

Germany's Eastern Front Allies (2)

Baltic Forces



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C Caballero Jurado & N Thomas PhD • Illustrated by D Pavlovic
Series editor Martin Windrow

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SS & Police Lt.Gen.
(SS-Obergruppenführer und
General der Waffen-SS und
Polizei) Friedrich Jeckeln, SS &
Police Commander in the Baltic
states, Belarus and northern
Russia. He is wearing a German
Army general officer's M1935
field tunic with second type
Waffen-SS general officers'
collar patches, introduced
20 April 1942. His collar is
open, common practice later in
the war. His Knight's Cross was
awarded 27 August 1944 for
halting a Red Army advance near
Lake Peipus at the head of his
German-Latvian battle group. As
the senior SS officer Jeckeln was
hanged in Riga in February 1946
for atrocities committed in the
Baltic region. (Henry Rüütel
Memorial Archive)

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

ALTHOUGH ESTONIANS, LATVIANS AND LITHUANIANS had lived for thousands of years in the Baltic region of North-Eastern Europe, from 1219 these peoples endured systematic foreign domination by Denmark, Sweden, Poland, and particularly by Germany and Russia. By 1793 all three Baltic states formed part of the Russian Empire. At the same time Estonia and Latvia were administered by ethnic German landowners descended from the Teutonic Order – the so-called ‘Baltic barons’ – while Lithuania was dominated by ethnic Polish aristocrats.

From the middle of the 19th century the Baltic nations began to be more aware of their own identity; and during the Russian revolution of October–December 1905 they expressed their determination to free themselves from the Baltic barons and Poles, and to halt the Russification of their lands.

The Great War found the Baltic states embroiled in the struggle between Germany and Russia. Lithuania was occupied by the Germans in September 1915. The Latvians feared that the Germans would increase the domination of the Baltic barons; and on 1 August 1915 they were permitted by Tsar Nicholas II to establish the 1st to 8th Latvian Rifle Battalions (expanded in October 1916 into eight regiments in two brigades), which fought effectively to help block the German advance. However, the Tsar’s abdication in February 1917 and the Bolshevik coup d’état of October 1917 caused political chaos, allowing the Imperial German Army to occupy Latvia in September 1917 and Estonia in April 1918.

On 16 February 1918 Lithuania declared her independence, followed by Estonia on 24 February, although both were under German occupation. These declarations were confirmed when German forces withdrew following the Armistice of 11 November, followed by Latvian independence on 18 November. Now the Red Army – ironically, under Jakums Vatsietis, a former Latvian Rifles colonel now leading pro-Bolshevik riflemen – invaded the Baltic states. Estonia formed its armed forces (under Maj.Gen. Johann Laidoner) on 2 December 1917, followed by Lithuania (Maj.Gen. Silvestras Zukauskas) on 23 November 1918, and Latvia (Maj.Gen. Janis Balodis) on 3 December 1918.

These forces were initially too weak and disorganised to withstand the Bolshevik onslaught. Nevertheless, in Estonia the British Royal Navy prevented the fall of Tallinn in December 1918, allowing the Estonian Army to force Red Army units back. By June 1919 the Lithuanian Army had evicted the invaders with Polish assistance; but on 9 October 1919 the Polish-Lithuanian Gen. Lucjan Zeligowski occupied the Vilnius-Suvalkai region of eastern Lithuania, including the Lithuanian capital Vilnius,



Lithuanian soldiers of the Red Army's 29th Rifle Corps deserting to German lines, June 1941. They wear pre-1941 Lithuanian Army uniforms with the Red Army cap badges, M1940 collar patches and officers' cuff rank chevrons prescribed for these corps. The officer (left) is wearing the distinctive M1931 *Posalmis* peaked field cap, M1934 officer's field tunic, breeches, riding boots, and brown leather belt and cross belt. The lieutenant (centre) wears the same uniform and carries a Lithuanian-issued German M1916 helmet, a Soviet M1891 Mosin-Nagant rifle and bayonet, and M1933 Tokarev 7.62mm semi-automatic pistol. The lieutenant (right) and the soldiers (background) wear Red Army M1929 *gymnastiorka* pull-over shirt-tunics. (Friedrich Herrmann Memorial Collection)

annexing it to Poland on 8 January 1922. By January 1919 Latvia had been conquered by the Red Army, but in February the Latvian Army counterattacked with Estonian, Baltic German Army (*Baltische Landeswehr*) and German *Freikorps* units¹, forcing the Bolsheviks back; with Estonian help they defeated the Germans in their turn on 22 June. The Soviet Union recognised the independence of Estonia on 2 February 1920, of Latvia on 1 August and of Lithuania on 25 August.

Independence proved difficult for the Baltic states in a troubled inter-war Europe. Social, political and economic problems led to the establishment of nationalist presidential governments: in December 1926, by Antanas Smetona in Lithuania; in March 1934, by Konstantin Päts in Estonia; and in May 1934, by Karlis Ulmanis in Latvia. However, the greatest threat was the growing might of the Soviet Union and German Third Reich, against which the Baltic states, with combined armed forces of only 68,450, could offer little resistance. In 1940 Estonia (Gen. Johan Laidoner) had 17,000-strong armed forces, Latvia (Maj.Gen. Hugo Rozensteins) 27,450, and Lithuania (Gen. Vincas Vitkauskas) 24,000 men. On 23 March 1939 Nazi Germany annexed the Memel (Lithuanian: *Klaipėda*) district, taking Lithuania's main port. However, following the joint Soviet-German occupation of Poland in September 1939 the Soviet Union restored to Lithuania on 10 October 1939 the Vilnius region which Poland had occupied twenty years before.

THE FIRST SOVIET OCCUPATION

On 20 August 1939 Stalin and Hitler concluded the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact by which Hitler, in order to prevent the Red Army attacking Germany whilst Germany was engaged against France, appeased the USSR by partitioning Poland and allotting the Baltic states to the Soviet 'sphere of influence'. At the beginning of World War II, in September and October 1939, Stalin pressured the Baltic states to accept 'treaties' allowing him to station Red Army garrisons on their territory.

On 15 June 1940, one month after the launch of Hitler's Western offensive, the Red Army occupied the Baltic states, and in August the USSR annexed them as Soviet Socialist Republics. Now these countries endured twelve months of property confiscation, religious persecution, summary execution and, on 13 June 1941 – a week before the German

¹ See Osprey Elite 76, *The German Freikorps 1918-23*

invasion – mass deportations to Siberia. The First Soviet Occupation cost the lives of about 100,000 Baltic citizens, an experience which proved so traumatic that Wehrmacht troops, advancing into the Baltic states from 22 June under Operation Barbarossa, were welcomed as liberators.

The Soviets had organised selected Baltic armed forces personnel into three 7,500-strong Red Army ‘Territorial Corps’ in June 1940. Estonia formed the 22nd Rifle Corps (180 & 182 Rifle Divs); Latvia, the 24th Rifle Corps (181 & 183 Rifle Divs); and Lithuania, the 29th Rifle Corps (179 & 184 Rifle Divisions). During the German attack in June 1941 all three Territorial Corps suffered mass desertions to the Germans; the Soviet High Command transferred them deep into Russia before disbanding them at the end of 1941, and hundreds of officers subsequently died in *Gulag* labour-camps while the other ranks were transferred to military labour duties. Last-minute Soviet attempts to mobilise Baltic civilians were largely unsuccessful.

In June 1940 some Estonian politicians and troops had fled to Finland, where on 23 June 1940 they formed, with German Abwehr support, a special 65-strong commando group designated ERNA, trained by German and Finnish instructors and commanded by Estonian Col. Henn-Ants Kurg. ERNA, dressed in Finnish Army uniforms, landed in northern Estonia in two detachments – by sea on 9 July and by parachute on 26 July – where it supported local Estonian guerrillas against the Red

Army; on 18 August it was reorganised as ERNA II Battalion. Many Latvians had also gone into exile during the Soviet occupation and a group of 200, mostly military personnel, were recruited and trained by the Abwehr. The Abwehr also trained 200 Lithuanian exiles under Col. Kazys Skirpa, commanding the main Lithuanian resistance organisation (Lithuanian Activist Front – *Lietuviu Aktyvistu Frontas*, LAF); but the Germans refused to form a Lithuanian Legion to fight with the Wehrmacht when it attacked the Soviet Union, for fear of compromising the secrecy of Operation Barbarossa.

Meanwhile, in each of the Baltic states guerrilla units were organised from armed forces personnel who had not been integrated into, or had escaped from, the Red Army; from

