

Estonian War Museum-General Laidoner Museum and the Estonian National Defence College call for paper proposals to an **international military history conference marking the 100th anniversary of the Estonian War of Independence**

Independence Wars in North-Eastern Europe and Beyond

Tartu, 29 May 2019

Mihkel Kaur was born in Tartu, Estonia, in 1898. In 1916 he volunteered for the Russian army and until December 1917 fought as a machine-gunner at the southwestern front in Bukovina. He returned to Estonia to join Estonian national units that had been formed in the Russian army, but after the start of the German occupation was demobilised in spring 1918. He joined the civilian work force in Imperial Germany. After the end of the Great War he was sent along with other foreign labourers back to his homeland. Years later Kaur remembered:

"Between Tartu and Tapa [Estonian] soldiers of the Independence War, which had only recently begun, came to inspect our train... An attempt was made to recruit us, but at least in that part of the carriage where I was, no one went along. No one knew what it was all about."

Eventually, like many other veterans, Mihkel Kaur joined the war again for "patriotic reasons", illustrating the difference of war experiences in Eastern Europe and Western Europe. In the East, war did not end in 1918, but continued in some places until 1922.

The First World War and the wars that followed had different origins. The First World War was rooted in the contradictions between the four great continental and the two colonial empires; later, many smaller countries joined the conflict or were engulfed by it. However, the wars that flared up in imperial borderlands after the Compiègne armistice were the result of the military and political collapse or the disintegration of the Russian, German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires.

In this vast space, new actors appeared on the stage. There were different movements seeking social justice – from the Bolsheviks with dreams of world revolution and their allies to different kinds of anarchists. There were the former national minorities, who used the opportunity to move toward independence although autonomy had been the limit of their imagination only a few years ago. Some actors, such as the Russian Whites, German monarchists and the supporters of the Habsburgs of Austria-Hungary wished to restore the pre-war situation. Among them were the Baltic German estates, who wanted to create, with German support, a Baltic Duchy, thus turning history backwards by about half a century before the Russification of Baltic provinces. All this was encouraged by the war experience. The majority of Europeans of all nations and classes were used to death and for many soldiering had become the only imaginable way of being.

One way to analyse this is to focus on the competition of two principles, social justice and the nation. Ideally, the first aspired toward the liberation of the lower classes while the other promised independence and state-building for the nation, but the two aspirations were in fact always intertwined. Nationalism had to adapt to social claims and socialism to the growing national self-awareness of the people. The struggle was decided by winning the support of the masses – leaving aside the important factor of foreign interventions from the Caucasus to Karelia. However, our knowledge of the experience and perceptions of the common people is one of the most neglected research fields.

In retrospect, the outcomes of the struggles have often been viewed as evidence of a purpose in history. The "new" nations of Eastern Europe have had the tendency to read history backwards, searching for evidence for the inevitability of the birth of their nation states. Over the past century, narratives based on Marxist thought have competed with those national narratives, reading history deterministically as a struggle between exploiting and exploited classes. Proceeding from the revolution-counterrevolution dialectic, Marxist narratives have no time for the notion of independence wars in the borderlands.

On 28–29 May 2019, the Estonian War Museum and the Estonian National Defence College will organise an international military history conference to seek new perspectives to analyse and conceptualise the military conflicts of 1918–1922. In particular, we look forward to receiving proposals on the following topics:

- the war experience and motivation of soldiers and officers
- recruitments and mobilisations
- political moods in the armed forces
- the propaganda of the warring parties – nationalism versus social justice or something else?
- the influence of politico-strategic developments in the Russian Civil War on individual war theatres and operations
- strategy, tactics and technology in independence wars
- the impact of international coalitions, foreign allies and transnational actors – from influencing morale to deciding the outcome of wars
- *aspects of the history of the Estonian War of Independence 1918–1920.

Please send an abstract of up to 4,000 characters and a brief, one-page CV in English or Estonian by 1 March 2019 to conference@esm.ee. The length of presentations will be 20 minutes. The working languages of the conference will be English and Estonian. All the presentations in Estonian will be translated into English and vice versa. Articles based on the presentations will be published in the Estonian Yearbook of Military History in 2020. The Estonian War Museum will cover the travel and accommodation costs of speakers. The conference will be held by the Estonian War Museum-General Laidoner Museum and the Estonian National Defence College on 29 May 2019 in Tartu.