



# Exploring military history

***Military heritage tourism invites you to travel and learn about history right where it happened. Especially in the Baltics, many former battle sites, military objects and other visible landmarks still exist. Each of them has its own story to tell – and offer visitors a unique opportunity to gain insights into pivotal battles and conflicts.***

by ALEXANDER WELSCHER

Wars and other military events have been, and still are, an integral element in the history of mankind and have significantly influenced its past, present and future. All of them brought glory to the victorious, the bitterness of failure to the defeated – and always violence, destruction and suffering to ordinary people. In many places all over the world there are memorials, monuments and relics of wars such as battlefields, fortifications and weapons that are related to the military heritage and lasting legacy associated with historical events and periods at both national and international levels.

Traditionally, mostly military history enthusiasts, veterans and their families showed an interest in these sites, but there has been a growing interest among other people as well who want learn about the historical stories, personal memories and experiences of those who lived and died during specific conflicts. Partaking in military heritage tourism has been on the rise in recent years and there is a wide range of places and historical artefacts that tourists can visit and explore to gain insights into pivotal battles and conflicts – also in the Baltic States and Germany. All four countries are home to

## CASTING A NEW LIGHT ON WAR

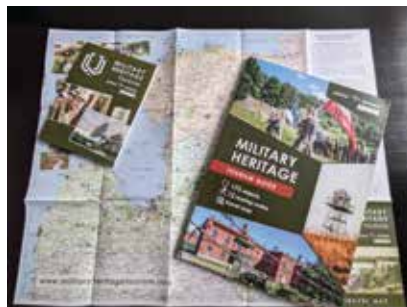
Housed in a historic arsenal building and reopened in 2011 after extensive construction work based on plans drawn up by star architect Daniel Libeskind, the Military History Museum of the German Armed Forces in Dresden captures the attention of visitors not only through its impressive architecture. Distancing itself from the usual presentation of military history, the museum's exhibition in the eastern German city is not about technology and a glorified display of weapons, but focuses on mankind and questions the causes and consequences of war and violence. It encourages visitors to reflect on the high price extracted by war and make them recoil from the death and destruction it depicts. The museum also reflects Germany's ambivalence about its military traditions that include both the atrocities in World War II and the esteem for the German military philosopher Carl von Clausewitz, whose book "On War" from 1832 is still read worldwide. Being considered to be one of the most important political-military analysis and strategy ever written, the book is on display in the museum that boasts 20,000 square meters of exhibition space and a collection of 1.2 million exhibits.



well-stocked military museums and other exhibition places.

### Military heritage sites

Aiming to uncover the military legacy by identifying key heritage sites in the Baltics and open them to both domestic and international visitors, two dozen organisations led by the Latvian Country Tourism Association “Lauku ceļotājs” have teamed up and created a military heritage tourism guide and travel map. Recognising the common history shared by the Baltic States which were caught up in the same geopolitical processes in the 20th century, the project partners have collected information on hundreds of museums, fortifications, military equipment, trails, bunkers, battle sites, military sites, infrastructure and memorial sites.



**Military heritage tourism guide and travel map for Estonia and Latvia**

Published in 2022 in five languages, the comprehensive guide lists 173 military heritage sites in Estonia and Latvia, and will soon be extended to include also sites in Lithuania. It is available for download from the Military Heritage project website ([www.militaryheritagetourism.info](http://www.militaryheritagetourism.info)) and provides practical information for travellers, along with the historical context. All

military sites are open to the public and enable visitors to learn about how the Baltic States established their statehood, were occupied during and after World War II, and restored their independence during the time period between the beginning of World War I in 1914 and 1990/1991 along with the collapse of the Soviet Union.

For a deeper exploration of the rich Baltic military history, there are twelve cross-border routes to visit military heritage sites lasting from 2 to 13 days. Each one includes the type of travel, the schedule of the route day by day, the military heritage location, and suggestions for accommodation and places to eat. The Military Heritage website also contains stories, personal memories and evidence about the military heritage site.

## DIGNIFIED BURIAL AND MEMORY SITES

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have shared a similar fate throughout history. All three countries gained independence in the turmoil of World War I and were forced to defend it in Wars of Independence. During World War II both Germany and the Soviet Union occupied the countries and fierce, bloody battles were fought as the front line ran right through their territories. There are numerous war gravesites all across the Baltics that bear witness to the violence and suffering on the battlefield. Whether you encounter a solitary grave in a small parish in the countryside or happen to come across one of the larger cemeteries in the Baltic capitals and other cities, you are rarely that far from a casualty of one of the two World Wars. German soldiers who lost their lives in the Baltics were, of course, buried there at numerous sites as well. The vast majority of them are now



**The German war cemetery in Kuressaare on Saaremaa**

buried at German Military Cemeteries that have been established and are maintained by the humanitarian non-profit organisation Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge – the German War Graves Commission. These sites remind the living of the past and confront them with the consequences of war and violence. Commissioned by the German government and based on bilateral agreements, the Volksbund currently takes care of

more than two dozen cemeteries in the Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the final resting place of about tens of thousands of German war dead. Aiming to preserve a dignified memory and working for reconciliation, understanding and peace, the Volksbund has also taken on the task of searching, recovering and reburial of war dead from both World Wars. Since the fall of the Iron Curtain, the organisation has exhumed more than one million war dead in Eastern Europe – with the symbolic excavation of the one-millionth taking place in September 2023 in Lithuania. There, the remains of a 1912 born World War II soldier from Saxony-Anhalt were recovered in a forest near Kelmė, where the burial site was discovered following information from the local population who fenced it off and looked after it after Lithuania regained its independence in 1991.