

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF MILITARY HISTORY

MS # D-061

THE ESTONIAN CONTINGENTS IN 1944-45

The Estonian Contingents in 1944-45.
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A report on the effectiveness of six Estonian border security regiments raised by conscription in April 1944. The Germans found them unreliable as fighting troops; only a few units stood their ground in combat, and a German company was usually held in reserve behind each Estonian regiment, even though the Estonians looked upon Russia as their natural enemy; the Russian occupation of 1940 had shown them what to expect in a Soviet Republic.

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Topic: The Estonian Units in 1944/45

Summary:

Origin of the Estonian self-defense units- mobilization by the SS (no SS-insignias)- formation of 6 independent frontier protection regiments- behaviour against the Russians.-

Hiding as rangers in the forests and swamps

Combat performance was different.-

No political independence of Estonia - bad equipment and faults of the lower commands.- Not fit for attack-operations- confidence to the German military H.Qu.- No Russian partisan-results- principal opposition against the Russians.

On 1 April 1944 conscription was introduced in Estonia. Prior to that time only one Estonian volunteer division had been organized as part of III SS Panzer Corps.

Although a militia for the country's protection had been organized under Estonian command during 1941-42, it was called out only in emergencies. The men did not wear uniforms, and their weapons were kept at home.

The full-scale mobilization of Estonian manpower beginning 1 April 1944 was directed by the SS. The conscripts were given SS pay records and wore SS insignia. While most Estonians of draft age were willing to perform military service, they did not relish serving in the SS. They primarily wanted to avoid being tagged with a political label. The German military leaders therefore exempted the border security regiments from wearing SS insignia.

Six separate border security regiments were organized for use in the Narva sector. After arriving at the front, these regiments were placed under the command of Armeeabteilung Narva (reinforced corps, commanded by a corps commander, with a corps staff). The SS was solely responsible for training these regiments, and also for filling personnel replacement requisitions.

From the very outset, Estonians looked upon Russia as their natural enemy. The Russian occupation in 1940 had shown them too clearly what they could expect in a Soviet Republic. The Estonians remembered the numerous deportations vividly. At the time, part of the population had found refuge in the inaccessible swamps and woods, where relatives cared for them until the German troops arrived in 1941. These people were called

"forest rovers" (an approximation of the German term "Waldläufer"). They occupied underground shelters on islands in the swamps to which strangers could not find access. Only the uninitiated, who knew the underwater corduroy roads could make their way to these islands. Cattle as well as men were hidden in this manner.

The fighting spirit among the Estonian regiments varied. The political aim of the Estonians was a German guarantee that an Estonian state would be established. German political leaders were opposed to this idea, although German military leaders strongly supported it. The latter felt that such assurance would have raised Estonian morale immeasurably.

Only a few Estonian units stood their ground in combat. This was due to the poor equipment, and to inferior leadership on battalion and company level. However, two Estonian border security regiments (2d and 57th Regiments) did exceptionally well in defensive action and consequently were not suited for this purpose.

When Estonian units were first committed, three or four German non-commissioned officers were temporarily attached to each Estonian company. After this cadre was withdrawn, a German company was usually held in reserve behind each Estonian regiment. The border security regiments could not be used in mobile warfare. This became quite evident during the evacuation of Estonia, when all Estonian units disintegrated within a short time. Most of the troops fled into the swamps and forests or returned to their communities, and few joined German units.

All elements of the Estonian population had confidence in the German military leadership. The Estonians approached the German military authorities about everything, asked for assistance, and in return did everything in their power to co-operate. On the other hand, the relationship between the civilian administration and the Estonians left much to be desired.

The smooth teamwork between the German military authorities and the Estonian civilian population eliminated the threat of partisan activity. There virtually were no Estonian partisans. In February and March 1944, 400-500 Russian partisans made their way across Lake Peipus and infiltrated into the forests behind the German lines. Since the civilian population fled and refused to feed them the Russians had to resort to force. After a week or two small groups of partisans fled back across the frozen surface of Lake Peipus under cover of darkness.

The Estonians were and are hostile towards Russia. For them the Narva River constitutes the boundary which separates Europe from Asia.