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Examining the Indefensible: Guarding Estonia in the Interwar Period and the Future

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Estonia failed to take adequate lessons from World War I to defend itself from the looming threat of the Soviet Union, and instead spent its limited resources on acquisitions of marginal utility and failed to adequately reform its military. Its international position was further weakened by an inability to forge appropriate alliances due to infighting among the countries of Northern Europe. This paper will shed light on the complex interplay of geopolitical factors, internal dynamics and the strategic choices made by Estonia during that critical time and explore how these insights can inform current defence strategies. During the interwar period, Estonia sought to modernise and organise its military forces, facing constraints in arming its soldiers with a hotchpotch of equipment comprising leftover Russian and German arms, lend-lease British equipment, and other sundries. Despite these challenges, Estonia made efforts to establish a defensive line in the northeast of the country and pursued alliances with Finland, Latvia, Poland and other states. It made preparations for a southeastern defensive network along the Võru axis, but ground had not yet been broken by the time of the Soviet ultimatum. Both efforts ultimately failed, and Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940. Lessons from this failure can be applied to the current strategic situation in the Baltic region, given the continuing importance of NATO and the renewed military significance of deliberate defensive positions backed up by long-range precision firepower and anti-access/area-denial weapons.

"A ground defence of the [Estonian] borders would be impossible", author Ralph Peters, a retired US Army lieutenant colonel, told the Hoover Institution in 2015, echoing the blunt structural realist

tradition of Kenneth Waltz and John Mearsheimer, "a defence in depth impractical without geographical depth".[1] Peters' assessment, while harsh, is nevertheless accurate and not without historical precedent.

Estonia's small population lies in a flat headland jutting into the Baltic Sea, protected on its eastern flank by the relatively narrow Narva River and Lake Peipus. "Estonia's geographic situation makes her the most exposed of the three Baltic states to a sudden attack by Soviet Russia", wrote Frederik Coleman, American envoy to the Baltic states in 1929. "Her exposed position has naturally played an important part in shaping her foreign policy."[2]

The tactical reality of this immutable geopolitical situation demands clever strategic thinking to provide a practical state defence and turn what could be a tempting target for a marauding bear into a wasps' nest of stinging complications. This was the reality the newly independent Estonian Republic faced in 1918 as it emerged from its fiery birth in the First World War and its own War of Independence. This is also the reality faced by the present Estonian Republic in 2023, as it faces a similar foe across the Narva River. The Estonian Republic of the past failed to defend itself against the looming Soviet threat due to a failure to secure effective military allies abroad, despite attempts to form a Baltic Entente or secure a defence treaty with the United Kingdom; a weak economy preventing substantive national defence; and an ineffective domestic defence policy throughout the 1920s and 30s. Such harsh lessons have been thoroughly learned since the Cold War by the Baltic states in general and Estonia in particular. Upon regaining independence, gaining accession to the collective security provided by NATO was of the utmost importance. It remains paramount to examine these historical lessons from the interwar period to continue to secure the strategic situation of Estonia now and into the future.

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[1] Ralph Peters, "Defending the Indefensible: NATO's Baltic States", Hoover Institution, 12 May 2015, https://www.hoover.org/research/defending-indefensible-natos-baltic-states, 3 December 2024.

[2] Frederik Coleman, Report to the Secretary of State, 22 April 1929, U.S. National Archives, College Park, MD, Record Group 59: Archives of the Department of State, RG 59.760n.61/32.

Historically, the defence of Estonia has been fraught with the challenges of defending against a numerically superior foe with the strategic initiative to strike anywhere along the multiple axes of advance towards Tallinn. In the few cases where the defender was able to hold Estonia even temporarily, it was due either to a disunited invader or to significant assistance from foreign allies – or both. The former factor is out of the defending state's control, but the latter is of the utmost political importance. This was the situation in 1558–60, where the Livonian Order was able to hold Reval [Tallinn] in the face of a Muscovite offensive and then launch a limited counterattack against Wesenberg [Rakvere] with assistance from Poland-Lithuania. The Order was further aided by the Russo-Crimean Wars distracting the tsardom and Ivan the Terrible's deteriorating mental state, which would lead to the start of the ruthless *oprichnina* in 1565.[3] The strain on the already teetering Livonian Order was too great, however, forcing its dissolution in 1561 and the final division of Estonia and Mainland Livonia between Sweden and Polish-Lithuania in 1582–83.[4]

Over 100 years later, Swedish king Charles XII brilliantly defeated a combined Russian-Saxon invasion of Estonian territories during the early phase of the Great Northern War. In 1700, he decisively routed a poorly disciplined Russian army besieging Narva. Prior to this, the Saxons had twice besieged Riga in Swedish Livonia. Following his victory at Narva, Charles invaded Polish-Lithuanian territories across Courland during 1701-1702, pursuing the Saxon forces there.[5] This victory proved to be short-lived, as the Russians captured Tallinn and annexed Estonia nearly unopposed in 1710, after the Swedish army was destroyed on the Ukrainian fields of Poltava, leading to two centuries of Russian domination.[6]

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[3] Isabel D. Madariaga, *Ivan the Terrible* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 129–131.

[4] Michael Roberts, *The Early Vasas: A History of Sweden, 1523–1611* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 264.

[5] Robert I. Frost, *The Northern Wars. War, State and Society in Northeastern Europe 1558–1721* (London: Longman, 2000), 229.

[6] Ibid., 286.

Russian rule over Estonia was first loosened by the 1918 German offensive and then shattered by the collapse of the tsarist regime in the Russian Revolution. The occupying German forces were then forced to hand over power and their dreams of a German-dominated Baltic Duchy in November 1918 by the terms of the Compiègne Armistice. Taking advantage of the perceived power vacuum, the newly formed Soviet Red Army immediately attacked Narva and swept westwards towards Tallinn along two avenues of advance, north and south of Lake Peipus. The Estonian resistance was aided by considerable assistance from the British Royal Navy and Finnish volunteers, and more inconsistent support from the Russian Whites and German *Balten Battalion*.[7] The 1920 Treaty of Tartu ended the war favourably for the Estonian Republic, but the treaty was as much the result of the Soviet desire for peace as of the Estonian force of arms.[8] The raging Russian Civil War meant that destroying the White threat was the Bolsheviks' priority, relegating the reconquest of the Baltic to the "For Later" folder. The Treaty of Tartu also carried important diplomatic cachet for the Soviets as it was their first internationally recognised treaty with another state. This gave Tallinn additional leverage at the table, but irritated their Entente supporters, who would have preferred that the Estonians keep fighting to distract the Bolsheviks.[9]

Estonia inherited a primarily agrarian economy from the Russian Empire, with agriculture and livestock generating around 60% of GDP in the early interwar period, along with a fairly respectable textile industry.[10] Although the population in 1920 only numbered

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[7] Volunteers also came from Denmark and Sweden, though in limited numbers – a couple of hundred from each country. See further: *Eesti Vabadussõja ajalugu. I., Vabadussõja eellugu. Punaväe sissetung ja Eesti vabastamine* (History of the Estonian War of Independence. Prelude to the War of Independence. Invasion of the Red Army and Liberation of Estonia), koostaja ja toimetaja Lauri Vahtre (Tallinn: Varrak, 2020), 408–419.

[8] Georg von Rauch, *The Baltic States: The Years of Independence: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, 1917–1940* (London: Hurst & Co, 1974), 73.

[9] Karsten Brüggemann, *Eesti Vabariigi loomine ning "ühtse ja jagamatu Venemaa" lõpp* (The Creation of the Republic of Estonia and the End of "United and Indivisible Russia") (Tallinn: Argo, 2023).

[10] Zenonas Norkus, "The economic output growth of Baltic countries in 1913–1938: a quantitative cross-country comparison", *Journal of Baltic Studies* 50, no 2 (2018): 1–21.

around 1.1 million,[11] economic reform and a rebalancing of the export market away from the Soviet Union and towards the UK and Germany allowed the economy to rebound to its prewar GDP levels by 1922 – the fastest recovery in Eastern Europe thanks to minimal devastation from the war and Russian gold received as war reparations in the 1920 Tartu Peace Treaty. By 1929, the per-capita GDP was $2182.4 (GK$ 1990), with a total GDP of approximately $2.44 billion.[12] This allowed the Estonian Republic to field an army of 13,000 soldiers divided into three divisions, with another 100,000 military-aged men who could be mobilised from the reserves – approximately a third of the total available manpower that Finland mustered during the Winter War.[13] Tallinn was as acutely aware as it is now of the disparity between its strength and that of its belligerent neighbour to the east, and so immediately began forging diplomatic relations with its neighbours and potential powerful allies.

Estonian diplomatic efforts in the interwar period were plagued by the country's perceived lack of legitimate standing due to its newly won independence, as well as the lack of diplomatic cohesion between Estonia and neighbouring states such as Finland and Latvia. The Soviet threat overshadowed the borders of the Baltic Sea and drove the involved nations into negotiations with each other for mutual security cooperation. The most ambitious plan involved a federation of the Scandinavian and Baltic states in a sort of 20th-century Kalmar Union. When this proved unfeasible, the plans were steadily diminished into a defensive alliance of the Baltic Sea nations, to a federation of Estonia and Finland, to only a defensive alliance between Estonia and Latvia.[14]

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[11] For context, the population of Philadelphia, PA, in 1920 was 1.8 million.

[12] Jaak Valge, "Uue majanduse lätteil. Eesti sisemajanduse kogutoodang aastatel 1923–1938", *Akadeemia* no 10 (2003): 2202–2228. Figures given are in Geary–Khamis 1990 international dollars. By 1938, Estonia had surpassed the Soviet Union in GDP per capita. After independence in 1991, it only took Estonia four years to surpass the Russian Federation in the same metric.

[13] Hellar Lill, "The People's Own Force", ICDS, 6 August 2018, https://icds.ee/en/the-peoples-own-force/, 12 December 2024.

[14] Edgar Anderson, "Finnish-Baltic Relations, 1918–1940: An Appraisal", *Scandinavian Studies* 54, no 1 (1982): 55.

Despite these grand plans, nationalistic concerns took primacy over compromise and cooperation among the three Baltic states and their neighbours. Independence is a heady brew, especially for nations whose ruling class had been made up of Baltic Germans and Russians for several centuries. This is illustrated by the 1927 address to the Assembly of the League of Nations by Latvian Foreign Minister Fēlikss Cielēns, where he announced the consideration of a "Locarno Pact of the East" with Finland, Estonia and Latvia joining in a security agreement guaranteed by the USSR, Germany, Britain and France.[15] Despite this being a major international project, Cielēns had not briefed none of his Baltic counterparts about any of this. The preceding speaker, Estonian Foreign Minister Friedrich Akel, had made no mention of it whatsoever in his speech and appeared surprised at the ensuing development, while the Lithuanian Foreign Minister, offended by his country being snubbed in the plan, was critical of Cielēns in his own remarks the following day.[16] With these inauspicious proceedings and Britain's outright rejection of the plan, the "Locarno of the East" was dead in the water. Another illustration of Baltic non-cooperation, bordering on political rivalry, in the League of Nations was their respective plays for the rotating non-permanent positions on the Council – the League's equivalent to the current United Nations Security Council – where they refused to support each other's candidacies with the myopic enthusiasm of crabs in a bucket.[17] This bickering was actively encouraged by Germany, Poland and the Soviet Union in order to weaken Baltic autonomy.[18]

Limited regional security efforts fared little better. Poland's Chief of State Józef Piłsudski and other leading Polish intellectuals had drawn up plans for an Eastern European security bloc – led by Poland,

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[15] A series of agreements in December 1925 whereby Germany, France, Belgium, Great Britain and Italy mutually provided for peace in Western Europe, most significantly guaranteeing the borders of Belgium, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

[16] Rita Putins Peters, "Problems of Baltic Diplomacy in the League of Nations", *Journal of Baltic Studies* 14, no 2 (1983): 140.

[17] Ibid., 141.

[18] Anderson, "Finnish-Baltic Relations", 58.

naturally – decades before the Great War. "Polish force and its importance in the various parts of Russia emboldens us to set as our goal the splitting of the empire into its constituent parts and the freeing of the subjugated countries," Piłsudski wrote in 1904. "Russia, stripped of its conquered lands, will be so weak as to pose no threat."[19] This plan was backed by the French, who saw the Poles as the potential keystone of a *cordon sanitaire* stretching across Eastern Europe to contain Bolshevik Russia. The foundation for this grand *Intermarium* coalition was proposed in a limited form to the Baltic states and Finland on 17 March 1922 in the Warsaw Accord. By this point, the Poles had been forced to water down the concept so much to appeal to the other potential signatories that the Warsaw Accord amounted to little more than an agreement to not support aggressors against any of the involved states. Lithuania was still simmering over the 1919 Polish annexation of Vilnius and the condescending attitude of Warsaw regarding the historical Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.[20] Polish revanchism also alarmed the Latvians, who suspected the Poles of eyeing the province of Latgale with similar intentions. The Finns, secure behind the Gulf of Finland and the vast forests of Karelia, refused to ratify even the lukewarm Warsaw Accord, concerned that it might be used against Germany.[21] The backlash in Helsinki was so intense that the Finnish Foreign Minister Rudolf Holsti, who was an advocate of close defence cooperation with the Baltic states and Poland, was forced to resign. Finland held a warm opinion of Germany due to their assistance in the Finnish War of Independence and Civil War, while the Estonians tended to see the Germans as arrogant oppressors due to the historically privileged position of the Baltic Germans. These diametrically opposed views of Berlin would go on to play a significant role in Finno-Estonian relations.[22]

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[19] Józef Piłsudski, *Pisma Zbiorowe*, vol 2 (Warsaw: Instytut Józefa Piłsudskiego, 1937), 249–253.

[20] Prit Buttar, *The Splintered Empires: The Eastern Front 1917–21* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2018), 420.

[21] Antonius Piip, "The Baltic States as a Regional Unity". *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 168 (1933): 174.

[22] Anderson, "Finnish-Baltic Relations", 53.

Thus, only the Estonians, far from the Polish Commonwealth's historical borders and keenly aware of the Soviet threat, showed any marked enthusiasm for the *Intermarium*. The Warsaw Accord was the high-water mark for potential Northern European security cooperation. One month later, in April 1922, none of the Baltic states joined Poland in protesting the Rapallo Treaty to normalise relations between Germany and the Soviet Union, instead using the opportunity to build trade relations with Berlin.[23] The fragmentation of these planned Eastern European security measures eventually led to the Estonians only being able to secure a defensive alliance with Latvia in 1923, in exchange for the Latvians relinquishing their claims on the island of Ruhnu in the Gulf of Riga.[24] The Lithuanians joined this agreement in 1934, forming the Baltic Entente, but it remained largely an alliance in name only.[25] Even after the rearmament of Germany in the mid-1930s, domestic pressure inside Latvia and Lithuania ensured that any consideration of Estonia upgrading the Baltic Entente into a full-fledged military cooperation pact remained a political fantasy.[26] The British and French saw no benefit in the Baltic and Scandinavian states forming an independent power bloc that could provide them security without needing Entente backing.

Estonia had very little success in seeking outside support from major military powers. The Scandinavian states – most notably Sweden, the largest economy in the region – embraced protectionist and isolationist policies that effectively left a vacuum in the Baltic Sea.[27] The French historical solicitude towards Poland did not extend

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[23] David Kirby, *The Baltic World 1772–1993: Europe's Northern Periphery in an Age of Change* (London: Routledge, 2014), 287.

[24] John Hiden and Patrick Salmon, *The Baltic Nations and Europe: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2014), 64.

[25] *The Baltic in International Relations Between the Two World Wars: Symposium Organized by the Centre for Baltic Studies*, November 11–13, 1986, University of Stockholm, Frescati, editors John Hiden and Aleksander Loit (Stockholm: Centre for Baltic Studies, 1988), 81.

[26] Eero Medijainen, "The 1934 Treaty of the Baltic Entente: Perspectives for Understanding", *Ajalooline Ajakiri*, no 1/2 (2012): 184.

[27] John H. Wuorinen, "The Efforts to Form a Union of Baltic States", *Current History (1916–1940)* 20, no 4 (1924): 613.

to a newly independent nation like Estonia, and British interest in the Baltic Sea was peripheral at best to their sprawling imperial domain. As Germany and the Soviet Union began to slowly climb out of the devastation wrought on their countries by the Great War, their geopolitical interests began to assert themselves as well, but there was no sense of urgency on the part of the Baltic states to put aside their individual national interests for the common good.

The only serious military assistance that the Estonians managed to secure in the 1930s was from Finland, which involved cooperation on the reconstruction of the abandoned Russian coastal artillery batteries between Tallinn and Helsinki, as well as a secret pact to block the Gulf of Finland with mines in the event of war with the Soviet Union.[28] This arrangement and the British-German naval agreement of 1935, whereby the British gave up their strategic interests in the Baltic Sea, led Estonia to approach Germany for security guarantees. However, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of August 1939 left Tallinn out in the cold, prompting Konstantin Päts and General Johan Laidoner to make the unilateral decision to surrender to the Soviet Union in September 1939. The failure of these interwar attempts to build solid alliances led to an increasing demand in Estonia and the other Baltic states for military reorganisation and rearmament to provide the deterrence that their foreign policies had failed to achieve. As contemporary historian John Wuorinen grimly remarked in 1924, "This military preparedness can hardly be considered as indicating a genuine belief in the adequacy of even the most elaborate war machinery that the relatively slender resources of these small countries could construct and maintain."[29] Unable to secure concrete defence assurances from abroad, the Estonians turned to their own devices and made a series of serious mistakes that critically undermined their national security.

After Konstantin Päts seized power in 1934, General Johan Laidoner was given a free rein over the Estonian military as commander-in-chief in exchange for the army's support for the coup. Laidoner

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[28] Hiden and Salmon, *The Baltic Nations and Europe,* 65.

[29] Wuorinen, "The Efforts to Form a Union of Baltic States", 614.

proceeded to introduce a new strategic vision that was apparently never officially codified in doctrine but nevertheless had a significant impact on Estonian land manoeuvres and training. This "active defence" doctrine emphasised the advantages that Estonia had along its borders with Russia – the river Narva, Lake Peipus and the dense forests of Võru County – along with the disadvantage of Estonia's small internal dimensions, emphasising that not a single inch of Estonian soil was to be surrendered without a fight.[30] The Russian offensive could only be forestalled, said Laidoner, through offensive Estonian action, a sentiment seemingly far more in line with the exuberant pre-Great War French *attaque à outrance* than the sombre interwar "flexible defences" of the Finnish Mannerheim and Hungarian Árpád lines, to say nothing of the massive, in-depth defences of the Maginot.[31] Despite the tactical importance of localised counterattacks, this is not apparently what Laidoner was proposing. Instead, active defence appears to have been a call for a generally offensive strategic mindset in order to keep the expected Soviet attack on its heels. Urmas Salo remarks that these plans on the strategic level were overly optimistic at best, due to the overwhelming numerical superiority of the Soviet side and the lack of allied support for the Estonian side.[32]

As Kaarel Piirimäe astutely points out, Laidoner's emphasis on the land domain drew strongly from his and Päts' experiences from the War of Independence, where Estonian troops were almost entirely dedicated to the land domain. The Baltic Sea had been easily secured by the Royal Navy, which dominated the Baltic after dispatching a light cruiser squadron in late 1918, capturing a pair of new but

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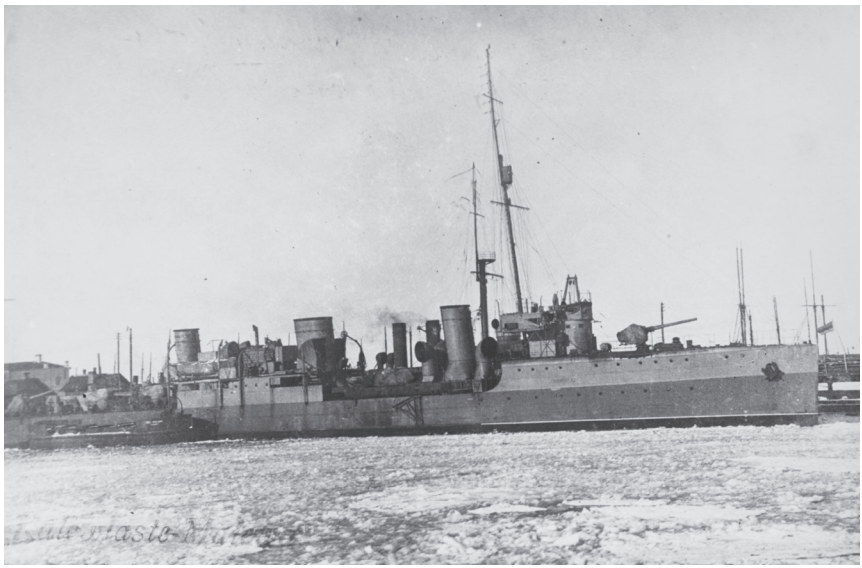
[30] Kaarel Piirimäe, "Preparing for War in the 1930s: The myth of the Independence War and Laidoner's 'active defence'", *Estonian Yearbook of Military History* 7 (13), (2017): 119.

[31] For French doctrine pre-WWI see Eric W. Kaempfer, "Army Doctrine Development: The French Experience, 1871–1914", *Army History*, no 28 (1993): 11–17. For an in-depth examination of Finnish flexible defence, see Gordon F. Sander, *The Hundred Day Winter War. Finland's Gallant Stand against the Soviet Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013).

[32] Urmas Salo, "Estimation of Security Threats and Estonian Defence Planning in the 1930s", *Acta Historica Tallinnensia* 12, no 1 (2008).



The Estonian Destroyer Vambola, photographed in Tallinn [Reval], Estonia, 1919. The Russian Orfey-class destroyer was launched in 1915 and entered service in 1917 as Kapitan I ranga Miklouho-Maclay. Following the Soviet takeover, it was renamed Spartak. The Royal Navy captured the vessel near Tallinn in December 1918 and subsequently transferred it to the Estonian Navy, in which it served until 1933 as Vambola. Estonia then sold the ship to Peru, where it was commissioned as the Almirante Villar, serving in the Peruvian Navy until 1954. Source: U.S. Navy History and Heritage Command Archives, NH 93632

poorly maintained Russian destroyers (Avtroil and Spartak) that they donated to the Estonians under the names Lennuk and Vambola. As for the air force, Estonia also received a handful of reconnaissance and fighter aircraft from the British that provided some limited utility, but the impact of aviation assets on the war proved to be modest at best.[33] After the Great War, the Royal Navy largely withdrew from the Baltic Sea due to pressing issues elsewhere in Britain's

[33] Eric A. Sibul, "Logistical Aspects of the Estonian War of Independence, 1918–1920", *Baltic Security and Defence Review* 12, no 2 (2010).

neighbourhood and in its sprawling empire. By the early 1930s, the Soviet Union began a large expansion of both its navy and air force that, combined with the rapid technological advances in aviation, meant that the enemy could potentially project air superiority over most of the Baltic region unless countered. Estonia, as previously illustrated, only had sufficient economic resources and manpower to cover one or at best two of the three domains (land, sea and air) as illustrated by the defence expenses of the mid-1930s.

Faced with the Gulf of Finland largely becoming void of a major power and with little confidence that either the Royal Navy or Kriegsmarine would protect Estonia's nearly 4,000 kilometres of shoreline, the Estonian government decided to focus primarily on naval acquisition and a close partnership with the Latvian Navy, trusting that Laidoner's active defence strategy could keep the Red Army at bay.[34] The destroyers Lennuk and Vambola were deemed unsuitable for coastal defence, and were sold to Peru in 1933 for $400,000 in gold (GK$ 3.1 million).[35]

Estonia hoped that the money raised from the destroyer sale, along with a general fundraising campaign across the country, would raise enough funds for a full-scale reform of the Estonian Navy, with plans to commission two coastal submarines along with some torpedo boats and minelayers. The Peruvian windfall was not as much as projected, however, and the Kalev-class coastal submarine project ran into serious cost overruns. Estonia contracted Vickers-Armstrong to build the submarines for £360,000 (GK$ 17 million), and went on to expend over 60% of its total military procurement budget for 1934–39 on Kalev and Lembit.[36] This sum could have been used to modernise the air force or air defence artillery, or to procure

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[34] Arto Oll, "Estonian and Latvian Naval Collaboration During the Interwar Period of 1920–1940", *Latvijas Vēstures Institūta Žurnāls*, Speciālizlaidums (116), 2022: 79–98.

[35] "Wambola and Lennuk," U.S. Navy History and Heritage Command Archives, NH 93632, https://www.history.navy.mil/our-collections/photography/numerical-list-of-images/nhhc-series/nh-series/NH-93000/NH-93632.html, 14 October 2023.

[36] Toe Nõmm, "Eesti sõjaväe varustus, sõjatööstus ja relvastuspoliitika", *Sõja ja rahu vahel. I. Eesti julgeolekupoliitika 1940. aastani,* peatoimetaja Enn Tarvel (Tallinn: S-Keskus, 2004), 233.

standardised infantry support weapons and radios for the entire Estonian Army.[37]

None of these requirements for modernisation or procurement could be ignored. As the Estonian authorities assessed correctly, keeping the Estonian coastline secure was of paramount importance, but it was even more vital to keep sea lines to other countries open – especially to Estonia's major maritime trade partners, Finland, Germany and the United Kingdom.[38] Considering the limited capacity of Estonian industry to support the armed forces for more than a few months, securing outside support was essential.[39] Without supplies from the outside, Estonia had no chance of winning a longer attritional fight, no matter how well its army fought to keep the Soviet offensive back. Despite this accurate assessment, the procurement strategy was flawed. The two brand-new Kalev-class submarines proved to be an expensive investment that pulled limited funds away from more pressing acquisition needs.

Neglecting the air domain meant an enemy air force would have free rein in the skies over Estonia. The republic was only able to muster 30 interwar airplanes of various fighter and reconnaissance configurations for the nascent Estonian Air Force. On the ground, Estonian air defences were woefully undermanned and underequipped in 1939, consisting of two batteries of mixed Russian 76mm and 37mm guns, along with some trucks and light machine guns.[40] The only significant air defence reorganisation and acquisition that Tallinn made in the interwar period was motorising the air defence cohort and purchasing a single battery of twelve new Bofors 40mm AAA guns that were acquired right before the Soviet ultimatum in the summer of 1939.[41]

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37 Ibid., 230.

38 I Diviisi kaitsepiirkonna kaitseplaani variant nr 1 (I Division's Area Defence Plan Version 1), RA, ERA.495.12.56, 1.

39 Nõmm, "Eesti sõjaväe varustus, sõjatööstus ja relvastuspoliitika", 253–254.

40 Urmas Salo, "Eesti kaitseväe valmisolek sõjaks ja vastupanuvõimalused 1939. aastal" (Military Readiness of Estonian Defence Forces and Possibilities of Resistance in 1939) (magistritöö (Master's thesis), Tartu Ülikool, 2005).

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

These limited means paled before the amount of protection required to protect the Estonian war economy in the event of an invasion. The meagre Estonian military industry was concentrated in the capital city of Tallinn and its suburbs.[42] The production of strategic commodities, particularly fuel from oil shale, was also vulnerable, being clustered in the eastern region of Viru county near the Soviet border.

Interwar Estonian lines of communication relied heavily on railroads, which had limited redundancy and heavily utilised the Tallinn–Tapa corridor. Seizing the Tapa railyard would cut off both Tartu and Narva from the rest of the country. The only alternative route to the southeast towards Võru was via a narrow-gauge track, requiring cross-loading to wide gauge through Tamsalu, which itself was similarly vulnerable. Eastwards land routes to the Narva front had no such alternatives and would have to rely solely on road transport if the Tapa railyard was lost. These are some simple examples of possible military targets aside from actual units on the frontline for an enemy air force operating without meaningful opposition. Naturally, all types of civilian targets could be included if the enemy chose to do so, necessitating the need for paved roads and rapidly repairable railroad lines.

Investing in the sea and air domains without proper investments in land defence would, naturally, be meaningless, as open sea lanes and contested skies are of limited strategic value when the enemy army can still seize key terrain. The numbers of the interwar Estonian Army were not bad, but its equipment, inherited from the War of Independence, was quite eclectic. Most of the resources in the decade after the war had been spent standardising, upgrading and repairing the mélange of leftover arms and materiel instead of in a deliberate effort to standardise equipment. The maintenance requirements for a very large equipment pool were a severe drain on the small nation's resources – resources that could have been spent on new procurements.[43] For example, the Estonian Army used a mixture of

[42] Nõmm, "Eesti sõjaväe varustus, sõjatööstus ja relvastuspoliitika", 259–260.
[43] Ibid., 227–228, 238–240.

Mosin-Nagants, Mausers and Lee-Enfield rifles, all of which used different ammunition. The British attaché observing the 3rd Estonian Infantry Division during manoeuvres in October 1938 noted that the wild diversity of obsolete weapons of all calibres was the largest problem facing the Estonian Army, rating the quality of armaments as "very bad", behind the "low" level of training and the "very low" overall quality of troops.[44]

Now, over a century from the interwar period, Estonia faces the same threat that it did after its newly won independence. In the event of a Russian attack, it is imperative to have a comprehensive defence strategy that prioritises a strong alliance system, active defence and the use of force multipliers such as fortifications to ensure Estonia's security and not repeat the mistakes of the past. Enough time must be bought for allied reinforcements to arrive, and enemy casualties must be inflicted to first deter, and if deterrence fails, defeat an invasion. The Estonian Army – supported by the brigade-sized NATO battlegroup – must prioritise a dynamic approach to defence that allows its forces to manoeuvre and counterattack effectively and avoid being trapped in a passive or static stance. In order to ensure superiority at the point of the attack, it will be necessary to reallocate resources from other sectors. To keep those sectors secure after pulling troops from them, Estonia must construct deliberate, in-depth defences, centred on fortified strongpoints, and prepare to lay anti-tank and anti-personnel minefields along likely avenues of approach.[45] These mines would have to also be projected via artillery into enemy territory to interdict troop movements. Long-range precision artillery would prevent the fortifications and minefields from being systematically dismantled.

Modern air defence systems and small unmanned aerial vehicles or drones should contest the skies and allow for surveillance, while

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[44] The British Attaché to the Foreign Secretary, 20 October 1938, FO 371/22226, NA, quoted in Piirimäe, "Preparing for War in the 1930s", 143.

[45] This would necessitate a withdrawal from the Ottawa Convention, which the authors strongly advocate for all European states.

in the Baltic Sea, maritime drones should keep the sea lanes open and allow for naval support along the Narva front. By employing these elements in a coordinated and comprehensive manner, Estonia can enhance its security and deter potential aggressors, ensuring its sovereignty and the protection of its citizens. This multifaceted approach would underscore Estonia's commitment to a proactive and adaptable defence strategy, informed by historical events, that meets the challenges of the modern security landscape.

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