

World War II and Auschwitz as it is remembered in Estonia

Olev Liivik, Estonian Institute of Historical Memory

Second World War is considered as traumatic event for most of Estonians, but it is remembered differently by different ethnic groups. Estonian nationalist discourse supported mostly by the native Estonians admit that WW II was not Estonian war, but Estonia is seen as a victim of two evils. Estonia lost its independence before being drawn into the war as result of the deal between the Russians and Germans in Moscow in August 1939 assigned Estonia to the Soviet Union influence sphere. Furthermore, the Estonians have not forgotten that allies of the Soviet Union the Great Britain and United States betrayed Estonia while accepted the Soviet demands about the Estonia and other Baltic States. When official historical discourse acknowledges that during the war both the Soviet and German occupation were equally harmful to Estonia, the ordinary Estonians, however, generally believes that Soviet occupation was considerably worse than the German one. Germans respected Estonian national aspirations, though on the limited extend if they matched with the German occupation policy. Not only the German moderate policy toward Estonians but primarily the fear of the Soviet terror to be launch when Russians return induced Estonians to support Germans. It has also to be noted that not a few ethnic Estonians believes that those of Estonians who served in German Army and battled against the Red Army at the border of Estonia in 1944 were fighting for Estonian independence. Therefore, the ceremonies held annually in the battlefields near the Estonian border could be understood on the one hand as memorial events in order to commemorate those fallen there but on the other hand those events have been organizing with the aim to honour Estonians warriors as if they were heroes. Latter purpose is very much of kind the reaction to the Russian memory policy glorifying the victory over the Germany without respecting sufferings of others caused by Russians. It is difficult to understand, however, different layers of the commemoration Second World War namely the Great Patriotic War by Russian speaking population in Estonia. When tens of thousands ethnic Russians are coming to celebrate the Victory Day in May or the conquest of Estonian cities which is representing as liberation from Nazi-Germany or other to say from fascists it could be seen partly as national identity issue, but it is also political statement providing an occasion giving the floor to those who express anti-Estonian sentiments. Those events are popular, patriotic and emotional bringing together people from different generations. Paradoxically the Russian school in Estonia still owned by state or municipalities tended to feed controversial interpretation and even delusions while

teaching WW II instead offering comprehensive approach and to raise understanding between Estonians and Russians. In this respect the Estonian Government keeps pluralist line honouring in connection with the anniversary of the end of WWII in Europe all those who were killed in the war regardless of either they served in the Red Army or German Army or whose victims they were if regard to the civil population.

From my observation the awareness of the Holocaust in Estonia has slowly but steadily increased being higher in younger generation learned about the Holocaust in school. Without the doubt an educated person has heard about Auschwitz as well but generally the knowledges about Auschwitz are poor. In Estonia on 27th January is celebrating the International Holocaust Remembrance Day but I wonder if most people know the background of this date. In other words, the connection between Auschwitz and Holocaust Day is generally not known. Auschwitz as symbolic space of death and evil and best-known authentic memorial of the Holocaust has remain abstract for Estonian people. Last year we organized essay competition for students with title “Holocaust today – what have we learn”. The best authors and their supervisors won the study trip to Auschwitz. But in generally it is hardly possible to find the stories about Auschwitz related to Estonia or even draw personal links with Estonian Jews and Auschwitz. Estonian Jews history and the course of Holocaust in Estonia is quite exceptional among the countries which were occupied by Nazi-Germany. Unlike other Eastern or Central-European counties the Jewish Population in Estonia was very small. Before WWII, approximately 4,400 Jews live in Estonia.

In June 1941, the Soviet authorities included roughly 400 Jews from the occupied Republic of Estonia in the deportations to Siberia. In proportion to Latvian or Lithuanian Jews population it is very high ratio. After war between Germany and the Soviet Union broke out in June 1941, nearly 3000 Jews left from Estonia to Soviet Union. The German occupation forces arrested within few months of occupation almost all Jews who remained in their homeland, it was nearly 1000 people. By the beginning of 1942, all the Jews arrested had been killed. Only a few individuals survived because they managed to hide until the end of the war. In a report by the chief of the Security Police forces responsible for the destruction of the Jewish population in the Baltic countries, dated January 31, 1942, Estonia is declared to be “free of Jews”.

Another chapter of Holocaust began in Estonia from Fall 1942 and lasted until the end of the German occupation in September 1944. Between this time period an estimated 12,500 Jews

prisoners were brought to Estonia from countries under German control. Most of them were from Vilnius and Kaunas and they were mostly used as slave labours in mining.

Unquestionably among those who were brought to Estonia were number of prisoners whose relatives had been deported to Auschwitz.

Among the Jews reached to Estonia an estimated 7,000-8,000 individuals died or killed in Estonia, while over 4,000 were taken to camps in other countries mostly to Stutthof but it cannot be excluded that among them were those who were deported to Auschwitz as well.

After the German retreat from Estonia only approximately 100 Jews brought to Estonia were still alive. Most of the Jews managed to escape from Estonia before Germans arrived in 1941, returned to homeland.