

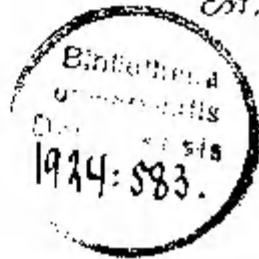
ESTHONIA

A SECOND BELGIUM



BY

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ESTHONIA

A SECOND BELGIUM

THE story of Esthonia is as tragically poignant as that of Belgium. Therefore she is called by Professor Sir John Macdonell the Belgium of the East. It is unfortunate that the British public are not familiar with her history, her trials, and her aspirations.

The Republic of Esthonia consists of the Northern part of the former Russian Baltic Provinces—*i.e.*, the Government of Estland (Esthonia), the northern part of Livonia, the islands of the Moon Sound, and also parts of the Pskov and Petrograd Governments inhabited by Esthonians or Esths. Esthonia is a country of about 47,500 square kilometres, with a population of one and a half millions, comprising 90 per cent. Esthonians, the remaining 10 per cent. consisting of Russians, Germans, Swedes, Letts, Jews, and emigrated Lithuanian and Polish workers. It is to be remarked that the German population in Esthonia is notable only by its paucity. According to the last calculation, there were but 2.4 per cent., which consisted of some hundred baronial families and a small number of bourgeoisie in the towns. *There is no German peasantry in Esthonia.* The Russian population exceeds that of Germany. Other nationalities are very sparsely represented, so that in speaking of Esthonia we must consider it to consist of the Esths, and of the Letts, speaking of the south of the Baltic provinces.

The ethnographical frontier between the Esths and the Letts is very strongly accentuated, and continues from the River Salis to Walk, and thence southwards almost to Marienburg, and from there north-east to Pskov-Lake. The Esthonian colony in the Petrograd Government is also large, the pure Esthonian part of it being near Narwa and Yamburg, which are attached to Esthonia.

The history of Esthonia is marked by a persistent struggle against the mediæval construction of social and political life, especially against the ancient organisation of self-government, which was represented by the class-organisation of the nobility and landlords on the model of the so-called Landtags of Nobility. The last unsuccessful attempt at reform in the political government of the country was in the year 1905, when a strong revolutionary movement made itself evident in the Russian Revolution. At that time the Baltic nobility, with the assistance of the Tsarist gendarmes, perpetrated one of the most cruel and sanguinary outrages that the world has ever seen.

It was the second Russian Revolution that completely changed the old political order of things. This Revolution in Esthonia was attended by a remarkable spirit of order and moderation. The events during the last year are as follows: The Esthonian National Council or Diet (*Maanõukogu*) was established by act of the Provisional Russian Government on March 30th (April 12th), 1917. On July 7th-8th the members of this body were duly elected by universal suffrage and proportional electoral law, and amongst

those so elected were the representatives of the German and Swedish population. The first meeting of the National Council took place in Reval on July 14th, 1917. A Government was established which took charge of all affairs of the former administration, both governmental and otherwise. In July-September the old Landtags of Nobility in Estland, Oesel, and partly in Livonia surrendered their self-government appointments.

The object in the minds of the Esthonians was to become a state in the Russian Federation. There then occurred the lamentable collapse of the Russian Army on the Eastern Front, under Bolshevik rule, which prevented any hope of help from that source in the Esthonian defence against the Germans, and as a consequence the Esthonian National Council met again at Reval on November 15th-28th in the same year and proclaimed the independence of Esthonia, basing their action on the principle of self-determination of nations as recognised by Russia and the Allied Powers. The National Council decided to convoke the Esthonian Constituent Assembly. On January 10th-14th, 1918, the resolution regarding the independence of Esthonia was confirmed by a United Assembly authorised by the National Council. It was also decided that the Esthonian Republic should be declared a permanent neutral country, and to this end international guarantees were to be asked for.

A proposal made by the German nobility in Esthonia, that the country should accept German protection in view of the Bolshevik terror, was not accepted, and the United Assembly unanimously adopted the following resolution:—

“ That all the political parties of Esthonia affirm that the Esthonian people in its entirety is opposed to the occupation of Esthonia by German troops, and sees in such occupation a most cruel violation of its national sovereign rights. At the same time the whole nation wishes that all foreign troops be at once removed from Esthonian territory.”

Despite this unanimous desire of the people, the German nobility took upon themselves, quite unexpectedly, the right to speak in the name of the country, and to collect signatures for a petition to the German Government requesting the German occupation of Esthonia. The signatures subscribed to this petition consisted solely of German residents in the country. The election for the Esthonian Constituent Assembly took place on February 3rd last. Unfortunately, the presence of the Bolsheviks interrupted the course of the election, and it was not completed. It is necessary, however, to note that the elections to the Esthonian Constituent Assembly were *de facto* a Referendum on the question of the Independence of the Country, and the result was that an enormous majority of the population voted for absolute independence, the remainder preferring an autonomy, but as part of the Russian Federation.

It is deplorable to relate that the invitation of the German nobility for German troops to occupy Esthonia was promptly accepted, and it was not long before the German military

authorities prohibited the National Council and the Provisional Government from carrying out their duties, and appointed Germans to govern the country. Thus commenced the materialisation in Esthonia of the usual German trend of thought: the breaking of international law, the violating of the Brest-Litovsk treaty, and the trampling underfoot of the laws of humanity, with the result that at present the whole of Esthonia, like the other Baltic provinces, is under the cruel and unjust domination of the Germans.

The present conditions ruling in Esthonia are intolerable in the extreme. Arbitrary rule is the order of the day. The Press of the Esthonian Parties has been crushed, political life is suppressed, and all meetings are forbidden. The Germans and the landowners are ruling the country. In the rural districts the authorities who were in office before the Revolution have been restored to their posts. The Russian language is forbidden, as also is correspondence in Esthonian. In Reval a German Mayor has been appointed, and the town council consists of men of that nationality. Many of the politicians and members of the Esthonian Government have been arrested, and the German barons and Pan-Germanists have a free hand. They have the monopoly of the judicature, and the censorship of correspondence. According to the news from Maxim Gorky's newspaper, *Novaia Shishn*, the barons have executed many of their labourers.

That the situation is acute may be surmised from the fact that even the Left parties in the German Reichstag have felt themselves obliged to protest against the violence of the German Baltic Barons and Pan-Germans. The representatives of the Esthonian Provisional Government in Stockholm on July 3rd, 1918, also issued a strongly-worded protest against the barbaric German oppression. This was not the first protest published by the Esthonians, as protests were issued against the right of the German barons to appeal for German troops to occupy the country, and also repudiating the right of the Landtags of nobility to speak on behalf of the Esthonian people. Protest was further made against the decision of the United Landesrat to ask for personal union with Prussia. The Esthonians have nothing in common, politically, with Germany; they desire neither annexation nor personal union: they claim their right to be independent, to be free of German domination, and also to be dissociated from the anarchic policy of the Great-Russians. Esthonia strongly protests against the violation of international laws, and even the restrictions of the Brest-Litovsk treaty are ignored.

The Germans being only the "policing force" (Art. 6, Brest-Litovsk treaty) have in Esthonia fewer rights than during a military occupation. Even during occupation the occupiers must "respect at the same time, unless absolutely prevented, the laws in force in the country." (Art. 43 of the Regulations respecting the laws and customs of War on Land, Hague, 1907.) Therefore this "policing force" has only the task of enforcing order as prescribed by the Constituent convention. The Germans, however, break these rules every day:--

(a) They do not respect the independent self-governing body, the Estonian National Council and Provisional Government, and they have declared that the only power in the country is the German military authority.

(b) They have dissolved the democratic town councils, and have appointed temporary committees composed of Germans. It is very palpable that the dismissal of these bodies was not due to absence of order, but simply by reason of the German annexation policy.

(c) They have created, partly by appointment, new bodies, two separate Country's Assemblies, in Reval and Riga, and a Landesrat in Riga for Estonia, Livonia, Oesel Island, and the city of Riga, and have given no recognition to the laws which were in existence before the German invasion. For example, they have destroyed the national unity of Estonia created by the legal Russian Provisional Government, rejoining the Estonian districts of North Livonia and South Livonia. The situation of the country presented no justification for the German violation of existing laws.

(d) The introduction of the German language in the schools and the prohibition of the use of the Estonian and Russian languages are quite beyond the province of the Germans' self-imposed task of acting as a "police force" for the preservation of order. There is also the Germanisation of the Dorpat University simply by a decree of a Commander of Division.

(e) The general requisition made in a country stricken with famine is most inhuman, and the Germans thereby violate international law, not only for the support of forces stationed locally but also for transportation.

(f) The oppression of the whole political life, which was in accordance with the wish of the people and calculated to maintain order in the country, is a new violation of their duties as police, as is also the monopoly of landed barons for judicature.

(g) The arresting and shooting of politicians and others is intolerable. The presence of the Germans is simply as a "policing force." There is therefore no military or martial law in Estonia.

It will be seen, therefore, that on all the above grounds international law, by Article 6 of the Brest-Litovsk treaty, has been violated by the Germans, who ignore all treaties and pledges, and no doubt justify their position on the principle that "Might is right."

For the sake of clarity it may be of interest to state briefly the exact international position of the Baltic Provinces and of Estonia. The *de facto* position is this. According to the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty concluded by the Russian *de facto* Government and Germany, without any right and without consulting the sovereign Estonian people, the Estonian Islands of the Moon Sound are separated from Russia, with their fate to be decided by Germany in accordance with the wishes of the population. Continental Estonia is still under Russian sovereignty, but invaded by a German "Police Force," until order is secured by the country's own institutions and State organisation. By a new Russian-German treaty the Continental parts of Estonia are also separated from Russia, being independent.

Germany has, however, broken her recent statement by creating

new bodies to express the Pan-German desire for personal union with Prussia, as passed by the Landesrat on April 12th. The German Government and the King of Prussia, Kaiser Wilhelm, although not having yet accepted the crown, replied that the fate of Esthonia and Livonia shall be settled in accordance with Russia, but a "desire expressed by the Landesrat would be welcomed."

The *de jure* position is this: Esthonia, basing herself on the right of the self-determination of nations as adopted by the Russian Government, has proclaimed her independence. The *de facto* independence of the Esthonian Republic has temporarily—until the occasion of the peace conference—been recognised by Great Britain, France, and Italy, and will, it is hoped, be equally recognised by the other Allies. The Esthonian Delegation, in the name of the Esthonian National Council on April 23rd, asked H.B.M. Government:—

"(1) To recognise the independence of the Democratic Republic of Esthonia within her ethnographical frontiers, including the Isles of the Moon Sound; (2) to recognise the Provisional Government authorised by the Esthonian National Council or Diet as the only legal power of Esthonia; and (3) to grant to Esthonia the right to participate in the General Peace Conference, so as to be able to defend her interests and introduce the question of Esthonian perpetual neutrality and its international guarantees."

On May 3rd, 1918, in the name of the British Government, Mr. A. J. Balfour, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, replied:—

"His Majesty's Government greet with sympathy the aspirations of the Esthonian people, and are glad to reaffirm their readiness to grant provisional recognition to the Esthonian National Council as a *de facto* independent body, until the Peace Conference, when the future status of Esthonia ought to be settled as far as possible in accordance with the wishes of the population. It would obviously be impossible for His Majesty's Government at the present time to guarantee to Esthonia the right to participate at the Peace Conference, but at any such Conference His Majesty's Government will do their utmost to secure that the above principle is applied to Esthonia."

The French and Italian Governments, on May 13th and 20th respectively, replied in terms similar to the above. The delegates of the Esthonian National Council are at the same time received by the respective Governments as the informal diplomatic representatives of the Esthonian Provisional Government.

It has been stated in the *Round Table* (March, 1918) that it would be difficult to find a peasantry so well cultured as is the Esthonian peasantry. This brave little nation, even now, under the German yoke, is making a wonderful stand for its independence. For reasons that are obvious, it desires neither personal union with Prussia nor association with Russia. The Germans are hated by the Esthonians for national and social reasons, and the Russians on political grounds.

Esthonia desires that her neutrality shall be guaranteed, so that she may become a free-trade country, with free harbours and free

access for the Western Allies to trade with Russia. The importance of Esthonian independence to the Western Allies may be judged from the fact that she is the gateway of the Baltic Sea for Russian trade. Fully one-third of Russia's foreign trade passed through the Baltic ports, as the following figures for 1913 will show:—

	Exports	Imports
Foodstuffs	24	24
Raw and Semi-manufactured Products...	44	46
Manufactures	12.2	27
Live Stock	6.8	—

Before the war the most important port for trade was Riga, Reval—the principal Esthonian port—being the second, as can be seen from the following figures (1913):—

	Imports (Roubles).	Exports (Roubles).
Riga	1,31,704,024	201,880,763
Reval	76,734,651	19,755,529
Narva	5,182,820	1,058,167
Pernau	2,273,140	3,874,237

It is beyond dispute that the loss to Great Russia of her Black Sea ports will greatly increase the importance of the Baltic ports for East European trade. Not even the open northern ports at Murman can reduce the importance of the Baltic ports, owing to the distance of the former from the chief centres of consumption.

The war will cause the routes of the world's trade to change for reasons both political and economical. It is more or less feared that some of the South Baltic ports, especially Libau and Windau, and possibly Riga, will remain under German influence, even if not annexed, as at present according to the accentuated desire of the Pan-Germans. Thus the South Baltic ports would be cut off from East Europe and become the ports of the Central Powers. Again, these ports cannot be navigable for some time after the cessation of hostilities through the destruction that has been meted out to them. It follows, therefore, that after the war the chief ports into East Europe will be the North Baltic or Esthonian ports of Reval, Baltic Port, &c., which are ice-free all the year round. These ports already exist as the most convenient winter harbours for Petrograd and Moscow, their facilities for shipping being excellent. Coal and cotton imports are perhaps the most important, and as regards exports, these mainly consist of oats, wheat, cabinet work, flax, rye, props, and paper manufacturing raw products.

If the freedom of the Baltic trade is to be maintained Esthonia's independence must be assured and her ports made free for the Western Allies. To Great Britain and the other Allies it is not only because of their reputation as defenders of small nationalities that Esthonia appeals; it is also because Esthonia, under German domination, would mean that the freedom of the Baltic Sea would be at an end, and the Baltic Sea would practically become a German lake. The question that will naturally be asked is whether Esthonia

would be in a position to maintain her independence were it assured to her. What guarantee would there be that the Central Powers would not violate her neutrality and consider any treaties made as "scraps of paper"? Esthonia must rely upon the Great Powers to maintain their guarantees, and she looks forward to the inauguration of the League of Nations to secure for her as well as for all small nations protection from the violation that Germany has repeatedly enforced as part of her military *régime*.

To summarise the case for Esthonia. Esthonia must be free from German domination, to maintain the freedom of the Baltic Sea. To the Esthonian people must be granted the full right of self-determination, and therefore Esthonian independence, proclaimed by their democratic representative body and reaffirmed by the cry of the people, must be recognised by the Western Allies. Esthonian freedom is essential for Great Britain and the other Allies for international trade, untrammelled by German interference. Esthonia looks therefore to the Great Allied Powers to accept her cause as their own, and to utilise their influence to liberate her from the tyrannic heel of German oppression.