

Estonia

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Introduction

Russia's long domination of Estonia finally ended with the Bolshevik Revolution in 1918. From 1918-1934, the country went through a brief period of sovereignty. As was common in most countries during the interwar years, Estonia witnessed political instability during this time. There was an overall demand for stronger governance, attempts to consolidate power by fascist groups, a failed communist putsch attempt, government banning anti-Democratic parties and associations etc. All this political instability ended on March 12, 1934, when Konstantin Päts, the then acting President, declared a state of emergency to prevent the opposition from coming into power.

In many ways, the biggest opposition to democracy in inter-war Estonia comes from the Veteran's League – a proto-fascist, radically right wing group, that was dissatisfied with instability in the democratic parliamentary system. The group was against the existence of political parties and instead advocated for a "democracy without parties". Their actions posed a threat to Estonian inter-war democracy in many ways especially by the early 1930s. In August 1933 for instance, Jaan Tonisson's cabinet declared a state of emergency as a response to the rising power of the Veteran's League at the time, expressing the League's actions as "a threat to public order".

The League's demand for a referendum so as to establish new constitutional changes was met in October 1933. A massive voter turnout and support for the League, showcased the overarching demand for reforms in the Estonian political system. This however, may have directly led to the end of democracy in the inter-war period. Konstantin Päts was then the temporary acting President and member of the Farmer's Party. The coming into force of the new constitution in January 1934 therefore, necessitated the election of a new president and parliament, which the citizens voted in favour of in October referendum. However, even before the League had a chance to win the election, Päts declared a state of emergency. When justifying his actions in the parliament, Päts lays an emphasis on the necessity of his actions to avoid extremism and save democracy in Estonia. He also claimed that the Veterans were "preparing a revolution" that may have resulted in a civil war. Päts' rule by decree lasted virtually with no interruption until 1940. He banned the

League and arrested a large number of its members. He also banned all political meetings, rallies and speeches, and disbanded any state bodies that seemed to oppose him. The outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 signalled the end of Estonian independence.

Elections

There were six elections in Estonia during the interwar period – in 1919, 1920, 1923, 1926, 1929, 1932. Scholars argue that the elections represented Estonian voters' gradual shift to the right.

April 5-7, 1919

Estonia's provisional government held elections for the constituent assembly. The elections were dominated by the democratic left with the Social Democrats winning 34 percent and the Labour Party winning 25 percent of the seats. The one other group that made a mark in these elections were the National Democrats, with 20.8 percent of the delegates.

November 27-30, 1920 Riigikogu (Parliamentary) Elections

These were the first parliamentary elections. The Estonian Labour Party won the popular vote with 21 percent of the vote share, followed closely by the Farmers Assembly and the Social Democrats.

May 5-7, 1923 Riigikogu Elections

Out of the twenty five parties that competed in these elections, fourteen achieved representation. Some controversies arose in this election when some of the electoral lists were declared void. These were largely Communist Party members who participated through different Party fronts, but because of the banning of the Communists in the inter-war period, this was viewed as an electoral violation. The Farmer's Assemblies achieved the highest number of votes, followed by the Social Democrats.

May 15-17, 1926 Riigikogu Elections

Before the 1926 parliamentary elections there was a significant change in the electoral provisions. There was now a relatively low threshold to be represented in the Riigikogu, with the need for at least two mandates by competing parties. The elections were won by the Estonian Socialists Workers Party, with the Farmer's Assembly falling closely behind.

May 11-13, 1929 Riigikogu Elections

The Socialist Workers won the elections, followed again closely by the Farmer's Assembly.

May 21-23, 1932 Riigikogu Elections

These were the last elections in independent interwar Estonia. Before these elections, major mergers of parties took place. For instance, the Farmer's Assembly and the Settlers Party merged together to form the Union of Settlers and Smallholders and the Estonian People's Party, Christian People's Party and the Landlord's Party merged to form the National Centre Party. The Union of Small Settlers Party won these elections, with forty two seats in the Riigikogu, the most number of seats won by a party during the interwar period.

Parties

Various socio-political currents influenced the lines in which parties in Inter-war Estonia were formed. While there were obvious class conflicts that led to the left and right distinctions in party ideology, issues of national rights, social justice and economic concerns remained key lines of distinctions between parties. Between April 1919 and March 1934, 21 separate Cabinets had been formed, producing an average Cabinet life of about eight months. This political instability was common in most of Inter-War Europe, and in Estonia led to strong public dissatisfaction with parliamentary democracy

Estonian Christian Democratic Party

The Estonian Christian Democratic Party organised itself in an attempt to represent the Lutheran conservatives, especially in the areas of education. They worked towards moderate social reforms and a democratic government. Throughout the interwar period however, the party did not receive much parliamentary representation and in 1931, even merged with the National Democratic Party, which soon consolidated with the Labour Party to form the new National Centre Party.

Communist Party of Estonia

The Communist Party of Estonia was an extension of the Bolshevik wing of the Russian Social Democratic Worker's. The party distinguished itself from all others in the interwar period because it did not support the sovereignty of Estonia, and instead appealed that it be part of the Soviet Russia. Despite the party's claim that they were autonomous from the Soviet Communist Party, they were suspected to be infiltrated by the Comintern, especially after the failed Communist putsch on December 1, 1924. After this, the party was outlawed by the Estonian government. However, it still operated as a underground entity and participated in national politics through the use of front organisations.

Farmer's Party

The Farmer's Party was the party with either the largest or the second largest majority in State Assembly elections and therefore played a major role in forming cabinets. It was the most significant conservative grouping, representing the political interests of the wealthiest Estonians, both rural and urban. Konstantin Päts was one of its most important members, who in 1934 starting his authoritarian regime after a bloodless coup. The party had multiple splits with varying degrees of success including the Rural League, Homesteaders Party, Smallholders Group and the United Agrarian Party.

Homesteaders' Party

Homesteaders' Party emerged from a split with the Farmer's Party, in an attempt to represent Estonia's less wealthy farmers. In the 1923 elections, the party received only four percent of the national vote, but by 1926 and 1929, this figure increased up to 14 percent. While overall, Homesteaders were a centrist party, by 1931, they rejoined their conservative parent party of the Farmer's.

National Democratic Party

The National Democratic Party was the most significant centrist grouping in interwar Estonia. It was one of the few parties to focus on the nation and national identity rather than social class in their ideology. The group however seems to have lost ground when looking closely at their representation of votes in the state assembly. While in 1917-1919 they had 20.8 percent of the delegates elected to the State Assembly, this number dwindled. In the assemblies elected from 1920-1929, this fell to 10 percent, 8 percent in 1923 and 1926 and 9 percent in 1929.

Social Democratic Party

The Social Democratic Party had been the most important party in the beginning stages of Interwar Estonia. During the 1919 state assembly elections, the party won 34 percent of the total votes – representing the largest political grouping in Estonia. However, the split within the party seems to have led to decreasing support as the years went on. In 1920, some of the left wing members of the party joined the Social Revolutionaries, to form the Socialist Worker's Party of Estonia. Electorally, this split seems to have weakened the party and the level of support they received in elections dramatically decreased. They received only 18 percent of the voter share in 1920 and 15 percent in 1923. The Independent Socialists merged into the Social Democratic Workers Party in April 1925 after the dismissal of the former, in an attempt to consolidate the Estonian Left. They formed the Socialist Workers Party. This merging strengthened the Social Democrats in

the elections who were able to secure 24 percent of the votes in 1926, 25 percent in 1929 and 22 percent in 1932.

Labour Party

From 1917 - 1923 the Labour Party played a central role in Estonian politics. In the first Riigikogu elections, the party won 22 percent of the votes, rising to the position of the largest parliamentary party, 22 seats out of 100. Afterwards however, Labours popularity seems to have declined with 12 percent of the votes in 1923, 13 in 1926, down to 10 percent in 1932. The party had been strongly socialist in its early years, focusing largely on separation between the church and the state and land reform. However, in the later inter war years, they merged with the centrist United Nationalist Party to form the National Center Party.

Veteran's League

Numerous fascist groupings evolved during the phase of Estonian Democracy. The most important one of which was the Veteran's League. The group largely composed of middle class soldiers and veterans who were unhappy with the parliamentary democratic system during this time. While their hostility toward democracy was obvious, they were also against communism and other forms of socialism. The League pitted itself against the rest of the political parties in Estonia, and forced a referendum in October, 1933, the aim of which was to curtail what they viewed to be political instability due to lack of executive power in one individual. Despite popular success of the referendum, with a high turnout to vote in favour of their proposal, this led to the end of democracy in Interwar Estonia and the authoritarian regime of Konstantin Päts.