

Estonia can be proud of the 20th century, because it won twice-in the War of Independence, as well as in the Cold War, President Toomas Hendrik Ilves said today, when speaking at the Estonia Concert Hall on the occasion of the anniversary of the Tartu Peace Treaty.

“Estonia has remained on the side of the victors. This should enable us to relate to the 20th century with the magnanimity and confidence of winners and to surmount the degrading fear of losers,” said the Head of State.

“However, how to relate to the victories of other peoples?” asked President Ilves. “Especially if one of these peoples lives here in Estonia with us and in a situation where their victory is not uniquely ours?”

According to the Head of State, the destruction of Nazism deserves to be celebrated. However, half of Europe was thereafter bowed to foreign rule for decades.

President Ilves said that, if for Russia and many of Estonia’s Russian-speaking people, the Second World War is primarily the years 1941-1945, when the Nazis attacked the Soviet Union and were defeated, for Estonia, for Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, the Second World War started two years earlier, on August 23, 1939, when Stalin and Hitler divided Europe into their spheres of influence.

“How to manage with this complicated past? The recipe could be simple: everyone has the right to celebrate their victories and commemorate their losses,” said the Head of State.

President Ilves affirmed that the Estonian people understand what the victory in the Great Fatherland War means to the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian people. “However, if instead of commemorating the fallen on the 9th of May, the occupation is celebrated, and at the same time, the suffering of the Estonian nation is negated, or even celebrated, then this we cannot tolerate,” said the Head of State.

According to the President, we should not overestimate the demonstrations and threats directed at Estonia, which originate from our neighboring country. "Instead let's worry about the fact that more than 15 years after the restoration of independence, we are short of scientifically examined information about who did exactly what in occupied Estonia in 1945-1991," said President Ilves. "Therefore, we should not be surprised that a large portion of the Estonian population has a poor or contrary understanding of our history. A thoroughly researched recent history, translated into various languages, is also a spiritual freedom, or commemorative, monument that is waiting to be erected."

"The whole Soviet occupation must be examined in its entirety. Including the times we may not like, when the blame may not rest only on the shoulders of the occupiers from abroad," said the Head of State. "If we do not want to fall into the same trap of treating history selectively, which we see happening to the East, we must make an honest and thorough examination of Estonian history until August 1991."

President Ilves emphasized that investigating history and understanding the past is much more important and painstaking work than fighting with monuments and he said it is iniquitous, when Estonia's politicians give into to the temptation to garner additional votes and use history as a club rather than a textbook.

"Unfortunately, we have seen this happening since last spring. Now we are arriving at a situation where Estonia itself is distributing the bullets for our critics to fire at us," said the Head of State. "In a situation, where many of the young people living in Estonia do not consider the Soviet Union to be an occupier but a liberator, our society is faced with a serious problem. The problem will not be solved simply by removing the Bronze Soldier, or leaving it in place."

According to the Head of State, only our own inability to come to agreement has left those who fell for Estonian independence without worthy homage. "There is still no Freedom Monument. This means that we also have not been able to mark our victories for future generations," said President Ilves. "Let's finally establish the Freedom Monument in a worthy place!"

The Head of State invited everyone to light candles on the graves and at the monuments for those killed in the War of Independence on February 2nd and February 24th. "Let's hoist our national flag and rejoice. After all, ultimately, in defiance of all our deprivations and tribulations, we are the victors."

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