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A theatre of wars: Memorials of the Great Northern War in Narva

The presentation discusses the ideological messages of monuments, the legends monuments support, and the life stories of monuments themselves, using the example of ten monuments connected with the Great Northern War (1700–1721).

The monuments are observed in the context of the culture of the period and the prevailing ideology. Each monument in Narva quite clearly emerges from its time period, bearing symbols and meanings appropriate to the era. Unfortunately, monuments usually bear the brunt of changes in ideological order and are destroyed as bearers of messages that are seen as outdated, alien, or often hostile to the new order. Thus, several monuments erected in Narva throughout the years to commemorate the Great Northern War and its protagonists have disappeared by now. On the other hand, two of the local monuments have been enjoying a remarkably long life.

Each monument is set up to tell the story of the “official” history. Yet, as also testified by the monuments in Narva, there are three histories of the Great Northern War – the Russian, the Swedish and the Estonian ones. Usually these “official tales of the war” can easily be related to legends about heroes in a literary sense. The battle of Narva of 1700 was described by the Russian side as the trope “the eventual victory [in the Great Northern War] was achieved through an instructive loss” and in Sweden as “a victory achieved through divine intervention”. In addition, each monument has its own tale to tell – its author, date of birth, adventures and, more often than not, also its death. Seen in this context, several monuments to the Great Northern War in Narva have had most colourful biographies.