



Estonian
War Museum
GENERAL LAIDONER MUSEUM

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR FROM VAIVARA TO VIIMSI

An exploration of the war events of 1941 and 1944
along a route from war museum to war museum



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You can find places related to the Second World War and their descriptions on the way from Vaivara to Viimsi using the map application.



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AN EXPLORATION OF THE WAR EVENTS OF 1941 AND 1944. ALONG A ROUTE FROM WAR MUSEUM TO WAR MUSEUM

Estonia, particularly Ida-Viru County, has a rich 20th-century military history. The best way to introduce and elucidate this legacy is by visiting the very locations where the events we describe here unfolded. To accomplish this, the Estonian War Museum in Viimsi, Harju County, and the Vaivara Blue Hills Museum in Ida-Viru County have joined forces in a collaborative project titled “Introducing Military Heritage in Ida-Viru County and Viimsi”. This initiative aims to create a journey from one museum to the other, providing insight into the multifaceted history of the region during the Second World War and the destiny of Estonia as a nation. The project is co-funded by the Estonia EU External Border Programme.

As part of this project, a tourist route has been established that connects the war museums in Vaivara and Viimsi, running from east to west. In addition to showcasing objects and aspects related to military heritage, it also highlights other attractions in the surrounding area. Through this effort, we aspire to attract not only those with a keen interest in military history but also visitors whose primary focus may lie elsewhere.

The journey from the Vaivara Blue Hills Museum to the Estonian War Museum spans nearly 200 km. However, visitors are not expected to cover the planned tourist route in its entirety. You have the flexibility to selectively visit the various points of interest, either one at a time or, if you choose to embark on the full journey, explore them in reverse order from Viimsi to Vaivara. For inspiration, you can refer to the digital route and sample routes available on the websites of the Estonian War Museum and the Vaivara Blue Hills Museum.

The following overview of the war events in Estonia in 1941 and 1944, written in a popular-scientific style, is primarily aimed at military history enthusiasts interested in delving into not only the details of individual locations but also the broader war events in northern Estonia. However, we hope that all readers will find it engaging. Drawing from the latest historical research, the following offers insights into various aspects, including the arrival of German troops in Tallinn, the activities of the Erna group, and the Forest Brothers in Viru County during 1941. It also covers the Red Army’s offensive, the actions of diversionary groups and the course of combat operations stretching from the River Narva to the Tallinn offensive in 1944.

WAR EVENTS OF 1941

On 22 June 1941, Germany launched Operation Barbarossa and initiated an attack on the Soviet Union. Approximately three million Wehrmacht soldiers commenced their march eastward. According to the Barbarossa plan, the Army Group Nord, which initiated the offensive from East Prussia, was tasked with besieging Leningrad. On the left flank of this army group, the 18th Army was ordered to advance towards Pskov to cut off the Red Army units remaining in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, preventing their eastward retreat from the southern part of Lake Peipsi. The conquest of Estonia was assigned to the XXVI Army Corps of the German 18th Army. Its advance units entered Estonia on 7 July, heading in the direction of Pärnu and Viljandi. Just before that, the Soviet 8th Army, including its 10th and 11th Rifle Corps, which had retreated from Lithuania to Estonia, arrived in Estonia. It took a defensive position extending from Pärnu to Lake Peipsi at the beginning of July. Over the following week, the progress of the Wehrmacht's sparse advance units stalled, and the front remained stable for ten days along the Suur-Emajõgi–Lake Võrtsjärve–Pärnu Bay line.

To occupy Estonia, the German Command deployed additional troops directed towards Rakvere, Narva and Lake Peipsi, with the objective of capturing Tallinn. The offensive resumed in the early morning of 22 July and proved successful this time. By 2 August, the German forces had captured Paide, and by 4 August, Tapa was under their control. Subsequently, the corps was dispatched eastward towards Rakvere. As long as the Narva direction remained open, taking Tallinn was challenging because the Red Army could reinforce its units, given its air superiority.

On 6 August, the Commander of the Soviet 8th Army informed the Commander of the Northern Front of his decision to have the right wing of the army (10th Rifle Corps) defend Tallinn while the left wing was to withdraw to the River Kunda. This decision signalled the acceptance of splitting the army into two parts. The following day, it became apparent that the Commander of the Northern Front disagreed with the retreat plan proposed by the Commander of the 8th Army. Instead, he ordered the army to hold positions on the River Loobu and launch an offensive against the enemy in the vicinity of Tapa.

However, events unfolded more swiftly than anticipated, leading to the failure of the counteroffensive. On 7 August, elements of the German XXVI Army Corps captured Rakvere, and on the same day, the corps' advance units reached the Gulf of Finland at Kunda, effectively dividing the Soviet 8th Army into two separate parts.



Map: Retreat of the Soviet Northwestern Front from 25 June to 10 July 1941
Photo: Narva Museum



Combat in Estonia 1941. The front on 11 August
 Estonia 1940-1945: reports of the Estonian International Commission
 for the Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity, IKUES, 2006



German field kitchen.
Photo: Estonian War Museum



German advance units, having reached Pärnu on 8 July 1941.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.37.0.172745

NARVA OFFENSIVE BY GERMAN TROOPS

As per the directive of the High Command of Army Group Nord, the offensive on Narva was executed through the collaboration of two army corps from three different directions:

- From the west, by the XXVI Army Corps, with its primary forces stationed in the Rakvere and Tapa region
- From the south, by Major General Rudolf Frederich's battle group, positioned along the Lohusuu–Avinurme line
- From the east and south, by troops of the XXXVIII Army Corps, advancing around Lake Peipsi.

The Soviet 8th Army's plan to defend the River Kunda did not materialise, and the units retreated to previously prepared positions along the River Purtse. Defence operations near Rakvere commenced in the latter half of July, after the German breakthrough had already started. These operations persisted until 6 August. In the vicinity of Rakvere, a defensive line was established, including the Palermo forest and a few other elevated terrains. However, these positions proved ineffective since it was anticipated that the Germans would invade from the direction of Väike-Maarja, whereas in reality, the city was seized from the direction of Haljala and Rägavere.

To impede the German advance towards the east, the second line of defence had to stretch from the mouth of the River Purtse to Lake Peipsi, with the River Purtse and the River Rannapungerja serving as natural barriers. The main focus was placed on tank barriers, accompanied by a line of trenches behind them. More robust defence structures were completed at major crossroads. The left bank of the River Rannapungerja was excavated and fortified to create a steep embankment extending approximately 20 km to the Sirts bog. On the opposite bank, the scrub and reeds were cleared.



By 10 August, units of the Red Army had retreated to the River Purtse and the Murakasoo line. The offensive of the XXVI Army Corps on the Purtse line stalled for three days. Friedrich's battle group succeeded in establishing bridgeheads near Rannapungerja and Tudulinna, but the road connecting them alongside the River Pungerja remained under Red Army control, preventing a breakthrough.

The challenging terrain, characterised by alternating bogs, forests, rivers and industrial areas, favoured the Red Army's defensive efforts. The Germans managed to achieve a breakthrough on 12 August by deploying additional artillery units for fire support and receiving air support. They reached the general line of Jõetaguse–Jõhvi–Valaste by the following day. Friedrich's battle group advanced slowly along the northwest coast of Lake Peipsi, seeking to expand the bridgehead between Rannapungerja and Kauksi. On the morning of 13 August, the Germans captured Jõhvi.

By 16 August, the Soviet 8th Army had amassed up to 50,000 fighters. On the same day, the Red Army initiated a withdrawal across the River Narva to establish defensive positions on the river's eastern bank, spanning from the northern bank of the River Pyata to the River Luga. Additionally, the Narva power plant and the River Narva bridges were detonated.

On the morning of 17 August, the intelligence of the German 93rd Division reported that no enemy forces were observed in front of them. An advance unit proceeded to Narva and secured the western part of the city, discovering that both railway and road bridges had been destroyed. The advance unit received orders to establish a bridgehead in Jaanilinn (Ivangorod) until the main forces arrived.

By the evening of 17 August, German troops had reached Narva and occupied the west bank of the River Narva, from Kreenholm to Narva, as well as the Jaanilinn bridgehead across the river and the section from Narva to Narva-Jõesuu. In the afternoon of 18 August, the Germans captured Zaretskye, between Jaanilinn and Komarovka, effectively establishing contact with units of the XXXVIII Army Corps, which had advanced from the eastern shore of Lake Peipsi. By 20 August, the XXVI Army Corps, comprising approximately 42,000 fighters, had already crossed to the other side of the River Narva.

According to reports from the German 18th Army headquarters, between 6 and 18 August, 6,578 prisoners of war were taken between Rakvere and Narva. Additionally, 44 cannons, one anti-aircraft gun, four anti-tank guns, two infantry guns, 34 heavy machine guns, four heavy mortars and 10 tanks were either destroyed or acquired as war spoils.



Destroyed German armoured car near Haljala, 1942.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.26.o.172607



Civilians tasked with performing fortification works in the summer of 1941.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.212.o.30767



Ruins of Oru Palace destroyed by the retreating Red Army.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.217.o.175275



F. Lissitsyn, Commander of the Narva 5th Destruction Battalion (later Narva Workers' Brigade), which was part of the Narva Battle Group.
Photo: National Archives. ERAF.2.I.7596.1 (AIS)



Red Army military equipment left behind during the retreat in 1941.
Photo: Paalmann, I. Tallinn City Museum



German advance unit during the battles in the summer of 1941.
Photo: Võru County Museum



Narva ruins, resulting from summer 1941 military actions, photographed in 1943.
Photo: Estonian National Museum

FOREST BROTHERS IN VIRU COUNTY

In addition to the hostilities between the warring sides, it is crucial to acknowledge the role played by local resistance fighters known as the Forest Brothers (*metsavennad* in Estonian). Following the June 1941 deportations, individuals began seeking refuge in the forests. Gradually, these forest dwellers began to organise themselves, forming armed units. Viru County, with its vast forests and bogs, proved to be an ideal setting for this resistance movement. Over time, nearly 70 significant resistance groups, each comprising approximately 20–25 members, more or less armed, were identified in Viru County. It has been estimated that there were at least 2,000 Forest Brothers operating in the area. Notable gathering sites or camps included Viru-Roela, Kulina-Puka, Neeruti forests, Salla municipality (Käru groups), Maidla municipality (“Maidla Grand Camp”), Jõhvi municipality (“Linnupuu Camp”) and Iisaku municipality (“Valgesoo Army”).

Initially, the primary aim of the Forest Brothers’ organisation was self-preservation and, in some cases, the protection of their families and property. With the influx of additional fighters and weaponry, they gradually assumed more military responsibilities. To the best of their abilities, the Forest Brothers disrupted the rear lines of the Red Army front. Their actions included sabotaging communication lines, destroying small bridges, obstructing mobilisation efforts (as evaders often joined armed squads), thwarting the requisitioning of livestock and horses, launching attacks on small Red Army units and fighter battalions travelling on roads, and assaulting municipal offices. It is reported that 69 Soviet troops, militiamen, members of fighter battalions and Soviet activists lost their lives during these operations. The Forest Brothers suffered 24 fatalities and 16 wounded in armed skirmishes, clashes and raids.

While the military aspect of the Estonian partisan squads should not be overemphasised, they certainly had a significant impact on the already fragile morale of the Red Army. Some individual Forest Brothers and squads also aligned themselves with the advancing German forces, who used them as experts on local conditions, spies and interpreters. Consequently, the German Command expressed interest in cooperating with the Forest Brothers, not solely for military purposes but also to facilitate the establishment of their authority. After all, the Forest Brothers were the only relatively organised local force that had assumed the role of defending villages, regions and municipalities upon the arrival of the Germans, sometimes even prior to their arrival. They took on wartime responsibilities for organising and securing the rear, a role that had previously belonged to the Defence League (*Kaitseliit*),

which had been disbanded in 1940. The first known people's militia (Omakaitse, or Home Guard) unit in Viru County was formed with men from Salla municipality on 30 July, and a similar development occurred in Vao and Avanduse municipalities on 2 August.

One of the initial tasks assigned to the Home Guard units was to establish local authorities, including the police. For example, after the capture of Rakvere on 7 August, the city's Home Guard leadership appointed the Viru County Government, Rakvere City Government, and individuals responsible for reinstating the functions of the police, prison, post office and telephone network authorities. In general, the establishment of local power followed a similar pattern in other municipalities. The local Home Guard appointed the municipal government and police officer(s), and subsequently began consolidating and organising their own administrative structures. Although they aimed to present these activities as their independent initiatives, they still had to coordinate all actions with the German forces and the temporary (later permanent) settlement commandants established by them. Typically, the latter did not countermand the original orders issued by the Home Guard.

One of the first orders given to the local militia organisations was to collect firearms from civilians. Furthermore, the advance of the German troops was accompanied by a considerable number of Soviet troops left behind by their retreating army, some in hiding and others attempting to catch up with their units. Many Soviet activists and members of destruction battalions were also stranded in the rear of the German army. Immediately after the transition of the front, the Home Guard assumed the task of organising raids to apprehend enemy forces left behind. Subsequent reports from German military staff, which included data on prisoners of war, also documented the Home Guard organisation's involvement in this effort. However, managing and escorting prisoners of war to temporary camps were tasks delegated to the Home Guard until German security units caught up with the army and assumed control of these operations.





A group of Forest Brothers in Pärnu County in July 1941.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.37.o.172784



Commander of the Viru Home Guard Unit, Captain Jakob Vaska, during the Estonian War of Independence in 1919.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.49.A.257.19 (AIS)



Home Guard outpost.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.271.0.391113



Soviet prisoners of war escorted by Home Guard fighters.
Photo: Estonian War Museum

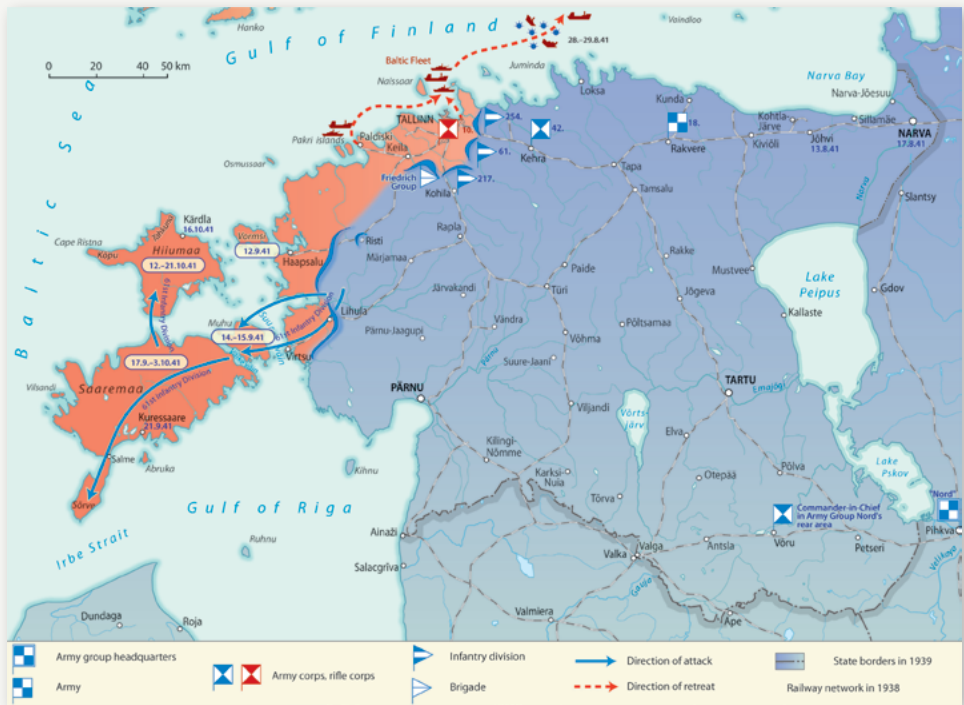
TALLINN OPERATION

Fighting was not limited to a single front in Estonia; it also extended towards Tallinn. By the beginning of August, the 11th Rifle Corps of the Soviet 8th Army had been virtually annihilated, and the 10th Rifle Corps retained only half of its combat-ready troops. The 10th Rifle Corps had approximately 20,000 personnel at its disposal, with roughly three-quarters of them in combat-ready formations. Combined with additional forces, including local destruction battalions that contributed to the formation of the 1st Estonian Red Rifle Regiment and the marines of the Baltic Fleet, there were up to 17,000 Red Army soldiers defending Tallinn. Units of the 10th Soviet Rifle Corps held a defensive line stretching almost 160 km, spanning from Maidla Manor across Hageri, Kohila, Pirgu Manor, Väike-Särge, Marguse, Paunküla and Voose, then along the west bank of the River Jägala to Partsaare, and finally across Valkla to Salmistu.

A secondary defensive position was planned along the eastern bank of the River Keila, encircling Tallinn and extending to the coast of the Gulf of Finland in the Jõelähtme area east of Tallinn. The primary force for this position was to consist of destruction battalions. The final 50 km of the defensive line around Tallinn ran from Tabasalu across Hüüru and Saue manors, Männiku station, Soodevahe village and Nehatu manor to Randvere. The main force here was the Naval Infantry Brigade of the Baltic Fleet, comprising 2,500 fighters.

The task of capturing Tallinn was assigned to the XXXXII Army Corps from the German side. The operation was scheduled to commence on 20 August, with the corps being reinforced by about 3,000 fighters on 14 and 15 August. The Tallinn operation was executed with four columns:

- The 217th Infantry Division advanced along the Tallinn–Viljandi highway towards Kose, with its main forces positioned south of Rapla
- Friedrich's group launched an offensive along the general line of the Tallinn–Pärnu highway
- The 61st Infantry Division attacked in the direction of the Tallinn–Tartu highway, with their starting point southwest of Aegviidu
- The 254th Infantry Division moved towards the Tallinn–Narva highway, starting near Viitna.



Combat in Estonia 1941. The front on 24 August
 Estonia 1940-1945 : reports of the Estonian International Commission
 for the Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity, IKUES, 2006

On 20 August, the German XXXXII Army Corps initiated an offensive on Tallinn. The defence strategy of the Red Army relied on the northbound rivers to the east of Tallinn, particularly on the River Jägala and the River Pirita on the right flank. The 254th Infantry Division successfully breached the Red Army's defensive line along the Gulf of Finland between Andineeme and Lake Kahala. However, the right flank of the 61st Infantry Division faced initial resistance at the positions by the River Jägala, between Soodla and Kehra.

After evaluating the two days of battle, it became apparent that the Germans had seized the initiative, while the Red Army lacked the strength and motivation to launch a counteroffensive. The forces available were insufficient to cover such an extensive front, and all reserves had been exhausted. The only hope lay in Tallinn, with the possibility of an evacuation by sea.

On 24 August, all German forces advancing from the east crossed the Pirita River, preparing to break through to Tallinn the following day. According to the daily summary of the 10th Soviet Rifle Corps, their units were forced to take up the main defensive line immediately outside Tallinn.

Fighting erupted near Tallinn on 25 August, and by 27 August, combat had engulfed the entire city. The German 254th Infantry Division was tasked with, among other objectives, cutting off the units on the Viimsi Peninsula from the defenders of Tallinn. However, due to heavy losses and exhaustion, the division could not prevent the evacuation of the primary Red Army forces and the Baltic Fleet from the Viimsi Peninsula.

On 28 August, at 14:00, soldiers of the 61st Infantry Division raised a German military flag atop the Town Hall in Tallinn's Old Town. By evening, units of the XXXXII Army Corps had also seized Paldiski. The corps incurred 871 casualties, including 35 officers killed or missing during the conquest of Tallinn, and 3,282 wounded, with 113 officers among them. While the precise number of Red Army casualties remains undisclosed, it is likely higher than that of the Germans. In addition, over 11,000 Soviet troops were taken prisoner during the Tallinn operation. The remaining forces were evacuated by ship to Kronstadt and Leningrad. On 26 August, Marshal Kliment Voroshilov, Commander of the Northwestern Direction, issued orders to abandon Tallinn.

The convoy of ships departing Tallinn encountered substantial losses on its way to Kronstadt. On 28 and 29 August, approximately 50 ships, including one-third of warships, were destroyed by mines, Luftwaffe airstrikes, and attacks from German and Finnish torpedo boats. The exact number of casualties, including civilians, remains uncertain. Official reports cite 4,767 fatalities, but the actual figure is likely three times higher.



Damaged Soviet tank on the Iru–Randvere road in 1943.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.26.o.172609



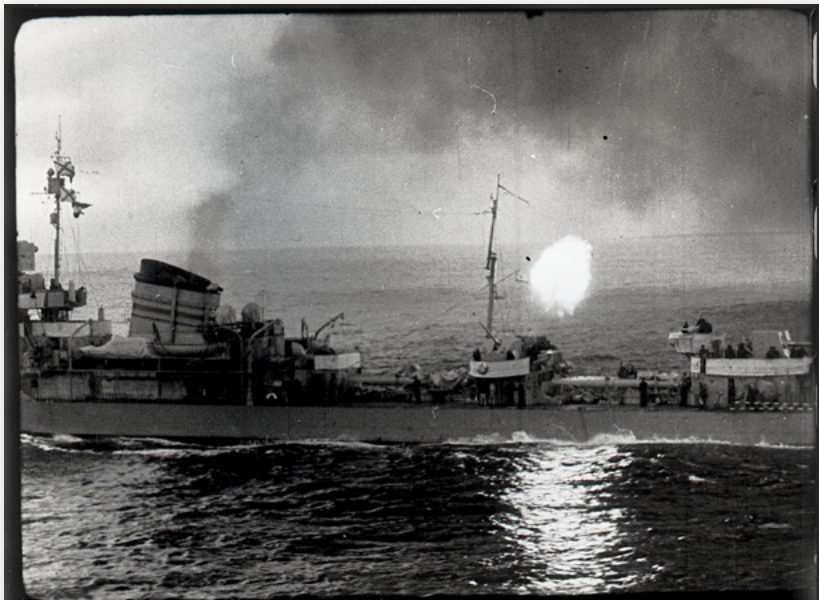
German soldiers.
Photo: Hintzer, K. National Archives. EFA.5.o.172454



Tallinn residents, forced to participate in defence operations,
digging anti-tank trenches in Harku.
Photo: Tallinn City Museum



Admiral Vladimir Tributs, Commander-in-Chief of the Soviet Baltic Fleet and Head of the Defence of Tallinn.
Photo: Estonian Maritime Museum



Baltic Fleet warship during the Tallinn raid in August 1941.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.203.0.117798



German War Cemetery Reval-Marienberg, 1944.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.210.o.156400



Column of Red Army soldiers captured during the Tallinn operation.
Photo: National Archives EFA.231.o.162728



German naval artillerymen in military service on Naissaar during World War II, 1944.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.616.o.188162



General Siegfried Hänicke, Commander of the 61st Infantry Division.
Photo: Saaremaa Museum

FOREST BROTHERS IN HARJU COUNTY AND THE ERNA RECONNAISSANCE GROUP

As German troops advanced in Harju County, Home Guard militia units were organised, similar to Viru County. However, Harju County did not offer as favourable conditions for the Forest Brothers. The presence of the Red Army in the region was too dense, and the natural terrain did not lend itself well to hiding and mounting large-scale counterattacks. Consequently, the activities of the Home Guard were more influenced by direct orders from German military authorities and Colonel Ernst Leithammel, appointed as the head of the local militia by the Germans.

In Harju County, armed groups were primarily formed on the outskirts of the region, bordering Järva and Viru Counties, where extensive marshy forest areas provided cover. The Forest Brothers operated mostly between the present-day Tallinn–Narva and Tallinn–Tartu highways, including in Kõrvemaa. They also operated in the Mahtra bog, where, led by Leithammel, they established their positions. On 28 July, they adopted the name Harju Malev, laying the foundation for the future Harju Home Guard Unit. Leithammel established contact with the advancing German units on 9 August, and military authorities recognised him as the head of the people's militia organisation in the county. However, there were other significant formations operating in the northern part of the marshy forest area, most notably the renowned long-range reconnaissance group Erna, which had deployed from Finland. The Forest Brothers collaborated with this group, primarily in the Kautla bog area, but also maintained communication with other larger groups, including Harju Malev, led by Leithammel.

In the winter of 1939/1940, several dozen Estonians travelled to Finland to fight against the Red Army in the Finnish Winter War. They underwent training in the Sisu unit of foreign volunteers but did not reach the front lines. In the first year following the Soviet occupation, more men fled from occupied Estonia to Finland. In the spring of 1941, Finland invited 15 Estonian volunteers to serve in military intelligence and provided them with training. Just before the war with the USSR, officers from the Brandenburg 800 Training Regiment of German military intelligence special forces were involved in training Estonians. The primary mission of the reconnaissance group and the squadrons formed from it was to provide Army Group Nord with information about the operational and tactical situation in the rear of the Red Army.

During the night of 10 July, the Erna group executed an operation on the Northern Estonian coast, with 42 men successfully landing. They took refuge in the Kautla bog, located about 60 km southeast of Tallinn. On 28 July, an additional 17 members of the group were sent as paratroopers. Although the group had an intelligence mission, local Forest Brothers began to gather around it. On 31 July and 1 August, the reconnaissance group and the Forest Brothers engaged in battle with destruction battalions. On 4 August, the group received orders to cross the front line and cease operations. On 6 August 1941, the Erna reconnaissance group transitioned from the rear of the Soviet troops to the side of the German troops. Based on this reconnaissance group, a battalion of about 400 men, known as Erna II, was formed. In August and September 1941, the battalion participated in the conquest of Harju County and the islands of Western Estonia as part of the German army.





Militiamen at the door of a military staff headquarters, 1941.
Photo: Tallinn City Museum



Colonel Ernst Leithammel, Chief of Harju Malev, in 1940 while serving as a legal consultant for the Ministry of War of the Republic of Estonia.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.26.3.1



Fighters of the reconnaissance group Erna in training in Finland.
Photo: National Archives. ERA.4996.1.221.10 (AIS)



Fighters of Erna-II in September 1941.
Photo: National Archives. ERA.4996.1.221.57 (AIS)

WAR EVENTS OF 1944

On 14 January 1944, the Red Army launched a strategic offensive against Army Group Nord, which consisted of the Leningrad Front, Volkhov Front and 2nd Baltic Front. Their objective was to conduct a strategic offensive operation along the Leningrad–Novgorod line. The ultimate goal was to liberate the Leningrad and Novgorod regions and sever the connection between Army Groups Nord and Mitte, which was defending the primary direction of the Red Army's 1944 offensives. The operation received air support from the 13th, 14th and 15th Air Armies.

Army Group Nord had been preparing for the anticipated major Red Army offensive since the second half of 1943. They had fortified their defensive line known as the Panther–Wotan line (Ostwall in German), which ran along the River Narva and the eastern shore of Lake Peipsi, and extended from the mouth of the River Velikaya across Pskov and further south.

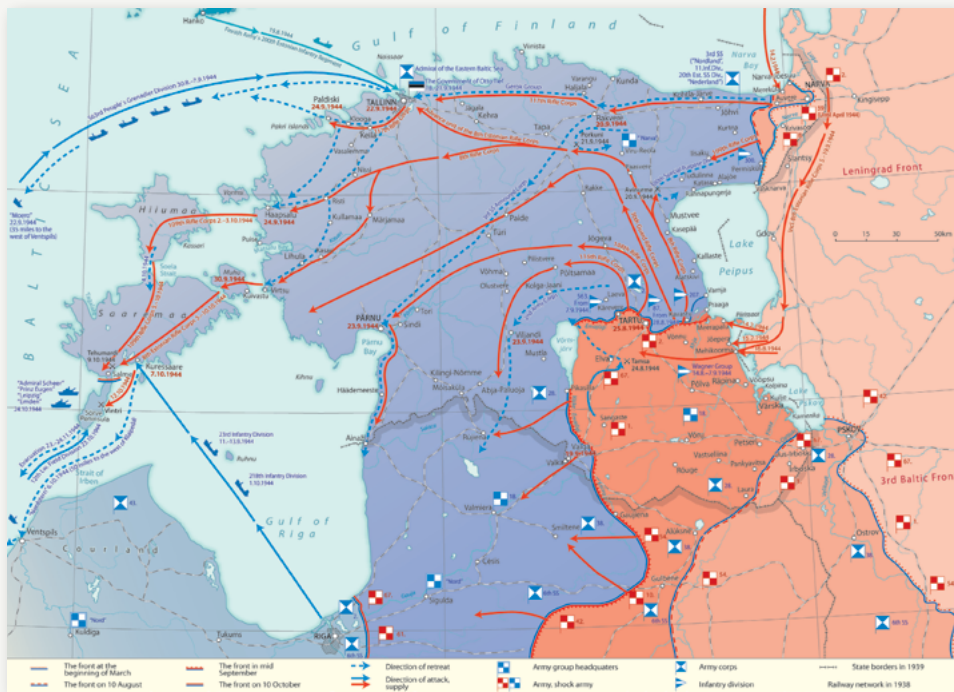
The Red Army's offensive was highly successful. By 20 January, they had captured Novgorod, and by 1 March, they had reached a defensive line running from the River Narva through Lake Peipsi to Pskov and Vitebsk. However, from that point on, the Red Army's advance slowed down. They had suffered heavy losses, faced shortages of ammunition and combat equipment, and had to contend with deteriorating weather conditions as the spring thaw began. Supply routes became increasingly challenging to navigate in the marshy regions of northwestern Russia.



Red Army soldiers on the Narva Front in the winter of 1944.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.203.0.77901



A roadside sign to motivate the Red Army in the Narva area: “Onward to the West!”, July 1944.
 Photo: National Archives. EFA.203.0.51995



Combat in Estonia 1944.

Estonia 1940-1945 : reports of the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity, IKUES, 2006

BATTLES ON THE NARVA FRONT IN LATE WINTER AND EARLY SPRING OF 1944

As the front reached the River Narva in early 1944, Estonia's territory became the immediate rear of the German Army Group Nord. On 1 February 1944, the Command of Army Group Nord instructed the forces responsible for defending the Narva line to defend the isthmus between Lake Peipsi and the Gulf of Finland at all costs. They were ordered to retreat to the west bank of the river while holding a bridgehead on the eastern bank near Jaamilinn (Ivangorod). Additionally, they were tasked with breaking the ice on the river from Vasknarva by Lake Peipsi to Krivasoo.

The German High Command attached great importance to stabilising the front along the River Narva because losing control of the southern coast of the Gulf of Finland would have allowed the Soviet Baltic Fleet to enter the Baltic Sea. This would have placed the entire German-controlled Baltic Sea coast in jeopardy and threatened the import of iron ore from Sweden. The loss of Estonia would have exposed the Finnish coast to airstrikes from Estonian territory and allowed for potential sea landings on the Finnish coast. Moreover, the German military relied on oil production from oil shale in northeastern Estonia to address its chronic fuel and lubricant shortages.

Additionally, natural conditions played a role. A breakthrough on a wide front across the River Narva was only feasible in winter when the river and Lake Peipsi were frozen, and marshes and bogs were solid. During this period, there was a large wetland southwest of Narva, now the location of the Narva Reservoir. Further south, towards the northern coast of Lake Peipsi, dense and impassable Alutaguse forests dominated the landscape. The only two roads and a railway leading west from Estonia's eastern border ran more or less directly eastward from Narva, following the northern coast of Estonia and the northern shoreline of Lake Peipsi. All of these factors made defending the Narva front easier from spring to autumn compared to winter.

By 5 February, the Red Army had crossed the river south of Narva, establishing a significant bridgehead known as the Krivasoo Sack, later also referred to as the Auvere Lodgement. Their objective was to cut off the railway and road connections west of Narva and encircle the German forces positioned along the River Narva, including those on the eastern bank bridgehead. The battles at Auvere continued until April, with the Red Army failing to break through.

On the morning of 11 February, the Red Army launched a massive offensive along the entire Narva front, initially repelled by the Sponheimer Group and later by A Group Narva starting from 23 February. The Waffen-SS armoured corps, including the 4th SS Panzer Grenadier Brigade Nederland and the 11th SS Panzer Grenadier Division Nordland, consisting of eight battalions, also participated in the defensive efforts.

In the latter half of February, the Panzer Grenadier Division Feldherrnhalle and the Grenadier Regiment Gnesen, units of the 20th Estonian SS Division, along with Estonian police battalions and territorial battalions of the Home Guard under the Command of the 2nd Anti-Aircraft Division, joined the Narva front. In March, the 2nd and 3rd Estonian Border Defence Regiments were added to the force.

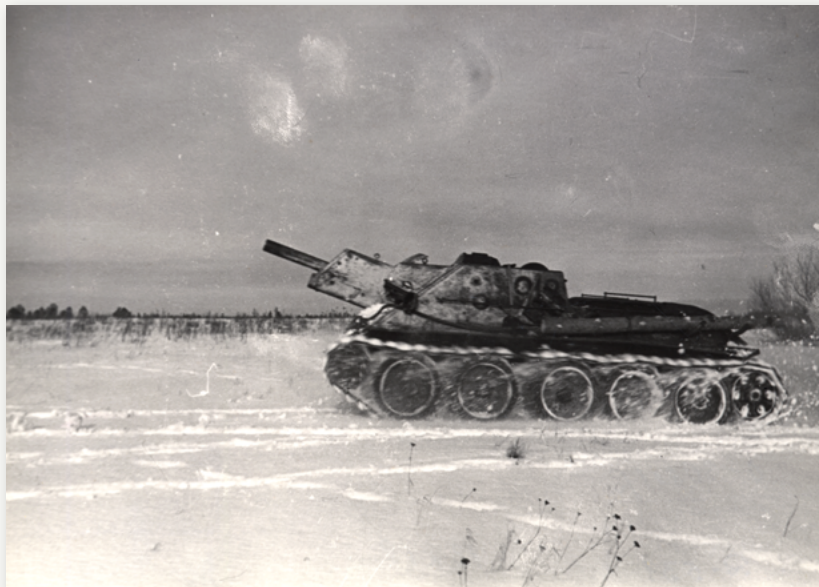
In total, approximately 125,000 fighters were under the command of the army group during this period, and this formation remained on the Narva front until May 1944.

The Red Army units in the direction of Estonia operated under the Leningrad Front's command, supported in the air by the 13th Air Army, and later also by the Baltic Fleet from the sea. The most challenging battles occurred on the Narva front during the first half of 1944. In February, the 8th Estonian Rifle Corps reached the Narva front, although not all of its units entered combat until September. However, artillery units from the corps were directly involved in combat.

By early 1944, the German troops had fortified their positions along the Narva–Pskov line, and Estonia and Latvia became the areas where Army Group Nord, which had withdrawn from northwestern Russia, reorganised its ranks. To disrupt the Army Group Nord’s rear communications, the Red Army launched airstrikes targeting key transportation hubs in Narva, Tapa and Tallinn. On the night of 6 March, the Red Army Air Force conducted a devastating bombing of Narva with more than 100 bombers, with the help of artillery, rendered the city uninhabitable. On the following night, approximately 3,000 additional bombs were dropped on Narva and targets in the Meriküla and Sillamäe areas. On 7 March, Tapa and Jõhvi were also bombed. The most extensive airstrike in the rear took place on the evening of 9 March and the night of 10 March 1944, when the Soviet Air Force targeted Tallinn.

Simultaneously with the air force attacks, the Red Army launched an offensive on 8 March against the positions of the III SS Panzer Corps on the west bank of the River Narva and the bridgehead on the eastern bank. On 9 March, the four divisions launched an offensive north from Auvere to encircle the German forces. The last major Red Army attack occurred on 16 and 17 March 1944, after which the front transitioned into positional warfare.

While fighting along the River Narva and the bridgehead on the eastern bank began to subside in the second half of March, in late March and early April, intense battles were fought to repel the “western and eastern ears” of the Red Army’s bridgehead in Auvere, to the west and southwest of Narva. These protrusions, or “ears”, posed a threat to the Tallinn–Narva railway and had the potential to serve as bases for an advance to the coast, encircling the troops along the river.



Soviet self-propelled artillery piece on the Narva front, 8 March 1944.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.212.0.30811



Aerial view of Narva and Jaanilinn, 1944.
Photo: Narva Museum



Tallinn in ruins, March 1944.
Photo: Vilper, H. National Archives. EFA.706.10.15008



German soldiers at Auvere in spring 1944.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.458.o.156389



German bunker on the Narva front in spring 1944.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.458.o.156408

SENDING DIVERSIONARY UNITS TO THE REAR OF THE NARVA FRONT

During the first half of February 1944, the Red Army captured the area between Lake Peipsi and Lake Pskov along the eastern shores of these lakes. The Red Army leadership devised a plan to conduct simultaneous landings across Lake Lämmijärv and near Meriküla on the Narva front. The objective was to infiltrate behind the German troops, forcing them to withdraw from Estonia due to the encirclement threat.

The Meriküla landing, northwest of Narva, had a more direct impact on the Narva area. In the early morning of 14 February, approximately 500 Red Army soldiers conducted a landing operation using three gunboats and 12 landing barges. By evening, this landing attempt had been decisively thwarted. Two gunboats and several landing barges were sunk while the remaining forces retreated. The majority of the battalion involved in the landing were either killed or captured. Concurrently, Red Army units initiated an offensive from the Auvere Lodgement to rendezvous with the landing forces. The offensive from Auvere was successfully repelled by the Feldherrnhalle Division.

In contrast, the actions of diversionary units that crossed the ice-covered Lake Peipsi created considerable confusion. A joint operation involving the headquarters of the Soviet partisans in Estonia and the Leningrad headquarters of the partisan movement occurred from 24 February to 17 March 1944, when three “partisan brigades” were dispatched to the rear of the German troops deployed along the Narva front. In total, approximately 800 saboteurs were sent to disrupt the German rear, with around a quarter of them being Estonians.



S. Mertsalov, a participant in the Meriküla landing in 1943.
Photo: Narva Museum



A group of fighters of the 1st Partisan Brigade, before being sent to Estonia, January 1944.
Photo: National Archives. ERAF.2.1.5116.1 (AIS)

BATTLES ON THE NARVA FRONT AND TANNENBERG LINE IN JULY AND AUGUST 1944

By the end of April 1944, both sides had sustained significant losses in the battles that took place on the Narva front during the late winter and early spring. At this point, the conflict in this region reached a standstill, and the focus of military operations shifted to the section of Army Group Mitte in Belarus. Here the Red Army had reached the Polish border by July 1944. In June, the Red Army had also launched an offensive against Finland on the Karelian Isthmus, resulting in the capture of Vyborg on 20 June 1944.

The need for troops on the Narva front had diminished as both sides redirected their forces elsewhere. The German Command mobilised Estonian reserves, organising and training them into units, with deployments beginning in March and April. In April and May, the formation of the 20th Estonian SS Division was completed, alongside the establishment of six border defence regiments (with a backup regiment), four police battalions, Home Guard battle battalions and other units.

In July, positional warfare persisted on the Narva front, characterised by active artillery exchanges and smaller-scale attacks. The Auvere Lodgement accommodated two rifle corps of the Soviet 8th Army, comprising nearly 28,000 soldiers, over 200 tanks, self-propelled artillery and more than 500 cannons. The 2nd Shock Army, with about 26,000 fighters, was standing by along the River Narva, to the north of the city.

With the removal of six German divisions from the Narva front, a need to reposition the front arose. German forces planned to abandon the city of Narva and their positions along the river, retreating to the Tannenberg Line, a series of fortified positions situated approximately 15 km west of Narva in the area known as the Blue Hills (Sinimäed in Estonian). The new front line was intended to run from the western tip of the Auvere Lodgement directly to the coast, enabling the release of units previously stationed on the northern side of the lodgement, the western bank of the river north of Narva, and the coastal defence units extending from Narva-Jõesuu to the newly established front line.

On the morning of 24 July 1944, the Red Army initiated an offensive on the Narva front. Following three hours of preparatory artillery bombardment, infantry units began their offensive from the Auvere Lodgement, supported by a tank brigade of three divisions. Initial attacks were repelled, prompting the German Command to order the evacuation of units from the Narva bridgehead to the west bank of the Narva River. This order was executed by 3:00 am on

25 July, and the Narva Bridge was detonated. On the morning of 25 July, the Red Army launched an offensive on the River Narva north of the city in the section of the III SS Panzer Corps, establishing bridgeheads on the west bank of the river after crossing with units from two divisions, subsequently prompting the Panzer Corps to retreat to the Blue Hills.

Simultaneously with the offensive in the Blue Hills, the Red Army launched strong attacks on the positions of Estonian Border Defence Regiments along the river. On 29 July, following preparatory artillery strikes and tank support, the Red Army initiated an offensive in both the section of the 11th Infantry Division from the Auvere Lodgement and the section of the Nordland Division in the Blue Hills.

The massive Red Army offensive, which spanned several days along the entire front line, was repulsed by German troops. Seven Soviet battalions in the Nordland and Nederland sections, as well as three battalions in the section of the 11th Infantry Division, completely lost combat capability. Attacks in the Blue Hills stalled on 10 August.

The Red Army was never able to break through the Tannenberg Line, and the front remained entrenched in the Blue Hills until the second half of September. It was only then, as the Red Army made significant advances in other sections of the front, that the retreat from the Narva front ensued, followed by the withdrawal of German troops from all of Estonia.

According to Red Army operational documents, the units of the 2nd Shock Army and the 8th Army suffered an estimated 8,000 fatalities and missing personnel on the Narva front from 24 July to 7 August 1944, with approximately 30,000 wounded. German defensive units also incurred heavy losses, with up to 10,000 soldiers recorded as dead, wounded or missing. Estonian units accounted for roughly one-third of the total losses of Army Detachment Narva.



Red Army soldiers crossing the River Narva in July 1944.
Photo: Fetissov, J. Estonian History Museum



Commander of the Leningrad Front,
Marshal Leonid Govorov.
Photo: Narva Museum



Equipment and arms left behind by the German units retreating
from their positions in Narva, 28 July 1944.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.212.0.30818



A Red Army truck crossing a temporary bridge on the River Narva in August 1944.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.203.o.84155



Fighters of the Estonian Legion being sworn in, 1944.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.210.o.156407



A Soviet tank on the Narva front in the summer of 1944.
Photo: Narva Museum

THE WITHDRAWAL OF GERMAN TROOPS FROM THE NARVA FRONT IN SEPTEMBER 1944

In late June and early July 1944, the Red Army posed a significant threat to the defence of the Army Group Nord at Daugavpils and Polotsk. This development, coupled with the Red Army's offensive toward Riga, had the potential to isolate Army Group Nord from Army Group Mitte.

On 10 August 1944, the 3rd Baltic Front of the Red Army initiated an offensive in the south. By the end of August, the front in southern Estonia had reached the Suur-Emajõgi and Väike-Emajõgi rivers.

Given that the main thrust of the 3rd Baltic Front was directed toward Riga, the Red Army Command determined it was more practical to employ the forces of the Leningrad Front, stationed on the Narva front, to conquer Estonia. Consequently, on 2 September 1944, the Red Army General Staff ordered the 2nd Shock Army to be redeployed to the River Emajõgi front. Their task was to advance over Rakvere towards Tallinn, coordinating with the 8th Army, advancing on the Narva front, and cooperating with the Baltic Fleet.

In light of Finland's withdrawal from the war, the German High Command decided to abandon Estonia and initiated preparations for an evacuation plan known as Operation Aster on 10 September. Following the Red Army's offensive from Madona in Latvia to the southern tip of Lake Võrtsjärv in Estonia on 14 September, Hitler approved Operation Aster on 16 September.

In the early morning of 17 September, after an hour and a half of preparatory artillery bombardment, Red Army units crossed the River Suur-Emajõgi and launched an offensive with tank and air support. Simultaneously, pressure was mounting south of Lake Võrtsjärv, and the troops of Army Detachment Narva, positioned on the Narva front, faced encirclement.

In the early morning of 18 September, the headquarters of Army Group Nord issued a retreat order to the troops of the III Panzer Corps. The main forces of the III Panzer Corps managed to withdraw from Estonia with minimal losses. However, the 300th Special Purpose Division (Höfer Group) and the subordinated 20th Estonian SS Division began their retreat from the Narva front at a later stage. In reality, this meant that these units were left to cover the retreat, during which they were crushed in minor clashes and the crews dispersed.

By the evening of 19 September, Red Army troops had reached the Toila–Jõhvi–Kurtina line. On the same day, in the evening, Soviet Air Force bombers targeted Rakvere.

On 20 September, the German forces began their retreat. The first major encounter occurred around noon on 21 September when the Red Army attacked a battle group that had withdrawn to the Kahala position with 40 to 50 tanks. This group retreated again in the afternoon toward Tallinn, ultimately positioning themselves along the River Jägala to avoid being surrounded. These positions were abandoned during the night of 22 September. No defence of Tallinn was planned following the city's evacuation.

On 22 September, Soviet troops from the 117th Rifle Corps of the 8th Army occupied Tallinn in cooperation with tank and self-propelled artillery regiments. As part of propaganda efforts during the “liberation” of the Estonian capital, the assault group of the 8th Estonian Rifle Corps, led by Colonel Vassili Vörk, Commander of the 354th Rifle Division, was integrated into the Red Army forces tasked with occupying Tallinn.

In a desperate attempt to restore legitimate authorities and pursue Estonia's independence, Prime Minister Jüri Uluots, acting as the President of the Republic, appointed a new government with Otto Tief as its head. The blue-black-and-white Estonian national flag was raised atop the historic tower of Pikk Hermann in Tallinn. The government attempted to organise the city's defence but was ultimately unsuccessful.

The Red Army entered Tallinn on 22 September, while the last German troops evacuated from the Estonian islands by the end of the year. This marked the conclusion of the war on Estonian soil, with the Republic of Estonia remaining occupied by the Soviet Union for the next 47 years. Estonia finally regained its independence in 1991, and the last Russian troops departed from the country in 1994.

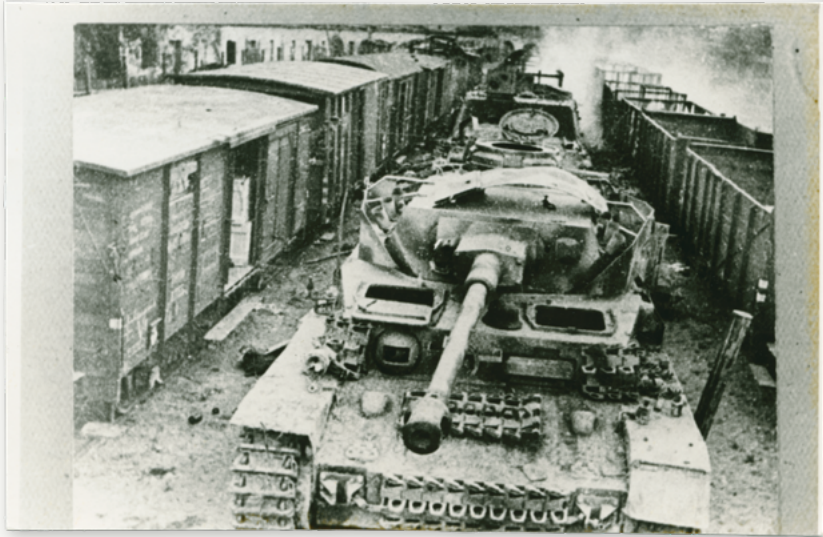




A German soldier resting, 1944.
Photo: National Archives



A heavy artillery unit of the 3rd Baltic Front in southern Estonia in late August 1944.
Photo: Nordstein, S. National Archives. EFA.242.o.65088



Military equipment and supply trains left behind in Tallinn Port during the city's evacuation, September 1944.

Photo: National Archives. ERAF.2.2.5308.1 (AIS)



Obersturmbannführer Harald Riipalu, Knight of the Knight's Cross of the Iron Cross.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.458.o.156413



Sending-off ceremony at Baltic Rail Station in Tallinn
for Estonian Legion recruits departing for a training camp.
Photo: Viikholm, O. National Archives. EFA.446.o.196995



General Felix Steiner, Commander of the III SS Panzer Corps,
with his division commanders in August 1944.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.37.0.173391



The oil factories in Kiviõli ablaze in September 1944.
Photo: Oja, M. National Archives. EFA.242.o.64427



A Soviet tank near Tallinn on 22 September 1944.
Photo: Mazelyev, P and Suchatov, V. National Archives. EFA.242.o.64422



German soldiers captured in the Tallinn area, September 1944.
Photo: National Archives. EFA.203.o.52004

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