

# Events of the Russian Civil War in Abkhazia 1918–1921 in the Manuscript Sources of the Estonians from Abkhazia

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## Abstract

A number of Estonian settlements were formed in Abkhazia in the 1880s. This article uses archival sources, written memoirs, diaries and secondary literature to focus on the experiences of Estonians in Abkhazia during the Russian Civil War until the establishment of Soviet power in 1921. The article discusses what role the proclamation of the Republic of Estonia played for the settlers, and what the change of status from an internal migrant to an emigrant meant for the Estonian community in Abkhazia, but also the political opportunities that the establishment of Estonia as an independent republic brought to compatriots living in the diaspora.

## Keywords

Abkhazia – colonization – Estonian diaspora – Russian Civil War – handwritten sources

## 1 Introduction

The First World War, the Bolshevik coup and the ensuing civil war in Russia led to the collapse of the empire, which resulted in tens of thousands of people suddenly finding themselves on the territory of another country. In many areas, the consolidation of Soviet power was preceded by several tense years of warfare. The Bolsheviks were simultaneously fighting the Russian Whites and the national armies of the frontier nations on a large number of fronts. At the

same time, both the Russian Whites and the various frontier national militias were being supported by the Entente allies.

At the time of the Civil War 250,000 Estonians lived outside of Estonia in other parts of the former Russian tsarist state, and accounted for about 20% of the total number of Estonians. The Estonians living in various parts of the tsarist state were locally impacted by the events of the Russian Civil War. And they came in contact with both the Bolsheviks and the Whites, and in many places, with the British and French who were supporting the Whites.

Estonians arrived in the Caucasus due to the colonisation policy of the tsarist state. After the Caucasian War of 1817–1864, a large portion of the native population of the Northwest Caucasus was forced to leave their homeland. Colonists from elsewhere in the tsarist state and abroad were settled on the resulting “empty” lands. Thus, in addition to Russians, Georgians, Bulgarians, Armenians, Greeks, Moldovans and Germans, as well as Estonians, arrived in Abkhazia. By establishing new colonies, the tsarist authorities wanted to contribute to the security of the country’s border areas. The tsarist authorities also hoped that the colonists would bring new agricultural methods to the Caucasus, which would benefit the economic development of the region. In the 1880s, Estonian villages were established in the Sukhum District of the Kutais Governorate (Upper Linda, Lower Linda and Estonia) as well as in the Sochi District in the Black Sea Governorate (Salme and Sulevi). In 1886, 846 Estonians lived in Abkhazia (in the Sukhum District and the Abkhazian part of the Sochi District). Estonian villages initially focused on the production of grain (wheat and, from the last decade of the nineteenth century, corn), and later on fruit production (citrus, plums, apricots). By the beginning of the First World War, some Estonians had also started growing tobacco, but this did not become as important an article for Estonians as, for example, for Armenians and Greeks.

The Estonian colonists had strong cultural ties with their homeland. In each village, newspapers and literature were ordered from Estonia and school teachers were hired. During the Civil War the cultural ties with the homeland decreased to some extent, yet at the same time, with the establishment of the Republic of Estonia on 24 February 1918, new political ties arose between the homeland and the settlements.

One of the aims of this article is to describe the political and military events experienced by the Estonian settlers in Abkhazia between 1918 and 1921, the choices they made and what these choices meant for the future of the settlements. Another aim is to introduce new manuscript material that can be used to nuance some aspects of the history of Abkhazia during that period. It is remarkable that in all Estonian villages in Abkhazia there were people

who wrote down their memories and kept the village chronicles. What is even more exceptional is that most of these sources have survived. However, the chronicles and memoirs have not been widely used, mainly for linguistic reasons, i.e., the handwritten materials of the Estonian settlers are in Estonian. The little use of the material during the Soviet years is also explained by political reasons – their content did not resonate with the Marxist discourse, which required, above all, the treatment of class struggle.

## 2 Sources and Historiography

These Estonian language sources have survived and been stored in archives thanks to the work done by several Estonians who were active in the Caucasus at various times and collected the handwritten texts of Estonian settlers in Abkhazia. Firstly, Samuel Sommer, an Estonian intellectual with a law degree, who lived in the village of Livonia in the North Caucasus during the Civil War and visited the Estonian settlements in Abkhazia, organizing educational courses there. Repatriated in 1921, he brought the collected manuscript materials to Estonia where they are preserved in the Samuel Sommer Collection of the Cultural History Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum (fond 235). Another important collection comes from Estonian entomologist Jakob Nerman, who lived in the villages of Salme and Sulevi from 1924 to 1936 and moved to Estonia in 1947. After retirement, he began researching the history of the Estonian settlements in the Caucasus and established an impressive network of correspondents among the Estonian villages in Abkhazia. The materials received from Abkhazia are stored in the Jakob Nerman Collection in the Estonian History Museum (fond 284) and in the National Library of Estonia (fond 28). Another network of correspondents was established in 1950–60 by August Martin, who had worked as a schoolteacher in the village of Upper Linda in Abkhazia during the Civil War, was a delegate to the Abkhazian People's Council from 1919 to 1921 and emigrated to Estonia in 1921. Today, the materials that he collected are in the Estonian Literary Museum.

Nerman and Martin also organised collection expeditions to Estonian villages in Abkhazia. August Martin also wrote his own memoirs – one text in Estonian (Martin 2013), the other in Russian (Martin 2009). Abkhazian authors (Bgazhba, Lakoba 2015, Lakoba 2018) have used Martin's Russian-language memoirs as a source in their publications, but not the Estonian-language ones for obvious reasons. In his memoirs, Martin focuses primarily on political developments in Abkhazia (see Jürgenson 2017a) and his work on the cultural

organization of Estonians (see Jürgenson 2017b). In the context of the events of the Civil War, his contribution can be appreciated primarily as a collection of the memories of other Estonian colonists in Abkhazia. Thanks to Samuel Sommer, Jakob Nerman and August Martin, we now have a large amount of manuscript material in Estonian, which can broaden our knowledge about the events in Abkhazia during the Civil War. In addition to the longer texts, shorter texts and notes, letters about the events of the Civil War have also been preserved in the Estonian archives. At the time, many Estonians in Abkhazia also published articles about the war events in Estonian newspapers in 1918–21.

The availability of these materials has so far been patchy for various reasons. The linguistic aspect has already been mentioned. In Soviet times ideological reasons also prevented the factual value from outweighing the “correct” view of history. For example, when an article by A. Kullerkupp appeared in 1930 in the Bolshevik Estonian Siberian newspaper *Siberi Teataja*, which was published in Novosibirsk, he wrote about an episode of the Civil War, the so-called Battle of Sulevi in the Sochi District (Kullerkupp 1930), in which the local Estonian partisans (so-called Greens) were presented as fighters for the Soviet regime; the article was sharply attacked in *Edasi*, another Estonian Bolshevik newspaper. The author, who hid behind the initials E.A., contended that the Greens were actually kulaks, the wealthier class of the peasantry who resisted both the Russian Whites and the Bolsheviks. According to the author, the Greens were headed by Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), and were therefore, a counter-revolutionary force (E.A. 1930). It is clear from the context that these two articles are part of disputes between the local Estonians in the Caucasus who, at that time, were quite numerous. It should be emphasised that when these articles were published in 1930, collectivisation had begun in the Soviet Union, and the authorities were identifying and repressing the so-called kulaks, under the banner of class struggle. But the dedicated Bolshevik E.A. was certainly right about one thing: neither the Estonian settlers nor the other so-called Greens were Bolsheviks, nor did they support the latter between 1918 and 1920.

Forty years later, the historian Lembit Võime took a closer look at the events of the Civil War in the Estonian settlements of the Caucasus: first in an article that appeared in 1973 (Võime 1973) and later in a monograph on the Abkhazian Estonians that appeared in 1980 (Võime 1980), in which we again learn that the Estonian settlers fought on behalf of Soviet power during the Civil War. Võime also deals with the aforementioned dispute in the Bolshevik press in 1930 and defends the position of O. Kullerkupp. He finds that E.A. was not sufficiently acquainted with the events of 1919–20 in the southern part of the Black Sea province when he describes the local “Green” movement as being a Socialist Revolutionary force (Võime 1973, 358). If the title of Võime’s article

(in translation: “Estonian settlers in the struggle for Soviet power.”) indicates that the Estonian settlers fought for Soviet rule on the Black Sea coast during those fateful years, the author was adhering to the Soviet tradition of describing almost all anti-Denikin movements in the Caucasus as being revolutionary (Bugai` 1991, 13). However, Võime’s text does not provide convincing evidence for this. Apparently, he did not even aspire to this, because he admits that in the spring of 1918 a meeting of the Salme settlement declared itself to be neutral and not aligned to any political movement (Võime 1973, 358). And he suggests, in several ways, that the people actually held rather nationalist views. This is also confirmed by the archival materials. This article also shows that there is no basis for accusing the Black Sea partisans, the so-called Greens, of being pro-Soviet.

In 1974, a survey of the events of that time was published in Stockholm by Estonians in exile Harald Kikas and Jüri Rimmel (Kikas, Rimmelgas 1974), which also used Võime’s 1973 article as a source. Since they were on the other side of the Iron Curtain, the authors did not have access to the manuscripts in the Estonian archives.

More recently, Russian authors Elena Shavlokhova and Evgenii Malakhov have briefly discussed the situation of the Estonians in the north-western Caucasus, including in the Abkhazian villages of Salme and Sulevi, during the Civil War. In places, the class-struggle phraseology familiar from the Soviet era is used. Samuel Sommer, who organised educational courses in the Estonian settlements during the Civil war and whose archival materials are described above, is described as carrying out nationalist activities in the Estonian settlements under the pretext of cultural activities, with the help of the petty bourgeois element and the wealthier peasantry. The authors enclose the word congress in derogatory quotation marks when describing the assembly that Sommer convened in Livonia, an Estonian settlement in the North Caucasus. They also write that the Estonian settlers considered the Red Army to be their only defender. Unfortunately, no reference is made to sources, as this statement strongly contradicts the other important sources. However, they do acknowledge that the partisans were ultimately more influenced by the Socialist Revolutionaries (Shavlokhova, Malakhov 2014, 100–102). The Russian authors did not use the Estonian manuscript sources.

### 3 Political Developments in Abkhazia 1917–18

First, a few words about the congress that is put in quotation marks and derogatorily referred to as a bourgeois national event in the article by Shavlokhova

and Malakhov. It was convened in May of 1917 by Samuel Sommer in the settlement of Livonia in the province (*oblast'*) of Kuban. It was officially called the Congress of Estonian Settlements in Southern Russia, Crimea, North Caucasus, Black Sea coast and South Caucasus. The congress took place in Livonia because that was where Sommer resided at that time, while preparing young Estonians to enter secondary school. He was also organising educational societies and inter-settlement contacts in the Estonian settlements in the North Caucasus (Sommer 1928, 3). At the congress, a plan was adopted for cultural activities in, and cooperation between, the Estonian settlements, with the main emphasis on education. One of the goals was for the Estonian youth in the settlements to attend secondary schools in Estonia and thereafter, the University of Tartu. It is for this purpose that Sommer was organising educational courses in various Estonian settlements in the Caucasus in 1917 and 1918, for instance in the villages of Salme and Sulevi in Abkhazia in spring 1918. In any case, there was nothing “petty bourgeois” about this activity, as Shavlokhova and Malakhov claim. Many of the goals established by the congress in Livonia were not achieved because by the following year, the region had been caught up in the whirlwind of the Civil War. The organisational activities of the Estonians shifted from the North Caucasus to the vicinity of Sukhum in Abkhazia, which during the next few years was under the rule of the Georgian Mensheviks, and therefore not directly impacted by the hostilities. The local chairman of the Estonian Council was August Martin, a school teacher from Upper Linda, who had also participated in the congress in Livonia.

The establishment of various councils and committees was quite common in Russia in 1917 after the February Revolution. This was also the case in Abkhazia. Ethnic groups living there became politically active. The Armenians, Greeks, Russians, Germans, Poles, Ukrainians, and Jews also established their own national councils and associations (Dzidzariia 1979, 294–295). As did also the Abkhazians on 8 November 1917, when the Abkhazian People’s Congress was held, which established the Abkhazian People’s Council (Абхазский Народный Совет). Among the main goals of this autonomous centre of power was to achieve self-determination for the Abkhazian people. Against the threat of the Bolsheviks, the Council needed allies. While some council members preferred allied relations with the mountain peoples of the North Caucasus, another part began looking for allies in Georgia (Welt 2014, 210–211). The threat of the Bolsheviks was real – first in February and then in April 1918, the Bolsheviks seized power in Sukhum. In late April and early May, battles also took place in the vicinity of the Estonian villages near Sukhum (Tammann 1921, 190). On May 17th, the Georgian Mensheviks, who were receiving help from Germany, forced the Bolsheviks out of Sukhum (Bgazhba, Lakoba 2015, 300–301). Estonian villages near Sukhum (Lower and Upper Linda and Estonia)

came under Georgian Menshevik rule. In the northwest, including in the Estonian villages of Salme and Sulevi, the Bolsheviks remained in power until June, but then, under pressure from the Georgian Army, retreated from there as well.

#### 4 The Estonian Villages under Bolshevik Rule in 1918

How did Estonians react to the advent of Bolshevik rule? Kristjan Truumann, an inhabitant of Estonia village writes that some (but only some) of the men in the village went along with the mobilisation by the Bolsheviks in February 1918. At the same time, the Georgian Menshevik units approaching Sukhum from the south used the men of the village of Estonia as guides (Truumann s.a., 4–5). As this period was short, Bolshevik power did not manage to establish itself strongly in Estonian villages near Sukhum. In Truumann's memoirs, he talks about scores being settled among the residents in the village of Estonia after power changed hands. When a Georgian military unit arrived after the Bolsheviks were defeated, some of the villagers took advantage of the situation and denounced their enemies as being Bolsheviks (Truumann s.a., 11).

In north-western Abkhazia, in the Estonian villages of Salme and Sulevi, the Bolsheviks were initially in power from early February to the middle of June 1918, after which the Georgian troops expelled the Bolsheviks. Bolshevik rule in these villages at this time has been described as relatively peaceful. The authorities did not obstruct certain national activities – when the above-mentioned Samuel Sommer started teaching cultural and educational courses in Sulevi village in May 1918, and established an Estonian educational society on May 15th (Ludvig 1925, 18), it does not appear from the archival materials that the authorities prevented this. However, it must be borne in mind that the Bolsheviks did not have resources to thoroughly reshape local power structures. For example, in this same Sulevi village, Villem Ludvik had been the village elder since the beginning of 1918 and when the Bolsheviks arrived in February, he became the Assistant Chairman of the Executive Committee of the local village council (which included both the Sulevi and Salme villages). Essentially, he retained his position of village elder. That being said, when the Georgian Army chased the Bolsheviks out in June, the current village government in Sulevi remained in place, and Ludvik became the commissioner (Ludvig 1925, 18). The authorities changed, but there were no major changes in the wartime conditions at the municipal level. Based on what we know, Ludvik definitely was not a Bolshevik sympathiser, although maintaining the position of village elder during the various military occupations certainly required some manoeuvring skills. When the Bolsheviks in Sochi issued a mobilisation

order, Salme and Sulevi declared themselves as being neutral in regard to the events in Russia on the grounds that the villagers were citizens of the Republic of Estonia (*Lühikene ... s.a., 1*). It is not clear on what basis because the majority of the villagers could not have been citizens of the Republic of Estonia at that time. Apparently, in the spring and summer of 1918, when calling themselves citizens of the Republic of Estonia, the Estonians of Salme and Sulevi were relying emotionally on the fact that Estonia had proclaimed independence on 24 February 1918. However, it is interesting that, according to sources, Estonian men were left in peace (*Lühikene ... s.a., 1*). But then on July 3rd, the Georgians occupied Gagra and Adler, on July 5th, Sochi and in early July, the Sochi District, while encountering little resistance (Mailyan 2013, 177–179).

## 5 Elections for the Abkhazian People's Council

In August, the Georgian authorities accused the members of the Abkhazian People's Council who favoured the Mountain Republic (established on 11 May 1918) of being Turkish-minded (Bgazhba, Lakoba 2015, 320–322, 327). When it turned out that members of the Abkhazian People's Council had also been in talks with the Russian Whites, the Georgian authorities disbanded the Council on October 10th, and some delegates were arrested and taken to Tbilisi (Lakoba 2015, 234; Bgazhba, Lakoba 2015, 320ff).

Elections for the new council were scheduled for 13 February 1919 by the Georgian authorities. Historians in Abkhazia and Georgia still hold different views regarding these elections. According to Abkhazian historian Stanislav Lakoba, the elections were not democratic, because some of the Abkhazian members of the former council at the time were known to have been arrested and unable to prepare for the elections (Lakoba 2017, 167, 168). Georgian author Jemal Gamakharia acknowledges the fact of the arrests, but contends that does not mean the elections were undemocratic (Gamakharia 2016, 43). Zurab Papaskiri, another Georgian historian, agrees (Papaskiri 2010, 197). In any case, this election did not take place in independent Abkhazia – Gamakharia also admits that the rules of procedure for the Abkhazian People's Council elections were not approved in Abkhazia, but by the Georgian Parliament on 27 December 1918 (Gamakharia 2011, 401).

On 17 January 1919, the Estonian Council (Эстонский Совет in Russian-language documents) also compiled an election list. August Martin, Upper Linda's school teacher, who was first on the list, campaigned actively in the Estonian settlements. However, the inhabitants of Salme and Sulevi refused, claiming that their villages were located outside the borders of Abkhazia. Since at least half of the region's Estonians refused to participate in the elections,



they were only able to send one deputy to the council. Martin received over 600 votes, including from non-Estonians (Martin 2009, 273–274).

As was expected, the Georgian Mensheviks achieved a majority in the Abkhazian People's Council. Martin's one-member Estonian delegation was officially called the faction of the District Council of the Estonian Colonies of the Black Sea Coast and Transcaucasia (фракция Районного совета эстонских колоний Черноморского побережья и Закавказья) (Martin 2009, 276; 2013, 55). In later historiography, the delegation has also been referred to simply as the "group of colonists" (Dzidzariia 1979, 308) or the "faction of colonists" (Võime 1980, 77), although it did not actually represent all the Abkhazian settlers, i.e., the Armenians, Greeks, Germans, etc. In the Council, August Martin supported the positions adopted by the nationalist Abkhazians, who were in the minority, against the Georgian annexation policy and was a thorn in the side of Georgian politicians. In his memoirs, he states that that organisation was merely an extension of the Georgian authorities in Abkhazia (Martin 2009, 288).

The fact that the Estonians in the villages of Salme and Sulevi did not participate in the elections for the Abkhazian People's Council is related to the changes at the front. Anton Denikin's White Volunteer Army captured Sochi and then Gagra from the Georgians on February 6th and by February 10th had reached the River Bzyb, which had been the border of the tsarist Sochi district (Papaskiri 2010, 202–203; Gamakharia 2011, 405; Kazemzade 2010, 226). Thus, on the day of the Abkhazian People's Council elections, the Estonian villages of Salme and Sulevi were on the other side of the front line. Denikin was also ready to expel the Georgians from Abkhazia, but the British, who were the strongest foreign military force in the region after the end of the First World War and allied with Denikin, threatened to deprive the Volunteer Army of military assistance if he carried out his plan and Denikin relented. Since the negotiations between Denikin and the Georgians were unsuccessful, the British had no choice but to move their 100-man unit to the Gagra area at the end of February. It was stationed on the shore of the River Bzyb (Mailyan 2013, 198, 200), about twenty to thirty kilometres east of the Estonian villages of Salme and Sulevi. Both sides promised not to cross the river. However, the agreement did not last long (Kazemzade 2010, 228), which meant that the battles in the disputed territory continued, including in Salme and Sulevi.

## 6 Under Georgian Rule

The Estonian villages around Sukhum remained under the control of Georgian forces until the Bolsheviks arrived in 1921. This ensured a degree of stability, apart from the frequent requisitioning of food and horses by the Georgians.

The requisitions of grain and cattle had previously been carried out in the villages by the Bolsheviks – this is why in the sources is justified why the Georgian troops were welcomed by the Estonians when they attacked the Bolsheviks in the summer (Kirkmann 1920a, 2).

The memories of local Estonians also testify to the tensions that existed between the Abkhazians and Georgians. For example, when Georgia announced a mobilisation, the residents in the village of Estonia turned to Varlam Shervashidze, the chairman of the Abkhazian People's Council, for advice. He advised them to ignore the Georgians' mobilisation, because Abkhazia would soon institute its own military rule and carry out a mobilisation. However, a few days later, the Georgian commissioner issued a new order – the men must report for service, or the army will come visiting. The Estonians again appealed to the Abkhazian People's Council, which thereafter began negotiations with the Georgian government. The matter was resolved positively for the Estonians, and they were exempted from this one mobilisation (Truumann s.a., 12–13).

Later, the Estonians in the Sukhum region sought and received help from the Estonian organisations and the Estonian consular officials in order to avoid mobilisation. The Estonian People's Council, which became active in Tbilisi as of 22 December 1918, set out to defend the interests of the local Estonians. The Council issued Estonian passports. Although they were not authorized by the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and therefore the Council had no legal right to issue Estonian passports on behalf of the Republic of Estonia (Kirkmann 1920b), these documents could nevertheless be used to impress local officials before "more official" passports were issued. On 28 July 1920, Johannes Kirkmann, the former chairman of the Estonian People's Council in Tbilisi, was appointed to be the Estonian consular agent in the Caucasus. The consul started to issue new passports, and in some cases, the existing passports issued by the Estonian People's Council were also declared to be valid (Mihkelson 1921, 1). In 1920, when Georgia announced a new mobilisation, Estonians escaped thanks to Estonian Consul J. Kirkmann, who travelled to Sukhum in the autumn and issued Estonian passports, which exempted them from military service as foreigners (Truumann s.a., 21).

It must be said that the people living in the Estonian villages around Sukhum did relatively well during these difficult war years. In January 1920, when Georgia was waging war on several fronts, Gustav Frisch, a resident of the small Estonian settlement of Kotkapesa ('Eagle's Nest') near Sukhum, wrote that the people in Upper Linda were making a good living by selling milk, since the demand was much greater than the supply. According to him, the residents of the Estonian village traded mainly in cabbage, potatoes and mandarins (Frisch 1920a, 2). The settlers did complain that, due to the war, it was difficult

to keep in touch with Estonia, with some letters and news reaching them via England. The situation was definitely more complicated in the Estonian villages of Salme and Sulevi on the Psou River in the Gagra region, which repeatedly changed hands in the course of subsequent events. During the times that Salme and Sulevi were under Georgian rule, the men there were exempted from mobilisation, as were the men in the Estonian villages in the Sukhum region (*Lühikene...*, 1). However, this situation did not last long, because, as we know, the territory was occupied by the White Volunteer Army in early 1919.

## 7 Under the Control of the Volunteer Army

How did the local Estonians react to the arrival of the Volunteer Army? When the Bolsheviks and Georgian Mensheviks had been in charge, the authorities had requisitioned food, horses, and wagons, but the men had yet to be mobilized. According to several sources, Estonians hoped to see better days and stability under Denikin. The word *volunteer* in the name of the White Army was also encouraging. It was hoped that such an army would not forcibly recruit anyone (*Lühikene ... s.a.*, 1). Denikin himself has written in his memoirs that after the conquest of Sochi on January 24th, the locals welcomed the Whites with open arms (Denikin 1991, 180). However, the residents of Sochi, as well as the Estonians of Salme and Sulevi, would soon be disappointed. Violence by Denikin's Cossacks, and the frequent orders for the requisition of wagons and foodstuffs, soon caused the people to run out of patience (Ludvig 1928, 25; Kirkmann 1920a, 2). Estonian villagers write that the Estonian villages suffered the most, because the inhabitants of Russian villages did not have anything for themselves and even less to give away (*Lühikene ... s.a.*, 1).

Rudolf Summer, a school teacher in the Estonian settlement of Krasnaya Polyana in the Sochi District, who surreptitiously escaped from the territory annexed by Denikin in a ship's coal bunker, wrote that the Estonians suffered more under Denikin's rule when the tsarist rural municipality governments were restored, and meetings prohibited, than at the hands of the Bolsheviks. If the Georgian government allowed lessons at school to be taught in the mother tongue, then under Denikin's rule Russian was reintroduced in schools as the language of instruction. Summer writes that soldiers were brought to the villages and the villagers had to feed them (Summer s.a., 40). In a letter to Ants Piip, the representative of the Republic of Estonia in London, Summer emphasized that the situation of the Estonians in the Sochi and Adler region, i.e., in Salme and Sulevi, was particularly difficult (Summer 1920, 12). In the second half of March 1919, Denikin announced the mobilisation, which also affected

the local Estonians. Denikin's order also announced that court-martials would be organized, and anyone evading mobilisation would be immediately executed (Võime 1980, 61; Kikas, Rimmelgas 1974, 89). The local peasants hid in the woods to avoid mobilisation (Mailyan 2013, 200). Estonians subject to conscription did the same. Ammunition was also stockpiled, with the Georgians promising to provide additional supplies. The farm animals were driven into the forest, and valuables were hidden (*Lühikene ... s.a.*, 1). Many young Estonian men fled across the front line to the Estonian settlements near Sukhum, which were in the territory annexed by the Georgian Mensheviks, and they remained for the entire summer. There were refugees from Salme and Sulevi in almost every village (Martin 1913, 57, Truumann s.a., 28). Some men left, some decided to resist. Villem Ludvik writes, how the younger men in Sulevi gathered and decided to resist mobilisation (Ludvig 1928, 25).

Since a British unit headquartered in Gagra was stationed in the area for peacekeeping purposes, rumours began to spread among the people that Britain was planning to make the Caucasus into a colony. This was not the case, but the locals had insufficient information about the role of the British in the region. The Estonians, wanting to find out more about the British plans, went to Gagra to investigate the matter further. Villem Ludvik and another settler Joosep Leht, who spoke English, arrived at the British headquarters, where, of course, it turned out that there was no talk of any British protectorate. The British soon made it clear to the delegation of Estonian settlers that Britain was only acting as a peacekeeper between Georgians and Russian Whites. The British also informed the Estonian envoys that the British government maintained good relations with the Volunteer Army and was helping them fight against the Bolsheviks. The Estonian envoys asked the British to ensure order in the villages, whereupon the staff supposedly sent a radio telegram to the British government (apparently, however, it was sent only to the British mission in the Caucasus). The envoys went back home happily, but it soon became clear that their hopes had been dashed. Essentially, the British did nothing to call the Whites to order (Ludvig 1928, 25). The Estonians' appeal had no impact on the neutrality of the British.

Now the Estonians had no choice but to resist the arbitrariness of the Whites and their mobilisation demands, although they threatened to bring the Estonians before a White court. A meeting was held on 21 March 1919 on Neebo Hill between Salme and Sulevi, which was attended by about 50 envoys from 20 neighbouring settlements, and a decision was made to defy the armed robbers. A second meeting was held on March 23rd, this time with about 700 men participating – Estonians, Russian, Moldavians and Georgians from the

surround villages. It is important to note, as V. Ludvig emphasized, that the local Armenians did not participate in the meeting, although they made up 75% of the region's population (Ludvig 1928, 3). The reasons are discussed in more detail below. The following week, shooting broke out between the Russian Whites and local partisans in the village of Salme, which, based on various recollections, was the largest battle at that time (Tinnert 1958, 7). Initially the locals were winning, but on March 30th, the Whites brought cannons and machine guns to Salme. And after a serious battle that lasted for several hours, the partisans were forced to retreat. Punitive actions followed. The commander of the White force sent against the partisans demanded that the rebel leaders be handed over. Otherwise, he would burn the village down. Since there was no response from the partisans, the threat started to be carried out. A punishment squad invaded Salme and started to rob and attack the villagers, and burn their farms. It is unclear how many houses in Salme were burned down. Harald Kikas and Jüri Rimmelgas mention nine farmhouses along with the outbuildings (Kikas, Rimmelgas 1974, 91). August Tinnert's memoirs refers to more than 10 houses destroyed (Tinnert 1958, 7). And Johannes Kirkmann cites 19 burned-out houses (Kirkmann 1920a, 2).

The memories of the local Estonians also tell us that, since the Whites also suffered great losses, they wanted to negotiate with the rebels (Ludvig 1928, 4). The real reason was that Denikin, who was fighting simultaneously on several fronts, had moved some of his troops from the Georgian front. They were fighting the Bolsheviks in the Don region and moving north with the aim of reaching Moscow (Bugai` 1991, 11). In other words, the Whites did not have enough resources to deal with the local rebels. In any case, the negotiations took place on April 3rd. The Whites were willing to stop mobilising the local peasants, but demanded that they surrender their weapons in return (Ludvig 1928, 4).

Denikin, who wanted to relocate some of his troops from the area, had received a promise from the British that they would stop the Georgians from crossing the River Bzyb. However, the British failed to deliver on that promise. The Georgians, who had strengthened their units on the other side of the Bzyb, including with the members of the Red Army who were interned in Georgia, took advantage of the moment to cross the Bzyb on the night of April 4th. And since the Whites were short of soldiers, they attacked the small Gagra garrison and quickly occupied the territory up to the River Mzymta. However, they soon retreated and took up a position on the River Mekhadyr, which flows a few kilometres east of Salme and Sulevi. Why did the Georgians stop at the Mekhadyr? This has sometimes been explained by the fact that this was Georgia's so-called "natural border", which runs along the Great Caucasian

chain (Arkhipova 2014, 95–96). Actually, it was more significant that Gagra, the most important city in the region and which was located between the Bzyb and Mekhadyr, was now under Georgian control. Both the Whites and the British demanded that the Georgians retreat to the previous line behind the Bzyb, but the Georgians refused (Gamakharia 2011, 406; Mailjan 2013, 201). The negotiations stalled. The Georgians did not retreat from their positions and remained at Mekhadyr in the immediate vicinity of the Estonian villages until the beginning of 1920.

In the summer of 1919, a neutral zone of about 7–10 *versts* (about 7.7–11 kilometres) wide was located in the area between the Rivers Mekhadyr and Psou (Mailyan 2013, 205). It included the Estonian villages of Salme and Sulevi. However, the substantive functioning of the neutral zone was overestimated, as was the ability of the British to guarantee regional neutrality. Villem Ludvik from Sulevi writes that for an entire year, several gangs remained active in Sulevi (Ludvig 1928, 4). August Tinnert, another settler from Sulevi writes that gangs from both sides organized raids into the neutral zone, including into the villages of Salme and Sulevi (Tinnert 1958, 8). The fact that the neutral zone essentially did not work was proven by the so-called Battle of Sulevi village, which broke out on May 17th after the Whites arrived in Sulevi to requisition foodstuffs. The battle between the Whites and the local partisans, which raged from 17 to 19 May, ended in victory for the latter. Ludvik believes that the men from Sulevi, who comprised about half of the partisans taking part in the battle, played a particularly important role in the victory (Ludvig 1928, 4–5, 29).

## 8 The Role of the Local Armenians

Local Armenians were also united with Denikin's army, and the local Estonians have colourful, but not warm, memories of them. War between the Armenians and Georgians had broken out in December 1918. The front was several hundred kilometres to the south-east from the Gagra region, but, understandably, it caused tensions between the Armenians of the diaspora living in Abkhazia and the Georgians trying to annex the region. As the Abkhazian historian Stanislav Lakoba has indicated, while the Georgian Menshevik government was in charge, Armenians were driven out of Abkhazia, and Georgians were settled on their lands. Lakoba provides examples of how the Georgians organized looting raids in Armenian villages (Lakoba 2017, 168). Denikin partly justified the Volunteer Army's attack in early February 1919 on the need to protect the local oppressed and insurgent Armenians, who had asked the Volunteer Army to protect them from the Georgians. Was this explanation justified?

Some Georgian historians do not think so. According to J. Gamakharia, the Armenians in the Sochi District actually supported the Democratic Republic of Georgia (DRG). In support of his claim, he cites Kh. Avdalbekyan's letter to the Georgian Prime Minister N. Zhordania, that since the proclamation of the DRG, the Armenian population in the Sukhum District has expressed great sympathy for the young democracy. Gamakharia claims that the People's Council of the local Greeks also expressed its support for the DRG (Gamakharia 2011, 402). However, these expressions of support should not be taken very seriously. At the time, they were, in fact, semi-compulsory in order to reassure the leadership of the annexing country that one's community was loyal to them. Gamakharia does not mention it, but the Estonians of Abkhazia also sent a greetings telegram to the Georgian government within the framework of the Second Congress of Estonian Settlements of the Black Sea Coast and the South Caucasus, which took place in the village of Upper Linda on 10–11 August 1919 (Martin 2013, 56). The congress had been convened by August Martin, an Estonian member of the Abkhazian People's Council, who, in fact, was critical of Georgian politics in Abkhazia. Such a greetings telegram was based on the need to survive. We have seen above that the north-western part of Abkhazia, where Salme and Sulevi were located, had been controlled by Denikin's troops since February, and their relations with the Georgian Mensheviks remained strained. Many of the men from Salme and Sulevi were refugees from the Estonian villages near Sukhum. This extremely complicated situation explains why the Estonian organisation felt it necessary to confirm its loyalty to the local Georgian authorities. It is worth noting that, in fact, this Estonian Congress also sent greetings telegrams to the governments of Abkhazia and Estonia. It also expressed support for the Abkhazian people's right to self-determination and called for greater Abkhazian autonomy within Georgia (Mustamere-Ranna ... 1919, 1).

Gamakharia's claim that the local Armenians (and Greeks) actively supported the Republic of Georgia is therefore based on rather weak evidence. The writings of local Estonians also do not confirm the validity of his statement. The above-mentioned J. Kirkmann states that the local Armenians cooperated with Denikin and assisted them in the attack on Georgia (Kirkmann 1920a, 2). Gustav Frisch, the business manager of the local Estonian Economic Association, also writes about the cooperation between the Whites and the local Armenians (Frisch 1920a, 2). In the memoirs of the Estonians, the Armenians living in the area are depicted both as fighters in the Volunteer Army and as marauders who plundered the villages, including Estonian villages, after battles (Ludvig 1928, 5, 18, 25–26; Tinnert 1958, 7). Rudolf Summer even called upon the government of the Republic of Estonia to provide the Estonians with state protection against the local Armenian marauders (Summer 1920, 49).

## 9 The Green Army

The rebellions by Estonian men in the spring and summer of 1919, which were partially successful, can be viewed in the context of the formation of a new force, the so-called 'Green Army'. With the exception of the local Armenians, who supported the Volunteer Army of the Russian Whites, most of the local population, including Estonians, was concentrated in the partisan forces, and their main goal was to protect their homes from attacks by any armed group or marauders. During the summer, more and more peasants from the surrounding area, as well as defectors from the Whites, joined the partisan army. The various forces operating during the Civil War on the Black Sea coast and in the wooded mountain areas were assembled under the leadership of the Liberation Committee. Although politically the Greens were most influenced by the Socialist Revolutionaries, who also coordinated their activities to some extent, the group was not very cohesive. A significant proportion of the Greens were local peasants who were trying to protect their homes and did not have any specific political views. A large proportion of the Greens were men who had refused to join the mobilisation announced by Denikin in early 1919 and had hitherto hid in the mountains or fled behind the front (Smele 2015, 138; Bullock 2010, 25–26). This also included many Estonian men from Salme and Sulevi. The peasants in Salme and Sulevi who opposed the Whites were also referred to as "Greens" in many handwritten memoirs.

It is clear from the Estonians' memoirs that the Georgian People's Army supplied them with weapons, ammunition and clothes in 1919 (Ludvig 1928, 6; Tinnert 1958, 7). This is also consistent with other sources (Cherkasov, Mamadaliev 2011, 25) and perfectly understandable – after all, the Estonians were mainly fighting against the White Russians. Villem Ludvik writes unequivocally about the next Sulevi battle, which took place on 27–28 January 1920, as being a victorious action on the Green front. He also notes that the local Estonians also played an active part in the subsequent attack on the Whites between Tuapse and Sochi (Ludvig 1928, 6–7). As far as the bigger picture is concerned, this battle in Sulevi and the subsequent attack were part of an uprising planned and carried out by the Liberation Committee. It began simultaneously on the night of January 27th in the surrounding settlements and targeted the garrisons of the Whites. Due to the surprise nature of the attack, the White Guards were not able to mount much of a defence and the Green Army moved on quickly to Sochi and the other settlements in the Sochi District. Sochi was captured on February 3rd. By 13 February 1920, the entire Sochi District was occupied and became the launching site for the military



operations of the Green Army (Cherkasov, Mamadaliev 2011, 27–30). The local Estonian K. Milender writes about the so-called government of the Greens in the Sochi District in 1920, and says that it ensured relatively good security in the villages and even issued its own banknotes. The Greens only remained in power for a few months, until the Bolsheviks invading from the north eliminated them (Milender, *Salme ... s.a.*, 2–3). If in May, the Greens, led by the Socialist Revolutionaries, hoped to reach an agreement with the Red Army, then the latter had their own understanding of the situation. Some of the Greens were arrested, others escaped (Cherkasov, Mamadaliev 2011, 43f.).

## 10 Events in Early 1920

Starting in early 1920, the odds in the confrontation between the Bolsheviks and the Whites began to favour the former. In April, the Bolsheviks surrounded and captured 60,000 Whites in the vicinity of Sochi (Smele 2015, 140). During the general retreat by the Whites that followed, it was the local peasants who suffered again – starving and ravaged soldiers took everything they could from the villages. Daily firefights between the looting White Guards and the local farmers also broke out in the Estonian villages. “Formerly rich Estonian settlers had become beggars,” J. Kirkmann wrote, perhaps exaggerating somewhat, but adding that this motivated the settlers to migrate to their homeland in Estonia (Kirkmann 1920a, 2). In the summer of 1920, Kirkmann had been appointed the Estonian consular representative in the Caucasus.

Many Estonians in Abkhazia expressed a wish to resettle in Estonia during this complicated period. In the Sukhum district, which was a rich tobacco-growing region, tobacco production had already begun to decline during the First World War, when the men had to go to war. Due to exporting difficulties, the tobacco industry almost came to a standstill. The output of this important industry declined tenfold. This forced the local Greeks and Armenians who had been active in tobacco growing to emigrate to Greece and Turkey in 1920 (Ioanidi 1990, 28). Estonian tobacco production also suffered and the Estonians engaged in tobacco production wanted to migrate to Estonia (Lukats 1921, 5–6). An increase in the desire to emigrate was also caused by the severe drought on the Black Sea coast that occurred in the summer of 1920, and resulted in crop failure. The corn and potato crops were especially hard hit (Frisch 1920b, 2–3). There were also people who did not want to leave for Estonia for economic reasons, but to fight for their homeland. Already in 1919, the Sukhum Estonian Council had been negotiating with the British representatives in Batum regarding the possibility of Estonian and Finnish soldiers and

young men being able to return to their homeland. The discussion was related to about hundred men (Mustamere ranna ... 1919, 19). There were also plans to form an Estonian battalion and send it home, but that failed due to British opposition (Kaljot 1919, 16).

## 11 The Moscow Peace Treaty of 1920 and the New Neutral Zone

On 7 May 1920, the Moscow Peace Treaty was signed between Georgia and Russia. In so doing, Soviet Russia recognized the independence of the DRG. Article III of the treaty established the border between Soviet Russia and Georgia on the River Psou. Essentially, this meant that Soviet Russia recognized Georgia's civil war-related annexation of Abkhazia, by ceding the area between the Rivers Psou and Mekhadyr in the Sochi District of the former Black Sea Governorate to Georgia. The Estonian villages of Salme and Sulevi were also located there. Article IV of the agreement also provided for the transfer of the Sukhum district to Georgia – which is where the rest of the Estonian villages in Abkhazia were located. According to the Moscow Treaty, a neutral zone was to be marked off on the Soviet Russia-Georgia border, which extended five *versts* (ca. 5.5 kilometres) on either side of the border. The Estonian villages of Salme and Sulevi remained in the neutral zone along the River Psou, and Estonians also lived in neighbouring settlements in the neutral zone. In his memoirs Villem Ludvik writes that, in the area around his home village of Sulevi, the Soviet Russian troops had to retreat behind the River Psou, and the Georgian Menshevik troops had to retreat behind the River Mekhadyr (Ludvig 1925, 221). The situation was confusing for the villagers. In his memoirs, Villem Ludvik calls the areas of the neutral zone a *no man's land*, but nevertheless reports that it was the Georgian government that started organising things locally, including renaming the company of Sulevi partisans as a militia company, and paying the salaries of the village commissar (Ludvik himself) and the head of the militia. According to the peace treaty, the area was demilitarized, and when groups of Whites retreating from the Reds began to arrive in the village, the farmers who had been named as officials demanded that they depart immediately, so they would not be accused of violating neutrality (Ludvig 1928, 6). An Estonian settler K. Milender also indicates that, although the Estonian villages remained in the neutral zone, they were still considered to be part of Georgia – the border was opened for free trade with Georgia. By autumn 1920, prunes – the main horticultural product of the Estonian villages – were already being traded (Milender, *Salme ... s.a.*, 3).

## 12 The Bolshevik Offensive and Liquidation of the Democratic Republic of Georgia

As the remnants of the White Army were evacuated from Crimea to Constantinople in November 1920 and the Soviet-Polish war was coming to an end (it ended in March 1921), the Bolsheviks “resolved” the troublesome Georgia issue. In February 1921, Bolshevik troops entered Georgia from Armenia, and soon afterwards also from Azerbaijan and Russia. At the end of February 1921, when the Reds had launched a general offensive, the Georgian government announced a general mobilisation. Attempts were also made to mobilize the Estonians. Several memoirs have survived from this period, which deal with the dilemmas faced by the Estonians. On the one hand, it was known that the Reds had defeated the Whites in the Civil War and established themselves in other republics of the South Caucasus. They had also seized the North Caucasus and were rapidly moving towards Sukhum. The general attitude of Estonians was to try and avoid mobilisation. Many had Estonian passports. The Estonian Consulate in Tbilisi had been granting Estonian citizenship to them since August 1920. Some had moved to Estonia, but most had remained in the Caucasus (Paul 1921, 113). There had been reports from the village of Estonia that, by the time this next mobilisation was announced, all local Estonians had become citizens of the Republic of Estonia and submitted a petition not to be mobilized as foreign citizens. However, the chairman of the Georgian military committee did not recognize their Estonian passports and claimed that, as local residents, they must serve in the military (Truumann s.a., 32). The letter of Sergei Paul, the new Estonian consular representative in Tbilisi to the Estonian Foreign Minister, which was dated as early as December 11th 1920, informs him that the Estonian passports distributed by Estonian consulate were provoking opposition from the Georgian authorities, since there was no agreement between Estonia and Georgia that described the procedure for changing citizenship. However, Paul succeeded in persuading Georgia to temporarily accept the Estonian passports until the relevant law was drafted. In early 1921, he also had to travel to Sukhum to protect the rights of Estonians at risk of mobilisation. He succeeded, as Mihkel Mihkelson, the Secretary of the Consulate, confirmed (Mihkelson 1921, 1). Rumours circulated in the Estonian villages that the Estonian government would be sending ships to pick up the settlers, encouraged by the fact that the settlers had not received any newspapers from Estonia for a long time due to the turmoil caused by the Civil War (Truumann s.a., 20). Many were simply afraid of travelling through Russia where the Civil War was raging. The possibility of travelling by sea was considered, but cargo ships refused to take them on board as passengers (Frisch 1920a, 2).

In early March 1921, the Red Army conquered Abkhazia. The Bolsheviks arrived in the villages and demanded food, wine, horses, wagons and hay for the horses. In the spring of 1921, reports from Salme and Sulevi appeared in the Estonian press, which were essentially requests for evacuation (Eesti asunikude ... 1921, 6; Viletsus ... 1921, 3). On 21 April 1921, the Estonian Consulate in Tbilisi asked the Estonian Government for funds to evacuate the local Estonians (Tifliisi ... 1921, 10). As the situation calmed down in the summer, the people's desire to leave also abated. In August 1921, almost 400 people who had acquired Estonian citizenship still lived in Abkhazia (Eesti Esitus Kaukasias s.a., 1). Most of them remained in Abkhazia, which was understandable in this situation – many were afraid to travel through war-torn Russia, but the Soviet authorities also prevented people from leaving. Pessimistic signals were also received from Estonia that due to the poor economic situation after the war, the perspectives of the repatriates for a better future in the homeland were weak. Also the time factor cannot be ignored. Estonian settlements had been established almost 40 years previously – a new generation had grown up for whom the settlements were their birthplace, which they did not want to abandon.

### 13 Conclusion

The First World War, the Russian Revolution, and ensuing Civil War plunged Russia into a whirlwind of events, which brought an end to the tsarist state and gave birth to a number of new nation-states. Since tsarist Russia had promoted extensive internal colonisation in previous decades, hundreds of thousands of people had moved to other parts of the country, and now found themselves cut off from their countries of origin. Internal migrants had become foreign immigrants. In Abkhazia, where a number of Estonian settlements had sprung up in the 1880s, the Georgian Mensheviks, Russian Bolsheviks, Denikin's Volunteer Army and Abkhazians all played a role in the events during the Civil War. When the Germans, who supported the Georgian Mensheviks withdrew from the war, they were replaced by a British military mission that tried to mobilize anti-Bolshevik forces, without much success. The Estonian villages around Sukhum, i.e., Upper and Lower Linda and Estonia, were under the control of the Georgian occupying forces for practically the entire Civil War, from early 1918 until March 1921, after which the area was conquered by the Red Army. Despite the constant requisitioning of goods for the war effort, this period passed relatively peacefully in these villages. However, the situation was quite different in the villages of Salme and Sulevi in north-western part of Abkhazia, which constantly changed hands between 1918 and 1921: first the Bolsheviks, then alternately the Georgian Mensheviks and the Denikin Volunteer Army,

then the Green Army, and finally the Red Army. Several battles in and around the villages of Salme and Sulevi, punitive actions by the Whites and looting by marauding gangs forced the Estonians to flee from the villages across the front and shelter in other Estonian villages, to take up arms in protest or seek cooperation with other armed units as well. The neutral zone, established upon demands from the British military mission, essentially existed only on paper and failed to secure peace in the region. During these difficult times, the proclamation of independence by the Republic of Estonia on 24 February 1918 was of great significance for the local Estonians. Many acquired Estonian citizenship to help them avoid local mobilisations. It seems that this was also the main reason for acquiring Estonian citizenship – there was no massive repatriation of Estonian passport holders to Estonia, even after the Red Army conquered Abkhazia.

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