

# Ritt Nach Dem Osten

by Richard Clarke

Mention the Freikorps to most gamers and they'll either summon up images of chaps in powdered wigs assisting the Great Fritz to win the Seven Years War, or chaps in coal-scuttle helmets assisting Rosa Luxemburg to shuffle off this mortal coil, both of which, in my opinion, are worthy pastimes. Within the context of Triumph of the Will it is the latter that we are more inclined to be involved with, but to view them as a mere instrument of White Terror, or a precursor to Nazism, is to misread their role in history.

The Freikorps were a product of the collapse of Imperial Germany at the close of the Great War. Whilst their most famous actions saw them fighting against a succession of minor Communist revolts in the major cities of Germany, including their brush with our chums Liebknecht and Luxemburg in Berlin, they were also to play very different roles further east.

## Poland

It is interesting to look back on the history of the first half of the twentieth century and view how it is written about and taught in schools. Where as Germany comes out as "Much sinning", Poland is seen as "much sinned against", and whilst it is difficult to argue with the former the latter is far from the truth.

Treaty of Versailles had made provision for the re-birth of Poland as a nation state, as they had with the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. From its inception Poland was aggressive and expansionist, both eastwards and westwards. In this they were largely supported by France, who were inclined to develop a new client state and ally on Germany's eastern border, and to see Germany reduced as much as possible.

The Soviet-Polish War saw them able to expand their frontiers eastwards at the expense of the Soviet Union who had ill-advisedly begun that war as the aggressor. However in Lithuania the Poles were not inclined to give up territory they had occupied, including the capital Vilnius, and were only obliged to do so due to

British pressure. On her western borders, however, her aggression was most pronounced.

Silesia had always had a mixed population, comprised for the most part of a Polish minority and a Germans majority. The Treaty of Versailles made provision for referenda in that area, and the borders were adjusted in Poland's favour as a result of that.

That, however, was not enough for the Poles who were keen to acquire not Polish speaking peoples, but German towns and the industrial capability that they would provide. On three occasions between 1919 and 1921 the Poles attempted to take by military and political means territory that had declared its desire to remain part of Germany.

Short of men and in a political no-win situation, the German government was loathe to commit troops to the region for fear of aggravating relationships with the victorious Entente powers. Local self-defence organisations based around towns and villages, rather like the British Home Guard, were left to fend for themselves. Or at least that was the official line. The Freikorps, however, enjoyed a greater degree of latitude than the government and they marched to the eastern borders to defend the Silesian population from an expansionist neighbour.

It should be pointed out here, in the interest of historical correctness, that the German population claimed that the Poles were attempting to ethnically cleanse the areas that they were interested in acquiring by acts that would, today, be considered terrorism. The Poles deny this. Either way this activity was (or wasn't!) a sideshow, and the Freikorps found themselves engaged in an on-going war to preserve their borders, culminating in the battle for the Annaberg in May 1921 which saw Freikorps forces convincingly defeat the Polish nationalist forces and bring an end to armed conflict along the border. Despite this the Entente powers imposed a further adjustment on the border in the favour of the Poles, much to the chagrin of the German population.

## The Baltic States

The involvement of the Freikorps in the Baltic States appears an oddity at first. What were German irregular forces doing fighting on foreign soil a year after the end of the Great War?

Well, for a start the Entente Powers insisted in November 1918 that German forces retreat immediately back to German territory, however they did introduce a caveat that, basically, said “except when we don’t want them to”. The earlier Treaty of Brest-Litovsk had seen Soviet Russia withdraw from the Great War. As part of that treaty Germany was left occupying the Baltic region and the Ukraine.

Now, with Russia submerged in the turmoil of her bloody civil war, it was felt in Paris and London that to simply withdraw the German forces occupying those regions would create a vacuum that would potentially be filled by the communists. To avoid that the Germans were instructed to maintain their forces in the eastern territories until the Allies could arrive to ensure the transfer of power to the local population.

In the Ukraine this proved to be impossible. German forces were demoralised by their defeat in the west, and withdrew almost immediately (it was this withdrawal that created the circumstance where Makhno’s Anarchists - a bigger bunch of lunatic ne’er-do-wells you’d struggle to find - could emerge). Whilst the same pressures were felt in the Baltic region there were other factors that came to play that stopped the collapse of German arms in that area.

Since times of the Teutonic Knights imposed Christianity on the Baltic it had been the ethnic Germans who had made up the land-owning classes in what are now Estonia and Latvia. German was the language of polite society, the Lutheran religion was prominent. A small, but socially dominant, part of the population was German, and these landed gentry called upon the German occupation forces to remain. In 1918, after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk had been signed, there had been moves to incorporate the Baltic region into Imperial Germany by appointing a German Duke to rule on behalf of the Kaiser. Clearly this idea was now dead, but there was still hope that a German backed government could still secure Latvia for its historical aristocracy.



In a perverse twist it was the fact that the Soviets occupied the eastern half of Latvia that allowed this idea to flourish and gain some credence even in the eyes of the Allied commissioners who had been sent to the area. The United States commissioner, for one, was convinced that the key to the emergence of a stable democratic Latvia was to harness the Baltic German population. Strangely enough the majority of Letts did not agree. Nor, and this was critical, did their Estonian neighbours.

The situation in the Baltic states in 1919 was chaotic to say the least. In Estonia, the most northerly of the new nations and the closest to the old Imperial Russian capital of Petrograd (or St Petersburg) there were three major forces in existence. Firstly the Soviets occupied the eastern parts of the country, clearly keen to protect what was no longer their capital but was still an important centre. Secondly the Estonians were, under British tutelage, making a fine breast of forming their own national army, especially as arms and equipment was now arriving from the UK.

Thirdly, and rather more oddly, were the White Russian forces of General Nikolai Yudenich. I say odd, as the White Russian movement was uncompromising in not just its opposition to communism, but also in its belief that all former Imperial Russian territories should be restored to Russia once they had defeated the Reds. What is notable was that the Estonians and White Russians were fighting along side each other through necessity rather than any true allegiance. Both needed the other to stop Estonia being over-run by the Reds, and the British were keen to supply both to assist with their goals in over-throwing the Soviet rule in Russia. The enemy of my enemy is indeed my friend.

In Latvia the situation was similar, but not identical. The German forces in the region were losing men through desertion as the

desire to return home was unavoidable, especially with rumours of Germany's own (if somewhat smaller) "civil war". However a Freikorps of volunteers was formed into what became known as the Eiserne Brigade, or Iron Division, from amongst the regular forces in the region, coming under the command of the politically astute General Rüdiger von der Goltz. Supplementing these was the Baltische Landeswehr led by Major Alfred Fletcher, the descendant of a Scots émigré to the region, made up of Baltic Germans. These two were hand in glove, intent on supporting Germanic control of the area, indeed promises of land were made to German soldiers who stayed to defend the area, with a view to a enlarging the colony already there.

In addition to this the Latvians had their own government which, supported by the British, was intent on stamping its authority on the country. It was hampered in this by the fact that the majority of the country, including the capital Riga, was occupied by Soviet forces and the material support had not been as forthcoming for them due to the German possession of the Red-free ports and von der Goltz's intentional policy of keeping the Latvians weak. Once again we see the Latvians needing the Germans to halt further Red advances, but uncomfortable with the relationship and ultimate goals of their "ally". Indeed, this was something that von der Goltz played on. As long as the Reds were in Latvia his forces had a *raison d'être* for being there. So, for the early part of the year he sat on his hands while the Baltic German party consolidated its position. However this stalemate could not continue for ever, and in the end it was British threats to recommence the blockade of Germany that ensured that von der Goltz and his Freikorps advanced on Riga.

In fact the Red opposition to the advance of the Baltish Landeswehr was minimal. Within 24 hours the Red defences were breached and on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of May the city itself was stormed. It is likely that von der Goltz had hoped for a success and then a stabilisation of the lines to the north and east of the Latvian capital. This would have allowed him to maintain his presence in the area, and allow the Baltic Germans to consolidate power in the capital. In fact the Reds were in full scale flight, made more fleet of foot by the arrival of Estonian forces who were now advancing southwards from their border at the invitation of the Versailles Treaty sponsored Latvian government which was currently "in exile" on a Royal Navy ship just off shore.

The Freikorps advanced northwards, and on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June they made contact with the Estonians around the town of Wenden (known to the Latvians as Cēsis and the Estonians as Võnnu). At this point the two sides were, hypothetically at least, uncomfortable co-protagonists fighting against the Soviets. The Estonians requested that the Freikorps move eastwards to face the Soviets; the Freikorps requested that the Estonians left Latvian territory. Both side had little doubt that conflict was inevitable.

And conflict there was. The next day the Freikorps seized the town of Werden, driving out the two companies that were defending it. Skirmishes continued for several days as the British and French attempted to broker a deal that would see the war continued against the Reds rather than between the Germans and the Estonians, and a cease-fire did come into force on the 10<sup>th</sup> of June. However continued political wrangling was clearly going nowhere. Von der Goltz seems to have decided that it was now or never. He informed the Allied commissioners that no German troops were left in the region, they were all now Latvians operating under the control of the Baltic German government. With that he launched his attack on the Estonians.



In an initial attack the Iron Division was partially successful in breaching the Estonian lines. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of June the Baltische Landeswehr launched their attack around Wenden with a view to completing a break through and driving the Estonians north.

In broad terms the attack that day started well. The Landeswehr were weak in actual numbers, but well equipped with modern equipment. What's more they were enthusiastic, recognising the importance of their task for their own future in the region. Three columns punctured the lines to the north and west of Wenden seeking to swing northwards to secure the railway line to Wolmar (Valmeira in Latvian) and thence the Estonian border.

Progress was good, as the Latvian Cēsis battalion, serving with the Estonians, was left exposed when an Estonian company withdrew from its flank. The Letts fled and a gap emerged through which the Balts pushed their columns. A German armoured train moved up towards the bridge south-west of Looe, but its progress was impeded by damage to the tracks and fire from the Estonian artillery which caused it some damage. Nevertheless the Landeswehr pressed on, threatening the station at Looe itself where an ad hoc company of Estonian cooks and clerks were thrown into the line to shore things up.

The arrival of the Estonian armoured train, Kapitain Irv, supported by the Kalevaste Maleva Battalion as reinforcements stabilised the line, but the Landeswehr on the extreme right were threatening to isolate what was fast becoming an Estonian enclave trapped around the station buildings. The last reserves were thrown in, an armoured car, the Estonian train crews and a company of sappers. Not much, but just enough. Without securing the railway line the Landeswehr were unable to reinforce their apparent success. Their bolt shot they began withdrawing to their starting positions earlier that day.

A desperate battle had been fought, with the Estonians holding on for just long enough to blunt the spear of the Baltic Germans. The following day the Estonians utilised the railway to bring up reinforcements and launched their own attack, putting pressure in Wenden, whilst holding off an attack by the Iron Division to the West. By the next day, the 23<sup>rd</sup>, the Baltisch Landeswehr, without fresh support, melted before the Estonian advance and a withdrawal on Riga became in danger of becoming a rout.

By early July a peace treaty was signed that saw the Entente sponsored Latvian government installed in Riga supported by Latvian troops now able to receive equipment from the British. The Iron Division retired into the south of the country around Kurland, whilst the Baltisch Landeswehr were now realising that future resistance to the new government was potentially doing them more harm than good. They entered into negotiations, securing a Baltic German voice in the new parliament, and were then transferred eastwards to face the Soviets on the border. Rather intriguingly their commander, Major Fletcher was replaced by a Briton, a certain Lieutenant Colonel Harold Alexander, later Field Marshal Viscount Alexander of Tunis, who thereby became one of

the few men to lead both German and British troops into battle in the twentieth century.



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## Refighting The Battle of Wenden

The battle of Wenden is a classic size for Triumph of the Will, with roughly a Brigade of troops on each side. The balance is an interesting one, the Baltisch Landeswehr are aggressive troops at this stage and well equipped with machine guns and artillery. The Estonians as nearly as good, and make up in numbers what they lack in hi-tech toys. The Landeswehr need to hit hard and consolidate on their gains to face an Estonian counter-attack. The Estonians need to whittle down their opponent, as any losses or reverses will see the Landeswehr morale drop, thereby losing their advantage.

### Baltic Landeswehr Briefing

You are Major Albert Fletcher, commanding the forces of the Baltic Germans in Latvia. After capturing Riga from the Reds you have now turned north to drive out the Estonian militias who are attempting to impose their own puppet government in Latvia.

Your objective is to punch through the enemy lines, capturing the road through to Starte and the railway line that leads to Wolmar. At present the bridges across the small river ahead of you are blocked to anything other than infantry, but the railway line should be

quite easily opened as the rails have been taken up but not removed or damaged.

Your forces are as follows.

#### **Von Jena Column**

##### **3<sup>rd</sup> Baltic Regiment:**

1<sup>st</sup> Battalion - two companies, 10 figures each, Regular

2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion - two companies, 10 figure each, Regular

Machine Gun Company - four MMG platoons. May be distributed amongst the above

Weickmann Freikorps Cavalry, 1 squadron, 10 figures, Drilled

Sievert Battery. One 76.2mm Field Gun, four crew

Howitzer battery. Two 150mm guns (heavy artillery) with spotter team (may be off-table), three crew each

Two heavy mortars

Armoured Train with:

One 76.2mm gun mounting

Two HMG mountings

One Infantry Company "landing Party".

10 figures, Regular, Aggressive

#### **Malmede Column**

##### **2<sup>nd</sup> Baltic Regiment**

1<sup>st</sup> Battalion - three companies, 10 figures each, Regular

2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion - two companies, 10 figures each, Regular

Machine Gun Company - two MMG platoons. May be distributed amongst the above

Petersdorf Marksman Battalion - three HMG platoons and one infantry Company, 10 figures, Regular

Freikorps Cavalry Squadron, 8 figures, Drilled

Barth Battery - one 105mm Field Gun, four crew

Two 76.2mm Field Guns with spotter team (may NOT be off-table), 3 crew each

Protection Company, 8 figures, Regular

#### **Estonian Briefing**

Today Estonian forces are faced with their toughest challenge yet. Having beaten the Soviets we now face the Baltic Germans who are attempting to impose their rule on neighbouring Latvia. The Latvians have been unable to arm themselves as the Germans block the ports for British arms and equipment that would allow them to free themselves. Now our forces have been invited into Latvia by the legal government of that country, and with the support of the victorious



Allied powers. The Germans have refused to turn east to face the Reds, and have recently been attacking our forward positions.

Together with our Latvian allies we must ensure that they are unable to advance northwards, we must hold the line against these potential oppressors of the independent Baltic states.

Our forces are as follows.

##### **3<sup>rd</sup> Division**

##### **3<sup>rd</sup> Estonian Regiment**

1<sup>st</sup> Battalion - four companies, 8 figures each, Drilled

2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion - four companies, 8 figures each, Drilled

3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion - four companies, 8 figures each, Drilled, plus one HMG platoon

One heavy artillery section - one 6" howitzer, three crew

One field artillery section - one 18 pounder Field Gun, four crew

Cesis Battalion (Latvian) - three companies, 6 figures each, Drilled, one HMG platoon

One 76.2mm field gun, three crew

Of the above the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion and the Cesis battalion are in the front line, deployed anywhere between Neu Ronneburg and Loode up to within 6" of the river bridges. They may have all of the above artillery in support of them.

The 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalions are in reserve positions around Starte, and must begin the game within 6" of that village. They may roll each turn to become activated, requiring a 6 on a D6 before they can undertake any actions. They will automatically become activated if the enemy come within 12" of Skangal.

### Reinforcements

The Armoured Train "Kapitain Irv" - one 76.2mm gun mounting, three HMG mountings. One Landing Party of 10 figures, Drilled, Aggressive.

Kalevaste Maleva Battalion - three companies of 8 men each, Drilled

The above will all be entrained and will arrive at point D on turn 6. Additionally, if the Landeswehr come within 12" of Loode an ad hoc company of cooks and clerks will appear in the station building, 8 figures, Drilled.

A second tranche of reinforcements will arrive at point C on turn 8, comprised of the following.

One Austin Putilov Armoured Car "Vanapagan" armed with twin MGs. One company of train personel, 6 figures, Militia, and one Sapper Company, 6 figures, Drilled.



### Umpire's Notes

The most important objective for the Landeswehr is the railway line, although they may not be entirely clear about that. Should they take Skangal without first securing Loode they should receive a communiqué that makes the importance of the railway quite clear.

The barricades on either the rail or road bridge may be cleared by one company spending one turn not under fire on them. Once clear the armoured train may cross with no penalty.

The terrain is heavily forested, with these being pretty much impassable due to the abundance of swamps therein. Units may move through the edges of the forests up to 4" in, but will lose 5" for bad going as opposed to the usual three. They may use the edges of the forests for cover.

The villages are pretty paltry affairs, being largely wood built houses that offers only soft cover. The exception is the railway station that is brick built. The rivers may be crossed by troops, taking one full turn to do so, from one bank to the other. The crops marked on the map are still standing, so present an obstacle to visibility.

The Landeswehr will win a major victory, the only sort possible, if they completely clear the railway line and also hold Skangal. The Estonians will win a major victory if they maintain their hold on Loode, the most effective blocking position on the line. The Estonians will achieve a victory if they still block the line at the level crossing, and also hold Skangal.

In reality the forces under von der Goltz were involved in a death or glory type war. They either achieved a stunning victory against all odds, or they failed totally, which, indeed, is typical of the battles fought in the East by the White Russians as well. Hopefully this scenario will provide an interesting link between the Freikorps in Germany and the Russian Civil War.

