

It seems utterly impossible to be able to summarize in two sentences. the entire War of Independence, which ended with the Tartu Peace Treaty and the Republic of Estonia stepping onto the world map.

We do, however, find a short and accurate description in Command of the Day No. 1308 from the Commander of the Armed Forces, which Lieutenant General Laidoner issued on March 28, 1920, the day he resigned his post.

“For thirteen months, Estonia’s army fought an immeasurably large and strong enemy under the most difficult of conditions, repulsed all its offensives, and liberated the land and people of Estonia. The enemy was forced to recognize us as an independent state and to make peace with us.”

In addition to the bravery of schoolboys, volunteers, and Estonian officers and soldiers who had recently fought in the Russian Army, we were helped by the politicians of the day who had the skill and courage to take correct decisions.

Estonian politicians could have used the same courage and skill later, especially in complex times in the second half of the 1930s.

Nevertheless, Estonia can be proud of the 20th century, because she won twice. First, the War of Independence, and secondly in the Cold War. 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 victors and to overcome the humiliating fear of the vanquished.

The second of February gives us the right and opportunity to look at our past and speak about how history may affect the present and the future.

We remember our victories. Be it the War of Independence, or the Tartu Peace Treaty, or the re-establishment of independence upon the ruins of the Soviet Union. Every people and nation

must remember and commemorate its victories.

How to relate, though, to the victories of other peoples? Especially if one of these peoples lives here in Estonia with us and in a situation where their victory is not at the same time, ours? Moreover, how to treat their victories, when their celebration in fact turns into a celebration of our losses?

The destruction of Nazism—a victory for all of Europe—deserves to be celebrated. Half of Europe, however, was subsequently bent for decades under Moscow's rule. This meant loss and suffering for Estonia. In the beginning killings, arrests and mass deportations, later persecution, russification, intimidation, and destruction of the spirit.

History can be multi-colored. For Russia and also for many Russian-speakers in Estonia, the Second World War means the Great Patriotic war that took place in the years 1941-1945, when the Nazis attacked the Soviet Union and were defeated.

For Estonia, as well as for Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland, the Second World War began two years earlier, on August 23, 1939, when two allies, Stalin and Hitler, divided Europe into their spheres of influence. This was followed by the agreement on the stationing of Soviet military bases, the overthrow of the government, loss of one's state, and various occupations.

This all lasted until August of 1991. It was only on September 1, 1994, when the last Russian soldier departed, that we could again feel like the masters of our own land.

How to manage with this complicated past? The recipe could be simple: everyone has the right to celebrate their victories and commemorate their losses.

Oswald Spengler said there is poetry in history. Currently we see how history, or rather the understanding of the past, is dividing the people living in Estonia, just like trenches and anti-tank defences.

The Estonian nation, which lost thousands of sons and daughters in the wars and repressions of the 20th century, understands 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, people instead celebrate Estonia's occupation, and in doing so deny the suffering of the Estonian nation, then this we cannot tolerate.

Esteemed countrymen.

Estonia's historical gaze is trained to see suffering rather than achievements, losses rather than victories. Fear and preconceptions rather than pride and openness dominate in our views. It's as if in our minds we are still fighting the Second World War, we continue fighting the occupation. Just like another country, not very far from here, finds it necessary to justify its actions during the 20th century.

Unfortunately, Russia does not want to recognize the words of its first president Boris Yeltsin, in Hungary in November 1992, when he said that after the destruction of fascism, another ideology of violence descended on Eastern Europe. President Yeltsin, who apologized for the violence caused by the Soviet Union, said that one must know one's own history, because without the complete truth, justice cannot be restored, and without the complete truth, there can be neither remorse nor forgiveness.

Yes, truly. Either there is remorse or there isn't. Just like you cannot demand that someone apologize, because apologizing is a matter of conscience, upbringing, and civilisation.

Estonia has repented and apologized for those compatriots who committed crimes against humanity during the German occupation. The courts of re-independent Estonia have administered justice to those who murdered or deported civilians during the Soviet occupation or shot in the back resistance fighters who hid in the forests.

It is insulting when compatriots of President Yeltsin, who offered his apology in Hungary, now accuse Estonians of rewriting history in favor of the Nazis. This accusation is wrong and it is unfair to those who took up arms to protect the freedom won for our nation in the battles of the War of Independence. This insults all those who lost their homes, homeland, families' health, and lives in the war unleashed by Germany and the Soviet Union.

Estonia is not rewriting its history. It is writing that which could not be written or even read during the years of occupation, and which the entire western world has known throughout this period.

The problem is rather that Russia's own historiography continues to labor under Soviet fantasies that no one in the free world takes seriously. However, they are believed by those who do not have the possibility to read anything else.

Therefore, we do not have to start "explaining Estonia's history to the world", as some suggest. The civilized world has known it all along, and indeed based its non-recognition policy on this knowledge.

At the same time, we need not overstate the importance of demonstrations and threats directed at Estonia, which come from our neighbor. Instead let us be concerned that more than 15 years after the restoration of independence, we remain critically lacking in academically examined facts regarding who did exactly what in occupied Estonia in the years 1945-1991.

We should not, therefore, 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 liberty or memorial monument that is waiting to be raised. It would help us all, including our Russian compatriots and those of other nationalities, to understand what actually took place.

The International Commission for the Research of Crimes Against Humanity established by President Meri has compiled and published its first voluminous compendium of over 1,300 pages, which describes events in Estonia in 1940-1945. A description of the second half of the 1940s is expected.

We may not, however, stop there. The whole Soviet occupation in its entirety must be examined. Including the times we may not like to know, when the blame may not rest only on the shoulders of the occupiers from abroad.

Collaborationism in Estonia is as little examined here as occupation has been in Russia. If we wish not to fall into the same trap of selective treatment history that we see to the East, we must make an honest and thorough examination of Estonian history up to August 1991.

Investigating history and understanding the past, my dear compatriots, is much more important and painstaking work than fighting with monuments. This is a job, moreover, that no one else will do for us.

Ladies and gentlemen.

We speak of injustice, of how Estonia is charged with absurd accusations. Yet it is also unjust for Estonia's politicians to yield to temptation to garner additional votes and use history as a club rather than a textbook.

Unfortunately, we have seen this too since last spring. Now we are arriving at a situation where Estonia itself is distributing ammunition to our critics to fire at us.

In the case of the so-called Bronze Soldier, a situation has developed, which Augustinus would have characterized when he spoke about history—it is all equally right because it is equally wrong.

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.

Rather let us think about everything we have achieved with our victory 15 years ago. We do not have to worry about absurd and false accusations, about whether and how this will affect Estonia's accession to the European Union or NATO. We are understood and we are firmly in the European Union and NATO.

We do not need to react to insults and idiocy. We can be above all this. We live in a free and democratic country, which we ourselves have created. Our history, with all its grandeur and its shameful stains, is open.

I call upon the Estonian public and politicians to rally their wisdom and dignity. Let us look toward the future, and see what is important for Estonia, Europe, and the world.

We must not, however, forget the past, especially those men and women, to whom we owe our victory in the War of Independence, to whom we owe our country. Only our own failure to come to agreement has left those who fell for Estonian independence without worthy homage. There is still no Liberty Monument. Meaning also we have not been able to mark our victories for future generations.

Let us finally erect our Liberty Monument in a worthy place.

Today and on February 24th, let us light candles on the graves of those who fell in the War of Independence and at the monuments commemorating them. Let us hoist our national flag and rejoice.

After all, ultimately, we are the victors, in defiance of all our losses and tribulations.