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Danish volunteer soldiers in Estonia's War of Independence

1919

By PhD. Historian and Author
MIKKEL KIRKEBAEK

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DANNEBROG 800
1219-2019

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K.M.B.

Kristina Miskowiak Beckvard
Ambassador

PREFACE

by Ambassador Kristina Miskowiak Beckvard

Shortly after my arrival in Tallinn as Ambassador of Denmark to Estonia, I had the honour to receive the first Danish contingent to NATO's enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) garrisoned in Tapa. The arrival of these soldiers constitutes a new important part of the very special Estonian-Danish story of security, freedom and solidarity.

It has been said, 'History does not repeat itself, but it often rhymes'. The rhymes or echoes of the past are indeed often present in our minds when new developments unfold. Estonian-Danish history contains the rhymes of some interesting numbers and events.

'200' is the number of Danish soldiers participating in the eFP, the purpose of which is to contribute to security for Estonia, the Baltic Sea Region and the whole of NATO. 200 was also the number of Danish volunteer soldiers who arrived a century earlier to participate in the Estonian War of Independence.

'19' is the number most frequently repeated in Estonian-Danish history: A journey in time could take us back to the fervent Danish support and leading role of former Danish Foreign Minister Uffe Ellemann-Jensen in the diplomatic fight for international recognition of Estonia's regained independence in 1991, and the journey could go further back in time to 1919 and the Danish contribution to the Estonian War of Independence. Even further,

this time travel could take us back to the Medieval relations marked by the events of 1219 when King Valdemar II commenced more than a century of Danish rule in Northern Estonia and, according to the legend, received the Danish flag, the 'Dannebrog', from the sky.

The story of the 'Dannebrog' falling from the sky at Lyndanisse, now Tallinn, is a legend that has been dear to Danes throughout times, so when the Danish volunteers arrived in 1919, they were well aware that they came to Estonia exactly 700 years after King Valdemar II. The volunteers fought side by side with their Estonian comrades, holding the Danish colours high now to the benefit of Estonia's independence, as can be seen for example in a unique film clip of the volunteers, kept in the Estonian National Archives.

During the War of Independence, it was the Estonians themselves who liberated their country, but the help from friends in the UK, Finland, Denmark and Sweden has not been forgotten.

At the 100th Anniversary of the Estonian Declaration of Independence, the contribution of the Danish volunteers was highlighted on Freedom Square in the speech of the Estonian Chief of Defence, and this was done in the context of the presence of the exact same number of Danish soldiers in the eFP,

one century later. History rhymed, and it echoed with every marching step, when the Danish contingent to the eFP and a Colour Guard of the Danish Home Guard showed the 'Dannebrog' in the 100th Anniversary parade.

In addition to the actions of the Danish volunteers, the British Royal Navy was allowed to use Copenhagen to situate their headquarters for its important operations in the Baltic Sea, indispensable in the Estonian War of Independence. This has been described also by Danish Brigadier General Michael Clemmesen, creator and first commandant of the Baltic Defence College in Tartu. A recent exhibition facilitated by my esteemed British colleague, Ambassador Theresa Bubbear, at the Maritime Museum, Seaplane Harbour in Tallinn – inaugurated by the Earl and Countess of Wessex in October 2018 – cast light on the importance of the British Royal Navy in the Estonian Independence War. This exhibition also contributed to the understanding of Denmark's support permitting the use of the port of Copenhagen in 1918-1919.

100 years ago, the first Danish-Estonian military cooperation began after Estonia's Declaration of Independence in 1918. When the citizens of Tallinn looked out their windows in the morning of 4 April 1919, they could already see Danish soldiers, in Danish military uniforms, moving around the capital. This book outlines the story of the Danish volunteers and the Danish military efforts in Estonia in 1919. More than 2,000 Danes had volunteered to participate in the independence war. Mainly due to financial problems, however, only one company arrived. The participation of the 200 volunteers was in many ways spectacular and controversial. However, the Danes were well-received. On departing from Nõmme, the Commanders of the Estonian forces, General Laidoner and Chief of Staff Soots, inspected the Danish volunteers. Laidoner praised the disciplinary attitude of the corps and thanked the volunteers for coming to Estonia.

The historical, military, cultural and human bonds between our countries are thus long-standing, close and strong. Estonia's security is Denmark's security, and the story of the Danish volunteers in 1919 illustrates that the Danish population's feelings of connection, inter-dependence and solidarity with Estonia go deep.

I hope that Estonian readers, as well as Danish and all other readers, will enjoy this booklet written by the committed and well-informed historian Mikkel Kirkebæk, who is working on an extensive research project on the Danish voluntary forces in the Baltic States during 1919.

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M.K.

PREFACE

by General Major and commander
of the Estonian Defence League Meelis Kiili

A great political leader, philosopher and military commander, Marcus Antonius, once said: "*The universe is transformation: life is opinion*". So one cannot ignore the ever-changing nature of the world – power politics, national interests, globalisation, violence and a myriad of other aspects that shape our societies' security environment and well-being. Yet, one should also acknowledge that there are numerous opportunities for us to lead the change in correlation with our national values.

Global World by definition dictates that changes do not occur in void or in isolation. We all have our neighbours with whom we share not only the geographical space but with whom we correlate or vice versa do not share the mental, cognitive or social values. The unity of likeminded countries is one of the most determining factors in preserving peace and security in our region. It enables us to deter a possible adversary and keep initiative. It can be demonstrated in many different ways and domains like diplomacy, information, economy and military.

Estonia is enjoying a security situation that is unprecedentedly one of the most stable and secure throughout Estonia's turbulent history. It is a result of a long evolution where allies have played a commendable role. Denmark is not just an ally but also a strategic partner. Not everybody can be the strategic partner; only the countries with whom we share our common values, security perception, geography and common history.

Meelis Kiili
General Major and commander of the
Estonian Defence League

The shared history of Estonia and Denmark might not have started in harmony as in history they often do not, but what matters is how the relationship has evolved and how it is going to proceed. The battle of Lyndanisse was where Denmark got hold of the national flag Dannebrog. Eight hundred years ago, that divided our nations but especially since the Estonian War of Independence, it has become a symbol of unity which binds our realms together. Did Estonians a hundred years ago, having allies on our soil, fighting for our cause, appreciate it? Of course, they did; it had a huge strategic message – we are

not on our own, facing the mighty enemy. By that posture, it was actually an invitation to join free nations; it was a manifest of belief for Estonia meeting the same standards and values as Denmark.

In addition, the white cross on red background was a sign of hope and determination in midst of the restoration of Estonia's independence. Recognition of our right to be free was a deed on global magnitude. When the great powers hesitated, Denmark did not. The almost immediate recognition of Estonia's sovereignty carried the same weight as the Danish volunteers in the Estonian War of Independence.

Today Danes and Estonians stay shoulder to shoulder defending our common values. We have been together in numerous military missions, taking risks and sacrificing our people to a greater cause. Yet again, the Danish banner is flying on our skies as a part of NATO's effort to preserve the peace.

Therefore, if life is an opinion then it is wise to shape it in a way which meets our nations' expectations, way of life and provide our people a maximum security. I am convinced that our generation and the ones to follow will bear the same dedication to come to aide each other when the times go ill. Furthermore, I can envisage that working together in the fields of diplomacy, information, politics, military and economy we will prevail over the malevolent and we preserve peace.

On behalf of my compatriots, I would like to express our gratitude for the Danish volunteers who came to our aide a hundred years ago, and to those who are with us today. Together we are strong; together we endure!

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DANISH VOLUNTEERS IN THE ESTONIAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE 1919

In January 2018, a 200-man strong Danish battlegroup contingent landed at Ämari air base in Estonia. The Danish troops were being stationed in Tapa as part of NATO's eFP force (enhanced Forward Presence), whose role is to deter Russia from violating Estonia's sovereignty.

On April 3, 1919 a 200-man strong Danish battlegroup contingent landed in Tallinn harbour. The Danish troops were to be deployed on the Southern front under the Estonian Army's 2nd Division, to fight in the Estonian War of Independence and thus secure Estonia's sovereignty and independence from Bolshevist Russia.

Although the events described above are a hundred years apart, it is almost impossible not to compare these two significant events in the history of Danish-Estonian military collaboration. The events may appear similar, but that was by no means the case. Estonia, a member of NATO and the EU, is an integrated part of the European family, but a hundred years ago the situation was quite different. During the years 1918-1920 Estonia fought a cruel independence war about the right to liberty and freedom from Bolshevist Russia. However, it is not common knowledge that Danish volunteer troops aided Estonia in this fight. Over a few months in the beginning of 1919, more than 2000 Danish men volunteered to join the Estonian fight for freedom. Ultimately, only the first of four planned companies went to Estonia, but despite the modest number of Danish soldiers, it was of great moral importance that Western European troops went voluntarily to reinforce Estonia in her fight for independence. This article tells the story of the Danish volunteers in the Estonian War of Independence in 1918-1920. The article stems from a comprehensive study of Danish volunteers in the Baltic independence wars, to be published in the autumn of 2019. Due to considerations of space, this article focuses solely on the volunteer effort in Estonia, although the Danish volunteers under Estonian command, fighting alongside Estonian brothers-in-arms, fought another two military campaigns in 1919 in Latvia and Russia, respectively. But the story of the Danish volunteer corps, named the *Danish Baltic Auxiliary Corps* (DBAC), begins long before the war – it begins in Tsarist Russia with the dream of an independent Estonian nation.[1]

1 This article was written with the support from the Danish Defence Staff, Copenhagen. In the footnotes, the following abbreviations are used: EAA (National Archive, Tartu), ERA (National Archive, Tallinn), FO (Foreign Office, UK), FOARK (Defence archives, DK), NA (National Archive, Kew, London), RA (National Archive, Copenhagen), UM (Foreign Office, DK), UMF (Foreign Office Archives, FIN), WO (War Office, UK).

THE BACKGROUND OF THE ESTONIAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

As was also the case elsewhere in Europe, Estonian minority in Tsarist Russia had been influenced by ideas of national identity and national self-determination since the mid-1850s. Initially, these notions just expressed a wish for greater autonomy within the Russian Empire. But World War I and the Bolshevist assumption of power in October 1917 (November 1917 according to the Gregorian Calendar) made the nationalist forces in Estonia begin working exclusively towards full Estonian independence. It was no easy task. In 1918 – the last year of the World War I – the German armies had made substantial advances on the Eastern front, and in order to save the faltering "world revolution", the Bolshevist leadership had signed the Brest-Litovsk agreement, agreeing to pull back from the Baltic region and leave Estonia in the German sphere of interest. When the Russian troops retreated from Estonia, and the German armies had not yet moved in, Estonian nationalists seized the opportunity to declare Estonia's independence on February 24, 1918. For the first time since 13th century, Estonia was free of foreign dominance. The joy was short-lived, though. German troops arrived in Tallinn the next day, and they refused to acknowledge the new independent state and the Estonian Provincial Assembly. Several nationalist leaders were imprisoned, and the independence efforts were suppressed. Although the German armies had a firm grip on the eastern front, the war took its toll on Germany on the western front, and in 1918 most people expected it to be a matter of time before Germany would have to surrender. A German defeat would mean that the German occupation forces would have to be withdrawn from Estonia. From an Estonian point of view, this was obviously positive, but at the same time it created a new and highly dangerous situation for the national independence movement. Without any German presence, Estonia was without any protection from the Bolshevists, who had several reasons to want to re-annex Estonia into Bolshevist Russia. First and foremost, Russian Bolshevism was fundamentally expansive, since it insisted on a world revolution. But Estonia was also important to the Bolshevists from a geopolitical perspective. Without the harbours in Estonia and Latvia, the Soviet Union would lose a lot of maneuvering space financially as well as militarily. The harbours also connected Russia with Germany and Scandinavia, and as such they were an important treadstone in relation to the world revolution. Particularly towards the end of the World War I, when the Bolshevists wanted to support the revolutionary tendencies in Germany, the recapture of the Baltic was considered essential.[2]

SCANDINAVIAN SUPPORT TROOPS TO ESTONIA?

During the World War I, in May 1918, the nations of France, Great Britain and Italy had de facto recognized Estonia's independence while the country was still occupied by German forces. The Estonian National Assembly had thereby achieved the acceptance of the allies and international legitimacy. However, it is important to note,

2 Hovi, Olavi: *The Baltic area in British policy, 1918-1921*. Finnish Historical Society. Helsinki 1980, s. 64

that there was no de jure recognition of Estonia, and that the allies' relationship to the Estonians mostly followed political paths that were more intended to weaken German and Bolshevist interests than to strengthen the specific national interests of Estonia. But the de facto recognition of Estonia had encouraged the independence movement, and during the German occupation the Estonians lobbied extensively to advance Estonian national interests and to ensure that the country would achieve independent status after the war. The national movements in Estonia had since the World War I been preparing themselves to meet the threat from the east, which would arise when the German troops would be forced to retreat from Estonian soil toward the end of the war. By the end of September 1918, the member of Estonian Foreign Delegation in Stockholm Jaan Tõnisson contacted the Swedish government to enquire the possibility of Sweden sending military forces to Estonia. The idea was to encourage the neutral Scandinavian countries, for an interim period, to send official army forces to Estonia to fill the power vacuum, which would develop when the Germans withdrew, and thus prevent the Bolshevists from moving in. The idea of letting Scandinavian army forces act as boots on the ground in Estonia to secure the West against Bolshevist expansion appealed greatly to the allies. Towards the end of the World War I, none of the Allied great powers appeared interested in another military engagement, so persuading the Scandinavians to deploy troops in Estonia seemed an ideal solution. From Autumn 1918 onwards, therefore, it became Estonia's and Britain's joint policy to attempt convincing the three Scandinavian governments to engage militarily in the protection of Estonia. On October 12, 1918 the Foreign Office received a report from the British military attaché in Copenhagen, analyzing the situation and advocating the necessity for outside military assistance to cover the gap between the German withdrawal and the establishing of Estonian army forces. In addition to this, he stated the following: "*The Esthonian delegates tell us that they have sounded Mr. Branting (Social Democratic leader Hjalmar Branting) and one of the Swedish Ministers and have received encouraging replies. They did not, they tell us, approach the Danes, assuming – no doubt correctly – that the habitual timidity of the Danish Government in matters of foreign policy would render such a request futile. On the other hand they consider that the Swedes, with their more aggressive and self-assertive temperament, would not shrink from the enterprise provided that the Allies gave it their countenance and that the Germans did not actually protest – which they would apparently have no grounds for doing.*"[3] Furthermore, the military attaché concluded that Scandinavian solidarity, having been notably strengthened during the war, would mean that once the Swedes had been persuaded to participate, Denmark and Norway would follow suit. The British diplomatic representatives Mr. Clive in Stockholm, Mr. Finlay in Oslo and Lord Kilmarnock in Copenhagen were now instructed to relay the contents of identical official requests from the British Foreign Office, issued on October 28, 1918 to the governments of the three Nordic countries, asking them in unambiguous terms to send troops to the Baltic.[4]

3 NA. FO 371/3344. Report from the British military attaché in Copenhagen, dated 12.10.1918.

4 Already the same day as the Aide Memoir was delivered in Copenhagen, the Danish Foreign Ministry wrote to Oslo and Stockholm to enquire about the positions of the Norwegian and Swedish governments on the matter. NA. FO 371/3344. Letter from the Foreign Office to Stockholm, Christiania and Copenhagen, dated 28.10.1918; RA. UM. Grouped files 1909-45, pk. 147-175, Aide mémoire, dated 29.10.1918 and letter to the Danish envoys in Christiania and Stockholm; Jensen, Bent: *Danmark og det russiske spørgsmål 1917-1924*. Jysk Selskab for Historie. Universitetsforlaget i Aarhus. Aarhus 1979, p. 136-137.

THE SCANDINAVIAN GOVERNMENTS AND THE INDEPENDENCE WAR

The British request presented the Scandinavian countries with several big dilemmas. In the middle of the World War it would be inconceivable to deviate from a neutrality policy by sending troops to the Baltic region, where Germany and Russia both had vital geostrategic interest. The consequences could be enormous for the small Scandinavian countries. On the other hand, it would be difficult for the Scandinavian governments to turn down the Allies, who would stand as the undisputed victors of Europe after the end of the war. Preferably, the Scandinavian countries would decline the task, but they thought it expedient not to refuse the Allies flat out. Scandinavia's attitude towards the British requests by the end of the war, then, was hesitant. A contributing factor to this reluctant stance, of course, was the fact that the Baltic countries were considered unstable formations of state, and were not expected to last very long. After some deliberations the Scandinavian governments decided that they were not willing to jeopardize neutrality by agreeing to send troops to the Baltic. But in 1918, it was crucial to all the Scandinavian countries to maintain a good relationship to the British.[5] Therefore, alternative ways to oblige the British request for military help to the Baltic were explored. With Germany beaten and Russia dissolving it seemed sensible to stay on good terms with the victors of the war – particularly as Denmark was hoping for the support of the Allies after the World War I to re-annex the region of Slesvig, which Denmark had lost to the Germans in 1864. The solution for Denmark then, was to lead parallel policies regarding military aid to Estonia: Officially, Denmark had nothing to do with it; unofficially, the Danish government allowed secret weapons exports to the British, allocated for the Baltic region, along with the formation and equipping of a corps of volunteer soldiers, who would assist Estonia in its quest for independence. The corps would be established and funded privately on a non-government basis. The Danish government neither could nor would take any active part but agreed to turn a blind eye, as long as enlistment and deployment of the Danish support troops was done discreetly. But time was sparse. Germany accepted their defeat in the World War on November 11, 1918, and by mid-November the German troops vacated Estonia. Shortly after, on November 28, the Red Army attacked Narva, thus launching their invasion of Estonia. The Estonian War of Independence had begun.

THE DANISH PRIVATE INITIATIVE

The Bolshevist attack on Estonia meant that the Estonian as well as international efforts to secure military assistance for the small Baltic country were heavily intensified. In Denmark, the upper-class conservative, heavily anti-Bolshevist circles had already been contemplating for some time how Denmark could participate in the armed anti-Bolshevist fight. The principal organizers behind these initiatives were Aage Westenholz, a pro-military businessman, and Iver Gudme, a young student. They had both been involved in the Danish help to the

5 On the Swedish and Norwegian position on the matter, see Kuldkepp, Mart: *Swedish political attitudes towards Baltic independence in the short twentieth century.* Ajalooline Ajakiri, 3:4. 2016, p. 401; Kristiansen, Tom: *Det fjerne og farlige Baltikum. Norge og det baltiske spørgsmål 1918-1940.* IFS Info – Institutt for forsvarsstudier. No. 4. 1992, s. 8, 25; Kangeris, Kārlis: *Die schwedische Baltikumpolitik 1918-1925. Ein Überblick.* Printed in: Hiden, John og Loit, Aleksander: The Baltic in international relations between the two world wars. Centre for Baltic Studies University of Stockholm. Uppsala 1988, s. 191; Westerlund, Lars: *Hur kom det "nordiska" til uttryck?* Printed in: Westerlund, Lars: Norden och krigen i Finland och Balticum 1918–1919. Statsrådets Kanslis Publikationsserie. Helsingfors 2004, s. 198-201.03.1919

white side in the Finnish civil war, and they both considered the anti-Bolshevist fight in the fringe states a vital part of Danish national defense. In January 1919, the public in Denmark was first made aware of the work which had been going on for some time in order to establish a Danish volunteer military effort for Estonia. However, most of it still went on behind closed doors. On January 6, 1919, the British acting military attaché in Copenhagen communicated with General William Thwaites, the head of British military intelligence in the War Office. The communication, which was classified, was about the potential establishing of a Danish expeditionary corps for deployment in Estonia, and about the Danish initiators' wishes for help from the British. In the report to London the military attaché Mr. Smithers elaborated: "*This force is being financed entirely by funds privately subscribed and without sanction of Danish Government. Impossible for them to purchase uniforms in Denmark. Suggest this should be a free issue. Reply urgently requested.*"[6]

The background for the report to the War Office was a report delivered to Mr. Smithers at the British legation in Copenhagen, with a request that it be forwarded to London. The report was written by Iver Gudme and contained a number of detailed plans and suggestions for the deployment of a Danish military contingent to Estonia. According to Gudme, he became aware of the Estonians' fight for freedom in 1918, after speaking to the British military attaché in Copenhagen, Colonel Wade. Then the idea of sending Danish volunteers to Estonia began to grow among the small group of Danish volunteers who had participated on the white side of the Finnish civil war from January to May 1918. In the report, Gudme also explained the motives behind the plans to establish a Danish volunteer corps. The main purpose was to fight Bolshevism and consequently strengthen Scandinavian solidarity in the struggles against Germany and Russia. But in addition, Gudme explained that the purpose was also to give the Danish people something that the Danish government would not have given: An opportunity to join the fight for peace and freedom in Europe. Herein lay of course a thinly disguised criticism of both the Danish government and the neutrality policy led by Denmark during the World War I. The report thoroughly explained how the ideas of a Danish expeditionary corps to Estonia began to take shape when one of the former Finland volunteers, Captain Jørgen Rantzau, suggested that funds might be collected in Denmark privately to allow 25 Danish officers to travel to Estonia to act as light machine gun instructors. Simultaneous to this small Danish initiative, the Finns had begun establishing a far greater Finnish expeditionary corps, to be deployed to Estonia by the end of 1918. Therefore, the Finns were very interested in knowing what Denmark was doing on the matter. On December 8, 1918, the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs received the following telegram from the Finnish legation in Copenhagen, clearly referencing to Gudme and Rantzau's initiative: "*Have learned from a reliable source the English are trying to recruit Danish volunteer military instructors for Estonia and procure Madsen rifles for them. Stop. A shipment of nine hundred rifles had already been promised, but special circumstances have prevented fulfilment of the pledge. Stop. Important whether Danish will*

6 NA. FO 371/3954. Letter from Smithers to Thwaites, dated 06.01.1919

to fight down Bolshevism could be useful to Finland".[7] The Finnish report clearly showed two things: Firstly, the English were positive to the idea of Danish volunteers and secondly, that the Finns were very concerned whether any Danish initiatives could be used to a Finnish political advantage. Without going into further detail about the organization of the Danish corps, it can be concluded here that Danish, British, Finnish and Estonian joint efforts went into establishing and equipping a Danish expeditionary corps, which would be attached to the Finnish volunteers in Estonia as a separate Danish unit. The Danish initiators would be in charge of recruitment and all practical matters in Denmark, as well as obtaining funding for parts of the expenses. The Estonian national government would carry the expenses for soldiers' pay and costs in Estonia, the Finns would organize transport of the volunteers (via Finland) and other logistical issues, while the British would arrange for weapons, depots and equipment for the Danes. The Danish government's only task was to keep its eyes and ears closed when the enlisting began. This was easier said than done, however, as recruiting Danes for foreign military service was against the law in Denmark, which caused friction for the government against its own support base as well as the leftist-socialist parties. Recruiting for the Estonia corps led to downright street fighting in the Danish capital between "reds" and "whites", so it remained an open question how long the Danish government would be able to maintain that it knew nothing about the Danish expeditionary corps. For this and many other reasons the organizers were in a hurry to send the volunteers on their way – and they did not waste time.

Picture 1

Danish volunteers during the hoist of Dannebrog at the training camp in Nõmme. The Danish Consul General presented the flag to the corps in Tallinn. The flag accompanied the volunteers during their time in the front in Estonia, Latvia and Russia (private archive).

The British promised to equip 1000 Danish volunteers, and after a trip to Estonia from January 12 to 18, 1919, Gudme returned to Denmark with a commitment from the Estonian government to provide the necessary funding for the corps. Together with the Finns, Westenholz and Gudme then completed the plans for the recruitment of 1000 Danish volunteers. The recruitment was an overwhelming success. Within a short time, more than 2000 Danish men had enlisted as volunteers, among them some skilled military men including some of Denmark's most prominent officers – for example Erik With, who would later become Commander-in-Cheif. However, the corps was hit by two major backlashes, which resulted in the corps not reaching the expected size or military quality. Firstly, the Danish government would not allow Danish officers of the line to leave. This meant that the most skilled Danish

7 UMF. 7.E. Viro (- 1923). Letter from the Finnish legation in Copenhagen to the Finnish foreign ministry, dated 08.12.1918

officers were prohibited from participating and the corps was therefore laid in the hands of officers of the reserve. They were not necessarily unfit, but on the other hand, they were not the upper tier. At the same time, the Estonian government was unable to procure the promised financial funds for the corps. Just 36 hours before the planned departure of the corps the money finally arrived, and only for one company (250 men) at that. But the extremely short summoning time meant that the Danish organizers could not get a hold of the personnel they had hoped. During the enlisting, the volunteers had been divided into two groups, "fit" and "unfit" for duty. As the organizers were not able enlist enough fit personnel in the short time, they allowed access for some unfit men, just to get the corps to company size. Some were recruited right off the harbour, several were underage, and poor Copenhagen workers became an overrepresented group in the corps. What should have been a 1000-man strong elite corps led by Danish top officers, was in this chaos transformed into a more modest 184 men, of which more than half of them had no military training. Later attempts to send some of the many volunteers who were waiting in Copenhagen were abandoned, as the Estonians could not put up the necessary guarantees for the volunteers' pay and costs. The one Danish company, then, was what there was. It was a tremendous disappointment to the Danish organizers, but seen through the eyes of conservative Denmark, it was still a success that on March 26, 1919, Danish volunteers – dressed in Danish military uniforms – had left Copenhagen to take part in the fight against Bolshevism in Estonia.[8]

ARRIVING IN ESTONIA

The corps traveled to Estonia via Finland, and was hindered several times by difficult ice conditions in the inner Baltic Sea. On April 3rd, 1919 at noon, the corps departed from Helsinki aboard an ice-breaking vessel destined for Tallinn. The crossing to Estonia should only take a few hours, but the difficult ice conditions meant that the ship with the Danish volunteers did not arrive in Tallinn until 22:30. Upon arrival, the corps was met by a small marching band on the dock. Other than that, there was not much of a big welcome, probably due to the late and unpredictable arrival time of the corps. The corps was to be quartered in the Libau barracks on the outskirts of Tallinn, and the men marched through the dark and desolate streets. When the corps arrived at the barracks, no preparations had been carried out. Cornet Knud V. Zetner described the arrival like this: "*Everything is in perfect disorder. Electric lightbulbs are missing in the sockets, mattresses for the beds (...) in addition, it is freezing cold.*" The barracks were unheated when the Danes arrived and there was no food which meant that the volunteers had to retire for the night cold and hungry. According to Corporal Rasmussen, the soldiers were after a few hours issued with a sack "*stuffed with wood shavings and lice*", as he described it in a letter home, and this was to represent a mattress.[9] In his report on their arrival, Gudme described the morale of the men as good. Regarding comfort, the officers were somewhat better off, as they were quartered at the Hotel Goldener Löwe (Kuld Lõvi), one of the best hotels in town. After a few days, the men were transferred to the so-called

8 *RA. FOARK 1919-1986. Various military history descriptions, manuscripts etc., pk. 23. A short description of the history of the corps, written by Gudme 02.10.1919; ERA.2315.1.22. "Kort Redegørelse over det Danske Frivillige Korps i Estland´s oprindelse, Organisation, Forløb og Hjemsendelse", sign. Iver Gudme 02.10.1919*

9 RA. Private archive. Aage Westenholz, pk. 27. Description by Rasmussen, dated 25.04.1919; Private archive. Knud V. Zeltner. *Under Dannebrog – Dagbogsoptegnelser fra Dansk-Baltisk Auxiliær Corps Deltagelse i den estniske Frihedskrig* (unpublished manuscript by Captain Knud V. Zeltner), chapter 1, p. 8. Manuscript also found in EAA. 5383.1.98

"Africa barracks", also in Tallinn. It had more conveniences than Libau, but was still significantly below Danish standards: "*a rather big barracks; but how dirty and decayed it is, like everything else here in Russia*", as one Danish volunteer soldier described the place.[10] The Danes' first days in Estonia were hampered by several problems. The Danish organizers were still angry that the expeditionary corps had not become the elite corps they had dreamt of, and the negative attitude rubbed off on the officers. A contributing factor to the bad atmosphere was that the number of officers was disproportionately high in the first company, because the expectation was that other companies would soon follow. Now, there were too many officers in the small corps, and many had to take up functions below their rank.

For most of the Danish volunteers, their meeting with Estonia was also a meeting with an entirely new world. Few had been outside the country borders and everything was different and in a state of decay. Many volunteers, therefore, had a somewhat colonialist view of Estonia and the local population was not seen to be as developed and civilized as the Danes. This perception was enhanced by the fact that the volunteers' basis for comparison was tidy and affluent Denmark which, unlike Estonia, had not been subjected to the effects of World War I, a Russian revolution and civil war. Also, Estonia was affected by a bloody and resource-intensive independence war. On top of all this, an entire state apparatus was having to be built from scratch in the few-months-old state. Many of the Danish volunteers did not appreciate the enormous challenges the Estonians were facing, and focused instead on all the details that did not work. Three days after the Danes' arrival, Lieutenant Peter de Hemmer Gudme (Iver Gudme's brother) wrote the following in his diary: "*Everything here in Estonia is in the most terrible state of confusion and disorder. Nobody knows anything. A few examples: Where are our weapons and English uniforms? Does the government intend to pay the officers for our keep, or must we pay for ourselves as we have done so far? In that case the money will not last long. Yesterday a Swedish officer was drunkenly firing live rounds in the hotel lobby, merely because it amused him to see an old lady jumping up in the air when he took aim at her legs. No police were there to deal with him, so it could have ended quite badly, had not a few of our non-commissioned officers stepped in to disarm the man. The Finnish soldiers are somewhere up near our barracks, firing away. Yesterday they murdered a civilian man who was obviously just passing by. The Swedish and the Finnish corps are both completely demoralized, and the Estonians, I take it, are no better.*"[11]

As Peter de Hemmer Gudme's description reflects, the conditions were rather chaotic and must have seemed overwhelming to someone coming directly from a well-organized Denmark. It is important to mention, that the foreign volunteer soldiers contributed significantly to the problems, which is also reflected clearly in Gudme's description. On the one hand, the many foreign volunteers were a means to create stable conditions in Estonia through their military assistance to the frontlines which were often under pressure. On the other hand, the foreign volunteers were themselves adding

10 Also, see letter from Peter de Hemmer Gudme to *København* newspaper. Printed 02.06.1919 "Med det danske Korps i Estland". *Kolding Avis* 29.04.1919 "De danske i Estland – Et Brev fra en ung Dansker". See also RA. Private archive. Aage Westenholz, pk. 95. Report no. 1 signed by Gudme, undated; Private archive. Knud V. Zeltner. *Under Dannebrog – Dagbogsoptegnelser fra Dansk-Baltisk Auxiliær Corps Deltagelse i den estniske Frihedskrig*, p. 9 and 11 (unpublished manuscript). ERA.592.1.15. Letter from DBAC to The Justice Department, Export Office, undated; RA. Private archive. Richard Gustav Borgelin. *Vor sidste Kamp for Estland*, p. 55; RA. Private archive. Knud V. Zeltner. Hand written journal, diary entry 11.04.1919

11 RA. Private archive. Peter de Hemmer Gudme. "Et moderne Korstog" 1919 (unpublished), diary entries 06.04.1919

to the chaos and could be a tremendous burden to the civilian population. Danish lieutenant W. Møgeltoft Jørgensen, who was working as a correspondent in Estonia for various newspapers, described Tallinn around the time of the Danes' arrival as "a true melting pot" and continued: "*The fight against the Russians, fought on both sides with the utmost bitterness, had attracted all kinds of adventure-seekers. In these days of distress there was no time to separate the sheep from the goats, and therefore things in Reval [Tallinn] did not always go according to rules.*"[12] In that respect, the Danes were no better than many others. When the Danish volunteers embarked in Copenhagen, the officers got their first impressions of the character of the troops. In his memoirs, DBAC officer Max Arildskov described how he was in charge of provisioning and maintaining discipline aboard: "*(...) and that was a rather demanding task, as there were individuals among them who were definitely of the "hard adventurer"-type*", as he put it.[13] But it was not until their arrival in Tallinn that the real problems began. Many soldiers simply left the corps without permission.[14] In his diary, lieutenant Peter de Hemmer Gudme noted on April 9, 1919: "*Unfortunately we have had some bother with men not returning to barracks at night etc, so that we have had to put four men in jail and administer fairly severe punishments. As of today at 06:00 I am the officer in charge here at the barracks, and I have just finished roll-call, where no less than 17 men were missing.*"[15] In his private diary, corporal Zeltner wrote the day before about the problems with the missing soldiers – Zeltner stated the number at 20 men – whose whereabouts were simply unknown to the officers: "*now police and military patrols are looking for them*", he noted.[16] A written complaint to corps Commander Iver Gudme from the owner of the hotel where the officers were accommodated shows clearly that it was not just the privates and the non-commissioned officers who were finding the temptations of Estonia's capital hard to resist. In the complaint, dated April 22, 1919, Gudme was asked to remove one officer of the corps from the hotel, as he had, late the previous night, brought a prostitute to his room. Since the owner of the hotel did not want prostitutes ("öffentlichen Strassenmädchen") in the hotel, he had requested numerous times that the officer send the woman away. But the drunk and aggressive officer in question was not minded to oblige, and it came to an incident where the owner eventually had to call for guards to forcibly remove the woman.[17] In a retrospect 10 years after the war, a Danish volunteer writes that the motley group of troops and officers made the first months very challenging for the corps, "*which was again and again in a state close to mutiny*", as he stated.[18] Despite several unfortunate incidents with the Danish NCOs[19], it does appear that the officers in the DBAC had a somewhat better grip on things than many of their colleagues in the other volunteer corps in the war, as they did in fact manage to build a quite well-functioning unit out of the motley group. With a weaker leadership, things might have gone entirely out of control, especially during the training period near Tallinn, which was initially characterized by drunkenness, lack of discipline and, as already mentioned, even mutiny (because of missing pay).

12 *Nationaltidende* 18.04.1919 "Hvor Østen og Vesten tørner blodigt sammen"

13 RA. Private archive. Max Arildskov, pk. 1. Unpublished memoirs p. 15

14 See ex. *Sorø Amts Dagblad* 23.05.1919 "En Vestsjællænder ved Bolschevikfronten – Brev til Sorø Amts Dagblad"

15 RA. Private archive. Peter de Hemmer Gudme. "Et moderne Korstog", unpublished. Diary entry, dated 09.04.1919

16 RA. Private archive. Knud V. Zeltner. Handwritten diary, entry 08.04.1919

17 RA. Private archive. Iver Gudme. Letter to Gudme from "Besitzer des Hotels", Goldener Löwe, dated 22.04.1919; Gudme 1921, p. 291

18 *Lolland Falsters Folketidende* 03.09.1929 "Et ti Aars Minde"

19 Non Commisioned Officer

TRAINING IN TALLINN AND NÕMME

When the corps was not as big as planned, the administrative system in the corps broke down. Lieutenant colonel Erik With, who had been appointed corps commander, did not go to Estonia. Neither did his replacement, captain Stürup from the Danish general staff. Iver Gudme was therefore appointed commander of the departed contingent. As he was the only one with a reasonable knowledge of the contacts in Denmark and Estonia, Gudme also had to take charge of all administration regarding the corps, while, at the same time, trying to be the military leader. It was unfeasible but he retained both the title and function of corps commander during the entire campaign, although his time was spent in the offices in Tallinn, rather than at the front leading the men, as he would have preferred.[20] To lead the men in his absence, Gudme picked the Danish lieutenant Richard Gustav Borgelin.[21] He had been put in charge of the corps' training in Estonia, leading up to its departure for the front lines, and as such, his title was school commander. Despite the many initial problems surrounding the corps, the first company commenced training in Estonia as planned in early April. Acknowledging the very different backgrounds of the men, during training they were divided into three schools: One for the trained soldiers (Team A), one for the soldiers who had Danish home guard training (Team B), and one for the troops with no training (Team C). Lieutenant Peter de Hemmer Gudme noted the following in diary from the Africa barracks in Tallinn about the abilities of the men: "*None of them are particularly skilled, but they throw themselves at the work enthusiastically, so in time it is going to be fine.*"[22] Shooting, marching, bayonet fencing, field duty and drill exercises came to form the majority of the volunteers' training. On April 22nd it was decided to dissolve the three training teams and instead structure the troops in four infantry platoons. Shortly after, an autonomous light machine gun platoon was formed, so that the corps now consisted of five platoons, and staff and train (stables, kitchen, depots and sanitation). On April 28th the corps was transferred to a former German barracks camp 7-8 kilometers outside of Tallinn, with the newly appointed captain Jens Martinus Mortensen as camp commander. The transfer was to get better training conditions than what the barracks in the outskirts of Tallinn could provide, and because there had been quite big problems with the discipline of the men in the capital. Nõmme had been selected as the place where the Danes would finish their training and get ready for the front lines. Even though a significant portion of the Danes had no prior military experience, the planned departure for the front was impending. The Estonians had not summoned the corps so that it could prepare itself for months at their expense, but rather so that it could join the fight as quickly as possible and make a difference in the struggle against Bolshevism. After some six weeks of training, the Danish corps was reported ready for service.[23]

20 ERA.2315.1.22. "Kort Redegørelse over det Danske Frivillige Korps i Estland´s oprindelse, Organisation, Forløb og Hjemsendelse", signed Iver Gudme 02.10.1919

21 RA. Private archive. Peter de Hemmer Gudme. "Et moderne Korstog" 1919 (unpublished), diary records 24.04.1919

22 RA. Private archive. Aage Westenholz, pk. 95. Report no. 2 signed by Gudme, undated.; RA. Private archive. Peter de Hemmer Gudme. "Et moderne Korstog" 1919 (unpublished), diary records 09.04.1919.

23 RA. Private archve. Aage Westenholz, pk. 95. Report no. 2 signed by Iver Gudme, undated.; Viggo Hansen's story. Printed in *Sorø Amts Dagblad* 01.07.1919 "I Kamplinien paa den estniske front"

Picture 2

The Danish volunteers preparing for the front deployment in May 1919. The corps was deployed on the southern front, not too far from Võru where they, together with the 2nd Estonian division, contributed on exorcizing the Bolsheviks from Estonia. On the frontline, the Danish volunteers brought a dog with them, which they in Nõmme had adopted as their mascot. The applicable name "Røv" was given to the dog that faithfully was following the corps during a major part of the campaign (EFA archives).

THE MILITARY SITUATION IN ESTONIA BY THE TIME OF THE CORPS' DEPLOYMENT

"One has only to compare the trench warfare of the Western front, its ferocious artillery duels, highly evolved technical equipment and enormous mass attacks, to the mobile warfare of the Bolshevist battles, being fought with small forces, limited use of artillery and a sparsity of all kinds of weapons, to immediately comprehend the enormous difference between the two theatres of war."[24] This is how Lieutenant Peter de Hemmer Gudme fittingly described the differences between the World War and the independence wars of the Baltic.

When the Bolshevists had initiated the war in late November 1918, the Danish Consul general was able to describe the fateful days from close hand. Simultaneously with the attack on Narva, the Red Army had opened a front south of the Peipus and Pihkva lakes by Petseri in southeastern Estonia. So enemy troops were advancing on the Estonian capital from several directions. Options of countering the coordinated attack were few, as the Estonian army lacked both manpower, equipment and military leadership, and consequently the Bolshevists made progress everywhere. Towards the end of 1918, the front lines were only 30 to 40 kilometers from Tallinn. However, in mid-December 1918 the British light cruiser squadron arrived in the Estonian capital with weapons supplies. According to Johansen, the mere presence of the British navy had prevented a local Bolshevist revolt in Tallinn. The British did not bring any fighting troops, though, so the overall military situation did not improve significantly. The Estonians tried to organize what little defensive capabilities were available. In this regard it was of great significance that on December 23, 1918, Colonel Johan Laidoner was appointed commander-in-chief of the Estonian armed forces. Laidoner had served as a Russian officer during the World War I, and he was both charismatic, experienced and competent.[25] So it was a great asset to the Estonian provisional government when he returned home to his native country in early December 1918. But with hardly any weapons or organized army forces, it was limited what he could do. When in December 1918 the situation looked its darkest for the Estonians, outside help finally arrived. It was Estonia's neighbour and sister country Finland who had decided to send

24 Gudme, Peter de Hemme: *Krigerlivets Religion og Etik*. Gads Danske Magasin, 15. Aarg., may-june 1921, p. 286

25 Smele, Jonathan D.: *Historical Dictionary of the Russian Civil Wars, 1916-1926*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. London 2015, p. 652

2000 combat-hardened Finnish volunteer soldiers.[26] Despite their limited numbers, the Finns' experience from the civil war meant that they were far superior to inexperienced compared to the poorly equipped Bolshevist forces in Estonia. As sworn anti-Bolshevists they were also eager to fight, and as such they were a boost to the general fighting morale in the Estonian forces. The Finnish expeditionary forces and the Estonian forces in unison succeeded fairly quickly in moving the front lines a good portion to the east, followed by victories both north and south. In February 1919, Laidoner was able to declare that there were no longer any enemy troops on Estonian territory. It was a brief respite, however, the departure of the Finnish volunteers in April 1919, combined with renewed Bolshevist offensives, meant that the Estonian borders were once again under threat. But when the Danes were deployed to the front in May 1919, the Estonian fighting force had grown substantially through extensive mobilization. The Estonian army now consisted of 3 infantry divisions (36 battalions) and 2 cavalry regiments, and in addition, a number of artillery units carrying both heavy and light batteries, 9 armoured trains and a number of smaller units such as engineers. A British report from the middle of May assessed the total number of Estonian forces (including reserves) to be approximately 62,000 men, distributed as follows: Estonians 52,200; Russian whites 5,500; Latvians 3,000; German-Balts 900; Swedes and Finns 250; Danes 150.[27] As these numbers reveal, the Danish corps did not in any way constitute a vital part of the Estonian army but it had great moral importance that the Danish corps was now ready to join the fight for Estonian freedom and independence. On May 23, 1919 – the exact same date as the Danish corps was deployed at the front – the Estonian general staff reported to the country's political leadership about the military situation. On the northern front, Russian white forces had left Estonian territory in mid-May 1919 and were now marching on the Bolshevist stronghold of St. Petersburg.

From an Estonian viewpoint, this front appeared relatively calm, as the fighting was far from the Estonian border. On the southern front, where the Danes were deployed, things were different. In their report, Commander-in-Chief Laidoner and Chief of Staff of Estonian army Jaan Soots stated: "*On the Southern front from the lake of Pskov to the Gulf of Riga on some points the enemy is still within the national border (...) against this part of the front the enemy has drawn his largest forces. From here he has tried several times to break our power and to give us a blow which would have thrown us to the sea. Up to the present he has not succeeded although the front has been changed several times and by which the district has been totally desolated. Greater part of the villages have been burned down and peaceful work and land cultivation have been made totally impossible. What has prevented us from driving out the enemy from this part of our country is the lack of supply of every kind. Our troops although comparing with the enemy are in numbers much weaker and tired to death have completed the work of defence honourably and are doing it still now.*"[28] One of the things that the Commander-in-Chief Headquarters stated as particularly important to supply to the southern front was machine guns. According to the report, there were too few

26 The Estonians also received a small amount of machine guns from the British shipment, which had arrived to Tallinn in December. NA. FO 371/3954. Letter from Clive to Foreign Office, dated 02.01.1919 and letter from the Finnish representative in London, Tancred Borenius, dated 09.01.1919.; Krepp, Endel: *The Estonian War of Independence 1918-1920*. Estonian Information Centre. Stockholm 1980, p. 29

27 Others estimate the size of the Estonian army by the end of May 1919 at approximately 75.000 men. See Smele, Jonathan D.: *Historical Dictionary of the Russian Civil Wars, 1916-1926*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. London 2015, p. 378; NA. FO 608/265. Report from Bosanquet to the Foreign Office, dated 13.05.1919."

28 NA. WO 157/1216 Report from the Estonian general staff (sign. Laidoner and Soots) to the Estonian prime minister and foreign minister, dated 23.05.1919.

machine guns at the front and an increase in numbers of this efficient and decisive weapon would, according the general staff; *"greatly increase the force of our small army"*, as it was put. The Danes arriving at the front carried no less than 24 machine guns with them, which was an impressive amount on the Estonian fronts for such a small unit.

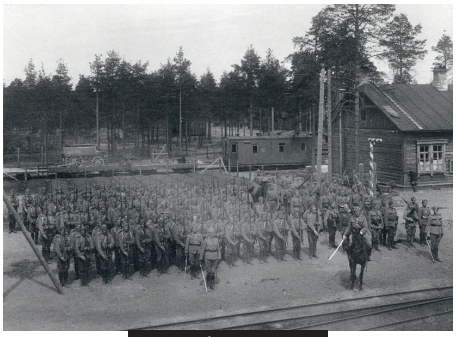
LAIDONER'S VISIT TO THE DANISH TROOPS

On Wednesday, May 14, 1919, the troops were informed that the corps would most likely leave for the front a few days later. The day after training ended early, allowing the men time to go to Tallinn and buy matches, writing paper etc., before their imminent departure for the front. On Friday there was an equipment check and missing or broken kit was replaced. On Saturday, May 17th, lieutenant Poulsen noted in his diary, that the order was ready for departure at moment's notice had "finally" arrived. The same day a train pulled up at the small station in Nõmme and the corps began loading equipment and provisions. Sunday morning the barracks were cleared and cleaned, everyone had the opportunity for a steam shower, and clean underwear was distributed. The troops were informed that there would be a farewell parade later that day.[29] It had been planned that the military commander-in-chief in Estonia, General Laidoner, would arrive in the training camp in Nõmme to inspect the Danish corps and wish them good luck before leaving for the front. With him were several high-ranking officers, including Chief of Staff Soots and the Danish Consul General Johansen, who acted as interpreter.[30] At 1300 the Danish corps stood at attention for the farewell parade. Laidoner and his staff witnessed a few drilling exercises followed by the General giving a speech to the corps, in which he thanked the men for coming to the Estonians' rescue against the Bolshevist enemy. After the parade, the men loaded the rest of the equipment and other items needed at the front onto the train carriages that were to transport the corps to Tallinn and from there on to the southern front where the corps would be deployed. There was a shortage of passenger carriages, so the troops had to spread straw on the floors of the cargo carriages to make themselves as comfortable as possible. Morale in the corps was good. The front carriage had been draped in a Dannebrog flag, and on May 18, 1919 at 19:00 the corps was ready for departure. The train left at 20:00 to the cheering of the local people from Nõmme and nearby areas, who had come to say farewell to the corps. First stop was the railway station in the capital, where Peter de Hemmer Gudme noted impatiently in his diary: "*We have waited now for about an hour here in Reval (Tallinn). In a few minutes, were are off to the front. Finally!*"[31]

29 Viggo Hansen's account. Printed in *Sorø Amts Dagblad* 02.07.1919 "I Kamplinien paa den estniske Front"; RA. Private archive. Alfred Larsen. Diary, diary entry 17.05.1919; Company order no. 14, dated 17.05.1919. RA. Private archive. Richard Gustav Borgelin, pk. 1.

30 ERA 592.1.2. Letter from Gudme to "Lasse", dated 22.05.1919

31 RA. Privatarkiv. Peter de Hemmer Gudme. "Et moderne Korstog" 1919 (unpublished), diary records 18.05.1919; RA. C. F. Schiöpffe's collection, H. nr. 370. Newspaper clipplings, *Bornholms Avis* 08.10.1919 "Med de danske Frivillige i Estland"



Picture 3

The Danish corps lined up in parade formation in Nõmme shortly before the volunteers were transported to the front. On the departure from Nõmme, the Commanders of the Estonian forces, General Laidoner and Chief of Staff Soots, inspected the Danish volunteers. Laidoner praised the disciplinary attitude of the corps and thanked the volunteers for coming to Estonia. (EFA Archive)

THE VALUE OF THE CORPS IN BATTLE

Several Danish officers' memoirs, written down after the war, describe the DBAC as an "elite corps". As it has already been shown, this was a bit of a stretch with regards to the quality, experience and training of the troops. In several areas, the DBAC resembled more a paramilitary corps than a military unit. The corps consisted of more amateurs than professionals and subsequently it lacked the ability, experience, discipline, and military cultural values that a proper army unit would possess. But in terms of weaponry, the DBAC was in every sense an "elite corps" in Estonia, and right from the beginning the plan had been to make it a powerful unit in terms of firepower. As Westenholz noted himself in January 1919, while in the process of establishing the corps, even a smaller corps of a few hundred men would be a considerable force "*what with all the light machine guns that can be put into it…*". How superior the firepower of the DBAC truly was, becomes evident when reading the contemporary British reports about the military situation in the Baltic region. In a report from May 13, 1919 – just a week before the Danes were deployed on the southern front – the British representative in Tallinn was able to send fresh statistics to the Foreign Office showing the military capabilities in Estonia. The report was based on the latest information from the Estonian general staff and showed that the army commanded 12,836 men on the southern front (not counting reserves) and 326 machine guns. Ten days later, a new report put the number of machine guns on the southern front at 290. These numbers show an average of one machine gun per 40-45 soldiers in the Estonian units. The small Danish corps was equipped with 24 machine guns – or the equivalent of one machine gun per 8 men. Compared to the Bolshevists, the Danes were far superior in firepower.

According to the report, the Red Army commanded more than 21,700 men and 310 machine guns by mid-May. This was an average of one machine gun per 70 men, so the Danish firepower was roughly ten times stronger than the Bolshevist.[32] The DBAC was one of the best equipped corps – if not the best equipped corps on the entire front in the Baltic region, which surely did make up for the lack of training for the Danish troops.

32 NA. FO 608/265 Report from Bosanquet to Foreign Office, dated 13.05.1919; NA. WO 157/1216 Report from the Estonian general staff (signed Laidoner og Soots) to the Estonian prime minister and foreign secretary, dated 23.05.1919

TO THE FRONT – TRENCH WARFARE AND STRONGPOINTS

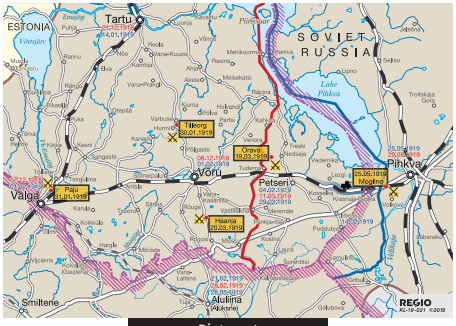
From Tallinn the voyage continued towards the front over Tartu and on to Võru, which was reached on May 20. Here, the corps spent two days sorting out the practical details: "*It is teeming with military everywhere, but then the front is only about 15 km from here*", lieutenant Alfred Larsen wrote in his diary.[33] The Danes were to be deployed some 20 km South of Võru. On the afternoon of May 22, 1919, the Danish corps marched toward the front lines, where they were to be deployed the same night. The march was under a flying Dannebrog flag, and in pouring rain. The volunteers were in suspense but happy, and sang as they marched along the darkening roads. On the way, however, the joy dissipated. If the volunteers had not yet fully understood the horror of war, it became obvious to them on their way to the front. Marching from the last railroad stop by Võru towards the actual front lines, they passed by an incident which several of the soldiers wrote about – if anything to document the evil, they were on their way to fight. Sergeant Peter Romanus Jensen wrote the following account to a Danish newspaper about the incident: "*A few kilometers behind the front we came upon quite a few fugitives. Among them were a young woman who was out of her mind, and she joined us. When we rested, she waited with us until we were ready to move on. We were able, with some difficulty, to hand her over to some peasants nearby who knew her. They told us that when the Bolshevists had ravaged that part of the country, they had tied her to a tree and made her watch as they murdered her father, husband and children, and committed acts of violence on her afterwards. From this the poor woman had completely lost her mind, her hair had turned white and she could not speak. She was 28 years of age. Had we not previously had a hatred of the red barbarians, it came now after having seen this proof of barbarity…*".[34]

The Danish corps was to be deployed in the south-eastern corner of Estonia, close to the borders to Russia and Latvia. The Danes would then be under the command of Colonel Viktor Puskar's 2nd Estonian division, which was holding a line south of Valga, over Võru, to Pechory. The sector to be manned by the Danes was some 20 kilometers south of Võru around the estate and village of "Hahnhof" (Haanja), where the terrain was wooded and quite hilly. Between the many forest-clad ridges were a few farm fields, and the rest was bogs, meadows, hedges and swamps. The distance to the Latvian border was only about 30 kilometers. At the time of the Danes' entering the war, the front line south of Võru had been more or less stabilized in an Estonian variation on the trench warfare known from the world war. The front running from west to east through southern Estonia covered vast geographical distances, and the troop units were rather small, so it was not possible to establish the long, unbroken chains of trenches familiar from the western front in France and Belgium during World War I. Instead, both sides of the front operated with lines of fortified strongpoints, strategically positioned in the terrain. The Danish sector consisted of a row of fortified hills or ridges with varying distance between them. These strongpoints were referred to as "outpost".

33 RA. Privatarkiv. Alfred Larsen. Diary records. Entry without specified date (on the days in Võru 20-22.05.1919).

34 *Fyens Stiftstidende* 30.09.1919 "Det danske frivillige Hjælpekorps"; Mødet med den sindssyge kvinde beskrives eks. også i: RA. Privatarkiv. Peter de Hemmer Gudme. Dagbogsoptegnelser dateret 24.05.1919; *Sorø Amts dagblad* 07.07.1919 "I Kamplinien paa den estniske Front"

The Danes were to man 6 to 8 kilometers of front line, consisting of 8 outposts, one of which was placed on Estonia's highest point, "Munamägi", 318 meters above sea level. To the left and right of the Danish, Estonian units were similarly deployed in a long row of out-



Picture 4

Map of Võru and the battles that took place during April and May 1919 (Map ©Regio 2019)

posts, which together constituted a very long and only partly coherent line: The southern front.

As described previously, a significant portion of the Danish corps were civilians with only a few weeks of training under their belts, so naturally it was an excited and nervous group who marched the remaining few kilometers to the front in total darkness. The Danish newspaper Lolland Falsters Folketidende printed an excerpt from the diary of a Danish soldier, describing the atmosphere in the corps when they arrived at the front: "*Here we are at the front. Getting here was the worst part. None of us in the platoon have been in a war before, except N.N. and he is a big-headed liar. It was so very dark on the way here; I walked alongside Thorbjørnsen and we were holding on to a wagon on which a few fellows were loading machine gun cartridges, which did nothing to lift our spirits. At times the horizon was lit as if by lightning, and shortly after followed a rumble like thunder. That was the cannon. There was a lot of firing that evening and night, much more than usual in that sector, an Estonians told us. Thorbjørnsen and I were talking about what was going to happen next, and considered exchanging addresses, in case of one us should fall, then the other one could … but nothing came of it. It was too frightening. At midnight we reached a lit farm where hordes of soldiers were walking in and out. This was the Estonian command HQ for the sector. But we had to move on and we went a long way further through hedges and forest. Were later gathered, the captain said a few words which revealed that he was at least as nervous as the rest of us. Afterwards we were split up again – every platoon into two squads, on in that fashion we approached the front.*"[35]

Upon arrival at Haanja estate, which functioned as headquarters for the sector, commander Borgelin was briefed on the situation by the commanding Estonian officer and he then briefed the rest of the Danish officers. "*Drowsy and disoriented, the soldiers gathered, shuddering with cold in the ranks as they were assigned to their duties in the various outposts,*" corporal Zeltner remembers their arrival at Hahnhof.[36] As Zeltner describes, the troops were split into squads. The four infantry platoons were divided into halves, and the men were distributed so that there were machine guns and gunners in

35 *Lolland Falsters Folketidende* 03.09.1929, "Et ti Aars Minde"

36 RA. Private archive. Knud V. Zeltner. *Under Dannebrog – Dagbogsoptegnelser fra Dansk-Baltisk Auxiliær Corps Deltagelse i den estniske Frihedskrig*, p. 32 (unpublished manuscript). Manuscript can also be found in EAA. 5383.1.98

every squad. The 8 half-platoons were now to man each their outpost, all a few kilometers from the farm.[37] Zeltner writes: "*... each with an Estonian leader, they make their way through the hilly and wooded terrain to the first line, which, judging by the scattered gunfire ahead, cannot be far away. The leader immediately gives the order to put out the tobacco and make certain that the weapons are secured so tightly that they do not rattle. (...) Then a faint glare appears ahead. It is the Estonian outpost's campfire, which has been dug in so that the fire is not visible from 'no-mans-land'.*"[38]

IN POSITION AT THE OUTPOSTS

Around 02:00 the night between to 22 and 23 May, the Danes relieved the Estonian troops, who were waiting impatiently for relief at the outpost. The Estonians had had two companies to man the sector, but due to the far superior firepower of the Danes, the task was now assigned to a single Danish company. Each outpost was manned with 12 to 18 men and only a very small force was kept in reserve. After a short briefing on the enemy positions, the Estonians left the position and the Danes were now left to their own devices: "*... not until now did we sense that were really at the front*", as Peter de Hemmer Gudme wrote in his diary.[39] When dawn started to break, the Danes could get an impression of the area to which they had arrived during the night. The terrain was very hilly, which could be a benefit as well as a drawback. The many ridges formed natural strongpoints which could be used as observation posts and would be difficult for enemy forces to capture. On the other hand, the hilly and wooded terrain would also allow an approaching enemy to remain unseen and launch an attack from quite a short distance. In his diaries Gudme expressed a slight worry about the Danes' thinly manned line, which he considered vulnerable, should the Bolshevists decide to attack – not least because the Danes could only muster a diminutive reserve. In some places, the terrain was difficult to get an overall view of from the outpost, and the Danes worried about the enemy breaking through the thinly manned line and possibly circumventing the outposts. Between some of the outposts the distance was so great that it was decided to establish a smaller post between them, consisting of four men and a machine gun to maintain some level of coherence in the sector.

Outposts communicated by dispatching orderlies or patrols between the posts, as no other means of communication were available – but the great distances between the outposts made it a challenge: "*How infinitely little one knows about what is happening when on outpost duty. All that is known is what goes on in one's own post and in the neighbouring post*", as Gudme wrote in his diary from his strongpoint.[40] The Danish battle line ran in an east/westerly direction and faced south in the direction of Latvia. Across from the Danish positions, the enemy was fortified in a similar system of elevated strongpoints running parallel to the Danes'. In the lower valley between lay a no-mans-land consisting of scattered fields, hills, swamp and forest.[41] The Danish outpost farthest to the left was only 400 meters from

37 Viggo Hansen's account. Printed in *Sorø Amts Dagblad* 07.07.1919 "I Kamplinien paa den estniske Front"

38 RA. Private archive. Knud V. Zeltner. *I Kamp mod de Røde* (unpublished manuscript).

39 RA. Private archive. Peter de Hemmer Gudme. Diary records dated 24.05.1919; *Fyens Stiftstidende* 30.09.1919 "Det danske frivillige Hjælpekorps"

40 RA. Private archive. Peter de Hemmer Gudme. Diary records dated 24.05.1919

41 RA. Private archive. Richard Gustav Borgelin. *Vor sidste Kamp for Estland*, p. 53

the enemy, while the one farthest to the right was upwards of 2 kilometers from the enemy. Therefore, the situation for the troops was different, depending on which outpost they were manning. In the outposts closest to the enemy, the soldiers came to expect direct fire as soon as they were seen in the positions, whereas the outposts farthest away from the enemy rarely came under direct enemy fire. These troops managed to take cover on the other side, making it possible for them to secure themselves when needed and only in case of an alarm the outpost was fully manned towards the enemy. Shelters had been dug into the back of the hills, and small wooden sheds had been erected for the men. In a few outposts, nearby farmhouses could be used for sleeping by the soldiers who were not on duty. On the front side of the outposts, firing positions had been dug, and these were connected to other parts of the outpost by trenches. At night in particular, work went on to expand and reinforce the positions.[42] A non-commissioned officer gave this account of the front lines near his outpost: "*We are on a hill, at the top of which have been dug some firing positions which are manned with a few men. To our right is a farm on a hill. It is occupied by two Estonian platoons, and to our left is a forest-clad hill. There, two of our machine guns are positioned. We cannot see any further to the left, but we know that the company is scattered on small hills and in woods over a distance of 8 kilometers. It is far too long. Right across from us are the Russians. (...) In the binoculars we can see as much as two rows of trenches, and any time one of our men stands up in one of our trenches, bullets immediately start whistling about his ears from their machine guns...*".[43] Often the enemy had calibrated the machine gun and then locked it into position, so that it would always strafe the top of the trenches at the correct altitude. The hilly terrain in combination with the thinly manned lines also appealed to snipers who would try to sneak into a favourable position during the night. Several times the Danes were shot at by such snipers, and their presence was a genuine threat to the troops. It was therefore necessary to stay in cover during the day. Here time was spent sleeping, playing cards or improving on the parts of the position which were not under threat of direct fire.

PATROL DUTY

In the gridlocked situation at the front, both sides would scout the terrain and test the strength of the enemy by dispatching small combat or reconnaissance patrols against the enemy outposts. The outposts closest to the enemy, which were most exposed to enemy fire, dispatched their patrols in the early dawn or right before dusk. Some of the other outposts also dispatched patrols during the day. It was on the various forms of patrol duty that the Danish troops saw their first actual combat in Estonia. In his diary, Lieutenant Peter de Hemmer Gudme described how his outpost dispatched a patrol on the morning after their arrival, to get a bearing on the area and the enemy positions. After an advance of approximately 1.5 kilometers, the patrol had contact with the enemy and withdrew quickly. The following evening, however, it was decided to dispatch a 14-man patrol in the dusk to demonstrate a presence towards the enemy, and to scout for any snipers in

42 On the layout and design of the outposts, see for example Arne Hansen's account in *Vendsyssel Tidende* 10.07.1919 "En Hjøringenser i Estland" and RA. Private archive. Richard Gustav Borgelin. *Vor sidste Kamp for Estland*, p. 74

43 *Lolland Falsters Folketidende* 03.09.1929, "Et ti Aars Minde"

the terrain, which was a particular worry. As combat was a distinct possibility, the patrol brought with it a machine gun. The evening patrol advanced in the same direction as the morning patrol had done, but after several kilometers it had still not had any contact with the enemy. They came across several heavily fortified but abandoned trenches, indicating that the enemy had recently been in the area. As the patrol's task was to scout the enemy, the troops advanced another 500 to 1000 meters, until they reached some woodland thinning out at the foot of a large hill. At the top of the hill the Danish advancing troops observed an enemy outpost at a distance of about 400 meters. Gudme's description continues: "*And it was manned, because we could see 3-4 sentries walking carelessly up and down the top of the hill. We crept into position unnoticed and opened fire, causing a couple of the sentries to fall. After a few moments, the entire crew of the outpost came running to take up positions and as I had quietly been hoping, they ran all the way up, so that for a moment they were clearly visible against the evening sky rather than crouching on the last stretch. We took advantage of that moment to give them a thrashing. Our fire was well-aimed and, as far as I could make out, effective. Our machine gunner in particular performed splendidly.*"

Firing continuously, the Danes advanced about 50 meters. Then the Bolshevists got a machine gun into position and started to return fire, upon which Gudme ordered the Danes to retreat to the edge of the woods. But the unexperienced Danish troops panicked and did not stop at the edge of the woods. Gudme managed to catch up with them and was able to calm the patrol down and lead it back to its own positions by around 00:30.

The other outposts dispatched similar patrols. One non-commissioned officer describes his first firefight when he was on night patrol in no-man's land. After pushing through a stretch of woodland beginning close to the outpost, they came to a valley in which was a small village. The four Danes approached the village cautiously in a line formation but were suddenly taking fire from multiple directions. They withdrew quickly to a more secure position on a hill not too far from the village. One of the Danes had panicked and run all the way back to the outpost. The remaining three soldiers were not aware of this and went calling for him in the dark. This only intensified the fire from the enemy but due to the darkness the Danes seemed 'invisible' as long as they did not release any fire. The three remaining men in the patrol were now lying on a slight slope with visibility the village. The NCO in charge of the patrol described what happened next: "*Having been subjected to such heavy fire had angered us somewhat, so we lay down next to each other and went to work on the windows in the farmhouses with our rifles. This made the Russians spring back to action, they were firing fiercely, and now they also began with a machine gun which was operated quite skillfully. We found cover in a small sink hole, and when the firing ceased we crawled back out. Then we received another barrage and had to take cover once more. This time we did not make it back to the hole, but each had to hide behind a tree, for the machine gun was tearing up the ground*

44 *Lolland Falsters Folketidende* 03.09.1929, "Et ti Aars Minde". See also Viggo Hansen's accounts of the patrols of outpost 7. Printed in *Sorø Amts Dagblad* 08.07.1919 and 09.07.1919 and 10.07.1919 "I Kamplinien paa den estniske Front". Also see Hugo Læssøe Arboe´s description of patrol duty from outpost 6 in *Aalborg Stiftstidende* 06.06.1919 "De danske Frivillige i Estland"

45 The private soldiers who are mentioned were no. 349 Kai Louis Hansen, 381 Hans Chr. Jensen and 394 Aksel Robert Theodor Madsen. On 30 May the corps received an inquiry from Red Cross in Tallinn, as to whether the fallen Hansen from the skirmish on May 24 by the village of Haanja was to be buried in Estonia or shipped to Copenhagen. It became the latter. The bodies of the two fallen Danes (Jensen died later of his wounds) were brought home aboard the Danish steamer Lindholm, which arrived in Copenhagen on June 15, 1919. RA. Private archive. Peter de Hemmer

in front of us, that is how good the shooting was. As we lay there, only a few paces from the position from where we had fired at the houses, three or four men came running from the village. We fired almost as one. My rifle clicked, as I had used up all the rounds in the magazine, and the Russian rifle does not stay back in loading position like the German one does when the magazine is empty. The two others shots hit one of the men in the middle. He toppled over and layed still, while the others ran back towards the village. Later they came back to collect the dead or injured man, but by then it was impossible for us to release shots because their machine gun was firing so heavily that we hardly dared stick our noses out from our cover. This continued for a long time, and all along the front other machine guns began chipping in, in the end gunfire was roaring from everywhere. We crept slowly from tree to tree, as the fire from the Russian rifles and machine guns slowly dissipated, and in the end we made it back to the Estonian trenches…"[44]

THE FIRST CASUALTIES

Not many hours were to pass at the front before the Danes suffered their own first casualties. By dawn on the second day there were reports of firing by one of the smaller outposts – an outpost which had been posted between the strongpoints in Lieutenant Peter de Hemmer Gudme's sector. Gudme dispatched a patrol from outpost 6, but it was almost immediately caught by heavy fire. A soldier came running back from the patrol to report that there were one fallen and two wounded Danish soldiers. Gudme continued: "*I hurried out there and found one of the sentries, 349 Hansen, lying dead, shot in the heart and knee. Furthermore, 394 who had been sent by me was wounded in the leg, and one of the men who went with him, 381 Jensen, with a wound in the head.*"[45] Exactly what had happened was not clear. A member of the dispatched patrol thought he had observed enemy fire, but he had also observed fire from the outpost. Where the fatal bullets had come from, he was unable to say. According to Gudme, it was the opinion of several that the outpost had felt so disoriented that it had opened fire on the approaching patrol, who had then returned the fire. So the tragic incident was in fact a case of "friendly fire" in an inexperienced fighting force. In his memoirs, lieutenant Arildskov is unequivocal about the incident, describing how he grabbed his binoculars when the firing began and was able through to see "*that it was Danish soldiers on both sides*", as he described the situation.[46] Others maintained that the fire had come from an enemy patrol. In the end, that became the official explanation. The private (381 Hans Chr. Jensen) who had suffered a head wound did not survive, which meant that the Danes had suffered two casualties within the first few days at the front, and morale was consequently somewhat low in the corps – not least because many probably shared the conviction that the corps had mistakenly fired on their own troops.

Gudme. Diary records dated 24.05.1919; *Fyens Stiftstidende* 17.06.1919 "De Danske i Estland"; *Dagens Nyheder* 17.06.1919 "To af Westenholz Korpsets frivillige faldne"; RA. Private archive. Iver Gudme. Letter from Walther to the DBAC, dated 30.05.1919.

46 Zeltner also describes in his memoirs how the deaths were a result of friendly fire: "Accidents could happen of course, and on an early misty morning two of our patrols clashed, and since they both believed themselves to be facing the enemy, they opened fire. When the fighting was over and the misunderstanding had been identified, we could record the company's first two fallen." RA. Private archive. Max Arildskov. Memoirs, unpublished. Account of the Estonian fight for freedom, p. 24.; RA. Private archive. Knud V. Zeltner. *I Kamp mod de Røde* (unpublished manuscript).

Picture 5

The Danish volunteers posing with the hallmark of the corps and showing military prominence with the Danish produced Madsen-machinegun. Due to its lightweight, the machinegun happened to be extremely mobile and very suitable as an offensive weapon. The Danish corps possessed 24 Madsen-machineguns, and with serval of the volunteers having expert knowledge to this weapon, the Danish corps obtained enormous firepower (private archive).

This was not the only case of "friendly fire" with the inexperienced troops. In an account of the patrol duties of outpost 7, private Viggo Hansen described how his patrol, on its way back to its own positions, suddenly came under flanking fire from an unexpected direction. When the bullets tore into the ground right in front of the squad, they immediately threw themselves down. They began discussing whether the Bolshevists could have bypassed them, but they quickly suspected that the fire they were receiving was coming from a patrol from one of the other outposts. This was confirmed shortly after. Viggo Hansen explains: "*We continued our walk homewards, and after some 1,500 meters we met some men from outpost 6. One of them came running to us, yelling: 'Let me tell you something, I shot my first Bolshevist on the top of a hill not far from here, I saw him falling'. We informed him that it was us he had been firing at and asked him not to fire at such long range if he was not certain what he was firing at.*"[47] Arildskov from outpost 4 also described in his memoirs how a patrol dispatched from his outpost had taken heavy fire from outpost 6. But Arildskov had the self-awareness to admit that it was his patrol's own fault, as they had eagerly moved into the terrain without bringing a compass with them, and without taking note of any significant landscape features. The result was that the patrol had lost its way, and suddenly appeared in front of the positions of outpost 6, who immediately opened fire, believing that the patrol was Bolshevist. Arildskov and the others in the small patrol, lying down, had to attach their hats to their rifle barrels and wave them in the air, while roaring that they were Danish until outpost 6 understood what was going on and ceased their firing.[48] As this example illustrates, there were no rehearsed standard procedures concerning patrol duty, and elementary things such as bringing a compass along and otherwise establishing a necessary overview of one's position were forgotten out of sheer eagerness. How untested the troops really were is also evident in company command no. 16 – the first to be given after arrival in the outpost positions. In this Borgelin wrote that upon inspection of the positions he found it "of the utmost importance" that the outpost commanders "strongly remind" the troops of a number of

47 Viggo Hansen's account. Printed in *Sorø Amts Dagblad* 02.07.1919 "I Kamplinien paa den estniske Front"

48 RA. Private archive. Max Arildskov. Memoirs, unpublished. Beretning om den estiske frihedskamp, p. 23.

49 Company command no. 16, dated 25.05.1919. RA. Private archive. Richard Gustav Borgelin, pk. 1.

50 Most probably Johannes Grant (1890-1950), who was company commander in the 1st regiment then. He has studied earlier in Leipzig Commercial School and in Riga Polytechnical Institute, so he could had been more pleasant

things. The manner of the reminders show a lack of basic military knowledge with some of the troops. For example, Borgelin wrote that all movement up and down the hills was to be carried out on the side of the hill facing away from the enemy (!). Another point was: "*Camp fires lit after dark must be carefully hidden, so that they cannot in any way be helpful to the enemy. Last night the enemy was able, with great precision, to target his artillery after one of the outposts, who had lit a great fire.*" Borgelin also emphasized that no sentry was to fire his weapon unless the sentry was in immediate danger.[49] Basically, there was a lot of enthusiasm but not very much "elite" about the self-proclaimed Danish elite troops, who, when faced with the front lines, appeared as what they were: Inexperienced – and for a large part, pure amateurs. This would improve as the Danes gained more combat experience through the fighting in Estonia, Latvia and Russia.

THE RELATIONSHIP TO THE ESTONIAN BROTHERS-IN-ARMS

During their time at the front, the Danish volunteers gained a far better relationship to the Estonians than they had had in Tallinn. The chaotic surroundings, the formation of the corps, the missing weapons, the missing men, and the delayed pay affected the relationship negatively at the time. After the deployment of the corps, it seems that the brotherhood with the other Estonian front units relaxed the relationship to some degree. On May 27th, the otherwise strongly critical Peter de Hemmer Gudme wrote that a visit had been paid by the commander of the neighbouring company (1st Estonian Regiment) on the right flank, Captain Grant[50], whom Gudme described as a "*remarkably pleasant Estonian officer*".[51] Others in the corps also spoke favorably of Grant. For example, Viggo Hansen wrote in a letter home that Captain Grant as well as his men were "*gallant and lively men, whom we can be proud to be fighting alongside.*" Sergeant Arildskov (the father of lieutenant Arildskov) also described an episode where he emphasized the courage of the Estonian officers in battle. During a retreat he ended up riding with some Estonian officers, and the group came under enemy fire. Despite the heavy fire, the Estonians acted ostentatiously calm and Arildskov had to force himself to do the same but noted candidly that "*... had I been alone, I would have gotten across the hill much faster*".[52] Company commander Borgelin also described Captain Grant and his men favourably, mentioning that Grant had been an invaluable support and personal friend to Borgelin in the unfamiliar conditions. Furthermore, it was clear that the Danes' somewhat colonial view of Estonia and the Estonians did not apply to Captain Grant and his men. They were highly respected for their skills in the field, where the Danes took on the roles as apprentices. For example, Borgelin wrote in his memoirs:"- *By being with the Estonians, whose officers had all served in the Russian army and fought during all of the World War, we naturally learned a lot which was particularly useful in the terrain of these countries and in the fight against the Bolshevists.*"[53] Another Danish volunteer wrote praisingly of the military skills of the Estonians: "*To the credit of the Estonians I must say that they knew how*

as common Estonian officer. He was promoted to 2nd Lieutenant on 11 June 1919, to Lieutenant on 7 November 1919 and to Sub-Captain on 8 March 1920. (The rank of Sub-Captain was abolished in Estonian army later, so he was a Captain in reserve later)

51 RA. Private archive. Peter de Hemmer Gudme. "Et moderne Korstog" 1919 (unpublished), diary records 27.05.1919

52 Old Arildskov's account is also in Borgelin's manuscript. RA. Private archive. Richard Gustav Borgelin. *Vor sidste Kamp for Estland*, p. 236; *Fyens Stiftstidende* 20.10.1919 "Det danske frivillige Hjælpekorps"

53 *Sorø Amts Dagblad* 16.07.1919 "I Kamplinien paa den estniske Front"; RA. Private archive. Richard Gustav Borgelin. *Vor sidste Kamp for Estland*, p. 69, 79, 205

to fire artillery. They may not be as fast as Danish artillery men to reload, but then they shoot many percent better, enriched of course by several years of combat experience. It is rather telling that almost every Estonian officer has participated in the World War on the Russian side."[54] What the Danes admired the most, though, was the Estonian and Russian soldiers' frugality. Private Viggo Jørgensen explained that food was the Danes' "soft spot" and continued: "*they cannot, like the Russians, go without food for days without losing their spirits.*"[55] Private Viggo Hansen from Hejninge wrote home that there was no limit to all the good the Estonians were willing to do for the Danes, but at same time he concluded that the country had been "depleted", so it was limited what could be offered. To illustrate this, he wrote: "*We live 10 times better than their own soldiers, and we have better uniforms. Many of the Estonian soldiers do not have boots and are forced to go barefoot or with rags wrapped around their feet.*"[56] There were still, however, traces of disdain in numerous incidents. The fast mobilizations in Estonia meant that not all privates had an interest in fighting the Bolshevists (with whom they might sympathize), and throughout the war there was a high amount of desertions and defections – from both sides. Many red defectors were quickly incorporated in the Estonian national forces, which the Danes found unsettling. The election of a socialist government in Estonia in April 1919 also affected the, often very conservative, Danes' view of the Estonians negatively. The same was the case for a number of incidents later during the Russian campaign, where the Danes felt abandoned by the young Estonian Scout battalion on several occasions during the extremely heavy fighting in the Pskov region. But compared to the time in Tallinn, respect for the Estonians rose significantly by the beginning of the front duty – particularly towards captain Grant's company, to whom the Danes considered a "sister unit" to themselves.

ADVANCE ON THE LATVIAN BORDER

On May 26 at 08:00 the outposts received orders from command to prepare to attack later that day.[57] The commanders of each of the eight outposts were assigned a position a couple of kilometers out in the terrain which they were to capture. After advancing some kilometers due south, only outpost 1, led by Lieutenant Poulsen on the right flank had been in a minor firefight, but the enemy withdrew quickly. The fortified Bolshevist positions which the patrols had fought previously were eventually reached, but they had been vacated. After 3 kilometers of advance an order to halt was given, to allow the outposts to regroup. It was around noon and the outposts were dissolved, and instead the original formation of four platoons was reinstated. When it was clear that the corps was about to enter a large-scale offensive, the corps stayed in the newly captured areas for the rest of the day, spending the time fetching equipment left behind in the outposts, setting up supplies etc. It was also necessary to commission wagons and drivers from the farms in the area to transport the corps' equipment.[58] Early morning the following day, all units were ready to continue the offensive. The objective for the day was to

54 *Fyens Stiftstidende* 08.10.1919 "Det danske Hjælpekorps"

55 *Aarhus Stiftstidende* 19.08.1919 "fra Kampene i Estland"

56 *Sorø Amts Dagblad* 23.05.1919 "En Vestsjællænder ved Bolschevikfronten"

57 See Viggo Hansen's account. Printed in *Sorø Amts Dagblad* 10.07.1919 "I Kamplinien paa den estniske Front"; Peter de Hemmer Gudme's account in *København* 28.06.1919 "Med det danske Korps i Estland"

58 Viggo Hansen's account. Printed in *Sorø Amts Dagblad* 10.07.1919 "I Kamplinien paa den estniske Front"

reach the Latvian border, which was 12 kilometers due south. Four cannon shots at 06:00 marked the beginning of the offensive across the entire front. The terrain was terrible, and it was no longer possible to bring wagons with the company, so the heavy munitions for the machine guns had to be carried, which made the march quite strenuous. The retreating Bolshevists were not far away. On one occasion, company commander Borgelin rode ahead with his orderly, count Holstein to scout. The vanguard had lost contact with the wing patrols, and the terrain and poor maps made it difficult to get a bearing, so the company commander attempted to gain an overview by riding ahead with the orderly. But when the two riders were suddenly fired upon, they had to return hurriedly. The sudden fire had startled Holstein's horse so that it threw him off. But his foot was caught in the stirrup, so he was dragged a considerable distance behind the galloping horse, but miraculously he escaped without any major injuries.[59] The example clearly illustrates that front lines were vague to put it mildly, and that any real overview did not exist on either side. All communication had to be done by orderlies and it was almost impossible to maintain contact in the immense terrain, with the units moving at different speeds. Fragmented Bolshevist units tried using evasive tactics here and there to secure an orderly retreat. But mostly the fights were scattered, unrelated skirmishes, where small groups of red and nationalist troops got into firefights wherever they met. The Danish corps continued its advance and practically all the platoons got involved in firefights with the enemy who was trying to cover the retreat. In his diary, Peter de Hemmer Gudme concluded: "*It became apparent everywhere that our superior firepower had made the difference, the Bolshevists could not resist the 10 machine guns we were bringing to the fight.*"[60] As the Estonians and the Danes drove the Bolshevists closer and closer to the Latvian border, they started showing their teeth, particularly in the small villages which provided some degree of cover for the retreating soldiers. Gudme describes: "*We finally managed to oust the enemy from the village, but when we entered the village ourselves it turned out that we had fallen out of the frying pan and into the fire: The bullets whistled between and through the wooden houses, which provided absolutely no cover.*" But the Danes succeeded to push through the village and advance further on, in a line formation. During the advance, one of the Danish platoons came under fire from the Estonians across a lake as they mistook them for enemies. Zeltner noted in his diary: "*... we were advancing so quickly that the Estonians took us for Bolshevists – that is how we got no. 323, the best man in the company injured, a bullet fired by the Estonians hit him in the leg.*"[61] However, they managed to signal the Estonians to cease their firing. Despite sporadic confusion and hard fighting, the Danish and Estonian forces had gained momentum and reached the Latvian border by nightfall. According to private Viggo Hansen, morale in the corps was high. The corps had suffered only two minor injuries since the advance from the outposts by Haanja and everywhere the Bolshevists had retreated from the Danish advance. The Bolshevists would open fire at up to 2000 meters distance, or they would shoot too high, and both had turned out to be fairly harmless.[62]

59 RA. Private archive. Richard Gustav Borgelin. *Vor sidste Kamp for Estland*, p. 90

60 RA. Private archive. Peter de Hemmer Gudme. Diary records dated 01.06.1919

61 RA. Private archive. Knud V. Zeltner. Handwritten diary, diary entry 27.05.1919

62 Viggo Hansen's account. Printed in *Sorø Amts Dagblad* 14.07.1919 "I Kamplinien paa den estniske Front"

The inexperienced Danish troops were exceptionally lucky that their baptism of fire was against a relatively weak and unmotivated opponent. The liberation of Estonia from Bolshevist forces did not mean that there would be no more fighting for the Danish corps. As mentioned initially, the Danish volunteers fought under Estonian command in another two campaigns (in Latvia and Russia), which are not described here. During these, the Danish corps would experience –

Picture 6

On the 8th July 1919, the Danish field hospital 'Valdemar Sejr Ambulance' arrived in Estonia. The mobile medical unite did not have any relations to DBAC and was purely humanitarian contribution to the war. The ambulance was led by 4 Danish Doctors and assisted by ten Danish nurses. Field hospital was installed at the railway junction in Valga. Hereby many of the wounded – including Danish volunteers – could be brought to by train (EFA archive).

and take part in – the more ideological, brutal and ruthless aspects of the Baltic independence wars. The corps would also, in the Pskov-region in particular, be fighting far more equal opponents. When the corps' contracts expired by the end of August 1919, the Danish volunteers could only muster a little more than 60 able-bodied men, so it was a worn-out corps which was celebrated and applauded in Tallinn before travelling back to Denmark in the beginning of September 1919. In several speeches, Estonian politicians and military leaders thanked the Danish volunteers for coming to Estonia's aid in a time of need, and many Danes were promoted and awarded Estonian military decorations.

Many of the volunteers' descriptions of the farewell party are filled with gratitude for the lavish supply of all sorts of delicious food and drinks. The party did not draw to a close until the early hours of the morning and there was just enough time to gather the necessary equipment before the corps was supposed to be ready at 10 AM, the 2nd of September 1919. The bodies of the (fallen) Danish soldiers were also to be transported home and their coffins were therefore carried through the city towards the harbour. The white coffins were draped in the Danish flag and decorated with wreaths from the Estonian state. At the harbour, the corps boarded the steamship Kalewipoeg and after lots of waving and cheering, the ship set off and left Estonia. After three days of voyage through the Baltic Sea, the corps was able to set foot on Danish soil again. Nothing much had changed in Denmark during the 6 months the corps had done military service in the Baltics, but many of the volunteers had seen, heard and experienced things that changed them and their perception of the world. The volunteer Hugo Læssøe Arboe had these thoughts about his time in Estonia: "*Half a year has passed since we landed; we have experienced many things that we will never forget and we have faced*

63 *Aalborg Stiftstidende* 07.09.1919 "De danske Frivillige i Estland"

death many times, but still we think back on the past with joy because we tried to help a small nation who fought against a superior force to maintain their independence and freedom."[63]

With these words, Arboe expressed the attitude of many of the volunteers. There had been many different motives to go to war and fight for a foreign nation, when the volunteers left for Estonia in March, 1919. Many of them may not have volunteered to free Estonia to begin with, but after the campaign, they felt pride in the fact that they had participated in the fight for Estonian freedom.

CONCLUSION

Despite the help from foreign volunteers to the nationalist movements in the Baltic, it should be remembered and emphasized that the Estonians liberated themselves in the period between 1918 and 1920. As the Danish newspaper *Aalborg Stiftstidende* concluded correctly about the Danish volunteers in Estonia: *"A handful of soldiers cannot have accomplished much. But their presence alone was a sign and demonstration of solidarity between civilized people against the red regime of terror."*[64] The prime accomplishment of the western allies was to be the political and military guarantee behind a German withdrawal from the Baltic, and to support the Baltic fight for existence against the Bolshevists through weapons aid, naval protection and political work.

Unlike the Danish government in 1919, there is much more public and political support in Denmark today for the Baltic region's national security. It is not a rare occurrence for Danish soldiers to be assisting the Estonian defense forces. To mark that Denmark assumed its sixth rotation in the NATO enforcement of sovereignty in Baltic airspace (Air Policing), the website of the Danish Ministry of foreign affairs reminded readers in January 2018 that "*the security of Denmark begins in the Baltic*".[65] Danish defense has significantly increased its military presence in the Baltic in recent years. Apart from providing troops for the eFP-mission in Estonia, Denmark has contributed continuously since 2004 to NATO's Baltic air policing mission, most recently in spring 2018. Furthermore, Denmark has offered to set up and lead a new NATO division HQ in Adazi [Ādaži] in Latvia, to be established in 2019, and has also pledged to contribute forces to the eFP-mission in Estonia in 2020. In the period 1918-1920, the Danish contribution was essentially non-governmental – today it is state sanctioned. This is a significant difference. The Baltic countries are now considered part of Western Europe – not least because of their memberships of the EU and NATO. A hundred years ago, Estonia was far more isolated in its battle for peace and security. While most national movements in the former Russian empire were crushed by the Bolshevist Soviet state, five countries along the Baltic Sea did manage to achieve independence. One of these countries was Estonia – it was an impressive feat.

64 *Aalborg Stiftstidende* 03.01.1920 "Danske Soldater i Nord-Rusland"

65 The statement was made at the official opening ceremony for the eFP mission which was held in Tapa in April 2017, in a speech given by Danish defense secretary Claus Hjort Frederiksen: "Danmark overtager NATO Air Policing i Baltikum", dated 09.01.2018 http://litauen.um.dk/da/nyheder/newsdisplaypage/?newsid=9c46d040-9b42-4701-b1c0-5ea0c3a7d16c (accessed 12.12.2018)

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