

# Estonia Today

## THE CROSS OF LIBERTY AND THE MONUMENT TO THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE IN TALLINN

### War of Independence and the Cross of Liberty

In the Estonian War of Independence, which took place from 1918–1920, the Estonian side lost 6 275 men and women, with many more injured.

To recognise the service of participants in the War of Independence, the first Estonian state decoration, the Cross of Liberty, was created in 1919. The Law on the Establishment of the Cross of Liberty stated that those who provided military and civilian services during the creation of the Republic of Estonia could receive the decoration.

Strict guidelines were followed in awarding the Cross of Liberty, so it became Estonia's most distinguished award, as well as the only one whose holders were legally given a number of privileges and concessions. The first seven Crosses of Liberty were bestowed in August 1919 on officers of the US Red Cross that helped Estonia during the War of Independence. Altogether 3 224 Crosses of Liberty were given out. Among those decorated with Cross of Liberty are Estonians as well as Finns, Britons, Russians, Swedes, Baltic Germans, Danes, Latvians, and Poles, as well as representatives of many other nationalities.

The most famous holders of the Cross of Liberty included King **Albert I** of Belgium, King **George V** of the United Kingdom, Danish King **Christian X**, Swedish King **Gustav V**, British Prime Minister **Winston Churchill**, Polish Prime Minister **Władysław Sikorski** and Marshal **Józef Piłsudski**, French Prime Minister **Georges Clemenceau**, Latvian President **Kārlis Ulmanis**, and Finnish President **Kaarlo Juho Ståhlberg**.

Along with deserving individuals, the Cross of Liberty has also been awarded to the city of Verdun in France, where one of the bloodiest battles of World War I took place. The allies that helped Estonia in the War of Independence were honoured by placing Crosses of Liberty on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Great Britain, France, and Italy.

The designer of the Cross of Liberty was the famous Estonian artist Nikolai Triik (1884–1940).

In 1925, the *Riigikogu* passed a law to discontinue bestowal of the Cross of Liberty, saying that the services of the individuals who were notable in establishing the independence of the state and freedom of the nation had been honoured. However, the awarding of the Cross of Liberty as a military decoration was preserved, and the guidelines for awarding it still exist in today's Decorations Act. The last holder of the Cross of Liberty, Karl Jaanus, died on 6 October 2000 in Estonia.

### Preserving the memory of the War of Independence before and after the Second World War

In addition to honouring the most remarkable soldiers in Estonia's War of Independence and allies that served the Estonian nation, Estonia also wanted to preserve the memory of all those who fought in the war. Many local monuments were established in memory of the War of Independence, but there was no central memorial, one dedicated to the whole nation. The idea to create a War of Independence memorial dedicated to the people was born in 1919, before the war had even ended. In 1936, a law was passed to construct a national memorial monument to the War of Independence, and the plan was to unveil the victory memorial on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Republic – 24 February 1943. Preparations were discontinued due to the Second World War and its aftermath.

In the second half of the 1980's and the beginning of the 90's, most of the Independence War monuments that had been destroyed during the occupations were restored by the initiative of the community. The matter of creating a national monument to the War of Independence also came up once more.

### The creation of the Monument to the War of Independence in Tallinn

In spring of 2005, the *Riigikogu* decided to create a War of Independence victory monument in Tallinn's Freedom Square, thereby realising the concept that

was formulated back in the time between the two World Wars.

In 2006, a contest was set up to find the best design idea for the War of Independence memorial to be constructed. The contest guidelines stated that “through the memorial, the Estonian people are showing respect and recognition to those who, gun in hand, established our independence, as well as those who have stepped up with words or weapons in the name of Estonia’s freedom and independence”. There were over 40 submissions to the contest, and the winner was the design entitled “Libertas”.

In the winning design, a central role is played by the Cross of Liberty as Estonia’s national service award

with the most prestigious history and the most important symbol of the War of Independence. The use of the Cross of Liberty as a symbol in the victory memorial to the War of Independence is nothing new – the Cross of Liberty as a motif has been used on many local memorials to the War of Independence created before World War II and later restored. The 1<sup>st</sup> rank, II division Cross of Liberty on the memorial – the highest recognition for personal bravery – has never been conferred on anyone. Now it is being used to symbolically honour all of Estonia.

The War of Independence Memorial, which is now in the construction stages, will be opened in Tallinn on 23 June 2009.

