



# Balancing between dissent and conformity: Estonian self-administration under German occupation, 1941-1944

**Kari Alenius**

University of Oulu, E-mail: kari.alenius@oulu.fi

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## Abstract

*When Germany attacked the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941, it also conquered the territory of Estonia by the end of the year. The German occupation administration of the new territories ruled by the Germans needed the help of local residents everywhere. For this purpose, a semi-autonomous (or quasi-autonomous) Estonian Self-Administration was established. Similar administrative bodies were established in Latvia, Lithuania and Belarus as well.*

*Based on previous studies, it is known that the Estonian Self-Administration worked closely with the German occupation administration. Thus, it is partially responsible for crimes committed in the name of the national socialist ideology in Estonia. It is clear that the Estonian members of the organization were German-minded and at least accepted the German rule for the time being. Otherwise, they would not have been able to join the Self-Administration.*

*However, in previous studies, little attention has been paid to how Estonians tried to balance the interests of Germany and Estonia. Based on the preserved archival material, it seems that the Estonian actors also tried to promote the national interests of the Estonians while cooperating with the Germans and working for them. The article is mainly based on the materials of the German Security Police and other German and Estonian archival material. In addition, the presentation analyzes how the*

## Rezumat

*Când Germania a atacat Uniunea Sovietică în vara anului 1941 aceasta a cucerit și teritoriul Estoniei până la sfârșitul anului. Administrația de ocupație a noilor entități guvernate de germani a avut nevoie de ajutorul rezidenților locali oriunde s-a instalat. În acest scop, a fost creată o autoadministrare estoniană semi-autonomă (sau coasi-autonomă). Organe administrative similare au fost înființate și în Letonia, Lituania și Belarus.*

*Din studiile anterioare se știe că auto-administrația estoniană a lucrat îndeaproape cu administrația germană de ocupație. Astfel, aceasta este parțial responsabil pentru infracțiunile comise în numele ideologiei național-socialiste în Estonia. Este clar că membrii estonieni ai organizației nutreau simpatii pro-germane sau, cel puțin, au acceptat pentru moment conducerea germană. În caz contrar, nu ar fi putut să se alăture Autoadministrației.*

*Cu toate acestea, în studiile anterioare s-a acordat puțină atenție modului în care estonienii au încercat să echilibreze interesele Germaniei și Estoniei. Pe baza materialului de arhivă păstrat se poate afirma că reprezentanții estonieni au încercat să promoveze interesele naționale ale compatrioților lor în vreme ce cooperau cu germanii și lucrau pentru ei. Articolul se bazează în principal pe materialele Poliției de securitate germană și pe alte materiale de arhivă germane și estoniene. În*

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Estonians who worked in the organization later described their wartime activities in their memoirs.

plus, materialul analizează modul în care estonienii care au lucrat în organizație și-au descris ulterior activitățile din perioada războiului în memoriile lor.

**Keywords:** Estonia; Germany; World War II; collaboration; dissidence

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## Introduction

German troops conquered the Estonian continental area in July–August 1941 during Operation Barbarossa. The last Soviet troops were forced to withdraw from the Estonian coastal islands by the beginning of December. The German armed forces defined the whole of Estonia as an operational area under military rule throughout the autumn, and the civil administration was officially adopted on 5 December 1941. Estonia was then administratively attached to *Reichskommissariat Ostland*. Ostland had four main commissariats: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Belarus. Another similar administrative unit was established in the Ukraine, and the rest of the occupied territories in the Soviet Union were under direct military control.<sup>1</sup>

When German troops moved into Estonia in the summer of 1941, self-proclaimed Estonian guerrilla units around the country supported them. The units were formed by Estonians who had fled to the forests to avoid recruitment into the Soviet army and others who were willing to engage in armed struggle against Soviet occupiers. In some places, the Estonian "forest brothers" forced the Soviet troops to retreat before the arrival of the Germans. The struggle against a common enemy on Estonian soil created expectations, on the part of the Estonians, that Germany would recognize the merits of the Estonians and would start negotiating on a roughly equal basis. Under the leadership of Jüri Uluots, the last Prime

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Dallin, *German Rule in Russia 1941–1945. A Study of Occupation Policies*. Second edition (Houndmills: Macmillan press, 1988), pp. 85-97; Seppo Myllyniemi, *Die Neuordnung der baltischen Länder. Zum nationalsozialistischen Inhalt der deutschen Besatzungspolitik* (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1973), pp. 72-74.

Minister of independent Estonia, the Estonians proposed that a “domestic administrative center” be established alongside the German administration.<sup>2</sup> However, Germany rejected the proposal because it already had a different plan, as well as people who would be more favorable to Germany to implement it.

Germany did not want to compromise with those who represented the previous holders of power in independent Estonia, but from the outset, it wanted to ensure that the leadership of the Estonian collaborators consisted of people who were already familiar with and loyal to Germany; these included Hjalmar Mäe, Oskar Angelus, Alfred Wendt and Juhan Libe. Hjalmar Mäe had served as the propaganda manager of the Union of Participants in the Estonian War of Independence and had been sentenced to 20 years in prison for a coup attempt in 1935. However, Mäe was pardoned after three years, and he moved to Germany in 1940 when the Baltic German minority group was transferred from Estonia and Latvia to Germany. There, he cooperated with the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Military Intelligence and the Ministry of the Eastern Areas (*Ostministerium*). In the summer of 1941, he rose to a key position when Germany designed its own collaboration organization in Estonia. Mäe and his assistant, Libe, arrived in Estonia for the first time in August 1941 and were soon followed by Angelus and Wendt. In August–September, under the guidance of the German Armed Forces, this group formed a cooperative body, which was officially named *Estnische Selbstverwaltung / Eesti Omavalitsus*, or the Estonian Self-Administration (ESA).<sup>3</sup>

From 15 September 1941, the Estonian Self-Administration consisted of five directorates, which, in practice, corresponded to ministries. In the first few months of operation, the ESA did not have a formal leader, but in March 1942, Mäe was named *Erster Landesdirektor*, or

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<sup>2</sup> Alvin Isberg, *Zu den Bedingungen des Befreiers: Kollaboration und Freiheitsstreben in dem von Deutschland besetzten Estland 1941 bis 1944* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1992), pp. 29-32; Toivo U. Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians*. Updated second edition (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 2001), pp. 157-158.

<sup>3</sup> Isberg 1992, pp. 21-28; Indrek Paavle, “Estonian Self-Administration in 1941–1944”, in Toomas Hiio et. al., ed., *Estonia 1940–1945: Reports of the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity* (Tallinn, 2006), pp. 539-541.

“First Director,” e.g. Prime Minister. Mäe was also responsible for the propaganda work of the ESA until the beginning of 1945. The Estonian Self-Administration was not appointed as a government, and Germany avoided any rhetoric or action that would have led to the conclusion that Estonia’s independence had been restored. In the German interpretation, Estonia, along with the other Baltic countries, had ceased to exist in the autumn of 1940, when the Soviet Union had annexed the Baltic countries. Despite their self-administrations, directorates and “leaders”, Estonia and the other Baltic countries were only part of the *Reichskommissariat Ostland* throughout the war. Germany did not let the Republic of Estonia’s holders of power return to key positions; at most, Germany needed them to demonstrate from time to time that the leadership of the former state of Estonia approved the supremacy of Germany and the position she had given it.<sup>4</sup>

So far, scientific research on the Estonian Self-Administration has been rather limited. The closest thematic one to this article is Alvin Isberg’s study of the activities of the Estonian Self-Administration, published in 1992. Isberg’s work focuses on the political activities of the ESA. On this basis, Isberg suggests that the Self-Administration was primarily a collaborator, but it also tried to promote Estonian national interests to some extent.<sup>5</sup> The framework set by the German occupation administration for the ESA is discussed in a work published by Seppo Myllyniemi in 1973, the main theme of which is the German occupation administration in the Baltic States in general.<sup>6</sup>

The doctoral dissertation published in 2012 by Meelis Maripuu discusses Estonian administrative history during the German occupation period.<sup>7</sup> The M.A. theses of Kristo Nurmis (2011) and Triin Tark (2013) have dealt with the propaganda work of the German occupation administration and the ESA, and at the same time, the authors have made observations of how the national interests of Germany and Estonia were reflected in

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<sup>4</sup> Paavle 2006, pp. 542-545; Raun 2001, pp. 160-163.

<sup>5</sup> Isberg 1992, pp. 46-47, 146-153.

<sup>6</sup> Myllyniemi 1973, pp. 103-120 (here in particular).

<sup>7</sup> Meelis Maripuu, *Omavalitsuseta omavalitsused. Halduskorraldus Eestis Saksa okupatsiooni ajal 1941–1944* (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2012).

propaganda directed at Estonians.<sup>8</sup> In addition, several works have focused on the German occupation administration in various parts of Europe.<sup>9</sup> They make it possible to compare the situation in Estonia to that of other countries. However, in previous studies, little attention has been paid to how Estonians tried to balance between German and Estonian interests.

This article focuses exactly on the given issue, i.e. the balancing between German and Estonian interests. A particular point of view is how the German occupation administration saw the role of the Estonian Self-Administration and the willingness of the Estonians to cooperate, and how the same things appeared to the Estonian public. The approach is complemented by an analysis of how the supreme leaders of the ESA later (after the Second World War) assessed their own activities and explained why they acted in a certain way during the war.

The most important archives for this research are those of the German Security Police and the Main Commissariat of Estonia. There are big gaps in the archives of all actors, but even in that form, they are reasonably useful. Based on the archival material, it is possible to reconstruct the main lines of organizational issues and the relationship between the ESA and the German occupation administration. Between 1942 and 1943, numerous reports on the development of Estonian public moods have been preserved, but only a few remain from 1941 and 1944. Most of the reports have also been published as a printed source collection.<sup>10</sup>

Most of the other preserved archival material (other than reports on public mood) is typically descriptive and simplified, highlighting the outcomes of decision-making above all else. As a rule, discussions between

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<sup>8</sup> Kristo Nurmis, *Das fein geschliffene Glas. Saksa okupatsiooni aegne propaganda organisatsioon Eestis 1941–1944*. Magistritöö (unpublished M.A. thesis), (Tartu: Tartu Ülikool, 2011); Triin Tark, *Eesti elanikkonna reaktsioonid Saksa propagandale 1941–1944*. Magistritöö (unpublished M.A. thesis), (Tartu: Tartu Ülikool, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Rab Bennett, *Under the Shadow of Swastika. The Moral Dilemmas of Resistance and Collaboration in Hitler's Europe* (Houndmills: Macmillan press, 1999); Vesna Drapac & Gareth Pritchard, *Resistance and Collaboration in Hitler's Empire* (London: Palgrave, 2017); David Gaunt, Paul E. Levine & Laura Palosuo (eds), *Collaboration and Resistance During the Holocaust. Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> The original documents have been published in the following source collection: Tiit Noormets, ed., *Eesti Julgeolekupolitsei aruanded* [Reports of the Security Police in Estonia] 1941–1944 (hereafter cited as EJA), (Tallinn: Riigiarhiiv, 2002).

people involved in decision-making were never documented, nor were the goals or motives of the actors. One might note, however, that making explanations and conclusions is always based on the analyses of the researchers themselves, so the situation here is not exceptional in that sense. It is also common that only a few of the people involved in the events later pondered their work in memoirs. The most important literary works for this study are the memoirs of Hjalmar Mäe, Director of the ESA, Oskar Angelus, Director of Internal Affairs, and Oskar Öpik, Director of Legal Affairs, which have been published as independent works from the 1950s through the 1990s.<sup>11</sup> Typical source-critical viewpoints must be taken into account with the use of these memoirs: the authors' tendencies toward aftertaste and the desire to interpret events and actions in the best possible way from one's own viewpoint are quite evident.

### **The view of the Germans on the Estonian Collaborators**

The German occupation administration's estimates of the abilities and willingness of the Estonians to cooperate varied. Roughly speaking, confidence in the Estonians was greatest at the beginning of the war, but the attitude changed later, especially in 1943–1944. Secondly, it can be said that the Germans had the most positive perception of the Estonians at the highest levels of the Self-Administration. Respectively, the perception of middle-level and lower-level Estonian collaborators was less positive.

The German Security Police assessed the people in leadership positions in the Estonian Self-Administration in a large report, which was drafted in July 1942 and before that in several shorter reports during the spring of 1941, when the attack on the Soviet Union was being planned. Primarily, their attention was focused on Hjalmar Mäe, the *Erster Landesdirektor*. As mentioned above, Mäe had fled from Estonia to Germany in the spring of 1940 and had immediately sought cooperation with the German Security Service there. A good foundation for cooperation was that

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<sup>11</sup> Hjalmar Mäe, *Kuidas kõik teostus. Minu mälestusi* (Stockholm: Kirjastus Välis-Eesti & EMP, 1993); Oskar Angelus, *Tuhande valitseja maa. Mälestusi Saksa okupatsiooni ajast 1941–1944* (Stockholm: Kirjastus EMP, 1956); Oskar Mamers [Öpik], *Häda võidetuile* (Stockholm: Kirjastus EMP, 1958).

Mäe had already gathered information for the Germans in Estonia in the late 1930s. In May 1941, Mäe moved to Finland and founded a five-member Estonian Liberation Committee with the support of a few other Estonian politicians and military personnel, most of whom later participated in the work of the ESA. *Abwehr*, the military intelligence of Germany, backed the committee.<sup>12</sup>

In the German Security Police records, Hjalmar Mäe was rated as very German-friendly and completely reliable. He was said to have a strong positive attitude toward the German political system (National Socialism), and he fully accepted that Estonia would be part of the German Empire. Thus, Mäe did not claim independence or a semi-independent status, as Slovakia and Croatia had, as a reward for cooperation. He was satisfied that Estonia would be a kind of protectorate for the time being. In the future, Mäe saw that the “racially valid” part of the Estonians would inevitably be Germanized and that Estonia would become an integral part of Greater Germany.<sup>13</sup>

There were four other directors, or ministers, in the Estonian Self-Administration. Alongside Mäe, another director who received a very positive assessment from the Germans was Alfred Wendt, who was responsible for economics and transport issues. Wendt was described as politically very reliable, and he was also considered a great organizer and leader. In the eyes of the Germans, his ability to act as director was even better than Mäe’s. However, Wendt was unknown in Estonia, which is why Mäe, who was known to the Estonian public because of his earlier political activity, was the better leading figure of the Self-Administration.<sup>14</sup>

The third very positively evaluated director was Otto Leesment, who was responsible for social issues and health care. Leesment was found to be thoroughly German-friendly and energetic. Two other directors, Oskar Angelus (internal affairs, police force and building issues) and Hans Saar (agriculture), were only judged to be of medium skill, but their political credibility was not directly questioned in 1941 when the ESA was

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<sup>12</sup> Isberg 1992, pp. 22, 26-27; Paavle 2006, pp. 539-540.

<sup>13</sup> Annual report of the head of Sipo and SD, July 1941 – June 1942, EJA, pp. 52. See also Myllyniemi 1973, pp. 109-110; Isberg 1992, pp. 46-47.

<sup>14</sup> Annual report of the head of Sipo and SD, July 1941 – June 1942, EJA, pp. 22, 52, 58.

established. However, in the summer of 1942, the Germans already had some doubts about the general suitability and ability of Angelus and Saar to perform their duties. Saar was transferred to a lower-level post at the end of 1942, after which Wendt was responsible for agricultural matters as well. At the end of 1942, the directorate was completed by the appointment of Oskar Öpik as Director of Legal Issues.<sup>15</sup> No assessments on Öpik have been preserved in the archives of the German Security Police.

Yet another change at the same time was that Otto Leesment began to lead the Estonian Relief Committee (*Eesti Rahva Ühisabi*), which was responsible for a wide range of social welfare issues and collections to support the German army. The organization was inspired by the *Nationalsozialistische Volkswohlfahrt* (NSV) in Germany. Arnold Raadik, who received rather positive comments in German evaluations, was elected as a director in place of Leesment. No other changes were made to the composition of the Directorate until the Estonian Self-Administration ceased its activities in early 1945.<sup>16</sup>

The Security Police report from the summer of 1942 stated that the mid- and lower-level officials of the Estonian Self-Administration were generally less politically reliable. While the directors were judged to be sincerely German-minded, the same did not apply to those who served in mid- and lower-level positions. The Germans had the impression that people in these positions were mostly pretending to be German-friendly and were cooperating only for tactical reasons. Actually, they had strong sympathies for Finland and Great Britain, and they wanted Estonia's independence to be restored. Only a common enemy—the Soviet Union and Bolshevism—united them with the Germans, and they hoped that Germany would defeat the Soviet Union in the war. As a result of the war, however, they hoped for the victory of the Western powers, as had happened in World War I. Alternatively, if (the rest of) the Baltic region

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<sup>15</sup> Annual report of the head of Sipo and SD, July 1941 – June 1942, EJA, pp. 52-53. See also Paavle 2006, pp. 543-545.

<sup>16</sup> Annual report of the head of Sipo and SD, July 1941 – June 1942, EJA, p. 53. See also Paavle 2006, p. 548.

were to be part of Germany, they wanted Estonia to nevertheless be united with Finland.<sup>17</sup>

Among the mid-level officials, there were few positive exceptions from the German perspective. One of these was Gustav Kalkun, who was appointed to form a youth organization in Estonia. The organization, *Eesti Noored*, or Estonian Youth, was essentially based on the model provided by *Hitler-Jugend*. An example in the other direction was Karl Grau, a lawyer who was originally chosen to deal with the legal affairs of the Self-Administration and was considered the corresponding director. However, in the autumn of 1941, the Germans discovered that Grau's political past was suspicious. He was dismissed from his duties, and the legal affairs of the Self-Administration were first transferred to Hjalmar Mäe and later to Oskar Öpik.<sup>18</sup>

During 1943–1944, the interest of the Germans in the Estonian Self-Administration decreased. It was probably because Germany's attention was increasingly focused on actual warfare when Germany's strategic situation deteriorated. Compared to that, any other administrative issues in the occupied territories were secondary. From 1943 on, the German occupation authorities were mainly content to deal with the Head of the ESA alone. He was then supposed to forward the commands he had received to the other directors. As a result, for instance, the German Security Police no longer spent much time evaluating other directors, but from their point of view, the only really important person was Hjalmar Mäe.

German attitudes toward Mäe changed somewhat between 1943 and 1944. Governor-General Karl-Siegmund Litzmann, Head of the German Occupation Administration in Estonia and a convinced national socialist, felt that co-operation with Mäe continued to work well. He even considered Mäe to be his friend. Instead, Hinrich Lohse, the *Reichskommissar* of Ostland, was very critical of Mäe. He was of the opinion that Mäe had too much influence over Litzmann, and Lohse was also

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<sup>17</sup> Annual report of the head of Sipo and SD, July 1941 – June 1942, EJA, pp. 40, 53-54.

<sup>18</sup> Annual report of the head of Sipo and SD, July 1941 – June 1942, EJA, pp. 37, 53. See also Paavle 2006, pp. 543-544.

irritated by the fact that, in some cases, Mäe dared to question the measures of the German occupation administration.<sup>19</sup>

The German Security Police had the same view. In the summer of 1944, the Security Police estimated that Mäe's views and activities were partly in conflict with German interests. In addition, Mäe's ability to act as a leader and to encourage Estonians to continue fighting alongside Germany had weakened, mainly because Mäe had experienced a religious revival<sup>20</sup>, and therefore, his public appearances had become "soft," as the Germans put it.<sup>21</sup> From a national socialist point of view, Christianity was a dangerous competitor, and its effect was to be reduced in both Germany and the occupied territories.<sup>22</sup>

A similar dichotomy can also be seen in many other countries occupied by Germany during World War II. The Germans were well aware that some collaborators were opportunists who could not be trusted. Nonetheless, Germany needed them, and as long as the opportunists did not turn against Germany, their work input was welcomed. In any case, it was the duty of the Security Police to monitor them and, if necessary, to intervene. It could also be realistically expected that when the course of the war and the strategic situation turned negative for Germany, opportunists were the first to change sides. After that, the faith of the more sincere collaborators also began to decline.<sup>23</sup>

### **The public's view of Estonian collaborators**

Ordinary people in Estonia initially expected that the Self-Administration would become a real wielder of power and would operate as a near equal in cooperation with Germany. In February 1942 and in 1943,

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<sup>19</sup> Report of the head of the Security Police (Estonian section), June 1944, EJA, pp. 294-296, 308, 317-319. See also Isberg 1992, pp. 80-84, 102-103.

<sup>20</sup> Mäe 1993, pp. 42-43, 319-325.

<sup>21</sup> Report of the head of the Security Police (Estonian section), June 1944, EJA, p. 296, 305, 308, 319.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Steigmann-Gall, *The Holy Reich. Nazi Conceptions of Christianity, 1919-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2005), pp. 261-267.

<sup>23</sup> Bennett 1999, pp. 43-67; Drapac & Pritchard 2017, pp. 74-104; Robert Bohn, "Kollaboration und deutsche Mobilisierungsbemühungen im RK Ostland. Grundsätzliche Überlegungen", in Gaunt, Levine & Palosuo 2004, pp. 33-44.

before Estonia's Independence Day (24 February), there were even rumors of a return of Estonian independence or at least autonomy under a German protectorship, but here, as in several other similar previous hopes, the Estonians were disappointed. Behind the scenes, the Estonian Self-Administration only had the role of enforcing the regulations of the German Occupation Administration. However, the Estonian larger public were not aware of these realities in the beginning.<sup>24</sup>

Governance executed by the ESA, in practice, meant that the Self-Administration seemed to have an independent role. As commonly experienced by ordinary Estonians, it was exactly their "own" national administrative body that gave the orders and guidelines concerning everyday life. Consequently, *Eesti Omavalitsus* inevitably had to bear the responsibility for the successes and failures of governance in the eyes of the Estonians. At least until the fall of 1942, Estonians had the notion that the Estonian Self-Administration had quite a lot of power and possibility to influence economic and other issues related to the maintenance of the population. According to reports on the public mood, ordinary Estonians were of the opinion that Estonia's Self-Administration had done its work poorly for the most part and had indeed borne the main responsibility for the shortcomings observed in everyday life.<sup>25</sup>

There were exceptions, though. In particular, the work of Alfred Wendt seems to have been effective from the point of view of the Estonian public. In 1942, he received a lot of praise for his work, and occasionally, other directors and lower-level officials received positive comments as well.<sup>26</sup> However, the main line was critical. Hjalmar Mäe, the First Director, personalized the Estonian Self-Administration. The overwhelming majority of ordinary Estonians wanted to restore Estonia's independence, and here, Mäe's public appearances and other activities did not meet expectations.

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<sup>24</sup> Bi-monthly and monthly reports of the Political Police (from different regions of Estonia), EJA, pp. 267-268. See also Argo Kuusik, "Public Sentiments", in Hiio 2006, p. 614.

<sup>25</sup> Annual report of the head of Sipo and SD, July 1941 – June 1942, EJA, p. 22, 27; Bi-monthly and monthly reports of the Political Police (from different regions of Estonia), EJA, pp. 97, 201, 274, 281. See also Isberg 1992, 43-45; Maripuu 2012, p. 268; Nurmis 2011, p. 27.

<sup>26</sup> Bi-monthly and monthly reports of the Political Police (from different regions of Estonia), EJA, pp. 114, 126, 160, 233.

The Head of the ESA was considered far too German-minded and was criticized for not being more vigorous in promoting Estonia's national interests.<sup>27</sup> His radio speeches and public appearances were rarely praised, but it can be stated that there are also some examples of such successes.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the "judgment of the people" was not unanimous, but all too often,



Mäe was seen in the role that the accompanying photo reflects.

**Picture 1: Hjalmar Mäe, Karl-Siegmund Litzmann<sup>29</sup>**

In the picture, Mäe (far left) makes a Hitler salute alongside Governor-General Litzmann (second from the left). It is noteworthy that, in

<sup>27</sup> Bi-monthly and monthly reports of the Political Police (from different regions of Estonia), EJA, pp. 97, 114, 135, 169, 199, 205-206, 222, 233-234, 247, 254, 261-262. See also Maripuu 2012, p. 268; Tark 2013, p. 89.

<sup>28</sup> Bi-monthly and monthly reports of the Political Police (from different regions of Estonia), EJA, pp. 120, 134, 146, 159-160, 211-213, 266.

<sup>29</sup> [http://www.estonica.org/en/The\\_German\\_occupation\\_power\\_in\\_Estonia,\\_1941-44/Leading\\_figures\\_of\\_the\\_German\\_occupying\\_powers/?max](http://www.estonica.org/en/The_German_occupation_power_in_Estonia,_1941-44/Leading_figures_of_the_German_occupying_powers/?max) (authorized by Estonian State Archives; e-mail to author (Kari Alenius) on 14 June 2019).

the same situation, high-ranking German officers who only make a normal military salute appear on the front row. In other words, nobody was forced to emphasize their sympathy for National Socialism, but Mäe chose that option. In the eyes of ordinary Estonians, it did not increase respect for him but made him look like an embarrassing loyal servant of the German occupation administration.

In reports on the public mood throughout 1943–1944, the same grievances remained apparent; only the degree of criticism increased. The German governance was now seen as bearing the main responsibility for the poor situation of Estonia. The role of the Estonian Self-Administration as a mere underling was already well publicized, which certainly did not reduce the disappointment felt by the people. The image of the Self-Administration as an apparent user of power then was just as poor as the image of the German Occupation Administration as the real user of power.<sup>30</sup>

Earlier studies have found that Estonians were initially very positive about the Germans, who were perceived as liberators of the brutal occupation of the Soviet Union. This was especially true in 1941 and early 1942. During that period in particular, various successful collections were organized in Estonia to support the German army. Considering also how many Estonians were volunteers in the German armed forces, the proportion of Estonians was highest in Eastern Europe compared to the population.<sup>31</sup> It is therefore easy to understand that the attitude of ordinary people toward Estonian collaborators was initially quite positive. There were great hopes for cooperation with the Germans, and besides, Estonians also appreciate efficiency and good order. This was clearly reflected in the attitude toward Alfred Wendt.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Bi-monthly and monthly reports of the Political Police (from different regions of Estonia), EJA, pp. 267-269, 274, 281-286.

<sup>31</sup> Reports of the public mood in the occupied areas of the USSR, 1 August 1941, 26 September 1941, 30 September 1941, documents published in Helmut Krausnick and Hans-Heinrich Wilhelm, *Die Truppe des Weltanschauungskrieges: Die Einsatzgruppen der Sicherheitspolizei und des SD 1938–1942* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1981), pp. 370-375; Annual report of the head of Sipo and SD, July 1941 – June 1942, EJA, p. 22, 27.

<sup>32</sup> Bi-monthly and monthly reports of the Political Police (from different regions of Estonia), EJA, pp. 114, 126, 160, 233. See also Nurmis 2011, 30-31.

On the other hand, efficiency could not compensate for the fact that, in their eyes, ESA leaders did not act effectively enough to restore Estonia's independence. According to reports from the Security Police, only about 3–5% of Estonians supported National Socialism and accepted the idea that Estonia would remain a part of Greater Germany after the war.<sup>33</sup>

Exact information is not available in any of the European countries, but the figures seem to have been at about the same level. Thus, it was almost impossible for the collaborators to get the majority of the people to directly support them in any country occupied by Germany. Everywhere, ordinary people found the collaborators' political line to be wrong.<sup>34</sup> The struggle against Bolshevism did motivate people to support the German armed forces, especially in the Baltic countries, which had been occupied by the Soviet Union in 1939–1941. However, people had an almost unanimous hope that independence should be restored after the war at the latest.<sup>35</sup> When the collaborators could not promise it, their image inevitably became negative among ordinary people, both in Estonia and elsewhere.

### **The view of Estonian Collaborators on their own activities**

After the war, three directors of the Estonian Self-Administration—Oskar Angelus, Oskar Öpik and Hjalmar Mäe—published a memoir or an autobiography describing their own activities in 1941–1944. There are similar features but also differences concerning how they present their war-time activities and thinking. The most important similarity is that, after the war, everyone still retained their stark anti-communist attitude.<sup>36</sup> This was logical, of course, because Estonia was now under the Soviet occupation. The only way to try to restore Estonia's independence was to side with the West in the Cold War. The collaborators' own activities during the Second

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<sup>33</sup> Annual report of the head of Sipo and SD, July 1941 – June 1942, EJA, p. 25; Bi-monthly and monthly reports of the Political Police (from different regions of Estonia), EJA, pp. 94.

<sup>34</sup> Bennett 1999, 43-67; Drapac & Pritchard 2017, 14-19.

<sup>35</sup> Annual report of the head of Sipo and SD, July 1941 – June 1942, EJA, p. 23; Bi-monthly and monthly reports of the Political Police (from different regions of Estonia), EJA, pp. 94.

<sup>36</sup> Mäe 1993, pp. 11-14; Angelus 1956, pp. 5-6, 288-295, 313; Mamers [Öpik] 1958, pp. 9-10, 14, 118-121, 264.

World War could then be presented as a precursor to the political struggle against Communism in the 1950s and 1960s.

The biggest differences can be found in how the authors seek to present their national motives. Through psychological research, it is clear that all people have a strong need to see themselves in a positive light. One's own thinking and actions will then be interpreted as legally and morally right. When remembering and describing one's own past, our choices are usually explained as sensible and appropriate to the situation. If there are uncomfortable things or mistakes in the past, the reason for them is sought from other people or from overwhelming circumstances.<sup>37</sup> Therefore, an autobiography can easily become a straightforward heroic report in which one's own activities are fully correct.

Oskar Angelus' memoirs of the war are a good example of a straightforward heroic report. If his memoirs are considered as a whole, it seems that Angelus had applied to the German occupation administration only to defend the interests of Estonia and Estonians. From the outset, he had opposed National Socialism and realized very early on, perhaps earlier than anyone else, that Germany was going to lose the war. He continued his work as a director of the ESA only because he tried to work for the restoration of Estonia's independence.<sup>38</sup> It is hard to estimate how much of this report is true and how much is aftertaste.

Oskar Öpik's autobiography covers his entire career, the earlier parts of which the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs employed him. Considering the whole, it is remarkable how briefly and superficially Öpik describes wartime and his own activities as a director of the ESA. Öpik clearly wanted to leave the impression that acting as a director was only a minor side note in his career, hardly worth remembering. Based on Öpik's story, it seems as if he had been a trivial low-level officer or an outsider whose task was mainly to observe what was happening in Estonia. Öpik

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<sup>37</sup> Neal J. Roese & Kathleen D. Vohs, "Hindsight Bias" in *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. Vol. 5 (2012), Issue 5, pp. 411-426; Mark V. Pezzo & Stephanie P. Pezzo, "Making Sense of Failure: A Motivated Model of Hindsight Bias" in *Social Cognition*. Vol. 25 (2007), Issue 1, Special Issue: The Hindsight Bias, pp. 147-164.

<sup>38</sup> Angelus 1956, pp. 6-7, 38-40, 49, 73, 94-107, 115-117, 137, 140, 146-153, 165-171, 177, 215-219, 223-226, 247-248, 258-259, 269-270, 274-280, 284, 298, 320-333, 339-340, 342-346.

suggests that he made no decisions, and the responsibility for what happened during the war was with other ESA officials and the Germans. Of course, Öpik has never been in favor of National Socialism or Germany, but he says he has always been a strong supporter of democracy.<sup>39</sup>

Both Angelus and Öpik are of the opinion that Mäe was the main culprit for everything.<sup>40</sup> Maybe it is their sincere opinion, but Mäe can at least act as a suitable scapegoat. Here, it is also necessary to note that, in all organizations, people expect a lot from the leaders. The leader is often praised for successes, but he is always accused of failures, no matter what his actual influence has been. This is emphasized in challenging circumstances, meaning that the more difficult or dangerous the situation, the more people tend to rely on their leaders.<sup>41</sup>

In his memoirs, Hjalmar Mäe gives a relatively versatile and honest impression of his own actions. Mäe remains silent about the most embarrassing things associated with the early stages of war. As mentioned before, Mäe had accepted Estonia's accession to Germany and the Germanization of the country, but these things are not dealt with in the book. An honest impression is created by the fact that Mäe can also look at his own activities in a critical light. He admits that he has made mistakes and has failed. At the same time, for example, he dares to acknowledge Governor-General Litzmann,<sup>42</sup> even though positive comments about the Head of the German occupation administration were certainly not fashionable or politically wise after the war was lost and after the fall of National Socialism.

Mäe's report that he sought to promote the national interests of the Estonians is supported by German and American archival material. It seems that Mäe was really trying to get Germany to support Estonia's independence and Estonian defense battles in their own country in the

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<sup>39</sup> Mamers [Öpik] 1958, pp. 51-54, 74-75, 192, 200-203, 210, 215, 224-225, 232, 235-239, 264, 280-284.

<sup>40</sup> Angelus 1956, pp. 94-103, 146-153, 165-168, 247-248, 258-259, 264-267, 282; Mamers [Öpik] 1958, pp. 203, 232, 240, 244, 289, 301.

<sup>41</sup> Kenneth J. Gergen & Mary M. Gergen, *Social Psychology* (New York: Springer Verlag, 1986), pp. 262-270, 333-336.

<sup>42</sup> Mäe 1993, pp. 10, 183, 193-195, 226-237, 241-243, 249-250, 256-257, 299-300

summer of 1944. Immediately after the war (1945), Mäe contacted General George S. Patton, military governor of Bavaria, and took over the forceful recruitment of Estonians into the German army. During the Nuremberg Process, he did the same.<sup>43</sup> By doing so, he risked being convicted as a war criminal himself, but at the same time, he protected Estonian soldiers who had surrendered to Western Powers from being handed over to the Soviet Union. In his memoir, Mäe generally does not leave the responsibility to others. Mäe's strong religious belief is a possible explanatory factor in the desire and willingness to "confess one's sins."

### **Conclusions**

If the question is to what extent the Estonian Self-Administration balanced between Estonian and German interests, the answer depends on the respondent. From a German perspective, Estonian high-level actors were "honest" conformists, and lower-level actors engaged just for tactical reasons. From the point of view of the Estonian public, the leaders of the Self-Administration were pure conformists who agreed to almost everything Germany required. Employees in the ESA saw their own activities as having been the opposite. Some of the highest officials claimed that, in reality, they were dissidents and freedom fighters. Thus, one can say that there were three competing or "alternative" truths.

In history, there are rarely completely black-and-white situations. It is also difficult to find "the ultimate truth" because no source material directly reflects the "truth," but the conclusions also contain the interpretations of the researcher. When comparing Estonia to other German-occupied countries during World War II, nothing can be found that would separate Estonia significantly from other countries. Of course, there are small local differences and shades, but the main lines are the same everywhere.

As far as conformism and dissidence are concerned, the most similar points of comparison are Latvia and Lithuania, which shared exactly the same features during 1939–1941, before the arrival of the

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<sup>43</sup> "Eluloolised andmed" in Mäe 1993, p. 8, 15, 50-51; Angelus 1956, 339; Voldemar Pinn, *Kahe mehe saatus. Johannes Vares, Hjalmar Mäe* (Haapsalu: s. l., 1994), p. 118.

German armed forces<sup>44</sup>. The fate of Poland was slightly different, and in Western Europe, the situation was clear in that the attacker was Germany, not the Soviet Union. However, from the point of view of collaboration, the situation was partly the same in that the collaborators, for instance in France, Belgium and Scandinavia, viewed the situation from a broad ideological perspective. They believed that Bolshevism was Europe's greatest threat and that Germany was the only country capable of protecting Europe. Similarly, for all of them, parliamentary democracy had failed, and National Socialism or Fascism seemed to be more promising solutions as they planned how societies should be developed in the future. Quite probably because of these calculations, they were willing to abandon the independence of their home countries in a traditional sense and to accept German domination.

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<sup>44</sup> Maripuu 2012, pp. 185-186, 263-266.

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