

Implications of General Johan Laidoner's Active Defence Doctrine in the Estonian Defence Modernisation Plan of 1938

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“A commander is not only required to lead his army to victory. He must create, equip and train that army”.¹

Major General Herbert Brede²

General Johan Laidoner's activities as commander-in-chief during Estonia's interwar period are often associated with his doctrine of active defence. While direct documentation is limited, scholars have reconstructed this doctrine from archival sources and analysed its defensive applications. This study examines how Laidoner's active defence principles influenced Estonia's military modernisation planning. Following the 1934 coup, Laidoner possessed unprecedented powers, providing him significant freedom to implement his strategic vision. The research addresses two questions: What were the main strategic and tactical principles of Laidoner's active defence doctrine, and what were their foundations? Can these principles be identified in Estonia's 1938 Defence Modernisation Plan? The analysis focuses primarily on the latter question, as development plans represent crucial forward-looking strategic management tools. The 1938 plan and accompanying discussions provide the clearest evidence

¹ Herbert Brede, *Strateegia. Loengud Kõrgemas Sõjakoolis 1935–36. a* (Tallinn: Kaitseväe Ühendatud Õppeasutused, 1936), 58–60.

² Major General Herbert Brede (1888–1942), a graduate of Michael Artillery School in St. Petersburg (1910) and École Supérieure de Guerre in France (1929), was the artillery inspector of the Estonian Defence Forces from 1920 to 1930, commandant of Estonian Military Educational Establishments from 1930 to 1934, permanent lecturer of strategy in the Higher Military School from 1934, and commander of the 3rd Division from 1934 to 1940. He was arrested by Soviet State Security in June 1941 and executed in October 1942 in Norilsk.

of Laidoner's commitment to implementing active defence principles within the evolving security environment of the late 1930s.

The main peacetime mission of every commander-in-chief is to prepare the armed forces to be ready for the next possible military conflict. Of course, this is a collective or communal task for him and his staff, rather than for just the commander-in-chief personally. Relying on an educated and experienced staff greatly facilitates the performance of this task. Still, in a commander-centric organisation like the Estonian Defence Forces (EDF)³ during the interwar era, the commander-in-chief's personal views and perceptions play a critical role in creating the vision and setting the priorities for force development. His understanding of the nature of possible future conflicts – by whom, why and when conflict will be ignited, as well as how and by which means war will be fought – will give direction to his staff for the necessary planning. More often, discussing General Johan Laidoner's views on warfare and battle, researchers bring up his doctrine of "active defence". Some researchers, like Urmas Salo,⁴ Kaarel Piirimäe,⁵ and Martti Turtola,⁶ have made attempts to reconstruct this doctrine, to a greater or lesser extent, from archival sources. Salo⁷ and Piirimäe⁸ have also tried to analyse the suitability of this reconstructed doctrine in the defence of the state at that time.

In January 1933, more than a year before assuming the position of commander-in-chief, General Laidoner gave a very critical interview

³ Here, the designation Estonian Defence Forces (Eesti kaitsevägi) is used. From 1920 to 1929 and from 1 March 1937, the official designation was Estonian Armed Forces (Eesti sõjavägi).

⁴ Urmas Salo, "Eesti kaitse üldised põhimõtted", *Sõja ja rahu vahel. I. Eesti julgeolekupoliitika 1940. aastani*, peatoimetaja Enn Tarvel (Tallinn: S-Keskus, 2004), 168–170.

⁵ Kaarel Piirimäe, "Preparing for War in the 1930s. The myth of the Independence War and Laidoner's "active defence"", *Estonian Yearbook of Military History* 7 (13) (2017): 116–150.

⁶ Martti Turtola, *Kindral Johan Laidoner ja Eesti Vabariigi hukk 1939–1940* (Tallinn: Tänapäev, 2008).

⁷ Urmas Salo, "Eesti kaitse üldised põhimõtted"; Urmas Salo, "Estimation of security threats and Estonian defence planning in the 1930s", *Acta Historica Tallinnensia*, 12, 2008: 35–74.

⁸ Kaarel Piirimäe, "Preparing for War in the 1930s".

to the newspaper *Vaba Maa* about the current state of the EDF.⁹ He pointed out that the armed forces had fallen behind even smaller neighbouring countries in terms of technology and technological innovation. However, his biggest criticism was of the way the military tried to adapt to the conditions of the economic crisis. He stated that instead of reducing the existing force equally, a new, smaller organisation of the defence forces should be established. In his view, the main reason for the emergence of such problems was the absence of a person with sufficient authority, a commander-in-chief.

After the bloodless self-coup d'état by State Elder (head of the government) Konstantin Päts in March 1934, General Laidoner, as part of Estonia's authoritarian leadership, possessed powers that no subsequent chief of the Estonian Defence Forces ever had. Some authors even argue that in exchange for support for the self-coup d'état, Laidoner got total freedom to build defences.¹⁰ Thus, he had relatively wide freedom of action to implement his ideas and beliefs in order to prosecute a future war in the best possible way. To understand whether and how Laidoner used his golden opportunity to prepare the Estonian forces to conduct a future war in the best possible manner, this article examines the links between his beliefs about future wars and the Estonian State Defence Modernisation Plan, approved in 1938 by the State Defence Council.¹¹

The paper covers the period of 1934–38, known in Estonian historiography as the Silent Era. This period encompasses the original discussion regarding the necessity for EDF modernisation through the final authorisation of the Estonian State Defence Modernisation Plan as presented in the modernisation plan to the State Defence Council. In the author's view, Laidoner's active defence concept was mainly an artificial construct, a synthesis comprising fragments of his statements made on different staff rides, lectures, field exercises

⁹ "Kaitsevägi vajab ümberkorraldust. Meie armee on rajariikidest praegu kõige nõrgem. Kindral Laidoneri seletusi "Waba Maale", *Waba Maa*, 4 January 1933, 2.

¹⁰ Piirimäe, "Preparing for War in the 1930s", 119.

¹¹ *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid 1933–39* (Minutes of the Estonian National Defence Council), allikapublikatsioon, koostanud Urmas Salo, Uurimusi ja allikmaterjale Eesti sõjaajaloost 6 (Tartu: Eesti Ajalooarhiiv, 2013), 328–349.

and written comments in staff documents. I have excluded from the synthesis his public appearances, because they were intended more to raise the general morale of the people, and therefore what is reflected in them can be misleading in a military-technical sense. The paper does not evaluate the suitability of steps taken to defend the small country but builds links between Laidoner's theoretical and practical understandings of warfighting and the State Defence Modernisation Plan of 1938. In addition, the article is not looking into the moral and legal aspects of the 1934 self-coup d'état, but only the practicalities regarding the development and modernisation of the defence forces.

General Laidoner's active defence principles

To understand how Laidoner's active defence principles were taken into account in the State Defence Modernisation Plan, we need to figure out what he meant by an active defence. Salo notes that, after the self-coup d'état in 1934, Laidoner reintroduced the principles of the active defence for the EDF, which had been abandoned during the economic crisis. Based on information from different staff rides, he concludes that Laidoner emphasised the requirement for an active approach to holding positions along the first lines of defence at the border during the initial phase of a war. Additionally, he indicated the intent to take warfighting into an adversary's territory.¹² Piirimäe is more detailed, pointing out that active defence had not only tactical but also strategic content.¹³ Turtola gives a generic overview of Laidoner's main activities to enhance the defence of the state, concentrating mainly on issues regarding the will to fight, and the shortfall in anti-tank and air defence capabilities.¹⁴ Both Piirimäe and Salo link his approach to the experience of the Estonian War of Independence, 1918–20. This could be true, but only partly. Of course, the Estonian

¹² Salo, "Eesti kaitse üldised põhimõtted", 168–169.

¹³ Piirimäe, "Preparing for War in the 1930s", 120.

¹⁴ Turtola, *Kindral Johan Laidoner ja Eesti Vabariigi hukk*, 105–119.

army's success in keeping the warfare away from Estonian territory during most of the War of Independence served as a positive example for new defence plans. At the same time, we must also consider the theoretical foundations that Laidoner acquired during his studies at the Imperial Nicholas Military Academy, also known as the General Staff Academy. The transfer of military activity to the enemy's territory from the very beginning of a war was also a favourite motif of the Imperial Russian military theorists. For example, General Antoine de Jomini, the founder of Russia's General Staff Academy, taught that there are very clear strengths in waging war on the enemy's territory: preventing the enemy from destroying its own territory, creating the opportunity to use the enemy's resources to support personnel and conduct operations, and affecting the enemy's fighting spirit and morale.¹⁵ Such motives are also seen in Imperial Russia's 1912 plan for war against Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.¹⁶ Therefore, active defence can be considered a universal warfighting principle based on the belief that battles, and the war, can only be won by attack. This principle was taught to generations of Imperial Russian officers, and Estonia's success in the War of Independence reinforced the correctness of the approach.

Before 1938, the official document describing the EDF's warfighting principles was Battle Regulation of 1932.¹⁷ Approved during the economic crisis, it gives us an understanding of the key decision-makers' mindsets at that time. The commission that prepared the document was led by Major General Juhan Tõrvand, chief of staff of the EDF, and consisted of various unit commanders and central staff members.

¹⁵ Antoine-Henri de Jomini, *The Art of War* (London: Greenhill Books, 1996), 17. Antoine-Henri de Jomini (1779–1869) was a military officer and theorist of Swiss origin who in the 1800s served successively in the French and Russian armies. He became a general in 1823. He was a founder of the Military Academy of St. Petersburg and was named *Général en chef* in 1826. He advised Nicholas I during the Crimean War and, after retiring to France, advised Napoleon III on the Italian expedition of 1859 (Editor's note).

¹⁶ Vladimir Zolotarëv (Владимир Золотарёв), *Istoriâ voennoj strategii Rossii* [История военной стратегии России; History of Russian Military Strategy] (Moscow: Kučkovo pole, 2000), 101.

¹⁷ *Lahingueeskiri* (Tallinn: KV Staabi VI osakond, 1932), 1–4.

Table 1. List of the members of the working commission for Battle Regulation 1932¹⁸

	Rank and name	Position
1	Major General Juhan Tõrvand	Chief of Staff, EDF; head of the commission
2	Major General Gustav Jonson	Commander of the 3rd Division; inspector of cavalry
3	Colonel Herbert Brede	Commandant of the Military Educational Establishments
4	Colonel Aleksander Jaakson	Deputy to the Commandant of the Military Educational Establishments
5	Colonel Richard Tomberg	Commander of the Air Defence
6	Colonel August Traksmäa	Chief of the VI (Training) Department, Staff of EDF
7	Major Herbert Freiberg (Raidna)	Chief of the I (Operations) Department, Staff of EDF
8	Major Elias Kasak	Chief of the III (Mobilisation) Department, Staff of EDF
9	Colonel Emil Kursk	Commander of the 2nd Armoured Trains Regiment
10	Colonel Jakob Vende	Commander of the Kalev Infantry Battalion

The regulation emphasised the premise that effective resistance must be offered immediately at the border of the state to give ample time for the mobilisation and consolidation of forces. The intruder should be stopped and pushed back through a counterattack. Defence itself must be active and precise.¹⁹ In the commander-in-chief's journal, compiled by Laidoner's aide-de-camp, there is a note that the general issued Directive No. 1 on 14 September 1938 in order to arrive at uniform principles of warfighting for the defence forces and the main tasks for the divisions (i.e., land forces), navy and air defence. From the description provided by the aide-de-camp, we can see that Laidoner foresaw not only defending Estonian territory on the border, but also shifting military operations to the territory of an adversary.²⁰ The directive itself has gone missing, and it is impossible to compare this document with the Battle Regulation of 1932. Nevertheless, some conclusions can be drawn from what fragments are available.

¹⁸ *Lahingueeskiri*, X.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3–4.

²⁰ Commander-in-Chief's journal (1934–1938), 14 September 1938, RA, ERA.2553.1.2, 204.

During his first year as commander-in-chief,²¹ Laidoner used the term “active defence” mainly in a tactical context. At the first senior commanders’ staff ride to southeastern Estonia in August 1934, he emphasised the need to keep strong defensive positions in the heights near Petseri (Pechory) using a covering force and to maintain active defence at the tactical level.²² The following year, during the senior leaders’ staff ride to the 1st Division’s defensive area, he stated:

The Narva River line is one that we cannot give up and must actively defend. To do this, we need to create a bridgehead as deep as possible, because our defence must be fully active. The line of the Narva River can be abandoned only by order of the commander-in-chief. Although the Narva environs are most easily defended along the river, we must think further; that is, how to cross the river ourselves. However, the crossing must be sought in any case by delivering sharp blows to the enemy, and for this we must have the river crossings in our hands. Therefore, the destruction must also be coordinated with the possible intentions of our counterattacks, because the enemy can only be defeated by an offensive.²³

In January 1935, making the comments on a General Staff 1935 annual working plan, he made a clarifying remark about the deployment of forces and engagement plan: “General principle: we cannot give away the defensive lines along the Narva River and in the Petseri heights. Losing these territories at the beginning of a war may cause catastrophe for us”²⁴ (see map). At the State Defence Council meeting in April 1934, Major General Nikolai Reek, Laidoner’s Chief of Staff, introduced the main strategic concept of the defence: “We need to win time. We cannot allow our forces to be annihilated by the enemy’s first strike. We must fight a series of battles for the step-by-step defence of our territory, trying to win on our own for at least

²¹ Laidoner had been commander-in-chief earlier during the War of Independence in 1918–20, and again during the communist putsch attempt from December 1924 to January 1925 (Editor’s note).

²² Commander-in-Chief’s journal, 14–15 August 1934, RA, ERA.2553.1.2, 16.

²³ Commander-in-Chief’s journal, 13 September 1935, RA, ERA.2553.1.2, 66.

²⁴ Commander-in-Chief’s journal, 25 January 1935, RA, ERA.2553.1.2, 32.

four to five weeks.”²⁵ Evidently, the commander-in-chief’s intent was to hold important defensible terrain on the border, and he needed the tactical-level commanders’ initiative and readiness to counter-attack in every possible situation. Therefore, in this context, it can be assumed that, at least in 1934, active defence was a tactical-level principle to keep the initiative in Estonia’s hands.

The first signs of Laidoner entertaining ideas of bringing the fight to an enemy’s territory are found in February 1935, in Protocol No. 15 of the State Defence Council’s meeting. Reek introduced the basic principles of the new mobilisation plan and referred to the commander-in-chief’s guidance, stating that the overall intent in case of war should be to transfer military operations to the enemy’s territory.²⁶ In April 1935, making concluding remarks after the Harju Military District war game, Laidoner declared, “We must cultivate the doctrine that we will defend our country at the border and not in retreat. When the opportunity arises, we must go on the offensive and bring the war to the enemy’s territory.”²⁷ He also used the same narrative in his Directive No. 1, signed on 14 September 1938. In order to take the fight to the enemy’s territory, Laidoner apparently held that two things had to be done: mobilisation of all forces and finding the opportunity to take the offensive. Therefore, it was necessary to have very good reconnaissance to discover possible opportunities and enough fast, uncommitted reserves to exploit the openings.

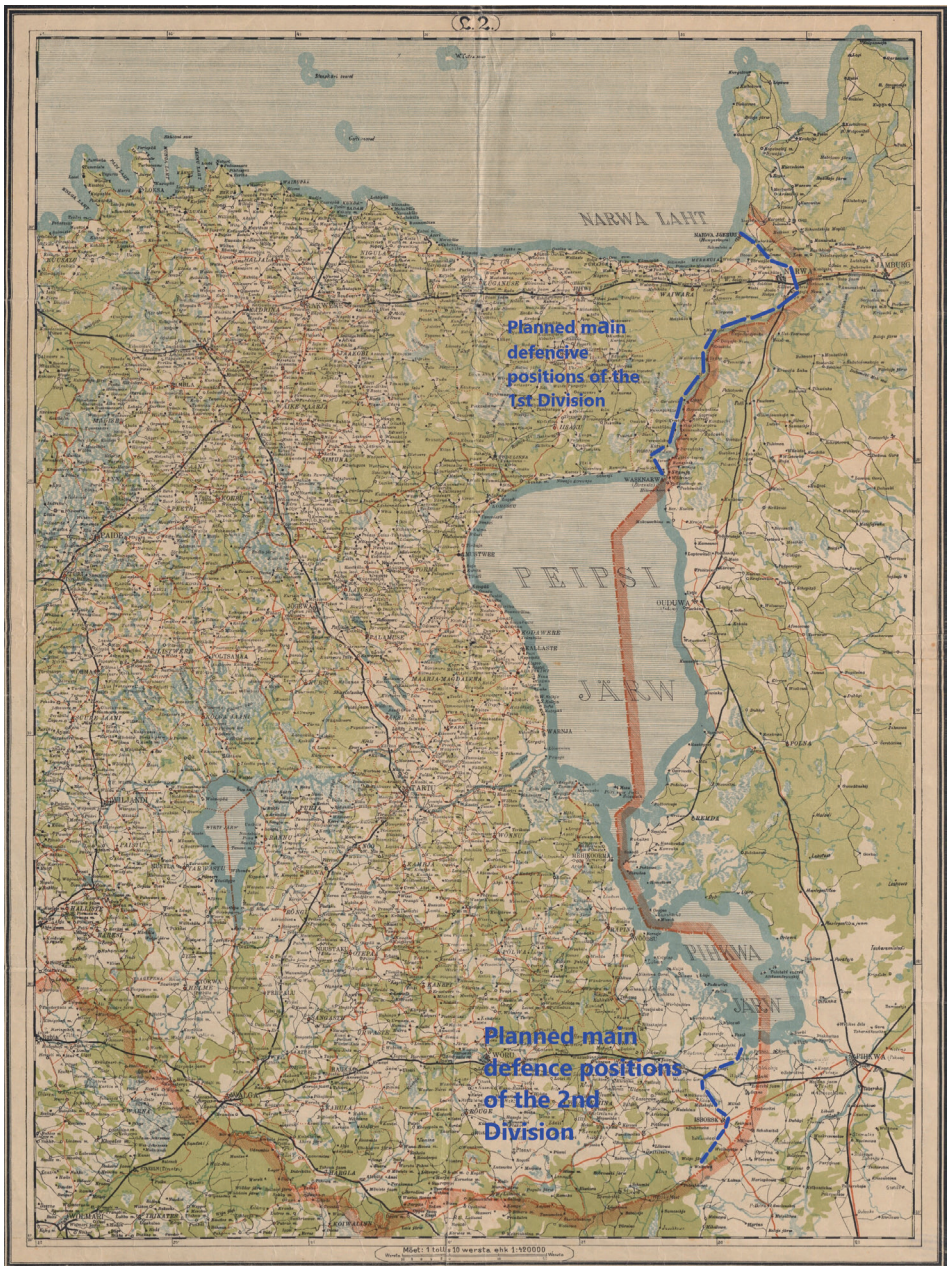
From the strategic perspective, Laidoner had three main concerns. First, the almost non-existent strategic depth of Estonia and the lack of good natural obstacles inside the country would give strategic meaning to the geography and topography favourable for defence along the border.²⁸ In the northeastern region, the Narva and Luga

²⁵ *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid*, 250.

²⁶ State Defence Council Minutes No. 15, 16 February 1935 – *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid*, 281.

²⁷ Commander-in-Chief’s journal, 13 April 1935, RA, ERA.2553.1.2, 45.

²⁸ Commander-in-Chief’s journal, 14–15 August 1934, RA, ERA.2553.1.2, 16.



Map of eastern and southeastern Estonia, showing the main planned defence positions of the 1st and 2nd Divisions

rivers and the swampy areas east of Jaanilinn²⁹ strongly restricted enemy manoeuvre. At the same time, the Narva River itself was a significant obstacle favouring defence. Fragmented landscape, with the hills, rivers and swamps in the southeastern region, west of Irboska (Izborsk)³⁰, also gave the defenders some advantage by limiting the use of moto-mechanised units.

Secondly, the understanding that the defence of Estonia would be difficult without outside support raised the need to win time for possible allies to both make the political decision to intervene and give them the time to react practically. Even if there were to be no bilateral or multinational political agreements in place, there was hope of acquiring matériel³¹ or even practical support in the form of troops.³² Therefore, fierce and determined fighting on the borders had a significant strategic meaning. Thus, the idea was to be able to defend and hold out for at least four to five weeks in order to give the politicians and diplomats the time they needed to organise possible outside supporters.³³

Thirdly, there was a concern regarding Estonia's ability to mobilise the army within the required timeframe in order to build up strong enough forces at the eastern borders, especially taking into account Estonia's inability to maintain strong coverage forces on the border itself. According to the mobilisation plan of 1939, the EDF needed at least seventy-two hours for full mobilisation,³⁴ which made the first three days of a potential war the most critical from the perspective of the state's survival.

²⁹ One of the districts of the city of Narva, located east of the Narva River. It was separated as the city of Ivangorod in 1954 after the eastern bank of the Narva River was annexed to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic in 1945.

³⁰ Petseri (Pechory) and Irboska (Izborsk) together with most of the territory of Petseri County were annexed to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic in August 1944 (Editor's note).

³¹ *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid*, 247; Commander-in-Chief's journal, 30 September 1938, RA, ERA.2553.1.2, 207.

³² Commander-in-Chief's journal, 13 April 1935, RA, ERA.2553.1.2, 45.

³³ *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid*, 247.

³⁴ Readiness Report for the Implementation of Mobilisation According to General Plan No. 2, 23 May 1939; Explanatory Note to General Mobilisation No. 2; Overview of Mobilisation Implementation and Readiness of Military Units and Institutions, 7 September 1939, RA, ERA.495.12.479, 1v, 7v, 23–23v.

At the tactical level, Laidoner believed that a future war would be even more technical than previous wars and that the infantry and artillery would play the key roles in battle. The best and most compact overview of Laidoner's beliefs on tactics is given by his Order No. 247, issued on 9 December 1936.³⁵ In this order, he referred to the experience gained from various exercises throughout 1936 and gave guidelines to improve the training of units. In his understanding, quality of command, knowledge and use of the terrain, maintaining the initiative, and skilful manoeuvring would be the factors that would decide the battle:

"I demand quick and timely decision-making, and the prompt issuing of orders from all commanders. The order itself must clearly express the commander's intent – the idea of the manoeuvre and the outline of what to do, but not how to do it. Commanders must act actively by taking their own initiative to achieve the objectives set forth by higher command."³⁶ These principles sound quite modern even today, in light of the manoeuvrist approach³⁷ and mission command.

Knowing the terrain and exploiting its possibilities to one's own advantage was another principle Laidoner emphasised, not only in the aforementioned order, but also in every staff ride or field exercise in which he participated.³⁸ Tangentially, this contradicts the principle of carrying the fight to the enemy's territory. In so doing, individual units lose the advantage held by having firm knowledge of the terrain.

Knowing the terrain was, in his understanding, also a key feature allowing the ability to maintain the initiative and execute skilful manoeuvres. From his various statements, we can see that he favoured flanking manoeuvres as opposed to a frontal attack in battle.³⁹ He reasoned that with the increased firepower of infantry units, making

³⁵ Infantry inspector's office, documentation on manoeuvres and tactical exercises, 1936–1940, RA, ERA.510.1.82, 40–42.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁷ For more detail, see William S. Lind, *Manoeuvre Warfare Handbook* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1985).

³⁸ Commander-in-Chief's journal, 13 April 1935, 27 May 1935, 30 December 1935, 3 March 1936, 45, 54, 80, 92.

³⁹ Infantry inspector's office, documentation on manoeuvres and tactical exercises, 41.



Commander-in-Chief Johan Laidoner at his desk, late 1930s. Source: Estonian War Museum, KLM FT 1793:2 F

frontal attacks was too costly to the attacker.⁴⁰ When discussing manoeuvre warfare, he usually emphasised manoeuvres by the force, but never talked about manoeuvres by fire. In this, he certainly differs from the contemporaneous French paradigm that defined the aim of manoeuvre as “to achieve the desired concentration of fire at the desired place and time, at the front or on the flank”.⁴¹ This may explain why increasing firepower up to the regimental level was never discussed during the development of the modernisation plans.

Interestingly, despite understanding the role of flanking manoeuvres, he was still quite pessimistic about the role of armoured and moto-mechanised units on the battlefield. Several times, he pointed out

⁴⁰ Commander-in-Chief's journal, 13 April 1935, 44.

⁴¹ A.T., “Modern sõjavägede iseloomustus”, *Sõdur* no 9/10, (1932): 214–221. The article refers to the lectures of the former Chief of the French General Staff, General Marie Eugène Debeney, “Caractères des armées modernes”, which he gave in several Swiss garrisons in 1931 and were first published in *Revue Militaire Suisse* in December 1931 and in January 1932.

that these new capabilities were overrated due to their significant operational constraints, including limited terrain mobility and dependence on support infrastructure.⁴² Of course, Laidoner believed that EDF officers, especially at the General Staff, overestimated the capabilities of moto-mechanised forces,⁴³ and in his statement, he aimed to reduce the “tank psychosis” in the army.

His preference for manoeuvres was so strong that at times he even seemed to denigrate other aspects of battlefield preparation such as engineering, especially field fortifications. For example, on 26 August 1934, while addressing the fortification works along the Narva River, he stated that the main defence of the river line will rely on a mobile defending force and the fortifications are just a supporting factor. Additionally, on 27 May 1935, after an operational test firing of one of the caponiers, he announced that he would personally place himself with a machine gun in the bushes alongside the caponier, rather than inside it.⁴⁴

Laidoner's practical steps in preparing for the modernisation of the defence forces

Taking into account Laidoner's beliefs about the principles of warfare, it is logical that in developing the armed forces, his focus would have been on the units' manoeuvrability, firepower and organisational flexibility. The following analysis examines how his active defence principles were reflected in the planning for the modernisation of the defence forces.

The need to modernise the defence forces emerged as a critical issue by the early 1930s. First, it was in reaction to the deep battle theory and the development of the moto-mechanised forces in the Soviet Union. However, it was also a response to the rapid development

⁴² Commander-in-Chief's journal, 13 April 1935, 45.

⁴³ Report on National Defence Activities 1934–1939, 9 March 1939, RA, ERA.2553.1.12, 34.

⁴⁴ Commander-in-Chief's journal, 27 May 1935, 54.

of military technology in the world and the reduction of military spending over the previous decade in Estonia. The issue was indirectly on the table of the State Defence Council as early as 12 June 1933, when the Chief of General Staff Tõrvand made a presentation on possible scenarios regarding a hypothetical attack by Soviet forces.⁴⁵ His report was quite pessimistic, pointing out the fast progress of Soviet moto-mechanised forces and the Estonian inability to stop their advance during the initial phase of the war. Potentially, Tõrvand also held the desire to illustrate to the State Defence Council that a decision it had taken at a previous meeting⁴⁶ to reduce the size of the wartime defence forces from 88,000 to 70,000 would have a direct negative impact on the implementation of the border defence and mobilisation plans. Nevertheless, it was imperative to start the modernisation of the defence forces immediately. At the State Defence Council's meeting in June, the topics that became the key issues of the later modernisation plan were touched upon for the first time: air defence, anti-tank weapons and armour. After the difficult years of the economic crisis, the report could have served as a wake-up call to start addressing defence issues more carefully and more precisely. Instead of the desired outcome, however, Tõrvand's report later provided an opportunity for his opponents, Laidoner and Reek, to accuse him of spreading defeatist thinking and pessimism amongst the officers.⁴⁷

On 16 April 1934, for the first time since the self-coup d'état the month before, modernisation questions were discussed at the meeting of the State Defence Council. The only topic on the agenda of this meeting was establishing the principles for the future development of armaments, technical equipment and organisation of the defence forces.⁴⁸ The fact that this happened so quickly after the coup shows that the problem was acute. The fact that it took two subsequent

⁴⁵ *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid*, 155–172.

⁴⁶ The decision to reduce the EDF's wartime strength from 88,000 to 70,000 reservists was made at the State Defence Council meeting on 11 April 1933, RA, ERA.988.1.1, 9–13.

⁴⁷ Report on National Defence Activities 1934–1939, 2–4.

⁴⁸ State Defence Council Minutes No. 13, 16 April 1934, RA, ERA.988.1.1, 27–28.

meetings to agree to these principles demonstrates the complexity of the issue. In the opening statement of the first meeting, Laidoner addressed the need to identify the extent of the resources that the government would be able to allocate for defence in the yearly budgets. In his view, that was the only way to initiate five- to ten-year force development planning.⁴⁹ There appears to have been a common understanding that only ten years of peace might be possible,⁵⁰ and Laidoner was determined to utilise this potential window for military modernisation. The main rapporteur was Chief of the General Staff Major General Reek. Laidoner and Reek approached force modernisation as a long-term effort, and it was divided into multiple stages.⁵¹ The intent was to purchase samples of new weapons systems and to ensure the ability to start training personnel in a modern way. The second stage aimed to provide the new equipment and weapons systems to the border protection units. The third stage consisted of the plan to modernise all the remaining forces. Of course, it is impossible to make clear distinctions between these stages in following practical steps, but procurement of sample weapons had started in 1935, and the preparatory phase for stage II began in 1936.⁵²

The six main areas of development Reek identified in his presentation were:

1. Creating the conditions needed to start training teams on the requirements of modern tactics
2. Replenishing and maintaining ammunition
3. Enhancing active and passive air defence
4. Equipping the border protection units to enable them to fight moto-mechanised forces

⁴⁹ *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid*, 244.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 244, 256, 265.

⁵¹ During the meeting, Reek explained the three-staged modernisation model, but Laidoner mentioned only two stages in the modernisation plan. See *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid*, 254–255.

⁵² Plans for the modernisation of financial planning and sales of 1937, RA, ERA.2553.1.11, 74–103. Somewhere in the middle of 1936, Laidoner tasked the Chief of the General Staff, Commander of Supply Administration, the Air Defence Commander and the Naval Commander to work out modernisation proposals in certain areas.

5. Strengthening air force
6. Modernising naval training.

The content of these development areas was not discussed during the meeting; therefore, it is impossible to build links between the developmental intent and active defence principles. At the same time, two guiding principles of modernisation were agreed on during these two meetings: improving the economic situation of officers and easing the budgetary situation of the Ministry of Defence by transferring part of the state defence-related obligations to other ministries.⁵³ The first principle was more related to the need to ensure the loyalty and support of the officer corps to the new powers after the coup d'état than to any modernisation process. The second principle, even though it eased the ministry's financial situation a little, did not have any significant effect.

At the end of the meeting, the State Defence Council tasked the General Staff to develop a plan to supplement and modernise the armament of the EDF.⁵⁴ Head of State Päts concluded the meeting with the words: "It's all for today. Next time we will meet when plans are ready."⁵⁵ The next meeting of the State Defence Council took place ten months later, on 16 February 1935. Of the modernisation issues, only the new wartime organisation, principles of the mobilisation and rear area organisation were discussed. The EDF modernisation plan was delivered to the State Defence Council almost four years later, in January 1938. The question arises of why it took so long to prepare the plan. There may be several answers, all possibly correct.

First, it was certainly a question of priorities. In 1939, summarising the results of his five years as commander-in-chief in a report to

⁵³ *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid*, 139. Similar to the name change of the Estonian Armed Forces, which were called the Estonian Defence Forces from 1929 to 1936, the ministry responsible for coordinating the government's national defence policy was called the Ministry of War from 1918 to 1929, the Ministry of Defence from 1929 to 1936, and again the Ministry of War from 1937 (Editor's note).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 271.

the President of the Republic,⁵⁶ Laidoner pointed out that he had six main tasks:

1. Elimination of political struggle inside the armed forces;
2. Transforming the mindsets and attitudes of the military leadership, especially in assessing the capabilities of their own and enemy forces;
3. Creating career opportunities for younger personnel;
4. Bringing the military out of a material depression;⁵⁷
5. Elimination of deficiencies in the areas of military command, mobilisation preparations and military organisation;
6. Modernisation of national defence legislation.⁵⁸

Modernisation-related tasks are down in fourth and fifth place on the list, indicating clearly that these issues were not the main concern of the commander-in-chief and his chief of staff. Additionally, from his remarks on the General Staff's working plan of 1935,⁵⁹ we can see that he considered even the modernisation of legislation a more acute question. He listed eight different legal acts and norms in his remarks, stating that issues with them should be resolved in 1935. From the plan itself, we can find just one sentence about the capabilities discussed during the State Defence Council meeting in April 1934: procurement of samples of anti-tank guns. Based on follow-up General Staff working plans, we find that Laidoner was more focused on finding more effective ways to use existing capabilities rather than experimenting with the creation of new ones, especially when there was not a near-term military threat facing Estonia.

⁵⁶ Report on National Defence Activities 1934–1939, RA, ERA.2553.1.12. The report was mainly drawn up by Reek, the chief of General Staff, and was signed by him and the commander-in-chief.

⁵⁷ In the report on national defence activities, the term "material depression" was used to describe a situation characterised by continuous budget cuts in national defence, forcing military personnel to rely on reserve resources. This condition triggered numerous problems in national defence, beginning with a decline in training quality. Most critically, the complete lack of prospects for acquiring modern weaponry and equipment not only hindered operational effectiveness but also severely damaged morale and motivation among military cadres (Editor's note) – see Report on National Defence Activities, 3.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2–4.

⁵⁹ Work plan of the Defence Forces Staff for the year 1935, 25 January 1935, RA, ERA.495.12.418, 6.

Secondly, there was a pall of uncertainty about the priorities and some confusion in finding suitable technical solutions inside the High Command and General Staff. At the State Defence Council meeting on 16 April 1934, Laidoner declared that of the three armed services, the most critical situation was in the army. In his opinion, the air defence situation was the best, and even the navy was in a more favourable situation than the army. It was also clearly stated that the main threat to Estonia would likely come from the land and air.⁶⁰ In January 1938, he assessed the air defence situation as more critical, noting that only twelve reconnaissance aircraft had combat value, and all the other remaining fighters and bombers were already obsolete.⁶¹ This does not mean that his initial assessment was wrong. Rather, it shows that his assessment in 1934 was no longer valid and that his honest appraisal in 1938 reflected the rapid development of military aviation. Unfortunately, the sound Estonian Air Defence of 1934 had been overtaken by technological developments by 1938 and was lagging behind other European air forces.

Additional confusion in finding proper technical solutions may be illustrated by the case of anti-tank guns. Back in 1933, at the State Defence Council meeting, Tõrvand had declared that every infantry battalion must have an element of 47 mm anti-tank guns.⁶² In April 1934, the State Defence Council even had a discussion regarding the possibility of producing the 47 mm anti-tank guns in Estonia.⁶³ In 1935, Laidoner appointed a special working group headed by Reek to figure out which anti-tank gun would be the best for the EDF. After visiting various factories from June to August 1935, Reek's commission proposed the Böhler 47 mm guns, and four samples were bought.⁶⁴ Agreeing with Reek's conclusions, Laidoner still made a written remark on the report: "Most probably, we need to stay with the Rheinmetall

⁶⁰ *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid*, 255.

⁶¹ Commander-in-Chief to Head of State, 14 December 1937, RA, ERA.495.12.85, 71.

⁶² *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid*, 173.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁶⁴ Toe Nõmm, "Eesti tankitõrje 1940. aastani", *Laidoneri Muuseumi Aastaraamat 2003*, 3, (2004): 112.

37-mm guns.”⁶⁵ In November 1936, in his proposal, Reek once again stressed the need to procure thirty-six Böhler 47 mm anti-tank guns. He argued that 37 mm guns were too weak and that the 47 mm guns were better suited to the needs of the modern battlefield.⁶⁶ There seems to have also been a conflict of opinion between the head of the Technical Department of the Supply Administration, Lieutenant Colonel Karl Tiitso, who was probably behind Reek's report, as all of its annexes bore his signature alongside that of the commander of the Supply Administration, Major General Rudolf Reimann. Reimann, in his written remarks to the commander-in-chief at the beginning of December 1936, agreed that the Rheinmetall 37 mm anti-tank guns were suitable for the EDF. Based on his assessment, Laidoner decided to procure a new set of samples, together with ammunition and vehicles, of the Rheinmetall 37 mm anti-tank guns.⁶⁷ However, this is not the end of the story. In February 1938, Laidoner once again sought to find a final solution to the question posed by the commission headed by Major General Herbert Brede that had been tasked to analyse how effective these guns could be against armoured vehicles with a mass of up to eighteen tonnes.⁶⁸ On 15 March 1938, Laidoner forwarded the results of this work to the Ministry of War with a comment that, from his perspective, there were no obstacles to starting the procurement of the 40 Rheinmetall 37-mm L/50 anti-tank guns.⁶⁹ It took three years to agree on the type of anti-tank guns to procure. Finally, Laidoner's arguments about the lower cost and better manoeuvrability of the 37-mm guns decided the outcome of the debate.

Thirdly, there was clearly a question regarding the cost and funding of the modernisation effort. In 1934, Laidoner initially estimated that the overall cost of the full modernisation would be

⁶⁵ Commander-in-Chief's journal, 27 May 1935, 54.

⁶⁶ Chief of Staff of the Estonian Defence Forces to Commander-in-Chief, 2 November 1936, ERA.2553.1.11, 75.

⁶⁷ Commander-in-Chief's journal, 9 December 1936, 140.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 5 February 1938, 175–176.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 15 March 1938, 180.

approximately 72 million Estonian kroons.⁷⁰ In his letter to the president on 12 January 1937, he estimated the full costs of modernisation at 140 million kroons.⁷¹ A year later, in January 1938, presenting the modernisation plan to the State Defence Council, he declared that the overall cost of modernisation would be 160 million kroons.⁷²

At the same time, Ministry of Defence expenditures were almost 20% of the state budget.⁷³ In 1933–34, the EDF's permanent expenses to maintain existing force levels were approximately 12–12.5 million kroons, of which almost half were personnel costs.⁷⁴ Therefore, as the political guidance was to not dismiss officers and non-commissioned officers from the service, there were no good solutions to find additional funds within the framework of the existing budget. Even though it was decided at the State Defence Council in April 1934 that, in the coming years, the EDF would have 14–14.5 million kroons in its annual budget, this was sufficient only for the first stage of the modernisation. The yearly budget consists of only 2–2.5 million kroons in foreign exchange. This last fact set very clear limits on further planning, since most of the new armaments had to be procured from abroad, which required foreign currency. A quick response to the civil war in Spain helped Estonia sell some outdated weaponry and acquire additional funds for modernisation, but it was not enough to cover the whole second stage.⁷⁵ Therefore, the question of additional funding needs was brought to the president several times. The first requests were made by the commander-in-chief in July, and the second in October

⁷⁰ *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid*, 256, 260.

⁷¹ Commander-in-Chief to the Head of State, 12 January 1937, RA, ERA.2553.1.11, 105.

⁷² *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid*, 339.

⁷³ For example, in 2024 Estonian Ministry of Defence expenditures were just 6,29% from the state's overall budget. See *State Budget Act of 2024*, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/119122023019>, 5 April 2025.

⁷⁴ *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid*, 496–509.

⁷⁵ In 1936–37, 11.3 million kroons were obtained from the weapons sales, with an additional 5 million kroons in 1938–39.

1936.⁷⁶ Laidoner also addressed the issue in January 1937 and took it up with the State Defence Council in January 1938.⁷⁷ In his letter to the head of state on 12 January 1937,⁷⁸ he introduced the modernisation plan and mentioned that the overall funding needs of the second phase of modernisation were estimated as 35 million kroons.⁷⁹ The State Defence Modernisation Plan, presented to the State Defence Council in January 1938, asked for 28 million kroons – in addition to the 11.3 million kroons that had been obtained from the sale of old weapons to Spain – to execute the second phase of modernisation within the next five to six years.⁸⁰ It is obvious that the commander-in-chief was ready to start executing the second stage of modernisation in 1936, but difficulties in finding political consensus on funding issues delayed the process by almost two years.

Based on General Staff working plans from 1934 until 1938,⁸¹ we can identify four clear lines of operations related to the modernisation issue:

1. EDF's organisation and wartime force structure
2. EDF's mobilisation system and plans
3. Rehearsal and development of border protection operational plans
4. Preparing the procurement plans to establish new capabilities or to enhance existing ones.

The main timeline with the key events is shown in Annexe 1. It seems that most of the preparatory work to draw the modernisation plan was done in 1935–36. In 1935, the anti-tank commission visited various arms plants abroad. Modernisation, for Laidoner, was not only the procurement of new weapons systems. It was also about the

⁷⁶ *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid*, 71. In July 1936, Laidoner asked the head of state for 8.8 million kroons within the next four years. But at the State Defence Council meeting on 22 October 1936, 15–17 million kroons had already been sought for the modernisation effort.

⁷⁷ *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid*, 328–349.

⁷⁸ General Laidoner to Head of State Päts, RA, ERA.2553.1.11, 103–108.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁸⁰ National Defence Modernisation Plan, RA, ERA.495.12.85, 57.

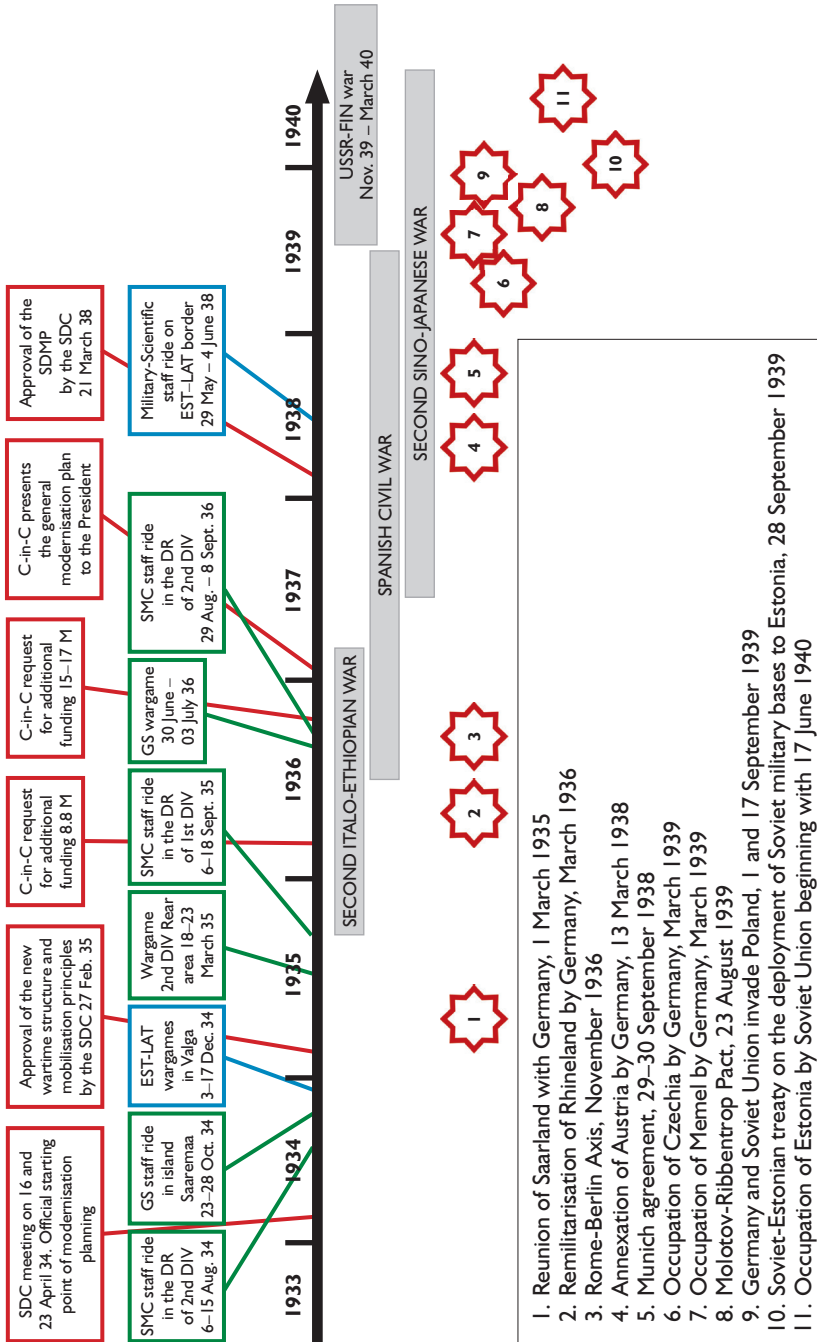
⁸¹ Report on the working plan of the Staff of the Defence Forces for the year 1936, 10 February 1937, RA, ERA.495.12.444, 1–13; Report on the working plan of the Staff of the Defence Forces for the year 1937, 13 April 1938, RA, ERA.495.12.464, 1–68.

mentalities of the officer corps. A series of high-level staff rides and war games were held in 1934–38 to address the “defeatist mentality” of commanders and to study the operational environment⁸² (see Annexe 1). In addition to the commander-in-chief and the chief of the General Staff, every such staff ride included the General Staff’s key department chiefs (such as the chief of the Operational Department), as well as the respective divisional and regimental staff officers. Laidoner’s own thoughts and conclusions from these rides are documented in the commander-in-chief’s journal. It gives us an idea of what he wanted remembered from the events, but it provides little explanation of the kind of “defeatist mentalities” he encountered and how he countered them. It seems some outcomes from the staff rides were considered in the project of the modernisation plan.

Alongside the staff rides, work continued on the new wartime structure and mobilisation plan. Work on the new wartime structure was initiated by the State Defence Council decision of 11 April 1933, reducing the number of soldiers and non-commissioned officers in the wartime structure from 88,400 to 70,000. The new wartime organisational structure, the new mobilisation plan and the rear area organisational plans were reviewed and approved at the State Defence Council on 27 February 1935.⁸³ With the approval of the new wartime structure, the plan to reduce the size of the defence forces was abandoned. The number of soldiers and non-commissioned officers in the approved structure was 81,681 instead of the 70,000 that had been requested. Of course, the new structure was slightly different from the older one, but the reduction was mainly done in a manner that Laidoner himself had criticised back in January 1933. It seems that in the process of working out the new organisational structure, no attention was given to maintaining or increasing the fighting power of units while reducing the number of personnel in them. Interestingly, taking into account the number of machine guns and indirect fire systems, compared with other European and

⁸² Report on the activities of the National Defence in 1934–1939, RA, ERA.2553.1.12, 36–37.

⁸³ *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid*, 143.



Annexe 1: Historical-political context in which the State Defence Modernisation Plan was developed.

Soviet forces, Estonian firepower was weaker.⁸⁴ The previous wartime structure had fifteen infantry regiments and eighteen artillery battalions.⁸⁵ The new 1935 structure envisioned eleven infantry regiments, nine single infantry battalions and seventeen artillery battalions.⁸⁶ Laidoner declared that the new structure was more flexible than the previous one and therefore was more suitable for situations in which the EDF does not have enough troops to cover the whole border area properly. He also pointed to the importance of flexibility in active defence. The work on the new structure was not linked with the technical modernisation processes. It did not address the development of new warfighting capabilities, such as anti-tank companies. It seems that Laidoner and Reek had already accepted that it would not be possible to do something within the next three to four years that would affect the EDF's wartime structure.⁸⁷

Interestingly, regardless of the position he had taken in the previous year, Laidoner did not fundamentally change the organisation of the defence forces but was satisfied with a uniform and moderate reduction in the personnel of the units.

The State Defence Modernisation Plan of 1938 from the active defence perspective

The State Defence Modernisation Plan (see Table 3) represented only a part of the broader modernisation effort, designed to cover the development areas that were not resourced through the Ministry of Defence's ordinary yearly budgets. Therefore, to gain a comprehensive overview of the overall modernisation initiative, the State

⁸⁴ "Lisa 9: Eesti ja teiste riikide jalaväerügementide sõjaaegne isikkoosseis ja relvastus (1939)" (Appendix 9: Wartime personnel and armament of Estonian and other countries' infantry regiments), *Sõja ja rahu vahel. I. Eesti julgeolekupoliitika 1940. aastani*, peatoimetaja Enn Tarvel (Tallinn: S-Keskus, 2004), 450.

⁸⁵ State Defence Council Minutes No. 1 (7), 12 June 1933, RA, ERA.988.1.2, 2–9.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 16 February 1935, RA, ERA.988.1.3, 6–17.

⁸⁷ *Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid*, 274.

Defence Modernisation Plan must be analysed together with the overall fund allocations for the second stage of modernisation (see Table 2) and the plan for utilising the proceeds from the arms sales to Spain (see Table 4). It is clear that by the time it reached the State Defence Council, the State Defence Modernisation Plan of 1938 was already a compromise between the needs of the different branches of the EDF and the financial capabilities of the state.

Before going further to analyse the content of the modernisation plan, two points should be noted. First, from the beginning, Laidoner and the General Staff took a modern approach, buying not just weapons but systems – weapons together with the necessary ammunition, spare parts, and support and maintenance tools. Second, the State Defence Modernisation Plan was just a part of the overall defence modernisation effort.

The air defence programme was the largest in the State Defence Modernisation Plan as well as in the overall plan, from the funding perspective. Most of the additional funding was allocated to air defence. It demonstrates how important Laidoner thought the air force would be in the future war. The overall need for aircraft was estimated at 90, comprising 42 fighters, 24 reconnaissance planes, 18 bombers and six torpedo bombers. The specified plan included the procurement of bombers and reconnaissance aircraft, but not fighters.⁸⁸ Buying four new bombers most probably played a role in keeping updated knowledge in this field. At the same time, the plan foresaw the largest technological upgrade of reconnaissance aircraft capability. Taking into account the active defence concept, this was logical and complementary. The proper use of these aerial assets could ensure the frontline divisions had an adequate situational picture.

The air defence path of the programme consisted only of model systems necessary to build up possibilities for modern training (see Table 3). One battery of 75 mm air defence guns hardly covered the needs to protect the critical infrastructure in Tallinn against an air threat. As the

⁸⁸ In addition to the State Defence Modernisation Plan, 2.4 million kroons received from arms sales to Spain were allocated for air defence needs. The plan was to procure 10 new fighters and four additional bombers.

plan was for both the 1st and 2nd Divisions to receive one 37 mm anti-aircraft gun battery, there was the possibility to start not only technical but also combined arms training. Technical training on these guns had started in 1936, when the first five sample weapons had been procured.⁸⁹

In the overall plan, three different programmes addressed mainly the army's needs (anti-tank, ammunition and motorisation programmes), totalling 13.5 million kroons. The State Defence Modernisation Plan allocated just 7 million kroons for the army.⁹⁰ However, 12.5 million kroons were allocated for the army in the overall plan for the second stage of modernisation (see Table 2). The programme included procuring one light tank company, motorising two anti-tank companies and procuring two long-range artillery batteries. The plan indicates that the initial intent was to have at least two tank companies, one for the 1st Division and another for the 2nd Division, as manoeuvre units. The question then became what type of tanks to procure. Reek argued that the most operationally suitable tank for the Estonian Defence Forces would be a medium tank armed with a 47 mm gun.⁹¹ A smaller and weaker gun, in his opinion, would limit the tasks tanks could fulfil on the battlefield, especially if used as a mobile anti-tank weapon. Interestingly, in the initial proposal, Laidoner mentioned just one platoon of tanks for training purposes, even though Reek's advice was to have at least two companies. In the State Defence Modernisation Plan, Laidoner seemed to accept the role of tanks on the modern battlefield, stating that it was possible to maintain certain activity without tanks, but not possible to maintain the overall required activity level.⁹² The anti-tank weapons programme involved the motorisation of two anti-tank companies. The proposal to procure 40 37-mm anti-tank guns was already being

⁸⁹ Toe Nõmm, "Eesti sõjaväe varustus, sõjatööstus ja relvastuspoliitika", *Sõja ja rahu vahel. I. Eesti julgeolekupoliitika 1940. aastani*, peatoimetaja Enn Tarvel (Tallinn: S-Keskus, 2004), 237–238.

⁹⁰ Of course, there were some projects executed or prepared for execution using the weapons sales money. Almost six million kroons were allocated to procuring anti-tank weapons, artillery and small arms ammunition, and submachine and machine guns.

⁹¹ Plan of procurement of the anti-tank weapons, RA, ERA.2553.1.11, 74–75.

⁹² The National Defence Modernisation Plan, RA, ERA.495.12.85, 13.



The Polish tankette TKS and its crew during their visit to Southern Estonia, August 1934. Source: Estonian War Museum, KLM ET 9184:53 F

processed by the Ministry of Defence. Therefore, it was not part of this programme. Since the overall need for anti-tank guns was estimated at ninety systems, we may ask why the capability cap was not met, especially if the estimated cost of the tank company was 2.4 million kroons and the price of the 40 anti-tank guns was 1.037 million kroons.⁹³ Laidoner explained his decision involved the need for balanced development of all branches of arms, as well as the need to build up expertise in armoured warfare.⁹⁴

Unlike in the draft proposal of 1937,⁹⁵ the issue of 20-mm anti-tank rifles was not addressed at all. With the decision that anti-tank guns would be included in the force structure as brigade-level weapons,⁹⁶ the infantry battalion and regiment levels were left without any anti-tank

⁹³ Toe Nõmm, "Eesti suurtükivägi 1918–1940. Relvastus ja ülesehitus" (Estonian Artillery in 1918–1940: Weapons and Structure), *Laidoneri Muuseumi Aastaraamat 2004*, 4 (2005): 137–138.

⁹⁴ Commander-in-Chief to Head of State, 14 December 1937, RA, ERA.495.12.85, 65.

⁹⁵ The plan for the procurement of anti-tank weapons, 2 November 1936, RA, ERA.2553.1.11, 78.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

tools. Additionally, taking into account that there were only four 20-mm anti-tank rifles procured as samples, there was no possibility of building up technical or tactical knowledge in regiments. Here, the decision to favour domestic production over the pace of armament had to be paid for.⁹⁷ Two motorised anti-tank companies certainly gave the division commander some flexibility and allowed him to react to the enemy's fast-manoeuving armoured units. At the same time, the battalions and regiments didn't have any anti-tank capabilities, which made them an easy target for the enemy in manoeuvre warfare.

As in most other small European armies, upgrading the artillery was a challenge for Estonia. In the second half of the 1930s, some work was done to modify artillery ammunition to increase the range of fire of artillery pieces.⁹⁸ An additional 1–2 kilometres in shooting range was a remarkable achievement in terms of static defence, but still limited division- and brigade-level commanders' abilities to execute an active defence or support manoeuvring of the troops. Having two batteries of long-range artillery as a commander-in-chief reserve is certainly congruent with the principles of active defence. It addressed two critical weaknesses of the EDF's artillery: inadequacy in the range of fire and poor manoeuvrability (pre-First World War equipment). This part of the army programme was also remarkable because it planned to purchase these batteries as complete units. Not only weapons systems, ammunition, maintenance parts and transportation, but also questions of organic air defence and anti-tank protection were considered. Nevertheless, the overall artillery question remained unsolved until July 1939, when a contract was signed with Rheinmetall to procure 32 modern 105-mm howitzers.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Nõmm, "Eesti sõjaväe varustus, sõjatööstus ja relvastuspoliitika", 237–238. The decision was made in 1936 to start producing 20-mm anti-tank rifles in the Estonian arms plant Arsenal, based on the Solothurn rifle. The first prototype was ready in spring 1938, and the first ten rifles were delivered in early 1940.

⁹⁸ Nõmm, "Eesti suurtükivägi 1918–1940", 203–204.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

From the communications programme, the motorisation of the two divisions' signal companies increased the chances of their staff surviving by enabling faster relocation. However, brigade and regimental staff remained reliant upon horse-drawn carriages for their radio equipment.

From planned developments in the State Defence Modernisation Plan, the procurement of new reconnaissance and bomber aircrafts, one tank company, one long-range artillery battery and the motorisation of two anti-tank companies are positively related to the principles of active defence, as they improve the divisional-level situational awareness, increase long-range firing capabilities and provide new mobile units to react to the uncertainties. Also, the procurement of new radios and the motorisation of divisional signal companies had the potential to increase situational awareness and limit interruptions to command and control. At the same time, the unsolved fire support questions at the regimental and lower levels limited the use of these principles at these levels.

Table 2. Overall fund allocation of the State Defence Modernisation Plan, presented to the head of state Konstantin Päts in January 1937¹⁰⁰

Field of modernisation	Sources allocated for development (million kroons)	% of overall funds
Air force and air defence	11.0	31.4
Anti-tank weapons and ammunition. Platoon-sized unit of modern tanks	10.0	28.5
Infantry small arms and artillery ammunition (procurement and maintenance)	2.5	7.1
Navy and coastal defence	2.0	5.7
Chemical protection	1.0	2.9
Motorisation programme. Vehicles, and fuel and lubricant reserves	1.0	2.9
Development of military industry	1.5	4.3
Development of infrastructure	6.0	17.2
Total:	35	100

¹⁰⁰ Commander-in-Chief to Head of State, 12 January 1937, RA, ERA.2553.1.11, 107.

Table 3. Final allocation of funds in the State Defence Modernisation Plan, presented to the State Defence Council in January 1938¹⁰¹

Field of modernisation	Requested funds in million kroons	% of overall funds
<i>Army modernisation</i>	7.0	25
• Light tank company (12 tanks)	2.326	
• Motorisation of two anti-tank companies	0.674	
• 150- or 155-mm long-range artillery batteries (2), with motorisation and anti-aircraft/anti-tank capabilities	4	
<i>Air force and air defence modernisation</i>	11.5	41.07
• Bomber aircraft (4) and		
• Reconnaissance aircraft (16)	6.0	
• 75-mm air defence battery (1); 37-mm anti-aircraft batteries (2); searchlight battery (1); 20-mm anti- aircraft guns (4); 13-mm anti-aircraft machine guns (4)	4.0	
• Tallinn airfield and maintenance facilities	1.5	
<i>Navy and coastal defence modernisation</i>	4.0	14.29
• Fast torpedo boats (3)	2.5	
• 305-mm armoured, turret-mounted, coastal defence artillery battery (1)	1.5	
<i>Communication equipment</i>	0.75	2.68
• Motorisation of signal companies of the 1st and 2nd Divisions	0.126	
• Procurement of R and B-2 type radios	0.554	
• Field wired communication	0.070	
<i>Border defence fortification</i>	1.25	4.46
• Narva area	0.75	
• Petseri area	0.50	
<i>Chemical protection</i>	0.5	1.79
<i>Fuel and lubricant reserves</i>	0.5	1.79
<i>Infrastructure development</i>	2.5	8.93
• Barracks for the battalion-sized covering force in Irboska	1.5	
• Hangars for aircraft, new equipment, and vehicles	1.0	
Total	28.0	100

¹⁰¹ National Defence Modernisation Plan, RA, ERA.495.12.85, 45–49.

Table 4. Allocation of funds acquired from Spanish arms sales, presented to the State Defence Council in January 1938¹⁰²

Field of modernisation	Sources allocated (million kroons)	Remarks
Air defence:		
• procurement of 75-mm air defence guns (8)	1.2	Ordered in November 1938
• 37 mm anti-aircraft guns (4)	0.5	Ordered in June 1937
Artillery ammunition: 84-mm and 114-mm	1.39	Partially used
Rifle ammunition (5 million cartridges)	0.675	Ordered in 1937
37-mm anti-tank guns (40)	1.5	Ordered in March 1938
Infantry small arms (submachine guns, machine guns from Finland, pistols FN from Belgium)	2.118	Ordered in 1937
Signal equipment	0.3	
Pioneer equipment	0.01	
Motorisation programme	0.127	
Air force equipment	2.4	
Unforeseen needs	0.149	
War museum	0.6	
Sanatorium for the treatment of tuberculosis	0.25	
Total:	11.3	

Conclusions

The overall process leading to the modernisation of the EDF was systematic. In a stable and peaceful environment, such a three-staged approach was definitely reasonable. The first stage aimed to acquire sample weapons and to start training teams with modern weapons. The second stage sought to equip the covering force, and the third stage intended to arm the remaining force with modern weapons. The modernisation planning process was initiated in April 1934, with

¹⁰² Riigikaitse Nõukogu protokollid, 345–347.

the implementation of the first stage beginning in 1935 through the acquisition of the first samples of anti-tank weapons. The planning for the second stage was most probably initiated in 1936, and the plan for the second stage of modernisation (1938–44) was presented to the State Defence Council in January 1938. It should be mentioned that a part of the second stage's procurements was already prepared in 1936–37. The overall cost of the second stage of modernisation was 35 million kroons.

However, this long-term approach to modernisation in a rapidly developing political and technological environment presented both risks and opportunities. From the technological side, it was possible to discover at the beginning of the second or third stage that the samples of modern weapons purchased at the beginning of the process had already become obsolete. On the political side, Laidoner and his staff vigorously exploited opportunities offered by the Spanish civil war to dispose of obsolete weapons and used the acquired money to accelerate the modernisation process of the defence forces. At the same time, they failed, mainly due to the economic constraints of the state, to secure additional financial support for modernisation. Therefore, 1936–38 can be seen as a period of lost opportunities. Modernisation itself was driven mainly by financial considerations, not threats or capabilities. Most critical decisions were made based on the availability of funds.

There are small, recognisable links between Laidoner's rhetoric regarding active defence and his expectations for subordinate commanders' decision-making capabilities. Despite advocating for active defence principles and demanding aggression, initiative and determination all the way down the chain of command, Laidoner did not increase the combat effectiveness and tactical flexibility of the core of his organisation: the army's battalions and regiments. It seems that in his eyes, the strength of a battalion or a regiment could be judged by the number of bayonets rather than by their fire-power. At the same time, the planned procurements addressed the active defence possibilities quite well at the brigade and divisional levels.

Given Laidoner's belief that the key players in a future war would be the infantry and the artillery, the modernisation plan's lack of provisions for upgrading the existing artillery was notable. However, the procurement of two heavy artillery batteries represented a significant attempt to enhance artillery capabilities. The quality of these new weapon systems was carefully prioritised – the selected 37-mm anti-tank guns, 150-mm howitzers, 37-mm anti-aircraft guns and 105-mm howitzers were the best weapon systems available at the time.

The positive aspects of the modernisation plan centred on strategic force development. Rather than simply purchasing individual weapons, the approach prioritised building comprehensive capabilities by acquiring the proper weapons along with supporting equipment. The organised procurement of the long-range artillery batteries exemplifies this strategy – planners addressed not only ammunition and maintenance requirements, but also battlefield survivability by incorporating anti-tank and anti-aircraft capabilities into the battery. Procuring weapon systems in a way that enabled the immediate start of unit-level training accelerated the acquisition of tactical knowledge. Additionally, the plan recognised that in certain technical fields, the EDF had limited or no knowledge. This led to a phased, gradual approach to introducing new capabilities, allowing for systematic knowledge building over time.

In conclusion, the State Defence Modernisation Plan was well-conceived and logically structured but unfortunately came too late to significantly influence military operations or political decisions following the events of 1 September 1939.

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