

Remembering World War II, the Defeat of Nazism: Toronto Officials Try to Thwart Victory Day Celebration

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Seventy one years ago the most violent military conflict of the 20th century, the Second World War ended in victory over Nazi Germany. Unprecedented levels of destruction, barbarism, industrial scale ethnic cleansing, and a myriad of other atrocities took millions of innocent lives. The Soviet Union paid the most terrible price with over 20 million civilian and military personnel dead.

The genocidal plans of the Nazi leaders and their collaborators scarred the lives of millions more. Literally every family in what is now the former Soviet Union lost loved ones, or had been impacted by the war. That is the reason why the Victory Day celebration is one of the most important days in the calendar for nearly all immigrant communities from the former Soviet Union. Victory Day is a very personal day for tens of thousands of residents of Toronto, war veterans, their families. It is a celebration and remembrance of sacrifice and heroism.

Last year's Victory Day event organized by grassroots volunteer veterans organization took place at Earl Bales park in the north end of Toronto. Several thousand people, many holding portraits of their parents and grandparents, marched through the park to underscore the unity of all people from different generations, waves of immigration, countries of origin, religions and political backgrounds in their respect and gratitude for the sacrifice of the veterans.



This year the Victory Day celebration might not have happened at all – if bureaucrats in the City of Toronto had their way. Officials at City of Toronto Parks, Forestry and Recreation did everything in their power to exclude organizers from Earl Bales Park, to prevent the community from honouring the sacrifice of their loved ones.

A dizzying array of unreasonable, ever-changing restrictions, and obstacles had been placed in order to discourage the organizers and the community. Firstly, the bureaucrats denied the request to have a small parade of veterans and family members in one of the park's roadways. Next they've tried to shuffle the event as far away from people's eyes into a remote parking lot, that looks more like construction site than a place where veterans should be honoured. They placed restrictions on the use of washrooms and other park facilities, tried to deny space for an art exhibition, and demanded that a garbage collection company be contracted one day before deadline. City of Toronto officials forced the organizers to rent, at their expense, the amphitheatre in the park regardless that organizers had no use for it. The amphitheatre is not wheelchair accessible and could not possibly be

used by veterans, many of who are wheelchair bound and are approaching their centenary.

✘ Next was the demand to erect a stage, also not needed. Building permits, crowd control plans, etc. Park officials did everything in their power to drown organizers in paperwork in order to satisfy constantly changing demands. Catering, signs, banners, all of the literature to be distributed or sold at the event had to be pre-approved by Parks officials. Even though the event is not political in nature City bureaucrats had effectively barred political organizations sympathetic to the cause from participating in the event. Organizers worked ceaselessly to satisfy the ever-changing whims of the bureaucrats. It took a month of negotiations, scores of meetings and the involvement of City Councillor James Pasternak for the City bureaucrats to finally allow veterans, but not members of general public, to march through the Park.

Yet as soon as one set of obstacles would be overcome, the bureaucrats would slap another set of restrictions turning the process into a never-ending nightmare with an ever-more uncertain outcome. On the day of signing the permit, a little more than a day before the event, Lindsay Peterson a manager for Parks North York District had demanded from organizers to provide porta-potties, contrary to previous agreement negotiated with the help of Ward 20 city councillor James Pasternak. Surely she was aware that such a requirement would be impossible to satisfy in few remaining hours before her office closes for the weekend. When that had failed she had questioned the authority of representative to sign for the permit. Mrs. Peterson demanded, that the president of organization, a 88 year old veteran who doesn't speak English, be summoned into her office to sign for the permit. It's a miracle and testament to perseverance of volunteers at veterans group were finally issued a permit for the event. ✘

The treatment the organizers received underscores the level of hostility of Toronto City Hall and other level of Canadian Government towards Russian and other communities from the former Soviet Union. The ideologically based harassment, bordering on ethnic discrimination is something the community had to deal with for years. Yet the treatment organizers, who wished nothing more but to provide the community with opportunity to honour the sacrifices of their relatives, veterans and loved ones, got from City officials this year is definitely a new low by any standards. Not only does this macabre show exposes the strength of in City's own Human Rights and Anti-Harassment/Discrimination Policy, but also showcases true value of Mayor John Tory's commitment to running an inclusive city administration, open to all the communities and their concerns.

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