

Parliamentarism in Estonia (1918-1940)

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Abstract: *This article examines parliamentarism in the independent Republic of Estonia, between the years 1918-1940. We begin with an overview of the political development and constitutional framework of the period. We then proceed to an analysis of representative assemblies and their composition, political parties, election results, the socio-demographic composition of the Members of Parliament, and finally relations of the Parliament with other state institutions.*

I. Political Development

Estonians have hardly had any experience with parliamentarism before the establishment of their independent state in 1918. For centuries, the tiny Baltic German ruling elite had institutions of self-government – the *Landtage* (Diets of the nobility) – in the Baltic Provinces of Estonia (Estland) and Livonia (Livland). After Estonian territory came under Russian rule in 1710 the Baltic German nobility continued to enjoy unfettered self-rule until the late nineteenth century. In the cities, the Baltic German merchant oligarchy governed as it had since medieval times until the new Russian municipalities law in 1877 modernized city government and widened the franchise. A breakthrough for Estonians came in 1904 when an Estonian-Russian electoral coalition succeeded in ousting the German-run municipal Government in Tallinn (Reval).

The Russian revolution of 1905 was a highly significant event in the Baltic region and resulted in the first mass political mobilization of Estonians. The first legal Estonian political party, *Eesti Rahvameelne Eduerakond* (The Estonian Progressive People's Party) was born.¹ Though the revolution failed and repression reigned in its aftermath, a positive outcome was the establishment of the Russian State Duma. Despite restrictions on the franchise, Estonians could indirectly elect their own political representatives and a few Estonians got a first experience of a type of parliamentarism.

The collapse of the autocracy during Russia's February Revolution in 1917 opened new opportunities for the Estonians. The Russian Provisional Government appointed the Mayor of Tallinn, Jaan Poska, as its Commissioner for Estonia – the first time an ethnic Estonian became the highest official in the land. The Russian Provisional Government allowed an Estonian Provincial Assembly (*Maanõukogu*) to be elected in the summer of 1917, the first elected assembly in Estonian history where the majority of the people were represented. The Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 and the subsequent German advance northwards were the main catalysts for the Estonian Declaration of Independence on 24 February 1918, proclaimed by the three-man executive committee of the Estonian Provincial Assembly headed by Konstantin Päts. This independence could only be realized

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¹ Mati Graf, *Parteid Eesti Vabariigis 1918-1934* (Tallinn: TPÜ Kirjastus, 2000), 16.