

HUNDRED YEARS SINCE THE TARTU PEACE TREATY (2.02.1920)

Although the Estonian Republic had been declared independent on February 24th, 1918, it was only a day later that most of the area of Estonia was occupied by the Germans. This lasted until late autumn, which is when the German Empire collapsed. Things did not change for the better for the Estonian territories, as on November 13th the Russian Bolshevik government unilaterally annulled the Treaty of Brest (which had been signed with Germany), allowing it to prepare for a westward invasion.

The first attempt by the Red Army to invade Narva, on November 22nd, was foiled by the Germans. After that, however, protecting the country became the responsibility of the Estonian military (which had just been created with difficulties). In the following weeks, the front moved from the northeast and southeast towards central Estonia. But soon after that, the Estonian army along with the support of Finnish volunteers and the British navy began its counterattack. They succeeded in pushing the Red Army out from Estonian boundaries, first from the northeast by the evening of January 19th and then from the southeast by the beginning of February.

Until the spring of 1919, it was mainly defensive battles that took place within the context of the Estonian Independence War. In May, however, Estonian military units began cooperating with the Northern Corps from the Russian White Army to go on the offensive towards Petrograd in order to overthrow the Bolsheviks. The move proved so successful that in one go they also decided to liberate Riga from the Red Army. But this led to a conflict with the Landeswehr (comprised mainly of Baltic Germans), who had dreams of creating a Baltic Duchy by uniting the former Baltic provinces. While the Estonians and Latvians managed to win the Landeswehr war that took place in June-July, they suffered needlessly large losses.

Having made peace with both the Germans and Baltic Germans, Estonia had to once again prepare for defensive battles. This was because the Northern Corps, retreating from Petrograd, were followed by the Red Army towards the Estonian borders. Although Estonian losses in the following weeks were large, they managed to fend off the Red Army's attacks. In September, the Red Army suddenly suspended their attack on the Irboska area. Now under international pressure, the Bolsheviks offered to start peace negotiations with the Baltic states. At that moment, only the Estonians were ready for it. While Great Britain was prepared to recognize Estonia's right for independence, France announced that if Estonia were to make peace with the Bolsheviks, an economic blockade would be established for Estonia. Antant had namely planned an extensive operation to overthrow the Bolsheviks. As part of the plan, Baltic military forces had to support the Russian White Army. Since Antant's other plan, according to which the Russian White Army's Northwestern and Western Army were to simultaneously begin an ascent to Petrograd, also failed, the Estonian forces had to return to pre-Narva defensive positions by the beginning of December.

Although the attempts in September to begin peace negotiations had not been successful, Estonians remained interested in ending the war. And because by the end of the same month Antant had given up on directly involving the Baltic states in the fight against the

Bolsheviks, they decided to begin negotiations with Russia for signing a multilateral peace treaty. In November, however, it turned out that only Estonia was interested in signing a peace treaty as quickly as possible. Thus, on November 19th, the Estonian Government decided to begin separate negotiations with Russia and made the corresponding offer to Moscow.

The peace conference began in Tartu on December 5th and it is possible to divide into two phases. The main goals of the first phase (lasting until the end of December) were ending the military activity and signing a truce. In parallel, arguments about state borders and military safeguards took place. The arguments about the border happened simultaneously with fierce battles on the Narva front, where on the one side was the Estonian army, and on the other, the Red Army, which was several times more powerful in terms of weaponry and manpower. Yet since the Red Army forces did not manage to invade Narva in any way, they were forced to end their attacks and sign a truce. This was done in the evening of December 31st and was in effect from January 3rd at 10:30 AM.

The second phase of the peace negotiations, taking place over the course of January, focused primarily on economic issues. The most difficult of these were the distribution of Russian state assets, the return of assets that had been evacuated from Estonia to Russia and future economic ties between the two countries. The Tartu Peace Treaty was signed on February 2nd at 12:45 AM.

Signing the peace treaty had several positive impacts on Estonia – first, the period of martial law ended. Second, Russia recognized Estonia’s independence and forever abandoned all rights that it had previously had on Estonia. And finally, the locations of the state borders that Estonia gained were highly beneficial in those circumstances. From an economic point of view, it is worth noting that both sides dropped their demands to collect war expenses and damages from each other. Additionally, Russia dropped its claims on Russian state assets located on Estonian territory, was required to pay 15 million gold rubles to Estonia and had to return governmental, science, educational and other assets that had been removed from Estonia. Finally, mutual trade concessions were established and promises were made about subsequent favourable trade deals.

Those trade deals especially allowed Estonia to be hopeful about restoring former economic ties with Russia. Initially, this seemed to be panning out. In 1920, most Russian business operations with Western Europe took place via Estonia. The outlook seemed even more promising after Russia announced a new economic policy in 1921, which slowly led to national commissions from Russia that revived the Estonian metal and paper industries. Yet just a few years later it became apparent that hopes on the Russian market were not justified and Estonia tried to reorient itself towards Western Europe. This decision was also supported by the understanding that developing economic ties with the east could endanger Estonian sovereignty.

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Mihkel Truman
University of Tartu