

SUMMARY

*Estonian National Regiments 1917–1918*

Since the Russian Army did not have any regiments formed on ethnic criteria before the outbreak of the World War II, Estonians who were mobilised during the war years (around 100,000 men) were scattered across Russia. Initially, however, the idea of concentrating Estonian military personnel into national regiments which would take part first and foremost in protecting Estonia was not supported due to opposition from Russian authorities and conflicts between Estonian public figures.

After the February Revolution Estonian soldiers and officers supported the idea of national regiments. This time the military authorities gave their approval. On 12 April 1917 the first day's order was issued to the First Estonian Regiment to be established in Tallinn. However, this success was curbed by counteractions from the Tallinn Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. Under pressure from the Soviet, the Minister of War prohibited the establishment of any new Estonian regiments and ordered the existing unit to be transferred from Tallinn to Rakvere.

The first Estonian Infantry Regiment was manned by Estonians from reserve units; contributions from Estonian organisations and private persons played an important role in supplying the regiment. Despite the demoralisation spreading throughout the Russian Army during the revolution, the regiment became a disciplined military unit, even if it never entered a front line battle. 1,600 men were captured by the Germans in October 1917 while trying to protect the western Estonian islands.

Although the Minister of War had prohibited the establishment of new armed regiments, under Estonian pressure many Russian army commanders ignored this. From September to November, the second and third Estonian Infantry Regiments and a reserve battalion were formed; in December the First Infantry Division was assembled. As of January 1918 the division consisted of four infantry regiments, an artillery brigade, one reserve battalion, an engineer corps, and logistic units.

In 1917 and 1918 the national regiments provided remarkable protection to Estonian citizens from demoralised Russian soldiers' unauthorised activities. At the same time, political conflicts developed within the regiments between nationalist-minded soldiers and the Bolsheviks, who had risen to power after the October Revolution. The Bolsheviks attempted to assert their power in the national regiments and achieved some success. However, in January 1918 at the Congress of Estonian Military Personnel, most representatives demanded the establishment of an independent Estonian state. Thus, the Bolsheviks quickly began to eliminate the national regiments.

Due to the German offensive that began on 18 February 1918, the elimination of the regiments was interrupted. The Estonian Bolsheviks and Russian infantry in Estonia as well as the vessels of the Baltic fleet hurried to escape as the Germans advanced. This enabled Estonian regiments to seize control nearly everywhere in Estonia; they helped to re-establish the function of local governments as before, maintained order and reclaimed any property stolen from Estonians by Russian troops as they were leaving the country. National regiments supported nationally minded politicians to proclaim Estonian independence and on 24 February 1918, an Estonian Provisional Government was set up. In the first days of the ensuing German occupation, the Army of the Republic of Estonia was formed out of the Estonian Division, but by the end of March, the German military ordered the Army to be dissolved.

In addition to protecting Estonian citizens and playing an important role in the proclamation of Estonian independence, the national regiments continued their efforts in the years to come. Estonians mobilised into the Russian Army had been concentrated in Estonia in order to form national units, thus gaining valuable military experience. They paved the way for the reemerging Estonian Army during the Estonian War of Independence (1918–1920) that successfully protected the country against the Red Army.