Fascism by Popular Initiative: The Rise and Fall of the Vaps Movement in Estonia

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Abstract

The Estonian vaps movement was one of the most popular fascist-type movements in inter-war Europe, yet has received relatively little attention from researchers. This article traces the emergence of the vaps movement and examines its dramatic impact on Estonian politics, particularly the collapse of democracy and the emergence of authoritarian rule in the 1930s. It analyzes the factors that contributed to the success of the movement and the causes of its ultimate failure. This article also discusses whether the vaps movement could be placed in the category of ‘generic fascism’ as defined by Roger Griffin.

Keywords

fascism – radical right – Estonia – The Veterans – Konstantin Päts – authoritarianism – vaps movement

The Estonian vaps movement (also referred to as ‘The Veterans’)

\footnote{The official name of the organization was the Eesti Vabadussõjalaste Liit [The League of Veterans of the Estonian War of Liberation]. Vaps (plural: vapsid) was the name popularly used; it is an abbreviation of vabadussõjalane [a veteran of the War of Liberation], not an acronym.}

was one of the most popular fascist-type movements in inter-war Europe, yet has been largely neglected by researchers of fascism as a transnational phenomenon. The pioneer of fascism studies, Ernst Nolte, observed that it was ‘the only one of all the fascist groups to succeed in legally obtaining the absolute majority
vote of the people.'² Though his statement is not entirely accurate (as will be explained below), it nevertheless highlights the significance of the vaps movement in the wider European context. Using Stanley Payne’s typology of fascism,³ I have previously argued that it is more appropriate to describe the vaps movement as ‘radical right’ rather than ‘fascist’.⁴ In this article, I hold nevertheless that there is some ground for including the vaps movement in the category of ‘generic fascism’ as defined by Roger Griffin and the ‘new consensus’ in fascism studies.⁵

The Rise of the Vaps Movement

Four broad factors account for the mercurial rise of the vaps in the early 1930s: the example of fascist-type movements in Europe; a strong organizational base; the economic depression; and the constitutional crisis in Estonia. Parliamentary democracy was challenged by fascist movements across the continent in the 1930s, but the major example was that which was closest to home. As so often in modern Estonian history and today, the example of Finland was a powerful influence. The radical-right Lapua movement burst onto the Finnish political scene in 1929. Using strong-arm tactics and enjoying a certain amount of support from the establishment, Lapua was able to successfully act as a pressure group which forced the Finnish parliament to adopt the anti-communist legislation that it demanded. Lapua was banned after an abortive insurrection in 1932 and was succeeded by the Isänmaallinen kansanliike [IKL; Patriotic People’s Movement], a genuine fascist party. There was also personal connection between members of the Finnish radical right and Estonian veterans since a number of Finns were comrades, having fought as volunteers in Estonia’s War of Liberation.⁶

Naturally, the example of fascist parties that came to power in Europe also had an influence. The first, in Italy, was too geographically and culturally distant to have any notable impact on Estonians. National Socialism in Germany

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² Ernst Nolte, The Three Faces of Fascism: Action française, Italian Fascism, National Socialism (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolsen, 1965), 12.
³ Stanley Payne, A History of Fascism 1914–1945 (London: UCL Press, 1995).
⁴ Andres Kasekamp, ‘The Estonian Veterans’ League: A Fascist Movement?’ Journal of Baltic Studies 24 (1993): 263–268.
⁵ Roger Griffin, ‘Studying Fascism in a Postfascist Age: From New Consensus to New Wave?’ Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies 1 (2012): 1–17, accessed August 21, 2015, doi:10.1163/221162512X623601.
⁶ Andres Kasekamp, ‘Radical Right-Wing Movements in the North-East Baltic,’ Journal of Contemporary History 34 (1999): 590–591.
received much more attention. However, much of it was negative. Unlike the Finns, the Germans had fought against Estonia’s independence and were the historic enemies of the nation. Hitler’s idea of *Lebensraum* was anathema to Estonians. Nevertheless, there was admiration for Hitler’s struggle against the communists. Their resemblance with German Nazism was an highly-awkward problem for the *vaps*, since it exposed them to charges of being unpatriotic.

The *vaps* was established in 1929 as the umbrella organization for local associations of veterans of the War of Liberation. In the aftermath of the First World War, and in the wider context of the Russian Civil War, Estonian national forces had fought Russian Bolsheviks and German *Freikorps* from November 1918 to February 1920 to win independence for their country. Unlike other fascist-type organizations, the *vaps* established a strong nation-wide network and organizational base before becoming a political force. Initially, it served as a lobby-group for veterans’ interests, but transformed itself into a political movement in 1932 when it began accepting non-veterans as members, though it never turned itself into a political party, always claiming to be above party politics. At this point active career military officers had to resign from the organization. The movement was able to profit from the positive public image the veterans enjoyed as national heroes. Since they had sacrificed to establish the state on the battlefield, they claimed moral authority and the right to have a decisive voice regarding the nation’s future.\(^7\)

The third factor, the worldwide economic depression, hit Estonia with its full force in 1931, resulting in bankruptcies and unemployment. The government’s ineffective response was austerity. The consequences for the economy were severe, but the more important result was the impact on politics – the heightening of political tensions and polarization. In this divisive environment it was harder to form and keep government coalitions together. The life-span of coalition governments had rarely been much longer than one year prior to 1930, but the economic crisis accelerated the turnover of governments. The issue stirring the greatest passions and creating political deadlock was whether to devalue the Estonian currency, the *kroon*. Since the parties and parliament were not able to effectively come to grips with the economic depression, it led to an increase in public mistrust and alienation from the entire political system.

Many Estonians began to perceive the lack of a strong leader as the key problem and looked to constitutional reform as the answer. The 1920 Estonian constitution vested the greatest powers in the legislature, the *Riigikogu*, and did not create a presidency. To many, the establishment of a strong presidency

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\(^7\) Andres Kasekamp, *The Radical Right in Interwar Estonia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 25–30.
promised a panacea for the crisis. Another notable feature of the constitution, which would play a decisive role in subsequent events and allowed the vaps to influence the political agenda while being only an extra-parliamentary movement, was the provision for popular initiative. Though constitutional reform to create a strong presidency came to be the focus of the vaps’s political effort, constitutional amendments were first proposed by the mainstream centre-right political parties. Ironically, Konstantin Päts, the man who would crush the vaps in 1934, was the one who first encouraged the vaps to intervene in politics. Päts was the first and most consistent proponent of constitutional change to create a presidency – naturally envisioning himself as the ideal occupant of the new office. He was the founding father of the republic and served as its first prime minister. In 1931 Päts’s Põllumeeste kogud [Farmers’ Union] – the largest political party of the country – put forward ideas for amending the constitution. Päts sought to engage the vaps to his cause in order for them to apply public pressure on the other parliamentary parties to support Päts’s proposed constitutional amendments.8

The Constitutional Crisis

Three national referenda on constitutional amendments to introduce a presidency and correspondingly reduce the powers of the parliament took place within the space of little more than one year during 1932 and 1933. The first constitutional amendment bill put forward by the centre-right parties failed narrowly in the referendum held in August 1932. The socialists viewed the amendment as a dangerous step towards weakening the power of the parliament in favor of the concentration of power in the hands of one individual. The vaps, however, believed that the bill did not go far enough in such a desired direction. Thus, the determined opposition campaign by the left and the radical right swayed the outcome more than the half-hearted efforts by the sponsors of the amendment. A revised constitutional amendment proposal (diluted in the vain hope of gaining socialist support) put forward by the Riigikogu was also defeated in a referendum in June 1933. The vaps could now go ahead with their own constitutional amendment proposal which the Riigikogu could no longer ignore. The provision for popular initiative provided for a legislative proposal to be presented to parliament if twenty-five thousand signatures

8 Eduard Laaman, Konstantin Päts: Politika- ja riigimees [Konstantin Päts: Politician and Statesman] (Stockholm: Vaba Eesti, 1949), 222.
were collected in its favor. If the Riigikogu would not endorse the proposal, then it would be put to a national referendum.9

However, before the vaps initiative could proceed, the centrist Jaan Tõnisson government instituted a state of emergency and banned the vaps in August 1933, citing a threat to public order. Tõnisson explained that the intimidating activities of the uniformed ‘security units’ of the vaps, but also of some other political forces, notably the socialists, were causing public anxiety and were a danger to democracy.10 The state of emergency was widely derided and the ban did not stop the vaps from continuing their political agitation.

The fact that the government appeared to be heavy-handedly targeting a movement that was airing popular grievances worked in favor of the vaps in the weeks leading up to the third referendum. Shortly before the vote, the Riigikogu decided to reinstate the requirement of an absolute majority of electorate which had been discarded for the previous referendum. The establishment appeared to be unfairly stacking the deck against the vaps. It should also be mentioned that the Tõnisson government forced through the devaluation of the currency in July, which generated strong criticism and bitterness in sections of society towards the government.

The constitutional provision for popular initiative allowed an extra-parliamentary force, which was officially banned at the time, to continue influencing the political agenda of the country. In October 1933, seventy-three per cent of the electorate voted in favor of the vaps’s constitutional amendment proposal, the essence of which was the establishment of a strong presidency and the corresponding reduction of the powers of the parliament. The constitutional amendment bill presented by the vaps movement was similar in its substance to the previous two failed amendment proposals put forward by the Riigikogu itself, but was somewhat more radical. The president could initiate legislation, issue decrees when the Riigikogu was not in session or in the case of ‘immediate state necessity’, lead cabinet meetings, and form and dismiss governments.11

In response to the electorate’s decision, the Tõnisson government resigned. The vaps were allowed to legally re-establish their organization. They proclaimed their victory in the referendum as ‘marking the beginning of the

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9 Rein Marandi, Must-valge lipu all: Vabadussõjalaste liikumine Eestis 1929–1937, Volume 1, Legaalne periood (1929–1934) [Under a black-white flag: The War of Liberation veterans’ movement in Estonia 1929–1937, Volume 1, The legal period (1929–1934)] (Stockholm: Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, 1991), 217.

10 Jaan Tõnisson, ‘Me peame end võtma kokku positiivseks ülesehitavaks tööks’ [We need to pull ourselves together for positive constructive work], Päevaleht 13, no. 218 (August 1933): 1.

11 Marandi, Must-valge lipu all, 189–202.
rebirth of the Estonian nation’ and initiating a ‘bloodless national revolution’. Nevertheless, the vaps could not claim the victory entirely for themselves. A decisive factor had been the Farmers’ Union and Päts, who had called on their supporters to vote in favor of the constitutional amendment. Of great significance for future developments, Tõnisson’s resignation allowed Päts to return to power as the head of a transitional minority government of technocrats.

The Ideology of the Vaps

The vaps defined itself as an activist movement and therefore rejected the need for a detailed political program. Nevertheless, it becomes evident when piecing together their ideology from their public speeches and articles in their newspaper Võitlus [The Struggle], that it corresponds to the definition of generic fascism conceptualized by Roger Griffin – ‘a revolutionary form of ultra-nationalism that attempts to realize the myth of the regenerated nation.’

Griffin’s ‘core matrix of axioms’ – 1) a revolutionary agenda; 2) a ‘populist’ drive towards mobilizing the energies of members of the national community; 3) and an organic concept of the nation – are all present to various degrees in the vaps movement.

The vaps movement was undoubtedly a revolutionary and forward-oriented movement as its motto ‘struggle for a better future for Estonia’ attests. The movement characterized itself as a ‘dynamic force’ opposed to the ‘coagulated status quo’. The ‘stagnated’ political party system was held responsible for blocking the path for the rise of younger men. It glorified youth and stressed the conflict between generations. Rhetorically, the main thrust of the vaps assault was against the political establishment, especially the political parties and public officials associated with them who were allegedly corrupt and profit-seeking. They sought the radical reorganization of the entire political system. In the newly independent state whose society had recently been radically transformed by a sweeping land reform, a conservatism that sought to preserve traditional institutions or hierarchies simply did not appeal to the

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12 ‘Võit kohustab meid veel suuremale võitlusele,’ [Victory obliges us to greater struggles] Võitlus, no. 96, 19 October 1933, 2.
13 Griffin, ‘Studying Fascism in a Postfascist Age,’ 1.
14 Roger Griffin, International Fascism: Theories, Causes and the New Consensus (London: Arnold, 1998), x.
15 Tõnis Vardja, ‘Vabadussõja idee kui rahvusriikluse kandja,’ [The spirit of the War of Liberation as the carrier of the nation-state] Võitlus, no. 55, 15 July 1933, 2.
Estonians. A nostalgia for the past existed only among the dispossessed Baltic German aristocrats, the former ruling elite. The vaps sought to develop a more patriotic citizenry and by actively generating national spirit to create a ‘new, upright and honest Estonian’. Their project of an alternative modernity entailed a categorical rejection of Marxism. Thus their second main target alongside liberal parliamentarism were socialists and communists. They decried the malignant influence of Marxist ideas on society which were undermining the foundations of the nation. The vaps went as far as to call for outlawing the Socialist Party (the Estonian Communist Party had always been underground). Their animosity was reciprocated with vigour.

Their brand of nationalism was certainly ‘palingenetic’ in Griffin’s sense. The nation state which they had helped to create in active combat had, in their view, degenerated. The lofty ideals of solidarity and fraternity of the War of Liberation had been trampled by the politicians who had led the state down the road to ruin with their greed and incompetence. As veterans of the war, the vaps had a special right and duty to intervene in order to resuscitate the nation after its descent into crisis. Theirs was a populist drive which successfully energized the grassroots of society and mobilized the masses. The vaps movement rapidly became the largest political force in the country. Their events were attended with greater enthusiasm than any political meetings since the days of the Russian Revolutions. Artur Sirk, the dynamic young leader of the vaps, was an inspirational orator who people queued to listen to. He was the figure that many looked to as the saviour of Estonian politics – the one who could implement strong and stable rule in the country.

The revolutionary agenda, populist drive and striving for national rebirth of the vaps movement is cogently encapsulated by their statement after their victory in the constitutional referendum:

The vaps people’s movement was blessed and consecrated by 416 000 citizens as the only true and rightful leader of the Estonian people . . . . the vaps movement wants to work tirelessly so that the Estonian people, not only in form, but also in content, can achieve the second republic so fervently desired by all classes, the republic which is truly based on justice and fairness as it is written in our constitution. That republic, however, can only be guided by the vaps spirit. The first republic belonged to the political parties. The second republic, however, belongs to the vaps spirit.17

16 ‘Uus inimene,’ [A new man] Võitlus, no. 28, 22 October 1932, 2.
17 ‘Teine vabariik: Rahva tunnustus uutele juhtidele,’ [Second republic: The people’s acknowledgement of new leaders] Võitlus, no. 110, 21 November 1933, 2.
Their main positive message was striving for national unity. Their point of reference was the revival of the ‘spirit of the War of Liberation’, meaning a sense of self-sacrifice and solidarity for the good of the nation. This was their answer to the Marxist attempt to ‘divide the nation’ by stoking class conflict. The republic which they fought for failed to live up to expectations because of the corrupt political class; they intended to renew Estonia with new men, a new generation, and a new spirit. The vaps movement was propelled by a ‘guiding idea’ – rahvuslik tervik [organic nation or national community]. Their aim was to create a rahvusriik, a ‘national state’, which would act in the interests of the nation, not favoring any classes or sectors of society over others – ‘a system which unites the Estonian nation into one organic whole where each class asserts itself only through the integral whole.’ The vaps stressed the importance of duty to the collective nation over sectarian interests. They appealed toward all classes and occupations, promising each group a ‘worthy and equal position in the national society’. Overcoming class conflict and narrow sectional interests, which characterized Estonian domestic politics, was the prerequisite for healing the Estonian body politic and moulding it into an organic whole.

Though a revolutionary nationalist movement, the vaps were not a racialist one like the Nazis. Anti-Semitism was simply not a significant issue in a country with just four thousand Jewish inhabitants. On the campaign trail, vaps leaders even attempted (unsuccessfully) to woo members of the largest ethnic minority group by giving speeches in Russian in Russian-populated eastern districts of the country. The most problematic ethnic minority were the Germans. The Baltic Germans had been the political, social and economic ruling elite for centuries and thus were the main target for Estonian hostility. The vaps naturally shared this sentiment, especially since the emotional high point of the War of Liberation had been the defeat of the Baltic German Landeswehr and German Freikorps. However, their evident affinity to German Nazism and their praise for Hitler’s anti-communism, left them open to charges of being unpatriotic by their political opponents, who tried to dent their popularity by accusations of association with German Nazism. Indeed, praise from Viktor von zur Mühlen, the pro-Nazi head of the Baltic German Party, inadvertently did much to tarnish their reputation.

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18 Vardja, ‘Vabadussõja idee’.
19 Jaak Valge, ‘Eesti vabadussõjalased ja Saksa natsionaalsotsialistid: ideoloogia, poliitiline taktika ja kontaktid,’ [The Estonian War of Liberation Veterans and the German National Socialists: Ideology, political tactics and contacts] Tuna: Ajalookultuuri ajakiri 12, no. 3 (2009): 59–62.
The Coup d’Etat of 12 March 1934

Some tentative generalizations about the social basis of support for the vaps movement can be made by examining the results of the local elections held in January 1934 – the first and only direct electoral test of the vaps’s popularity. There was a substantial urban/rural divide in their support. The vaps were victorious in cities, obtaining a plurality of votes in the three largest cities, Tallinn, Tartu and Narva. However, in the countryside, where two-thirds of the population still lived, the vaps fared poorly, with voters generally maintaining allegiance to their traditional parties. The vaps were remarkable in winning adherents from all classes, at least in urban centres. Particularly noteworthy for an extreme right movement was their ability to attract support from the proletariat and especially to win over former supporters of the communists. Päts later alluded to this by claiming that along with the ‘floodwaters’ come the ‘dregs’.\footnote{Konstantin Päts, 15 March 1934. Riigikogu V koosseis. Stenograafilised aruanded. IV istungijärk [5th Riigikogu. Stenographic Protocols. 4th session], 1436.} In any case, the vaps did not have much time or opportunity to exercise the levers of power in municipal government. In most of the cities where the vaps won a plurality, the established political parties kept them out of office by forming broad coalitions amongst themselves.

The coming into force of the new constitution in January 1934 necessitated election of a president and a new parliament. Elections were scheduled for April and in the meantime Prime Minister Päts became Acting President, temporarily assuming greater powers. The vaps nominated retired General Andres Larka as their presidential candidate, in retrospect a fatal mistake. Larka certainly had the credentials – he was formally the leader of the vaps and the only general in their ranks – but the real driving force of the movement was its vice-chairman, Artur Sirk, a lawyer who had been a lieutenant in the War of Liberation. He was the charismatic orator, while Larka was a rather dour personality. However, Sirk was only thirty-three years old, and thus did not meet the minimum age qualification for the presidency. In order to stand as a candidate for the presidency ten thousand signatures needed to be collected. The collection of signatures was turned into a competition to show public support for their candidate by Hjalmar Mäe, the vaps’ election campaign manager. By March 12, Larka had managed to secure more signatures than the other three candidates combined. Päts was a distant third after retired General Johan Laidoner, who had been nominated by centrist parties. This fact, has often been used to argue that Larka would have been the winner of the election. However, an absolute majority in the first round of the election was implausible.
The most likely scenario would have been a second round run-off between the two generals, with the anti-vaps vote consolidating behind Laidoner. In terms of popularity and authority, Larka paled in comparison with Laidoner. The fact that Larka was the commander of the army as it retreated in the initial phase of the War of Liberation until he was replaced by Laidoner, who led it to victory, spoke volumes about the level of respect accorded to either of them by the public.

The successful referendum campaign and municipal elections gave the vaps movement substantial political momentum in the run-up to the presidential and parliamentary elections. Political agitation reached an unprecedented level and electoral campaigning reached a fever pitch. Uniformed vaps security units often faced off against the brawny ‘gymnastic’ squads of the Young Socialists. These tried mutually to intimidate or disrupt the campaign meetings of the other, but despite the dramatic escalation in political competition, there was no serious violence. In fact, in characteristic Estonian fashion, they typically tried to drown out the others’ voices with singing of their patriotic or internationalist anthems.21

Before the vaps movement’s popularity could be tested nationally at the ballot box, Prime Minister Konstantin Päts declared a state of emergency and banned the vaps movement on March 12, 1934. Päts appointed Laidoner as Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and Chief of Internal Security and hundreds of leading members of the vaps movement were arrested across the country. Three days later Päts justified his actions to the Riigikogu. He claimed to have saved democracy from extremism, insinuating that the vaps movement represented a foreign ideology (i.e. Nazi Germany) and was preparing to seize power. Päts charged that the vaps had been ‘preparing a revolution’ which could have resulted in a ‘civil war’. Regarding the forthcoming elections, he stated: ‘We do not think that in such an atmosphere, where on the one hand the people have been incited to anger and thoughts of revenge, and on the other, there is a wave of fear, that anyone would be able to fulfil his duties as a citizen and make responsible decisions. The people must settle down; instead of agitation there must be explanation. It must be explained that there is a serious illness in our state.’22

The government’s measures were overwhelmingly approved by the Riigikogu whose members were relieved that the challenge from the extreme right had been foiled. Päts disingenuously denied his own personal ambition played a

21 Kasekamp, The Radical Right, 62.
22 Konstantin Päts, 15 March 1934. Riigikogu v koosseis, 1438.
role in his actions. He had consistently been the major proponent of the creation of a presidency, but his own chances as a presidential candidate appeared unfavourable. He outsmarted the Vaps movement and other political actors by appointing his popular rival presidential candidate General Laidoner as the Supreme Commander, thereby guaranteeing the support of the military.

The leaders of the Vaps were not entirely surprised by the government clampdown, but yet did nothing to resist. They had learned the wrong lesson from the ban and state of emergency imposed by Tõnisson’s government in August 1933, which discredited the government and increased the popularity of the Vaps. Sirk reportedly told Mäe: ‘let them imprison us, the people will vote us out of jail. The government cannot halt the elections, but the use of force against us will arouse the people to even greater indignation.’ Sirk assumed that Päts would respect the democratic framework and misjudged how far Päts was willing to go in order to secure power. The literature tends to portray the Vaps as having been given a taste of their own medicine, having themselves drafted a constitution which supposedly granted the president dictatorial powers. Päts claimed to be acting constitutionally by using the authority granted to him as Acting President under the amended constitution. However, his actions went considerably beyond anything envisioned by the new constitution and amounted to a coup d’état.

The Päts Dictatorship and the Fate of the Vaps

Päts’s goals were not limited to removing the Vaps from political life. He seized the opportunity to fulfill his own ambition of fundamentally reordering the political system. After his coup d’état and the subsequent purge of Vaps supporters from civil service, military and political offices, Päts developed a nationalist authoritarian state with many of the characteristics envisaged by the Vaps. All along, his steps toward building a dictatorship were justified as measures to thwart the threat from the Vaps. The expropriation of the more popular ideas and external forms of fascist movements by conservative elites was a common occurrence in Central Europe during the Thirties. Päts extended the state of emergency by one year in September 1934, thus further

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23 Marandi, Must-valge lipu all, 414.
24 Peeter Kenkmann, ‘Kas 1933. aasta põhiseadus lubas autoritaarset valitsemist?’ [Did the 1933 constitution permit authoritarian rule?] Tuna: Ajalookultuuri ajakiri 12, no. 3 (2009): 42–49.
25 Roger Griffin, The Nature of Fascism (London: Pinter, 1991), 120–122.
postponing the elections. As his actions to this point had encountered hardly any opposition, Päts reconvened the Riigikogu for an extraordinary session on September 28 with the goal of forming a pro-government majority bloc. However, when the Riigikogu took a critical stance and elected an opposition candidate as Speaker, Päts responded by the dismissing the Riigikogu. It was not dissolved but ‘silenced’, a phrase which gave name to the entire subsequent six year period – vaikiv ajastu [the era of silence].

Päts shared the vaps’s contempt for the parliamentary system and the political parties. Though he had supposedly acted to save democracy, Päts made it clear that there would be no going back to the old order. The state of emergency was extended every year. Päts banned political parties and in their place established the Isamaaliit [Fatherland Union] in 1935. The regime experimented with corporatism as an alternative to parliamentary democracy by setting up fifteen occupational chambers. Päts framed his authoritarian rule as one of ‘reform’ and ‘state-building’. The political parties and elections could not be allowed to return because the people were suffering from what Päts termed an ‘illness’, allegedly having lost its wits due to the powerful demagogy and agitation of the vaps movement. Päts portrayed himself as the only physician who could administer the right doses of medicine to the Estonian body politic to enable it to eventually recover its senses. Thirty-nine leaders of the vaps who were arrested in March 1934 were brought before a military tribunal in June 1935, charged with having belonged to an association whose aims ‘threatened public safety and peace’. Though convicted, they received only short suspended sentences. This was a tacit admission by the regime that there was no evidence to prove its claim that the vaps had been preparing to forcibly seize power. Notably absent among the defendants was Sirk, who had managed to escape from prison and found asylum in Finland. In exile and forced underground at home, the vaps leadership became radicalized and desperate. Finnish sympathizers from the ranks of the People’s Patriotic Movement aided and abetted Sirk and other vaps leaders to plot the capture of the Estonian government in December 1935 and take over power. However, the Estonian political police arrested the conspirators a day before the planned coup. The

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26 William Tomingas, Vaikiv ajastu Eestis [The Era of Silence in Estonia] (New York: Eesti Ajaloolu Instituut, 1961).
27 Ago Pajur, ‘Die „Legitimierung“ der Diktatur des Präsidenten Päts und die öffentliche Meinung in Estland,’ in Autoritäre Regime in Ostmittel- und Südost europa 1919–1944, ed. Erwin Oberländer, Rolf Ahmann, Hans Lemberg and Holm Sundhaussen (Padeborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2001), 163–213.
28 Süüdistusakt, Estonian National Archive (ERA), f. 927, n. 2, s. 3, lk. 27p.
mass trial of the conspirators in May 1936 was the largest trial ever held in Estonia with 155 defendants. Throughout the trial the chief defendants never wavered from the position that their actions had not been illegal since their motive had been to defend the constitution by removing the unconstitutional regime. Unlike in the first trial of vaps leaders in 1935, the sentences were harsh. After the arrest of the conspirators, Sirk fled Finland and died in exile in Luxembourg in August 1937, of apparent suicide, but the suspicious circumstances led some to suspect the hand of the Päts regime.29

Päts was able to exploit the aborted coup attempt to move forward with his own agenda for restructuring the state and to neutralize remaining opposition. The vaps were irredeemably discredited. Päts convened a National Assembly in 1937 which drafted a new constitution according to his guidelines. The new constitution came into force in the beginning of 1938 and Päts was duly elected President. Following elections to the new Riigikogu an amnesty was granted to those convicted for political offenses, which resulted in all remaining vaps members being released from prison in May 1938. This shows that the regime had confidence that the vaps movement, leaderless after the death of Sirk, no longer posed a threat and its political agenda was irrelevant. In any case, the regime had implemented many of the popular demands which the vaps movement had channelled: a strong presidency, stability, curtailing the political parties, promoting national unity and patriotism. A strong economic recovery also served to diminish any criticism of the Päts regime.30

**Conclusion**

Within the space of a couple of years, the vaps movement became the largest and most dynamic political force in Estonia. It was able to make use of the constitutional provision for popular initiative to spearhead the successful drive to amend the constitution to establish a strong presidency. The political ambitions of this new radical populist movement grew rapidly until the political establishment felt its existence to be threatened. It was outlawed by the government, which claimed that the vaps posed a danger to the existing order.

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29 Rein Marandi, *Must-valge lipu all: Vabadussõjalaste liikumine Eestis 1929–1937, Volume II, Illegaalne vabadussõjalus (1934–1937)* [Under a black-white flag: The War of Liberation veterans’ movement in Estonia 1929–1937, Volume 11, The illegal period (1934–1937)] (Stockholm: Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, 1997), 188–192.

30 Tõnu Parming, *The Collapse of Liberal Democracy and the Rise of Authoritarianism in Estonia* (London: Sage, 1975), 64.
The authoritarian regime erected by Päts subsequently borrowed much of its nationalist rhetoric and implemented policies favored by supporters of the vaps, while simultaneously vilifying the movement.

When characterizing the vaps, the term fascism has always been problematic. Using the typology of fascism developed by Payne, it is evident that the vaps movement falls short of fulfilling several of his criteria, such as an authoritarian leadership principle, use of violence, irrendentism, and corporatism.31 However, according to Griffin, specific external attributes and elements of style are secondary in terms of definition since fascism ‘assumes unique ideological, cultural, political, and organizational expression according to the circumstances and national context where it takes shape.’32 Hence Griffin’s concept of ‘generic fascism’ is not as rigid as Payne’s older typological framework and allows for greater leeway of interpretation. When viewed through this prism, the vaps in its essence corresponds with Griffin’s concept of the mythic core of fascist ideology being national rebirth after a period of decadence.

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31 Kasekamp, The Radical Right, 158–159.
32 Griffin, ‘Studying Fascism in a Postfascist Age,’ 14.