

Korkeakallio earth fortifications in Myllypuro

In the forests of Helsinki one comes upon pits, trenches and concrete bunkers that give flight to the imagination. These structures can be found from Westend in Espoo all the way to Vartiokylänlahti in eastern Helsinki. They are earth fortifications built during the period of the First World War by Russians to safeguard St. Petersburg from an attack by the Germans. An enormous amount of human labour was harnessed to make something that was never used.

The building works began in earnest in 1915. By the end of the year 34 points of support were under construction. Despite the Russian Revolution the fortification works continued on the land front during the entire year of 1917 until February of 1918 because a German invasion was still considered possible. Military engineers from the Viapori fortress, acting on orders from the St. Petersburg administration, supervised the work.

The builders were primarily Russian garrison troops and labourers. Many Finnish workmen were also recruited for the fortification works because jobs were hard to find at that time. Besides the volunteers, the authorities also invoked martial law to confiscate manpower as well as materials and equipment. The Russians also put prisoners of war to work on the fortification sites. These were 3,000 Tartars and Asians, most of whom were Chinese. Besides the builders, a large group of civilians were needed for various service tasks.



All in all it has been estimated that 100,000 people were involved with the building of the fortifications; this is a huge amount when compared to Finland's population of three million at that time. The fortifications were built hurriedly. Occupational safety was an unknown concept at that time. Labourers died daily, usually in connection with bedrock demolition works.

The fortifications were never completed, nor were they ever used for their intended purpose. As the Germans advanced on Helsinki in 1918, the Russians retreated according to the terms of a mutual agreement, destroying parts of the facilities in the process.

During the Second World War certain bunkers were used as ammunition workshops; after the war they were used as air raid shelters and storerooms. Little respect was accorded the fortifications. They were filled and demolished. Blast shelters and gunpowder magazines were blown up. Local residents filled the trenches with garden trash and other scrap.

It was only in 1971 that the earth fortifications were seen as historical monuments covered by the Antiquities Act. The City of Helsinki Public Works Department inventoried the earth fortifications in 1996. A management plan was then drawn up to make them a visible part of our city's history. Piece by piece they are being unearthed from the depths of the forests.



Next to the Myllypuro sports park is a forested park area called Korkeakallio. The entrance to the park is from the south end of Myllynsiipi puistotie. In the forested park the concrete structures and dramatic fortifications are like a movie set. The fortifications have also served as, for example, backdrops for environmental art.

At the Korkeakallio location is Support Point VI, Artillery Battery 65. The ramparts were excavated into the bedrock and concreted. Concrete blast shelters built in connection with the gun emplacements were bricked up, and other blast shelters were demolished. The connecting trench is partially concreted, partially supported by heavy timber posts. In 1918 the armaments there were four 280-mm mortars.

In 2005, an extremely thorough renovation was carried out to uncover the park's fortifications and enhance their appearance. The connecting trenches were cleared of garden waste and other trash. Vegetation was cleared; a pathway and two bridges were built over the connecting trenches.

Nationally protected White Adders-Mouth orchids flourish at the marshy bottoms of what were formerly two large gun emplacements. Between the shelters grows a sizeable patch of Awnless Brome.

Here one can come with a friend on a forest picnic and try to imagine the thoughts of the Chinese forced labourer who dug and built these structures far from home in a strange, cold country with his Russian and Finnish workmates. What would he have thought if he had known that all his hard work would be for nothing?

