**Liisi Esse. Eesti sõdurid Esimeses maailmasõjas: sõjakogemus ja selle sõjajärgne tähendus**

As has become customary in e-Estonia, doctoral dissertations are published online as well as on paper, making them more likely to become integrated into the wider scholarly discourse. Hopefully, this will also the case with Liisi Esse’s PhD thesis, successfully defended at University of Tartu on August 24, 2016 and now available to read for all who read Estonian.

The main part of her dissertation consists of a compilation of five previously published or forthcoming articles, two in English and three in Estonian. In addition, the volume includes an introduction on 26 pages, conclusions on 14 and a thorough bibliography on 22, which has some independent value as a catalogue of recent research pertaining to the war experience of Estonian servicemen in World War I.

It hardly needs to be mentioned that the First World War has, for a long time, been an almost forgotten war in Baltic historical literature. This is all the more remarkable given the fact that the interwar-era Baltic states were in many ways the products of this war – it is almost inconceivable they could have come into existence without the two Russian revolutions in 1917 and the defeat of Germany in 1918. Even the wars of independence in 1918-1920, of crucial significance for interwar-era Baltic statehood, are generally not seen as continuation wars to the Great War, which, of course, they naturally were. And if anything, the role and the legacy of World War I in Baltic social and personal history has been even more poorly understood, in spite of the fact that hundreds of thousands of Latvian, Estonian and Lithuanian servicemen fought as soldiers and officers in the imperial Russian army.

That said, the picture has changed considerably over the past few years. The centenary of the First World War in 2014 invigorated research both internationally and in the Baltic states, with several international conferences held, online databases opened and publications prepared. As some of these initiatives have continued over the following two years, there is a chance that this surge of interest will have some longer-term effects. The centenary of the Baltic independence in 1918, for example, will likely give the scholarly community further occasion to reflect on the role of World War I in Baltic history.

Liisi Esse’s doctoral thesis is a part of this new wave of interest in the Great War – three out of the five included articles were published in 2014 – but also its precursor, since her research project was obviously started well before it. The topic of the dissertation is the war experiences of Estonian servicemen in the Russian army during World War I, considered both in their immediate contemporary context and from the perspective of their post-war significance. The study is based on ego-documents (letters, diaries and memoirs) originating from the soldiers themselves, most of which have not entered scholarly circulation before.

The general aim of Esse’s research is to determine the aspects in which the war experiences of the Estonian servicemen were distinctive compared to their counterparts in other armies, but also in the context of the multiethnic Russian army, where they formed one of its many national minorities. These questions have not at all been previously considered in Estonian historical research, which has mostly focused on the war’s military and political aspects, and they have also been absent in international scholarship, which has understandably had only a limited interest in the Estonian case study. Filling this perceived gap is the central aspiration of Esse’s work, which places the experiences of the Estonian soldiers in a broader international context – that of Russia with its multiethnic army in particular, but also in the wider and ever-diversifying scholarly discourse on the First World War, increasingly turning to “other fronts”, other nationalities and less-commonly studied aspects of war experience.

The main conclusion of the dissertation is that in addition to general negative factors influencing the experiences of all soldiers, the Estonian servicemen serving alongside Russians were very often also affected by conflicts on national basis, as well as habitually bad treatment by Russian officers. These negative experiences contributed to a fast decline in their patriotism, which had been strong at the outset of the war, and a lack of camaraderie felt with other soldiers. As the image of Russians turned more negative over time, the image of the enemy – Germany – correspondingly improved.

For me, this observation opens a tantalizing possibility: was there perhaps a more general development of pro-German sentiment in Estonia up to the German occupation of 1918? But even if this was so, the story obviously did not end there. The change in soldiers’ self-image from patriotic Russian subjects to victims of national persecution was, for many of them, followed by a further development into patriotic Estonians as the political and military situation kept changing at breakneck speed.

Since it is hardly likely that Estonians were alone in having similar experiences, these conclusions should be tested against those of the soldiers belonging to other national minorities. Esse goes as far as possible in this direction, but the results are unavoidably limited, since there have been few comparable studies of other nationalities in the Russian army. However, by underlining the importance of appreciating the national minority perspective in armies with one dominant nationality, and pointing out the significance of war experiences for the development of the said minority’s national identity and self-image, she certainly opens exciting vistas for future research. Most certainly, a broader study on the multiethnic composition of the Russian army as a factor in the soldiers’ identity formation would merit an international comparative research project.

Another distinctive feature of Esse’s thesis is the attention paid to the afterlife of the war experiences. Not content with a narrower study limited to the time spent in the army itself, she also investigates how the war experiences were influenced by the process of returning from the war, and how they were remembered and re-actualized during the interwar era, as well as during interrogations by Soviet security services in the 1940s and 1950s (in the final article co-written with Aigi Rahi-Tamm).

To me, this, too, seems like a very fruitful approach. On the one hand, it helps to call into question the centrality of some experiences and the marginality of others – as far as Estonian soldiers are concerned, it is well possible that the brutalizing frontline experience was in hindsight no more central than the generally bad relations between the nationalities. On the other hand, a longer-term perspective helps us also to understand why World War I has been “forgotten” in the Estonian national discourse – for example, as Esse does, by drawing attention to the post-war competition for status between the soldiers of the “Russian war” and the Estonian War of Independence.

There are hardly any deficiencies worthy of mention. As is the nature of a dissertation based on a compilation of articles, some readers may find it difficult to read due to the unavoidable repetitions between the texts, or dislike the mixture of English and Estonian. That said, and as is hopefully obvious from the rest of this review, Liisi Esse’s doctoral dissertation is a very valuable contribution to Estonian historical research, as well to broader international scholarship on the war experiences of soldiers in World War I.

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