

Estonia Today

THE TÕNISMÄE SECOND WORLD WAR MEMORIAL

Estonia, like other EU member states, honours all victims of the Second World War and values the contribution made by those nations who helped defeat Fascism in Europe and the world. Estonia also condemns the activities of all individuals –whether Estonian citizens or representatives of a foreign power – who committed crimes against humanity and carried out mass repressions on Estonian territory. Crimes against humanity must be treated as international crimes without a statute of limitations in the hope that they can be prevented in the future. In Estonia, there are 217 known grave sites for Soviet soldiers and 18 German military cemeteries all of which are national heritage landmarks. The exact number of military grave sites changes as new sites are found and reburials are carried out. The burial sites of Soviet soldiers are being cared for by local governments across Estonia.

World War II was a tragic page in Estonia's history. In 1940, Estonia was occupied and illegally annexed by the Soviet Union for more than 50 years. Estonians were forcibly drafted to fight in the ranks of foreign armies on both sides of the front. The generally accepted principle that a military draft may not be enforced in an occupied territory was breached and male residents of Estonia were mobilised into the armed forces of both occupying regimes. As a result of these occupations and massive deportations, Estonia suffered great human losses during the war. Russian, Jewish, Swedish and other minority cultures that had flourished in Estonia before the war were nearly annihilated. The celebration of Second World War victories and liberations is therefore highly controversial in Estonia.

The Tõnismäe Second World War memorial was erected in central Tallinn in Tõnismäe Park on 22 September 1947. As an obligatory component of Soviet city planning, a Red Army memorial had to be erected in a public place in the city centre and surrounded by a spacious square where it would be possible to carry out large-scale events on Soviet and Red Army anniversaries. The entire location, as a burial site for those who fell in the Second World War, was later designated as a cultural landmark.

The memorial has a dual meaning for Estonians – on the one hand, it is a painful reminder of Estonia's occupation by a foreign army. On the other hand, it commemorates those who gave up their lives fighting against Nazi Germany. The glorification and celebration of Estonia's illegal occupation is, of course, unacceptable for Estonia. The second meaning is the only possible one, and similar in content to that of memorials elsewhere in Europe.

According to an historical study conducted by the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity titled "The Soviet Army Troops' Common Grave and Memorial in Tallinn's Tõnismäe", it is believed that 12 coffins were buried for propagandistic purposes in Tõnismäe on 14 April 1945. Existing archives and

documents do not contain information on the exact burial spots. Nor do they give a clear picture of who was buried in Tõnismäe and why. Indeed, existing sources provide somewhat contradictory information and not all archive materials, primarily those in Russia, are accessible. There is therefore a need to investigate the site in more detail.

Estonia has a moral and international obligation to ensure the security and peace of military graves and their adjoining markers. The War Graves Protection Act was passed on 10 January 2007 with this very purpose. The Act observes international principles (the corresponding Geneva Convention) and practices. According to the act, a War Graves Commission was established by the Ministry of Defence. The Commission's task is to present proposals to the Minister of Defence on matters concerning the security of burial spots of soldiers who were killed in action and the possible reburial of remains.

On the basis of the aforementioned convention and common decency, it is not acceptable that people are buried in unmarked graves in a park in central Tallinn and that public events are held on these unnamed graves. The existing location is inappropriate as a last resting place as unhindered pedestrian traffic crosses the probable burial site.

In recent years, numerous gatherings have taken place at the Tõnismäe grave site. Several of these meetings have been hostile towards the Estonian state and have clearly disturbed the peace of the grave. The site no longer symbolises a memorial for the fallen, but has turned into a location where various political groups gather to demonstrate and incite hostility, where laws are broken and the criminal Communist regime is praised. Moving the remains and the grave marker from Tõnismäe Park to a suitable location – a cemetery – would help restore order and dignity. The grave marker could then become a true memorial to those who were killed in action during the Second World War.



On 9 March 2007, the War Graves Commission made a recommendation to the Minister of Defence that any remains located in Tõnismäe should be reburied in the Garrison Cemetery in central Tallinn. In the commission's view, this is an appropriate location where the fallen can rest in peace. Servicemen and soldiers killed in action, including Estonian, British and Russian soldiers, have already been buried in the Garrison Cemetery.

All the steps that are to be taken in this matter will be in accordance with Estonian and international laws as well as European principles. The National Heritage Board, as well as other appropriate experts, will be involved in the reburial process. Representatives of the Lutheran, Orthodox, and Catholic churches, as well as the Jewish community, have approved of organising reburials.

The situation in Estonia is by no means exceptional. Throughout Eastern Europe, the remains of those having fallen in war have been reburied in

cemeteries so as to ensure that their final resting place is peaceful. For example, this was done on an especially massive scale in Hungary at the beginning of the 1990s. A Soviet War Memorial was relocated in the Czech Republic, where war memorials can only be located in cemeteries.

The Tõnismäe war grave site has sparked a widespread debate in Estonian society over the meaning of the site and its present location in Tallinn's metropolitan space. Tallinn City Council has organised meetings on this subject. Over 30 organisations and political alliances, including war veterans' groups, have participated. At the last session, on 6 March 2007, the participants found that one possibility would be to find an appropriate location for the grave monument located at Tõnismägi. This is a step towards a more mature society, that shares democratic values, in which attempts are made to solve the problems confronting society at a common conference table, where the multiplicity of opinions are taken into consideration.