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War in Ukraine and the Estonian War on Monuments

Contexts of a Discussion that Was Not Expected to Happen

Monumental landscapes and the debates around them are always multi-layered. As elsewhere in Eastern Europe, in Estonia the current conflict around Soviet monuments builds on the Russian war in Ukraine, but also on earlier historical traumas, competing interpretations of the past, unresolved memory work and contemporary political rivalries. These processes have their local features, as well as connections to much broader global developments concerning dissonant heritage and decolonisation.

In Estonia, the situation regarding monuments from the Soviet era became particularly heated in summer 2022. Within more than a year, the discussions developed in multiple directions, not just limited to World War II memorials in the public space, but including architectural and interior decoration, the collaboration of Estonian intellectuals with the Soviet regime and exhibiting Russia-related heritage and authors in museums today. The upcoming elections of March 2023 loaded the discussions with political and manipulative arguments, and thus many argued that the removal of "Red" monuments also involved a potential crisis of democracy. It was often framed as a conflict between politicians and heritage or art professionals, but this article seeks to show that the groups involved in the conflict have been remarkably diverse, ranging from top-level and municipal politicians and administrators to various experts, their organisations and activists with different agendas[1].

Contexts: Monument Landscape and Research in Estonia

The dismantling of monuments and other symbolic acts in public space (e.g. renaming) have been integral parts of regime changes in this part of the world, which has seen many shifts in power throughout the 20th century (and in earlier centuries). From the Estonian perspective this includes the fall of the Russian Empire (1917), the emergence of a new nation-state during the interwar period (1918–1940), the Nazi (1941–1944) and Soviet (1940–1941, 1944–1991) occupations, and the regaining of independence from the USSR (1991).

Despite this complicated history, the total number of statues in Estonian public space has always been relatively modest. During the "long 19th century", the age of the invention of traditions, the Estonian territory was part of the Russian Empire, but was locally ruled by the highly privileged Baltic German elites, who had been dominant in the region since the Middle Ages. Only a few imperial monuments were erected, while the Baltic German elites did not create many monuments (or other visualisations of the past, e.g. murals) either. After the emergence of their national movement and upward social mobility in the 1860s, the Estonians largely based their identity on opposition to the Germans and their understanding of Baltic history, but did not yet have the means to manifest their version of the past in public space[2].

This relative scarcity of monuments and memorials gives further weight to the fate of every single statue. But it has also revealed a lack of know-how and experience in dealing with monuments, or even given reason to speak of visual illiteracy. The same has been pointed out about the 21st-century conflicts around monuments in Estonia. Along with the spread of critical heritage and memory studies, recent decades have given rise to an increasing number of studies addressing the roles of monuments and heritage in socio-political conflicts, power relations, nation building and collective memory in Estonia[3]. This research has shown, for example, the importance of the erection, removal and re-erection of War of Independence (1918–1920) monuments during regime changes[4] and of the popular heritage movement of the late 1980s, during the regaining of independence from the USSR[5].

Fig. 1: Memorial to the men who fought against Bolshevism in the Lihula cemetery. Photo: Urve Rukki, 2004 (National Archives of Estonia, EFA.697.0.201224).

Newer research has also examined different types of dissonant heritage in Estonia, especially its Baltic German and Soviet layers[6]. Other forms of contested heritage, including Russian imperial legacies, have been studied and debated much less. There have also been few studies comparing the often very entangled monumental and heritage conflicts throughout the different transformation periods of the "long 20th century". Besides academic research, however, a comprehensive project has been carried out to map and analyse 20th-century architectural heritage in order to list buildings and sites as national monuments[7]. A number of experimental conservation projects have also tested new approaches to Soviet heritage, including the heavily contested military heritage[8].

The Bronze Soldier Crisis of 2007 and Other Prequels

The practices and politics of handling Soviet monuments and heritage in post-socialist Estonia in the 1990s and early 2000s seem paradoxical in many ways. In comparison to many other Eastern European countries, the Estonian reaction to Soviet heritage has been more relaxed and less regulated. In the 1990s transformation period in Estonia, the removal of Soviet monuments was rather peaceful and quite limited: it concerned mostly statues of Lenin or other leading communists and revolutionaries. The Soviet monuments to World War II were mostly left untouched, although some elements were dismantled and the eternal flames extinguished. Despite this, in 2007, Estonia witnessed one of the earliest and most heated conflicts over Soviet monuments in East Europe.

The crisis began with the dedication of a monument in the small town of Lihula in 2004 (fig. 1)[9] commemorating the Estonians who fought in the Nazi German army (and who outnumbered significantly the Estonian men enlisted in the Red Army). In 2002, the same monument had first been unveiled in another Estonian town, Pärnu, and removed only about a week after a condemnation coming from the Prime Mister. Although the soldier represented on the relief did not bear any insignia, the uniform recognisably belonged to the Waffen SS. The inscription dedicated the memorial "To the Estonian men who in 1940–1945 fought against Bolshevism in the name of Estonia's independence". This led the government authorities to remove the statue also shortly after its second inauguration in Lihula[10].

The toppling of the monument did not go peacefully, however, but led to a fight between the police and the protesters. The removal was heavily criticised by many, and it also led to the desecration of several Soviet monuments. Activists erected a small commemorative stone on the memorial's former location, whereas the original monument is today located in a privately owned Museum for the Fight for Estonia's Freedom[11]. The plans to move it back to its site in Lihula have not vanished either, but appear frequently in the election promises of the Conservative People's Party of Estonia. For the authorities, the Lihula conflict was a major learning experience as a first large-scale post-Soviet monument conflict of its kind in Estonia. It also created the precedent of engaging academic visual language specialists in conflict solving, as the

Fig. 2: Pioneers' vigil at the Bronze Soldier on 9 May 1984. Photo: Georgi Tsvetkov (National Archives of Estonia, ERAF.2.2.461.17).

police commissioned an analysis of the monument from the semioticians of the University of Tartu[12].

As another indication of the growing opposition between rivalling memories of World War II and the appropriation of those memories by different stakeholders, new conflicts also emerged around the Soviet World War II monument – the so-called Bronze Soldier – in the city centre of Tallinn. Located at a site of war graves, the monument dated from 1947[13], consisting of a dolomite stone wall and a bronze figure of a Red Army soldier, designed by the Estonian sculptor Enn Roos. In 1964–1991, the site also included an eternal flame. In 1964–1995, the inscription attached to the stone wall read "For the heroes who fell during the liberation of Tallinn", and from 1995 "For those who fell during World War II" (in both cases in Estonian and Russian)[14]. After having been a central site for war commemoration and rituals during the Soviet times (fig. 2), in the post-Soviet period, Tõnismäe monument began to serve as the main site of 9 May celebrations for local Russian-speakers.

The multi-layered conflict that emerged around the Bronze Soldier in the 2000s involved activists from the Russian-speaking and Estonian communities and politicians, but was also clearly impacted by the Russian Federation. In April 2007, the relocation of the Bronze Soldier to the Defence Forces Cemetery of Tallinn (fig. 3) and the reburial of the soldiers' remains[15] led to several days long riots and a major diplomatic conflict with the Russian Federation[16]. It also had a negative effect on the relations between the state and the Russian-speaking community on a longer run.

On the one hand, the Bronze Soldier crisis resulted in an academic boom of local and international research about this monument, as well as about Estonian memory, identity and integration issues in general[17]. The site has also provoked artistic interventions. Already in 1998, Hanno Soans interacted with the monument in his happening *Backdoor Performance*, which addressed the post-Soviet condition and cityscape in more broader terms[18]. Kristina Norman's *After-War*, created in the aftermath of the 2007 crisis, pointed clearly to the potential of artistic research in dealing with monument and memory conflicts[19] (fig. 4). Norman's multi-media installation based on this project also represented Estonia at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009[20].

Fig. 3: The site of the Bronze Soldier prior to its removal in April 2007. Photo: Leena Hietanen (Wikimedia Commons).

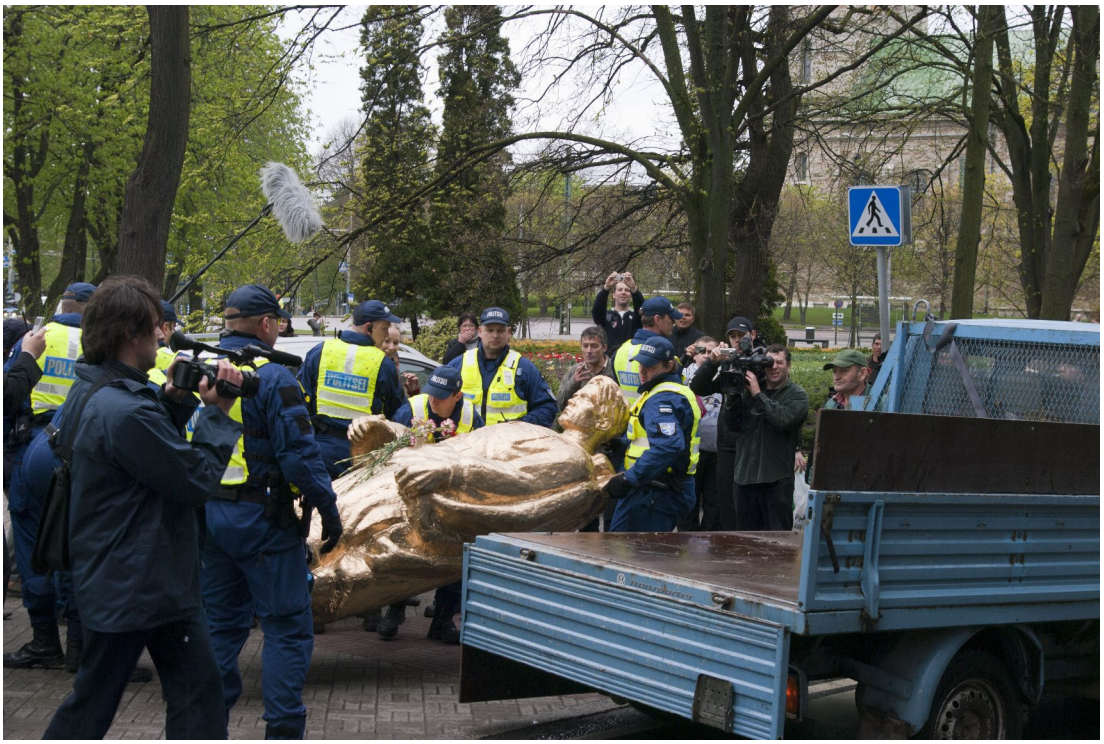

Fig. 4: Documentation of Kristina Norman's art project *After-War* on the site of the former Bronze Soldier, 2008. Photo: Reimo Võsa-Tangsoo (courtesy of the artist and photographer).

On the other hand, apart from this one instance, almost nothing was done about Soviet monuments. Despite the scale of the Bronze Soldier crisis, no strict regulations were imposed on Soviet heritage, unlike in several other Eastern European countries. There also emerged no significant projects concerning the mapping or re-framing of Soviet monuments, except for a few educational programmes for which the initiative mostly came from outside of Estonia[21]. Hence the Soviet monuments were left more or less as they were.

Hunt for the Red Monuments in 2022

After the full-scale invasion of Ukraine by Russia on 24 February 2022, the question of Soviet heritage did not arise immediately in Estonia. The society-wide debate emerged only half a year later, and became particularly heated during the autumn and winter. The approach of the Estonian parliamentary elections (which took place on 5 March 2023) likely had a considerable impact on the situation, but both top-down politics and grass-roots initiatives appear to have played their parts in bringing the issue of monuments to the limelight.

Media and social media played catalysing roles. On 21 June 2022 the newspaper *Postimees* (the flagship of the eponymous conservative media corporation) started the campaign "Help Find the Red Monuments"[22]. Following this initiative, the Government Office launched a similar campaign, inviting people to report on any "monuments to the occupying power"[23]. By the end of June, the Secretary of State established an expert group under the Government Office. Arguably for security reasons, the members of the committee were not made public, except for their head, Asko Kivinuk, Undersecretary of the Ministry of Defence. Different rumors circulated around the number of art and heritage specialists involved in the committe, while Kivinuk confirmed only the involvment of at least one representative from the Ministry of Culture and/or its subordinate authorities[24]. The aim of the secret committee was to "gather together the information on the grave markers and monuments in Estonia that carry the symbols of the occupation regime and work out a solution to remove them and to replace the grave markers with neutral markers"[25].

Shortly thereafter, the National Heritage Board renounced its rights over the handling of Soviet war memorials. In July, under the leadership of its new Director General, Liisa-Ly Pakosta (a long-time prominent member of the Isamaa (Fatherland) political party, which strongly advocated for the dismantling of Soviet monuments), the Heritage Board prepared a draft for the exclusion of war graves from protection. This essentially gave the Ministry of Defence and its new War Graves Commission authority over Soviet World War II monuments, or – according to the administrative vocabulary – "war graves" (273 in total) and "their elements" (grave markers, monuments and memorial ensembles). Presently, the removed monuments and memorials are still listed in the National Registry of Cultural Monuments, with the removal and reburial dates added[26]. The very framing of such monuments as war graves goes back to the Bronze Soldier crisis: the War Graves Protection Act, declared in January 2007, had created the legal basis for the relocation of the monument and the remains of the soldiers buried underneath it[27].

July 2022 the actual dismantling of Soviet monuments began. Among these, the removal of World War II monuments in Rakvere (1945, architect Alar Kotli; fig. 5, 6) and Võsu (standard design, also by Kotli) attracted a great deal of attention in Estonian, as well as in Russian-language media and social media. This was largely due to the reburying of the human remains of Red Army soldiers that rested underneath the monuments. While the remains from Rakvere were reburied in the Rakvere city cemetery, and the ones from Võsu in the nearby Haljala cemetery, the monuments were demolished[28]. A news item in a local newspaper illustrates the mood of the supporters of monument removals, as well as their attitude towards reburials:

"The brigade of the Estonian War Museum is doing quick and decent work in Lääne-Viru County. The same team that the day before yesterday took down the Red monument in Rakvere and dug up the mass

grave did the same in Võsu yesterday. At 14:30, the tractor had already closed the hole."[29]

The Estonian War Museum also remained closely involved in the removal and reburial process later.

The Narva Tank Case

While the removal of monuments gradually gained momentum in the late summer, all other events were overshadowed by the removal of the so-called Narva Tank on 16 August 2022. At that early stage, this tank monument became a central element in the conflict over competing versions of World War II memories and the changing meaning of the Soviet tradition of war commemoration in the context of the current war in Ukraine.

Due to Soviet-era immigration being driven by the heavy industrialisation of north-eastern Estonia, the Narva region situated right next to the Russian border is mostly Russian-speaking today. Since the collapse of the USSR, the area has suffered heavily from the decline of industry and unemployment, similar to many other post-socialist, post-industrial regions. The areas around Narva had been subject to heavy fighting in 1944 and were hence decorated with numerous Soviet war memorials[30]. In 1970, a monument featuring a Soviet T-34/85 tank on a limestone pedestal was dedicated. Located on the outskirts of the city, on the bank of the river Narva, it commemorated the advance of the Red Army during the Narva Offensive in 1944. Rather forgotten in the 1990s, the monument gradually regained its importance, not least due to initiatives and funding from the Russian Federation and the Russian Embassy.

As the news about possible removal of the Narva Tank began to spread in July and August 2022, many Narva locals and activists began to gather around the monument, surrounding it with candles, flowers etc. (fig. 7). They also organised a night watch. Arguing for its removal, Estonian politicians and other supporters of the monument removal campaign capitalised on the argument that a real tank was an especially inappropriate and offensive symbol in public space. Thus the events preceding the removal and the process around it gained wide media coverage. On 16 August, a major "special operation" was organised to remove

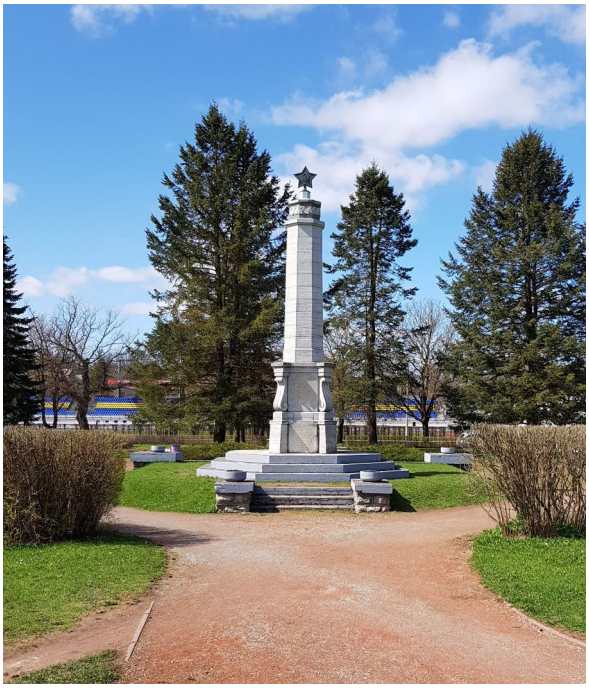

Fig. 5: Soviet World War II monument in Rakvere. Photo: Mirjam Abel, 2018 (National Registry of Cultural Monuments).

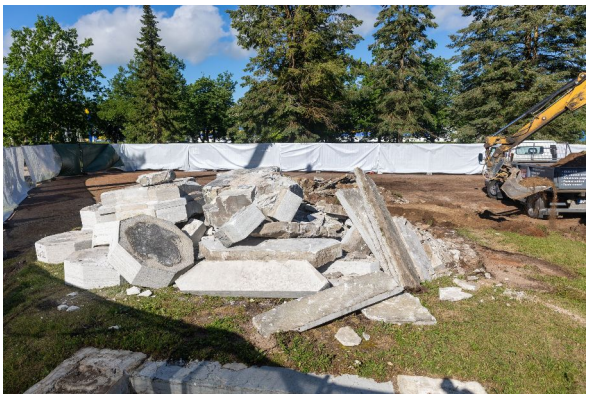

Fig. 6: Pieces of the demolished Soviet World War II monument in Rakvere on 14 July 2022. Photo: Ain Liiva (Postimees).

the tank, as well as a few other Soviet World War II monuments in eastern Estonia[31].

Although the process was presented as a major success in the Estonian media, it also produced anxiety. Ever since the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014, the question of whether "Narva is next?" has been repeatedly raised by Estonian and international media. Prior to the dismantling, many recalled the Bronze Soldier crisis and asked whether new riots would occur. However, the removal of monuments did not end up causing any rioting in Narva or anywhere else in Estonia, partly due to greater precautionary

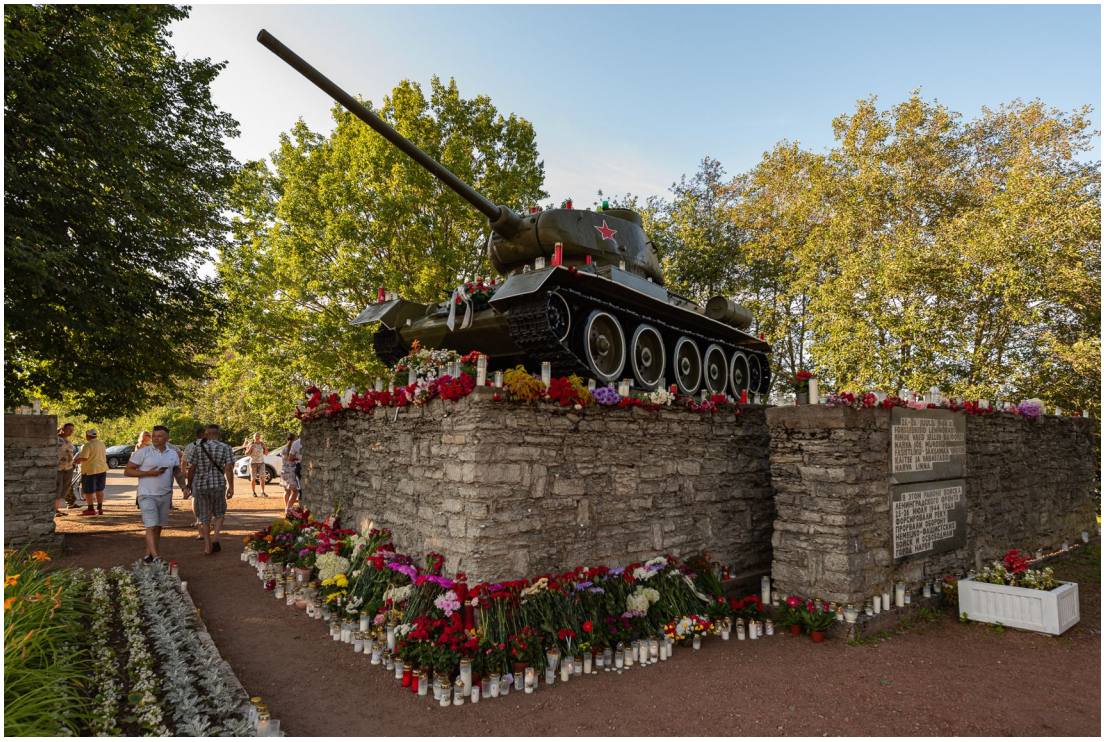

Fig. 7: Narva Tank prior to its removal in August 2022. Photo: Ülo Veldre (Wikimedia Commons).

measures. Instead, in Narva the monument removal led to other forms of non-violent, but emotional modes of protest and vernacular commemoration: until August 2023, every single day local activists lit candles on the former location of the Narva Tank monument and decorated the location with flowers and LED lights[32]. To a lesser extent, they also lit candles at other sites of former Soviet monuments near Narva. Roughly a year after its removal, on 8 August 2023, the Estonian Police and Border Guard closed the former site of the Narva Tank, in order to start building a radar station on the same spot[33]. The police thereafter took flowers and other decorations to other former monument sites nearby.

Another twist was added by the activities in Ivangorod, the Russian city just across the river from Narva. Although contacts with the Russian Federation have decreased dramatically since the start of the full-scale invasion, the Russian influence on the conflicts around monuments and the commemoration of World War II remains. Shortly after the removal of the Narva Tank, on 11 September 2022, the municipality of Ivangorod installed – with a public celebration – a copy of the Narva Tank, declaring it would stay there only until the one in Narva could be re-installed[34]. On 9 May 2023, Ivangorod city authorities organised a concert on the banks of the river, facing the city centre of Narva and oriented towards its Russian-speaking inhabitants[35].

Wave of Monument Removal across Estonia

August 2022 marked a milestone in monument removal in the Baltic region more broadly, as it also saw the removal of prominent Soviet memorials in neighbouring countries. On 8 August, the World Peace Statue in Helsinki (a very late Soviet gift from Moscow, in 1989), was taken down with the excuse of imminent construction work[36]. On 22 August the Victory Monument and the accompanying large memorial complex in Riga were demolished. The decision to dismantle was made by an expert committee led by the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia[37]. The demolition of the Riga Victory Monument gained wide media coverage in Estonia, which emphasised the efficiency, decisiveness and success of the Latvian administration in handling the dismantling process. The public debates in Finland and Latvia received less attention.

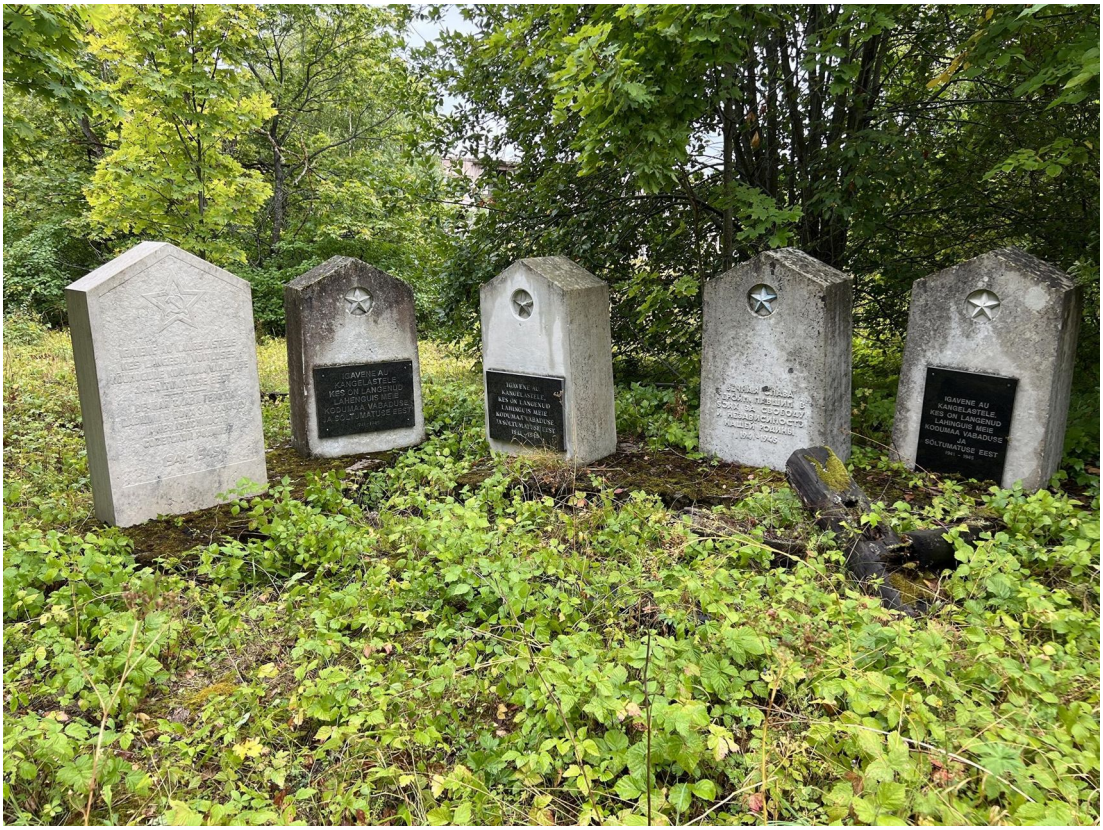

Fig. 8: Soviet World War II monuments from Western Estonia relocated to the Virtsu Museum in August 2022. Photo: Juhan Hepner (ERR News).

In late summer and autumn of 2022, a number of Soviet monuments were dismantled in Estonia. Responsibilities for decision-making and carrying out the removals varied, ranging from municipalities to state administration. In Narva, for example, at first the city government was expected to decide on the removal of the monuments, but after they failed to reach a decision, the Narva Tank and other monuments were removed by state government order. Prime Minister Kaja Kallas explained on 16 August:

"Early this morning, the government took the decision and by the afternoon, the military monuments to foreign powers had been removed and the tank had arrived at the Viimsi War Museum. It all took place quickly and peacefully, and hopefully it will stay that way. The Soviet monuments that were a source of tension have disappeared from the public space and we can move forward together. We share a common future and it is time to focus on it."[38]

Besides Narva, some other big monuments were dismantled by means of large operations, such as the Raadi World War II memorial complex in Tartu, dismantled in September 2022[39]. The remains of those buried in the graves at the site of the monument were reburied. The mayor of Tartu and the chairman of the city council had asked the state to remove the monument in spring[40].

As monument removal gained momentum during the summer of 2022, the process was made the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence. The reburial of soldiers' remains and the removal of grave markers have been handled by the Estonian War Museum, along with local municipalities[41]. On the whole, the monument removals became increasingly characterised by scattering into different levels of decision-making though. The fates of many small, peripherally located monuments were left to the municipalities, who often lacked the means, skills or knowledge to handle them.

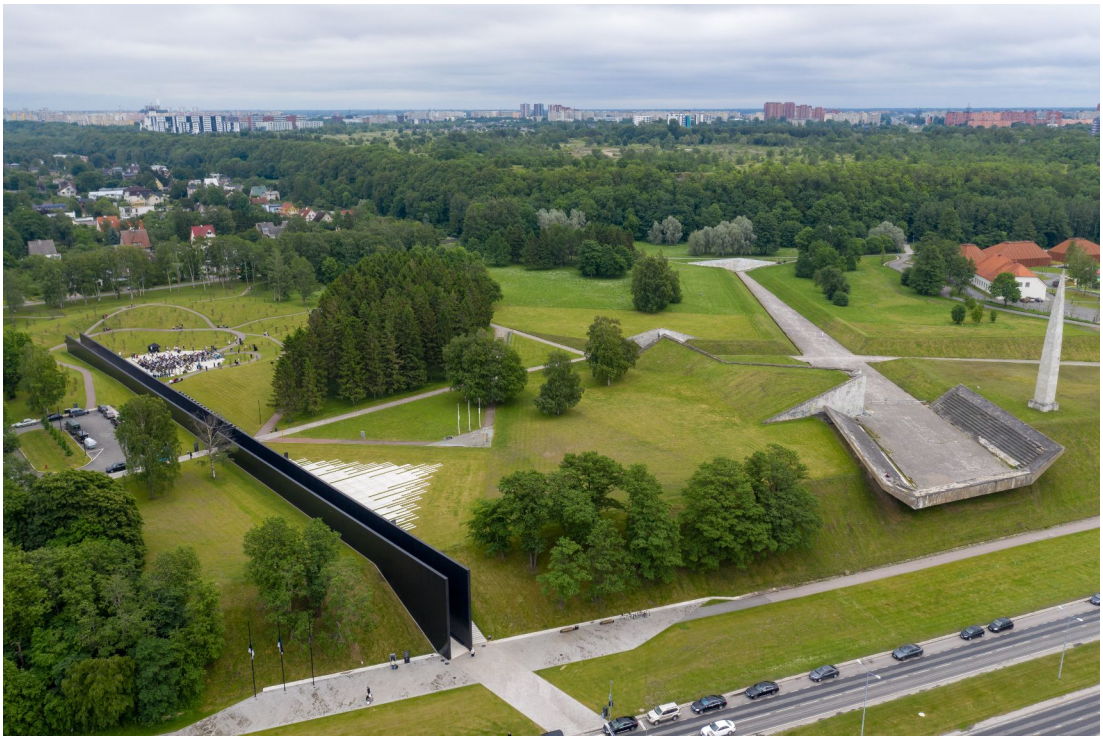

Fig. 9: Memorial to the Victims of Communism (2008, left) and Maarjamäe memorial (1960–1985), 2020. Photo: Robin Roots (Scanpix).

The handling of the material remains of monuments after removal was likewise divided and poorly coordinated. Many artistically less significant monuments have simply been destroyed. Some have been handed over to major museums[42]. While the majority of these have remained in collection storages, the Narva Tank is a notable exception: it was moved to the Estonian War Museum near Tallinn, and put on display rather quickly. Sometimes small museums with very limited resources (such as the Virtsu Museum of Hobbies; fig. 8) have been entrusted with the custody of memorials. On the whole, there has been almost no discussion on how museums could contribute to dealing with such controversial heritage: new museology offers many options besides simply providing storage space[43].

There has also been little debate on what kinds of objects and examples to preserve in the first place, and if these decisions should be based, for example, on the aesthetic value, or on giving an overview of different examples of monumental sculpture, including both more standardised and lesser known versions.

During the process, two special cases emerged: the memorial sites in Maarjamäe and Tehumardi, representing the high tide of Soviet modernism in Estonia. The Maarjamäe memorial in Tallinn has been a subject of political and public dispute for a long time[44] and was again heavily disputed in 2022–2023. The construction of the memorial had been a very long process, which started during World War II[45]. The planning and building of the memorial took place in many phases, and the site was never completed. The main elements of the memorial originate from 1960 (architect Mart Port and sculptor Lembit Tolli) and 1975 (architects Allan Murdmaa, Peep Jänes, Rein Kersten and Henno Sepmann, and artist Jüri Palm). It has largely been defended as a prominent example of post-war modernism, combined with large-scale landscape architecture.

Some elements were removed from Maarjamäe in the 1990s already, and 2022 saw the removal of further elements. Moreover, due to these re-contextualisations and further additions, Maarjamäe is the most multi-layered memorial site in Estonia: it has connections to the remembrance of a totalitarian regime and political terror (fig. 9). In 2018, during the centenary celebrations of the Republic of Estonia, a large new national Memorial to the Victims of Communism

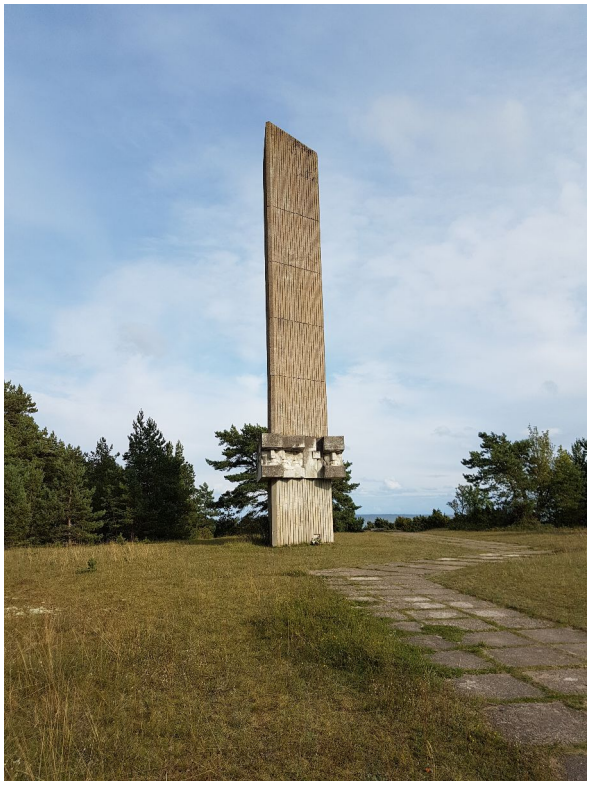

Fig. 10: Tehumardi memorial. Photo: Keidi Saks, 2017 (National Registry of Cultural Monuments).

(authors Kalle Vellevoog, Jaan Tiidemann, Tiiu Truus et al.) was opened next to the Soviet monument complex[46]. Very well received by the Estonian population, it has quickly gained the reputation of being the most emotionally appealing and respected memorial in the country. Its design combines monumental abstract form (reminescent of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC) with the commemoration of concrete individuals (22,000 names on the memorial wall) and emotional elements (apple trees, small bee sculptures).

In the same 2018, a special outdoor exhibition of discarded Soviet monuments opened at the Estonian History Museum, located on the other side of the Maarjamäe memorial[47]. Furthermore, since the collapse of the USSR, Maarjamäe's German war graves have also gained new markers. In 1941–1944, the Nazi authorities buried around 2,300 soldiers in Maarjamäe, envisioning the site as a grand military cemetery and memorial. Destroyed by the Soviets, the German cemetery gained new minimalist limestone crosses to commemorate the soldiers, according to the agreement that the Republic of Estonia and the Federal Republic of Germany signed on the restoration and maintenance of German war graves on Estonian territory in 1995[48].

Tehumardi, a memorial to the eponymous brutal battle of 1944, is located on Saaremaa Island and was built in 1966. Its artistic team included the sculptors Riho Kuld and Matti Varik and the architect Allan Murdmaa, who was also one of the key authors of the Maarjamäe memorial. Although smaller, it shares similar features with Maarjamäe, and can also be regarded as an example of modernist memorial architecture and landscape design (fig. 10).

Both sites – Tehumardi and Maarjamäe – are still standing, and in both cases aesthetic arguments have been used surprisingly effectively to preserve the memorials. This is not to say that other reasons have not played roles, such as the large size (i.e. the physical difficulty of removing them) and very visible location by the sea, not to mention the presence of the Tehumardi battle in the Estonian cultural and family memory.

New Law in the Making: Ministry of Justice as Memory Expert

All of these developments led to an increasingly wider public debate in late summer and early autumn of 2022, by which time the parliamentary elections were approaching. Much of the discussion centred around the Ministry of Justice's draft for a new law to regulate not only monuments but also their architectural decorations (e.g. symbols, such as five-pointed stars). In order to pass it more quickly, the law was drafted as a minor amendment to the existing Building Code. On 14 November 2022, the government submitted it to the parliament. If adopted, the amendment would have required municipalities and countless private landlords, housing associations and others to remove Red monuments and symbols within three months from public spaces, including from interiors, and from private property if the symbols were visible from public space[49].

As more and more critical voices began to emerge in August and September 2022, this led to a reaction by Lea Danilson-Järg, the Estonian Minister of Justice (Fatherland Party), one of the key promoters of monu-

ment removal and the new law. In her opinion piece, "Hello, Art People, Please Come Back to Earth!", she criticised art and heritage professionals for naivety, and drew a direct link to Russia's war in Ukraine:

"Putin has just started a mobilisation, but we are worried that the removal of Soviet coats of arms and insignia from buildings would spoil the architectural facades of buildings. […] Removing Red monuments will allow Estonia to finally free itself from the ideological influence of the criminal invader. […] Russian soldiers worshipping these same symbols are killing hundreds of people, including women and children, and destroying entire towns and cities in Ukraine every day. If possible, they would gladly do the same in Estonia."[50]

Disregarding any artistic or historical value that such monuments could possibly possess, she even suggested that the war might have been prevented if the Soviet symbols had been removed earlier:

"We have been too lenient so far. If the worshippers of the Soviet symbols had been condemned in time, there might not be a war in Europe today. Symbols glorifying the occupation regime cannot and must not be tolerated, even if they are cast in an artistically beautiful form."[51]

This newspaper article reflects the beliefs shared by many advocates of monument removal: that Soviet symbols feed militancy in contemporary Russia, that they pose security threats in other countries, and that taking the monuments down will immediately improve the national security situation. Danilson-Järg also extended the debates to other kinds of controversial heritage: "There is a war going on in Europe based on the Soviet legacy. Hardly anyone would dare to complain that removing Nazi symbols from buildings would spoil their composition."[52] The banning of Nazi symbols is a parallel which is another argument often used by the supporters of removing Soviet monuments, and one that links it to broader debates around comparisons between Communist and Nazi terror, which have been present in Estonia since the turn of the 1980s–1990s.

Fig. 11: Interior of the "Estonia" theatre, showing the effects of the post-war remake, 2006. Photo: Arne Maasik (Estonian Museum of Architecture).

In September 2022 Mart Kalm, an architectural historian and the rector of the Estonian Academy of Arts, was asked to comment on plans for this new law on a popular evening television programme of the national broadcast channel ERR. Developing into one of the most prominent critics of the rushed monument toppling, he put forward several arguments that were central to other art specialists as well: that many of the monuments had basically been forgotten and that it was the removal campaign that was bringing them back into the limelight, that the dismantling campaign did not help Ukraine in any way, that the process was strongly influenced by upcoming elections, and that Soviet symbols were part of the architectural designs of many prominent buildings[53].

Along with the initiative for the new law, the debates focused also on Soviet and especially Stalinist architecture. One of the examples Kalm gave was the Sõprus (Friendship) cinema in Tallinn's Old Town, which for decades has housed a nightclub and

an arthouse cinema. Built in 1953–1955 (architects Friedrich Wendach, Ilmar Laasi, Peeter Tarvas and August Volberg), the décor of the Stalinist building features numerous Soviet symbols, including five-pointed stars. Another centrally located building that received a lot of attention was the Russian cultural centre, the former Soviet navy officers' club in Tallinn. Built in 1954 (architect Aleksandr Kuznetsov), the facade and the interior of the building include plenty of Stalinist-era decorations reflecting the height of Socialist Realism[54].

The most heated discussions have centred around the National Opera building "Estonia", an important site of national memory and an early symbol of the Estonian identity. The original Art Nouveau structure from 1913 was designed by the Finnish architects Armas Lindgren and Wivi Lönn. Badly damaged during World War II, the theatre was extensively renovated and rebuilt in 1945–1951 (architects Alar Kotli and Edgar Johan Kuusik), acquiring several Stalinist features. In the autumn of 2022, the management of the National Opera wanted to cover up the Socialist Realist ceiling painting in its main hall (by Elmar Kits, Evald Okas and Richard Sagrits, completed in 1947; fig. 11). Art historian Krista Kodres, another voiced critic of the rushed removal campaign, pointed out that the theatre as a whole has a coherent (and to a great extent Stalinist) aesthetics[55]. The opera's initiative was, however, biased, as the opera had been intensively lobbying for the reconstruction and extension of the building for years. The slogan "Art Belongs to the People!" above the theatre stage was painted over – without the approval of the National Heritage Board – but this is as far as it went. Although the phrase dates back to the French Revolution, this action was justified by attributing the famous quote to Lenin. In fact, some elements had already been removed from the theatre hall in 2006, including 16 bas reliefs with faces representing the different nationalities and republics of the Union – a problematic act in itself and far from decolonial solidarity[56].

As the initiatives around the removal of Soviet heritage from public space extended from monuments to other forms of heritage, this created a need to publicly discuss the monumental decorative art of the late Soviet period. Heritage specialists pointed out that this layer of heritage from the 1960s–1980s could easily be destroyed if the messages from authorities were unclear and if art specialists were not included in the decision making[57]. A warning example was the monumental decoration of the Auvere thermal power station building: originally an electricity-related symbol, a spark, was confused with the Soviet pentagon and removed in August 2022[58].

The increasingly heated public debate, building on numerous opinion pieces and media appearances arguing both for and against the removal of Soviet monuments and decorations, was quite contrary to the initial message of the administrators of monument dismantling. In short, their position was that there was nothing to discuss and public debates should be avoided in times of war.

Series of Appeals from Heritage Specialists

Reacting to these short-sighted statements, since late summer of 2022 many public debate panels have been organised by museums, creative unions and other professional organisations[59]. These institutions have also published several appeals. The first appeal by the professional associations to the Prime Minister, the Minister of Culture and the Secretary of State (8 August 2022) addressed the exclusion of specialists from the decision-making process and called for an end to secrecy, referring to concealing the members list of the "expert group"[60]. It did not receive any official response, or lead to any direct results.

During autumn and winter of 2022–2023, much of the dispute centred around the aforementioned amendment of the Building Code. The planned amendment was very unclear about how to define these symbols that allegedly incited hatred or justified occupation. It also did not clarify who was competent to decide on this, stating that a committee, including members of the government, would decide which symbols were not suitable, while its members were actually working secretly.

The problem was also drawn to the attention of creative associations, this time together with the ICOMOS Estonian National Committee, in another public address of 20 December 2022[61]. They pointed out that, while leaving the interpretation of symbols very open-ended, the draft obliged the police to safe-

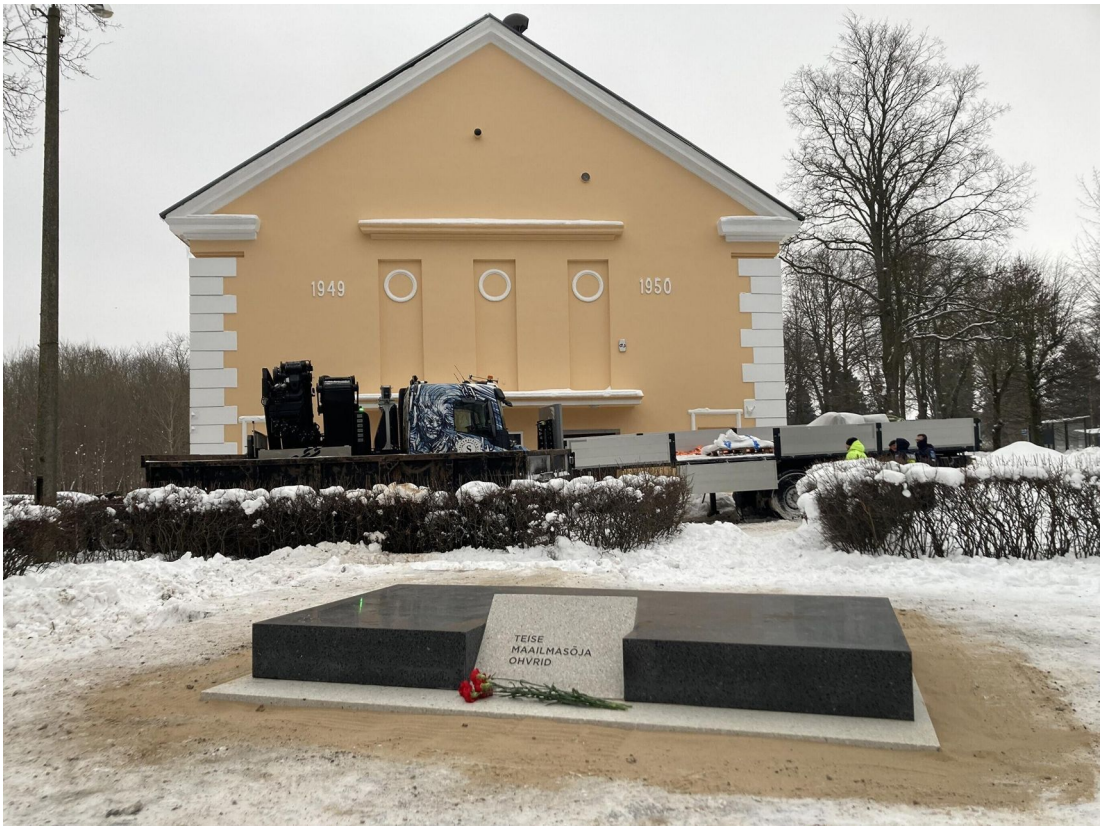

Fig. 12: Installation of a neutral grave marker, here in Sillamäe, 2023. Photo: Rene Kundla (ERR News).

guard removal decisions, even giving law enforcement the right to enter people's back gardens.

During the preparation of the draft of the updated Building Code, on 9 November, the creative unions pointed out the ambiguity of the interpretation and decision-making mechanisms in another joint appeal[62]. In the run-up to the elections, the draft was adopted by the National Assembly on 15 February 2023, but it was not signed by the President. However, much of the damage was already done. The most prominent example is that in October 2022 the National Heritage Board had decided to put the process of creating a conservation area for Sillamäe's Stalinist town centre on hold[63].

By that time, repeated appeals from creative associations had problematised the exclusion of specialists in handling dissonant heritage. They argued that instead of demolishing, there are professional analysis and tools that would enable alternative solutions, which would also advance critical thinking and visual literacy. The appeals also highlighted the highly problematic nature of distinguishing between "us" and "them", between the "right" and the "wrong" kind of heritage and history, thus questioning the manifestations of these divisions in public space.

A major question the professionals raised was democracy. Which carried a greater threat: the Soviet heritage or the disregard for democratic and open decision-making processes during the removal process? They also criticised the use of the national security argument. Similarly to the Bronze Soldier crisis of 2007, the removal of Soviet monuments in 2022 was framed as above all a security issue. This argument was not only used to justify the removal of Soviet statues, but also the domination of state power over decision-making and the formation of secret consulting bodies to decide about public space. The historian Marek Tamm even went so far as to argue in a popular TV programme that the aforementioned Minister of Justice, Lea Danilson-Järg, posed a bigger security threat to Estonia than the Red monuments ever could[64].

Official Report: Non-Neutral Monuments and Reburials

The overview of monuments by the secret expert group under the Government Office was finally published on 28 November 2022[65]. A few days before, the working group introduced the new "neutral war graves marker", which was intended for sites where the Soviet memorials had been removed[66]. Clearly minimalist in form and markedly low in height, the markers included two types of grey stone, and a simple message: "Victims of World War II" (fig. 12).

The work group stated that 188 monuments should be removed or replaced in Estonia, 133 of them connected to war graves, meaning that soldiers' corpses were intended to be reburied, in most cases in civilian cemeteries. By that time the Minister of Defence and the War Graves Commission had already decided to remove many of the monuments listed in the report. At that point, the War Graves Commission decided to rebury the remains from 54 sites, leaving open the fate of the other 79 sites[67].

The handling and the official discourse around the reburial practice was problematised by the cultural theorist Epp Annus, who called for respect for fallen soldiers:

"Every war grave is a monument to the terrible consequences of human stupidity. Every war grave is the grave of every war. There is not much we can do in retrospect. What we can do is offer peace to the memory of those who so senselessly and prematurely lost their lives. We might also, in doing so, understand that it is this – the futility of death – that unites warriors on both sides. And we would commemorate the fallen as if they were our own, all of those Ukrainians, Belarusians, Kazakhs, Mordovians, Udmurts, Armenians, Estonians, Russians and other nationalities who laid down their lives on Estonian territory. Of course, there is no need to perpetuate Soviet-era liberation rhetoric in these burial places, but all Estonians could commemorate together in these places those who died in vain in wars."[68]

Of 322 examined "Red monuments", the commission ultimately allowed 78 to remain in place, judging them to be "neutral" enough. Characteristic of the working group's approach was the radio interview given by Asko Kivinuk, the chairman of the secret committee and its only public spokesman, in which he stated that all monuments depicting women and children should be considered neutral[69]. This is in stark contrast with the perspective of memory and heritage studies on monuments: no monument can ever be completely neutral, of course; it always reflects some kind of ideology. It is also well known that women and children have been widely used to embody all kinds of ideologies. In the 19th century, female figures became important symbols of nationality. An equally common and charged symbol is the figure of the mourning woman. In Estonia, the best-known example of this is the monument to those massacred in the Revolution of 1905 (sculptor Lembit Paluteder), erected behind the aforementioned Estonian National Opera in the very centre of Tallinn in 1959. A few years ago, it was slightly relocated into a more peripheral corner of the same square[70]. This leads us to the next paradox in the recent monument debates.

Silenced Imperial Heritage and Other Cases of "Other" Heritage

There have been a number of Russian imperial monuments taken down in Ukraine and elsewhere, both monuments erected during the tsarist period and the later representations of Russian imperial rulers and cultural figures. In Estonia, there have been a few calls for this[71], but they are generally ignored. This seems to be linked to a wider unwillingness – or inability – to talk about the legacies of Russian imperialism and colonialism.

In Tallinn, one of the city's most beloved monuments, the winged Russalka (1901, sculptor Amandus Adamson), is dedicated to the Russian imperial warship of the same name, which was lost in the Gulf of Finland in 1893. However, this monument did not come up once in the discussions of 2022[72].

Nor was there much discussion about the monuments dedicated to Baltic German nobility in the service of the Russian imperial army. Yet the prominent role of Baltic German elites in the Russian Empire provides plenty of material for potentially very fierce debates, e.g. the involvement of Baltic German officers in the subjugation of the frontier regions, or in

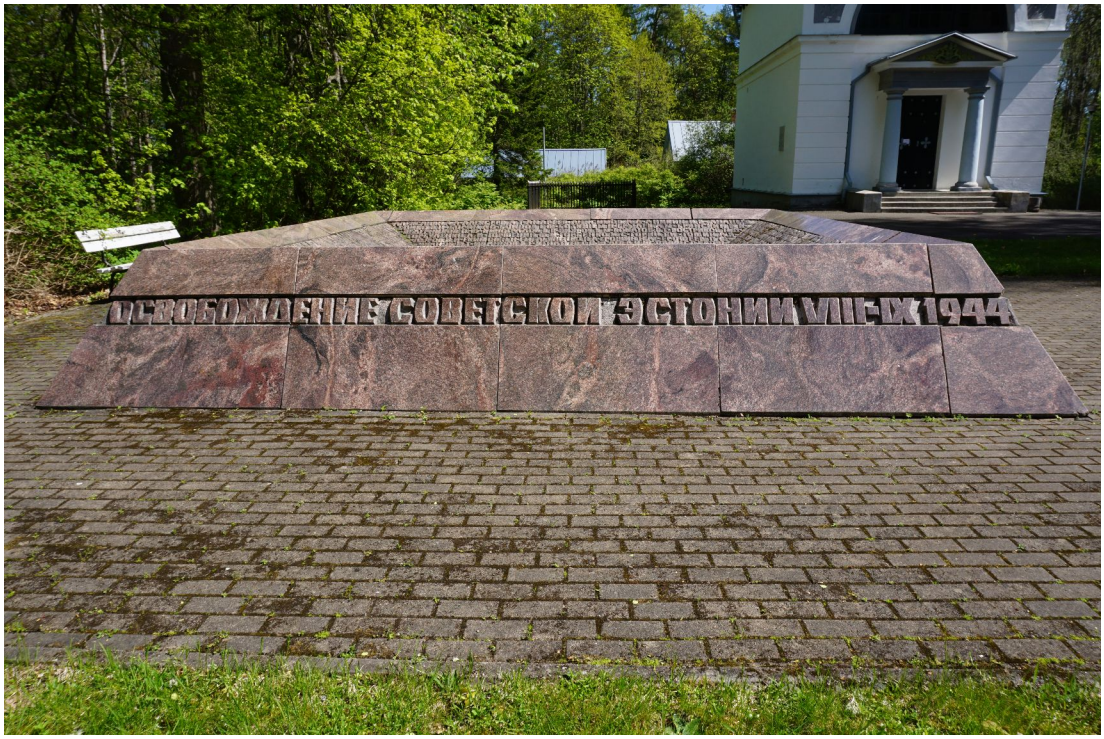

Fig. 13: Soviet World War II monument and Barclay de Tolly's mausoleum in Jõgeveste, 2022. Photo: Margis Sein (National Registry of Cultural Monuments).

the Russian colonial expansion. The Baltic German learned elites were also heavily involved in the Russian imperial projects as administrators and scientists, but the discussions around colonial heritage in Estonian collections are only starting[73].

A good example of this is Barclay de Tolly, a Baltic German nobleman and one of the leaders of the Russian army in the Napoleonic Wars. Several monuments were erected in his honour, still preserved in Estonia (as well as in Latvia and Russia), yet he is not overtly associated with Russian historical military might. His memorials also provide an excellent example of how closely intertwined the Russian and Soviet layers of heritage are. In Jõgeveste, his mausoleum (1823, architect Apollon Shchedrin) and the memorial to the fallen soldiers of World War II (1973, architect Murdmaa, sculptor Varik) were even located side by side (fig. 13). While there was a rush to remove the Soviet-era monument, the need to preserve de Tolly's mausoleum was never questioned.

We have given these examples not to argue that the imperial layers should be removed as well, but to show that the current discussions are limited, very era-specific and not really part of the broader discussion of problematic and dissonant heritage.

The debates over Soviet monuments have run parallel to discussions of other forms of Russian and Soviet heritage. Heritage-wise, the question was quickly raised in connection with some museum displays. The exhibition *Thinking Pictures* focused on the dialogue between Baltic and Moscow artists in the 1970s and 1980s. Curated by Anu Allas and Liisa Kaljula, and set to open at the Kumu Art Museum in March 2022, the exhibition ended up becoming an anti-war protest: it was inaugurated without any works, but they were gradually hung over the following weeks[74]. This action won acclaim as a creative experiment and a reaction to the full-scale war, but also faced some criticism. It was pointed out that the works exhibited had been critical of the Soviet regime, and that many of the Moscow artists were not ethnic Russians[75].

In parallel to this, the issue of re-identifying authors (or even works) has been raised relatively little in Estonia since the full-scale Russian invasion, although elsewhere such initiatives have been taken. However,

the re-identifying of authors previously considered Russians has raised new debates about how to define authors from the borderlands of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union, who may have been of very multi-ethnic origin or even nationally indifferent[76].

In Estonia, there has also been relatively little debate about the performances and presence of the well-established Russian classics of theatre, music or literature. Often, arguments in favour of the Russian classics are heard[77], which shows that the supportive attitude towards Russian classics is in sharp contrast with the much lower tolerance for the Russian language and the local Russian-speaking community[78].

In contrast, there have even been direct manifestations of Soviet nostalgia successfully persisting, clearly showing how ambivalent the heritage and attitudes actually are. A popular new destination in Kuressaare on Saaremaa Island is the Nice Life Centre (Kena elu keskus), opened in the former Saare KEK building, a fine example of late Soviet kolkhoz architecture (1982, architect Marika Lõoke)[79]. It is currently displaying the exhibition *A Trip Back in Time to Soviet Everyday Life*. Although the most recent, it is by no means unique – one of the key attractions of the Estonian Open Air Museum, for example, is the silicate brick kolkhoz apartment building from 1964, relocated and opened at the museum in 2019[80] – but the timing certainly changes the context.

Nostalgia for the Soviet period likewise continues to be expressed in other forms of cultural memory (TV shows, films etc.). In many ways, this nostalgia centred around material culture has played an important role in diversifying the historical memory of the Soviet period[81]. These tendencies started in the 2000s in Estonia and illustrate the more relaxed attitude that accepts the period of Soviet occupation as part of history. Even after the full-scale war in Ukraine, this heritage of daily life and its adapted elements of Soviet ideology are not generally seen as problematic. Addressing the spread of this nostalgia – and the actual diversity of the Soviet experience – would be worthy additions to the discussions about erasing Soviet layers from public space.

Most Recent Debates: Estonian Elites and the Soviet Regime

After heavy fighting around war monuments, a great deal of discussion has centred around the involvement of Estonian intellectuals in the Soviet system and the collaboration of the cultural elites in particular.

In the spring and summer of 2023, a bas relief dedicated to a prominent Soviet Estonian author, Juhan Smuul (1922–1971), became a hot topic of debates about Soviet legacy. Smuul was a leading Soviet Estonian writer and his bas relief was placed on the house of the Writers' Union in the Tallinn Old Town in 1971 (authors Murdmaa and Varik). In 2023, a group of writers campaigned for its removal, arguing that he was a Stalinist who had participated in deportations. The heated debates extended well beyond the Writers' Union, especially after a newspaper article revealed archival documents showing that Smuul and his wife, the prominent Soviet Estonian writer Debora Vaarandi, had indeed taken part in the mass deportation of 1949[82]. Yet several writers, literary critics and historians spoke up for Smuul, some of them pointing out that the issues related to collaboration are much more complex and that, rather than focusing on this one person, there is a need to discuss the broader Estonian involvement in deportations[83].

In April 2023, the general assembly of the Estonian Writers' Union voted to leave Smuul's bas relief in place. Tiit Aleksejev, the head of the union, said that in the past the whole union had been deeply intertwined with the Soviet authorities: "There were honest people there, but the organisation was Red. Today, this bas relief is part of the history of this house, and the history of this house is Red, which does not mean that today's writers share this mentality."[84]

Thereby Aleksejev suggested that taking down Smuul's bas relief would have continued the practice of highlighting individual collaborators, which would have maintained the relatively black-and-white myth of resistance and opposition of Estonians to the Soviet regime. Focusing more broadly on the Writers' Union, however, would make it possible to discuss the different ways in which Estonians were integrated into and cooperated with the Soviet system. Those supporting the keeping of Smuul's bas relief also suggested a new way of framing the monument,

promising to add a QR code on it. This has not been done yet, but the bas relief has become a site for expressing reactions to Soviet monuments. In July and August 2023, various demonstrations took place, including the conservative politician Jaak Valge (Conservative People's Party of Estonia) raising the Red flag of the Estonian SSR next to Smuul's bas relief in protest[85].

A similar issue came to the fore with the publishing of the memoirs of Jaak Kangilaski (1939–2022)[86]. A prominent art historian, professor and leading figure of the art scene in Soviet and post-Soviet Estonia, Kangilaski posthumously revealed in his memoirs that he had been a double agent working both for the Soviets and later Sweden. Although there was a great deal of emphasis on the exceptionalism of his case in the debates that followed[87] (and no means of verifying his claims due to the lack of sources), among the society at large this case may help to raise broader questions on the involvement of Estonian elites in the Soviet system.

In Conclusion – What Next

Since the parliamentary elections of 5 March 2023, the debate over monuments has calmed down, apart from in Narva, where the site around the former tank monument has seen a lot of activity (as described above), and where also the municipal politics has witnessed intense conflicts, e.g. regarding the renaming of streets honouring Soviet personalities. On 7 March 2023, the President refused to sign the law on the removal of Red monuments from public space, the law implementing the Building Code and Planning Act and the law amending the State Property Act, arguing that they were unconstitutional[88].

The combination of conflict over Soviet monuments and elections led many to draw parallels with the Bronze Soldier crisis. In 2007, the leader of the Reform Party, Andrus Ansip, gambled on the removal of the Bronze Soldier and brought the party an election victory. In 2023, the Reform Party's overwhelming victory cannot be explained by the removal of Red monuments, and was probably driven more by security concerns and fears of a radical right coalition. The politicians of the Fatherland Party, who were the most vocal in calling for the removal of the Soviet symbols, were not successful in the election, with one of the most active proponents of the issue, the former Minister of Justice Lea Danilson-Järg, receiving only 408 votes[89].

As with the events of Bronze Night 2007 (and the removal of the monument to Estonians who fought in the German army in World War II, erected in Lihula in 2004), the Red monuments were framed as a security issue. Security was used not only to justify the removal of the monuments but also to justify state control over not only the decision-making, but indeed over the decision-making bodies and the need for secrecy.

The possibility of being labelled as pro-Russian certainly muted the discussions on the potential of Soviet memorials and symbols as artefacts that in fact help to remember and work through difficult and dark periods of history. This fear is probably among the reasons why there have been very limited attempts by artists to reframe and recontextualise the artefacts in the past two years.

Museums have also remained passive in providing resting places for the removed symbols during the heated political debates. What this process could benefit from is treating monuments on a case-by-case basis. So far there are just a few successful cases of completely re-framing monuments in Estonia. A notable example of deliberate re-framing is Evald Okas's panoply *Friendship of Nations*, which was completed in 1987 together with the Museum of History and Revolution of the USSR in a historical manor in Maarjamäe, but now it houses the Estonian History Museum. One of the biggest memory conflicts of the 2010s erupted around this work when it was revealed that Tallinn's Russian-speaking schools were taking class photos in front of a painting loaded with Soviet symbols[90]. As a result of the scandal, the panoply was covered up in 2014, but during the renovations of the manor (re-opened in 2018), a solution was found that allowed the mural to be both covered up and exhibited, as it is housed behind a milk glass screen that can be made opaque. This involved the restorers working through the history of the panoply itself, as well as the visual artist Kristina Norman's performance and video work *Festive Spaces* (2016)[91].

In 2022 and early 2023 the approaching elections made the public debate more intense, but also

hindered decision-making: politicians were not keen to make any bold moves prior to the elections that would have irritated either the supporters or critics of Soviet monuments. Since the elections, political will has been diverted from dealing with the monuments for another reason: the political conflict between the coalition and opposition has been intense but focused on other matters. Thus, so far, the months following the elections have not brought any more coherent strategies from the state and administration.

Endnotes

1. Disclaimer: Both authors have also been involved in the debates, writing opinion pieces, appearing in media, organising events etc. The article benefits from this experience and knowledge, but also, no doubt, makes us involved participants. See Riin Alatalu, "Mõtestamata sõda kividega" [A meaningless war with stones], in: Postimees, 21.9.2022, https://arvamus.postimees.ee/7610348/riin-alatalu-motestamata-soda-kividega; Riin Alatalu, "Punamonumentide seadus väänab näpuviibutusega kommunistiks" [Red monuments law twists you into a communist with a flick of the wrist], in: Eesti Päevaleht, 5.2.2023, https://epl.delfi.ee/artikkel/120138790/riin-alatalu-punamonumentide-seadus-vaanab-napuviibutusega-kommunistiks; "Historian: Justice Minister's Soviet Symbols Crusade the Real Security Threat", in: ERR News, 15.11.2022, https://news.err.ee/1608789307/historian-justice-minister-s-soviet-symbols-crusade-the-real-security-risk; "Historian: Maarjamäe Memorial Requires New Idea Competition", in: ERR News, 25.7.2022, https://news.err.ee/1608666508/historian-maarjamae-memorial-requires-new-idea-competition; "Professor: Punamonumentide teisaldamise arutelu ei tohiks karta" [A debate on the removal of Red monuments should not scare us], in: ERR News, 27.7.2022, https://www.err.ee/1608668761/professor-punamonumentide-teisaldamise-arutelu-ei-tohiks-karta; Linda Kaljundi, "Tankist edasi – kas arutelu ja dialoog on lubatud?" [Beyond the tank – is debate and dialogue allowed?], in: Müürileht, September 2022, https://www.muurileht.ee/tankist-edasi-kas-arutelu-ja-dialoog-on-lubatud/ (all last accessed 30.11.2023).
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4. Marek Tamm and Saale Halla, "Ajalugu, poliitika ja identiteet: Eesti monumentaalsest mälumaastikust" [History, politics and identity: On the Estonian monumental mnemoscape], in: Monumentaalne konflikt. Mälu, poliitika ja identiteet tänapäeva Eestis, eds. Pille Petersoo and Marek Tamm, Tallinn 2008, pp. 18–50; Johannes Saar, "Kerkivad monumendid iseseisvunud Eestis" [Emerging monuments in independent Estonia], in: Eesti kunsti ajalugu, vol. 5: 1900–1940, ed. Mart Kalm, Tallinn 2010, pp. 390–405.
5. See Riin Alatalu, Muinsuskaitse siirdeühiskonnas 1986–2002: Rahvuslikust südametunnistusest Eesti NSV-s omaniku ahistajaks Eesti Vabariigis [Heritage protection in transitional society: From nation's conscience in the Estonian SSR into the harasser of private owner in the Republic of Estonia], Tallinn 2012.
6. See Kristina Jõekalda's research on German heritage in the Baltics, incl. German Monuments in the Baltic *Heimat*? A Historiography of Heritage in the "Long Nineteenth Century", Tallinn 2022. For Soviet monumental art, see Notes on Space: Monumental Painting in Estonia, 1947–2012, ed. Gregor Taul, Tallinn 2017; Anu Soojärv, "Peidus pärand: Unustatud teosed ja kunstnikud nõukogude Eesti monumentaalkunstis" [Hidden heritage: Forgotten artworks and artists among the monumental art of Soviet Estonia], MA thesis, Estonian Academy of Arts, Tallinn 2021, https://digiteek.artun.ee/download/newwin-download/oid-9308/9308.pdf?what=orig&show=1 (last accessed 29.11.2023); Anu Soojärv, Hilkka Hiiop and Varje Õunapuu, "Applied Artists as Creators of Ceramic Monumental Art in Soviet Estonia: The Past and the Future", in: Acta Academiae Artium Vilnensis, vol. 104, 2022, pp. 178–196.
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legacies], in: Kunstiteaduslikke Uurimusi / Studies in Art and Architecture, vol. 30, no. 3–4, 2021, pp. 84–111.

9. See Karsten Brüggemann and Andres Kasekamp, “The Politics of History and the War of Memories in Estonia”, in: Nationalities Papers, vol. 36, no. 3, 2008, pp. 425–448, here pp. 430–433.
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12. “Lihula Monument”, in: Centre for Semiotics Applications, University of Tartu, s.a., https://www.serake.ut.ee/en/lihula-monument/ (last accessed 29.11.2023).
13. A temporary wooden memorial was erected at the site as early as 1945, but was blown up by two Estonian schoolgirls in 1946.
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15. Ibid.
16. See Monumentaalne konflikt 2008 (also for an overview of the media coverage); the evolving of the conflict is illustrated by Meelis Muhu’s documentary film *Aljoša* (2008).
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25. Monuments [Republic of Estonia Government Office] 2022.
26. The editing history does not show when this information was added to the e-database (National Registry of Cultural Monuments, s.a., https://register.muinas.ee/public.php?lang=en; last accessed 29.11.2023).
27. “Sõjahaudade kaitse seadus” [War Graves Protection Act], in: Riigi Teataja, 7.3.2023, https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/SHKS (last accessed 29.11.2023).
28. See National Registry of Cultural Monuments, s.a., https://register.muinas.ee/public.php?menuID=monument&action=view&id=5772 and https://register.muinas.ee/public.php?menuID=monument&action=view&id=5811 (both last accessed 29.11.2023).
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Abstract

The article aims to both synthesise and contextualise the Estonian debates around Soviet monuments and other Soviet and Russia-related heritage since the full-scale invasion of Russia in Ukraine. The many regime changes in Estonia during the long 19th and 20th centuries have had an impact on the local monumental landscape and historical memory in this multinational border area. Emphasising the role of earlier post-Soviet monument crises, the article gives an overview of the dynamics of the most recent debates. It follows the emergence of both bottom-up and top-down campaigns to locate and remove Soviet monuments, as well as the governmental strategies: the founding of a secret monuments’ committee by the Government Office, and new legislative initiatives for the removal of Soviet symbolism. Despite the state authorities argument that there is nothing to discuss,

the non-involvement of art and heritage professionals and undemocratic decision making gradually led to intense debates. Mapping the evolvement of a public debate between the professionals and the representatives of the state politics, the article also looks into the agendas of other stakeholders in this process, raising the question what was left out of the debates (e.g. the relative invisibility of Russian imperial and colonial heritage).

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Title

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