

## **Double Interpretation of History and “The War of the Monuments”: Estonia’s Case I**

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### **The War of the Monuments: Estonian Case II See page 9**

*“Monument is the permanent structure, building, erections, etc made at the place to mark the memory of a historical event, action, place or person, etc”<sup>1</sup>*

#### **Abstract**

The 2007 April events broke up Estonia’s national groups into two opposing powers. The reason of the split was directly related to differences in the Second World War understandings resulting in dissimilar reactions to the decision to move the monument called the Bronze soldier from its original location to the War cemetery. The government’s intentions were not properly explained to the Estonian Russians, and looked extremely provocative on the eve of the Victory Day (May 9), which Russians used to celebrate by this monument. Estonians celebrate the victory over fascism on May 8. Double standards exposed in the course of these events could have been overcome if the society’s opinion and the program of actions had been better prepared. In this paper we shall examine the preparation stage of the April 2007 events, their succession, and consequences.

#### **Introduction**

Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn (in the original: Tallinna vabastajate monument) was unveiled in the Tallinn city center on September 22, 1947, on the third anniversary of the liberation Tallinn from the German occupation. It was the very first Soviet monument in Estonia and it was erected to commemorate the memory of the dead Soviet soldiers, who was buried on the Tõnismäe Square (former Liberator’s Square) on April 14, 1945.

Through the Soviet-era the whole complex—the so called Bronze Soldier, i.e. the Monument, the Eternal fire (lighted in 1964) and the Tõnismäe Square—formed the Second World War memorial; from 1993 to 2007 it was officially called the Monument to the Second World War Victims (in the original: Teises Maailmasõjas hukkunutele).

After Estonia regained its independence in August 1991, the composition of the Estonian nation drastically changed: in one day Russians living in Estonia turned from the predominant majority into one of the ethnic minorities. According to the official data, in 2007 there were about 920.000 Estonians and 345.000 Russians in Estonia, thus 25.6% of the total population of Estonia were Russian.<sup>2</sup> For the Estonia’s Russian-language people the Bronze Soldier and the Tõnismäe Square was the place to honor war-victims; also Estonia’s Russian used to celebrate there the Victory Day.

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<sup>1</sup> Legal-Explanations.com, Legal Definitions, „Monument“, <http://www.legal-explanations.com/definitions/monument.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Statistikaamet, Rahvastik, <http://pub.stat.ee/px-web.2001/Dialog/Saveshow.asp>

## Double Interpretations of the Second World War history

The 2007 April events broke up Estonia's national groups into two opposing powers. The reason of the split was directly related to differences in the Second World War understandings resulting in dissimilar reaction to the decision to move the Bronze Soldier from Tallinn city-centre to the War Cemetery.

Estonians tend to consider September 1944 (the month the Soviet Army and the Soviet Army Estonian Corps came into Estonia) the continuation of the Soviet occupation of their homeland. Russians, however, perceive it as the victory over fascism—in this case, on Estonian land. Thus the Bronze Soldier for most of Russian-speaking minority representatives symbolizes the freedom from fascism and for most Estonians—new soviet occupation and peoples' mass deportations to Siberia.

The government's intention to rebury the Soviet soldiers' remains and remove the monument to the War Cemetery, were not properly explained to Estonian Russian-speaking minority, and looked extremely provocative on the eve of the Victory Day, May 9, which Russians and war veterans (including ethnic Estonians who fought in the Soviet Army Estonian Corps) used to celebrate by this monument. Here is another point of misunderstanding between Estonians and Russians, as Estonians celebrate the victory over fascism on May 8, like most Western countries.

### Public opinion

Double standards exposed in the course of these events could have been overcome if the society's opinion and the government's program of actions had been better prepared.

It is noteworthy that initially the government stepped forward with a gracious gesture stating that the monument won't be removed until the Victory day. At the end of March 2007 the prime-minister Andrus Ansip said that by 9<sup>th</sup> of May the monument will be surrounded by a metal fence in order to avoid any possible provocations.<sup>3</sup>

More to the point, on the April 25, that is a night before the notorious events happened, the prime-minister said in his interview to the Russian-broadcasting *Radio 4* that both on the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> of May the Bronze Soldier will be standing where it stands.<sup>4</sup>

On the eve of the April events sociologists carried out several surveys examining people's opinion of the monument's future. Initially these studies were conducted among Tallinners, as before 2006 the city council—the formal owner of the monument—was considered the one to decide the monument's fate. These surveys revealed that from the people's viewpoint the Bronze Soldier should stay on the Tõnismäe Hill. More than 49% of the respondents said, that the monument should stay in its original place; about a half of them said the monument should be

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<sup>3</sup> Karin Rohtla, "Peaminister Ansip lubab: 9. Mail piiratakse pronkssõdur plaguga." *SL Õhtuleht*, March 30, 2007, <http://www.sloleht.ee/index.aspx?id=223340>

<sup>4</sup> Kristiina Mõttus, „Ansip: kaevetööd Tõnismäel võivad kest kuid“. *Postimees*, PM online, April 25, 2007, <http://www.tarbija24.ee/250407/esileht/siseuudised/tallinn/257147.php>

dedicated to the memory of all dead in the Second World War. Less than 30% of all said, that the Soldier should be removed to a more appropriate place in Tallinn.<sup>5</sup>

The following surveys were done all across the country, thus making the problem of the pan-Estonian importance. And yet all these surveys, for instance, the very last one, which was published on the eve of the Bronze Night (April 26–27), showed that only 37% of the respondents supported the relocation of the monument, while 49% were against the removal and 14% did not have a firm opinion. In the ethnic respect 32% of the interviewed against the removal were Estonians and 86% were Russians.<sup>6</sup>

Before the Bronze Night Estonian newspapers published a number of articles calling out our government to the common sense, and advising not to make quick decisions and think it over, before giving the order to remove the monument. Written by professors, sociologists, journalists and other experts these articles and public letters stated that unless agreed with people, especially the vets' organizations and Russian-language minority representatives this decision will put an end to a 10-year integration process and marks the beginning of a deep social crisis. However all these voices were neglected, and those calling to the common sense were nicknamed "red professors", "communists' sympathizers", etc.

### **"War of the Monuments"**

On July 14, 2002 a monument dedicated "To all Estonian Soldiers, who died in the II War of Independence for their homeland and free Europe in 1940-1945" (in the original: "Kõigile Eesti sõjameestele, kes II vabadussõjas langesid kodumaa ja vaba Euroopa eest 1940-1945") was erected in an Estonian resort, Pärnu. The monument looked like a bas-relief of a soldier in a German military uniform with the Estonian SS Legion's signs and a German machine gun MP-40 pointing to the East (i.e.: to the Russia).

However, on July 23, 2002 under the public's pressure and by the Pärnu City Council's decision the bas-relief and the dedication were removed. This removal made the BBC News headlines just like the crash of the ferry *Estonia*, Estonia's victory on the Eurovision song contest, Prince Charles's visit to Estonia or bootleg vodka deaths in Pärnu. On July 24, BBC issued the news "Estonia removes an SS monument".<sup>7</sup>

Yet two years later, on August 20, 2004 another controversial, i.e. overtly Nazi monument opened up in a little town called Lihula. This provocative monument, quoting the Prime-Minister Juhan Parts, had a plaque saying "To Estonian men who fought in 1940-1945 against Bolshevism and for the restoration of Estonian independence" (in the original: „Eesti meestele, kes sõdisid 1940-1945 bolshevismi vastu ja Eesti iseseisvuse taastamise nimel“). Later the same

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<sup>5</sup> Mari Kamps, „Pooled tallinnlastest toetavad pronkssõduri jätmist Tõnismäele“. *Postimees*, PM online, December 7, 2006, <http://www.postimees.ee/071206/esileht/siseuudised/tallinn/233030.php>

<sup>6</sup> Kristiina Mõttus, „Eestlased teisaldaks pronkssõduri, venelased mitte.“ *Postimees*, PM online, April 25, 2007, <http://www.postimees.ee/250407/esileht/siseuudised/tallinn/257074.php>

<sup>7</sup> *BBC News World Edition*. 2002. Estonia removes SS monument, July 24, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/2148732.stm>

year the prime-minister said that the opening of the monument was the “silliest thing of the year”.<sup>8</sup>

The monument was the same Pärnu’s soldier in the SS-uniform bas-relief removed two years earlier. This apparently Nazi war monument which was supposed to commemorate Estonians who fought in the Estonian SS-legion was removed on September 2, by the Estonian Government’s order issued under the EU and the USA pressure.<sup>9</sup>

It is noteworthy that the monument was removed late at night with the help of the police. During the removal the people who were gathered there threw stones at the police and workers removing the monument and crying “Shame! Shame!”. The police was forced to fire tear gas.

In 2005 this controversial monument was returned to its owners and opened on October 15, on the private grounds of the Museum of Fight for Estonia’s Freedom in Lagedi, and stays there up to the present day.

These war monuments erections, removals and re-erections resulted in a series of radical statements in the press, coming from both Estonian and Russian nationalists, and culminated in the Bronze Night, i.e. the Bronze Soldier’s removal.

### **Nationalist’s provocations**

It is important to underline that Estonian nationalists’ provocations started long before April 26. Several times the monument was painted with different colors: yellow and red, blue, black and white. However, these incidents came into fashion just after the Lihula story. Thus, on the eve of May 9, 2005 the Soldier was marked by red paint. Though these events were initiated by nationalists’ forces, their actions were not supported by any political program and had a sporadic character.

One of such events happened on May 21, 2006, when the monument was painted after the manner of the Estonian national tricolor: blue-black-white. While the red paint is associated with the color of the Soviet flag and is comprehensible in the general context, the blue-black-white version of the monument, which for Estonian nationalist symbolizes the Soviet occupation, has no comprehensible meaning whatsoever.

Hundreds of veterans met again by the monument on May 9, 2006. A well-known Estonian nationalist Jüri Böhm also came there waving the national tricolor, and was taken into custody by the police for his own safety. Soon after, on May 20, there was a meeting of Estonian nationalist, who demanded the monuments’ removal; one of them threatened to blow up the monument unless it is not removed. Jüri Liim emphasized that he wanted to do that already in 1990, yet his pity for the windows of the nearby St. Charles church prevented him from doing so. This is yet

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<sup>8</sup> Toomas Sildam, „Parts: Lihula samba sünd on aasta rumalaim tegu“. *Postimees*, December 23, 2004, <http://www.postimees.ee/231204/esileht/153399.php>

<sup>9</sup> Jaanus Piirsalu and Mirko Ojakivi, „Parts põhjendas Lihula aktsiooni välissurvega“. *Eesti Päevaleht*, September 4, 2004, <http://www.epl.ee/?artikkel=273336>

another proof of the nationalists' inconsistency in relation to their goals: at some point in time they feel pity for church windows, and seventeen years later do not care for it whatsoever.

Due to frequenting upheavals and civil crimes on the Tõnismägi Hill, on May 26, 2006 the Minister of the Interior Kalle Laanet forbade any meetings around the monument. The territory adjusting to the monument was surrounded by the police blue-white band, and the police started to patrol the monument's surroundings. The police patrolled the monument till October 2006.

Due to the mentioned provocations around the Soldier, on August 22, 2006 the Tallinn City Government sponsored a Round Table with representatives of 27 organizations. Two right-wing parties, Pro Patria and Res Publica and Reformist Party boycotted the Round Table. The newly formed government of March 2007 met with the Round Table representatives only on April 26, 2007, when the Minister of the Defense Jaak Aaviksoo stated that everything was ready for the process of exhumation of the soldiers' remains and the work was due to start immediately.<sup>10</sup>

On March 25, 2007 the same Estonian nationalist, Jüri Böhm tried to "decorate" the monument with a barbwire wreath bearing the following inscription: "To Estonian Peoples Murderer!" (in the original: „Eesti rahva mõrtsukale!“). He succeeded in doing that only thanks to the Estonian Police Special Forces, which were called to Tõnismägi to involve into the fighting started. Very soon the wreath was taken away by Russian activists (the monuments' defenders). It should be noted that this happened while the newly formed government were already in power. The first attempt to "decorate" the monument with the same barbwire wreath took place on February 23, 2007 the Day of the Motherland's Defender (earlier – the Red Army Day) was unsuccessful. Different kind of provocations from both sides and even on a higher level lasted up to April 26, 2007.

### **Parliament's actions.**

On January 10, 2007 the Estonian Parliament passed the War Graves Protection Act. According to this act, the Government was allowed to remove the monument to a more suitable location and rebury the soldiers' remains beneath it. Another bill called Law on Forbidden Structures was approved on February 15, 2007 with 46 votes for the Law and with 44 votes against it. The majority of people, predominately Russians, thought this law was approved only thanks to the absence of two Russian Members of the Parliament of the Reformist Party: Tatiana Muraviova and Sergei Ivanov (i.e. two likely "contra" votes). As a result the Russian-language press called them traitors.

However, the President of Estonia Toomas Hendrik Ilves vetoed the bill, as it did not comply with the Constitution of Estonia. But the Prime-Minister Andrus Ansip said that through the War

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<sup>10</sup> Tallinn, „Tallinna volikogu juures kogunev ümarlaud kuulas 26. Aprillil kaitseminister Jaak Aaviksoo seisukohti Tõnismäe monumendi tuleviku suhtes“, Pronkssõduri ümarlaud, <http://www.tallinn.ee/est/g3747>

Graves Protection Act Government could relocate the monument and reburies the soldiers' remains anyway.<sup>11</sup>

### **April 26, 2007**

These days, in the twenties of April, 2007 it was seen that Tallinn is full of police forces from all over the country, as policemen started to play a visible part in the cityscape. Early in the morning, April 26 (4:30 AM), a two-meter fence was erected around the Bronze Soldier square again with the Estonian Special Forces' help. Later the afternoon the area around the Soldier was covered by a plastic tent, and the monument disappeared from people's sight.

After that people started to gather around "the Bronze Soldier Square" and the nearby National Library. It is known that afternoon and the night that followed there were more than 5,000 people out there (among them were a lot of Estonians too). The night culminated with street fights and pillages provoked by a mass psychosis and the police's refusal to interfere into it (that is the police's passivity in the course of several hours), and, finally, with the removal of the monument from the Tõnismäe Hill.

All we should, however, make a difference between the events around the monument before the police used force, and after, because the events that followed were not directly related to the meeting, but rather were more of a chain reaction resulting from the clandestine monument's relocation. What was interesting, that the Prime-Minister stated a year before the events he could not imagine the state of affairs, under which the monument could be removed clandestinely. "This is not a kind of decision the legitimate state could afford", stated Prime-Minister Andrus Ansip.<sup>12</sup> At that moment Mr. Ansip hinted at the abovementioned case of the Lihula monument's relocation, yet in April 2007 he did exactly the opposite. The meeting, the suppression of the meeting and the street-fights were merely "justification" of the Prime-Minister's actions.

### **Conclusion**

As it mentioned earlier, surveys showed that the majority of people living in Estonia did not support the idea of the monument's relocation even several days before the notorious Bronze Night (April 26 and 27).

On April 23, 12 professors from Tallinn University, Tartu University, Tallinn Technical University and Helsinki University (Finland) sent their open letter to Estonia's Minister of the Defense Jaak Aaviksoo. They mentioned that the monuments removal may have some risks at the end. They implied the relocation of the monument might solve some problems with the Victory Day, May 9, but would leave a great risk factor from the point of view of Estonia's distant interests in the future (the internal stability; Estonia's reputation for the outside world and so on). They wrote both factors would be damaged unless the government refused from its plans.

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<sup>11</sup> Kai Kalamees, "President Ilvese veto lõpetas praeguse riigikogu koosseisu jaoks sambasõja", *Eesti Päevaleht*, February 16, 2007, <http://www.epl.ee/artikkel/374514>

<sup>12</sup> Mirjam Mäekivi, „Ansip ei välista pronkssõduri saatuse otsustamist riigikogus“, *Posimees*, PM online, June 29, 2006, <http://www.postimees.ee/290606/esileht/siseudised/207552.php>

Now we can say that Estonia's relationships with Russia has been damaged very seriously in different respects. But what is more important is that our internal stability has been damaged in an enormous way.

In 2008 the Russian-language minority and Estonian veterans, who fought in the Soviet Army, have two places to go where to honor the Red Army soldiers—their relatives, comrades in arms, and killed in action: the Tõnismägi Hill and the War Cemetery. In the middle of 2000s Russian started to identify themselves with the Bronze Soldier, in particular those of the elder generation. In 2008 the monument symbolizes their national consciousness for all Russians living in Estonia from the elderly to little kids. Such self-identification prevents Russians from integrating the Estonian society, and the Prime-Minister was warned by the professors about this consequence in the above-mentioned letter. Another consequence is the change in the language behavior: many Russians fluent in Estonian do not speak Estonian any longer out of protest, nonconformism, or because they feel offended. They feel offended, because at the end of 1980s and at the very beginning of 1990s most of them supported Estonia's independence.

Today two Estonia's communities—Estonian and Russian—live their lives separately: with the symbols of their own, with their own memories about the II World War and the events that followed up to this day.

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