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The espionage connected to the Soviet prisoners of war graves in Northern Norway 1945–51

Abstract

When the war ended in Norway in May 1945, Norwegians and liberated Soviet prisoners of war celebrated together. Six years later, in 1951, the bodies of the 8,000 buried Soviet prisoners of war in Northern Norway were dug up, bagged and shipped to a collective war cemetery at Helgeland in Nordland. The relocation of the Soviet war graves was named “Operation Asphalt” and was tried to be kept secret. The operation was not uncontroversial. The Soviets, who had been tortured and mistreated by the German occupiers in Norway during World War II, were met with sympathy by Norwegians. This paper examines how the Cold War era and foreign affairs affected the collection of the Soviet war graves, following the process from 1945 to 1951. Further the paper discusses how Norway’s membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization from 1949, and the threat of escalating Soviet activities in response to the war graves in Norway contributed to suspiciousness and dramatically changed the Norwegian war graves policy.

Keywords: the Cold War, war graves, prisoners of war, the Soviet Union, Norway

On July 8, 1953, Tjøtta Soviet War Cemetery was inaugurated.ⁱ Almost 8,000 Soviet citizens were buried there. According to historian Marianne Soleim (2016), Norwegian Foreign Minister Halvard Lange and the Ambassador of the Soviet Union, F.A. Afansiev, spoke at the inauguration, and the Norwegian newspaper *Dagbladet* reported that Lange and Afansiev made peace at the memorial stone (*Dagbladet* 8.7.1951, as cited in Holtsmark (Ed.) 2015). The excavating and relocating of the 8,000 corpses had, however, not been performed peacefully. The Norwegian government adopted a secret plan, code-named “Asphalt,” for the relocating and gathering of the Soviet war graves in June 1951. During the fall of 1951, every Soviet prisoner of war (POW) grave in Northern Norway (with few exceptions) was dug up, bagged and shipped to a collective cemetery at Tjøtta in Helgeland. The plan was relayed to the Soviet Union in notes on July 10, and August 2, 1951. On August 22, the Soviet Union responded and opposed the plan. Norway answered on September 19 that the proposal had already been put into action and had to continue. The Soviet Union objected again in a note on October 1, requesting the work to cease and calling the relocating “an unfriendly act” and “a mocking of the memory of Soviet soldiers” (The Soviet Union note in Holtsmark (Ed.), 1995, pp 460-461). Furthermore, the Soviet Union proposed a joint commission to decide the fate of Soviet soldiers’ gravesⁱⁱ in Norway. In a note dated October 10, 1951, Norway stated that the relocation in Northern Norway could not stop, but it expressed that it was also in favor of a joint commission. Notes were exchanged from the Soviet Union on October 31 and from Norway on November 8 and 17. The Soviet Union responded in a note dated December 7, 1951, and an agreement on a joint commission was reached. The commission would determine the relocation in the southern part of Norway and the design of the memorial at Tjøtta War Cemetery (DUUK, 23.10.1951, pp 9-10). The official argument for Operation Asphalt was “maintenance,” as people can still read the following on the government’s website about the Soviet war graves: “In 1951 the Norwegian Government decided that Norway would take on the task of providing dignified graves for the Soviet war dead and would subsequently maintain these graves and pay all related costs” (Ministry of Culture, 2019). There is no mention of controversy. In this paper, I discuss how the Cold War and foreign affairs affected the gathering of the Soviet war graves, and I demonstrate how the fear

of espionage at the end served as the main motivator behind the government's decision to use Operation Asphalt as the solution for the relocation of the Soviet war graves. To do so, I must start with the end of World War II.

From war graves to foreign policy

When peace emerged in May 1945, people from many countries, such as Yugoslavia, Poland, the British Commonwealth, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark, the Soviet Union and Germany, had found their graves in Norway. The deceased included soldiers fallen in combat, slave laborers and prisoners killed by hunger and torture, most of them Soviet citizens. Approximately 100,000 Soviet soldiers and forced workers came to Norway during World War II. Of them, 13,700 died because of hunger, disease and maltreatment in German captivity in Norway (Soleim, 2016, p. 13). Most of the Soviet POWs in Norway were in Northern Norway due to Germany's expansion plans for communication and defense, including *Polareisenbahn* and *Festung Norwegen*. Approximately 8,000 of these POWs died and were buried near camps and working areas (RAFA-2018). After the war was over, an investigation of the graves was needed for several reasons. In addition to the bereaved wanting to know where their loved ones were buried, a review was required for hygienic purposes. Some bodies were buried near houses and drinking sources for people and creatures. In July 1945, the Norwegian Armed Forces in Northern Norway declared in a press release that the district held many scattered graves where fallen or executed allies, especially Russians, were laid to rest (RAFA-2510, box 316, file 3). The press release asked everyone who knew about scattered graves to report this to the parish priest.

To manage the registration of war graves, an office was established under the Army's command in 1946, with four district offices, including one placed in Northern Norway (AHB, box 291). Despite the establishment of offices, the registration, gathering and maintenance did not live up to requirements. The leader of the district office in the North, Arthur Berg, concluded in 1948 that the situation was not satisfactory when it came to Russian war graves, and some places were even worse than others (AHB, box 291).

The following summer, in 1949, an inquiry from the Soviet Union Embassy concerning the maintenance of the war graves arrived after an inspection. The central office of war graves received a message from Berg, informing it that maintenance was not satisfactory for most of the war graves, both those of the Allies and of the Germans. Berg told them that the maintenance for some of the graves was terrible and that there would be rightful complaints for every new inspection (RAFA-2018, box 30, file 1). After a trip to Northern Norway in the spring of 1949, Defense Minister Jens Christian Hauge sent a note to the chief executive of the Ministry of Defense, asking who was responsible for the Soviet war graves, since he had become aware that several of the Russian war graves were in poor condition (FA, box 3). The minister received an extensive reply at the end of June 1949, where the establishing of war grave offices, the Geneva Convention, and financial conditions were expounded. The reply explained that the Norwegian Defense Staff had been asked if it was necessary to move all the graves sites close to a military area and noted that such a solution was probably desirable but not advisable because of the costs. Most of the Soviet war graves were close to a military area. The reply stated further that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was negotiating with the "Eastern powers," and this process was not over. Finally, the reply concluded with the statement that pending a solution, no other work would, nor should, be initiated, including Russian graves, on their behalf (RAFA-2018, box 26, file 4). It may be helpful to understand what happened before this.

In February 1946, based on the Soviet Union's initiative, a bilateral Norwegian-Soviet commission was established with the mission to discover details about the Soviet POWs who had been murdered by the Germans and about the POWs' employment and working

conditions (RAFA-2018, box 30, file 8). According to Arne Ording, an editor and special advisor to the Foreign Minister, the commission wanted to learn about the POWs' lives and did not deal with the question of the graves and what to do with them (Ording, 1951, p. 191). The historian Reinhard Otto believes that Soviet authorities were not interested in mapping individual graves. They feared that relatives of the dead POWs would then want to visit the graveyards, and for millions of Soviet citizens, that would also be a visit to capitalism. For Soviet authorities, it was better to honor individuals back home in the Soviet Union (Otto, 2011, pp. 20-21). According to the Norwegian members of the commission, the Soviet members had little interest in the fate of the POWs and were more concerned with the monetary value of the POWs' work. The Norwegian members claimed that the Soviets were primarily interested in traveling to as many airports, coastal fortifications and other military installations as possible. The report following the commission's work in 1946–47 contained detailed information showing that the members of the commission had a general idea of the geography and the location of military facilities in Norway (S-2259, box 3709).

In contrast to the other allied European nations, Norway had a common border with the Soviet Union. For Soviet representatives, it was interesting to observe the constructions of the Norwegian Armed Forces. Norway's membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) from 1949 reinforced the Soviet need for information, and the war graves offered an opportunity for travel within the borders of their small neighbor to the West. With the Allies' occupation of Germany, a similar situation occurred in the gradually divided Germany. The Soviet-ruled Germany bordered with West-Germany. The war graves were used politically and to achieve goals other than the tombs themselves. The historian Seth Bernstein describes how the dead were remembered differently in the Soviet Union and the West. In the West, the focus was on the individual, while the Soviet Union emphasized the collective. The Soviet Union neither had a war grave commission nor institutionalized the work with war graves. It was primarily concerned with returning Soviet citizens, not burying the dead. The Soviet Union was badly affected by the war, and that was one of reasons the dead were treated differently in the West and the East; the Soviet Union was overwhelmed with just taking care of the living (Bernstein, 2017, p. 715). In Germany, the Soviet Union would no longer let former Allies into their zone to find and take care of their fallen. The Soviets assumed that the main goal for the Allies was espionage, but since former POWs wanted to stay in West Germany, a compromise was made, despite skepticism. As Bernstein states: "But rather than rejecting what they viewed as attempts at espionage, Soviet officers traded the western dead for their own sacred mission – the chance to return living Soviet repatriates from the western zones of occupation" (Bernstein, 2017, p. 710). However, such diplomatic negotiations for the corpses could not be used by Norway.

The Norwegian War Grave Commission was operational four years after World War II to find the Norwegian fallen abroad. The dialogue with the Soviet Union regarding the Soviet war graves in Norway was complex and difficult. The situation was not any easier in East Germany, the Soviet zone. The Norwegian War Grave Commission reported that the only thing they had achieved was a transit through the zone but, as the only country, without a working permit. They noticed that the longer time went by, the NATO membership discussion slowed down diplomatic negotiations with nations on the other side of the Iron Curtain (RAFA-2018, Da, box 1).

The Soviet Union expected that any opportunity to spy would be used. The Norwegian authorities also feared that the Soviet Union used the opportunity given by the war graves for espionage. Was this just the Cold War atmosphere making the Norwegians overly suspicious? An internal document in the Soviet Union from the fall of 1945 indicates a real threat. It stated that for political reasons, it was desirable that as many memorials as possible remained in Norway. It was further written that their consular staff would have greater opportunities to

travel around the country if the graves were scattered in different areas of Norway (Soviet document in Holtmark (Ed.), 1995, p.366). Political interests trumped the maintenance of the many war graves. The Soviet Union conducted tours of inspection throughout the 1940s. Both police and military authorities in Norway were well informed about the Soviet Union's travels in Northern Norway. A report from the Chief Constable of Vadsø (close to the Soviet Union border) in 1948 to the Police Security Service states that the purpose of the Soviet stay there was supposed to be an inspection of the Soviet graves (DKN). At one tour of inspection, the Soviet commander prepaid for the maintenance of some Soviet war graves in the region of Troms. He expressed dissatisfaction with the extremely terrible conditions of the Soviet war graves (DKN). Even though the region of Troms was about to become a central military area, and interesting for further tours of inspection, the prepaying indicates that the Soviet also had sincere interest in the war graves. Rasmus Gedde-Dahl, who has reviewed Soviet sources, believes that the Soviet Union obviously considered the maintenance of the graves important (Gedde-Dahl, 1997, p. 61).

A relocation of the war graves was suggested in September 1948 between the Norwegian Foreign Affairs Council and the Soviet Embassy. A Norwegian Intelligence Service officer in the Navy, Ole Snefjellå, reported after a meeting in Finnmark with the Soviet Embassy that the Soviet representatives proposed that the Soviet war graves in Norway should be relocated to one or a few central places. They were apparently extremely interested in getting a final solution to this (DKN). In addition, the Chief of the District Command in Northern Norway reported that the Soviet Embassy did not mind a relocation to larger and more central cemeteries, which could then be more reasonably maintained (RAFA-2510-2, Da, box 117, file 33).

In June 1949, the authorities in Moscow stated that they supported the relocation of the graves in central places, except for well-kept local cemeteries that could be left in peace. Furthermore, they urgently asked for a Norwegian proposal on relocations and an estimate of the costs (S-2259, box 3709). The reply from Norway came two years later on May 9, 1951. The reason for this delay is complex.

The Foreign Minister highlighted the conflict between a military desire for a military-appropriate relocation and the reluctance to undertake the costs of such a move (S-2259, box 3709). The different homelands of the POW graves usually incurred the costs for relocation and maintenance of the graves. The Norwegian authorities presumably realized that if the Soviet Union did not agree to a relocation, Norway would have to pay for it. In the spring and summer of 1949, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense and the Office for War Graves corresponded with each other to determine a solution to the problem of the Soviet war graves. The Office for War Graves had obtained suggestions with cost estimates for a different alternative for relocation of the graves (S-2259, box 3708). The District office in Northern Norway concluded that the alternative that involved relocation of all the war graves to one place would lead to enormous expenses due to the number of diggers and graves and the vast distances involved, and thus rejected this option (RAFA-2018, box 26, file 5). Everyone did not agree with this conclusion. The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs wrote to the Ministry of Defense in August 1949, specifying that the proposed relocation of war graves would lead to a possible Soviet presence in several places in Northern Norway, an area of considerable military importance (S-2259, box 3708). In September 1949, a meeting involving the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Office for War Graves and the Defense Staff occurred. They agreed on reviewing the Soviet war graves in Norway (RAFA-2018, box 26, file 3). The Defense Staff obtained statements from the Army, the Navy and the Air Force in the spring of 1950 and made a list of desired relocations. The District Command in Northern Norway stated that the Soviet war graves and others associated with "the Eastern Block" should be prioritized and moved away from areas of military

interest. They further stated that for the Army, it would be desirable to put all the war graves together in one place. The head of a regiment in Northern Norway presumed that security reasons had brought the move of foreign soldiers' war graves to the top of the agenda. He thought that if the war graves had to be moved away from where it would be unfavorable for the military to have too many unwelcome visits, official or unofficial, all buried soldiers from certain countries should be moved away from Northern Norway (RAFA-2510-2, Da, box 145, file 32). The Army's chief of command agreed but believed that a relocation of all these graves was impossible (RAFA-2018, box 27, file 6). This was stated in February 1950. In March 1950, the Ministries referred to the proposal for relocation from the Defense Staff as unsuitable as a reasonable and economical plan for relocation (RAFA-2018, box 26, file 3). They further stated that they could not prevent espionage by relocating some grave sites. The Ministries wanted only relocations that were necessary due to military considerations to be performed (RAFA-2018, box 26, file 3). However, the Army's chief of command concluded that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which negotiated with the Soviet Embassy, had to express that worthwhile maintenance of the war graves depended on their distance from military areas. The Soviet Union also had to be made aware that it would have to cover the costs. The Minister of Defense also expressed his views in March 1950 and stated that for economic reasons especially, it would only be possible for Norway to implement a few of the precautions wanted by the Defense Staff (S-2259, box 3708).

In the spring of 1950, the Soviet Union reminded Norway that it wanted an answer. In September 1950, a suggestion for a note from Norway was sent to the Ministry of Defense from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In November 1950, the Ministry of Defense responded that it had nothing to comment. Finally, on May 9, 1951, a note was sent from Norway to the Soviet Embassy, in which Norway, discussed, among other topics, the fact that it regretted that the maintenance of the war graves was not satisfactory. The government blamed it on a high number of graves and the challenging geography in Northern Norway. The note outlined the relocations that had already been made and argued that putting the graves in the same place would make the maintenance more affordable, but it also said that relocations were very expensive. A list of Soviet citizens buried in Norway, which was partly incomplete, was attached to the note, together with the cost estimate that was provided by the Soviet Union two years earlier (S-2259, box 3708).

The Soviet Union responded quickly, and on May 31 and June 5, 1951, Norway received notes from the Soviets. Now, the Soviets agreed with Norwegian authorities that the price of relocation was too high, and they only wanted a minimum number of war graves relocated. Furthermore, the Soviet stated that work on the war graves should take place immediately and be performed during 1951. With this, the situation of the Soviet war graves entered a new and urgent phase that required a swift decision from the Norwegian side, a decision that would raise strong dissatisfaction from the Soviets, as it was written in a memorandum from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (S-2259, box 3708). It was probably quite disturbing for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the Soviet Union had people ready who could be sent to more than 90 grave sites in Northern Norway, an area which was considered to be an important military area. Why did both the Soviet Union and Norway suddenly feel the need to hurry?

From believing that the relocation of Soviet war graves was economically unsustainable and could not prevent espionage in 1950, some now argued that economic reasons could not be included in the decision. The question was no longer if, but how, it should be done, and the Minister of Defense thought it could be possible to take action in the year of 1951 (S-2259, box 3708). On June 26, 1951, the 2-year plan for the gathering of Soviet war graves was adopted by the Norwegian government, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs waited until the digging was initiated before it sent a note to the Soviet Union

Embassy. The Minister of Defense wrote the following: “[We] are waiting to respond to the Russian Embassy until the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been able to approve the plan currently in progress” (S-2259, box 3708).ⁱⁱⁱ The plan was named “Operation Asphalt” and was strictly secret, so secret that the Chief of the District Command in Northern Norway still did not know anything about it on June 23, 1951 (RAFA-2510-2, Da, box 166, file 33).

At the end of June 1951, the Department of Defense wrote a summary and a proposal for the implementation of Operation Asphalt to the Minister of Defense, which stated that as the minister knew, the war grave question was a complex issue that had ramifications for security, economy and international law (RAFA-2018, box 26, file 5). To understand what was behind this statement, it is necessary to examine several issues. There are certain phases and a milestone for Soviet POWs buried in Norwegian soil. There is the liberation phase in 1945, when the work of bringing the war graves to consecrated site began. The next phase was around 1948–1949, when the condition of the war graves started to become critical and the military authorities became increasingly annoyed by the Soviet inspections. Finally, a milestone occurred in June 1951, when the plan and implementation were suddenly ready for both the Soviet Union and Norway.

The international circumstances were special in the years after 1945 and played a decisive role in Operation Asphalt. Historians Knut E. Eriksen and Helge Pharo, who wrote volume five of the Norwegian Foreign Policy History, believe that among other things, Operation Asphalt seemed to sour and limit the connection between Norway and the Soviet Union (Eriksen and Pharo, 1997, p. 63). Historian Stian Bones argues that it is unfair to interpret the Soviet Union’s concern for the memory of the dead solely as tactical (Holtmark (Ed.), 2015, p. 341). Eirik Traavik claims that Operation Asphalt “as an isolated event is unlikely to have had a detrimental effect on the bilateral relationship” (Traavik, 2012, p. 39). To understand Operation Asphalt and the various decisions that were taken, it is necessary to understand the international situation and what was happening in domestic and foreign policy.

Immediately after World War II, Norway adopted a bridge-building policy between the great powers. The Office of the Prime Minister stated in a summary of Norwegian foreign policy after the liberation that the Norwegian task was to act as a bridge between the great powers in the East and the West. Norway’s geographical position and their military effort made such a role natural (S-1005, N, L0001). While Norway felt both affiliation with and dependence on the United Kingdom and the United States, it was important to maintain an amical relationship with the third leading superpower, the Soviet Union. In June 1946, the Soviet ambassador in Norway reported home that the foreign policy line that ruled in Norway, which all the political parties accepted, was based on the effort to keep in close contact with not only the Western powers but also the Soviet Union (Soviet document in Holtmark (Ed.), 1995, p.379). However, the conditions changed rapidly between the former Allies internationally. In September 1946, Norway’s Minister of Foreign Affairs was already reporting back home from the Peace Conference in Paris that the atmosphere was sometimes anything but pleasant (DUUK, 19.09.46, p.3). The “Iron Curtain” became a term, and Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia in 1948 led to, as written from the Office of the Prime Minister, the opinion that bridge-building policy was actually considered utopian (S-1005, N, L0001). The Cold War was a reality, and as historian Stian Bones explains, the years from 1947 to 1953 can be characterized as “the deep Cold War years” (Bones, 2015, p. 147). After the attempt to reach a Nordic defense pact failed, Norway joined NATO in 1949, thus taking a clear stand regarding to which side it belonged.

During Operation Asphalt in the autumn of 1951, it was written in the Soviet press that Norway was the American Empire’s lackey and that the entire (Norwegian) Gerhardsen-Lange government’s policy was built on submissiveness to the Americans (S-2259, box

3709). Another headline from a communist newspaper in Sweden followed the same mindset, asking if the desecrating of the graves occurred on American orders (S-2259, box 3709). The communist newspapers were maybe motivated by self-interest in expressing these allegations, but one might wonder if there could still be some truth to them. The available documents from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in the United States indicate that the Norwegian authorities acted on their own in this case. In the comments about the Soviet Union notes, it was written that: “[...] two strong protests on a relatively minor issue – Norwegian movement of Soviet war graves – were probably intended to increase the feeling of strained relations in order to influence Norway’s attitude toward NATO bases” (CIA, VOL I). The CIA believed that the Soviet Union was not much interested in the war graves themselves but used them to achieve other goals. Another notice from the CIA commented that “Two issues are primarily responsible for the current high temperature of Norwegian-Soviet relations” (CIA, 22 October 1951). One was the gathering of the Soviet war graves, and the second was Norway’s NATO policy. The latter applied to two notes in the autumn of 1951, which brought up the question of Svalbard again.

The Svalbard question went back to 1944 when the Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov, in a meeting with Trygve Lie, proposed a change to the Svalbard Treaty to a Norwegian-Soviet common rule of the archipelago. From the Norwegian side, the proposal was perceived as dramatic, and the Svalbard question occupied a central place in the relationship between the two governments at the end of the war (Holtmark (Ed.), 2015, p. 297). In 1945, Norway agreed to a re-negotiation of the Svalbard Treaty with all the nations involved, as an attempt to forge a common defense with the Soviet Union. However, throughout the post-war period, it became evident that Norway could not join a common defense. With Norway’s membership in NATO, the Soviet Union changed its focus by highlighting Article 9 of the Svalbard Treaty, which states that the archipelago should not be used for the purpose of war (Holtmark (Ed.), 2015, p.317).

At the same time, as Norway distanced itself from the Soviet Union, it was important not to provoke the Soviets. In January 1951, Svalbard was incorporated into NATO and, in principle, Svalbard became an available area for defense bases (Holtmark, 1993, p. 148). Norway delivered a note, known as the Base Declaration, to the Soviet Union on February 1, 1949, specifying that Norway did not want defense bases for other countries on their territory as long as Norway was not exposed to attacks or threats of attack (Bones, 2007, p.129). At the outbreak of the Korean War, there was a proposal to reverse the Base Declaration from 1949, and with the incorporation of Svalbard into NATO, it may have been that the Soviet Union felt an uneasiness and tried all available means to influence Norway’s decision regarding defense bases on Svalbard. The tone between the countries in the case of the war graves and Svalbard in the fall of 1951 can be interpreted as such. The Soviets may have perceived that Operation Asphalt offered an opportunity to influence Norway in the final phase of the Svalbard case. Major General C.D. Packard from England interpreted the Soviet actions that way and said in a lecture he had around that time Norway became member of NATO: “The present action against Norway now is a very typical war-of-nerve move” (PA-1299, file 91). The question remains regarding whether the Soviets used the war graves as an opportunity to influence.

In 1946, the Soviet General Staff proposed to the Soviet Foreign Ministry that it should be suggested to the Norwegian authorities to gather all the corpses of Soviet citizens in a single cemetery (Soviet document in Holtmark (Ed.), 1995, p. 366). However, the Soviet Union changed its mind by 1951. Rasmus Gedde-Dahl writes that Halvard Lange (Norwegian Foreign Minister) saw both the Soviet notes about Svalbard and the war graves as part of a campaign to frighten and stimulate the opposition in Norway against NATO (Gedde-Dahl, 1997, p. 59). Nevertheless, Gedde-Dahl also highlights that it is difficult to find a direct link

between the war graves and the defense bases in the Soviet source material. He worked through the relevant sources and concluded that the question of the war graves was handled separately and gave no impression that the Soviet Union's involvement in the war graves was a temporary motivation to push Norway to reduce its NATO involvement (Gedde-Dahl, 1997, p. 61).

Norway and the West were insecure regarding the Soviet Union. The international conditions were tense. In a speech in February 1948, the Prime Minister of Norway, Einar Gerhardsen, launched a public campaign against the communists, expressing that the most important thing for the Norwegian security was to reduce the influence of the Communist Party. In that speech, Gerhardsen broke with the Norwegian Communist Party, which was then politically ostracized. The Norwegian Communist Party was banned from the Norwegian UN delegations and from the Foreign Affairs Committee in the Norwegian Parliament (Eriksen and Pharo, 1995, p.57). The policy gave rise to suspicion, both in military and civilian milieus. It became more difficult to oppose the government's policy, since one could easily be branded as a communist and thus a danger to the nation's security. Was this an overreaction or was it necessary to hunt communists and fear espionage? The Minister of Defense, who advocated for significant growth of the Norwegian Armed Forces and the Norwegian Intelligence Service, may have been nervous about Soviet espionage and may have therefore initiated the bringing of Soviet war graves to Tjøtta. It is documented in Russian sources that the Soviet Intelligence Service ruled the Soviet politics of war graves (Eriksen and Pharo, 1997, p.64). It was thus a real threat that the Soviet Union could engage in espionage while visiting war graves in Norway. However, Pharo and Eriksen write that in the effort to get the northern flank (Northern Norway) revalued and to attach the two leading Western powers to the Norwegian Armed Forces, Norwegian politicians and military authority sought to increase the threat from the Soviet Union (Eriksen and Pharo, 1997, p. 68). This aspect is highlighted in Traavik's master's thesis: "it is worth noting that Lange in his Storting and Rome speeches drew lines between the [Operation Asphalt] note correspondence and worries over Norway's territorial integrity" (Traavik, 2012, p.27).

The budget of the Norwegian Armed Forces increased in the years after the war. There was political disagreement about the resources, and far from everyone agreed to prioritize the defense. Following Norway's membership in NATO in 1949, the need for funding for the Norwegian Armed Forces increased. It was due to commitments to the other nations in NATO but also to the aforementioned international events that increased the tension and threat of war. In the autumn of 1951, a new defense budget with a new contingency plan was to be adopted by the government and the parliament. If anyone doubted the need for a contingency plan, they were probably convinced by the harsh notes from the Soviet Union in the fall of 1951. Continuous inspections of the war graves from the Soviets showed that the threat was real enough. When the Norwegian authorities received notices about Russians who had traveled around the country and had even signed an agreement with local authorities about maintenance of the graves, it created nervousness and a need for something to be done (RAFA-2018, box 26, file 5). Gedde-Dahl believes that a significant part of the Soviets' involvement in the war graves was essentially related to the prospect of gathering information at the places where the graves were sited (Gedde-Dahl, 1997, p.60). The fear of communists was therefore not unfounded. Bones explains that the anti-communist work was especially harsh in the period from 1948 to the mid-1950s (Bones, 2007, p. 279). In April 1948, the Minister of Defense summarized Norway's good old relationship with the Soviet Union. It was based on what it had always been – that Norway wish good neighborly relations, trade and cultural relations (PA-1299, box 94). However, in June 1951, the Minister of Defense and the ministries ignored the good old relationship and adopted Operation Asphalt.

Summary and conclusion

It is clear that the Cold War and foreign affairs affected the gathering of the Soviet war graves. The collection of the Soviet war graves began with the liberation in the spring of 1945. The important issues were health, piety and dignity for the dead POWs. The maintenance and registration of the war graves became worse throughout the post-war years. Inspections from Soviets in 1948–49 complained about the conditions of the graves. The development of the Soviet war graves followed international and political conditions. At the time of liberation, Soviet and Norway were allies, but this changed rapidly. The period from 1947 to 1953 included the deep Cold War years, which affected Norway's relationship with the Soviet Union. Norwegian military authorities became increasingly critical of the inspections close to military-exposed areas. Suspicion developed that the inspections of the Soviet war graves were a cover for espionage. Norway went from a bridge-building policy to an alliance in NATO, thus showing where it stood internationally. Northern Norway became a Western flank. The Armed Forces had to be rebuilt, but in the North, the Soviet war graves complicated the work. Soviet sources confirm that the Soviet Union wanted to exploit the war graves for espionage. At the same time, Soviet wanted to keep the memory of the Soviet POWs alive in the Norwegian population.

The development in the relocation of the Soviet war graves followed the same pace as other nations' relocations of war graves. Because of the Cold War, communication about the war graves became more difficult between the Norwegian and Soviet authorities, but the dialogue progressed slowly. At the end economy was the factor that made the decision about the Soviet war graves take time, both the price of the work and who should pay, Norway or the Soviet Union. The breaking point occurred in June 1951, when the Soviet Union was suddenly ready to perform the relocating itself. Norway seemed to become afraid of the consequences. Despite previous caution, Norway broke its former diplomatic practice and quickly adopted and implemented Operation Asphalt to avoid Soviet opportunities for espionage.



Figure 1: Map of Norway and its borders with Sweden, Finland and the Soviet Union/Russia. Tjøtta is in the region of Helgeland where the central Soviet war cemetery are placed.
Source: Wikimedia Commons, made by TUBS,
[https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nord-Norge#/media/Fil:Nord-Norge_in_Norway_\(plus\).svg](https://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nord-Norge#/media/Fil:Nord-Norge_in_Norway_(plus).svg)
(18.09.20).



Figure 2: An overview of the German camps in Norway during World War II. *Krigsfanger* means “prisoners of war.”

Source: Falstadsenteret, <http://powstories.no/map/leirsystemet-i-norge/> (18.09.20).

Notes

- ⁱ This paper is based on a part of Fagertun (2018), the master thesis *Glemte minner?*.
- ⁱⁱ The Soviet Union referred to “Soldier graves” also for the POWs graves.
- ⁱⁱⁱ My translation: “[Vi] venter med å svare den russiske ambassade inntil Forsvarsdepartementet og Utenriksdepartementet har kunnet approbere den plan som nå er under arbeid”.

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