in sporting activities emphasizing self-defense, including marksmanship. They wore a distinctive uniform consisting of a blue shirt and hat with their badge.⁴² Their first engagement or “training excursion” was the disruption of the Veterans’ rally at Tapa in July 1932.⁴³

As the League gained popularity, other political parties tried to steal their thunder by forming their own veterans’ organizations, consciously modelled on the League.⁴⁴ Socialist leader Rei liked to claim, on the basis of the soldier’s vote for the Constituent Assembly during the War of Independence, that a majority of veterans had actually been supporters of the democratic left.⁴⁵ The Tõnisson government’s decision of 11 August

³⁵ K.Ü. *sisekord*, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 641p.

³⁶ *Süüdistusakt*, ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 3, lk. 14p.

³⁷ K.Ü. *sisekord*, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 640-1.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, lk. 641p.

³⁹ *Süüdistusakt*, ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 3, lk. 14-6.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, lk. 640p.

⁴¹ Mihkelson, *Vastu tuult*, p. 165.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Rahva Sõna*, 20 July 1932.

⁴⁴ *Võitlus*, 1 April 1933.

⁴⁵ Rei in the *Riigikogu* on 27 July 1932, *Maaleht*, 30 July 1932.

1933 to ban “organizations whose members wear uniforms or other distinctive insignia and are subject to specific discipline” mentioned by name, in addition to the League, the Democratic Frontline Soldiers’ Association created by the Socialists, as well as the Socialists’ gymnastics groups, and the Young Socialists’ League. Also banned were the *Põhja Küttide Leegion* (Northern Riflemen’s Legion) associated with the Settlers, and the *Üleriiklik Vabadussõjalaste Ühendus* (National Veterans’ Association) established by the Farmers.⁴⁶

Pitka’s *Lahinguvendade klubi* (Battle Comrades’ Club) which marched out of the League’s third congress in 1932 was coopted by the Centre Party.⁴⁷ Alleging that the League had “strayed from the proper path” of a veterans’ association, Pitka held the founding meeting on 26 Dec 1933 of the *Vabadussõja Rindemeeste Ühing* (War of Independence Frontline Soldiers’ Association), an organization which was never heard of again.⁴⁸ The Northern Riflemen’s Legion created by the Settlers wore a green armband and was envisaged as a “green guard”. The Northern Riflemen’s Legion had an almost identical organizational structure⁴⁹ to that of the League’s and among the tasks it set for itself, many corresponded to those of the Veterans: to promote a sense of duty, fairness, and the development of national consciousness; to fight against profiteering and political corruption; “to promote respect for the achievements of the War of Independence and to inculcate citizens with the will to victory of the War of Independence era.”⁵⁰ The similarity of these aims demonstrates that the general patriotic ideals and attitudes propagated by the League were widely shared by those in opposing political camps and were in no sense confined to the Veterans. The distinction was less a question of ideology than a matter of personal allegiance or affiliation.⁵¹

⁴⁶ *Sisekaitse ülema otsus* nr. 1193-p., 11 August 1933, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 69, lk. 1.

⁴⁷ *Võitlus*, 1 April 1933.

⁴⁸ *Vaba Maa*, 30 December 1933.

⁴⁹ Congress, council, central executive, and regional subdivisions (*ringkond, valdkond, rühm, jagu*), *Põhja Küttide Leegioni sisekord*, ERA, f. 953, n. 1, s. 17, lk. 2-3.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*; ERA, f. 949, n. 3, s. 48, lk. 11.

⁵¹ Ilmar Raamot, the chief secretary of the Settlers’ Party, recalls that Laidoner and Einbund, who later repressed the Veterans’ League for its alleged paramilitary nature, were impressed by the Northern Riflemen’s Legion when Raamot put on a display, Raamot, *Mälestused*, vol. 2 (Stockholm, 1991), p. 95. Raamot also notes that Sirk and Seiman while they were still members of the Settlers’ Party had organized the *Talurite Liit* (Farmers’ League), a paramilitary and youth group affiliated with the Settlers’ Party, Raamot, *Mälestused*, vol. 1, pp. 267-8.

Members of the Veterans' League identified themselves by wearing a white and black armband. Though it was similar to the blue and black armbands of the Lapua movement, it was more likely inspired by the white and blue of Finnish veterans' league, the VRL.⁵² On the armband was the Veterans' logo: a hand clutching a sword within a stylized cross reminiscent of the design of the Liberty Cross, the War of Independence decoration. Inside the cross were the letters 'V' and 'L', the initials of the Veterans' League (*Vabadussõjalaste Liit*) and the dates 1918-1920, the years of the War of Independence. The most distinctive symbol of the League, adopted by chance in mid-1932, was the black beret.⁵³ The black beret, more than any other external attribute, came to represent the movement. In addition, the Veterans developed a military style uniform consisting of a green shirt, breeches, and boots. However, uniforms were worn by very few members, foremost by those in the security units, not by the general membership. The most obvious borrowing from fascist trends was the use of a raised arm salute at rallies.⁵⁴ The popular symbol for the Veterans was the club or cudgel (*kaigas*) and they were often popularly referred to as *kaikamehed* (cudgel-men). The nickname stuck after Tallinn Veterans' League member Boris Parm appeared at an audience with *Riigivanem* Päts carrying a wooden club, a symbol of peasant protest, to demand the fulfillment of the government's pledges to the war veterans.⁵⁵

An important means of identification was the Veterans' battle-song or anthem, *Mehemeel* (Manly Spirit), the final verse of the well-known 19th century patriotic song *Eestimaa, mu isamaa* (Estonia, my Fatherland).⁵⁶

Estonia, your manly spirit
is not dead yet.
Though death reaps a rich harvest
in the din of war
we remain faithful to the fatherland
till our last drop of blood,
till our last drop of blood.⁵⁷

⁵² Marandi, *Must valge-lipu all*, p. 492.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁵⁴ *Võitlus* preposterously claimed that ancient Estonian warriors had used a raised arm as a greeting, 3 June 1933.

⁵⁵ The League disassociated itself from Parm's actions, *Võitlus*, 29 January 1932.

⁵⁶ Marandi, *Must valge-lipu all*, pp. 28-9, 124.

⁵⁷ *Eestimaa, su mehe meel
pole mitte surnud veel.
Peab surm ka rohkem lõikust
suure sõjakäraga,*

In a country known for mass song festivals, the League's anthem was of great importance. In fact, it could be described as one of the chief weapons in their arsenal. The exceptionally tumultuous election campaign of 1934 superficially resembled a singing contest rather than the "wave of terror" described by Päts. The disruption and break up of Socialist meetings by the Veterans was accomplished more often by singing *Mehemeel* and drowning out the Socialists' "International", instead of by violent physical force.

Membership and support

The Veterans' portrayal of themselves as political outsiders was misleading. A number of their leaders had been actively involved with political parties before. What they did have in common was that they had all been unsuccessful in their political activity, measured in terms of securing a seat in the *Riigikogu*. The only exception was Rõuk, who though not belonging to any party, had served briefly as minister of justice in 1924. The background of the Veterans' leadership was not the right-wing of the political spectrum as might be expected, but rather the centre, especially the Settlers and the Centre Party. Sirk and Seiman had been members of the Settlers' Party.⁵⁸ Sirk had even been elected to the Settlers' Tallinn executive committee and had wanted to stand as a candidate in the 1929 *Riigikogu* elections, but he would have been too far down the party list to be elected and he did not have the patience to wait for his turn to rise higher up.⁵⁹ The failure of Sirk's bid to become a candidate underlines the importance of the Veterans' demand for British style individual mandates to replace the system of proportional representation.⁶⁰ Mäe had a similar experience: he had been a member of the Centre Party's Harju county executive and a candidate in the 1932 *Riigikogu* elections.⁶¹ He claimed that his defection was a principled stand protesting at the Centre Party's stance on constitutional amendment, but it is obvious that as an unsuccessful candidate he saw the League as a quicker way to a position of political power. Some other leading Veterans also came from the Centre

*truuks jääme isamaale
viimse veretilgani,
viimse veretilgani.*

⁵⁸ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90; Raamot, *Mälestused*, vol. 1, pp. 267-8.

⁵⁹ Raamot, *Mälestused*, vol. 1, pp. 267-9; vol. 2, p. 17.

⁶⁰ Marandi, "Riigivõimude tasakaalu otsingul," p. 25.

⁶¹ Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, p. 84.

Party: Oskar Luiga belonged to the Centre Party executive in Rakvere; Dr. Harry Rütman, the auditor of the League's central executive, was an active figure in the Centre Party; and through most of the year 1932, Colonel Dr. Hans Leesment, was simultaneously the League's deputy chairman and a member of the Centre Party's central committee.⁶²

After the League was re-established in October 1933, individual chapters were re-registered and the founding of new chapters quickly mushroomed. By the banning of the League in March 1934 nearly five hundred chapters had been registered.⁶³ The League even had one chapter outside Estonia in New York.⁶⁴ Many of these, however, existed only on paper and had not yet begun to function. Judging from the number of League chapters that the police closed down, it appears that 386 chapters were active.⁶⁵

No statistics exist or were ever compiled giving an overall profile of the membership of the League. The leaders of the League themselves evidently did not know the exact membership figures. When questioned by the political police they gave conflicting answers.⁶⁶ Marandi estimates a figure of more than 60 000 for the total membership.⁶⁷ Kuuli gives a much more cautious estimate of 10 000.⁶⁸ Both numbers, however, are unsatisfactory.⁶⁹ Marandi errs by relying on a statement by Sirk that was surely an exaggeration, while Kuuli underestimates the number of Veterans outside Tallinn in the rural chapters. A more satisfactory rough estimate of between 20 000 and 25 000 members is arrived at by proceeding from the assumption that between one-third and one-quarter of the League's membership belonged to the Tallinn chapter which was, at its maximum, no more than 7 000 strong.

⁶² Raamot, *Mälestused*, vol. 2, p. 38; *Võitlus*, 3 December 1932; Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 150, footnote 36.

⁶³ Political police reports give differing figures: 493 chapters in ERA, f. 14, n. 2, s. 73, lk. 3 and 495 chapters in ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 74, lk. 172.

⁶⁴ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 91, lk. 647.

⁶⁵ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 129.

⁶⁶ The membership figures for the Tallinn League chapter given at their political police interrogations in March 1934 by Seiman: 7000, Sirk: 6000 and 3000, Klasmann: 6000, Rudolf Joonits (treasurer of the Tallinn chapter): 3000, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 28, 45, 630, and s. 91, lk. 36.

⁶⁷ Marandi, *Must valge-lipu all*, p. 321. Surprisingly for the always cautious and careful Marandi, his figure is taken simply from Sirk's speech of 3 December 1933. This was certainly an exaggeration and not reliable since Sirk gave contradictory membership figures on other occasions, see previous footnote.

⁶⁸ Kuuli, *Vapsidest Isamaaliiduni*, p. 91. Kuuli assumes that the bulk of the membership was in Tallinn and that most rural chapters consisted of only a few members.

⁶⁹ Other estimates are 52 000, Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, p. 105, and 40 000, Hannes Walter, "Jüri Uluots," *Looming*, no. 1, 1990, p. 107.

The socio-economic composition of the League's membership is difficult to determine. Fearing measures against it in March 1934, membership lists were destroyed.⁷⁰ The political police compiled lists of their own after the banning of the League, but for their purposes they were interested only in those who were state employees or members of the armed forces and the Civil Guard.⁷¹ Membership lists exist for only a few League chapters. The only known analysis of the membership by occupation carried out by the League itself was on the fifth anniversary of the Tallinn Veterans' League in 1931.⁷² This breakdown shows the composition of the largest and most important chapter of the League while it was still an ex-combatants interest group and before it became a mass movement.

Table 4. Membership of the Tallinn Veterans' League in 1931

Occupation

| | |
|----------------------|-------|
| white collar workers | 38.0% |
| blue collar workers | 26.5% |
| professionals | 13.0% |
| military | 10.5% |
| entrepreneurs | 6.0% |
| farmers | 3.0% |
| students | 3.0% |

Level of education

| | |
|----------------|-----|
| primary | 28% |
| higher primary | 20% |
| secondary | 25% |
| post-secondary | 20% |
| vocational | 3% |
| unknown | 4% |

One source of data for League membership in its final phase can be gleaned from lists of candidates for the local elections in January 1934. Of the 153 Veterans' candidates in the municipal elections in Tallinn⁷³ and

⁷⁰ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 91, lk. 154-5.

⁷¹ *Nimekirjad suletud EVL kuulunud liikmete kohta prefektuuride kaupa*, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 76.

⁷² *Võitlus*, 28 November 1931.

⁷³ *"Vabadussõjalaste Rahvusliikumise" kandidaatide nimekiri Tallinna linnavolikogu valimistel 14.-15. jaan. 1934.*

Tartu⁷⁴ the most common occupations were businessmen (27%), lawyers (11%), workers (10%), skilled workers (9%), and state employees (9%). The predominance of businessmen and lawyers does not show any particularity of the League since these were two of the most usual backgrounds for politicians in general. More noteworthy is the high number of workers. Of the Veterans' candidates fully 84% lived up to their name by having actually served in the War of Independence. A sample of 300 League candidates in the municipal and rural district elections for Tallinn and Võru county⁷⁵ gives a median age of 40. The average age for candidates would likely have been higher than that of the membership. For example, the average age of the 152 member chapter in the town of Antsla was 34.⁷⁶

The most complete listing of the occupations of the members of the League is that of the 448 member chapter in Nõmme, a town adjoining Tallinn.⁷⁷

Table 5. Most represented occupations among members of the Nõmme chapter (1934)

| | |
|----|-----------------------|
| 94 | artisans or tradesmen |
| 41 | housewives |
| 39 | railway employees |
| 34 | military |
| 30 | workers |
| 18 | merchants |
| 16 | unemployed |
| 13 | office clerks |
| 13 | civil servants |
| 12 | drivers |
| 8 | construction workers |
| 8 | policemen |
| 8 | businessmen |
| 7 | shop clerks |

An incomplete listing of occupations for members of the Tartu chapter shows a similar pattern with the largest group being artisans and tradesmen, followed by workers, and then skilled workers, students, and shop clerks.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ *Võitlus*, 11 January 1934.

⁷⁵ ERA, f. 953, n. 1, s. 36, lk. 83-9.

⁷⁶ ERA, f. 953, n. 1, s. 36, lk. 151-3.

⁷⁷ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 196.

⁷⁸ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 74, lk. 107-9.

A picture of the membership of the League in the countryside can be gleaned by a sample of several chapters in rural districts of Tartu and Valga counties: the largest group were farm labourers (34%), followed by farmers (25%), renters (17%), artisans (14%), workers (8%), and merchants and dairymen (3%).⁷⁹ This suggests that a substantial part of the support for the Veterans in rural areas came from the less well off groups in society.

The only attempt to analyze the social basis of support for the Veterans has been made by the American sociologist Tõnu Parming.⁸⁰ His thesis is that the urban middle class, fearing the threat from the depression to its recently achieved status, abandoned its allegiance to traditional bourgeois parties and placed its hopes on the radical right. Though not mentioned, this corresponds to Seymour Lipset's thesis of fascism being the "radicalism of the centre."⁸¹ Comparing the results of only the first and the third constitutional referenda, Parming points to a strong shift in the number of urban voters supporting the Veterans' constitutional amendment. He then proceeds to demonstrate that of the urban electorate it was the middle class which moved to the Veterans. Parming's key piece of evidence is the strong degree of correlation between the level of support for the Veterans' proposal in the referendum and the number of votes given to bourgeois parties in the 1932 *Riigikogu* elections. Unfortunately the validity of his conclusion is based on deficient sources. Furthermore, his thesis rests on the untenable assumption of class identification with parties and that the electorate voted along class lines. More specifically, he assumes that "those traditionally voting for a bourgeois party would support the Veterans' proposal at the referendum" and that those voters supporting Socialists and Communists would vote against it. In fact, it was precisely Socialist and Communist voters who abandoned their previous affiliation to vote for the Veterans in the local elections three months later. Parming notes this fact, but is not able to explain how this fits his middle class thesis.

Extrapolating from the results of the referendum, however, is clearly insufficient. The only certain guide to voter support for the League are the municipal and rural district elections held in January 1934, the only elections in which the Veterans had the opportunity to participate. In the

⁷⁹ Sample of 175 League members in the Kavilda, Luunja, Tomma, Ulila, Mäksa, and Meeksi chapters, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 74, lk. 82, 85, 89, 90, 133, 135.

⁸⁰ Parming, *The Collapse of Liberal Democracy*, pp. 51-6.

⁸¹ Seymour Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Political Movements* (New York, 1960), p. 133.

municipal elections the Veterans received 41% of the overall vote in the cities, and finished first in the three largest cities, Tallinn (49%), Tartu (48%), and Narva (44%).⁸² The League's spectacular gains came mostly at the expense of Tõnisson's Centre Party, the Socialists, and the Communists, all of whom suffered staggering losses. In comparison with their results in the 1932 *Riigikogu* elections the Centre Party lost 46 000 votes (67%), the Socialists 25 000 (61%), and the Communists 16 000 (85%). In the countryside, however, the Veterans made much less headway. The League fielded candidates in only half of the constituencies in the rural districts and captured just over 10% of the overall vote.⁸³ The majority of votes were shared almost evenly between the two agrarian parties, the Farmers and the Settlers, who successfully managed to retain their electorate against the challenge from the Veterans. The League could not successfully compete with their well-established organizational networks nor could it shake the image of being an urban party.⁸⁴ When the total of votes for the League in the cities, rural districts and towns (*alevid*) are combined, a figure of approximately just over 20% of the total votes cast is arrived at.⁸⁵ This made them the strongest party, just ahead of the Farmers' Party.

It is evident that the Veterans' movement was a predominately urban phenomenon. About two-thirds of the League's support came from the cities, but at this time more than two-thirds of the population still lived in the countryside. Nevertheless, the composition of its social base was heterogeneous. Visiting Tallinn in September 1933, leading Finnish radical right figures Vilho Helanen and Reino Ala-Kaljo were amazed at the extent of worker support for the Veterans which was inconceivable in the case of Finland, or for that matter almost anywhere else.⁸⁶ As the election results show, the League was not a classic fascist party of the lower

⁸² Table of results and an analysis of the figures provided in Olaf Kuuli, "Parlamendi- ja kohalike omavalitsuste valimised kodanlikus Eestis 1930-ndatel aastatel ja Eestimaa Kommunistliku Partei taktika," pp. 112-6; also in Kuuli, *Vapsidest Isamaaliiduni*, pp. 119-21.

⁸³ Percentually the results were as follows: Settlers 27, Farmers 27, other non-socialist lists 22, the Veterans 11, socialist lists 11, independents 2. Derived from a table of the results in Kuuli, "Parlamendi- ja kohalike omavalitsuste valimised kodanlikus Eestis," pp. 110-1.

⁸⁴ *Maaleht*, 23 January, 27 February 1934; *Kaja*, 6, 10 March 1934.

⁸⁵ Parallel to elections to the city and rural district councils, elections were also held for the councils of smaller towns (*alevid*). In the towns the League received 20% of the overall vote, but the electorate was only a fraction of the size of the city and rural electorate, Kuuli, "Parlamendi- ja kohalike omavalitsuste valimised kodanlikus Eestis," p. 115; also in Kuuli, *Vapsidest Isamaaliiduni*, pp. 123-4.

⁸⁶ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 72, lk. 20.

middle class or as Parming has argued of the “whole spectrum of the urban middle class”,⁸⁷ but quite clearly also enjoyed substantial working class support, in fact, more than the Socialists and Communists combined. Thus it could even be claimed that League had won the support of the majority of the working class. This is a feat for which it is hard to find parallel amongst radical right-wing and fascist movements.

A measure of the Veterans’ success was their wresting of control of the “Movement of the Unemployed” from the Communists. In 1934 Veterans took over the leadership of the Committees of the Unemployed in Tallinn and Tartu, both of which had previously been dominated by Communists. Of the seven members of the Tallinn Committee of the Unemployed elected on 22 January, all three executive members were Veterans, while of the non-executive members two were Communists, one was a Socialist, and one politically unknown.⁸⁸ The Veterans also made their mark at the fourth Congress of the Unemployed in Pärnu on 20 January when in response to the singing of the “International”, the Veterans’ *Mehemeel* was sung more powerfully. This provoked a brawl which was broken up by the police and resulted in the dispersal of the Congress.⁸⁹ The Veterans’ success in this quarter moved *Vaba Maa* to sarcastically label them a “movement of the unemployed.”⁹⁰ Other hostile commentators alleged that Communists could be seen making common cause with the Veterans.⁹¹ According to Heinrich Frank, a factory worker who was a circuit speaker for the Veterans, the League made an impact on the working class because it was the only party which showed that it “cared” about them, and it was successful because it lifted their self-esteem.⁹² The Veterans’ emphasis on the honour of labour, the value of work, and integration into the national community offered workers new forms of recognition and status. A more pragmatic reason for working class support might have been that, unlike the Communists or Socialists who had no hope of coming to power, the Veterans were effectively challenging the establishment and held out the tangible prospect of altering the system which treated workers as an underclass.

⁸⁷ Parming, *The Collapse of Liberal Democracy*, p. 55.

⁸⁸ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 72, lk. 72.

⁸⁹ Mihkelson, *Vastu tuult*, p. 312.

⁹⁰ *Vaba Maa*, 12 January 1934.

⁹¹ A typical example was a story in *Kaja*, 7 February 1934, “Former teachers’ union secretary swaps red shirt for black one.” See also Laaman, *Konstantin Päts*, p. 246.

⁹² Heinrich Frank, “Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Liit ja Eesti Tööliskond,” in Hamilkar Mengel, ed., *50 aastat* (USA, 1987), pp. 53-7.

Radical movements protesting against the established parties typically tend to attract a disproportionate number of young people. This clearly holds true in the case of the Veterans. Like fascist movements, they exalted youth and emphasized the conflict between generations. *Võitlus* identified the League with “the rising generation” and the “dynamism of youth”.⁹³ The “stagnated” political party system was held responsible for hindering the rise of younger men. Sirk and most of the Veterans who formed the war generation were born at the turn of the century, and thus were in their early- to mid-thirties when the League was at its zenith. The ruling elite, the generation preceding the Veterans, however, had established itself rapidly at an early age in the chaotic conditions of the establishment of the new state in 1918-1920 and thus seemed set to remain in charge for an extraordinarily long period of time. The Veterans accused the establishment of “blocking the augmentation of the nation’s leadership with new blood,” in contrast to the War of Independence era when “every brave soldier could advance according to his abilities.”⁹⁴ The respected daily *Päevaleht* concluded that the League was a “youth protest movement” and even observed that “the present struggle to a large degree is one between generations.”⁹⁵ Furthermore, Estonia had one of the world’s highest ratios of university education at that time, resulting in a surplus of graduates and a serious problem of intellectual unemployment.⁹⁶ Thus student fraternities constituted a strong base of support for the Veterans. Though the fraternities were officially apolitical, their general world view was emphatically nationalistic. However, it was not the affinity of their ideological orientations which was the primary motivation for their attraction to the Veterans, but rather the hope of securing jobs for the members.⁹⁷ It is noteworthy that Sirk and several other prominent Veterans’ leaders were alumni of the same fraternity, *Sakala*.⁹⁸

The Veterans had considerable support in the armed forces. This was especially worrisome for the authorities; according to the prosecution at the trial of the Veterans’ leaders, the League’s agitation and recruitment

⁹³ *Võitlus*, 15 July 1933.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Päevaleht*, 29 September 1933.

⁹⁶ Joseph Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars. A History of East Central Europe*, vol. IX (Seattle, 1974), p. 374.

⁹⁷ Oskar Loorits, *Eesti ajaloo põhiprobleemid* (Stockholm, 1955), p. 165.

⁹⁸ On “Sakala” and the Veterans see ERA, f. 952, n. 1, s. 53.

had a destabilizing effect on the armed forces.⁹⁹ Some Veterans' agitators threatened officers and non-commissioned officers who did not support the League with demotion after the Veterans came to power. But it appears that most military men needed little convincing, for sympathy with the Veterans came naturally. Many officers began their military careers in the War of Independence and would have understandably joined a veterans' association, while not necessarily supporting the League's politics. In many units of the armed forces the majority of officers and non-commissioned officers were supporters of the League. This was the case for the armoured regiment in Tallinn, the first infantry regiment and first artillery group stationed in Narva, the second artillery group and fifth infantry battalion based in Rakvere, the two infantry battalions garrisoning Pärnu, the first armoured train regiment based in Tapa, and the several units stationed in Tartu and Petseri.¹⁰⁰ While sympathy for the League was clearly widespread, it is also important to note that the army remained steadfastly loyal to government. Orders to suppress the Veterans were carried out without any instances of disobedience.

Many supporters of the Veterans were also to be found in the Civil Guard (*Kaitseliit*). As the Civil Guard functioned as a military reserve, most veterans of the War of Independence were naturally members. The Commander of the Civil Guard, General Johannes Roska (Orasmaa), had even been the deputy chairman of the League in 1930-31. Furthermore, the purposes and goals of the Civil Guard accorded well with the convictions of the Veterans: defense of the Fatherland, patriotism, duty to the nation, and internal security against Communist subversion.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, despite these affinities, the Civil Guard was politically heterogeneous, and included members of the Socialist Party as well. The Veterans' prominent role in units of the Civil Guard applied only to the cities, especially Tallinn, Tartu, and Narva,¹⁰² for in the countryside the Civil Guard units were dominated by supporters of the two agrarian parties. After Päts' coup d'état, a thorough purge was carried out in the ranks of the Civil Guard in which well over a thousand guardsmen were expelled for having been politically active on behalf of the Veterans.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ *Süüdistusakt*, ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 3, lk. 16-17.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Kaitseliidu põhikiri*, ERA, f. 1, n. 6, s. 8, lk. 74.

¹⁰² *Süüdistusakt*, ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 3, lk. 17.

¹⁰³ See chapter nine for figures on Veterans' supporters expelled from the Civil Guard after 12 March 1934.

The League financed itself largely through membership dues and contributions from wealthier members and supporters. Individual chapters had to contribute 20% of their income from membership dues to the central executive.¹⁰⁴ On the campaign trail, additional income came from voluntary donations at meetings and the selling of postcards with a picture of Larka.¹⁰⁵ In 1931 the League had an income of 8347 kroons and an expenditure of 7384 kr.¹⁰⁶ The final budget for the Tallinn chapter in 1934 was 5 000 kr.¹⁰⁷ The last League congress in December 1933 approved a budget for the central executive of 38 000 kr., 30 000 kr. from membership fees and 8 000 kr. from contributions.¹⁰⁸ By far the largest portion of expenditures, 25 000 kr., was allocated for propaganda. The figure for contributions, however, could certainly have been expected to be higher. The League had begun to solicit contributions from wealthy supporters in 1931 when an informal "finance committee" headed by General Põdder sought donations from businessmen.¹⁰⁹ A group of wealthier members helped to maintain the League's headquarters building at 46 Narva Road and the Tallinn chapter's new headquarters on Mere Avenue.¹¹⁰ Later, when the Veterans had acquired more popular support and appeared to be heading towards power, prominent businessmen were more willing to contribute substantial sums.¹¹¹ After the success of the October 1933 referendum Gottfried Dunkel collected 5000 kr. each from industrialists Martin Luther (veneer and furniture manufacturer), Kristjan Rotermann (flour mills and bakeries), and Narva textile factory director Peltzer.¹¹² These were among the largest donations, but certainly not the only contributions. Some of these benefactors later paid dearly for their generosity: after the Päts coup d'état, seven businessmen who had supported the League were sent to internal exile on the island of Kihnu.¹¹³

¹⁰⁴ *Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Liidu põhikiri*, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 71, lk. 15.

¹⁰⁵ Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, p. 106-7.

¹⁰⁶ ERA, f. 3632, n. 1, s. 1, lk. 12.

¹⁰⁷ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 91, lk. 36.

¹⁰⁸ *Võitlus*, 19 December 1934.

¹⁰⁹ ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 88a, lk. 54-5.

¹¹⁰ Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 481.

¹¹¹ The German embassy reported that "nearly all industrial enterprises have placed significant sums at the disposal of the Veterans as insurance or in view of the large portion of workforce belonging to the movement," *Gesandtschaft an das AA*, 15 March 1934, AA, Pol. Abt. IV, Po. 5.

¹¹² ERA, f. 949, n. 3, s. 31, lk. 67.

¹¹³ These businessmen were Heinrich Tofer, Karl Jänes, Karl Uudel, Artur Oksenberg, Karl Luberg, Jaan Urla, and Vassili Voinov, *Päevaleht*, 28 March 1934. Tofer and Jänes continued to support the League financially in its underground period, Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, p. 107; Raamot, *Mälestused*, vol. 2, p. 125.

Some businessmen even attempted to profit from the Veterans' popularity by marketing products which capitalized on the public image of the Veterans, such as a chocolate bar named "Dictator"¹¹⁴ and a brand of "Veterans' cigarette" called the *Kaikamees* (cudgel-man, the nickname for the Veterans). An advertisement for the latter showed a hand wielding a club and the jingle:¹¹⁵

Whose faith in our victory is lacking,
straight away we'll send 'em packing.
Kaikamees leads the race,
victorious in every case.

¹¹⁴ *Võitlus*, 21 October 1934.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11 January 1934.

CHAPTER 9

THE COUP D'ÉTAT OF 12 MARCH 1934

The opening salvo in the government's counter-offensive against the Veterans' League came in Päts' speech to the Farmers' Party Congress on 18 February 1934. Päts asserted:

We in the government must keep our eyes open and be prepared to use strong measures when necessary to protect the state. I have shown in my life that I do not shirk from such measures, because I am convinced that often a few sacrifices can save the state from large sacrifices. You can be certain that as long as I am at the head of the state, I will not allow any disorder to go so far as to place our state in danger.¹

He proposed a law forbidding military personnel from belonging to any organization with political aims or from participating in any form of political activity. The *Riigikogu* speedily passed such a law on 27 February.² This resulted in mass resignations from the League in the beginning of March: for example, 62 active servicemen left the League chapter in Rakvere, 74 in Valga, and 303 in Tartu.³ The following week, the government took a further step to ensure the loyalty of the armed forces by transferring several senior officers to different posts and retiring some others.⁴ The cabinet also tabled bills to forbid political intimidation and to allow the government to dismiss civil servants in an area where a state of emergency was in effect.⁵ At the same time, Päts instructed the Minister of Justice and the Interior, Johan Müller, to compile a list of the League's leaders.⁶

Suspicion by the Veterans of a possible clampdown was already hinted at by a headline in *Võitlus* on 1 February, "A Socialist deal with the candidates of the political parties, Laidoner and Päts? The Socialists hope

¹ *Kaja*, 20 February 1934.

² *Riigi Teataja* 18 - 1934, art. 128, 134, 135. Such a measure had already been recommended by a *Riigikogu* committee in December, *Kaja*, 16 December 1933.

³ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 76, lk. 144-7, 151-2, 170-1.

⁴ Most notably, Army Chief of Staff General Juhan Tõrvand was replaced by General Nikolai Reek, *Postimees*, 9 February 1934.

⁵ Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 410.

⁶ Laaman, *Konstantin Päts*, p. 251.

to liquidate the Veterans' movement with their assistance."⁷ The article accurately predicted that, "in the event that either Päts or Laidoner becomes president, then new pressure will be applied against the Veterans' movement and measures will again be taken to close the Veterans' organizations." The League leadership was, in fact, aware of the government's intention to stage a new crackdown, having received reliable information from their informants in the Political Police that lists of those Veterans' leaders to be arrested were being drawn up.⁸

The central executive warned League chapters in a circular on 8 March:

Since General Larka has received so many signatures the parties have come to understand that they will lose the forthcoming elections . . . Therefore the partymen might create a provocation against the Veterans and fabricate lies in order to give a superficial reason to the people for the closing of the League and the use of coercion.

The central executive therefore issued the following instructions to its chapters:

- 1) Scrupulously adhere to the law in all activities.
- 2) If the League is once again closed and searches are undertaken, remain perfectly calm.
- 3) At the closing of the League the partymen will think up some slander about a putsch, a putsch attempt or connections with Hitler or with the communists etc., as happened last summer.
- 4) If the League is closed again, then every member should continue to work energetically for our victory at the polls.
- 5) Be extremely careful in accepting new members into League chapters.⁹

The last point reflected the concern that rival candidates' campaign organizers, especially the Laidoner committee, were trying to place spies into the League and provocateurs who would join and then quit.¹⁰ They were anxious that another incident along the lines of the case of reserve-Colonel Karl Parts, a well-known hero of the War of Independence who quit the League, joined the Centre Party and denounced the League in the

⁷ *Võitlus*, 1 February 1934.

⁸ Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, p. 98.

⁹ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 92, lk. 13-4.

¹⁰ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 92, lk. 20.

press, should not be repeated.¹¹

At the same time (8 March), oral instructions were issued by telephone to League chapters by the central executive to hide their correspondence and membership lists so that they would not fall into the hands of the police.¹² In some centres, such as in Tallinn, orders were given to destroy League documents.¹³ Further precautions taken in the face of an imminent crackdown included the sale on 12 March of the *Võitlus* printing press to League central executive member Paul Telg, who in turn sold it to a company created specifically for that purpose, to avoid possible confiscation by the authorities.¹⁴

Monday, March 12th, the day chosen by Päts to eliminate the League, was an unpleasantly damp and windy winter's day.¹⁵ Events were set in motion by the cadets of the military academy in the early afternoon on the orders of their commander, Colonel Aleksander Jaakson.¹⁶ Though a number of other regular military units were stationed in the capital, they were evidently not considered as politically reliable for the task as the cadets. One company of cadets was dispatched to the Toompea palace to secure the seat of the government, and a second company surrounded the headquarters of the League at 46 Narva Road while the police swooped in to arrest Sirk and other leaders of the League at around 17:00.

At about the same time, ministers gathered at the Toompea palace for an emergency cabinet meeting, the agenda of which they were not informed. They were surprised to find Laidoner also present. Päts announced his proposal for a state of emergency to be declared for six months and to appoint Laidoner as Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and Chief of Internal Security.¹⁷ This came as a surprise to all

¹¹ *Vaba Maa*, 6 February 1934.

¹² ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 96, lk. 143.

¹³ August Maling, the Tallinn Veterans' League's salaried secretary, received instructions from the central executive to destroy the League's correspondence, especially that pertaining to the membership. Maling burned the League's documents on the 9th or 10th of March, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 91, lk. 154-5. Other papers were taken by Seiman and Viidik to the latter's home on Suurlaagri street for safekeeping. After they had all been arrested, Evald Lepisto burned the material on the insistence of Viidik's wife, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 91, lk. 179-80, 184.

¹⁴ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 91, lk. 673. This transaction did not succeed in preventing the confiscation of the printing press. The authorities simply did not recognise the validity of the transaction. The printing press was later used to publish *Uus Eesti*, the Päts regime's mouthpiece, Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 333.

¹⁵ Raamot, *Mälestused*, vol. 2, p. 23; Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, p. 80.

¹⁶ Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 424; Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, pp. 79-81.

¹⁷ Riigivanema otsus nr. 173, *Riigi Teataja* 22 - 1934, art. 156.

except Müller, the Minister of Justice and the Interior. As they were presented practically with a *fait accompli*, none of the members of the cabinet questioned Päts' pronouncement.¹⁸ The decree was immediately implemented (as of 17:00) by telegraph.

Laidoner quickly sprang into action. His first act as Chief of Internal Security was to order the closure of the League and to take its property into custody on the grounds that the League "organized and agitated against the state and the social order stipulated in the constitution and threatens general peace and public security".¹⁹ Laidoner also forbade any political meetings.²⁰

Sirk and all the other leading members of the League, with the exception of Paul Telg, who fled to Finland, were arrested. Larka went into hiding, but as he was a presidential candidate, the police were instructed by Laidoner not to arrest him. The following day further military detachments were deployed in the city. The police operation swept the provinces as well. In the operation which lasted several weeks, at least 886 people were detained by the police,²¹ more than twice as many as the 400 usually quoted.²² Most of these individuals, however, were detained for only a few days or weeks. Nearly 400 chapters of the League nation-wide were closed.²³

Why did the Veterans accept their fate so passively? Clearly, they believed that the Päts government would adhere to the bounds of legality and would not take such far-reaching measures.²⁴ Their response was conditioned by their experience of the state of emergency imposed by Tõnisson's government in August 1933. They thought that it would be just like Tõnisson's ban, which mostly made a mockery of the government and increased the popularity of the Veterans. Sirk told Mäe just hours before they were arrested, "let them imprison us, the people will vote us out of prison. The government can not halt the elections, but the use of force against us will arouse the people to even greater indignation."²⁵ Sirk mistakenly believed that the government's resolve was weaker, and the

¹⁸ The members of the 'transitional' cabinet were not likely to disagree with Päts on this issue as they were not representatives of the parties, but 'experts' chosen by him personally.

¹⁹ Sisekaitse ülema otsus nr. 2526/519, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 69, lk. 134.

²⁰ Sisekaitse ülema sundmäärus nr. 14, *Riigi Teataja* 22 - 1934, art. 157.

²¹ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 69, lk. 162.

²² Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians*, p. 118; Uustalu, *Eesti Vabariik*, p. 138.

²³ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 129.

²⁴ Raamot, *Mälestused*, vol. 2, p. 22.

²⁵ Letter from Hjalmar Mäe to Rein Marandi, 6 January 1972, Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 414.

Veterans' support more committed, than it actually was.

The standard view of the coup d'état is that Päts had been biding his time, but was forced into action by news from Laidoner that the Veterans were planning to seize power.²⁶ Päts in his explanation of his actions to the *Riigikogu* on 15 March claimed: "this step was taken at the last minute. Information had come to me . . . that all sorts of instructions had been given to take to the streets and men from military units with weapons would have come along."²⁷ The idea that Päts would have carried out his actions one week later had he not received information of plans for a coup by the Veterans on the night of the 12th of March is contradicted by evidence from Müller, Päts' Minister of Justice and the Interior. According to Müller,

The action came half a day earlier than had been planned because Laidoner interfered. Päts had requested me to come to his office at 9:30 in the evening of the 12th of March. The final deliberation was to have taken place there and the corresponding action would have followed that night.²⁸

According to him, Laidoner acted on information from Rei, not from the police. Another source which contradicts the accepted version is the *Riigivanem's* appointment diary for 12 March which lists Laidoner, Müller, Head of Internal Security General Gustav Jonson, Chief of the General Staff General Nikolai Reek, Minister of Defense General Paul Lill, head of the Military Academy Colonel Aleksander Jaakson, Air Force chief Colonel Richard Tomberg, and leader of the Socialist Party August Rei - all the key players in carrying out the coup.²⁹ The most logical explanation for the timing of these appointments was that they had been summoned to be given their final instructions and that the 12th of March had already been decided upon in advance as the date of the operation.

Päts was already aware of the passive stance adopted on 8 March by the Veterans.³⁰ The manner of the troop deployment on 12 March also attests to the fact that the government knew perfectly well that the Veterans were not going to seize power. The Tallinn garrison was not used nor were troops deployed at key communications sites which would

²⁶ Laaman, *Konstantin Päts*, pp. 250-1.

²⁷ Päts, 15 March 1934, *Riigikogu V koosseis. Täielikud protokollid ja stenograafilised aruanded*, p. 1435.

²⁸ Raamot, *Mälestused*, vol. 2, p. 31.

²⁹ ERA, f. 31, n. 5, s. 497, lk. 128. Also on the list were the Soviet and Lithuanian ministers.

³⁰ Päts, 15 March 1934, *Riigikogu protokollid*, p. 1437.

have been the targets of any coup attempt.³¹ In any case Päts' justification is simply untenable because it hardly makes sense that the party expected to triumph in the elections would have wanted or needed to seize power by force.

On 15 March 1934 Päts appeared before the *Riigikogu* to explain the reasons for the steps that he had taken three days earlier. First, he denied that there had been any personal motive. He stated that with the wave of "terror and intimidation" the League's campaign of "undermining the authority of the state" had reached an advanced stage. He charged that the Veterans had been "preparing a revolution" and would have taken over power by force if necessary. If that had occurred then "the chances of a civil war erupting would have been very close." Regarding the forthcoming elections, he stated:

We do not think that in such an atmosphere, where on the one hand the people have been incited to anger and thoughts of revenge, and on the other there is a wave of fear, that anyone would be able to fulfill his duties as a citizen and make responsible decisions. The people must settle down; instead of agitation there must be explanation. It must be explained that there is a serious illness in our state.³²

One of the more disingenuous justifications given by Päts and stated more explicitly by Laidoner two days later was that the very existence of independent Estonia was endangered by the League.³³ The only conceivable threat could have come from the USSR which was indeed alarmed by the prospect of 'fascists' coming to power in a neighbouring state. However, the priorities of Soviet foreign policy in early 1934 were promoting regional peace and applying for League of Nations membership, and in any case, the internal situation in the USSR did not allow for an aggressive foreign policy.³⁴

The *Riigikogu*, relieved that its enemy had been restrained, unanimously approved Päts' steps and agreed temporarily to suspend its session. On 19 March, Päts postponed elections until the end of the state of emergency. Why did the *Riigikogu* go along with this? The *Riigikogu*

³¹ Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 463.

³² Päts, 15 March 1934, *Riigikogu protokollid*, p. 1438.

³³ General Laidoner's proclamation to the armed forces, 17 March 1934: "In the atmosphere that had arisen, a delay would have been dangerous for our national security, not just internally, but most dangerously - the danger would have come from abroad", Villem Saarsen, ed., *Johan Laidoner* (Stockholm, 1953), p. 100.

³⁴ See discussion of this issue in Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, pp. 441-6.

parties were all willing to acquiesce in firm measures in order to eliminate the threat from the Veterans. The Farmers' naturally supported their leader. The Communists and Socialists had already been fighting the 'fascist' threat for two years in vain and had the most to lose, and also knew that a large portion of their electorate was deserting them in favour of the Veterans. Likewise, the ethnic minority parties were wary of the Veterans' nationalism. Tõnisson and the Centre Party had already tried a similar, but unsuccessful measure against the Veterans in August 1933, and also had good reason to fear abandonment by their voters. The Settlers, being the most sympathetic to the Veterans, had doubts about the need for such actions, but they went along with all the measures because their presidential candidate Laidoner was now one of the two men in charge.³⁵

The Socialist Party was a silent partner in Päts' coup d'état. According to Socialist leader Karl Ast, a secret understanding with Päts had been reached already in October 1933. In return for "showing the Veterans their proper place", Päts asked the Socialists to support his government and to go along with necessary restrictions. Ast later wrote:

It was clear that because of the general psychosis, especially the mood of the army, of the Civil Guard, and of Päts' own backing, the activity of the *Riigikogu* in its present form can not last. In the case of a conflict, nothing will remain, but the personal authority of Päts and General Laidoner. In other words, a government with unrestricted power. However, I held this to be a thousand times better for the Estonian state than surrendering power to Sirk and Larka.³⁶

Rei, after hearing through the Socialist Party that the Veterans were preparing a coup on the night of 12th March, went to Päts and told him: "You have power, save the state!"³⁷ The reaction of the Socialist Party's newspaper, *Rahva Sõna*, to the state of emergency was positive, even gloating over the fact that the Veterans had received their comeuppance, with a headline proclaiming, "The counter-blow is dealt: the government's steps to protect the state."³⁸

The attitude of the Estonian left is exemplified in the

³⁵ ERA, f. 949, n. 3, s. 48, lk. 1.

³⁶ Karl Ast, "Demokraatliku Eesti loojakul," *Akadeemia* 3, 1989, p. 615; first published in *Vaba Eesti* 1 (11), 1955.

³⁷ August Rei, "Kindral J. Laidoner 75-aastane," *Teataja*, 14 February 1959, cited in Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 461.

³⁸ *Rahva Sõna*, 14 March 1934.

correspondence between two prominent Marxist intellectuals, poet-doctor Johannes Vares (later prime minister in the 1940 Soviet-installed government) and writer Johannes Semper a few days after the declaration of the state of emergency. Vares wrote:

Every intellectual who regards freedom of expression as the main condition for creativity can be congratulated on the altered situation. I have experienced Veterans' terror run amok, in written, as well as in spoken form, and I suspect the muzzling of intellectuals that would have occurred had they triumphed . . . The present situation is, however, the maximum that we could have achieved in this hopelessness. It is also the minimum that an intellectual can still accept, even if we must live for some time in an unavoidable atmosphere of democratic dictatorship.³⁹

The Communist reaction was characteristically indiscriminating: both the Veterans and the Päts-Laidoner 'cliques' were regarded as fascist. The only difference between the two rival cliques was said to be their external orientation: the former towards German fascism and the latter towards British capital.⁴⁰

Subsequent to the proclamation of the state of emergency, the Päts government initiated a series of measures designed to eliminate the Veterans as a political force, and to remove League members from positions of power and influence. Although the League had already been banned by Laidoner acting as Chief of Internal Security, on 22 March the Minister of Justice and the Interior ordered the closure of the League on the grounds that "in its activities the League and its chapters had demonstrated an intention forcibly to change the state and social order stipulated in the constitution."⁴¹ The government also revoked the mandates of those League councillors elected in the municipal and rural district elections held in January, including that of Hans Ainson, the mayor of Tartu.⁴² A total of 916 Veterans' representatives were expunged from local councils.⁴³ According to Päts' amended municipal and rural districts elections law, they were not replaced. The central government thus established control over the local authorities. The government also

³⁹ Õie Elango, "Kultuurpoliitikast ja -orientatsioonist Eestis aastail 1934-1940," *Looming*, no. 1, 1974, p. 108.

⁴⁰ Kuuli, *Vapsidest Isamaaliiduni*, p. 141.

⁴¹ Kohtu- ja siseministri otsus nr. 2387, *Riigi Teataja* 26 - 1934, art. 201.

⁴² Kohtu- ja siseministri otsus nr. 2388, *Riigi Teataja* 26 - 1934, art. 202.

⁴³ Kuuli, *Vapsidest isamaaliiduni*, p. 138.

purged the army, police, and civil service of League activists. The most extensive purge was carried out in the Civil Guard. At least 1247 men were expelled from the Civil Guard for having been involved with the League's political activities.⁴⁴ The largest purge was in Viljandi county where 331 guardsmen were expelled.⁴⁵

The literature on the subject tends to portray the League as hoisted on its own petard.⁴⁶ The Veterans drafted a constitution which supposedly granted the President dictatorial powers and they received their own medicine. In fact, however, the Päts government's actions went considerably beyond anything envisioned in the Veterans' constitution. The appointment of a Supreme Commander during peacetime and the postponement of elections were both contrary to the new constitution.⁴⁷ Thus Päts and Laidoner's actions cannot be termed anything but a coup d'état.

Untangling Päts' personal motives from his public ones is quite difficult. No one fought harder for the implementation of a presidency than Päts, not even the Veterans. In the Constituent Assembly debates of 1919-1920 over the drafting of the constitution Päts spoke out in favour of a presidency; he advocated it in the wake of the Communist putsch attempt in 1924; two years later he received the support of his party to present a proposal to the *Riigikogu*. In 1929 the Farmers' Party under his prompting presented another proposal, and in 1930 Päts warned the *Riigikogu* that there would be a great crisis if the constitution was not reformed. Looking for support for constitutional reform outside the *Riigikogu*, Päts was responsible for first involving the Veterans in politics. After the defeat of the first constitutional amendment bill, he proposed to the Veterans and other political parties the convening of a bicameral constituent assembly exactly like that which he convened in 1937. He was an instigator of the *Riigikogu's* bill to lower the required quorum before the first referendum, and to reduce it further before the second

⁴⁴ Number of Civil Guard members expelled by district: Tallinn 16 officers (*pealikud*) and 29 guardsmen; Tartu 16, 63; Narva 20, 27; Pärnu 4, 0; Harju county 32, 154; Tartu county 40, 117; Valga county 6, 26; Petseri county 5, 15; Järva county 29, 28; Viljandi county (*Sakalamaa*) 43, 187; Saaremaa 20, 39; Lääne county 11, 24; Pärnu county 14, 12; Viru county 30, 64; Võru county 31, 145, ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 90, lk. 634-6.

⁴⁵ 13% of the total county membership, ERA, f. 2154, n. 1, s. 14, lk. 16.

⁴⁶ Laaman, *Konstantin Päts*, pp. 254-5; *The Baltic States: A Study of their Origin and National Development; Their Seizure and Incorporation into the U.S.S.R. Third Interim Report of the Select Committee on Communist Aggression* (Buffalo, 1972; first published Washington, 1954), p. 99.

⁴⁷ Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, pp. 112, 116-20; Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, pp. 431, 433-4.

referendum. In the third referendum he supported the League's proposal.⁴⁸ Thus Päts was absolutely convinced that the state's well-being required a presidency.

Päts was equally convinced that he was the man who was made to measure for that office. Having worked longest to create a presidency, Päts was not going to allow some newcomers to steal the position that he felt he had justifiably earned. Moreover, he had a tendency to identify the fate of the nation with his own political fate.⁴⁹ Speaking of himself and Laidoner, Päts stated:

We both have felt that the Estonian state could not have come about without our efforts; our sleepless nights helped the Estonian state to be established, and because we have made our sacrifices and had our sleepless nights, we are of the opinion that it was our duty to act when the state was threatened.⁵⁰

His actions in the referenda campaign demonstrated the extent of his personal ambition. A case in point is the second *Riigikogu* proposal which was drafted when he was *Riigivanem* and the acceptance of which he tried to assist by introducing the motion to lower the quorum to 30 per cent. However, by the time of the referendum Päts had been replaced as *Riigivanem* and curiously did not campaign in favour of the proposal, most likely because Tõnisson, being in office at the time, would have become the acting president, thus gaining a step on becoming president.⁵¹ After Tõnisson's resignation, Päts immediately accepted the offer from his supporter Einbund, the Chairman of the *Riigikogu*, to become the transitional *Riigivanem* who would implement the new constitution. Päts formed a cabinet in record speed even though he knew that he could not secure the backing of the *Riigikogu* majority. To obtain the presidency he even approached the Veterans to be their candidate.⁵² His ambition was well known. When he explained his actions to the *Riigikogu*, he felt it was first necessary to deny any personal motives: "When I was nevertheless forced to do this, then not for personal motives and reasons, as some society gossips have attempted to explain, that I as a candidate

⁴⁸ Marandi, "Riigivõimude tasakaalu otsingul," p. 26.

⁴⁹ Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, p. 102.

⁵⁰ *Kaja*, 17 January 1935; Juhan Veelman ja Henno Rahamägi, eds., *12. märts. Aasta riiklikku ülesehitustööd* (Tallinn, 1935), p. 5.

⁵¹ Marandi, "Riigivõimude tasakaalu otsingul," p. 26.

⁵² See chapter six.

competing in the presidential elections had agreed with another candidate to eliminate a third candidate.”⁵³

Päts had long been dissatisfied with the political structures in Estonia and knew that the implementation of most of his ideas would not be possible even under the new (Veterans’) constitution. Full power to enact changes by decree, as well as another round of constitutional reform, would be necessary to implement his reforms, such as an upper chamber for the *Riigikogu* and corporatist institutions. The regime stressed that the 12th of March was not just a clampdown, but the beginning of a new era of reform and nation-building.⁵⁴

As things stood at the beginning of March 1934, Päts looked to be heading for certain defeat. The results of the collection of signatures for presidential candidates had been very disappointing and placed him at a distant third.⁵⁵ If the Veterans were to win the presidency, then Päts would have been far removed from the centre of power for a long time (as would have been the Farmers’ Party whose fortunes were tied to his success). That would have been unbearable for a man who thought he knew what was best for the Estonian nation and thought he was the only person capable of leading the country out of its crisis. Päts’ paternalistic nature is evident in his distrust of the voters who he stated were suffering from an “illness” which only his dictatorship could cure: “when I saw that our state and people were living through a severe political illness . . . I declared a state of emergency.”⁵⁶ The metaphor continually used by Päts to justify his actions and to explain the popularity of the Veterans was that of the nation’s political “illness” which his government would “cure” and set the state on a stable course again:

We are currently living through an infectious disease; we must treat the people like one who is seriously ill, one who should not be excited, with whom we must be cautious, whose nerves must be given time to calm down and to gather strength . . . Every step which we have taken has been like that of a doctor.⁵⁷

Päts’ coup d’état probably could not have been possible without Laidoner, who not only secured the support of the armed forces, but added

⁵³ Päts, 15 March 1934, *Riigikogu protokollid*, p. 1435.

⁵⁴ Friido Toomus, *Konstantin Päts ja riigireformi aastad* (Tartu, 1938), p. 123.

⁵⁵ see chapter six.

⁵⁶ Päts in *Põhiseadus ja rahvuskogu*, p. 9.

⁵⁷ *Uus Eesti*, 1 October 1936.

his unrivaled personal prestige to the regime. Tomingas claims that Laidoner's motivation for joining Päts was revenge against the Veterans for having been jilted as their presidential candidate and for the subsequent article in *Võitlus* exposing his financial dealings and debts.⁵⁸ While this personal affront might have influenced his decision, Laidoner shared Päts' opinion that the best interests of the state required that the Veterans be stopped. Like Päts, Laidoner also had plans for reforms which he wished to carry out, but knew that these would never be approved by the *Riigikogu*. He was eager to reform the army command structure, especially to recreate his wartime position of Supreme Commander so that one individual would be in overall charge of national defense.⁵⁹ A further consideration might have been that as Supreme Commander, rather than President, he could keep his lucrative appointments on the boards of directors of several large companies such as Estonian Oil-Shale and Scheel's Bank.⁶⁰

On balance, the evidence does not support the view of the Päts-Laidoner action as a preventive coup d'état. The Veterans had no plans to seize power by force, and the campaigning for the elections had not deteriorated to conditions of near anarchy, as claimed by Päts and Laidoner. The unanswered question remains whether the Veterans, if elected to power, would have continued to play by the democratic rules, or maintained their power by other means. The fear of such an outcome was instrumental in prodding Päts and Laidoner to take action. However, their rhetoric about "saving the state" was exaggerated, and their actions were undoubtedly also influenced by personal ambition.

⁵⁸ Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, p. 102.

⁵⁹ *Postimees*, 13 January 1933.

⁶⁰ "Laidoner no longer thought about the presidency because then he could not keep his positions in businesses, the match trust, oil shale, Kreenholm, etc., which provide him with 4-5000 kroons per month," comment by Joachim Puhk, Estonia's best known industrialist, 23 March 1935, Laaman's diary, ERA, f. 827, n. 1, s. 1a. Laidoner sat on the boards of Estonian Oil-Shale, the Bank of Estonia, the Scheel Bank, "Ilmarine" Inc., the Estonian Match Monopoly Inc., PK Estonia, *Eesti Biograafiline Leksikon*.

CHAPTER 10

THE LEAGUE UNDERGROUND

The Aftermath of Päts' Coup

In the months following the proclamation of the state of emergency and the banning of the League, Veterans' sympathizers publicly expressed their opposition to Päts' actions. Numerous arrests were made for displays of disrespect towards the *Riigivanem*: four men were arrested on 10 May 1934 for shouting interjections during Päts' speech at Liberty Square.¹ The same day another man was arrested for making "impermissible utterances against the state order and violating public peace" during the *Riigivanem*'s reception at Kadrioru palace.² Twenty-three League members and sympathizers were arrested on 6 May, one group of men who in two boats went out into Tallinn harbour close to the central prison and sang *Mehemeel*, the League's anthem, to boost the morale of their incarcerated comrades, and another group which demonstratively wore black berets in front of the former Tallinn League headquarters on Mere Avenue.³

The most noteworthy protest against Päts' actions was organized by William Tomingas, a businessman who along with Pitka had quit the League in 1932. Tomingas modelled his declaration on the Vyborg manifesto of 1906 which protested at the dissolution of the first Duma by Tsar Nicholas.⁴ In drafting his text, Tomingas consulted Prof. Uluots, who advised him on points of constitutional law. At first, Tomingas attempted to have his declaration published in *Päevaleht* or *Vaba Maa*, but the editors balked at Tomingas' proposal. Tomingas resorted to more conspiratorial methods and circulated his statement in the form of a handbill of which 10 000 copies were printed at the end of April and distributed nation-wide on the following days.⁵ The handbill argued that Päts had violated the constitution by appointing Laidoner Supreme Commander and by postponing the elections, and concluded that if the elections were not held as stipulated within 100 days after the constitution

¹ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 123, lk. 310.

² *Ibid.*, lk. 311.

³ *Päevaleht*, 7 May 1934.

⁴ William Tomingas recounts the preparation of the handbill in Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, pp. 160-4.

⁵ *Süüdistusakt*, ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 5, lk. 5-8.

came into force, then citizens should disobey any unlawful decrees issued by the government.⁶ The appeal was signed “unincarcerated War of Independence veterans”. The handbill apparently succeeded in attracting widespread notice; arrests of its distributors were made country-wide.⁷ Tomingas was sentenced to two years and three months imprisonment by a military court.⁸

Several legal challenges to the government’s actions were mounted by representatives of the League. The first of these was undertaken by Theodor Rõuk, the only member of the League’s executive board to have been immediately released after detention. Rõuk challenged the *Riigikogu*’s electoral commission’s decision to invalidate Larka’s candidacy. As the commission, however, rejected the complaint, he took the matter to the Supreme Court.⁹ On 6 April, the court decided not even to consider his suit.¹⁰ Another set of legal actions challenged the closure of the League and the invalidation of the mandates of Veterans’ representatives on municipal councils. The Supreme Court ruled on 14 April not to proceed with the case.¹¹

Though the League had been left leaderless by the arrests (no one had been deputed to take responsibility for the organization), attempts were made to maintain the organization through the formation of an underground network. Individual groups formed to maintain contact and three type-written underground issues of *Võitluse asemel* (Substitute for *Võitlus*) were produced.¹² A provisional underground leadership triumvirate emerged in Tallinn, consisting of two doctors specializing in venereal disease, August Kook, treasurer of the former central executive, and Harry Rütman, auditor of the former central executive. The third member, Aleksander Viiding, Sirk’s adjutant, was soon found out to be a

⁶ For the text of the handbill see ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 102, lk. 116. The text given in Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, pp. 516-7 is imprecise.

⁷ Five distributors were arrested in Rakvere on 7 May 1934, ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 5, lk. 297; three distributors in Viljandimaa on 8 June, lk. 421. The handbill was even distributed in Petseri, lk. 284. Tomingas and two others were arrested in Tallinn more than two months later, on 6 July, lk. 523.

⁸ The court verdict, ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 5, lk. 160-4: William Tomingas 2 years and 3 months, Johannes Teder 1 year in a house of correction, August Suurkivi and Venda Freiberg 6 months, and Heinrich Frank and August Kurlei were acquitted. Tomingas recounts his trial in Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, pp. 208-24. For the indictment of the distributors of the handbill in Viljandi county see ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 7, lk. 6-9.

⁹ ERA, f. 80, n. 5, s. 2223, lk. 1-8.

¹⁰ Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 433.

¹¹ Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, pp. 130-3.

¹² Issues number one and two in ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 123, lk. 348; the third issue in ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 97, lk. 48.

police agent.¹³ Though Larka had been left at liberty, he was too high-profile to organize any underground activity. It was also evident that without Sirk the League was rudderless. Basically, the Veterans adopted a wait-and-see stance, awaiting the results of the forthcoming trial of their jailed leaders.

Of the political parties, the Settlers' remained the most irreconcilable opponents of Päts, and thus the most open for co-operation with the Veterans. Initially, however, they accepted the coup d'état because their presidential candidate, Laidoner, had played a leading role in it and they cherished the hope that he would become the actual leader of the ruling duo. Furthermore, as was the case for several other parties, the prospects for the *Riigikogu* elections were not promising, since many of their supporters had gone over to League.¹⁴ Soon they were disabused of their illusions, having seen that Päts was firmly in charge and that Laidoner no longer took any notice of them.

The Settlers were interested in the League's electorate which had been left leaderless. At this point, in Spring 1934, it was still generally expected that the postponed elections would be held as soon as the state of emergency ended. Many Veterans had been rewarded with land for their participation in the War of Independence and thus perhaps had a greater affinity with the Settlers than with any other party. Furthermore, some leaders of the League, most importantly Sirk and Seiman, had started their political careers in the Settlers' Party. Ilmar Raamot, chief secretary of the Settlers' Party, initiated contact with Rütman who indicated the Veterans' willingness to cooperate.¹⁵ Raamot, with his personal contacts in the prison administration, provided the initial channel for communication with Sirk. It was agreed to create a common front to pressure the government to return to constitutionality and for a future election campaign. To head this common front Raamot approached Uluots as a nationally renowned figure who could provide a focal point for the opposition to Päts. Uluots, however, turned out to have been a poor choice as he was a theoretician, not an organizer. Furthermore, it became apparent by April 1935 that the regime was successfully wooing him into its orbit and therefore contact with him was discontinued.¹⁶

¹³ Raamot, *Mälestused*, vol. 2, pp. 39-40.

¹⁴ ERA, f. 949, n. 3, s. 48, lk. 4.

¹⁵ Raamot, *Mälestused*, vol. 2, p. 38.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-7.

There were also half-hearted attempts made at rapprochement between the government and the League. Päts' confidante, ethnographer Oskar Loorits, seeking to reconcile Veterans in Tartu academic circles found that they were primarily interested in jobs for the boys.¹⁷ According to Laaman, unnamed Veterans offered to support Päts in the presidential election if he would allow the League to be relegalized.¹⁸ It was likely that this was simply a case of some individual's personal initiative, possibly Kook. Päts, however, told them that he did not need their support since he already had more than enough power thanks to their constitution. While attempting to accommodate the Settlers to the regime, Prime Minister Eenpalu (formerly Einbund) proposed to Raamot in April 1935 that he visit Sirk in Finland. However, nothing came of this plan because Eenpalu would not accede to Raamot's request for written confirmation of his mission.¹⁹ While the regime was interested in accommodating opposition figures, it was fundamentally uninterested in reaching a compromise. Instead it pursued a strategy of attempting to buy off the opposition by offering its leaders attractive positions.²⁰

The situation for the League changed dramatically on 11 November 1934 when Sirk escaped from prison.²¹ The escape was organized with the collusion of the prison director's deputy, Evald Viikman, and a guard, Johannes Küttim, who sympathized with the Veterans. Küttim simply opened the front gate for Sirk, locked it behind him from the outside and fled with him to a waiting car. The initial plan to spirit Sirk and Küttim immediately to Finland did not succeed and instead a more inconspicuous and circuitous route via Latvia was adopted. In Riga, the wealthy Estonian businessman Nikolai Falk arranged for a boat to take them from Ventspils to Finland where they arrived in the beginning of December and were received by ideological friends from the Finnish radical right. The populace greeted Sirk's escape (the first successful escape from the central prison) with 'tremendous enthusiasm' and the government looked foolish.²² His arrival was also a source of excitement in Finland and the authorities promptly granted him asylum and assigned him residence in Lohja, 50 km west of Helsinki.

¹⁷ Loorits, *Eesti ajaloo põhiprobleemid*, p. 165.

¹⁸ Laaman, *Konstantin Päts*, p. 254.

¹⁹ Raamot, *Mälestused*, vol. 2, pp. 79-82.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²¹ The fullest account of Sirk's escape is provided in Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, pp. 236-45; see also Raamot, *Mälestused*, vol. 2, pp. 42-6, 61-3; *Uusi Suomi*, 1 March 1935.

²² *The New York Times*, 14 November 1934, cited in Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, p. 244.

Almost the entire spectrum of opinion in Finland was critical of the authoritarian regime in Estonia.²³ The left criticized the repression of the unions and thought the government was too lax regarding the 'fascists'; the right criticized the measures implemented by the government against the Veterans; and the mainstream liberals were critical of restrictions on civil liberties. This is well illustrated by the reporting of Finnish newspapers on the trial of the Veterans in June 1935: the liberal *Helsingin Sanomat* hoped that the trial would provide legal substantiation for the government's measures; the conservative *Uusi Suomi* was critical of restrictions by the dictatorship of the rights of the defendants; the radical right *Ajan Suunta* wholeheartedly supported the Veterans and claimed that they had done nothing illegal; while the *Suomen Sosialdemokraatti* wishfully forecast the same ignominious end for the IKL and the Finnish radical right.²⁴ As can be seen, the Finnish political left and right fought their own battles by proxy in the commentary of their partisan press on developments in Estonia.

Sirk was a hero for Finnish radical right circles. He was frequently visited in Lohja by his Finnish ideological friends, especially Vilho Helanen, himself a volunteer in the Estonian War of Independence. Helanen was detained in Estonia in June 1934 for publicly speaking in support of the Veterans and criticizing the government.²⁵ His detention provoked a note of protest by the Finnish government, one of the first signs of the estrangement between the two countries as a consequence of the advent of dictatorship in Estonia. *Sinimusta*, the magazine of the IKL youth organization, the Blue-Blacks, hero-worshipped the Veterans and was proud of being their 'comrade'.²⁶ *Sinimusta* practically served as the organ of the League and contained articles written by Sirk and Paul Telg, the other prominent League leader living in exile in Finland. A couple of bilingual issues were devoted entirely to the Veterans and were smuggled

²³ "At present it is hard to find circles in Finland who do not feel apprehension at what the future holds for Estonia. Nothing can be more warmly desired here than Estonia returning as quickly as possible to a democratic basis", *Helsingin Sanomat*, 8 March 1935.

²⁴ *Helsingin Sanomat*, 18 June 1935; *Uusi Suomi*, 17 June 1935; *Ajan Suunta*, 17 June 1935; *Suomen Sosialdemokraatti*, 17 June 1935.

²⁵ The Estonian government replied that Helanen was not arrested, but only being interrogated, *Helsingin Sanomat*, 8, 17, 20 June 1934.

²⁶ Even after the aborted coup *Sinimusta* wrote regarding the Veterans: "Can we Blue-Blacks call you comrades? That would be a joy and honour for us. You are soldiers of liberty. We wish to be the same. You have now offered the greatest sacrifice for liberty. We wish to be your comrades even now and swear to be in every circumstance", *Sinimusta*, no. 25-6, 18 December 1935. The same was the case for the successor of *Sinimusta*, *Luo Lippujen!* which exhorted its readers "to live and fight like Artur Sirk", *Luo Lippujen!*, 22 September 1937.

into Estonia.²⁷ Estonian Ambassador Hans Rebane constantly badgered the Finnish Foreign Ministry to ensure that Sirk would not be involved in politics.²⁸ The Estonian regime was not satisfied with the efforts of the Finnish government so an official protest note was sent on 7 November 1935 demanding that Estonian political exiles and Finnish organizations be denied the opportunity to develop anti-governmental activities.²⁹

The Päts government was concerned about continued support for the League although the only public manifestation of such support was at the funeral of reserve-Captain Heinrich-Balduin Dunkel, head of the League's security units. Dunkel had died suddenly in prison in January 1935, officially of a heart attack, though foul play was suspected by the League's supporters.³⁰ Several thousand League supporters participated in the funeral procession through Tallinn despite the fact that the regime attempted to hinder the march.³¹

Over a year passed from the banning of the League before 39 leading Veterans³² were brought to trial before a military tribunal in June 1935.³³ In spite of having carried out 8487 interrogations, 1337 searches, and compiled 19 379 pages of material, the Political Police failed to uncover any evidence to substantiate the government's allegation that the Veterans were preparing a coup d'état.³⁴ In fact, the army chief prosecutor, Colonel Trakmann, in his secret report of his findings to Laidoner stated that no grounds existed to charge the Veterans with seeking to "forcibly change the existing order".³⁵ Instead they were charged simply with having belonged to an association whose aims "threatened public safety and peace".³⁶ The prosecution alleged that the League leadership flouted its officially registered statute by creating a "secret authoritarian organization parallel

²⁷ *Sinimusta*, nos. 14, 20, 21, 25; ERA, f. 957, n. 14, s. 163, lk. 69-70.

²⁸ ERA, f. 957, n. 14, s. 17, lk. 2-15.

²⁹ ERA, f. 957, n. 14, s. 163, lk. 79b-80.

³⁰ *Tomingas, Vaikiv ajastu*, pp. 332-5.

³¹ *Ajan Suunta*, 11 January 1935. Photos of the funeral in ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 101.

³² Andres Larka, Aleksander Seiman, August Klasman, Karl-Arnold Jalakas, Eduard Kubbo, Oskar Luiga, Karl Podrätsik, Leonhard Laast-Laas, August Kook, Theodor Rõuk, Johannes Holland, Lembit Hellat, Voldemar Laurisson, Alfred Sampka, Andreas Leppik, Karl Dobrus, Villem Reier, Paul Laamann, Leonhard Pallon, Osvald Mitt, Mihail Kalm, Leonhard Krull, Helmar Rästas, Edvin Kääramees, Johannes Sengbusch, Nikolai Põlendik, Armin Rägo, Eduard Rosenbach, Voldemar Laube, Hans Ainson, Harry Berg, Peeter Masul, Andres Hirsch, Julius Keerberg, Alfred Sild, Jaan Mägi, Valter Viks, Karl Kondas, and Hjalmar Mäe.

³³ The judge was Colonel Nikolai Helk, the brother-in-law of Päts' brother.

³⁴ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 125, lk. 40.

³⁵ ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 124, lk. 34.

³⁶ *Süüdistusakt*, ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 3, lk. 27p.

to the elected public organization, whereby the secret directed the public organization."³⁷ The select group of League leaders present at the secret extraordinary congress at Võru in November 1933 made the decision to establish the unelected positions of campaign leader, a hierarchy of regional campaign leaders and a staff to direct the League's activities, thus allegedly implementing the 'leader principle'. Also not prescribed by the League's statute was the organization of the membership into companies and the creation of paramilitary security units. Furthermore, the League undermined the state by recruiting in the armed forces, civil guard and police. To cap off its case, the prosecution catalogued the numerous threats heard on the campaign trail to the effect that if Larka was not elected then the Veterans would take over power by force. All the defendants maintained their innocence. The legal foundation of the case was questionable: the defendants were charged under a section of the law which Päts had supplemented by decree after the League had already been disbanded, but they were finally sentenced under the old law which was still in force at the time.³⁸ The 39 defendants received one year to six month suspended sentences, with the exception of two who were acquitted.

The government needed the trial and the convictions in order to justify the repressive measures it had taken. The trial, by criminalizing the organization, had great propaganda value for the government in demonstrating that the League was a threat to the state. On the other hand, the fact that the charges were milder than had been expected and that the defendants received only suspended sentences seemed to a certain extent to have vindicated the Veterans. The verdict left the situation unresolved. This ambiguity was reflected in the public mood. According to the Political Police, the results of Päts' coup d'état were approved of, though not the method. While most people believed that the further development of the Veterans' movement would have been potentially dangerous for the state, the allegation that the Veterans had been preparing to seize power did not receive much credence.³⁹

The government had a further chance to impress on the public the threat posed by the Veterans in the trial of the so-called 'vaps-terrorists' in September 1935.⁴⁰ A group of little-known members of the League outside

³⁷ *Ibid.*, lk. 10.

³⁸ Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, pp. 259, 275-7.

³⁹ ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 33, lk. 73.

⁴⁰ ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 11, lk. 6-11.

the mainstream of the Veterans' organization hatched a muddled plot to assassinate Päts and Laidoner. The ringleaders were Rudolf Reha, a border guard captain who had been retired after the banning of the League, and Joosep Meibaum, formerly leader of the extremely obscure Estonian National Fascists' Assembly (*Eesti Rahvusfasistide Kogu*) and author of an exposé of political corruption under the pseudonym Meig.⁴¹ The conspiracy came to the attention of former League central executive members Seiman and Kook who were appalled and reported it to the police. In the beginning of March 1935, the conspirators were arrested and eight handgrenades were found in their possession. While these men were conspiring to assassinate Päts and Laidoner, they, however, had not worked out a definite plan. The chief conspirators received six year prison sentences, but were released early by Päts' decree.⁴² This peculiar episode illustrated that the Veterans were not willing to condone political murder and that they also realized that such violence would have been disastrous for their cause. Seiman and Kook were justifiably afraid that the plot was a Political Police provocation aimed at irrevocably discrediting the League.⁴³

Conspirators

With the Veterans' leadership out of jail (having received suspended sentences), the League was reactivated underground. The initiative was taken by Sirk who communicated with Kook and Johannes Holland in Tallinn through Finnish couriers. In July, Sirk summoned Holland and Seiman to Finland to plot out their strategy. Joined by Klasmann and Mäe, they were taken by fishing boat from Merivälja outside Tallinn to Kokskär where they were met by a Finnish motorboat driven by Jaakko Virkkunen, a leading activist of the Blue-Blacks, who took them to Helsinki from where they were driven to Lohja. At a three day meeting in a summer cottage at Lohja, they discussed how to force the government to relinquish power and to carry out the postponed elections.

⁴¹ See chapter four.

⁴² The following sentences were handed down on 27 September 1935: Rudolf Reha, Martin Sepp, Joosep Meibaum six years; Adam Kresling, Jaan Lukk, Arnold Pikkat five years; Leonhard Luts one year; August Pais, Endla Kresling, Artur Braun one year suspended sentence, ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 11, lk. 236-8. Most of them released early by Päts' decree, but Julius Kiisholts convicted and sentenced to three years imprisonment in 1938 after returning from Finland, ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 11, lk. 349-51, 359, 381, 407, 422-3.

⁴³ Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, p. 293-4.

They saw as their mission the proper implementation of the constitution which the Päts government had illegally overridden.

Sirk outlined three alternative courses of action: accommodation with the government, a common front with the opposition parties, or force. Reaching a compromise with the government had been left to Kook, but had led nowhere since all the cards were in the hands of the government. Evidently desiring to meet with Päts, Sirk asked the Finnish authorities for permission to visit the spa at Naantali in July 1935 at the same time as Päts was expected to visit Finnish president Svinhufvud in his summer residence in neighbouring Kultaranta, but permission was denied.⁴⁴ Seiman was made responsible for negotiations with opposition parties, but nothing of consequence resulted from these efforts. There was also contact with the Centre Party through Tõnisson's son Ilmar, the chief secretary of the Centre Party, who visited Sirk in Lohja in August 1935.⁴⁵

The last attempt at a peaceful solution sought to use the method which worked so well for the Veterans in the past: popular initiative, i.e., amendment of the constitution through a referendum. Sirk wanted to alter the constitution in order to change clauses that had been used to suppress the League. He also wanted to add clauses which would result in forcing the Päts government to relinquish power. The main points were that civil liberties could only be restricted during wartime and that *Riigikogu* elections could not be postponed.⁴⁶ Sirk's proposal was revised by Mäe and signed by Larka who presented it to the *Riigikogu* executive on 20 September 1935 to start the procedure for popular initiative leading to a referendum.⁴⁷ The move caught the government by surprise.⁴⁸ Päts' heavy-handed response was to override the constitution again by decreeing on 25 September that referenda proposals could go ahead during a state of emergency only with the expressed permission of the *Riigivanem*.⁴⁹ Not surprisingly, on 9 October Päts deemed Larka's proposal to be "detrimental to state order and security at the present time."⁵⁰ Recovering from its initial surprise, the regime even managed to turn the embarrassing predicament into a propaganda success by claiming

⁴⁴ Henno Rahamägi and Juhan Veelman, eds., *12. märtsi radadel* (Tallinn, 1936), p. 74.

⁴⁵ Rein Marandi, "Artur Sirk Soomes 1934-1935," *Eesti Teadusliku Seltsi Rootsis aastaraamat XI 1988-1990* (Stockholm, 1992), p. 141.

⁴⁶ ERA, f. 80, n. 5, s. 2056, lk. 1-4.

⁴⁷ Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, p. 104.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Riigi Teataja* 81 - 1935, art. 691; Edgar Talvik, *Legaalsuse põhimõte Eesti Vabariigi põhiseaduse tekkimises, muutmistes ja muutmiskavades* (Tartu, 1991), p. 52.

⁵⁰ ERA, f. 80, n. 5, s. 2056, lk. 11.

that Larka's amendment proposal demonstrated that even the Veterans' acknowledged that their constitution was faulty.⁵¹

After the failure of this attempt, Sirk decided that the only option left was the removal of the Päts government by force. At the July meeting, Sirk had charged Holland with the task of preparing for the overthrow of the regime. To this end Holland set about to build a conspiratorial organization and Bernhard Väli reactivated the League's former companies in Tallinn. The decision to seize power by force was taken by Sirk in October. In meetings at Lohja he discussed the details of the seizure of power with Holland and the formation of a transitional government with Mäe.⁵²

The overall plan was produced by Holland according to Sirk's guidelines and the plan to capture the government was drawn up by Paul Laamann. The plan was to utilize the occasion of the opening congress of the *Isamaaliit* (The Fatherland League), the new government party, in the *Estonia* theatre on 8 December 1935. It was known that the congress opening would be attended by Päts, Laidoner and most of the cabinet, thus providing a singular opportunity to take them into custody. The plan was to surround the building - those in the theatre were to be ordered out in groups of three starting with Päts, Laidoner and Eenpalu, members of the cabinet, military commanders, and police commissioners. Top military, police and government figures absent from the congress would have been arrested in their homes.⁵³ The plan also called for the simultaneous takeover of the armoured regiment and the central telephone exchange. The plotters optimistically hoped to avoid bloodshed by presuming no resistance since all those individuals with the authority to proclaim a general alarm would be isolated in the theatre. The organizers of the putsch believed that in order to implement their plan, they had altogether 200 men at their disposal, in seven groups, based on the previous Tallinn companies of the League. Outside Tallinn, the plan had originally also called for the simultaneous takeover of the civil and military radio stations in Tartu and isolation of the mayor, General Aleksander Tõnisson. The necessary financial backing for the coup attempt (30 000

⁵¹ Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, p. 105.

⁵² The description of the plot is taken from the indictment, ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 9, lk. 7-44.

⁵³ See the memoirs of Hans Meret, the only conspirator to actually have gone ahead with his assignment (to note which ministers were absent from the *Estonia* theatre) on 8 December because he was unaware that the leadership had been arrested, Hans Meret, *Teremi jutustus. "Estonia mässust", sõjast, Berliinist, KZ-laagrist ja muust* (Toronto, 1984), pp. 30-7.

kroons for weapons, ammunition and other organizational expenses) was provided by Nikolai Falk of Riga, the same wealthy Estonian construction businessman who assisted in Sirk's escape.⁵⁴

The League's political program and the justification for the ouster of the Päts regime were contained in a manifesto intended for distribution as well as radio broadcast.⁵⁵ The manifesto outlined the way in which Päts had governed unconstitutionally and claimed that the ouster of the illegal government was sanctioned by the first paragraph of the constitution which stated that "sovereignty resides in the people". The new representative of the people would be the National Congress for the Establishment of Constitutional and Lawful Order (*Põhiseadusliku ja Õigusliku Korra Jaluleseadmise Rahvuskongress*) which initially was to have consisted of 13 leading Veterans (Larka, Sirk, Seiman, and others)⁵⁶ and three eminent opposition figures, Jaan Teemant and Tõnisson, both former *Riigivanem*, and Uluots. The latter three were included without their consent or knowledge in order to give the congress an appearance of a broader base than just the Veterans.

The congress would appoint a government with Sirk as prime minister as well as minister of the interior and transport, retired Colonel Viktor Puskar as minister of defense, Mäe as minister of education, agronomist Hans Saar as minister of agriculture, Tartu economics professor Juhan Vaabel as finance minister, lawyer Aleksander Buldas as minister of justice, Kaarel Pusta as foreign minister. The foreign ministry press secretary Jüri Sammul was to fill in as Pusta's deputy until he arrived from Stockholm (where he was the ambassador). Pusta as foreign minister was meant to reassure neighbours that Estonian foreign policy remained unaltered. Most of these men were not asked, but their willingness was assumed as they had been slated as potential ministers during the 1934 election campaign.

The conspirators took pains to maintain a semblance of legality: a referendum was to be held within three weeks to approve the provisional government and elections for the *Riigikogu* and presidency were to be held within three months. Päts and his cabinet were to be put on trial, but government officials who fulfilled their unconstitutional orders would be

⁵⁴ Interrogation of Voldemar Kivistik, VA, EK-Valpo II: IX. B. 30. The money was in Latvian currency and Hjalmar Mäe added 10 000 kroons of his own money by mortgaging his house, Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, pp. 107-8.

⁵⁵ ERA, f. 949, n. 2, s. 445, lk. 2.

⁵⁶ Larka, Sirk, Holland, Klasmann, Kubbo, Laamann, Luiga, Mitt, Pallon, Podrätsik, Puskar, Seiman, and Paris.

given a blanket amnesty. The state of emergency in force since 12 March 1934 and the restrictions on civil liberties would be lifted. Finally, to assist in the takeover of power, the manifesto urged citizens to form a 'Constitutional Guard' (*Põhiseaduslik Kaitseliit*).⁵⁷

On 7 December, the evening before the proposed coup, a meeting of 14 conspirators was convened by Holland in a house on Kadaka street in a Tallinn suburb. Those present included Seiman, Laamann, Klasmann, Mäe and Larka.⁵⁸ Holland presented the general plan and Laamann read out his plan for capturing the *Estonia* theatre. Sirk was also expected at the meeting, but was forced to turn back to Finland because of stormy seas.⁵⁹ The news of Sirk's inability to attend was a severe blow since it deprived the plotters of the weapons and ammunition that he was supposed to bring. The absence of Sirk's dynamic leadership would also be demoralizing to the conspirators. Added to these concerns was the realization that the available manpower was not sufficient for the plan to succeed. In view of these considerations, the participants of the meeting unanimously decided not to go ahead with the plan. When the meeting was already over, the police who had all along maintained constant surveillance on the League's activities surrounded the house and arrested all those found inside.⁶⁰

The uncovering of the planned seizure of power provided the Päts regime with the opportunity finally to destroy the League.⁶¹ The shock also gave Päts the popular support necessary to embark on his plans for far-reaching constitutional reform. The regime made the most out of the great opportunity for anti-League propaganda, publicly displaying the weapons and equating the aborted coup d'état with the bloody communist putsch attempt of 1924.⁶² The alleged foreign backing for the conspirators was emphasized. Though it was not stated explicitly, the clear insinuation

⁵⁷ ERA, f. 949, n. 2, s. 445, lk. 2p.

⁵⁸ The participants in the meeting were: Holland, Larka, Seiman, Klasmann, Laaman, Pedak, Pallon, Podrätsik, Mäe, Kalm, Allik, and Liivak. Kubbo, Puskar and Paris arrived later from Tartu.

⁵⁹ Explanation of Jaakko Virkkunen, the pilot of Sirk's boat, cited in Marandi, "Artur Sirk Soomes," p. 143.

⁶⁰ There is speculation that Eenpalu had wanted the army to be called out and on the spot court-martials (executions) to be administered as after the communist putsch attempt of 1924, Lt.-Col. Richard Maasing, the head of military intelligence, quoted in Laaman's diary 10 December 1935, ERA, f. 827, n. 1, s. 1a.

⁶¹ There are allegations that the entire conspiracy was a provocation by the political police, Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, p. 313; Meret, *Teremi jutustus*, p. 75. Elmar Tambek, head of the President's office, reports that Päts himself doubted the genuineness of the conspiracy, Tambek, *Tõus ja möödn*, vol. 1, pp. 152-5;

⁶² Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, pp. 303-8.

was that Germany had supported the Veterans. The German Foreign Ministry was sensitive to this and was careful to orientate the German press to express support for the Päts regime.⁶³ Concerned about the allegations in the Estonian press of German complicity in the procuring of arms for the Veterans' aborted putsch, von Grundherr, the *Referant* for the Baltic states in the German Foreign Ministry made inquiries which satisfied him that the weapons had not come from a German source.⁶⁴

The mass trial of the conspirators from 6-25 May 1936 in the military court was the largest trial ever held in Estonia with 154 defendants. The prosecution had a strong case since the chief organizer of the putsch, Holland, had revealed all the details of the plot as well as the names of the conspirators during his interrogation, naively believing that the Political Police would adhere to a deal with him to let the small fish off.⁶⁵ Throughout the trial the chief defendants never wavered from the position that their actions had not been illegal since their motive had been to defend the constitution by removing the unconstitutional regime. One of the defendants was General Juhan Tõrvand, who had been Chief of General Staff until 1934. He had been approached by Holland through Mäe to seek his opinion whether the 'hypothetical' plan was feasible. Tõrvand warned that the plan would involve bloodshed and would be dangerous for Estonian independence because the USSR would surely feel threatened.⁶⁶ Though Tõrvand had nothing to do with the plot, he was betrayed by Holland and sentenced to 15 years imprisonment because he had not informed the authorities. One of the few defendants to be acquitted, Pusta, the senior diplomat who had been slated as the Veterans' foreign minister attracted international support. *The Times* of London referred to him as an "international lawyer of repute"⁶⁷ and the *Institut de Droit International* sent a telegram to Päts in his defense.⁶⁸ The only defendants who made political statements were Laamann and Mäe, who

⁶³ Reinebeck (Reval), 8 December 1935, an das AA; von Grundherr, 13 December 1935, AA, Pol. Abt. IV, Po. 5.

⁶⁴ In reply to von Grundherr's inquiry, the Gestapo categorically stated that no sale of German arms to Estonians or Finns had taken place, Preußische Geheime Staatspolizei, 15 April 1936, an das AA; the Hamburg authorities suggested that the pistols might have come from Brno, Czechoslovakia, hamburgisches Staatsamt, 17 March 1936, an das AA, AA, Pol. Abt. IV, Po. 5.

⁶⁵ Kaarel Robert Pusta, *Kirjad kinnisest majast* (Stockholm, 1966), p. 112. Some of Holland's fellow accused later suspected that he had been involved with the political police, Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, pp. 406-7, 418-9.

⁶⁶ ERA, f. 949, n. 3, s. 31, lk. 905; Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, p. 106.

⁶⁷ *The Times*, 22 February 1936.

⁶⁸ ERA, f. 957, n. 14, s. 186.

stated that though they had fought for the constitution, the February 1936 plebiscite had demonstrated the people's approval of the government's course and they bow to the decision of the majority, and that thus the League has no more reason for existence.⁶⁹

Unlike in the first trial of the League leaders in 1935, the sentence was harsh: nine of the defendants received 20 years imprisonment with forced labour and only seven were acquitted.⁷⁰ According to the Political Police's confidential reports on public attitudes, public opinion found that the verdict was unduly severe and did not believe the regime's attempt to portray the Veterans' crimes as equivalent to the failed communist putsch of 1924:

The defendants of the last Veterans' trial are seen quite widely as honest Estonian citizens who in the political struggle in defense of their October constitution have come into conflict with the present government and the prevailing order without having desired any harm to Estonian independence.⁷¹

The Finnish radical right played a major role in preparing the December 1935 putsch. One especially far-fetched scheme to send a ship of 200 armed Finnish civil guards to support the putsch attempt in Tallinn was dreamt up by the IKL parliamentary deputy and leader of the Blue-Blacks pastor Elias Simojoki and Captain Anton Eonsuu.⁷² Finnish smuggler Kustaa Laiho bought the arms and ammunition (250 Walther pistols and 12 500 cartridges) in Hamburg for 10 460 Swedish kronor.⁷³ The shipment was transported to Danzig where it was picked up by the Finnish ship "Margit" captained by Karl Rolf Karlsson.⁷⁴ In the Gulf of Finland the crates were transferred to a Finnish motorboat and taken to the Finnish coast to await transportation to Estonia. A batch of 100 grenades and 95 sticks of dynamite was procured from the Finnish manufacturer by Major Bernhard Heimolainen under the pretext of testing them. The dynamite,

⁶⁹ Pusta, *Kirjad kinnisest majast*, pp. 130-1.

⁷⁰ 9 defendants received 20 years imprisonment, 20 received 15 years, 4 received 12 years, 29 received 10 years, 41 received 6 years, 14 received 4 years, 14 received 3 years, 12 received 2 year suspended sentences, 2 received 6 month sentences, 3 received 6 month sentences, and 7 were acquitted. The 9 who received the highest punishment were Holland, Seiman, Laaman, Klasmann, Pedak, Pallon, Mäe, Kubbo and Väli; Larka was sentenced to 15 years. ERA, f. 1, n. 7, s. 140, lk. 169-71.

⁷¹ ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 34, lk. 62, 65, 71.

⁷² VA, Suomen 1920- ja 40 luvun historian säätio: 22 Haastattelut, Anton Eonsuu.

⁷³ ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 106, lk. 1536p.

⁷⁴ VA, EK-Valpo II: IX. B. 30.

77 grenades, and the manifestos (printed in Porvoo) were transported by Finnish coastguard motorboat to Estonia on 6 December, but the pistols were to have come with Sirk. Thus when the conspiracy was uncovered it was inevitable that there would be repercussions in Finland. Finnish and Estonian police co-operated and arrests were made in Finland. Ten men who had procured and transported the weapons were eventually tried and sentenced for "a crime against a friendly state".⁷⁵ Their involvement in the events in Estonia discredited the radical right and was led to banning of the Blue-Blacks in January 1936.⁷⁶

The Death of Sirk

Fearing arrest after the December 1935 fiasco, Sirk fled Finland overland to Sweden and on to England where Laurence Collier, head of the Foreign Office's Northern Department offered to keep an eye on Sirk for the Estonian government.⁷⁷ Sirk soon moved to Rotterdam where in February 1936 the Estonian authorities persuaded the Dutch police to arrest him; however, he was released after the request for his extradition was rejected by a Dutch court which ruled that his alleged crimes were of a purely political nature.⁷⁸ Sirk had wanted to go to Switzerland, but was denied a Swiss visa.⁷⁹ The German government also assented to the Estonian government's wish not to allow Sirk a visa.⁸⁰ Fearing that he was being watched, Sirk moved in Spring 1937 to Echternach, a small town in Luxembourg near the German border, where he checked into Hotel Wengler.

On 31 July Sirk's body was found in the courtyard of the hotel, nine metres below his open second story window. He died two days later on 2 August. No farewell note was found among his effects, nevertheless, the Luxembourg Gendarmerie report assumed suicide.⁸¹ According to the Luxembourg police report, the wife of the hotel owner reported hearing a

⁷⁵ Bernhard Heimolainen - provided the grenades and dynamite, Kustaa Laiho - organized the buying of pistols, Karl Karlsson - captain of the boat which brought the arms for Danzig, Jaako Virkkunen - the chief organizer, Vilho Helanen - the contact man, Erkki Ervamaa, Matti Kaminen, Heikki Säilä, and Yrjö Nevalainen - transported the weapons on land, Johannes Teder (an Estonian exile) - organized the printing of the manifestos, VA, EK-Valpo II: IX. B. 30.

⁷⁶ Uola, *Sinimusta veljeskunta*, p. 308.

⁷⁷ ERA, f. 957, n. 14, s. 160, lk. 2.

⁷⁸ ERA, f. 957, n. 14, s. 160, lk. 10-11, 15; see also Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, pp. 386-9.

⁷⁹ ERA, f. 957, n. 14, s. 163, lk. 7.

⁸⁰ Von Grundherr, 13 December 1935, AA, Pol. Abt. IV, Po. 5; ERA, f. 957, n. 14, s. 160, lk. 8.

⁸¹ The Luxembourg Gendarmerie report on Sirk's death, ERA, f. 957, n. 14, s. 488, lk. 12-3.

sound ('a heavy thud') in the hotel's courtyard. On investigation she found Sirk lying in the courtyard three metres from the wall below his second story window and summoned a doctor (Dr. Speck). She reported that Sirk had spent most of his time inside his room and appeared to be suffering from rheumatism. He had never expressed any suicidal intentions. According to Dr. Speck, Sirk landed on his feet, but fell over and broke his left knee and fractured his skull against the paving stones. Sirk was in a semi-conscious state and mumbled in Estonian, which of course no one could understand. Dr. Speck asked him in German whether he had sought death because "he was tired of life" to which he replied *ja*, but the value of that answer is undermined by his reply of *ja* to all of the doctor's questions including whether he was a Catholic.⁸²

All of Sirk's acquaintances saw him as an energetic, vital and emotionally stable personality. No one who knew Sirk could believe that he was capable of suicide. Because of this, and the inconsistencies in the Luxembourg Gendarmerie report as well as the paucity of medical information (there is no record of a diagnosis in the hospital at Echternach, nor was an autopsy performed), Sirk's death generated a lot of speculation, with foul play suspected by many. The news of Sirk's apparent suicide came as a great shock in Estonia and occasioned disbelief which gave rise to widespread rumours that Sirk had been killed by the Estonian Political Police.⁸³ In Finland, doubts as to the circumstances of Sirk's death were openly raised in the press. The IKL formed a three man commission to go to Luxembourg to investigate the circumstances of Sirk's death.⁸⁴ They brought his corpse back to Finland where a post-mortem was conducted by Finnish specialist Prof. Ehrnrooth on the already decaying cadaver. While not being able to determine a cause of death through his external examination, Ehrnrooth did not find the broken bones reported by the Luxembourg doctors.⁸⁵

Because of the suspicions and rumours about the cause of Sirk's death, as well as to try to procure Sirk's belongings, the Estonian government sent its chargé d'affaires in Paris, Rudolf Möllerson, to

⁸² Pusta, *Kirjad kinnisest majast*, pp. 187-8. In a written reply to a request for information on this point by William Tomingas on 17 September 1960, Dr. Speck stated that Sirk did not regain consciousness, Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, p. 393. As evidence, Pusta's conversation with Speck at the scene a few days after the incident must take precedence over Tomingas' correspondence 23 years later.

⁸³ ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 36, lk. 153.

⁸⁴ *Ajan Suunta*, 6 October 1937; Pusta, *Kirjad kinnisest majast*, p. 189.

⁸⁵ ERA, f. 957, n. 14, s. 488, lk. 26.

investigate the scene.⁸⁶ Tomingas has suggested that Möllerson's report (unavailable to him in the Estonian SSR) could shed light on what actually happened.⁸⁷ Möllerson's report, however, concludes that the Gendarmerie report is consistent with the explanations given to him by the witnesses.⁸⁸ While there are unexplained elements in Sirk's death and the motive for suicide is not immediately apparent, to postulate political murder is also problematic. Although at this point Sirk still had a potential to at least embarrass the regime (he was planning to publish his version of the events of the last few years),⁸⁹ he was no longer such a threat that it was necessary to physically eliminate him. Being a fugitive in exile in Luxembourg, Sirk no longer played an active role in Estonian politics and the mass trial of the conspirators did much to discredit the League in the eyes of the Estonian public. However, it cannot be denied that regime was greatly relieved by his death, but in the final analysis, political murder is inconsistent with the overall behaviour of the regime and the political culture of interwar Estonia. An alternative explanation advanced by Marandi which overcomes the discrepancies of the suicide and assassination models is that Sirk jumped from the height of eight metres in an attempt to flee from real or imagined pursuers, but landed unluckily.⁹⁰

Sirk's funeral in the Old Church in Helsinki on 9 October was a noteworthy event in Finland and was attended by the entire spectrum of the radical right.⁹¹ The coffin was flanked by a guard of honour from the Academic Karelia Society and the Female Students' Karelia Society. The church was packed and about 450 people (including 200 from the AKS and 100 from the Blue-Blacks) participated in the funeral procession. Eulogies were delivered by Simojoki and Helanen, and at the cemetery a speech was made by an Estonian named August Jääger accusing the Päts regime of

⁸⁶ Personal investigations of the scene in Echternach were also made by diplomat Kaarel Pusta and later by the former head of military intelligence Villem Saarsen. Both concluded that Sirk's death was the result of suicide. Pusta, *Kirjad kinnisest majast*, pp. 176-91; Villem Saarsen, *See mis ma nägin* (Stockholm, 1978), pp. 420-3.

⁸⁷ Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, p. 394.

⁸⁸ ERA, f. 957, n. 14, s. 488, lk. 9.

⁸⁹ Sirk had written to Artur Meckler, a Veteran living in New York, about the possibility of publishing his manuscript in the USA, but the cost was prohibitive. Veterans' supporters in New York, however, did send money to Sirk, Heinold Okas, "Vabadusristi kavaler Lt. Artur Sirk," in Mengel, ed., *50 aastat*, p. 33.

⁹⁰ Rein Marandi, "Kuidas suri Artur Sirk?" *Eesti Sõnumid*, 17 August 1994.

⁹¹ The Academic Karelian Society, the Women Students' Karelian Society, the IKL, Sinimustat, a number of fraternities, the Finnish Veterans (VRL), and nationalist youth organizations, VA, EK Valpo II, Henkilömapit 11198 - Sirk, Artur, 114a.

having murdered Sirk. The Estonian government was extremely sensitive to what was happening eighty kilometres north of Tallinn and kept a close watch on events.⁹² It was very annoyed by the anti-Päts regime manifestation at the funeral and sent a note to the Finnish government protesting at the lack of effective measures to prevent expression of sentiments hostile to the Estonian government at Sirk's funeral.⁹³ An editorial appeared in the government's organ *Uus Eesti* criticizing the Finnish government's laxity regarding the radical right and in turn caused adverse comment in the Finnish press.⁹⁴

Artur Sirk was unquestionably the guiding soul and embodiment of the movement. With his death the League lost its most dynamic leader, and the last chance to become an effective political force against the Päts regime. Since the other Veterans' leaders were not considered capable of catalyzing public opinion, the regime was able to relax and concentrate on obtaining broader public support. The incarcerated Veterans noticed a marked improvement in their treatment in prison.⁹⁵

With Sirk out of the way, the regime even considered co-opting the Veterans. In November 1937 Prime Minister Eenpalu invited Oskar Luiga, Karl Kondas and William Tomingas for talks in his office. Eenpalu began by saying that the accusations against the Veterans had been exaggerated and that the problems between the Veterans and the government had mostly been the result of personal misunderstandings. The government and the Veterans had both fought against the uncurtailed sway of the political parties and thus, according to Eenpalu, had common goals. He surprised his guests by proposing that the Veterans should join the government's Popular Front in the forthcoming election campaign for the new *Riigikogu* in 1938. Tomingas set the condition that the imprisoned Veterans be released. Eenpalu agreed, but only if they first asked for a pardon. Tomingas replied that, since the problems had resulted from personal misunderstandings (as stated by Eenpalu), there was no need for the imprisoned Veterans to ask for a pardon.⁹⁶ Although this episode led

⁹² *Eesti riik ja rahvas teises maailmasõjas* vol. 14 (Tallinn, 1971), p. 56.

⁹³ ERA, f. 957, n. 14, s. 488, lk. 46.

⁹⁴ "Soome vapside häbematus läheb üle igasuguste piiride. Käu sallib seda Soome valitsus (The shamelessness of the Finnish extreme right knows no bounds. How long will the Finnish government tolerate it)?" *Uus Eesti*, 12 October 1937. "Virossa pelätään Suomen rintamamiesten kiihoitusta (Finnish front veterans' agitation causes scare in Estonia)," *Helsingin Sanomat*, 13 October 1937.

⁹⁵ Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, p. 112.

⁹⁶ Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, pp. 452-5.

nowhere, it did demonstrate the government's confidence in dealing with the now leaderless Veterans.

Following the 1938 *Riigikogu* elections, one of the first steps of the new *Riigikogu* was to unanimously approve an amnesty law for those who in the past had acted against the established order, i.e. were convicted for political offenses. Under the amnesty 73 Veterans and 106 Communists were released from prison in May.⁹⁷ Larka and Tõrvand had been released earlier for health reasons at Christmas 1937 along with 16 other Veterans.⁹⁸

Following the amnesty in 1938, Hjalmar Mäe assumed the duties of the leadership of the League. Before Sirk had fled Finland, he had appointed Mäe as his successor as campaign leader. Larka also gave his authority as chairman to Mäe because he wanted a quiet life in the country and someone else to run the League's affairs in Tallinn.⁹⁹ Mäe, however, realized that it was pointless to resurrect the League. The League's goal of a new constitution with a strong executive had been achieved, albeit through other means. He believed that a new political struggle would be divisive when the country needed unity and stability. Therefore Mäe let it be known that he considered the League's political activities to be finished.¹⁰⁰ Not all Veterans' leaders agreed with Mäe's position, but he managed to persuade most of them of the need to maintain civic peace.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 459.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 455.

⁹⁹ Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, pp. 131-2.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

CHAPTER 11

THE AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

Päts' goals were not limited to removing the Veterans from the political arena. He seized the opportunity to fulfill his own ambition of fundamentally reordering the political system. After his coup d'état and the subsequent purge of League supporters from civil service, military and political offices, Päts developed a nationalist authoritarian state with many of the characteristics envisaged by the Veterans. All along, his steps toward building a dictatorship were justified as measures to thwart the threat from the Veterans. The expropriation of the more popular ideas and external forms of radical right-wing and fascist movements by conservative elites was not an uncommon occurrence in Europe during the Thirties.¹

Consolidation of Power

In September 1934 Päts extended the state of emergency by one year, thus further postponing the elections. As his actions to this point had encountered hardly any opposition, Päts reconvened the *Riigikogu* for an extraordinary session on 28 September with the goal of forming a pro-government majority bloc of representatives. The first point on the agenda was the election of a new chairman. Päts had appointed the previous chairman, Karl Einbund, minister of the interior and deputy prime minister, in effect, acting prime minister. The government's candidate for chairman, General Jaan Soots, the mayor of Tallinn, was narrowly rejected in favour of Rudolf Penno of the Settlers' Party, demonstrating that the majority of the *Riigikogu* was in opposition to the government. The other point on the agenda was the government's report on the political and economic situation. Einbund once again justified the government's actions by claiming that continued irresponsible agitation, threats and intimidation, and the systematic infiltration of the army and government institutions by the Veterans would have led to the collapse of

¹ Examples are Austria under Dollfuss and Schuschnigg, Portugal under Salazar, Romania under King Carol's dictatorship, Greece under Metaxas, Poland under the Colonels, Hungary under the Horthy regime from 1932. Roger Griffin defines this phenomenon as "para-fascism", Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (London, 1991), pp. 120-2.

the state had the government not acted decisively on the 12th of March. In his words, "a seizure of power was just around the corner."²

The representatives of the Farmers, the Russians, and the Socialists (with some reservations), the same parties which had supported the Päts cabinet in October 1933, spoke approvingly of the government's actions, but the representatives of all the other parties were critical. The opposition parties condemned the extension of the state of emergency and demanded the proper implementation of the constitution by the carrying out of the postponed elections.³ In the face of the *Riigikogu's* critical stance, Einbund terminated the session after its second day (with a decree prepared in advance by Päts) and announced that henceforth the *Riigikogu* would not convene, but would assume a "silent existence" (*vaikiv olek*). Thus originated the term 'the silent era' (*vaikiv ajastu*) under which the period from 1934 to 1940 came to be known.⁴

The regime shared the Veterans' contempt for the Estonian parliamentary system. Though the government had supposedly acted "to save democracy", Päts and Einbund made it clear that there would be no going back to the old order. Organization by occupational groups was promoted as an alternative to the political parties. Corporatism, which ideally sought to limit class conflict and increase co-operation among different groups in society, was part of a general trend in the interwar period. In Estonia, it was Päts, not the Veterans, who was the chief proponent of this idea. His inspiration, however, did not come from Mussolini, but rather from the various chambers representing professional and occupational groups established earlier in Germany.⁵ Organization by occupation had indeed been a pet concept of Päts' for quite some time - at his instigation, the *Riigikogu* had previously established two professional chambers, the first one (the chamber of commerce and industry) already in 1924.⁶ Between 1934 and 1936 Päts decreed the establishment of 15 new chambers,⁷ representatives of which were later

² Einbund, 28 September 1934, *Riigikogu V koosseis. Täielikud protokollid ja stenograafilised aruanded*, pp. 1469-70.

³ Speeches by Oskar Köster (Settlers), Theodor Tallmeister (Centre), Aleksander Jõeäär (Communists), Johannes Tamson (independent), Jaan Teemant (Farmers, but not speaking in the name of his party), and Mihkel Juhkum (independent), 2 October 1934, *Ibid.*, pp. 1498-1500; 1507-22.

⁴ Kuuli, *Vapsidest Isamaaliiduni*, p. 149.

⁵ Laaman, *Konstantin Päts*, p. 290.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 192-3, 212-3.

⁷ The following groups were represented in their own professional chambers: engineers, doctors, pharmacists, homeowners, veterinarians, agronomists, housewives (home economics), cooperatives, dairies, fisheries, rural workers and small landowners, workers,

assigned seats in the upper houses of the National Assembly and the 1938 *Riigikogu*. In February 1935 Päts established the State Economic Council (*Riigi majandusnõukogu*) with 15 members elected by the occupational chambers and 10 appointed by Päts to advise the government.⁸ This transitional institution, modelled after the state economic council of Weimar Germany, however, was not very active since the government rarely asked for advice.⁹

Päts explained his vision of organization by occupation to mean that “a person will no longer have to kneel before the parties” but would join together with his “closest co-workers”. Everyone should feel that they are “part of one large family and that they can only flourish under a common roof”. Furthermore, this reform was to have a deeper meaning: “to teach a new morality and sense of honour - individual rights alone are not decisive, rather, who does the most for the good of the state.”¹⁰ According to Prime Minister Einbund, the purpose of these chambers was: “to engage all of our occupational groups, without class conflict, in our common effort to develop our state toward our common national and state goals.”¹¹ This emphasis on public responsibilities and national duties, rather than individual rights, was a common theme for the Päts regime and was quite consistent with the ideas espoused by the Veterans.

On 6 March 1935 political parties were abolished. The following day the establishment of the Fatherland League (*Isamaaliit*) was officially announced. Its aim was “to unite the Estonian people in the service of the fatherland under the state’s protection and guidance.”¹² To this end it sought to develop in the people “a spirit of harmony, solidarity, cooperation among all classes, and singleness of purpose.” The regime attempted to mobilize public opinion and broaden its base of support. The Fatherland League, however, did not prove to be popular and it was seen as nothing more than a prop for the government; its membership consisted mainly of office holders and opportunists.¹³ Though in the regime’s rhetoric the Fatherland League was to serve as the intermediary between the government and the people, in practice it functioned simply

teachers, artisans, employees of private enterprises. Chambers of commerce-industry and agriculture were established before the dictatorship in 1924 and 1931 respectively.

⁸ *Eesti kroonika 1935* (Tartu, 1936), p. 30.

⁹ Laaman, *Konstantin Päts*, p. 213.

¹⁰ *Kaja*, 17 January 1935; Johannes Klesment, “Sisepoliitiline kriis ja põhiseadus,” in *Põhiseadus ja Rahvuskogu* (Tallinn, 1937), p. 68.

¹¹ Toomus, *Konstantin Päts ja riigireformi aastad*, p. 199.

¹² ERA, f. 943, n. 1, s. 1, lk. 47.

¹³ Political Police public opinion reports, ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 33, lk. 13, 33, 145.

as a propaganda vehicle for the regime. Its role was mostly limited to promoting government sponsored campaigns, and thus can not be viewed as a serious attempt to establish a one-party system. The Fatherland League with its nebulous nationalist ideology, hierarchical structure, and pretense of being something other than a party was in many respects a pale imitation of the Veterans' League.¹⁴

To direct public opinion, the government established an information bureau which in September 1935 was expanded into the State Propaganda Office whose chief was given cabinet minister status. The Propaganda Office's mission was "to organize the people and activize all elements of society for participation in state and national tasks."¹⁵ Its duties also included censorship.¹⁶ The Propaganda Office conducted campaigns to promote national consciousness and pride, such as the increased use of the state flag, a competition to compose patriotic songs, the revival of folk traditions, and the wearing of folk costumes. The two most successful and popular drives were the Estonianization of family names, with acting prime minister Karl Einbund setting the example by Estonianizing his name to Kaarel Eenpalu, and the beautification of homes.¹⁷ These cultural activities were also meant as a substitute for political involvement.¹⁸

In the economic sphere Päts was the beneficiary of lucky timing. The foundation for economic recovery had been laid by the Tõnisson cabinet's devaluation of the kroon in July 1933.¹⁹ At the time of Päts' coup d'état the worst of the crisis had already passed and the depression had slowly begun to recede. The regime's policies, nevertheless, also deserve ample credit for bringing about economic recovery. The hallmark of these policies was centralization and state capitalism.²⁰ The regime subsidized agriculture, made the export of the three most important products (butter,

¹⁴ Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, pp. 252-3.

¹⁵ ERA, f. 1093, n. 1, s. 3, lk. 10.

¹⁶ See the memoirs of two officials of the State Propaganda Office, Kaul Kadak, *Mitme taeva all* (Stockholm, 1974); Andrus Roolaht, *Nii see oli...* (Tallinn, 1990).

¹⁷ Review of the State Propaganda Office's activities, ERA, f. 1093, n. 1, s. 17, lk. 5-10; s. 14, lk. 9-15. Inda Rajasalu, "Riiklik Propaganda Talitus ja eesti nimi," in Ant, et al., eds., *Tundmatu Eesti Vabariik*, pp. 96-106.

¹⁸ Laaman records the following illuminating exchange in his diary on 5 May 1936 when Eenpalu tried to explain the need for the State Propaganda Office's home beautification campaign to invited newspaper editors in his office. Eenpalu: "the public must have something to keep occupied with so that..." journalists in chorus: 'it does not damn well start getting involved with politics!' General laughter", ERA, f. 827, n. 1, s. 1a.

¹⁹ *Estonian Economic Year-Book 1934* (Tallinn, 1935), p. 12.

²⁰ Royal Institute of International Affairs, *The Baltic States*, pp. 144, 152.

eggs, and meat) a state monopoly,²¹ and launched an industrialization drive which concentrated on the development of new industries to refine Estonian raw materials, such as oil shale. Financially, the government concentrated on the accumulation of capital for the purpose of investment rather than to raise the standard of living. Strike activity increased during the first two years of the dictatorship, but in later years the government increasingly stepped in to arbitrate labour disputes.²²

For Päts' program of industrial development to succeed the nation needed to produce more skilled workers. This concern determined the priorities of his social policy. The first major reform the government undertook was an overhaul of the educational system which restricted the number of students entering higher educational institutions and directed more young people to expanded vocational training facilities.²³ This unpopular step to curb the overproduction of university graduates was also intended to diminish any residual popularity of the Veterans' League, as unemployed intellectuals were perceived to have been particularly receptive to the movement's promise of a better future.²⁴

A second area of concern for Päts was the low rate of population increase which he saw as the root cause of the labour shortage and detrimental to the nation's ability to defend itself against external enemies.²⁵ Like French statesmen, Päts honoured mothers with large families.²⁶ Mothers' Day became a holiday in the service of the regime's nationalist ideology.²⁷ The family was further promoted by the publishing law which proscribed written material dealing with marital problems, divorce, family conflicts and suicide in an indecent or offensive manner.²⁸ Opportunities for women in terms of political representation decreased as could be expected under a paternalistic, pronatalist regime with a traditional view of the role of women in society.²⁹ No women were

²¹ Richard Antons, *Agraarsuhted kodanlikus Eestis* (Tallinn, 1957), p. 228.

²² Parming, *The Collapse of Liberal Democracy*, p. 12.

²³ Uustalu, *The History of Estonian People*, p. 223.

²⁴ Märt Raud, *Kaks suurt. Jaan Tõnisson, Konstantin Päts ja nende ajastu* (Tallinn, 1991; first published Toronto, 1953), p. 205. Estonia had one of the world's highest ratios of university education at that time (1 student per 220 citizens), Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars*, p. 374.

²⁵ Laaman, *Konstantin Päts*, p. 284.

²⁶ This was reflected in § 21 of the 1938 constitution which contained a clause stating that "families with many children will be especially cared for."

²⁷ Kivimäe, "Frauen und Frauenbewegung in Estland von der Jahrhundertwende bis zum Ausbruch des Zweiten Weltkrieges," pp. 219.

²⁸ *Eesti kroonika 1938*, p. 36.

²⁹ For the situation of women under the regime see Mäelo, *Eesti naine läbi aegade*; Liivi Soova, "The Main Features of Estonian Women's Movement (1920-1940)," *Proceedings of the*

elected to the *Riigikogu* in 1938; only Linda Eenpalu was appointed to the upper chamber as the corporate representative for home economics.

The absence of any significant opposition to the regime can be explained by Päts' success in eliminating the threat from the Veterans and bringing about economic recovery, as well as by the public perception of the pre-1934 parliamentary system as thoroughly discredited. The regime was also adept at co-opting opposition figures with attractive offices. Furthermore, the Päts government had managed to satisfy the public's yearning for stability which the Veterans had exploited so successfully. Indeed, Parming believes that "by the end of 1935 Päts had adopted almost every one of the Veterans' probable ruling methods."³⁰

Although his regime enjoyed fairly broad public support, Päts took a series of steps to silence opposition to the government. The state's relations with the Lutheran church became much closer, as did the former's involvement in the latter's affairs. Initially, the church welcomed this development. In December 1934 Päts granted the church the institutional status and legal rights that liberal democracy had denied it. However, at the same time the state asserted control over the church with the Minister of the Interior having the right of rejecting church appointments.³¹ The sympathy shown by some clergymen towards the Veterans was probably part of the government's motivation for this step.³² Parallel with developments in public life, the church structure was centralized and greater power was given to its head, the Bishop. In September 1939 internal strife erupted in the Lutheran church over the divorce of Bishop Rahamägi which the government quelled through the extraordinary step of suspending the activity of the Bishop, the Church Consistorium and the Church Council, and appointing a caretaker in their stead until a new Bishop was elected.³³ One factor in this action might have been the regime's displeasure that almost all the clergymen who ran for a seat in the 1938 *Riigikogu* elections opposed the government's candidates.³⁴

Estonian Academy of Sciences 42 (1993), pp. 157-168; Kivimäe, "Frauen und Frauenbewegung in Estland".

³⁰ Parming, *The Collapse of Liberal Democracy*, p. 57.

³¹ Veem, *Eesti Vaba Rahvakirik*, pp. 305-6.

³² Alvin Isberg, *Med demokratin som insats. Politiskt-konstitutionellt maktspel i 1930-talets Estland*. *Studia Baltica Stockholmiensia* 4 (Uppsala, 1988), p. 162.

³³ Veem, *Eesti Vaba Rahvakirik*, pp. 321-2.

³⁴ *Päevaleht*, 7 February 1938; Andrus Roolah, *Nii see oli...*, p. 292-8.

In September 1936 the entire Labour Unions' Central Council was replaced by government appointees because the regime was annoyed at the rise in the number of strikes and especially by the long duration of the strike in the oil-shale industry. The government justified this action by dubiously claiming that the Council was being subverted by communists.³⁵ The renowned liberal Tartu daily *Postimees*, owned and edited by Päts' old rival Jaan Tõnisson, was sequestered, ostensibly because of its debts, but primarily to deprive the opposition of a voice.³⁶ The government also acted against the oppositional 'Tartu spirit' as manifested by students. University reforms in 1936 and 1937 attempted to create a 'disciplined' student body by giving the state appointed rector wider powers, dissolving and reorganizing the student council, and bringing student fraternities under state supervision.³⁷

The Päts Constitution

The exposure of the League as a serious threat to the state with the arrest of the conspirators in December 1935 gave Päts the opportunity to make a clean sweep of the past and construct a new order. The regime skilfully used the revelation of the aborted putsch to thoroughly discredit the League and rally the nation behind the government.³⁸ Päts capitalized on the opportunity by announcing a plebiscite to amend the constitution in a radio speech on New Year's Eve 1935. He claimed that the people realized that they had narrowly escaped a serious danger and now understood what the League was all about, and therefore desired that the state's system of government be based on a "new foundation". He argued that since the Veterans had supposedly wished to seize power and establish a dictatorship, the constitution drafted by them was dangerous and had to be replaced.³⁹ The regime asked the people to authorize it to convoke a National Assembly (*Rahvuskogu*) for the purpose of amending the constitution or drafting an entirely new constitution. The National Assembly was to consist of two chambers: the first with 80 members

³⁵ Mihkelson, *Vastu tuult*, pp. 376-8.

³⁶ Mikk Põlde, "Postimehe areng ja sekvestri alla võtmine," in Blumfeldt et al., eds., *Jaan Tõnisson*, pp. 282-4; Arno Raag, *Kõuepilvede saatel* (Lund, 1971), pp. 182-4; Herbert Michelson, *Eesti radadelt* (Toronto, 1975), pp. 104-5.

³⁷ Artur Grönberg, *Eesti Üliõpilaste Seltsi ajalugu*, vol. 2 (Montreal, 1985), pp. 365-408; Ots, *Mehed sündmuste kurvidel*, pp. 107-9; See ERA, f. 952, n. 1, s. 51 for protests against the university reforms.

³⁸ *Eesti kroonika* 1935, p. 38.

³⁹ *Uus Eesti*, 20 January 1936.

directly elected; the second with 40 representatives of institutions, local governments and professional corporations, and individuals appointed by Päts.⁴⁰ This was almost identical to the plan which Päts had privately presented to the Veterans and other parties in 1932.⁴¹

The plebiscite in February 1936 was preceded by a governmental propaganda campaign assaulting the existing constitution written by the Veterans as being fundamentally flawed, hurriedly drafted, containing provisions for dictatorial power which if fully used could lead to “civil war” and “revolution”. Furthermore, it was allegedly “alien” to the deeply democratic Estonian character and the concentration of power in the hands of the president was inspired by the foreign concept of the “leader principle”. Päts even used the example of how he promulgated the budget by decree to illustrate how excessive the power granted the president was. He claimed that the outlook for the nation would be dire, if in the future, individuals less responsible than himself were placed at the helm of the state.⁴²

All this was in marked contrast to Päts’ expression of confidence in the new constitution after the victory of the League’s proposal in October 1933.⁴³ Päts had started publicly talking of the need for reforming the constitution already in January 1935.⁴⁴ The Veterans’ aborted putsch provided a convenient pretext for carrying out his plans for reordering the state to fit his desires. The Veterans were used by the government as the main *Feindbild* in its campaign for popular support of its replacement of the constitution. The regime’s crude propaganda was similar in style to that of League’s own demagoguery as the following pamphlet distributed by the Fatherland League illustrates:

⁴⁰ The second chamber of the National Assembly consisted of the representatives of the following institutions: the judiciary (2), local governments (7), professional corporations (13), universities (2), the civil guard (2), the heads of the Lutheran and Orthodox churches (2), ethnic minorities (2), Liberty Cross cavaliers (1), and individuals appointed by Päts (10).

⁴¹ See chapter five.

⁴² *Uus Eesti*, 20 January 1936.

⁴³ “Personally, I don’t fear that the basis of the state’s organization will be changed. Our state will remain on a democratic foundation”, Päts in *Päevaleht*, 18 October 1933. The same was echoed by Einbund, *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Kaja*, 17 January 1935.

A new war of independence is ahead of us because the Veterans' coup attempt came from abroad. The whole undertaking was directed from abroad - grenades, dynamite, printed materials and 15 millions in currency of unknown origin came into play . . . some dark foreign power, some black hand wanted at all costs to prevent the *Riigivanem* from announcing fundamental reforms . . . The *Riigivanem*, the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces and the government, under whose wise leadership the life of our nation has happily revived, call on the people to continue that work and convene the National Assembly. Foreign powers with the help of their henchmen, the Veterans, wanted and want even now to prevent that. Thus, two fronts have formed: the front of the Estonian people and the front of the foreign powers.⁴⁵

The overwhelming vote (76%) in favour of constitutional reform⁴⁶ can be explained by the fact that no agitation against the government's proposal was permitted and that it was generally believed to be the first step in ending the state of emergency and returning to normalcy.⁴⁷

Democratic opposition to the regime was remarkably quiet and its protests were completely ineffectual. The only significant manifestation was the memorandum of four former heads of government (Juhan Kukk, Ants Piip, Jaan Teemant, and Tõnisson) handed to Päts personally and published in *Helsingin Sanomat* in November 1936 criticizing the government's policies and demanding the easing of the martial law prior to the National Assembly elections in December to allow freedom of expression and association.⁴⁸ Päts simply ignored the memorandum.⁴⁹ In reaction to the restrictions placed on their campaign activities, most of the opposition boycotted the elections and thus the pro-government candidates won an overwhelming majority with only 30 of the 80 electoral districts being contested.

⁴⁵ ERA, f. 943, n. 1, s. 53, lk. 34-5. The foreign power alluded to, but never explicitly mentioned, was Nazi Germany.

⁴⁶ V. Jõgi, "Rahvahääletus rahvuskogu kokkukutsumiseks," *Eesti statistika kuukiri*, no. 176-7 (1936), pp. 404.

⁴⁷ ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 34, lk. 265.

⁴⁸ Memorandum of four former heads of government, ERA, f. 989, n. 1, s. 1798, lk. 233-4p; Rein Marandi, "Endiste Riigivanemate märgukiri," in Evald Blumfeldt et al., eds., *Jaan Tõnisson*, pp. 286-291.

⁴⁹ Päts' only response was to criticize the authors of the memorandum for washing Estonia's dirty laundry in the foreign press and shamefully "seeking foreign assistance against the Estonian state's internal order", *Uus Eesti*, 9 November 1936.

The National Assembly was convened in February 1937, a year after the plebiscite. The opening of the Assembly by its oldest member, the prominent Veterans' supporter (though also Päts' old friend) Oskar Rütli, now a member of the Fatherland League, occasioned some comments.⁵⁰ The National Assembly worked out a new constitution in just under half a year on the basis of a draft provided by Päts.⁵¹ The idea of an undemocratically elected upper chamber aroused the fiercest opposition during the Assembly debates and did not even evince much enthusiasm from Päts' closest supporters.⁵² Undoubtedly, Päts was influenced by the advice of his friend Finnish President Svinhufvud, who believed that "the weakness of the new states is the absence of an upper chamber".⁵³ The other important influence on Päts was the 1935 Polish constitution which he studied while at a sanatorium in Poland in 1935.⁵⁴ The configuration of the upper chamber and the method of election of the president interested him most, and his draft contained echoes of the Polish system.⁵⁵

Though the National Assembly witnessed some stormy debates, as it was composed mostly of pro-government deputies, the end product did not contain any significant alterations of Päts' draft. The stated aim and advertised result of the new constitution was to find a middle way between the democratic excesses of the first constitution and the authoritarian excesses of the second constitution. Päts himself used the terms "moderate" and "balanced" to describe his creation.⁵⁶ Despite the regime's rhetoric about correcting the dictatorial elements of the Veterans' constitution, the new one was clearly less democratic.⁵⁷ In general, the importance of the state's interests were increased at the expense of

⁵⁰ ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 34, lk. 247.

⁵¹ The draft was composed by a committee appointed by Päts headed by Johannes Klesment, the consultant for the Ministry of Justice.

⁵² Artur Mägi, "Põhiseaduse koostamise käik Rahvuskogus," in *Põhiseadus ja Rahvuskogu*, pp. 196, 224.

⁵³ Laaman's diary, 14 October 1934, ERA, f. 827, n. 1, s. 1a. Svinhufvud also told Päts that "if you succeed in establishing it, then you will be ahead of us. The upper chamber should be the embodiment of state wisdom", *Ibid.*, 25 May 1937.

⁵⁴ Laaman, *Konstantin Päts*, p. 270.

⁵⁵ For the similarities with the election of the upper house and the president in Poland see Antony Polonsky, *Politics in Independent Poland 1921-1939. The Crisis of Constitutional Government* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 387-9, 398. The composition of the upper chamber also resembled the upper chamber in Hungary, Rothschild, *East Central Europe between the Two World Wars*, pp. 161-2.

⁵⁶ Laaman, *Konstantin Päts*, p. 227.

⁵⁷ Rein Taagepera has applied the recently developed Shugart-Carey scale of presidential powers to the Estonian case and found that the 1937 constitution contains considerably stronger presidential powers than the 1933 constitution, Rein Taagepera, *Estonia: Return to Independence* (Boulder 1993), p. 56, footnote 11.

individual rights. The new constitution deprived the people of the right to initiate legislation by referendum and omitted the previously guaranteed right to strike. The new *Riigikogu*, like the National Assembly, was bicameral: the lower chamber, the Chamber of Representatives (*Riigivolikogu*), had 80 directly elected members; the upper chamber, the State Council (*Riiginõukogu*), had 40 members - 16 elected by professional corporations, 14 representatives of institutions, and 10 appointed by the President.⁵⁸ The power to initiate legislation was almost entirely taken away from the *Riigikogu* and placed almost exclusively in the hands of the government.

The constitution deprived the people of the right to nominate their own candidates for the office of President. Instead that privilege was given to three institutions: the Chamber of Representatives, the State Council, and a council of representatives of local governments who were each allowed to nominate one candidate. If they did not all nominate the same candidate, then the people were to decide whom they favoured in a direct election.⁵⁹ The President's powers included the right to appoint and dismiss the members of the government, appoint judges, issue laws by decree when the *Riigikogu* was not in session, and a suspensive veto. The President was also given the right to appoint a supreme commander of the armed forces during peacetime with the authority to give orders to civilians and civil institutions in the interests of external or internal security. Päts also forced through first past-the-post elections to replace proportional representation, one of the main demands of the Veterans which they had nevertheless left out of their amendment bill because they feared that it would provoke too great opposition.⁶⁰

The whole process of adopting the new constitution contradicted the one that was in force at the time.⁶¹ The *Riigivanem* had no right to initiate a plebiscite, convoke a National Assembly, or implement constitutional amendments by decree. The *Riigikogu* leadership under

⁵⁸ Of the 14 institutional representatives, 6 were appointed *ex officio*: the Commander-in-Chief, the heads of the Lutheran and Orthodox churches, the rectors of the 2 universities, and the head of the Bank of Estonia; local governments elected 4 representatives; the civil guard, education and culture, health, and ethnic minorities each elected 1 representative. The 16 representatives chosen by the occupational corporations were divided as follows: agriculture and fisheries - 5, industry, artisans, commerce, shipping, and co-operatives - 5, employees/workers - 3, owners of city property - 1, free professions - 1, home economics - 1, the Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, § 84.

⁵⁹ The Constitution of the Republic of Estonia, §40.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, §67.

⁶¹ Talvik, *Legaaluse põhimõte*, p. 67; Isberg, *Med demokratin som insats*, p. 167.

chairman Penno did warn Päts of the unconstitutionality of his steps, but their memoranda were completely ignored.⁶² Päts argued that in the February 1936 plebiscite the people had made their position clear and given him a mandate to implement a new constitution. While admitting that 'fine details' of procedure had not been fulfilled, he defended his actions as being dictated by *raison d'état*.⁶³

The regime's claim that the new constitution was a return to the path to democracy is unconvincing. The process of drafting a new constitution was connected to the postponement of the *Riigikogu* elections which could not continue indefinitely if Päts did not wish for the regime to be seen as a naked dictatorship. Thus the adoption of a new constitution was a manoeuvre designed, in Kuuli's words "to cover the Päts' dictatorship with the fig leaf of democracy."⁶⁴ Indeed, after the implementation of the new constitution and the elections which followed, the character of the regime remained basically unaltered. Thus the main purpose served by the exercise was the legitimization of the regime.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Päts did attempt to maintain a semblance of popular and legal sanction for his rule unlike his imitator Karlis Ulmanis in Latvia who did not even go through the motions and was critical of Päts' moves towards limited pluralism.⁶⁶

During the transition period from the implementation of the new constitution on 1 January 1938 until the election of the new President, Päts occupied the specially created office of *Riigihoidja* (Regent, literally State Holder), answerable to no one. An examination of his actions during this period provides the clearest insights about the nature of his political inclinations. Päts used his position as *Riigihoidja* to issue a number of decrees contradicting the government's rhetoric heralding a return to democracy. The state of emergency was again extended, and restrictions on

⁶² ERA, f. 80, n. 5, s. 282, lk. 271-2.

⁶³ Päts in the National Assembly on 17 August 1937, the text of his speech in Tomingas, *Vaikiv ajastu*, p. 534-8. This dubious argument is supported by Uibopuu: "procedural unconstitutionality was sanctioned by the will of the people, and constitutionality was thereby restored", Henn-Jüri Uibopuu, "The Constitutional Development of the Estonian Republic," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 4 (1973), p. 21.

⁶⁴ Kuuli, *Vapsidest Isamaaliiduni*, p. 178.

⁶⁵ Parming, *The Collapse of Liberal Democracy*, p. 59.

⁶⁶ Ulmanis told Estonian ambassador Karl Menning on 10 January 1936 after Päts announced his intention to convene a National Assembly, "we certainly cannot go along your path, we will go step by step along the present road", ERA, f. 957, n. 14, s. 163, lk. 46-7. Päts commented to Laaman that for the present he would keep the parties restrained "but that I am not Ulmanis who would do so forever nor do I think that I will last forever", Laaman's diary, 19 October 1936, ERA, f. 827, n. 1, s. 1a.

civil rights, previously of an extraordinary, temporary nature, were made permanent. Any public expressions “disrespectful toward the Estonian state and people, the present democratic order, state institutions, and the leaders of the state” were banned by the publishing law and the association law, as were any expressions which might “create discord” and “harm community solidarity and national unity.”⁶⁷ Laws on local government revealed another characteristic of the regime’s policies: centralization. Mayors of municipalities and heads of the county governments were to be appointed by the President or the Minister of the Interior.

Elections for the new *Riigikogu* were held on 24/25 February 1938, the twentieth anniversary of Estonian independence. Päts explained before the elections that, “now is not the time to allow such a luxury as to let the parties loose before the elections . . . A serious illness may return if one is not careful enough. One who has been ill must be careful that upon repetition of the illness it does not get worse.”⁶⁸ Until the new constitution was implemented the regime would not contemplate loosening the reins. The only party officially permitted to campaign for election was the government’s Popular Front for the Implementation of the Constitution (*Põhiseaduse elluviimise rahvarinne*), an organization created for that purpose by the Fatherland League. The main themes of the Popular Front’s campaign were that the new *Riigikogu* should be comprised only of supporters of the new constitution, the nation must be united, not to allow internal disagreements to provide an opportunity for foreign intervention (again alluding to alleged foreign involvement in the Veterans’ aborted putsch), and not to elect those who would want a return of the instability of the early days (the former parties).⁶⁹ These themes were similar to those of the Veterans’ campaign in 1934 which urged voters not elect those who favoured the old system, but only those who had supported their new constitution. The press received instructions to report positively on the Popular Front and not to comment on the activities of the opposition.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ *Eesti kroonika* 1938, p. 36.

⁶⁸ Laaman, *Konstantin Päts*, p. 308.

⁶⁹ ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 38, lk. 65-8, 574-5.

⁷⁰ ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 38, lk. 5-6. The way the election campaign was conducted was condemned from abroad, including by the entire spectrum of Finnish opinion as can be seen in the following headlines: “Estonian parliamentary elections to be conducted in true Stalinist style”, *Ajan Suunta*, 24 December 1937; “Opposition be silent!” *Helsingin Sanomat*, 28 January 1938; “Gangster methods used in Estonia to hinder the participation of political opponents in the elections”, *Suomen Sosialdemokraatti*, 30 January 1938.

At least 23 candidates could be identified as Veterans, though, of course, they did not campaign on a common platform, but only as individuals.⁷¹ The use of term *vabadussõjalane* (war of independence veteran) was actually banned. Karl-Arnold Jalakas was even sentenced to one month imprisonment for “abuse” of the term.⁷² Rudolf Mähar in his campaign literature referred to himself more circumspectly as a “volunteer in the Russo-Estonian war”.⁷³ Though campaigning by non-Popular Front candidates was restricted, they nevertheless received 53% of the popular vote to the Popular Front’s 47%.⁷⁴ However, since the voting was conducted on a first past-the-post basis rather than a proportional one as previously, the Popular Front won 54 seats (8 of these constituencies were uncontested). This number increased to 64 because many candidates who campaigned as independents joined the pro-government bloc when the *Riigikogu* convened. These included Jalakas, the former chief editor of *Võitlus*. The other two candidates identified with the Veterans who won mandates, Oskar Lõvi and Eduard Peedosk, joined the representatives of the Centre Party and the Settlers to form the “Democratic Faction” whose chief spokesman was Tõnisson. The other six-member opposition faction, the “Working People’s Unity Faction”, was formed by Communists and left-wing Socialists.⁷⁵

The first task of the new *Riigikogu* was to conduct the presidential elections which went smoothly for Päts. The three nominating institutions, the State Council, the Chamber of Representatives, and the council of local governments all chose Päts as their candidate. In the Chamber of Representatives he was unsuccessfully challenged by Tõnisson’s candidacy. Thus according to the new constitution, he was elected President at a special joint meeting of all three bodies, leaving the people out of the process entirely. The functioning of the new governing institutions was less democratic in practice than in theory. In his inaugural speech Prime Minister Eenpalu made clear that the government did not consider itself responsible to the *Riigikogu*. The supposed balance between the executive and the legislative branches did not exist: power was firmly in the hands of the President who continued to issue legislation by decree and the *Riigikogu* did not exercise its right to initiate

⁷¹ ERA, f. 949, n. 1, s. 38, lk. 1-4.

⁷² *Ibid.*, lk. 836.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, lk. 639.

⁷⁴ *Päevaleht*, 28 February 1938; Kuuli, “Parlamendi- ja kohalike omavalitsuste valimised koduslikus Eestis,” p. 120.

⁷⁵ Kuuli, “Parlamendi- ja kohalike omavalitsuste valimised koduslikus Eestis,” p. 121.

legislation.⁷⁶ This new system was aptly dubbed “guided democracy” (*juhitud demokraatia*) by Eenpalu.⁷⁷

Some conclusions about the social basis of the regime can be drawn from the results of the *Riigikogu* elections. Support for the regime was strongest in the countryside.⁷⁸ The Popular Front’s success there was no surprise as it was able to utilize the Farmers’ Party’s old network as most of the leadership of the Popular Front had come from the Farmers’ Party. In the larger cities, however, the pro-government candidates fared poorly.⁷⁹ They did not win a single seat in Tartu, the bastion of liberal thought. The intelligentsia, alienated by the continued restrictions on civil liberties, was the staunchest opponent of the regime. The attitude of the working class was ambivalent. The general economic recovery and the regime’s program of industrialization which helped to eliminate unemployment were welcome, yet in 1935-36 there was a great increase in strike activity.⁸⁰ The Socialists had supported the Päts government because they feared the alternative, a ‘fascist’ regime.⁸¹ Business circles and the military can also be counted among the supporters of the regime. The stability that the authoritarian regime provided facilitated a smoother running of their affairs.⁸² Business was pleased by the economic recovery and Päts’ policy of industrialization.⁸³ The influence of the military was significantly increased thanks to General Laidoner’s role as the second pillar of the regime.⁸⁴

After the Päts coup d’état support for the Veterans dissolved rapidly, demonstrating that it was not the movement itself which appealed to the masses, but what it represented: firm leadership and political stability.⁸⁵ Once Päts provided that, the League lost its *raison d’être*. Furthermore, there was substantial ideological affinity between them as the nationalistic

⁷⁶ Mägi, *Das Staatsleben Estlands*, p. 307.

⁷⁷ *Eesti Kroonika 1938*, p. 38; Kuuli, *Vapsidest Isamaaliiduni*, p. 183.

⁷⁸ Kuuli, *Vapsidest Isamaaliiduni*, p. 218.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 219-20.

⁸⁰ Parming, *The Collapse of Liberal Democracy*, p. 63.

⁸¹ Ast, “Demokraatliku Eesti loojakul,” p. 615.

⁸² Imre Lipping, “The Emergence of Estonian Authoritarianism,” in Ziedonis, Winter and Valgemäe, eds., *Baltic History*, p. 213.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

⁸⁴ In his position as Commander-in-Chief, Laidoner was in charge not only of military defense but of internal security as well which meant that he could also issue orders to individuals and institutions not directly under his command. Furthermore, the army was represented in the cabinet by a senior general as Minister of Defense and the mayors of Tallinn and Tartu, Jaan Soots and Aleksander Tõnisson, appointed by Päts were both generals.

⁸⁵ Parming, *The Collapse of Liberal Democracy*, p. 62.

and anti-democratic policies implemented by Päts demonstrated. He appropriated and put into practice many of the ideas originally propagated by Veterans. These, however, were put into service by him against them.

CHAPTER 12

WORLD WAR TWO, OCCUPATION, AND COLLABORATION

The End of Estonian Independence

By the end of the Thirties, the escalating international tension caused by Hitler's expansionist policies cast a menacing shadow over the continued existence of independent states on the eastern shore of the Baltic. Shortly after the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact of 23 August 1939 with its secret protocol assigning the Baltic States and Finland to the Soviet sphere of influence, Estonia was faced with demands from the USSR for military bases. These demands were backed up by massing of troops at the border and violations of Estonian air space and territorial waters - in effect they amounted to an ultimatum. Finding itself in a hopeless position, the Päts government acquiesced and signed a Treaty of Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union on 28 September 1939 allowing Soviet troops to be based in Estonia.¹

In this perilous situation, the regime found it necessary to seek a *modus vivendi* with the opposition.² The immediate result was the replacement of the unpopular Prime Minister Eenpalu by Prof. Uluots who attempted to broaden the basis of the government. He succeeded in winning a degree of cooperation from the opposition parties whose representative Prof. Ants Piip of the Centre Party became foreign minister. Uluots even attempted to include Mäe, Sirk's successor, as minister of information (propaganda), but Mäe refused the offer.³ In forming his cabinet, Uluots asked all parties, including the Veterans, to propose a political program suitable for the current circumstances. According to Mäe's memoirs, the program that he wrote on behalf of the Veterans had as its main goal the strengthening of national unity and the expenditure of large funds on propaganda in the USA as measures to avoid Soviet

¹ On Estonia's foreign relations in this critical period see, David M. Crowe, *The Baltic States & the Great Powers. Foreign Relations, 1938-1940* (Boulder, 1993); Seppo Myllyniemi, *Die baltische Krise, 1938-1941*, Schriftenreihe der Vierteljahrshäfte für Zeitgeschichte 38 (Stuttgart, 1979); Magnus Ilmjärv, *Nõukogude Liidu ja Saksamaa vahel. Balti riigid ja Soome 1934-1940* (Tallinn, 1993); John Hiden and Thomas Lane, eds., *The Baltic and the Outbreak of the Second World War* (Cambridge, 1992).

² One manifestation of this was that Päts met privately with his chief opponent Tõnisson regularly from October 1939 to June 1940, Raamot, *Mälestused*, vol. 2, pp. 170-1.

³ Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, pp. 140-1.

domination.⁴ This, however, does not represent any “Veterans’ program,” but only reflects Mäe’s own eccentric ideas and his belief in the decisive power of propaganda. Furthermore, in the light of his collaboration with Germany that had already begun, it is implausible that this is what he actually proposed. With catastrophe looming, Päts clutched at straws. A measure of his desperation in this situation was that he secretly met with Mäe because he was interested in hearing his views on foreign policy.⁵ Both men believed that war between Germany and the USSR was inevitable, but Päts based his policy on the belief that both would exhaust themselves, leaving the situation to be determined by Britain and France. Mäe, on the other hand, was convinced of a German victory.⁶

The era of Soviet bases lasted less than a year. In June 1940, as the Germans were entering Paris, the Soviet Union presented ultimata to the Baltic states demanding the establishment of new governments better able to fulfill the Mutual Assistance Pacts and free passage for Soviet troops. With the Soviet troops already in bases in Estonia, the Päts government was in no position to resist the demands. Within a few days, Estonia was under full military occupation and Päts was forced to accept a government of left-wing intellectuals named by Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin’s personal emissary.⁷ Under pressure from Zhdanov, Päts declared new *Riigikogu* elections. This single party “election” resulted in a *Riigikogu* which proclaimed Soviet power in Estonia and applied to become a member republic of the USSR. Päts was forced to resign on 22 July and was deported a week later.⁸ One of Päts’ last acts as President was to restore the rank, medals, and rights of those Veterans who had been imprisoned in 1936.⁹

The events of June and July 1940 marked the end not only of the Päts regime but Estonian independence as well. The new Soviet government proceeded with the Sovietization of political, cultural and economic spheres. Leading members of political, religious, educational,

⁴ These funds were to be taken from the military budget which Mäe believed was made redundant by the Soviet bases in Estonia, *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁷ David Kirby, “Incorporation: The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact,” in Graham Smith, *The Baltic States. The National Self-Determination of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania* (London, 1994), pp. 69-85.

⁸ For the further fate of Päts and Laidoner see the records of their interrogations, *President ja Sõjavägede Ülemjuhataja NKVD ees. Dokumente ja materjale*, translation and commentary by Magnus Ilmjärv (Tallinn, 1993).

⁹ President’s decree on 20 June 1940, ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 5, lk. 228.

and administrative institutions were arrested and deported, with a substantial number executed. The Estonian army was integrated into the Red Army, however, most senior officers, and many in the middle ranks, were arrested and executed or deported.¹⁰ Mass deportations to Soviet prison camps took place in June 1941 when 'unreliable elements' from all walks of life suffered this fate. It should be noted that Veterans were more vulnerable than other groups because the records maintained in the Ministry of the Interior of their membership and their political activities were available to the Soviet authorities, and because those who fought in the Estonian War of Independence were considered by the Soviets to have committed treason in the Russian Civil War. Deportation and/or death was the fate of almost all the leading figures of the Veterans' movement including Larka, Kubbo, Luiga, Rõuk and the rest of the entire membership of the last League executive elected in 1933. A few Veterans managed to avoid this fate by resettling in Germany, under the terms of the German-Soviet agreement allowing ethnic Germans and their spouses, as well as some Estonians claiming German ancestry, to leave Estonia.¹¹ Of these emigrants the most significant was Mäe.¹²

Collaboration with the Nazi occupation

The mass trial of 1936 and the death of Sirk in 1937 signified the end of the Veterans' League as an organized political movement. Though the organization itself had ceased to exist, nevertheless, there was a strong element of personal continuity during the Nazi occupation of Estonia from 1941 to 1944 when Mäe served as the head of the collaborationist administration. Thus this section will examine how Mäe obtained his position, the goals and activities of the Estonian collaborators, and attempt to determine to what extent the native administration could be identified with the Veterans.

¹⁰ Vello Salo, comp., *E.V. kaadriohvitseride saatus 1938-1994* (Brampton, Ontario, 1994).

¹¹ Over 2000 Estonians managed to resettle in Germany in the *Nachumsiedlung* in February and March 1941, Karlis Kangeris, "Kollaboration vor der Kollaboration? Die baltischen Emigranten und ihre 'Befreiungskomitees' in Deutschland 1940/1941," in *Europa unterm Hakenkreuz. Okkupation und Kollaboration (1938-1945)* (Berlin, 1994), p. 170.

¹² Mäe managed to falsify his records to claim German ancestry through the help of his friend the head of the Estonian State Archive, Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, p. 158. Other leading Veterans who managed to resettle to Germany were Paul Laamann and Viktor Puskar.

After his release from prison in 1938, Mäe established an import business that required him to travel frequently to Berlin.¹³ There he cultivated personal contacts with German policy makers, especially Dr. Peter Kleist, in charge of East European affairs in Ribbentrop's office, later head of the *Ostland* department in the *Ostministerium*, and also Himmler's deputy, Dr. Werner Best of the *SS-Hauptamt*.¹⁴ Mäe quickly won the trust of the *Reichssicherheitshauptamt*. It is important to note that the Germans did not seek contact with him, but that Mäe himself offered them his cooperation.

With the planning of Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union, in full swing in early 1941, Mäe was foreseen by Nazi planners as the man to head an indigenous administration. Mäe, however, did not win this position because he was the leader of the Veterans' League. In his memoirs he based his claim to head an Estonian government on Päts having authorized him, at their last secret meeting in June 1940, to negotiate a treaty with Germany to rid Estonia of the Soviet occupation.¹⁵ Such retrospective justification, however, had no legal or practical value in the circumstances of 1941 nor was this taken into consideration by the Germans.¹⁶ Instead, Mäe won his position thanks to his persistent lobbying, influential contacts, and by being most convincing in his promises to carry out German plans for Estonia.

In Spring 1941, waiting for Nazi-Soviet hostilities to commence, Mäe formed the Estonian Liberation Committee in Helsinki with the goal of restoring Estonian independence with German assistance. The Committee sent an appeal to Hitler stating that,

before the small Estonian *Kulturvolk* is completely sacrificed to the basest instincts of the Jews and uncivilized asiatic troops, we direct an urgent appeal to you, *Herr Führer*, and beg you to put an end to this foul crime through German arms and banish these asiatic and medieval conditions from Aryan and civilized Europe.¹⁷

¹³ Mäe was well-acquainted with the German-speaking world as he had obtained doctoral degrees in astrophysics from Innsbruck in 1927 and in political science from Graz in 1930.

¹⁴ Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, pp. 136, 183.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

¹⁶ Alvin Isberg, *Zu den Bedingungen des Befreiers. Kollaboration und Freiheitsstreben in dem von Deutschland besetzten Estland 1941 bis 1944*, *Studia Baltica Stockholmiensia* 10 (Stockholm, 1992), p. 25.

¹⁷ Kangeris, "Kollaboration vor der Kollaboration?" p. 182.

Mäe candidly assured the German foreign ministry that given half a year he could re-educate Estonians from their nationalistic thinking to acceptance of a "general European outlook" (*gesamteuropäischer Gesichtspunkte*), i.e. the goals of National Socialist ideology.¹⁸ The "necessary close relationship" with Germany would be forged by Estonian soldiers fighting alongside German troops against the Soviet Union. Furthermore, Mäe expressed his "understanding" for German settlement in Estonia. This made a good impression on German officials and assured him the position of their most trusted collaborator.

In view of the brutal Soviet occupation it was not surprising that the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 was initially perceived by many Estonians as liberation. They were soon disappointed. The Germans refused to consider any measure of independence or autonomy for Estonia. Germany did not recognize the legal status of the Baltic states and treated them simply as occupied territory of the USSR and the German government retained property nationalized by the Soviets. Estonia and the other Baltic states became part of *Ostland*, governed directly by *Reichskommissar* Hinrich Lohse in Riga, and his representative, *Generalkommissar* Karl Litzmann in Tallinn. Alfred Rosenberg, the chief Nazi ideologue, and head of the *Ostministerium* responsible for the occupied territories of the Soviet Union, instructed the *Reichskommissar* for *Ostland* that his mission was to prepare to incorporate the territory into the Greater German *Reich* through the means of "Germanization of the racially worthy element, colonization by Germanic people, and the transfer of the unwanted element."¹⁹

One of the first priorities of the Nazis was the extermination of the Estonian Jewish population. Most of Estonia's 4000 Jews fled to the Soviet Union while nearly all the 1000 who remained were executed between late August and December 1941 by *Sonderkommando* 1A of *Einsatzgruppe* A.²⁰ The Estonians involved in these crimes were mainly former members of the Estonian Political Police reemployed by the Germans.²¹ The small

¹⁸ Seppo Myllyniemi, *Die Neuordnung der baltischen Länder 1941-1944. Zum nationalsozialistischen Inhalt der deutschen Besatzungspolitik*, Historiallisia Tutkimuksia 90 (Helsinki, 1973), pp. 107-8.

¹⁹ Kangeris, "Kollaboration vor der Kollaboration?" p. 186.

²⁰ Eugenia Gurin-Loov, *Suur häving. Eesti juutide katastroof 1941. Holocaust of Estonian Jews 1941* (Tallinn, 1994), pp. 13-4.

²¹ The Germans were unsuccessful at provoking Estonians to organize pogroms, report by *Einsatzgruppe* A commander *SS-Brigadeführer* Walther Stahlecker to SD chief Reinhard Heydrich, 15 October 1941, *Pruun katk. Dokumentide kogumik fasistide kuritegude kohta okupeeritud Eesti NSV territooriumil* (Tallinn, 1969), p. 67.

number of Estonian Jews meant that the killing went quickly and by the infamous Wannsee conference in January 1942 Estonia was reported *Judenfrei*.²²

A native Estonian civilian administration was formally established by Hitler's decree on 5 December 1941.²³ This Estonian *Landesverwaltung* or *Omavalitsus* (Self-Government) took the form of a directory headed by Mäe as *Erster Landesdirektor* or more impressively in Estonian, *Omavalitsuse juht* (leader of the Self-Government). The other directors were former interior ministry senior official Oskar Angelus (interior), former finance ministry official Dr. Alfred Wendt (economy), Otto Leesment (social affairs) and agronomist Hans Saar (agriculture).²⁴ Education, justice, propaganda, and culture were initially placed under Mäe. Two more directors were appointed later: Arnold Raadik for technical matters and the diplomat Oskar Öpik who took over responsibility for justice.²⁵ Of the seven directors, Mäe, Leesment and Saar had belonged to the Veterans' League.²⁶ Saar had earlier also been slated to be the minister of agriculture by the Veterans during the 1934 elections as well as by the conspirators in December 1935.²⁷ Nevertheless, the directors were chosen foremost because of their pro-German attitude and competence in their fields, not because to their previous political affiliation. Indeed, Angelus and Wendt, as well as Mäe, had left Estonia as part of the resettlement of Baltic Germans and returned as German citizens.²⁸ Thus the Estonian collaborators can be characterized as individuals especially friendly towards Germany, and indeed they were more favourably inclined towards Germany than their counterparts in the other Baltic states. The German authorities were pleased with the work of the directory as well as with the correct behaviour and racial qualities of the Estonian population.²⁹

²² Starting from 1942 the Germans shipped foreign Jews to a concentration camp at Klooga, west of Tallinn, where 2000 perished, Gurin-Loov, *Suur häving*, p. 21.

²³ The Mäe administration had already been set up on 15 September by the order of the commander of the rear area of the German Army Group North, General Franz von Roques, Myllyniemi, *Die Neuordnung der baltischen Länder*, pp. 80, 109.

²⁴ Isberg, *Zu den Bedingungen des Befreiers*, p. 48.

²⁵ Oskar Angelus, "Tsiiviilvalitsuse organisatsioon," in *Eesti riik ja rahvas Teises maailmasõjas*, vol. 6 (Stockholm, 1958), pp. 80-1.

²⁶ Rosenberg had originally also wanted General Juhan Tõrvand, the former army chief of staff who was imprisoned in 1936 for his role in the Veterans' conspiracy, as a director, but Tõrvand was deported by the Soviets in 1941, Oskar Angelus, *Tuhande valitseja maa*.

Mälestusi saksa okupatsiooni ajast 1941-1944 (Stockholm, 1956), p. 38.

²⁷ ERA, f. 927, n. 2, s. 9, lk. 12.

²⁸ Isberg, *Zu den Bedingungen des Befreiers*, p. 45.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

While the Germans valued Mäe's cooperation and believed that his goals corresponded with their plans, they were aware that he had little or no support among Estonians and was in fact a "very unpopular person."³⁰ Mäe was generally known simply as one of the plotters in the conspiracy against the Päts government in 1935. Sporting the same style of moustache as Hitler also did not help him win any respect.³¹ None of the directors were previously well-known figures, however former government officials such as Angelus and Wendt were held in higher public regard. To buttress his position, Mäe attempted to enlist the support of prominent public figures, especially Uluots who as the last prime minister represented legal continuity with the Republic of Estonia. *Generalkommissar* Litzmann also tried unsuccessfully to win Uluots' cooperation.³²

With Mäe's appointment as the head of the civil administration, it appeared to many that the Veterans had finally achieved power. When Mäe's position became known, some Veterans believed that their time had come and demanded positions of power for themselves. A delegation of Veterans headed by Colonel Ernst Leithammel demanded from Mäe that his comrades, the Veterans, participate in the Self-Government, form a consultative council, and be appointed to top posts in the administration.³³ Mäe rejected these demands and explained to them that in the midst of a war in which the county had suffered terribly, he would not allow new rivalries to be established by favouring one group over others in his appointments. Mäe's claim in his memoirs that a further consideration of his was that if the League was reestablished then Estonia would be labelled fascist by enemy propaganda, harming Estonia's cause internationally, is probably a later invention.³⁴ In any case, the resurrection of the League was not a question to be decided by Mäe, but by the Germans who undoubtedly would have immediately quashed such an idea since allowing any political activity was contrary to their occupation policies in the East.

In his first radio address, Mäe stated that in such difficult times the country needed unity and solidarity, and therefore past political affiliations were to be put aside. His appointments would be based on competence

³⁰ Myllyniemi, *Die Neuordnung der baltischen Länder*, pp. 110, 140.

³¹ Though in all fairness, Mäe had worn that style of moustache since before Hitler came onto the world stage.

³² Isberg, *Zu den Bedingungen des Befreiers*, p. 111.

³³ Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, pp. 132-3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

and not personal ties or previous party associations. In this Mäe was more or less true to his words. The Veterans' enemies in the Päts regime were not spurned. An example was the case of Johan Müller, who as Päts' Minister of Justice and the Interior signed the order for the arrest of the Veterans' leaders in 1934. When the Gestapo did not approve his license to practice law, Angelus and Mäe intervened on Müller's behalf since that meant "a nice gesture and demonstrated a serious desire to overcome difficult memories of the past."³⁵ Of course, after the Soviet occupation Estonia did not have a great pool of talent to draw on so Mäe had little choice and the animosity between Veterans and Päts supporters had been diminished by their common suffering. Mäe, however, did give jobs to Veterans, especially in the *Rahvakasvatuse Peavalitsus* (Propaganda Central Authority), an agency made responsible for information, newspapers, theatre, sport, youth, etc.³⁶ It was headed by Hans (formerly Boris) Meret, a co-conspirator in the Veterans' 1935 aborted putsch.³⁷

The Veterans' movement was portrayed in a positive light by the Self-Government's Propaganda Authority. Official memorial services were held in the Tallinn Toomkirik (Dom) for Sirk on the anniversary of his death.³⁸ The Veterans were identified as the Estonian equivalent of the NSDAP, having fought for the same ideals as the Nazis: the leadership principle and against communism, liberal democracy, international Jewry and freemasonry. Their ideals were reinterpreted to fit the circumstances. Their anti-Baltic German attitude and the battle against the *Landeswehr* and *Freikorps* in the War of Independence were not mentioned. The Päts era was treated critically. The foreign policy of the Republic of Estonia was castigated for having failed to understand that only Germany could ensure a secure existence for the country. In one of his first radio broadcasts in the Autumn of 1941 Mäe blamed Päts' shortsighted orientation towards England for bringing on the Soviet occupation. This was a major blunder on Mäe's part: his insensitivity to the fate of the deported president aroused great indignation and inflicted irreparable damage to his image amongst Estonians.³⁹

³⁵ Angelus, *Tuhande valitseja maa*, p. 76.

³⁶ Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus*, pp. 132-3.

³⁷ Some of the other noteworthy Veterans in the Propaganda Authority were Juhan Libe, former editor of *Võitlus*, who oversaw the publishing bureau, and Klasmann, the former Veterans' central executive member, who ran the so-called "2nd bureau" which checked the backgrounds of the personnel of the civil administration, Meret, *Teremi jutustus*, p. 175.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 198-9.

³⁹ Angelus, *Tuhande valitseja maa*, pp. 102-3; Tambek, *Tõus ja möön*, vol. 2, p. 305.

Mäe tried to instill in Estonians the ideology of the European mission of National Socialism, the essence of which was that the German war against the Soviet Union was not one of conquest, but a general European crusade to save western civilization from the barbaric East. Estonia would enjoy a better future as a part of the new European order being created by Hitler. The existence of the small border states between Germany and the USSR had been only temporarily sustainable. Estonians could only be content when they were no longer a border nation threatened with annihilation by their giant eastern neighbour. The German invasion of the Soviet Union had saved Estonia from destruction. To live in peace and security, Estonians needed to fight side by side with the Germans to ensure the defeat of the common Bolshevik enemy because without Germany there could be no salvation from the Soviet Union.⁴⁰

The main issue of contention between the Estonian Self-Government and the German authorities was the status of the country. From the outset, Mäe focused his efforts on winning autonomy. The restoration of full independence, however, was never his goal as Isberg has shown; the maximum aim was a position of a German satellite state equivalent to that of Slovakia.⁴¹ The directory tried to interest the Germans in the proposition by offering the prospect of mobilization in exchange for autonomy. Hitler, however, was initially adamantly opposed to using non-German troops on the battlefield.⁴² His position altered as the situation at the front deteriorated, and additional troops were required for the war effort.

The first German attempt to recruit Estonian troops in October 1942 to form an Estonian SS-Legion was a complete failure.⁴³ Estonians showed little enthusiasm for fighting outside their own borders and volunteers were few. The director of interior affairs Angelus argued in a memo in March 1943 that Estonians were ready to fight against the Soviet Union alongside Germany, but that in return they had to be given a future worth fighting for. The recognition of Estonian independence would fulfill Estonian wishes and would release "latent forces" in the country and result in an outpouring of troops.⁴⁴ Though *Generalkommissar*

⁴⁰ Mäe's speech on Estonian independence day, *Eesti Sõna*, 26 February 1942, cited in Isberg, *Zu den Bedingungen des Befreiers*, pp. 56-7.

⁴¹ Isberg, *Zu den Bedingungen des Befreiers*, pp. 45, 126.

⁴² Myllyniemi, *Die Neuordnung der baltischen Länder*, p. 61.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

Litzmann was sympathetic to the strivings of the directory, autonomy had no place in Nazi plans for the Baltic states. The Germans were also wary of creating the nucleus of a future Estonian army.

As the tide of the war turned on the Russian front, the German authorities declared a partial mobilization in March 1943 that resulted in several thousand young men fleeing to the forests or to Finland in order to avoid serving in German uniform.⁴⁵ In September 1943 Himmler orally promised Mäe autonomy in return for conscription, a cynical ploy which did not correspond to his real intentions.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Mäe saw Himmler's promise as his greatest success and based his further actions upon it. The result of Mäe's mobilization in October of men born in 1925 was also well below expectations. Only when the Red Army threatened the Estonian border in early 1944 did the situation change. Mäe declared conscription for men in the 1904-1923 age range in February 1944. Mäe portrayed the call up as a new war of independence, a question of existence or extinction for the Estonian nation, and emphasized that the "voluntary" mobilization would demonstrate to the world that Estonia had not joined the USSR by its own free will.⁴⁷ Mäe's total mobilization went considerably further than what the Germans had envisaged.⁴⁸ The conscription yielded 38 000 men, more than twice the number expected.⁴⁹

The astounding success of the draft can be ascribed to the support given by Uluots, the last prime minister, and the leaders of the national opposition, i.e., the remaining leading figures of the interwar period who rejected collaboration with the Germans and placed their hopes on the western Allies. They felt that it was necessary to try to hold off the Red Army until Germany capitulated to the Allies.⁵⁰ In effect, they operated under the assumptions of the War of Independence, i.e., that the circumstances which allowed the state to be established in 1918 would be repeated in 1944. In retrospect this strategy appears a rather naive misreading of the circumstances, ill-advisedly supplying young men for the German war machine. However, given Estonian experiences of the brutal Soviet occupation in 1940-41, any attempt to avoid a repetition of that fate was considered worthwhile.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

⁴⁶ Isberg, *Zu den Bedingungen des Befreiers*, p. 96.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 114-5.

⁴⁹ Myllyniemi, *Die Neuordnung der baltischen Länder*, p. 276.

⁵⁰ Isberg, *Zu den Bedingungen des Befreiers*, p. 118.

The Germans were uneasy about the spectacular result of Mäe's total mobilization. Himmler rightly feared the dangerous consequences of the formation of a "private Estonian army" and did not hurry with the equipping of the Estonian 20th Waffen-SS division.⁵¹ Mäe as well as the national opposition saw the building of an Estonian army as the first step towards their differing conceptions of independence. Though these Estonian troops were instrumental in halting the Soviet advance for half a year, they could not prevent the inevitable. The illusions of the collaborators, as well as those of the national opposition, were finally crushed with the occupation of Tallinn by the Red Army on 22 September 1944.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

CHAPTER 13

THE RADICAL RIGHT IN THE NORTH-EAST BALTIC

To gain a better understanding of the Veterans' League, a comparative perspective is useful. The League can most profitably be compared and contrasted with parallel radical right-wing movements in Estonia's two closest neighbors, the *Perkonkrusts* in Latvia and the Lapua movement and the *Isänmaallinen kansanliike* (Patriotic People's Movement, hereafter referred to as the IKL) in Finland. This is particularly appropriate since they influenced each other and there was significant interaction between them.

Lithuania is excluded from the following analysis because Lithuania's development was entirely distinct from the Baltic Provinces, being historically and culturally linked with Poland. The Lithuanian movement which had the strongest fascist tendencies, the Iron Wolf (*Gelezinis vilkas*), was of a completely different character than those of its northern neighbours, arising only after the demise of democracy. An authoritarian regime was imposed in Lithuania already in 1926, not ostensibly to counter a threat from the extreme right as in Estonia and Latvia, but through a military coup against a leftist government, following Pilsudski's example.¹ The Iron Wolf was never a mass movement or political party, but existed as a small semi-legal paramilitary organization developed by the Nationalist Prime Minister Augustinas Voldemaras to support his personal ambitions. After Voldemaras was dismissed by President Antanas Smetona in 1929, the Iron Wolf operated as an underground conspiratorial network.²

Estonians are linguistically and culturally closest to the Finns, but have shared an almost identical historical experience with the Latvians since the conquest by Teutonic crusaders in the thirteenth century. The republics which the three nations established at the end of the First World War were all successor states to the Russian Empire. Finland, the last addition to Russia's western borderlands, having previously been an

¹ V. Stanley Vardys, "The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Baltic States," in V. Stanley Vardys and Romuald J. Misiunas, eds., *The Baltic States in Peace and War 1917-1945* (University Park, Pennsylvania, 1978), p. 68.

² Romuald J. Misiunas, "Fascist Tendencies in Lithuania," *Slavonic and East European Review* 48 (1970), pp. 99-103; Leonas Sabaliunas, *Lithuania in Crisis. Nationalism to Communism, 1939-1940* (Bloomington, 1972).

integral part of Sweden, enjoyed the privileged status of Grand Duchy. The Tsars maintained Finland's Swedish 'constitution' which provided for a Finnish Senate and a four estate Diet including the landed peasants. Thus the nineteenth century Grand Duchy could be considered an embryonic state.³ The Baltic Provinces of Estland, Livland, and Kurland, corresponding to the territory of present day Estonia and Latvia, also enjoyed a significant, though lesser, measure of autonomy.

The dominant elites of the North-East Baltic region did not belong to the indigenous ethnic group nor to the imperial nation. In Estland, Livland, and Kurland, political, social and economic power remained firmly in the hands of the Baltic German landowners until 1917. The social structure of Finland was quite different because the peasants, like those of Scandinavia, had never been enserfed, and the position of the Swedish upper class was not dependent on their relationship to the land.⁴ While the national movement in Finland could be led by members of the Swedish-speaking upper class with the support of the landed peasants, in the Baltic Provinces cooperation with the Germans was difficult for Estonians and Latvians because the national and class struggles were, to a large extent, identical. Thus the Revolution of 1905 had strikingly different results: the establishment of an unicameral legislative assembly and universal suffrage in Finland; a peasant jacquerie against the German landowners followed by bloody repression in the Baltic Provinces.⁵

The establishment of independent states in the North-East Baltic was made possible by the collapse of Russia and then Germany in 1917-18. There was a shared experience in the War of Independence as Finnish volunteers fought for the Estonian cause and the Estonian army liberated northern Latvia and fought together with the Latvians against the Germans.⁶ Though all three wars of independence contained elements of civil war, this was clearest in the case of Finland, initially in Latvia, and less so in Estonia.

³ C. Leonard Lundin, "Finland," in Edward C. Thaden, ed., *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914* (Princeton, 1981), p. 361.

⁴ Risto Alapuro, *State and Revolution in Finland* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: , 1988), p. 223; Edward C. Thaden, "Finland and the Baltic Provinces: Elite Roles and Social and Economic Conditions and Structures," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 15 (1984), pp. 216-27.

⁵ Toivo U. Raun, "The Revolution of 1905 in the Baltic Provinces and Finland," *Slavic Review* 43 (1984), pp. 461.

⁶ Seppo Zetterberg, *Suomi ja Viro 1917-1919. Poliittiset suhteet syksystä 1917 reuna- ja poliittikan alkuun*, *Historiallisia Tutkimuksia* 102 (Helsinki, 1977), ch. 5.

The basic political party pattern in the new republics was similar.⁷ The social democrats were the largest party in all three countries, but continually lost ground from their high point in the early years of the republics. As they remained in opposition for most of the time, the second largest party, the agrarians, had the greatest role in leading governments. In Estonia and Latvia the farmers' parties functioned as the conservatives since no genuine conservative party existed as in Finland. The new class of 'new farmers' or 'settlers' created by the Estonian and Latvian land reforms of 1919 and 1920 formed parties to compete with the older agrarian parties. The progressive and liberal parties of the centre were a third force after the socialists and agrarians. On the fringes were parties representing the ethnic minorities and communist front parties. Fragmentation of the political system was most evident in Latvia where regional parties from Latgale duplicated the national parties and at one point 28 parties had seats in the parliament. Since the largest party in all three countries, the socialists, were for the most part out of the process, constructing governments required a coalition of at least three parties. As a result, frequent cabinet crises were the norm; in the period from the establishment of the republics to the crisis years of the early 1930s the average duration of a cabinet was less than a year.⁸

The radical right was a chronologically parallel phenomenon in all three countries, having its meteoric rise and brief life in the first half of the Thirties. In Finland, the Lapua movement arose in 1929 as a broad anti-Marxist front.⁹ Though it appeared as a spontaneous reaction of farmers to communist activities in the town of Lapua, the movement had the backing of such right-wing groups as the strike-breaking organization *Vientirauha*, and quickly gained the support of most political parties and organizations to the right of centre. The authorities attempted to appease the movement by endorsing its goal of eradicating communism from Finland and did nothing to stop Lapua's campaign of physical intimidation.

⁷ Juhani Mylly and R. Michael Berry, *Political Parties in Finland. Essays in History and Politics* (Turku, 1987); Jürgen von Hehn, "Letland zwischen Demokratie und Diktatur," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Beiheft 3 (München, 1957); Laaman, *Erakonnad Eestis*; Vincent E. McHale, "The Party Systems of the Baltic States: A Comparative European Perspective," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 17 (1986), pp. 295-312.

⁸ The average life span of a cabinet in Estonia (1921-1934) was nine and a half months, in Finland (1919-1932) just under eleven months, and in Latvia (1919-1933) just over eleven months, Mägi, *Das Staatsleben Estlands*, p. 202; Uustalu, *Eesti Vabariik*, p. 76.

⁹ The most extensive analysis of the Lapua movement is Juha Siltala, *Lapuan liike ja kyyditykset 1930* (Helsinki, 1985); the only detailed account in English remains, Marvin Rintala, *Three Generations: The Extreme Right Wing in Finnish Politics* (Bloomington, 1962).

By mobilizing broad popular support Lapua was able to dictate the government's agenda in 1930-31 and succeeded in forcing through anti-communist laws, legislation that required a two-thirds majority. However, by 1932 Lapua had alienated many of its bourgeois supporters through its continued lawlessness and escalating demands. Matters came to a head in February/March 1932 with a muddled rebellion at the town of Mäntsälä, subsequent to which the Lapua movement was banned.¹⁰ A few months later, in June 1932, the IKL was founded to continue the battle for Lapua's ideals.

In Latvia, the impetus to unite various small right-wing societies into a strong nationalist organization came from the head of the academic section of the National Union, Gustavs Celmins who convened the founding meeting of the *Ugunskrusts* (the Fire Cross) on 24 January 1932. The *Ugunskrusts* was banned on 12 April 1933, but was immediately resurrected under the new name of the *Perkonkrusts* (Thunder Cross). However, the *Perkonkrusts* was also banned by the authorities on 30 January 1934, because of its alleged paramilitary nature. Nevertheless, they continued their agitation for a "Latvian Latvia" with undiminished vigour. The *Perkonkrusts'* public activities finally came to an end when Prime Minister Karlis Ulmanis declared martial law on 15 May 1934 and outlawed all political activity.¹¹

These were the most important, though not the only permutations of the radical right formed in the early Thirties. In Finland Dr. Yrjö Ruutu developed his version of national socialism in the early Twenties and formed the Finnish National Socialist League in 1932.¹² Ruutu, the only intellectual thinker of the radical right in the Baltic region who had a theoretical basis for his program, propagated state socialism as the means of achieving national integration. A cruder form of national socialism was practiced by Captain Arri Kalsta's Finnish People's Organization (*Suomen Kansan Järjestö*), a direct imitation of German Nazism to the point of using swastika symbols and brown shirt uniforms.¹³ In contrast to the Ruutu's group or the IKL, Kalsta's party was not ethnically based, including both Finnish and Swedish members.

¹⁰ The best account of the Mäntsälä revolt is Martti Ahti, *Kaappaus? Suojeluskuntaselkkaus 1921, Fascismin aave 1927, Mäntsälän kapina 1932* (Helsinki, 1990).

¹¹ *Latvijas Valsts Vestures Arhivs* (LVVA) [The Latvian State History Archive], 3235,1/22, 701, 120; 2906, 1, 8; 3235, 1/22, 708, 1; 3235, 1/22, 921, 20.

¹² David Kirby, "Yrjö Ruutu and Finnish national socialism," *Turun Historiallinen Arkisto* 34, pp. 141-58.

¹³ VA, EK-Valpo II: IX. D. 5 *Suomen Kansan Järjestö*.

In Latvia Janis Stelmachers, a lawyer in the foreign ministry and passionate anti-alcoholism campaigner, created the Latvian National Socialist Party (*Apvienota Latvijas Nacionālistu partija*) in 1932 after failing to obtain a seat in parliament as a Christian National Party candidate. Its program attacked Marxism, speculative capitalism, the minorities, especially Jews, and advocated national unity under a strong leader.¹⁴ Stelmachers' movement was shunned by the rest of the radical right and by nationalists for being pro-German.¹⁵ Another extremist organization, founded in 1932 by Colonel Voldemars Ozols, the Legion of Lacplesis Order Cavaliers and Freedom Fighters (*Lacplesa Kara Ordena kavalieru un brīvības cīnītāju biedrība*), was, as the name suggests, primarily an association of war veterans. The Legion was the only group that prime minister Karlis Ulmanis specifically mentioned by name as a threat to the state in his declaration of martial law on 15 May 1934. Ozols was arrested for allegedly preparing a coup d'état.¹⁶ However, these organizations, as well as their Estonian counterparts, such as the Patriotic Association (*Isamaalik Ühing*),¹⁷ remained marginal and could not compete in popularity with the dominant movements of the radical right: Lapua, the IKL, the *Perkonkrusts*, and the Veterans.

In terms of electoral support, the greatest achievement of the radical right in the region was the stunning success of the Veterans in the municipal elections of 1934. The *Perkonkrusts*, like the Veterans, were banned before they could partake in any parliamentary elections.¹⁸ Only the IKL was able to evolve into a parliamentary party, obtaining fourteen seats in an assembly of two hundred.

The wars of independence were a central concept for the radical right. The leading figures of the Latvian and Finnish radical right such as Gustavs Celmins and Vihtori Kosola were veterans of these wars. For them, as for the Estonian Veterans, the 'War of Independence spirit' meant patriotism, unity, and self-sacrifice. The *Perkonkrusts* identified

¹⁴ LVVA, 3235, 2, 5604, pp. 41-4.

¹⁵ *Ugunskrusts*, 28 July 1932.

¹⁶ The takeover of government ministries by men dressed in *Aizsargi* (civil guard) uniforms was planned in April 1934 by Ozols from the Estonian border town of Valga. Ozols, however, was lured back to Latvia by the political police and arrested ten days prior to Ulmanis' coup by which time the Legion could not be considered a serious threat, LVVA, 3235, 1/22, 701, pp. 1-2; 3235, 1/22, 921, pp. 8-9.

¹⁷ See chapter four.

¹⁸ Celmins thought that the *Perkonkrusts* could capture 12 to 15 seats in the Autumn 1934 parliamentary election, von Hehn, *Lettland zwischen Demokratie und Diktatur*, p. 33, footnote 120.

themselves with the Latvian freedom fighters who “wanted to be masters in their own liberated land, but regret that they have relinquished their arms which today are again necessary for a new battle.”¹⁹ Their struggle was to be the “second war of liberation.” Lapua sought to conclude the unfinished business of the War of Independence (*viedä vapaussodan loppuun*). The victory in the war was perceived as incomplete and Lapua’s anti-Marxist activities as a continuation of the war. The War of Independence, however, had a more divisive meaning in Finland than in Estonia because it had also been a vicious civil war, resulting in sharp political and social divisions in post-war Finland. Lapua sought to create a ‘White Finland’ - an exclusionary concept reconstructing the victorious wartime White front.

The radical right felt that the politicians were squandering the accomplishments for which they had fought in the wars of independence. Their ire was directed at the political parties whose activities were seen as nothing more than unprincipled horse trading (Est: *lehmakauplemine*, Fin: *lehmäkauppa*).²⁰ Latvian parties were characterized as “enemies of our people”, comprised of “miserable crooked businessmen” for whom the parliament was simply a “stock exchange where they buy and sell the nation’s interests.”²¹ They were held responsible for dividing the people and the encouragement of class conflict. Corruption and greed for spoils needed to be replaced by state interests; the old venal politicians were to be swept out. According to one of the participants in the Mäntsälä rebellion, “the country has too many masters who are always quarreling amongst themselves.”²²

The common answer to the problem of fragmented, ineffective parliamentarism was the establishment of strong one-man leadership in the form of a directly elected president with the power to appoint and dismiss the government and drastic reduction in the size and importance of the legislative assembly.²³ Following the fashion of the day, the radical right envisaged the reorganization of elective bodies along occupational lines. Their notions of corporatism, however, were vague and lacked any depth or real enthusiasm. While the *Perkonkrusts* demanded a

¹⁹ LVVA, 3235, 1/22, 921, p. 6.

²⁰ Rintala, *Three Generations*, p. 129.

²¹ LVVA, 3235, 1/22, 921, p. 5; *Ugunskrusts*, 16 October 1932; *Perkonkrusts*, 24 September 1933.

²² Interrogation transcript of Aarne Runolinna, VA, Valpo II: IX. B. 20, p. 219.

²³ *Valtiollisen ohjelma suuntaviivoja*, VA, *Suomen 1920-ja 1940-luvun historian säätiö* (SuHs) 12; *Kas ir?...Perkonkrusts*, pp. 35-6.

parliament composed of representatives of trades and professions,²⁴ only the IKL eventually got as far as actually drawing up a detailed scheme for such an assembly.²⁵

Reform of the system of government or constitution, however, was not an end in itself, but only a means toward the goal of creating a strong, united national community, similar to the German idea of *Volksgemeinschaft*. The Veterans called it *rahvuslik tervik*, in Finnish it was *kansankokonaisuus* or *kansamme eheytyks*, and in the Latvian case it was expressed in the goal of a "Latvian Latvia" (*latviesu Latviju*). The self-proclaimed goal of the *Perkonkrusts* was to work for the benefit of the Latvian nation: "our God, our faith, our life's meaning, our aim is the Latvian nation. He who is against its welfare is our enemy."²⁶ Individual rights and freedoms were to be sacrificed for the sake of the nation. The forging of an integrated national community was seen as the supreme task. The interest of the nation was the supreme value professed by the radical right. However, only in Finland, with its activist tradition of civil disobedience, did the Lapua movement go so far as to take this idea to its logical extreme and proclaim a "law of Lapua" (*Lapuan laki*) above the actual law of the land. This was expressed most bluntly by Kosola:

We are told that we have disregarded the law. I say that the law has disregarded the nation. If our legislators have made such laws that in following them, society, the nation, and the fatherland would be harmed, and faith in God destroyed, then it is our duty to fight against them.²⁷

Unlike the Latvians and Estonians, the Finnish radical right was dissatisfied with the terms of their 1920 peace settlement with Soviet Russia. The Treaty of Tartu which left Eastern Karelia in the possession of Russia gave rise to an idea analogous to the 'stab in the back' myth of Weimar Germany.²⁸ Irredentism proved itself to be a fertile breeding ground for radical nationalism and fascism. The recovery of Karelia and the concept of a "Greater Finland" (*Suur Suomi*) encompassing not only

²⁴ *Kas ir?...Perkonkrusts*, pp. 35-6.

²⁵ The *Eduskunta* (parliament) was to have consisted of representatives of agriculture (60%), industrial workers (20%), and professionals, officials and artisans (20%), and in addition a number of experts appointed by the directly elected president, VA, Valpo II: IX. B. 12a, p. 19.

²⁶ *Perkonkrusts*, 24 September 1933.

²⁷ *Ajan Sana*, 22 February 1932.

²⁸ Rintala, *Three Generations*, p. 99.

the Finnic-speaking peoples of Russia, foremostly the Karelians and Ingrians, but also the Estonians, were of central importance for the IKL. The *Perkonkrusts* and Veterans in contrast had little more to say on foreign affairs and security than to condemn pacifism and reliance on the League of Nations to maintain national sovereignty, and to insist that the nation must be strong and prepared to defend itself against its enemies.²⁹ Interestingly, the *Perkonkrusts* wanted Latvian foreign policy to be based on political, economic, and military co-operation between the three Baltic states, an idea which the Estonian radical right never mentioned.

The economic thinking of the radical right followed similar lines in all three countries.³⁰ Agriculture was recognized as the most important sector of the economy and needed to be subsidized by the state. Inner colonization, i.e., creation of new farms and the cultivation of previously unused land, was a high priority. It was also seen as a way of reducing unemployment as the unemployed could be sent to work on the land. They did not threaten the capitalist system or private property, but demanded that industry serve the national good. That economic power should be in the hands of the indigenous nation was especially a concern in Latvia where the minorities had a strong position in the economy. One of the *Ugunskrusts* first actions was the organization of a boycott of Jewish shops and the publication of a list of Latvian and non-Latvian owned shops.³¹ Great emphasis was placed on creating a patriotic-minded labour force. Workers were to be given a worthy and respected place in society. However, none went so far or was sophisticated enough to offer corporatism as a means of regulating relations between workers and employers. Their economic policies remained sketchy and insubstantial because their central premise was that the creation of an integrated national community would be the solution to all of society's problems.

Though all three countries were predominately Lutheran, the radical right's relationship with the church was quite different in each case. It was closest in Finland with its strong Pietist tradition. The centre of the movement, the province of Ostrobothnia (where the town of Lapua is located) had been the heart of religious revivalism in the previous

²⁹ *Kas ir?...Perkonkrusts*, p. 27; *Ugunskrusts*, 9 October 1932.

³⁰ The economic programs of the IKL and the *Perkonkrusts* are to be found in *Isänmaallisen Kansanliikkeen taloudellinen ohjelma*, VA, Valpo II, IX B 8b, p. 42 and *Kas ir? Ko grib? Ka darbojas? Perkonkrusts*, pp. 34-6.

³¹ *Ugunskrusts*, 28 August 1932, 18 December 1932.

century.³² Lapua's anti-Marxist campaign often took on the flavour of a religious crusade and its rhetoric was couched in religious terms. Pastors such as Elias Simojoki were leading figures in the IKL, and six of the IKL's fourteen parliamentary deputies in 1935 were Lutheran clergymen.³³ The history of the church and its role as an instrument of Baltic German domination was identical in Estonia and Latvia, but unlike the Veterans who cultivated warm relations with the Lutheran clergy, the *Perkonkrusts* rejected the Christian heritage and sympathized with pagan revivalism which they regarded as representative of the true ancient, native Latvian spirit.³⁴

Hostility towards ethnic minorities was most virulent in the Latvian case where they constituted one quarter of the population and had the greatest political, social, and economic influence. The fragmented parliamentary system was also seen as giving the minorities an inordinate measure of influence. The *Perkonkrusts'* motto and guiding idea was "Latvia for the Latvians - work and bread for Latvians." Celmins divided non-Latvians into two categories: Estonians and Lithuanians who were classified as friends, and Jews, Germans, Russians, and Poles for whom there would be no place in the future Latvian Latvia. They would gradually be deprived of their rights, thus forcing them either to assimilate or emigrate.³⁵ A particularly sore point for these ultra-nationalists was the high percentage of Jews and Germans in trades and the free professions such as law and medicine. They demanded that the number of Latvians in all fields should at least be proportionate with their share of the population and the restriction of the number of non-Latvians accepted into university faculties.³⁶ While the Baltic Germans had been the oppressors of the Estonians and Latvians, the Finns were traditionally pro-German. It is ironic that the *Freikorps* and *Landeswehr* which fought against the Estonians and Latvians in 1919 was led by General von der Goltz who in the previous year had commanded the German expeditionary force that conquered Helsinki for the Finnish Whites. Hostility towards the Swedish minority did not initially manifest itself in

³² Heikki Ylikangas, "Ostrobothnia in Finnish History," in Max Engman and David Kirby, eds., *Finland: People, Nation, State* (London, 1989), pp. 73-84.

³³ Reijo E. Heinonen, "From People's Movement to Minor Party: The People's Patriotic Movement (IKL) in Finland 1932-1944," in Larsen et al., eds., *Who were the Fascists*, p. 695.

³⁴ Ernests Brastins, the ideologue of the *Dievturība*, the 'Latvian national religion', was the one who suggested the *perkonkrusts* (thunder cross) as the organization's symbol, Armands Paeglis, "*Perkonkrusts*" *par Latviju 1932-1944* (Riga, 1994), pp. 8-9.

³⁵ Gustavs Celmins, *Perkonkrusts*, 24 September 1933.

³⁶ *Ugunskrusts*, 21 August 1932.

the Finnish radical right. Lapua took the form of a general bourgeois reaction against communism, and it was only later that the IKL took an ethnically-centred anti-Swedish orientation. Anti-Semitism was a central tenet of the radical right's ideology in Latvia, but had only a minor role in Estonia and Finland where the Jewish population was tiny.

Fascism was admired and deemed appropriate for Italy, but all claimed that their ideas were purely products of their native soil. They applauded Hitler's suppression of Marxism, and shared the perception that Hitler saved Germany, and indeed all of Europe, from succumbing to Marxism. This was particularly significant for the border states who feared the possibility of being caught between a Communist Germany and the Soviet Union.³⁷ For the *Perkonkrusts* and the Veterans, approval of Hitler's domestic policy was offset by recognition of the dangers posed to the Baltic states by the Nazi desire for *Lebensraum*. Sympathy for National Socialism was most overt in Finland. On the behalf of the Lapua movement, Lt.-Col. Aarne Somersalo presented Hitler and Mussolini with Finnish hunting knives as symbols of sympathy for their "energetic action in suppressing Marxism" which strengthened the Finnish anti-Marxist front.³⁸ The IKL's youth movement, the Blue-Blacks (*Sinimustat*), took the *Hitler Jugend* as its model and its anthem *Luo lippujen* was the Nazi *Horst Wessel* song.³⁹ Gustavs Celmins was an enthusiastic exponent of radical nationalist solidarity. While in exile during the latter part of the Thirties he participated in Fascist courses in Italy and travelled to Romania to meet Corneliu Codreanu, the leader of the Iron Guard, with whom he discussed the idea of setting up an international centre in Switzerland.⁴⁰ The Germans, however, did not support any of the radical right-wing movements in the North-East Baltic, considering it more important to ensure good relations with the established governments in the region.⁴¹

³⁷ "If Hitler had not succeeded in Germany in uniting all national-minded citizens into one strong anti-Marxist organization, and if the bourgeois element would have continued to squabble and quarrel over comfortable positions and over good *Schnitte*, then instead of Hitler, Thälmann [leader of the Communist Party] would be in power . . . What would have then happened to us does not need closer commentary: Communist Germany and Russia would have combined to wipe away the border states," *Võitlus*, 11 March 1933. See also *Sinimusta*, 8 February 1935.

³⁸ *Ajan Suunta*, 15 August 1933. The most direct contact with Italian Fascism was the visit to Finland in 1935 of Mussolini's special emissary, Ezio Maria Gray, who presented the IKL with a bronze bust of Mussolini, Uola, *Sinimusta veljeskunta*, pp. 253-4.

³⁹ National Socialism and the *Hitler Jugend* featured prominently in the Blue-Blacks' study program, VA, EK-Valpo II: IX. B. 6.

⁴⁰ LVVA, 3235, 1/22, 922, p. 283.

⁴¹ Karlis Kangeris, "Kollaboration vor der Kollaboration?" p. 168; Uola, *Sinimusta veljeskunta*, p. 137.

The radical right-wing movements in the North-East Baltic lacked a *Führer*, a charismatic leader who had proven crucial for the success of fascist movements in Italy and Germany. Vihtori Kosola, the 'Finnish Mussolini', was more a frontman for the grandees of the right than an independent actor, and suffered from the Finnish national illness, alcoholism, which contributed to his premature death.⁴² Paradoxically for an organization promoting the leadership principle, the IKL was governed by a collective leadership.⁴³ Sirk had the necessary qualities, but owing to his junior rank and youth, he conceded leadership of the Veterans to General Larka. Only the *Perkonkrusts* could be said to have possessed a genuinely strong leader in Celmins, though not comparable with Ulmanis, the *Tautas Vadonis* (leader of the nation), who encouraged the development of a cult of personality.

Paramilitary attributes were typical of the radical right-wing organizations. Their elite wore paramilitary style uniforms: the *Perkonkrusts* had gray shirts, the Veterans, black berets, and most strikingly, the IKL, black shirts with light blue ties.⁴⁴ Distinctive identifying emblems were used: a hand clasping a sword for the Veterans, the swastika, which had strong tradition in Latvian folklore, for the *Perkonkrusts*, a peasant riding a black bear and wielding a club, symbolic of the 1596 peasant uprising, for the IKL. The *Perkonkrusts* boasted that their "system, principles of activity and tactics correspond to those of a fighting organization."⁴⁵ They regarded themselves not as "private persons or even citizens, but as soldiers of Latvian Latvia."⁴⁶ It was this alleged paramilitary character which the authorities in Latvia and Estonia cited as a threat to public order in banning them. However, violence and lawlessness really only occurred in Finland where resistance to the Tsarist government had produced an "activist" tradition of civil disobedience. During the 1930 'Lapua summer' 254 kidnapping attempts were made against Communists and other opponents, including former President

⁴² Rintala, *Three Generations*, p. 198.

⁴³ Uola, *Sinimusta veljeskunta*, p. 237. Lt.-Col. Aarne Somersalo promoted the idea that the leadership of the IKL be in the hands of only one individual, but was defeated in 1938, EK-Valpo II: IX. B. 18.

⁴⁴ The Lapuans and the Veterans also wore similar armbands: blue-black for the Finns and white-black the Estonians.

⁴⁵ *Kas ir?...Perkonkrusts*, p. 18.

⁴⁶ LVVA, 3235, 1/22, 921, pp. 6-7. The political police claimed to have evidence of the *Perkonkrusts*' military character which included the use of a military-style hierarchy, commands, discipline, guard units, attack groups, and the fighter's greeting *cinai sveiks*.

Ståhlberg, who in many instances were driven to the Soviet border and dumped there.⁴⁷

Characteristic of the North-East Baltic region was the existence of large civil guard organizations that functioned as military reserves and also served to safeguard the established internal order. In Finland and Estonia the radical right had a strong presence in the civil guards. Some units of the Finnish civil guard, the *Suojeluskunta*, participated in the Mäntsälä insurrection, but obeyed President Svinhufvud's order to disperse. The Estonian civil guard faithfully fulfilled its duties although there was a great deal of sympathy for the Veterans in its ranks. In the Latvian case, however, the civil guard, the *Aizsargi*, was associated with the Farmers' Union and was used by the Ulmanis to carry out his coup d'état.⁴⁸ The radical right also had substantial support in the ranks of the armed forces, but in all three cases the military remained loyal to the government and did not waver when ordered to suppress the extremists.

With the exception of Lapua, which was a farmers' movement supported by big business,⁴⁹ the radical right was largely an urban phenomenon. The IKL appealed more to educated classes, with the largest group of members being officials and professionals (30%).⁵⁰ The *Perkonkrusts* was the smallest and most elitist of the radical right organizations.⁵¹ Its membership can be characterized as young, well-educated, middle-class, and urban. Of the forty members of *Perkonkrusts'* central committee, nearly half were under thirty years of age.⁵² By occupation, the largest group consisted of officials (45%), followed by students (20%).⁵³ All but two lived in Riga.

Students and the younger generation played a significant role in the radical right. Student politics in Estonia, Latvia, and Finland during the Thirties were predominately right-wing and nationalist. In Finland, the Academic Karelia Society (AKS) became the preeminent student

⁴⁷ Siltala, *Lapuan liike ja kyyditykset 1930*, p. 363.

⁴⁸ Ilgvars Butulis, "Die Schutzkorpsorganisation in Lettland (1919-1940)," in Oberländer, et al., eds., *Autoritäre Regime in Ostmitteleuropa* (forthcoming).

⁴⁹ Risto Alapuro, "Mass Support for Fascism in Finland," in Larsen, et al., eds., *Who were the Fascists*, p. 679.

⁵⁰ The other large groups were farmers (21%) and workers (17%), VA, SuHS 10, *IKL:n johdon kokousten pöytäkirjoja 1935*, p. 4.

⁵¹ Von Hehn estimates a membership of 6 000, von Hehn, *Lettland zwischen Demokratie und Diktatur*, p. 25.

⁵² LVVA, 3235, 2, 5210, p. 7.

⁵³ The complete occupational breakdown of the *Perkonkrusts'* central committee is as follows: 18 officials, 8 students, 3 academics, 3 professionals, 2 craftsmen, 2 employees, 1 teacher, 1 farmer, 1 journalist, 1 unemployed, *Ibid.*

organization and won a tremendous degree of influence among the educated classes.⁵⁴ The AKS promoted the idea of unifying Eastern Karelia with Finland and was at the forefront of the language question, one of the most contentious issues during the interwar period. The focal point of this debate was its demand for the Finnicization of Helsinki university. The ideology of the AKS was adopted by the IKL and formed the core of its program.

In Latvia the role of students was especially noteworthy. In the university's students' council elections of 1933 the radical right received an absolute majority.⁵⁵ Indeed, the émigré historian Adolfs Silde, himself a former member of the *Perkonkrusts*, describes the movement as primarily a response by Latvian youth to the domination of business and the professions by ethnic non-Latvians, i.e. Germans and Jews.⁵⁶ In many respects the membership of the *Perkonkrusts* could be considered the up and coming Latvian elite. Hence, a generational perspective might be insightful. For these young ultra-nationalists the Latvian War of Independence had been the formative experience of their youth and their entire mature lives had been spent in independent Latvia. The political parties, however, were mostly led by men who had begun their careers already during the Tsarist period and for whom the formative experience of their lives had been the Revolution of 1905.

In contrast to the Estonian and Latvian angry young men who wanted to replace wholesale the corrupt older generation of politicians, the Finnish radical right had a close relationship with conservatives.⁵⁷ Lapua was not interested in putting new men in charge, but wanted the old leaders of the white front, Svinhufvud and Marshal Mannerheim, to take over the reins of power. The Lapua movement was meant as an umbrella organization to encompass the entire bourgeois anti-Marxist front. Subsequently, in 1933, the IKL formed an electoral alliance with the

⁵⁴ On the AKS see Risto Alapuro, *Akateeminen Karjala-Seura* (Porvoo-Helsinki, 1973); Risto Alapuro, "Students and National Politics: The Case of the Finnish Student Movement in the Interwar Period," *Scandinavian Political Studies* 8 (1973); Marvin Rintala, "Finnish Students in Politics: The Academic Karelia Society," *East European Quarterly* 6 (1972), pp. 192-205; Rintala, *Three Generations*, pp. 103-111.

⁵⁵ LVVA, 3235, 1/22, 922, p. 326.

⁵⁶ Adolfs Silde, *Latvijas vesture 1914-1940* (Stockholm, 1976), p. 563.

⁵⁷ Sociologist Lauri Karvonen who has quantitatively tested the applicability of theories of fascism to the Finnish case concludes that the variable which produces the strongest correlation with support for fascism is previous political conservatism. Communities where "White" culture was unmistakably dominant were the most fertile areas for fascism, Lauri Karvonen, *From White to Blue and Black: Finnish Fascism in the Interwar Period*, *Commentationes Scientiarum Socialium* 36 (Helsinki, 1988), pp. 122-3.

Conservative (*Kokoomus*) party which was terminated three years later by the new Conservative chairman, Juho Paasikivi, who considered it detrimental to party interests.⁵⁸

The Finnish, Estonian, and Latvian radical right influenced and interacted with each other. The Lapua movement arose earliest and its dramatic exploits were followed closely in Estonia and Latvia. The Veterans were often labelled the Estonian Lapua movement by the hostile press. The League's official ties were with the Finnish war veterans' league, the VRL, which participated wholeheartedly in the Lapua movement.⁵⁹ Some Finnish veterans, such as Lapua leader Kosola, were 'brothers-in-arms', having fought in the Estonian War of Independence. There was a great deal of overlap among the organizations of the Finnish radical right: for example, Vilho Helanen, who had also been a volunteer in Estonia and maintained the closest personal ties with the Veterans, was a leading figure in the VRL, AKS, Lapua and the IKL.⁶⁰ During the League's underground period after Sirk escaped to Finland, cooperation between the Finnish radical right and the Veterans became especially close. Leaders of the IKL's youth organization, the Blue-Blacks were intimately involved in the aborted coup d'état in Tallinn in 1935.⁶¹

The Veterans were a great inspiration for the *Perkonkrusts*. The triumph of the Veterans' constitutional referendum received widespread notice in Latvia and the *Perkonkrusts* hoped to emulate their success.⁶² After both organizations had been banned, the *Perkonkrusts* sent an emissary to Estonia in order to become acquainted with the League's organization and hoped that they would soon carry out a coup d'état in Estonia that would provide encouragement for the *Perkonkrusts*.⁶³ Celmins admired Sirk and often visited his grave while in Helsinki as a volunteer in the international brigade in the Finnish Winter War.⁶⁴

The men who defeated the radical right, Päts, Ulmanis, and Svinhufvud, had a great deal in common. Svinhufvud was a "conservative peasant leader" in the same mold as Päts and Ulmanis.⁶⁵ All three had been national leaders already prior to the Russian

⁵⁸ Anthony F. Upton, "Finland," in Stuart J. Woolf, ed., *European Fascism* (London, 1968), p. 211.

⁵⁹ See chapter seven.

⁶⁰ Helanen was also the author of *Suomalaiset Viron vapaussodassa* (Helsinki, 1921).

⁶¹ See chapter ten.

⁶² *Perkonkrusts*, 22 October 1933.

⁶³ LVVA, 3235, 1/22, 921, p. 143.

⁶⁴ Myllyniemi, *Die baltische Krise 1938-1941*, p. 96; Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all*, p. 488.

⁶⁵ Risto Alapuro, *State and Revolution in Finland*, p. 258.

Revolution and were the fathers of independence, serving as the first prime ministers of their newly established states. From the outset, they were critical of overly democratic constitutional arrangements.

Svinhufvud wanted Finland to have a monarch in 1918 and Päts and Ulmanis were the greatest advocates of constitutional reform to establish a directly elected president and to strengthen the powers of the executive in relation to the legislature. They were not adverse to getting cozy with the radical right. Päts allied his party with the Veterans in the final constitutional referendum and considered becoming their presidential candidate. Svinhufvud became prime minister in 1930 and then president the following year as Lapua's preferred candidate. Only two weeks after he suppressed the Mäntsälä rebellion, Svinhufvud attended a meeting which discussed how to carry on Lapua's ideals through legal means.⁶⁶

Unlike the Baltic states, Finland avoided succumbing to authoritarianism and remained a democracy. The crucial factors were the well-established state institutions, longer constitutional experience, a stronger executive, and a more highly developed civic culture.⁶⁷ According to Risto Alapuro, the Scandinavian social structure, particularly the solid position of the independent peasantry, also played a decisive role.⁶⁸

The coup d'état carried out by Ulmanis in Latvia on 15 May 1934 was directly inspired by Päts' actions two months earlier.⁶⁹ Ulmanis' justification of his coup was similar to that given by Päts: the government claimed that its measures were necessary to prevent political tensions from exploding and to ensure peace and order.⁷⁰ There were two significant differences. The coup was directed against the Socialists, not carried out with their tacit support as was the case in Estonia. Unlike Päts, Ulmanis did not immediately suppress the radical right, but attempted

⁶⁶ David Kirby, *The Baltic World 1772-1993. Europe's Northern Periphery in an Age of Change* (London, 1995), p. 323.

⁶⁷ Lauri Hyvämäki, "Fasistiset ilmiöt Baltian maissa ja Suomessa 1920-luvun lopussa ja 1930-luvulla," *Historiallinen Arkisto* 72 (1977), p. 135; Rein Taagepera, "Civic Culture and Authoritarianism in the Baltic States, 1930-1940," *East European Quarterly* 7 (1973), p. 408.

⁶⁸ Alapuro, *State and Revolution in Finland*, pp. 217-8, 259.

⁶⁹ Ulmanis told Päts that he had followed his example, Laaman's diary 13 June 1935, ERA, f. 827, n. 1, s. 1a

⁷⁰ Specifically Ulmanis cited three factors: 1) the danger from "irresponsible armed groups"; 2) the inability of the parliament and the political parties to solve Latvia's problems; 3) the rejection of his constitutional reform project by the parliament, "Manifest der Regierung," 16 May 1934, *Rigasche Rundschau*. The motive of personal power is advanced in Janis Rogainis, "The Emergence of an Authoritarian Regime in Latvia, 1932-1934," *Lituanus* 17 (1971), pp. 221-37;

instead to win them over to his plan for building a new Latvia. Celmins was even offered the post of Ambassador in Paris.⁷¹ Only after their refusal to cooperate with the new regime were Celmins and 96 other leading *Perkonkrusts* arrested.⁷² The regime which Ulmanis set up in Latvia was analogous to that of Päts in Estonia, but was more openly dictatorial. Ulmanis combined the offices of prime minister and president in his own person in 1936 and did not attempt to legitimize his rule through constitutional reforms or elections.⁷³ Nor did he create a party or ideological movement to support his regime.⁷⁴ Like Päts, he appropriated many of the nationalist and corporatist ideas of the radical right which he had suppressed.⁷⁵

Marshal Mannerheim and Generals Laidoner and Balodis, the former Tsarist officers who commanded the victorious Finnish, Estonian, and Latvian armies in the wars of independence, played a special role in the political life of the new states. Though they retired from military service after the war, as national heroes they maintained a great deal of influence. They were involved in varying degrees with politics but were critical of the system and also unhappy with the way the military was run in the post-war period. Neither Laidoner nor Mannerheim were initially unsympathetic to the radical right. Both had a chance to become head of state with the backing of the radical right: the rebels at Mäntsälä wanted Mannerheim to take over power and Laidoner was considered as the Veterans' presidential candidate.⁷⁶ The turning of their backs on the radical right and siding with the government was crucial in the downfall of the former. Balodis, like Laidoner, was persuaded to support the coup

⁷¹ Von Hehn, *Lettland zwischen Demokratie und Diktatur*, p. 49.

⁷² LVVA, 3235, 1/22, 708, p. 124.

⁷³ Latvian President Kviēsis complained to Päts that Latvia was "the only state in Europe that lives on empty hallelujas without any constitution", Laaman's diary, 13 June 1935, ERA, f. 827, n. 1, s. 1a.

⁷⁴ As a German embassy report comments, "the observer cannot fail to note a certain humorous aspect, again and again, especially on festive occasions, how ardently they try to imitate the German example without grasping the decisive idea - the creation of a movement encompassing the entire *Volk* on an ideological basis." The report concludes that the regime was not upheld by the people, a movement or a party, but simply by the army and civil guard, *Gesandtschaft (Riga) an das AA*, 24 April 1936, AA, Pol. Abt. IV, Lettland, Po. 11, Nr. 1.

⁷⁵ Aivars Stranga, "Das Regime von Karlis Ulmanis in Lettland 1934-1940: Genesis, Entwicklung und Inhalt," in Oberländer, et al., eds., *Autoritäre Regime in Ostmitteleuropa* (forthcoming).

⁷⁶ Risto Alapuro and Erik Allardt, "The Lapua Movement: The Threat of Rightist Takeover in Finland, 1930-32," in Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stephan, eds., *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes* (Baltimore, 1978), p. 133.

d'état and became the number two man in the authoritarian regime, ensuring its survival by providing the support of the army.

Though the radical right was defeated in all three countries by the government, they continued their activities underground in Estonia and Latvia, and in the form of a new parliamentary party, the IKL, in Finland. An aborted coup d'état in 1935 resulted in the imprisonment of the Veterans' leadership. The *Perkonkrusts*, operating in cells, continued to agitate against the Ulmanis regime⁷⁷ until a new wave of arrests in 1937 finally put an end to most of their activities.⁷⁸ Though the IKL built itself into a well-disciplined force with a parliamentary representation of 14 deputies, it lacked Lapua's impact on politics. In contrast to the broad bourgeois front mobilized by Lapua in 1930, the IKL was treated as a pariah by the political establishment. The IKL was banned in 1938 by the Finnish Minister of the Interior Urho Kekkonen, but the ruling was overturned by a Helsinki court.⁷⁹

Collaboration with Germany in World War Two revived the potential of the radical right and created new opportunities. All three countries were allocated the same fate by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 23 August 1939 which placed them in the Soviet sphere of influence. The Soviet occupation in 1940-41 meant deportation and death in Siberian gulags for most of the leaders of the Latvian and Estonian radical right except those who managed to get out of the country. Only Finland put up armed resistance to Soviet demands. The IKL's anti-Marxist, anti-Russian ideals along with its propagation of national unity and preparedness for defense found some justification in the Winter War. When Finland allied itself with Germany against the Soviet Union in 1941 the IKL were given a seat in the cabinet and the Greater Finland ideal gained currency.⁸⁰

The German occupation provided a new opportunity for the radical right in the Baltic states. In Estonia, Mäe, the surviving leader of the Veterans, became head of the native civil administration, but the League itself was never revived. In contrast, the *Perkonkrusts* organized quite openly, but did not come nearly as close to attaining a measure of power. With the German invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, the *Perkonkrusts*

⁷⁷ On 18 November 1935 the *Perkonkrusts* managed to plant a bomb near the foreign ministry where Ulmanis was to give a speech, but it went off only the next morning. Less serious acts of hooliganism included releasing a pig with a portrait of Ulmanis at a parade in 1935, LVVA, 3235, 1/22, 708, pp. 236, 260; 3235, 1/22, 920, p. 278.

⁷⁸ LVVA, 3235, 1/22, 708, 116; 3235, 1/22, 920, p. 213.

⁷⁹ Heinonen, "From People's Movement to Minor Party," p. 697.

⁸⁰ Vilho Annala was Minister of Transport and Public Works during 1941-43.

offered their services to the Germans to fight against the Soviets. They quickly reestablished themselves as collaborators, but by August 1941 they were banned by the German military command because they had gone too far: aggressively recruiting an expanded membership, arresting people without consulting the German *Sicherheitsdienst* and in general behaving like 'masters' in the countryside.⁸¹ The *Perkonkrusts* did everything to curry favour with the Nazis: proposing to establish an institute of anti-Semitism, publish the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* in Latvian, and create two Latvian divisions for the Waffen-SS.⁸² Some members of the *Perkonkrusts* such as Victors Arajs, head of the Latvian *Sicherheitshilfpolizei*, played a major role in the murder of the Jews.⁸³ However, they were not trusted by the Germans because of their previous hostility toward the Baltic German minority. Celmins claimed that his anti-German remarks had been misinterpreted: they were directed only against the Baltic Germans who were anti-National Socialist. By 1942 the relationship had deteriorated and Celmins started an underground opposition group to the German occupation, an action which landed him in a concentration camp in 1944.⁸⁴

For the radical right in all three countries, the end came in 1944. When the Finns sued for peace the Soviets dictated the terms of the armistice which included the liquidation of organizations that they deemed fascist, including the IKL, the civil guard and the Academic Karelia Society. With the Soviet reoccupation of Estonia and Latvia all political activity except that approved by the Soviet authorities was prohibited.

⁸¹ H. Biezais, "Gustava Celmina Perkonkrusts dokumentu gaisma," *Latvijas Zinatnu Akademijas Vestis* (1/1992), p. 41.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁸³ Robert G. Waite, "Kollaboration und deutsche Besatzungspolitik in Lettland 1941 bis 1945," in *Europa unterm Hakenkreuz*, pp. 221-2. See also Andrew Ezergailis, *The Holocaust in Latvia* (Riga, 1995), ch. 7.

⁸⁴ Paeglis, "Perkonkrusts" par Latviju 1932-1944, p. 184.

CHAPTER 14

CONCLUSION

The Rise and Fall of the Veterans' Movement

The Veterans' League started with a solid base of membership of prominent War of Independence Veterans. Their name, *vabadussõjalased*, had great popular appeal, and they were widely respected, especially those who had been decorated with the Liberty Cross, as were most of the leaders of the League. Their appeals to patriotic virtues appeared untainted by political motives and were consistent with the views of many Estonians. The public perception of the Veterans as patriotic war heroes left a positive initial impression of an apolitical movement, a view that changed only gradually as the League evolved into a political movement and became involved in mudslinging with the political parties. As Laaman cynically remarked, "in our political landscape barren of ideas, a group of enterprising Veterans have hit upon the idea to use their distinguished 'brandname' to reap political profit".¹

The deepening economic crisis in the early Thirties created the conditions in which it was possible for the Veterans' movement to obtain widespread popular support and to become a significant political factor in Estonia. Increasing unemployment and a decline in living standards resulted in a loss of confidence in the parliamentary system and a willingness to accept panaceas such constitutional reform embodying strong leadership. The limited experience with participatory democracy in Estonia and the immaturity of the political parties also created conditions favourable for the emergence of the radical right. Estonia's most highly acclaimed novelist, Anton Hansen Tammsaare, noted that whereas democracy is created by culture and demands hard work, authoritarian government was the easy, and in the Thirties, fashionable alternative, able to thrive in an underdeveloped civic culture.²

The most important political factor that allowed the extra-parliamentary right to become so influential and powerful was the use of popular initiative to amend the constitution. This was unique to the

¹ Laaman, *Demokraatia ja diktatuur*, p. 101.

² Anton Hansen Tammsaare, "Kultuurist ja demokraatiast," *Vaba Maa*, 17 November 1933.

Estonian case, enabling the movement to grow without any parliamentary base and build a broad constituency while campaigning on a single issue. Significantly, popular initiative provided a tool for the Veterans to circumvent initial attempts by the government to suppress the movement: the referendum on Veterans' constitutional amendment proposal went ahead even though the League itself was banned. Thus the Veterans were vindicated and the government defeated because the League appealed directly to the people over the head of the government and *Riigikogu*.

The Veterans' ability to popularize and exploit ideas that originated with others was instrumental to their success. At the time of the rise of the Veterans' movement, the issue of constitutional reform had already been placed on the political agenda by the Farmers' and Centre Parties' amendment proposals. The need for a stronger executive, in the form of a presidency, had been advocated for some years by numerous public figures, most notably Päts. The Veterans simply appropriated this ready-made issue and made it their own by mobilizing mass support for it.

The League was unique among Estonian political parties in capturing support which crossed all class lines. Except for its relative weakness in the countryside, the League's support was broadly based. Particularly noteworthy for a radical right-wing movement was the substantial support of the working class.

In spite of all these favourable conditions, the movement failed because the Veterans were tainted with a foreign ideology, lacked a charismatic leader, and were not perceived as the only alternative to communism. In the end, they were outwitted by the experienced politicians, and proved irrelevant after constitutional reform had been enacted.

Even though the Veterans were ultra-nationalist and their leaders had demonstrated their convictions on the battlefield, their opponents were successful in calling their patriotism into question. The democratic parties from the Farmers to the Socialists were able to take over the issue of patriotism from the Veterans and turn it against them. Although there is no evidence of contact with the Nazis, the Veterans could not shake off allegations of affiliation with them, particularly after the laudatory comments from the Baltic German Nazi leader von zur Mühlen. They were thus tainted by an apparent ideological affinity with Estonia's

traditional enemy. Päts and Laidoner were even able to claim that victory by the Veterans would increase the threat of foreign intervention by hinting that the USSR would not tolerate a 'fascist' regime on its doorstep.

The radical right and fascism were more successful in states where a perceived communist threat existed.³ Though Estonia had experienced a communist putsch attempt in 1924, sponsored by its giant neighbour, Soviet Russia, the Estonian Communist Party in the early Thirties was minuscule and the Socialists were well-integrated into the political system. Thus the Veterans, unlike the German National Socialists or Italian Fascists, could not present themselves as the only alternative to communism. In fact, opponents of the League were able to turn the issue of a communist threat against the Veterans. The Veterans' success in obtaining the support of the working class and the unemployed allowed opponents to allege that communists were infiltrating the ranks of the Veterans.

Lack of a strong charismatic leader was a serious handicap to the League which made it difficult for it to convert its popularity into power. Successful fascist movements relied on the strength of one powerful individual leader who embodied the party's ideology. The Veterans' colourless leader Larka could not possibly play such a role, and Sirk, although an inspiring orator, was too young to be a presidential candidate. The choice of Larka as their presidential candidate was ill-advised - had they chosen Laidoner it would have been considerably more difficult for Päts to carry out his coup d'état.

In the end, the Veterans were outwitted by Päts who demonstrated that he was tougher and more resourceful than they had imagined. Päts, who had worked longest to create the presidency, would not allow some young upstarts to usurp the position that he believed he had justifiably earned. The experienced old statesmen proved to be too clever for the naive Veterans who actually believed that the politicians would play by the democratic rules and hand over the reins of power to them. After Hitler's seizure of power through 'legal' means in Germany, governments across Europe realized that the challenge from the radical right had to be met head on, not appeased.⁴

The first attempt in August 1933 to declare a state of emergency and outlaw the League was unsuccessful because the opposition parties were

³ Linz, "Political Space and Fascism as a Late-Comer," p. 160.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-5.

sharply critical of the Tõnisson government's measures. The Veterans learned the wrong lesson from the first banning of the League while their opponents drew the right conclusions. Sirk believed that the government's heavy-handed actions against the League only increased its public popularity to which the government would have to yield. Päts and Laidoner, however, concluded that such action could not be done by half-measures, but must be decisive and overpowering. When the final showdown came in March 1934, all the parties supported the government's actions against the Veterans and the *Riigikogu* unanimously approved Päts' declaration of a state of emergency. The cooperation of the Socialists with the government was particularly noteworthy in the European context. All the parties were willing to acquiesce in firm measures to eliminate the threat from the Veterans for the sake of self-preservation, not realizing that it would also lead to their own demise.

Since constitutional reform had been the major goal for the Veterans, its passage in the referendum deprived them of their *raison d'être*: their program could be implemented without them. And that is in fact what happened under the Päts regime. Päts put an end to the political parties, and in his own subsequent constitutional reform, he replaced proportional representation with first past-the-post elections, one of the key unfulfilled demands of the Veterans. His government presided over economic recovery, and provided the strong and stable leadership which the people had yearned for. The regime appropriated the integrating nationalism which formed the core of the Veterans' ideology. This was most clearly seen in the creation of the Fatherland League whose patriotic platitudes blatantly echoed those of the Veterans' League. Thus Päts put into practice much of what the League had propagated.

Since Päts provided the people with a program similar to what the Veterans had offered, the Veterans had no second chance to come close to obtaining power after the implementation of a state of emergency and the banning of the League. In the underground the Veterans proved to be inept conspirators and were badly outsmarted by political police. Out of desperation, they plotted to overthrow the government by force, unaware that the political police had kept tabs on their activities. The subsequent arrest of the conspirators enabled the Päts regime to eliminate the Veterans as a potentially troublesome political movement. Finally, Sirk's

death in 1937 removed the driving force of the movement, the man whose personal popularity was the last remaining asset of the League.

A Fascist Movement?

As the preceding discussion has illustrated, some aspects of the Veterans' ideology and organization resembled fascism. Yet, there were significant differences. While fascism remains a problematic concept and a matter of dispute among scholars,⁵ probably the most influential and widely accepted definition of fascism is Stanley Payne's typological description:⁶

A. Fascist negations:

Anti-liberalism

Anti-communism

Anti-conservatism (though with the understanding that fascist groups were willing to undertake temporary alliances with groups from any other sector, most commonly with the right)

B. Ideology and goals:

Creation of a new type of authoritarian state based not merely on traditional principles or models

Organization of some new kind of regulated, multiclass, integrated national economic structure, whether called national corporatist, national socialist, or national syndicalist

The goal of empire or a radical change in the nation's relationship with other powers

Specific espousal of an idealist, voluntarist creed, normally involving the attempt to realize a new form of modern, self-determined, secular culture

C. Style and organization:

Emphasis on esthetic structure of meetings, symbols, and political choreography, stressing romantic and mystical aspects

Attempted mass mobilization with militarization of political relationships and style and with the goal of a mass party militia

Extreme stress on the masculine principle and male dominance, while espousing the organic view of society

Exaltation of youth above other phases of life, emphasizing the conflict of generations, at least in effecting the initial political transformation

Specific tendency toward an authoritarian, charismatic, personal style of command, whether or not the command is to some degree initially elective

There is no doubt that the Veterans shared the fascist negations of Payne's typology. The League's struggle against liberal democracy and the hegemony of the political parties was its most obvious feature. The Marxist ideas of class struggle and internationalism were anathema to the

⁵ For an exposition of the differing interpretations of fascism see Roger Griffin, ed., *Fascism*, Oxford Readers (Oxford, 1995).

⁶ Payne, *Fascism: Comparison and Definition*, p. 7.

Veterans' ideal of unifying nationalism. The Veterans sought to regenerate the nation, and thus saw themselves as a revolutionary, rather than reactionary movement, who strove to create a brighter future, rather than turn back the clock.

Although the Veterans were inclined towards the ideological goals of fascism which Payne outlines, they did not fully embrace any of them. They certainly sought to create a stronger state, but in proposing to amend the constitution to establish a presidency and reduce the powers of the *Riigikogu* they were following the lead of two of the larger democratic parties. Whether this would have been authoritarian in form is open to question, but the constitution crafted by the League itself was not. Pääs used the Veterans' constitution to legitimate his authoritarian rule, but that was accomplished only by acting contrary to its provisions.

The Veterans propagated cooperation among all classes and occupational groups, but had no interest in a reorganization of economic or state institutions along corporatist lines. They wanted to strengthen the nation's defenses, but as Estonia was a territorially satisfied state, there was no advocacy of expansionism or any kind of foreign policy adventurism. While the Veterans shared fascism's metaphysical idealism and vitalism, emphasizing heroic self-sacrifice and the triumph of 'spirit' over materialism, they did not envision a radical restructuring of society to create a fascist 'new man'.

In terms of style and organization, the League did resemble fascist movements. This is partly attributable to its nature as an association of ex-combatants. Paramilitary attributes and male dominance came naturally to Veterans who favoured military models of organization, military terminology, parades, and ceremony which were familiar to them. The Veterans were more successful than most comparable movements in mobilizing mass support. This was apparent in the phenomenal success of the collection of signatures for Larka's candidature, and the large and enthusiastic crowds who thronged to hear Sirk speak.

Geoff Eley has stated that the use of violence ultimately distinguishes fascism from the radical right.⁷ While political campaigning in Estonia during 1933-34 was unprecedentedly tumultuous, largely because of fracas between the Veterans and Socialists, violence never involved anything

⁷ Geoff Eley, "Conservatives and radical nationalists in Germany: the production of fascist potentials, 1912-1928," in Martin Blinkhorn, ed., *Fascists and Conservatives. The radical right and the establishment in twentieth-century Europe* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p. 50.

more than fisticuffs, never got out of control, nor did it result in any casualties. While the Veterans used intimidating rhetoric, the League did not encourage violence. The only exception was the aborted coup attempt of 1935, but it took place under different circumstances when the League had been reduced from a mass movement to a band of underground conspirators. Had the plot been carried out it would likely have involved casualties, but it is important to note that the plan was conceived with the aim of avoiding bloodshed.

The Veterans held an organic conception of the society in which duty to the nation outweighed individual rights and where a woman's role was to raise children for the fatherland. Their aim was to create a *rahvuslik tervik*, an integrated national community, similar to the German idea of *Volksgemeinschaft*, but without the racial content. The Veterans exalted youth, emphasized generational conflict, and wholeheartedly identified themselves with the younger generation whose rise was blocked by the status quo. Finally, as has been discussed above, though Sirk was a strong personality and became increasingly more powerful and influential in the movement, Larka, the League's elected leader was not a charismatic figure, and thus the League lacked the personal, authoritarian style of command that is a typical feature of fascist movements.

On balance, as judged by Payne's criteria, although the Veterans' League shared many of the characteristic features of fascism, there were too many divergences from the definition for it to be considered a genuine fascist movement.

APPENDIX

Chronology1918

- 24.02 Estonian independence declared
 25.02 German army occupies Tallinn
 19.11 Germany relinquishes power to the Estonian Provisional Government
 28.11 Red Army invades Estonia

1919

- 05-07.04 Constituent Assembly elected
 19-22.06 German *Freikorps* and *Landeswehr* defeated by Estonian and Latvian forces
 10.10 Land reform act

1920

- 02.02 Estonian-Soviet peace treaty signed at Tartu
 15.06 Estonian constitution ratified

1921

- 08.05 Demobilized Soldiers' League founded
 22.09 Estonia becomes member of League of Nations

1924

- 01.12 Failed Communist putsch in Tallinn

1926

- 10.10 Tallinn Veterans' League founded
 12-14.05 Pilsudski seizes power in Poland
 16.12 Smetona seizes power in Lithuania

1929

- 02.06 Veterans' Central League founded
 25-26.05 Finnish Veterans' League (VRL) established
 01.12 Lapua movement founded

1930

- 26.01 First Veterans' League congress

1931

- 22.03 Second Veterans' League congress
 24.04 Veterans' propose bill to lower quorum for referendum

1932

- 19.01 *Ugunskrusts* registered
 27.02-06.03 Lapua rebellion at Mäntsälä
 20.03 Third Veterans' League congress
 21-23.05 *Riigikogu* elections
 05.06 IKL founded
 17.07 Veterans' League rally at Tapa
 13-15.08 First consitutional referendum
 10.11 Veterans present constitutional amendment proposal to *Riigikogu*
 27.11 Fourth Veterans' League congress

1933

- 30.01 Hitler appointed German Chancellor
 12.05 *Perkonkrusts* founded
 03.06 Tartu county Veterans' League closed by the government
 10-12.06 Second constitutional amendment referendum
 27.06 Devaluation of the Estonian currency
 11.08 Tõnisson government declares state of emergency and bans the Veterans' League
 14-16.10 Referendum on the Veterans' constitutional amendment
 21.10 Päts government formed
 28.10 Veterans' League refounded
 12.11 Meeting of Veterans' leadership at Võru
 17.12 Veterans' League congress

1934

- 07-08.01 Rural district elections
 14-15.01 Veterans' triumph in municipal elections
 24.01 Veterans' constitution comes into force
 30.01 *Perkonkrusts* banned
 12.03 Päts declares state of emergency, appoints Laidoner as Supreme Commander; Veterans' leaders arrested
 19.03 Elections postponed until end of state of emergency
 22.03 Minister of the Interior dissolves the Veterans' League
 15.05 Ulmanis declares state of emergency in Latvia
 14.06 *Perkonkrusts* leaders arrested
 02.10 *Riigikogu* dissolved
 11.11 Sirk escapes from prison

1935

- 22.02 Fatherland League founded
- 06.03 Political parties banned
- 12-20.06 First Veterans' trial
- 20.09 Larka presents Veterans' new constitutional amendment proposal
- 26-27.09 Veterans' "terrorists" trial
- 07.12 Veterans' conspirators arrested

1936

- 23-25.02 Plebiscite to convene National Assembly
- 06-25.05 Trial of the Veterans' conspirators
- 12-14.12 Elections to the National Assembly

1937

- 28.07 National Assembly ratifies new constitution
- 02.08 Death of Sirk

1938

- 01.01 New constitution comes into force
- 24-25.02 *Riigivolikogu* elections
- 24.04 Päts elected President
- 05.05 Amnesty for political prisoners

1939

- 23.08 Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact
- 28.09 Estonian-Soviet Mutual Assistance Treaty allowing Soviet military bases on Estonian territory
- 12.10 Uluots cabinet formed
- 30.11 USSR attacks Finland

1940

- 17.06 Soviet forces occupy Estonia
- 06.08 Estonia incorporated into the USSR

1941

- 28.08 German occupation of Tallinn
- 05.12 Estonian civil administration appointed

1944

- 22.09 Red Army reconquers Tallinn

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