

Estonian Independence War (1918-1920) exhibition “Frontline”

The exhibition contains about 120 photos, most of them little known or unpublished before, together with explanatory texts. Side by side with extremely popular during his lifetime Commander of Home defence forces and the 3rd division in the Independence War, and the first Commander of the Defence League Major-General Ernst-Johannes Põdder, there are meritorious Commanders of armoured trains, Eduard Neps and Oskar Luiga, and armoured car “Pisuhänd” team member Peeter Katus, as well as inspector of armoured trains division artillery, lieutenant Reinhold Sabolotnõi and the 6th infantry regiment private Taavet Poska. The latter was later Director of Estonian War Museum (1919-1940).

Estonian Independence War began on 28 November 1918 with Red Army attack on Narva. So far underground Defence League which began its public activities on 11 November 1918 was initially the only armed force under the command of Estonian Provisional Government. At the start of Independence War, it had around 11,000 members, including 240 officers. In the course of war, the Defence League gradually developed into a proper defensive army with mandatory recruitment policies.

In November 1918, the Provisional Government initially called recruitment of volunteers, officers, doctors and officials; later mandatory recruitment of men between 21 and 35 years age was initiated. On 5 January 1919, before the counter-attack, the number of recruits was 15,343, including 1,257 volunteers. In addition, at least 2,300 men volunteered to army without registration in reception commissions.

The Commander-in-Chief of Estonian Army General Johan Laidoner succeeded in starting the decisive counter-offense in the beginning of January 1919, and in its energetic implementation. His achievement was a spectacular active defence war strategy and its realization. In the words of Rear-Admiral Johan Pitka, the Commander of Estonian Navy in Independence War, the war was a manifestation of people’s toughness, strength and will of liberty. “Courageous deeds did not emerge from instructions of headquarters, located in the rear, from orders or papers, but from self-initiative and conscious self-activities of every frontline soldier”, underlined the Admiral. “Only this way we could achieve results on land and sea, at Narva and Pihkva (Pskov), at Võnnu (Cesis) and Riga. I have to say that one can rarely find such Commander-in-Chief, as we were lucky to find in General Laidoner’s person. He understood and could value the vast importance of people’s, as well as army’s self-activity.”

The photos on the exhibition have large formats and are coloured brown and white. We can see Kuperjanov squad soldiers in the end of May 1919, amidst peasantry in Petseri region and their arrival in Pskov; the Kalev battalion soldiers on the South Front; get an impression of army workshops, field kitchens and shops, of foxholes on the frontline, of weaponry storage and repair; we can see battle banner designs of Estonian units formed during Independence War, and Independence War memorials.

On battle fields, 2,121 soldiers lost their lives; 2,058 more died of wounds, contusions and diseases. Together with terror victims, imprisoned soldiers and those perished otherwise, Estonian losses in Independence War were 6,127 persons. The number of wounded on battle fields reached 12,000.

The most celebrated Estonian military decoration – the Liberty Cross – was awarded to 3,224 persons, including 2,076 Estonian citizens.

The exhibition was composed and designed by Tanel Lään, Estonian Defence League Museum