

Ethnic Estonian Units in the Soviet Army during the Period 1940–1956

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After the Soviet Union on 17 June 1940, occupied Estonia, the Estonian armed forces remained intact, under the name of the Estonian People's Force (*Eesti Rahvavägi*). Until Estonia was formally united with the USSR in August of 1940, the country was run by a puppet government that had a minister of war, Major General Tõnis Rotberg, as well as a commander of the military forces, Major General Gustav Jonson. Both of them were legitimate Estonian generals, but the make-up of the puppet government, along with its minister of war, and the commander of the armed forces, had been dictated to the Estonian president, Konstantin Päts, by Joseph Stalin's emissary to Estonia, Andrei Zhdanov.

The commander-in-chief of the Estonian armed forces, General Johan Laidoner, was dismissed on 22 June 1940, and thereafter, on July 19, was deported to Russia. The Estonian People's Force was placed under the control of Red Army officers, particularly Soviet political officers and the secret police of the time, the NKVD. In 1940, the Estonian military and the Ministry of War employed about 14,000 officers, non-commissioned officers, enlisted men, and civil servants.

The Red Army's 22nd (Estonian) Territorial Rifle Corps. On 17 August 1940, the Soviet people's commissar of defence, Marshal Semyon Timoshenko, ordered that the military forces of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania be reorganized into the 22nd, 24th, and 29th Red Army Territorial Rifles Corps, respectively. A rifle corps was to consist of a little more than 15,000 men. Major General Jonson was assigned to be the commander of the 22nd Rifle Corps, and was promoted to the rank of Red Army Lieutenant General. The personnel of all Estonian Army units, as well as of the General Staff, the Ministry of War, the Air Force, the Navy, and the Coastal Fortifications were merged with the corps. "Anti-Soviet elements" were eliminated from the corps – they were retired, with

many of them being arrested by the NKVD. At the beginning of 1941, there were about 10,500 military personnel in the corps.

The corps encompassed two peace-time sized (about 6,000 men) rifle divisions: No. 180 (with headquarters in Tallinn) and No. 182 (with headquarters in Tartu). Plus, the corps headquarters had, under its command, a heavy artillery regiment, communications and sapper battalions, an air wing, and an anti-aircraft battalion. Division, regiment, battalion, and company commanders were, mostly, Estonian officers, who were monitored by Red Army officers who had been assigned to be their deputies. Also, the Red Army political officers and NKVD Special Departments continued their activities at the corps and division headquarters. The Red Army took over all former Estonian military barracks. Therefore, the units of the 22nd Territorial Corps were distributed all over Estonia to manor-houses, schoolhouses, and other incidental locations.

In the summer of 1941, the corps was brought up to full strength with conscripts from Russia, and was sent to the front at the beginning of July. At this time, the corps consisted of about 18,000 conscripts from Russia, and less than 7,000 Estonian military personnel. The majority of the Estonians, at least 4,500 of them, including about 200 officers, defected to the German side, or were taken prisoner by the Germans. It is not known how many fell in action. In September, the remaining Estonians in the corps were assembled, and sent to labour units in the rear. Estonians, along with Latvians, Lithuanians, Germans, Poles, and some other nationalities, were regarded as being unreliable, and this applied even to members of the Communist Party and its youth organization, Komso-mol. In the fall of 1941, all Red Army corps were temporarily eliminated. Although, the 180th and 182nd Rifle divisions kept on fighting as regular Red Army divisions, but without any Estonians in their ranks.

The 1941 Soviet conscription in Estonia. In July and August of 1941, the Red Army conscripted about 45,000 draftees and reservists in Estonia, of whom, more than 32,000 reached the Soviet Union's far rear. These men were sent to labour units, mostly in the Urals and Northern Russia. Living conditions in the labour units were extremely harsh, since the food was inadequate, and the housing, medical care, sanitation, clothing, and

working conditions were abysmal. Plus, the extreme winter weather was devastating for the Estonian men, despite the fact that they are Northern Europeans. By the spring of 1942, thousands of them had died.

The Red Army's 8th Estonian Rifle Corps. In the fall of 1941, the Soviet Union's higher political leadership started making preparations for the formation of ethnic units. This was partly stimulated by the USSR's great casualties in 1941. And Estonian Communists, thanks to whose formal proposal the formation of ethnic Estonian units took place, explained that, due to the Estonian conscripts' poor grasp of Russian, they could not function well in regular Red Army units.

The decision to form the first ethnic Estonian unit, the 7th Estonian Rifle Division, was made by the Soviet State Defence Committee on 18 December 1941. The ethnic Estonian units were established in the Urals, where the Soviets assembled the conscripts who had been serving in the labour units, as well as men who had been evacuated from Estonia in the summer of 1941, and were suitable for military service. But also, Estonians who had been living in the USSR already before the war were assigned to these ethnic Estonian units, as were, even, Red Army soldiers of other nationalities.

In 1942, the Reserve Regiment was formed, as was the 249th Estonian Rifle Division. In September of 1942, the ethnic Estonian units were merged into the 8th Estonian Rifle Corps. The commander of the corps was a Red Army Lieutenant General of Estonian background, Lembit Pärn, who had been born in Russia. The divisional commanders were, at first, former Estonian officers, whose deputies were Red Army officers. Later, Red Army officers of Estonian background, who had been serving in the Red Army already before 1940, became the commanders of the divisions. By December 1942, there were more than 32,000 individuals serving in the corps, of whom, more than one third had not been conscripted in, or evacuated from, Estonia.

The corps was thrown into the Battle of Velikije Luki (December 1942 – January 1943), in which it suffered heavy losses. Over 3,000 men defected to the German side, or were captured by the Germans, or went missing. According to the documents of the Estonian Security Police that

functioned during the German Occupation (1941–1944), in the course of this battle, 1,887 Estonians came, voluntarily, over, from the Red Army, to the German side. After this, the corps was put into the reserve, and was not sent to the front again until 1944. Then, from September until November, it fought in battles in both continental Estonia, as well as on the large island of Saaremaa, off of Estonia's north-west coast. In March 1945, the corps was deployed to the front in Courland, Latvia, where the remnants of German Army Group Nord, known as Army Group Kurland, were encircled. There, the corps fought until the war ended.

In addition to military and propagandistic objectives, the establishing of the corps was also, directly associated with an administrative vision of the near future. Namely, the personnel of the corps, the majority of whom were thought to have received adequate Soviet training, was seen as a human resource that would help to continue to Sovietize Estonia, after the Germans had been driven out. This future purpose of the corps was even used as an excuse for not utilizing the unit in combat operations where losses were expected to be very heavy.

The Soviet conscription of 1944–1945 in Estonia. The order for carrying out military conscription in “liberated” Estonia was given by the Commanding General of the Leningrad Front already in February 1944. This conscription was to affect men between the ages of 17 and 50. After taking over Estonia, 30,000 men were to be conscripted, half of them from Eastern Estonia, the rest from the western part of the country.

But when the front stalled at Narva, on the Estonian-Russian border, these plans could not be implemented until the fall of 1944. On 25 August 1944, when the Red Army only had South-Eastern Estonia and the area around Narva, in North-Eastern Estonia, under its control, the Council of the People's Commissars of the Estonian SSR issued a directive to register, for potential military service, all men born between the years 1896 and 1927. The actual conscription began in November 1944. So, in 1944–1945 more than 20,000 men in Estonia were conscripted into the Red Army, the majority of them ending up in the Estonian Rifle Corps or its Reserve Regiment. Thus, there was a total of about 9,000 “new” men in the corps's divisions that had been at the front. Although the conscripts

were thoroughly screened, so as to weed out those who had previously served in the German army, some of them, nevertheless, ended up in the combat divisions as well as the Reserve Regiment.

Many men saw the Red Army conscription as a chance to cover up their previous service in the German military. Those who were exposed were sent to serve in labour units, which were, mostly, used to build Soviet military installations in Estonia. Although these men were, officially, soldiers in the Red Army, serving in these labour units was more like being in a prison camp. Many of them were not demobilized until the end of the 1940s, or the beginning of 1950s.

Ethnic Estonian units in the Soviet military after WW II. In June 1945, the 8th Estonian Rifle Corps was brought to Estonia, and was renamed the 41st Guards Rifle Corps. But, in 1946, the corps was disbanded, and most of the personnel were demobilized.

Already at the beginning of 1944, it was announced that foreign affairs and defence people's commissariats (actually ministries) would also be established in the individual Soviet republics. This was part of Stalin's preparations for adapting to the new order that would be dominating the world after the end of the war – all the individual Soviet republics were to join the United Nations as, formally, independent states (actually, only Ukraine and Byelorussia ended up as UN members). The commander of the Estonian Rifle Corps, Lieutenant General Lembit Pärn, was, in 1945, also named the Estonian SSR's minister of the armed forces. The Estonian SSR was, actually, the only Soviet republic in which such a ministry ever began to function. Despite the grandiose plans that the leadership of the ESSR and General Pärn had for the formation of an "Estonian Red Army", this was not at all what the higher leadership of the Soviet Union had planned. Thus, at the beginning of 1951, General Pärn was relieved of the post of minister of the armed forces, and was sent to Moscow to work as a lecturer at the military academy. And the ministry was officially dissolved.

But the ethnic Estonian units remained in existence until 1956. The majority of Estonian draftees performed their obligatory military service in units stationed in Estonia, and in which most of the officers were Esto-

nians. Quite a few men were also sent to Soviet military schools, so as to ensure that there would continue to be ethnic Estonian officers.

After the corps was disbanded, the Estonian career servicemen who were permitted to remain, and the draftees, were assigned to the 118th Guards Estonian Rifle Division (1946–1947). Thereafter, the division was reorganized into the 22nd Tallinn Single Rifle Brigade. From 1951 to 1956, the ethnic Estonian units again functioned as the 118th Guards Estonian Rifle Division. Both the division and the brigade were subordinate to larger Soviet Army units stationed in Estonia, like the 10th Guards Army. And the relationship with the ESSR Armed Forces Ministry, while that government establishment still existed, tended to be more of a formality.

Ethnic units also existed in Latvia and Lithuania, as well as in the Soviet republics in the Caucasus. But, in March 1956, disturbances broke out in Georgia – the people were protesting against the exposing of Stalin's (who was a Georgian, and thus, a folk hero in that republic) crimes by Nikita Khrushchev. And the ethnic Georgian military units sided with the people. As a result, all ethnic military units in the Soviet Union were disbanded. From then on, Estonian draftees performed their obligatory military service in various units located all over the Soviet Union.