

POLITICS OF HISTORY IN ESTONIA: CHANGING MEMORY REGIMES 1987-2009¹

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Abstract: In this article I examine three separate landmarks of Estonia's contemporary "historical culture" that are all examples of the continuous reinterpretation of historical facts that has taken place since the society underwent political reframing;² namely 1) the work of the "Estonian Occupation Museum"; 2) the "Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity"; and 3) the conflict over memorial monuments to different veteran groups in Estonia. All these cases concern public ways of dealing with the enduring ambiguities of Estonia's recent past; particularly with the controversial issues of indigenous collaboration and complicity with the Soviet regime and the Nazi occupiers, as well as with traumatic memories of the war and post-war years. Within the realm of "memory politics" they represent attempts at agreeing on a codification of how to officially remember Estonia's past. In the background of my discussion stands the question of *what* makes them instances of "historical revisionism". To scrutinize this question, I consider "historical revisionism" in relation to five different "public

¹ This article is based largely on Chapter Seven of my doctoral thesis, entitled *Historical Culture, Conflicting Memories and Identities in Post Soviet Estonia*, forthcoming in Berghahn Books (in the series on Making Sense of History). It examines the debated codification of an official memory in contemporary Estonia, while exploring how the experience of long-term occupation impacted on the formation of post-Soviet identities. The study used life story interviews as its primary source: between 1996 and 2003 I interviewed over 40 historians of Estonian, Russian and Estonian Russian background, questioning them about their childhood, choice of profession, war memories, narratives of resistance, suffering, and shame.

² I employ the concept of "historical culture" (In German, *Geschichtskultur*), first introduced by Jörn Rüsen, as it offers an integrative approach to the study of collective memory and history by understanding both phenomena as expressions of "historical culture". In short, "historical culture" includes every articulation and contestation of "historical consciousness" (In German, *Geschichtsbewußtsein*) and all the ways in which "historical memory" is processed in the daily life of a society. The concept of "historical culture" includes both processes of "history production" and the moral standards operative in the relevant society – see Jörn RÜSEN, F. JÄGER, "Erinnerungskultur" (Memory Culture), in K. KORTE, WEIDENFELD (eds.), *Deutschland TrendBuch. Fakten und Orientierungen* (Germany Book of Trends. Facts and Orientations), Opladen: Leske & Budrich, 2001, pp. 397–428, 399. Jörn RÜSEN, "Was ist Geschichtskultur? Überlegungen zu einer neuen Art, über Geschichte nachzudenken" (What is Historical Culture?), in Jörn RÜSEN, K. FÜßMANN, et al. (eds.), *Historische Faszination. Geschichtskultur Heute* (Historical Fascination. Contemporary historical culture), Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1994, pp. 3–25.

uses” of history, namely the moral, ideological, political, existential, and emblematic dimension of history.³

Keywords: Estonia, post-socialist society, Estonian Occupation Museum, Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity, memorials.

“All history is the history of past politics”
F. R. Ankersmit

HISTORICAL REVISIONISM

I begin by proposing that revising conventional historical interpretations in the light of subsequent knowledge is an essential part of what Alexander von Humboldt termed “the historian’s task”; that is, the (self-) reflexivity of a scholar and his or her discipline. In this the interpretation of historical facts is not simply corrected and erased; it is rather a case of adding layers to an existing body of knowledge. To put it differently, the lens through which historical facts are viewed is “exchanged” for a more fitting one. Temporal distance and a somewhat more “detached” perspective may also lead to the revision of past interpretations. Therefore, I understand the term “revisionism” as an effort to update the interpretation of historical facts in the light of new findings (e.g. the opening of archive collections, the release of formerly classified material, etc.). Hence, the revision of history is dependent on the availability of sources, and on the researcher’s position in time and space.

Albeit the term “historical revisionism” has acquired a pejorative meaning, implying manipulation and abuse, I do not view it as something negative *per se*. And even though David Irving can be termed a historical revisionist (or more precisely a “Holocaust revisionist”), I nevertheless contend that not all historical revisionists are of Irving’s *contour*.⁴ Irving’s case, which certainly represents the extreme end of the scale, may however serve us in the attempt to define historical revisionism.⁵ Levy, who also does not view historical

³ On the different dimensions of history and its public use, see: Jörn RÜSEN, F. JÄGER, *op. cit.*, p. 406. Nicola GALLERANO, “History and the Public Use of History”, in *Diogenes*, December 1994, vol. 42, no. 168, pp. 85–102; K.-G. KARLSSON, *Historia som vapen: Historiebruk och samhällsupplösning i Sovjetunionen och dess efterföljarstater 1985–1995* (History as Weapon. Uses of History and the Dissolution of the Soviet Union and its Successor States 1985–1995), Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1999, pp. 57, 218–232. Karl-Goeran KARLSSON, “History in Swedish Politics – the ‘Living History’ Project”, in A. POK, Jörn RÜSEN, et al. (eds.), *European History: Challenges for a Common Future*, Hamburg: Körber Stiftung, 2002, pp. 145–162; K.-G. KARLSSON, ZANDER V et al., *Echoes of the Holocaust. Historical cultures in contemporary Europe*, Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2003.

⁴ Eva MENASSE, *Der Holocaust vor Gericht. Der Prozess um David Irving* (The Holocaust in court. The case of David Irving), Berlin: Siedler Verlag, 2000.

⁵ That is, where is the border between legitimate re-examination of history and re-writing

revisionism as something intrinsically negative, notes how the “hunger for memory” observable since the 1980s has been accompanied by a proliferation of historical revisionism, and that its objective is to question the foundational myths of the nation.⁶ “More specifically, the object of historical revisionism is to debunk those mythical substructures upon which collective identities rely. By attacking these mythological foundations, revisionists thematize issues that were not previously discussed, and render them intelligible for rational debate”.⁷

While Levy studies France, Germany, Israel and the US, I turn to Central Eastern Europe to address the question of whether this region is witnessing a specific kind of historical revisionism (that is, if the surge of historical revisionism has been exceptionally strong there). I begin my answer to this question with Shari J. Cohen’s pertinent analysis of the “amorphous nature of these societies emerging from communist domination”. She continues that it is important to recognize “the lack of unifying ideologies, a devastating legacy left by the fifty – or seventy – year experience of Leninist domination. These are societies trying to create new polities without common standards of moral or historical judgment”.⁸

In my description of the landmarks of post-Soviet Estonian historical culture, I illustrate how the experience of alternating military occupations and the legacy of two totalitarianisms, makes the assessment of the past a highly complicated matter.

POLITICS OF HISTORY: DIFFERENT USES OF PUBLIC HISTORY

Apart from historians rewriting history for and within the academic domain, there are many different societal groups “using” history for their ends in the public sphere. The term “user” signifies intermediaries such as politicians and teachers, disseminating historical facts, as well as the wider audience of consumers (e.g. newspaper readership, students, etc.). In addition, local historians produce history outside of mainstream academia. The term use implies that, alongside ethically and morally decent ways of utilizing history, misuses or abuses also exist. This is intimately connected to the question of principles, rules, and standards of “history production” and to whose or what ends historical facts are employed.⁹ However, “uses” of history cannot be equated

history in a politically motivated manner, while changing widely established historical facts?

⁶ Daniel LEVY, “The Future of the Past: Historiographical Disputes and Competing Memories in Germany and Israel”, *History and Theory*, 38, no. 1, 1999, pp. 62–63.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

⁸ Shari J. COHEN, *Politics without a Past. The Absence of History in Postcommunist Nationalism*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999, p. 2.

⁹ In the light of Cohen’s assessment of post-communist societies, these common standards of “history production” may be weak or non-existent.

with manipulation or deception *per se*.¹⁰ Gallerano holds that the “public use” of history is “all that developed outside of the domain of scientific research in its strictest sense, outside the history of historians which is usually written by scholars and intended for a very limited segment of the population”.¹¹ However the academic domain does not exist in isolation from other ideological and political currents in the society that surrounds it.

I argue that historical revisionism is more connected to the “public use” of history than confined only to the scientific community, or more precisely, it is situated at the interface of the two and targeted (more) towards a wider public. It is in the public sphere that different societal groups attempt to gain recognition for their privately held memories (individual or group); it is this struggle for public recognition which is intrinsically connected to questions of authorship, authenticity, custodianship, and ultimately identity.¹² The different “dimensions of history” emerge in this “rational” debate over the past. I will identify four dimensions of public history that I hold to be relevant to the topic of historical revisionism (whereby I understand these differentiations to be only of ideal typical nature, as in practice all dimensions overlap in various ways).

MORAL DIMENSION

The moral dimension of history is a reaction to past insults, and can be found in the endeavor of a political elite to put right “historical wrongs”. In the public discourse surrounding Estonia’s accessions to NATO and the European Union, the narrative of “being wronged by history” appeared in moralizing arguments of betrayal and retribution. For instance, it was occasionally stated that Western Europe bears a moral responsibility towards Estonia (since the Allies did not intervene and spare them their fate).¹³

Ideological dimension

The use of history by intellectuals for the national cause can be defined as an ideological dimension of history (for the purpose of national regeneration, for example). Such an ideological take on history was prevalent in the program of the Estonian People’s Front (In Estonian, *Eestimaa Rahvrinne*, or RR), mobilizing mass-support for Estonia’s independence. Both the ideological and the moral dimensions of history are linked to ideas of absolute truth. Here, history is not a gradually evolving process, but a story of mistakes that need rectifying. Quintessentially this presupposes history as a metaphysical

¹⁰ Tzvetan TODOROV, “The Abuses of Memory”, in *Common Knowledge*, 1996, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 6–26, 15.

¹¹ Nicola GALLERANO, *op. cit.*, p. 85. According to Gallerano, the “public use” is to a large extent based on the means of mass-communication and encompasses the use of history in schools, museums, cultural associations, political parties, etc.

¹² And to what might be translated as “definitional authority” (in German, *Definitionsmacht*).

¹³ Cf. Toomas H. ILVES, “Estonia and the state of change in European security”, paper delivered at Chatham House, London, 04.05.1999.

entity that is intrinsically moral. But can history be “wrong” or “right” in the first place?¹⁴

POLITICAL DIMENSION

The political dimension denotes the rhetorically convincing use of historical arguments to tackle or attack existing socio-political shortcomings. In this way, historical arguments are employed in a comparative, metaphorical fashion (often taken out of their original context). An overbearing political dimension translates into an inflationary use of historical arguments in the public arena (e.g. in political propaganda). The concept of politics of history (In German, *Geschichtspolitik*), which views history as fundamentally political and focuses on the formation and imposition of historical interpretations and models of identification in the official domain, is useful in highlighting the fact that history is essentially political.¹⁵ In the same vein, Gallerano insists that “history is used above all as an instrument of the day-to-day political battle”.¹⁶ Both the ideological and political dimensions of history are employed to claim and legitimize political power. I argue that historical revisionism is intimately linked to the ideological and political dimensions of history.

EXISTENTIAL DIMENSION

Fourthly, history plays a pertinent role for the identity of a community (for example “remembering in order not to forget” – In Hebrew, *Zahor – Lo Tishkah*). When a society is facing external or internal pressures of cultural homogenization (caused for example by inter-ethnic conflict, foreign occupation, etc.), the existential dimension of history becomes more pronounced. As a counter-history it will be largely confined to the private or semi-private sphere (for instance the opposition movement and dissident circles in Soviet Estonia). The example of the heated conflict over memorial monuments to different veteran groups, discussed in a later section, demonstrates that the existential use of history can also be played out in the public sphere.

In what follows, I will delineate different landmarks of the historical culture in post-Soviet Estonia, while paying close attention to the different dimensions of public history as previously outlined.

¹⁴ An over-moralisation of history can also be found in the public discourse on Germany's recent past during the 1990s.

¹⁵ E. WOLFRUM, *Geschichtspolitik in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland: Der Weg zur bundesrepublikanischen Erinnerung 1948–1990* (The politics of history in the FRG: The path to a memory of the Federal Republic of Germany 1948–1990), Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1999, pp.13–38.

¹⁶ Nicola GALLERANO, *op. cit.*, p. 100.



In the main entry hall of the Estonian Occupation Museum two massive iron locomotive *replica* can be found serving as a gateway to the exhibition. The models are identical copies of each other, except that one displays a red star, whereas the other bears the swastika. An artistic expression, which places both regimes on parallel tracks, raising the pertinent question of the dangers inherent in historical comparison.

THE ESTONIAN OCCUPATION MUSEUM: A CLAIM FOR COLLECTIVE SUFFERING

The Estonian Occupation Museum provides a case in point of the political dimension of history and the quagmires that historical comparisons often entail. Battered suitcases, prison doors, aluminum cutlery, a refugee boat, a range of trivial objects of daily use, as well as letters and newspapers, constitute the core of the exhibition.¹⁷ In the words of one interviewee, who was involved in planning the Museum from the very start, it “has to be like a monument or a tombstone for the many people who have not returned. And I believe that for the people who still live, but went through this period, this [museum] would be something to make them feel a little proud; that something like this is built for them”.¹⁸

¹⁷ In the main entry hall of the Estonian Occupation Museum (photo: M. Wulf). Otherwise the Occupation Museum relies on new media, including video testimonies and a series of seven CD-ROMs covering roughly the period from 1940 to 1987, as well as the Estonian independence movement. See: www.okupatsioon.ee

¹⁸ Estonian historian and former dissident, alias SIMON, interviewed by M. Wulf, Tallinn,

The museum documents mainly the suffering that Estonians endured at the hands of the Soviets between 1940 and 1991, while paying little attention to the victims of the Holocaust in Estonia or questions of indigenous collaboration with the foreign regimes. This focus is consistent with the fact that the repression by the Soviet authorities stands out as *the* main public concern regarding Estonia's recent past.¹⁹ This only changed under international pressure, leading to a "prescribed public remembrance" of the events surrounding the German occupation.²⁰ Why public debate about the occupations in post-1991 Estonia mainly concerned the Soviet terror, while Estonian collaboration during the Nazi occupation was hardly touched upon, can in part be understood as an overreaction against the long-endured bias in Soviet historiography, which focused mainly on the atrocities committed during the Nazi occupation of Estonia.²¹ A further cause may lie in Russia's failure to acknowledge the events of 1939–41 (specifically annexation of Estonia in 1940) as illegitimate acts.

Equivalents to the Estonian Occupation Museum can be found in Riga (the Documentation Centre of Totalitarianism, TSDC, established in 1998) and with the Museum of Genocide Victims located in the cellars of the former KGB headquarters in Vilnius (founded in 1992).²² It appears that in post-Soviet societies an idiosyncratic logic or perspective is operational: the fact that these societies experienced both the Nazi and the Soviet occupations leads to a specific interpretation of history different from that which prevails in Western European countries, which were "only" occupied by Nazi Germany. For if one were to pass by a "museum of occupation" in Amsterdam, Paris, or Oslo, one could conclude from the name alone that the museum concentrates on mass-deportations of Jews, communists, and anti-German resistance fighters; but the curators of the Estonian Occupation Museum clearly adhere to a different

Estonia, June 7, 2002. The interview was conducted before the Occupation Museum was inaugurated in 2003.

¹⁹ Elsewhere, I sustain the argument that it is the narrative of sole victimhood, which leaves little space for another people's suffering, which forms an important part of Estonian national identity.

²⁰ Namely the work of Efraim Zuroff (the head of the Jerusalem office of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre), pressure from Russia and pressure applied to Estonia in the course of the EU and NATO accession processes (in connection to this, the example of the Holocaust Day is discussed in a later section).

²¹ R. J. MISIUNAS, "Soviet Historiography on World War II and the Baltic States, 1944–1974", in V. Stanley VARDYS and Romuald. J. MISIUNAS (eds.), *The Baltic States in Peace and War 1917–1945*, University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978, pp. 173–196.

²² For historical revisionism in post-Soviet Latvia, see: Eva-Clarita ONKEN, "Revisionismus schon vor der Geschichte: Aktuelle lettische Kontroversen um die Judenvernichtung und Kollaboration 1941–1944" (Revisionism prior to history: current Latvian controversies on the Holocaust and collaboration 1941–1944) [= *Galut Nordost*, special issue 1]. Köln: Verl. Wiss. & Politik, 1998, pp. 1–131.

logic. Here, it is the “national suffering” of ethnic Estonians during the various occupations that takes centre stage (that is, mainly the Soviet occupations).²³

At the opening of the museum the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement that the museum’s creation was informed by a political bias, in equating fascist Germany and the former Soviet Union.²⁴ Although it is crucial to avoid the pitfalls of historical comparison, such as attempting to relativize individual or collective suffering and injustices by means of such comparison, it is also necessary to bear in mind that comparison deals with both resemblance and difference, and that to compare does not mean to justify. Hence, the crimes committed in the name of Hitler’s Germany cannot be explained by the atrocities committed in the name of Stalin, or vice versa.²⁵ In the mainstream academic debate in the former FRG, comparative approaches to understanding the totalitarianisms of Stalinism and Nazi Germany were frowned upon, and left on the fringes.²⁶ After the break-up of the Soviet bloc and German reunification, direct comparisons between the systems became more *en vogue*; this was particularly the case in the debates emerging in newly independent Eastern Europe. In the public debate in post-Soviet Estonia, there was little hesitation about comparing the two systems, which would indicate that it is not the victims of the Nazi occupation (that is, Jewish survivors or communist sympathizers) who dominated the debate, but victims of Stalinism and those that believed that the Nazi occupation was the “lesser of two evils”.²⁷ In re-

²³ This is the overall tenor of a publication displayed at the Estonian Occupation Museum in 2003, such as Mart LAAR, Tune KELAM, Toivo RAUN, *International Conference on Crimes of Communism*, Tallinn, Isamaaliit and Jarl Hjalmarsson Foundation, 14.06.2000; or K. KUKK, T. RAUN, *Soviet Deportations in Estonia: Impact and Legacy Articles and Life stories*, Tartu University Press, 2007. The Museum Dungeon of the KGB in Tartu, which was termed the “Grey House”, is another site to remember the Estonians’ struggle for freedom (and their suffering). This museum was established in 2001, that is, two years prior to the inauguration of the Occupation Museum; similarly, its collection lacks any reference to the site’s usage during the German occupation. See: http://linnamuseum.tartu.ee/?m=2&page=front&change_lang=en (accessed 22.09.2010)

²⁴ Michael TARM, “The Gift. An American of Estonian descent funds a new museum that recounts a nation’s tragedy – and her own”, *City Paper. The Baltic States*, September 2003, http://www.balticsworldwide.com/occupation%20_%20museum%20_%20tallinn.htm (accessed 22.09.2010)

²⁵ Tzvetan TODOROV, *op. cit.*, pp.16–19.

²⁶ Cf. Hannah ARENDT, *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft* (The Origins of Totalitarianism), München: Pieper, 1986; Dietrich BEYRAU, “Nationalsozialistisches Regime und das Stalin-System. Ein riskanter Vergleich” (National Socialism and Stalinism. A precarious comparison), in *Osteuropa*, 2000, vol. 50, no. 6, pp. 709–720; E. NOLTE, *The Three Faces of Fascism*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965; Stefan CREUZBERGER, Ingo MANNTEUFEL, et. al., “Kommunismus und Terror. Das ‘Schwarzbuch des Kommunismus’ – Hauptthesen und – Argumente” (Communism and Terror. The ‘Blackbook of Communism’ – Main Theses and Arguments), in *Osteuropa*, 2000, vol. 50, no. 6, pp. 583–584; Dan DINER (ed.), *Ist der Nationalsozialismus Geschichte? Zu Historisierung und Historikerstreit* (Is National Socialism History? About Historization and the Historians’ Debate), Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1988.

²⁷ This is when we follow Todorov’s list of four possible responses to the comparison of the two

sponse to a speech by the Latvian President Vike-Freiberga (at the International Forum on Preventing Genocide in Stockholm in 2004) Ephraim Zuroff, head of the Jerusalem office of the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, complains that some political leaders utilise the destruction of the European Jewry as a background to speak about other tragedies, such as communist crimes. To specify, Zuroff opines that the mass deportations of Latvians were not a case of genocide, and warns of a false symmetry that upgrades communist crimes by placing them on an equal footing with the Holocaust.²⁸

THE ESTONIAN INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION FOR THE INVESTIGATION OF CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

Whereas the museum's primary objective is to collect and exhibit artefacts, memoirs, and eyewitness accounts to document the periods of occupation, the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity (hereafter "Commission"), was established by the Estonian government in 1998 to produce objective research reports on the same periods, clearly tailored towards an international readership.²⁹ It was decided at the outset that a team of researchers selected by the Commission's board would first investigate crimes against citizens of Estonia (or on the territory of the Estonian Republic) committed during the German occupation, and subsequently explore crimes committed during the Soviet occupations. The report attributes overall responsibility for the crimes committed during the German occupation to the Germans, but it identifies individual Estonians who served in the Estonian military units, Estonian Police Battalions, and Estonian Security Police, stating that they shared responsibility through their own actions in and outside of Estonia.³⁰ Moreover, the Commission holds all members of the Estonian Political Police responsible for war crimes, and as-

totalitarianisms. It helps to identify the standpoint of the individual employing the comparison: 1) "Hitler's hangmen" favor the pairing with Stalinists because it serves to excuse their own actions; 2) Hitler's victims oppose a pairing, because they are aware that the "hangmen" use it as an excuse; 3) "Stalin's hangmen" oppose a pairing, because it is used against them as an accusation; 4) Stalin's victims favor the pairing, because they can use it as an accusation, cf. Tzvetan TODOROV, *op. cit.*, pp.16–19.

²⁸ Ephraim ZUROFF, "Misleading comparisons of the 20th century tragedies", in *The Baltic Times*, 19.02.04; Ephraim ZUROFF, "Lifting the shadow of a bloody past", in *The Baltic Times*, 04.03.04.

²⁹ The clear focus on an international public is also reflected by the international composition of the Commission's board, with politicians and scholars from Germany, the UK, Finland, Denmark and Russia (that is, Arsenij Rosinsky, the head of *Memorial*). It is noteworthy that there are only a few trained historians among the board members. Former President Meri's initiative was supported by leading Jewish organizations in the US, which is mirrored in the person of Nicholas Lane, Chairman of the IR commission of the American-Jewish Committee, also member of the Commission's board. It needs to be stressed that comparable commissions were set up in the other Baltic States (also in 1998), so that we may speak of a regional post-Soviet phenomenon.

³⁰ By its statutory report the Commission refrains from assigning "collective guilt".

serts that members of the Estonian self-government were also responsible for war crimes committed in Estonia. It is noteworthy that the Commission debunks the myth of a “just war” of the Estonian auxiliary police (In Estonian, *Omakaitse*, or *OK*) in 1941 by emphasizing that the bulk of the killing of alleged communists during the early stages of the German occupation happened at the hands of the Estonian auxiliary police, and that, in assisting the *Einsatzkommando* 1 A, the *OK* played an active role in the extermination of the local Jewry in 1941–42.³¹ The report also mentions that the majority of members of the “destruction battalions” were ethnic Estonians, thus touching on another taboo—viz. that of the fratricidal war in Estonia.³² The report ends on the broader note that historical events made Estonia a “victim nation”, but states that this “does not preclude acts of perpetration.”

According to its statutory report, the Commission is not intended to be a fully-fledged “Truth Commission”. Former President Lennart Meri, who headed the Commission until 2001, explained its two-pronged approach: “It reflects our hope in Estonia, that shining the bright light of truth on some of the tragedies of the past will not only contribute to reconciliation within our society and its further reintegration into the international community of nations, but also prevent the repetition of such tragedies elsewhere.”³³

From this it is evident that the Commission is not a juridical or prosecutorial body, which is why it did not initiate the tracking down of those few Estonian perpetrators still alive, who were identified in the report on the German occupation (published online in 2001), in order to extradite and try them. One may argue, however, that the Commission is not *just* a scholarly body of politicians and journalists, since it is a state-funded institution. Hence, the question remains as to why the Commission did not instruct the relevant governmental body to follow up these cases. In this context Zuroff rebuked the contemporary Estonian Security Police for not investigating the suspected criminals identified in the Commission’s report. Already in autumn 1991, he made a failed attempt to arrest the Estonian Evald Mikson (who was living in Iceland at the time) for war crimes committed during the Nazi occupation of Estonia.³⁴ More recently, Zuroff presented the Estonian Security Police with a list of 16 members of the 36th Police Battalion, who according to the Commission’s report participated in the execution of Jews in Belarus in 1942; but, different from the Commission’s findings, the Estonian Security Police concluded that they had no evidence to confirm this indictment. In obvious frustration, Zuroff then announced an award of \$10,000 for anyone

³¹ The report stresses that 1,200 of the 40,000 members of *OK* were involved in killings.

³² These destruction or shock battalions fought side-by-side with regular Soviet troops carrying out Stalin’s scorched-earth policy in the face of the approaching German troops in 1941.

³³ See the Commission’s homepage, www.historycommission.ee.

³⁴ Efraim ZUROFF, *Beruf: Nazijäger. Die Suche mit dem langen Atem: Die Jagd nach den Tätern des Völkermordes* (Profession: Nazi Hunter. A Search that requires a long breath: Hunting for the Perpetrators of the Holocaust), Freiburg: Ahriman-Verlag, 1996, pp. 318–321; cf. Raul KRUIUS (ed.), *People be Watchful!*, Tallinn: Estonian State Publishing House, 1962.

providing information leading to the arrest of these men.³⁵ His effort to place an advertisement reading “during the Holocaust, Estonians murdered Jews in Estonia as well as in other countries” in local newspapers, however, came to nothing.³⁶ Consequently, in his reports of the years 2001 and 2003, Zuroff classified Estonia as making “insufficient and/or unsuccessful efforts to prosecute perpetrators of the Holocaust”.³⁷

Compared to the objectively written report of the Commission, the paper of a younger Estonian historian (who worked in the Commission’s research team on the German occupation) presented at a conference in Sweden on “Collaboration and Resistance in Estonia 1940–44”, seemed slightly more biased, as he deliberately only included the genocide of Estonian Jews, while choosing not to deal with the fate of those thousands of European Jews who were deported to Estonia to perish in the camps there.³⁸ This limitation allowed him to claim that less than 1000 Estonian Jews were killed in Estonia during the German occupation. Moreover, he suggested that the “evacuation” of approximately 500 Estonian Jews to Russia by the Soviets can be termed the “first act of the Holocaust”. All this led him to conclude that Estonia, although it was the first country to declare itself “free of Jews” (In German, *judenfrei*), was also the country in which the smallest number of Jews was exterminated under German occupation. His presentation stands as an example of a highly selective and ethnocentric approach to the study of the Holocaust in Estonia. At the same conference, an American historian of Lithuanian origin acknowledged that Lithuanians needed to settle accounts with their past, but that this could only happen in their own time, in their own way; above all he said that they needed to discuss it among themselves in their own language, as many Lithuanian words (and concepts) cannot be translated into English and are thus fundamentally unintelligible to outsiders. This is the

³⁵ Sara TOTH, “Cursory Nazi probe rejected”, in *The Baltic Times* (from now on T.B.T.), 25.07.02.

³⁶ T.B.T. staff, “Wiesenthal Center ad left unprinted”, in *The Baltic Times*, 30.01.03.

³⁷ In April 2001 Estonia belonged to “category D”, Baltic News Service (from now on B.N.S.); “Juudikeskus peab Eestit kehvaks natsiuurijaks” (The Jewish Centre in Tallinn holds Estonia to be a lousy Nazi-investigator), in *Postimees*, 20.04.01. In 2003 Estonia remains in this category, joined by Austria, Finland, France and the UK; T.B.T. staff, “Estonia gets low marks in Nazi hunting”, in *The Baltic Times*, 01.05.03; B.N.S., “Reinsalu disputes Nazi-hunt findings”, in *The Baltic Times*, 31.08.03.

³⁸ Meelis Maripuu’s paper reads “the present article is only concerned with the fate of the local Jewish community during the Second World War; while the destiny of those European Jews deported to Estonia in 1942–44 is not addressed”, Meelis MARIPUU, “Kollaboration und Widerstand in Estland 1940–1944” (Collaboration and Resistance in Estonia 1940–1944), a paper presented at the conference on “Reichskommissariat Ostland. Collaboration and Resistance during the Holocaust”, Stockholm & Uppsala, Sweden (18–21.04.02). Conference papers have been published in: David GAUNT and Paul LEVINE (eds.), *Collaboration and Resistance During the Holocaust: Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania*, Peter Lang, 2005; cf. Anton Weiss-WENDT, *Murder without Hatred. Estonians and the Holocaust*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2009.

argument for a “closed discourse”; and possibly a consequence of long-term foreign rule.³⁹

Shari J. Cohen notes that the difference between Eastern and Western Europe and the USA shows when it comes to the interpretation of the Holocaust.⁴⁰ The uproar caused by the then newly appointed American ambassador to Estonia, Joseph M. De Thomas, when he drew attention to the fact that since 1991 no Estonian war criminal had been prosecuted for crimes committed during the Holocaust, sustains this claim. De Thomas recommended that the Holocaust needed wider recognition as part of Estonia’s national history.⁴¹ His remarks were however rated as “interference in the internal affairs of Estonia” by the Estonian Justice Minister, who replied that De Thomas’ statement was like “breaking in through an open door, since only a few states have done as much work as Estonia in investigating the crimes of the Holocaust”.⁴² De Thomas’ comments were not entirely unfounded, for as recently as October 2000 the Estonian Minister of Education declared that a Jewish Holocaust Day in schools was not required. This opinion was only revised in 2002, when the Estonian government declared January 27 Holocaust Day in schools.⁴³ This incident illustrates how Estonian politicians can act as if they were under attack when it comes to the internationally-voiced demand for education in and research on the Nazi occupation of Estonia.⁴⁴ This defensive reaction may be understood to stem from the fact that during the Soviet period Estonians (along with the other Baltic nationalities) were collectively branded as “fascists” and “collaborators”; there is a tradition of defiance against these kinds of allegations.⁴⁵

EMBLEMATIC DIMENSION

The Commission’s work may be seen as an attempt at restoring Estonia’s moral standing in the international community (that is, as a strategy of whitewashing), which would substantiate the idea that the Commission’s

³⁹ My usage of the term “closed” ought not to be confused with Karl Popper’s concept of the “closed society”.

⁴⁰ Shari J. COHEN, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–12.

⁴¹ In his article, De Thomas states “the fact that the Soviet occupation did more direct harm in Estonia, however, does not negate the fact that the Holocaust happened here too”, Joseph M. DE THOMAS, “Past, Present and Future”, in *Eesti Päevaleht*, 28.05.02.

⁴² “Estonian government puzzled at US ambassador’s Holocaust statement”, in *Leta Daily News Review*, 30.05.02.

⁴³ “Lieber braun statt rot?” (Better Brown than Red?), in *Newsletter of the Swiss Baltic Chamber of Commerce*, 27.10.00. March 25 and June 14 are National Days of mourning in remembrance of the mass-deportations during the Soviet periods.

⁴⁴ Karsten BRÜGGEMANN, “Von der Renationalisierung zur Demontage nationaler Helden. Oder: Wie schreibt man estnische Geschichte?” (From Re-Nationalisation to the Demolition of National Heroes. Or how does one write Estonian History?), *Osteuropa*, 2001, vol.7/no. 51, pp. 810–819.

⁴⁵ Cf. V. Stanley VARDYS and Romuald. J. MISIUNAS (eds.), *op. cit.*

carefully-worded and well-balanced report may not reflect the predominant opinion among Estonian historians, or indeed of Estonian society at large.⁴⁶ It may therefore be described rather as an “emblematic” use of history, leading us to the fifth dimension of public history, that is, the emblematic dimension. The moral use of history can be labeled emblematic when the discussion of certain historical facts remains mostly on the surface. For instance, a fundamental settlement with the Soviet legacy through “lustration” (in Czech, *lustrace*, to bring to light) or a “Truth Commission” has not been achieved in post-Soviet Estonia.⁴⁷ Another example of the emblematic use of history in Estonia is the recently introduced “Holocaust Day” which lacks meaning for most Estonian pupils since the Holocaust plays such a minor part in most family narratives or in the official narrative.

WHEN PRIVATE MEMORY GOES PUBLIC: FISTICUFFS OVER MONUMENTS

During the Soviet period, narratives of fighting side-by-side with the Germans against the Red Army were passed on as essentially unquestioned heroic stories of national resistance in the private realm of many Estonian families. However, not all the privately held counter-memories that resurfaced in the public domain of newly independent Estonia could be integrated into the official history in the long run. The memory of the veterans who fought in the German army is an example of an unofficial account that became part of the public memory after 1991, but was pushed back into the private sphere thereafter. It is this phenomenon that will be elaborated in subsequent sections.

Earlier it was mentioned that a different regional logic prevails in societies which experienced both the Nazi occupation and the Soviet regime. Enn Sarv’s recollections on the situation of Estonians in early 1944 reflect this specific outlook on the past predominant among Estonians.

[...] In order to obtain weapons, [Estonian] men were forced to fight in German uniform (...), but they considered themselves an Estonian army. They had managed to gain the right to wear a coat of arms with the colors of the Estonian national flag on their sleeves. In February, Estonian SS fighters

⁴⁶ In her review of the final 1300-pages long report of the Commission (published in English in 2006), Eva-Clarita Onken concludes that it fails to take notice of the social context in which the findings had been published (online) over the last six years, that is, its reception among the wider Estonian public. Moreover, Onken notes a rather positivistic understanding of history as “true facts” in the individual contributions (and consequently a lack of analysis); see: Eva-Clarita ONKEN, “The Politics of Finding Historical Truth: Reviewing Baltic History Commissions and their Work”, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 2007, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 109–116.

⁴⁷ Apart from declarations, such as the statement of the President of the Estonian Parliament, Toomas Savi, on February 18, 2002 on the crimes of the occupation regime in Estonia, see: Toomas SAVI, “Statement of the President of the Riigikogu on the occupation regime in Estonia”, in *Euro University. The monthly survey of the Baltic and Post-Soviet Politics*, 2001/2002, vol. 109, no. 7, pp. 3–4.

removed the SS symbols from their collars without authorization and replaced them with the emblem of the Estonian Cross of Freedom. (...) Our main enemy, the Soviet Union, was about to invade Estonia, once again aiming to destroy our nation: so the War had become our own War [...]”⁴⁸

Another Estonian interviewee (a professional historian and politician born 1960) related that his father and both his uncles fought in the German army. In response to my question about whether his father joined the German army voluntarily, he clarified:

To fight against the Russians of course! You know pretty well that the Germans had been our historical enemy and we Estonians didn't like them very much. But only one year, 1940–41, made us love the Germans so much and greet them as “liberators”. Nazis as “liberators”, isn't it awful? But it only gives you an idea what the communist occupation had been like. Not that we are Nazis or Nazi-minded, no, never!⁴⁹

My respondent insisted that they did not expressly fight *for* the Germans or on the German side, but that they had no other choice. This is the line of argument the veterans themselves take. So for instance, Ilmar Haalviste, a Waffen SS veteran, exemplified this particular Estonian standpoint when he stated: “At the end of the day there was no right or wrong side. The War was thrust upon us. We were on our side, defending our homes”⁵⁰

THE MEMORIAL STONE IN PÄRNU: A SYMBOL OF RESISTANCE

In July 2002 a privately-funded memorial stone depicting an Estonian soldier in Waffen SS uniform was put up at the Estonian sea resort town of Pärnu. After attracting a negative response from the national government, the memorial was removed and town officials ordered its redesign and the replacement of its inscription, which originally read “to all Estonian soldiers who fell in the Second World War to liberate their homeland and to free Europe in 1940–45”.⁵¹ A local historian, Leo Tammiksaar (born in 1962), who has

⁴⁸ Enn SARV, “Our Duty of Remembering”, in M. LAAR, T. KELAM et al., *International Conference on Crimes of Communism*, Tallinn, Isamaaliit and Jarl Hjalmarsson Foundation, 14.06.2000, Tallinn, p. 36.

⁴⁹ Estonian historian and politician, alias OSKAR, interviewed by M. Wulf, Tallinn, Estonia, October 1, 2003.

⁵⁰ “Veterans: Views from the east”, in *BBC News Week*, 09.05.05, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4530273.stm> (accessed 22.09.2010). By comparison the veterans of the Red Army in Russia vehemently deny such claim.

⁵¹ B.N.S., “History buff building SS Legion museum in Pärnu”, in *The Baltic Times*, 03.06.04; Agence France-Presse, “Plans halted for WWII memorial”, in *The Baltic Times*, 25.07.02; Melanie O'CONNELL, “Pärnu to commemorate freedom fighters again”, in *The Baltic Times*, 31.08.03.

ran an organization called the “Estonian SS Legion Museum” (In Estonian, *Eesti SS Leegioni Muuseum*) since the early 1990s, is behind the memorial.⁵² The inference from the original inscription and from Tammiksaar’s public statements is that he believes that the Estonian legionaries prevented the Red Army from occupying the whole of Europe.

The Lihula monument to Estonian soldiers in the German army



THE “LIHULA CONTROVERSY”

The Pärnu monument was altered and re-erected in the Estonian village cemetery of Lihula in August 2004. The local authorities and about 2000 people who witnessed the unveiling ceremony wanted – in the words of the former dissident and historian Tiit Madisson and mayor of the Lihula parish, “to honor those who chose the lesser evil”.⁵³ Whereas the monument still depicts an Estonian soldier in German uniform, the altered inscription is now

⁵² Aleksei GUNTER, “Monumental needs and rethinking Estonia’s past”, in *The Baltic Times*, 10.06.04.

⁵³ “Estonia unveils Nazi war monument”, in *BBC News World Online Edition*, 20.08.04, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3585272.stm> (accessed 22.09.2010); The Lihula monument depicts a soldier wearing a German army helmet and carrying a gun, with the order of the Estonian Cross of Freedom on his collar (photo: The Baltic Times).

“to the Estonian men who fought in 1940–45 against Bolshevism and for the restoration of Estonian independence”.⁵⁴

A fortnight after its inauguration, the police removed the monument in the face of an enraged, stone-throwing crowd of several hundred. After the removal only the base of the memorial remained, where a simple plaque was installed, reading “at this place the monument to the Estonian men used to stand 20.08.04–02.09.04”.⁵⁵ The national government maintained that it was not appropriate “to build a monument that may be interpreted as an attempt to commemorate totalitarian regimes that had occupied Estonia”.⁵⁶ The announcement of the Estonian Foreign Minister Kristiina Ojuland expressed a similar view:

[...] Estonia must not isolate itself from the international community and damage its reputation. (...) Local inappropriate action often results in very serious and far-reaching international consequences (...) Estonia (...) acknowledges the need to commemorate the fallen. This must be done in a manner that does not bring forth past evils to poison the future [...].⁵⁷

At the same time the Estonian government offered its cooperation in setting up a more apposite memorial.⁵⁸ In a general response to the fisticuffs over the Lihula monument, it established yet another commission to decide on the official representation of Estonian contemporary history, whose long-term objective is to “persuade the international community to condemn the crimes of the communist regime”.⁵⁹

The position of the Estonian government on the occasion of the reburial of Alfons Rebane, an anti-Soviet partisan (and later a commander of the Estonian Legion) in 1999 was equally ambiguous. For even though the government contributed (financially) towards a reburial ceremony with full military honors, only two MPs and the commander of the Estonian Defense Forces attended the occasion. Most representatives of the Estonian government may have feared international criticism and thus avoided a public appearance.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Aleksei GUNTER, “Riot police help remove controversial WWII monument”, in *The Baltic Times*, 09.09.04.

⁵⁵ Matthias KOLB, “Looking for the truth behind Lihula”, in *The Baltic Times*, 27.04.05.

⁵⁶ T.B.T. staff, “State removes controversial monument by force”, in *The Baltic Times*, 02.09.04, <http://www.baltictimes.com/news/articles/10834/> (accessed 22.09.2010)

⁵⁷ Välisministeerium (Estonian Foreign Ministry), “Press Release: Statement by Foreign Minister Ojuland Concerning the Lihula Monument”, 03.09.04, <http://www.vm.ee/?q=en/node/410> (accessed 22.09.2010)

⁵⁸ “State removes controversial monument by force”, in *The Baltic Times*, 02.09.04.

⁵⁹ Aleksei GUNTER, “Estonia sets its history straight”, in *The Baltic Times*, 01.11.04; Matthias KOLB, “Looking for the truth”, 27.04.2005; From Wire Reports “Controversy erupts around historical commission”, in *The Baltic Times*, 18.05.05.

⁶⁰ Mel HUANG, “Doing it Half Right”, in *Central Europe Review*, July 1999, vol. 1, no. 2, <http://www.ce-review.org/99/2/amber2.html> (accessed 22.09.2010)

THE “ESTONIAN FREEDOM FIGHTERS’ ASSOCIATION”

On July 6, 2004 about 1,500 Estonian veterans commemorated the 60th anniversary of the battles against the Red Army. This public annual celebration in Tallinn has been organized by the Estonian Freedom Fighters’ Association’ since the early ‘90s.⁶¹ During the course of the celebration, the Estonian government was pressed to attribute the status of “Freedom Fighters” to those Estonians who fought against Soviet occupation, in recognition of their claim to have fought for Estonia’s freedom and democracy.⁶² In their appeal the veterans explicitly sought state protection against accusations from Russian and Jewish organizations which labeled them fascists.⁶³ The veterans demand public rehabilitation of their status; hence their identification as “Freedom Fighters” in reference to the name of the veterans of the Estonian War of Independence (1918–20). Also during the summer of 2004 the “Estonian Freedom Fighters’ Association” planned to erect a set of memorial plaques and crosses adding to the existing Maarjamäe Memorial Complex outside of Tallinn, to include the names of 16 Estonian units who fought as part of the Wehrmacht and a map indicating the sites of battles involving SS units against the Red Army.⁶⁴ While the Estonian government decided against this in April 2005, an arrangement of three crosses and two plaques has nevertheless been established there in slightly altered form.⁶⁵ The Maarjamäe complex with its overlapping layers commemorating German soldiers, those Estonians and Russian speakers fighting in the Red Army and those Estonian fighting in German army units as well as in the War of independence remains a perplexing site for any visitor.

⁶¹ Michael SHAFIR, “Estonian War Veterans Stir Up Russian Propaganda Campaign by Proxy”, in *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, (RFR RL) Newsline 23.07.04, Volume 8 Number 139, <http://www.hri.org/news/balkans/rferl/2004/04-07-23.rferl.html> (accessed 22.09.2010); The “Estonian Freedom Fighters’ Association” represents Estonians who fought in divisions of the Waffen SS (particularly soldiers of the 20th division of the Waffen SS, that is, the Estonian Legion) and as anti-Soviet partisans (that is, the “Forest Brethren”). Likewise in neighboring Latvia, the veterans of the Latvian SS Legion (the “National Soldiers’ Association”) organize an annual public march to the Freedom Monument in the centre of Riga on March 16.

⁶² B.N.S, “Freedom fighters demand historical clarification”, in *The Baltic Times*, 08.07.04.

⁶³ Staff and wire reports “Freedom fighters appeal for help, evaluation of WWII events”, in *The Baltic Times*, 05.08.04.

⁶⁴ Jerusalem Postcom Staff, “Estonia plans to unveil memorial to SS veterans”, in *Jerusalem Post*, Online Edition, 22.05.04. The Estonian Legion *per se* cannot be termed a criminal organization, since in 1949–50 a UN commission investigated the Estonian and Latvian SS (the so-called Baltic Legions) and found these military units to be neither criminal nor Nazi collaborators. However, the 16 Estonian units include the 36th Estonian Division of the *Waffen SS*, which the Commission had identified as having committed crimes against humanity.

⁶⁵ Itar-Tass, “Tallinn decides against unveiling monument to Estonian Nazi troops”, in *Estonia in the News*, 27.04.05. After the German troops withdrew from the city of Narva in April 26, 1944, soldiers of the Estonian Legion tried to bring the advancing Red Army to a halt at Sinimäe. It is to the graves in Sinimäe that Estonian Waffen SS veterans, or legionaries, come to commemorate their battle on May 8, a day *before* Victory Day, see Sergei STEPANOV, “Victory Day opens old wounds”, in *The Baltic Times*, 16.05.02.

CHANGING MEMORY REGIMES

In sum, the contested monument to the Estonian soldiers who fought in the German army brought to light how counter-memories can enter into the official representation of the past, but can then be pushed back into the private sphere once the official interpretive framework, or memory regime, changes. In the course of a strengthening orientation towards the West, the specific Estonian interpretation of the Second World War clashed with the interpretive framework underlying the Western discourse on the topic. It can be concluded that, compared to the early '90s, a reorientation took place in the Estonian public by the end of that decade which no longer allowed the Estonian legionaries public space for their commemoration.⁶⁶ Consequently, the odd situation occurred that the individual memories of Estonians who fought in the German army were once more confined to the private sphere.

The Bronze Soldier Statue



THE BRONZE SOLDIER STATUE

The removal of the Lihula monument unleashed a wave of vandalism against Soviet-built memorials all over the country.⁶⁷ In recent years the

⁶⁶ Urmas SEAVER, Rooväli KÜLLIKE, “Pärnu sai SS-vormis ‘Euroopa vabaduse kaitsja’ bareljeefi” (Pärnu became the “savior of European freedom” in SS uniform), in *Postimees*, 23.07.02; Urmas SEAVER, Ojakivi MIRKO, “Pärnu võttis SS-vormis sõduriga ausamba maha” (Pärnu tore down the SS-soldier monument), in *Postimees*, 24.07.02.

⁶⁷ Aleksei GUNTER, “Riot police help remove controversial WWII monument”. The Bronze Soldier at the foot of Tonismägi in central Tallinn, which allegedly contains the ashes of fallen Soviet soldiers, was erected in 1947 (formerly with an eternal flame lit in front of the memorial). It became the concourse for the annual meetings of Red Army veterans on May 9 and September 22 (that is, on the “Victory Day” and on the “Day of the Liberation of Tallinn from fascism”) (photo: ITAR-TASS).

Bronze Soldier – a prominent Second World War memorial, known as the “monument to the liberators of Tallinn”, commemorating Soviet soldiers who died fighting against the German army, has become a field of commemorative combat over the revision of Estonia’s recent past.⁶⁸ It was vandalized with paint on the morning of May 9, 2005 – the 60th anniversary of “Victory Day”, and on numerous occasions thereafter.⁶⁹ May 9 became the focal point of attention for Red Army veterans and Estonian legionaries, all of whom claim to have fought for the “Estonian cause”.⁷⁰ But whereas for the Red Army veterans the date marks the “liberation” of Estonia from Nazi occupation and fascism, it represents the continuing occupation and the “Long Second World War” for many Estonians.⁷¹ Hence many Estonians publicly request the removal of this monument, arguing that it serves as a reminder of five decades of Soviet rule in Estonia; while for many Red Army veterans a removal implies the revision of the results of the Second World War.⁷²

The furor about the Bronze Soldier is indicative of the fact that the memory of those Estonians who fought in the Estonian Corps (Red Army) was pushed to the margins of the national narrative of post-1991 Estonia. Forgetting that (ethnic) Estonians fought as Soviet soldiers, many Estonians understand the Bronze Soldier to honor only the Russian soldiers (while equating Soviet with Russian).

To this day the official canon on how to remember the fallen remains unresolved in Estonia; nor is it decided whether the fallen on *all* warring sides

⁶⁸ Even though the inscription (in Russian and Estonian) reads “To the fallen of the Second World War” the statue depicts a soldier in Soviet uniform clearly defining the meaning of the monument, Steven Lee MYERS, “Debate Renewed: Did Moscow Free Estonia or Occupy it?”, in *The New York Times*, 25.01.07, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9402E6DB163FF936A15752C0A9619C8B63> (accessed 22.09.2010)

⁶⁹ Jari TANNER, “War monument in Estonia vandalized”, in *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 09.05.05; From wire reports “Candle vigil throws kind light on bitter monument”, in *The Baltic Times*, 15.09.04.

⁷⁰ Joel ALAS, “May 9 protestors call for removing Bronze Soldier statue”, in *The Baltic Times*, 10.05.06; Joel ALAS, “Brawl breaks out in shadow of the bronze memorial”, in *The Baltic Times*, 24.05.06. On May 9, 2006 the controversy reached a new height when Estonian nationalists clashed with Soviet veterans and members of the Russian-speaking community waving Soviet flags, Joel ALAS, “Coalition split over Bronze Soldier”, in *The Baltic Times*, 17.01.07.

⁷¹ Evidence for a different perception of European history came to show during the 60th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, when the Estonian and Lithuanian leaders did not travel to Moscow for the celebration on the 9th of May. The Latvian president attended the ceremony, using the publicity to demonstrate the Baltic view on the events of the Second World War (Johannes VOSSWINKEL, “Der 8. Mai 1945. Wo Russen Täter waren” (May 8, 1945. Where Russians were the Perpetrators), In *Die Zeit*, 04.05.05.

⁷² The dispute prompted members of the Russian Duma to push for sanctions against Estonia, Agence France-Presse, “Russia slams removal of WWII memorial”, in *The Washington Times*, 22.01.07. The Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called upon the other European countries not to permit “this kind of blasphemous attitude towards the memory of those who fought against fascism”, T.B.T. staff, “Russian foreign minister opposes sanctions against Estonia”, in *The Baltic Times*, 30.01.07.

shall be honored, or only selected groups⁷³. In an attempt to end this divisive and somewhat ethnocentric interpretation of the past, the chairman of the Russian Faction of the Reform Party, Sergei Ivanov, suggested replacing the Bronze Soldier with a monument to all soldiers who fell in the Second World War.⁷⁴ Ivanov's proposal thus includes all soldiers who fought in the armed forces and seems to be based on the assumption that soldiers generally are victims of their sovereign.⁷⁵ Furthermore, we would have to examine whether Ivanov's suggestion is born of humanitarian intent or whether he is in fact attempting to relativize the war crimes committed by soldiers of either side.⁷⁶ We need to be clear that the memorial in mind would only concern soldiers who fought in the war; because it is yet another matter to erect a monument for all the victims of war and tyranny in Estonia (see for instance in the case of the New Guard House in Berlin (In German, *Neue Wache*), which would unite perpetrators and victims of the war and of totalitarian regimes in their suffering and thus perilously blur the line between them.⁷⁷ The current Estonian Prime Minister Andrus Ansip has repeatedly spoken in favor of the removal of the Bronze Soldier as "Monuments must unite people, but the monument in question [the Bronze Soldier] is dividing people".⁷⁸ His main coalition partner, the Centre Party under Edgar Savisaar, is, however, against

⁷³ See: KATTAGO, SIOBHAN, "Commemorating Liberation and Occupation: War Memorials Along the Road to Narva", *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 39:4, 2008, pp. 431-449, here, p. 436.

⁷⁴ From Wire Reports "Russian-speaking NGOs to hold roundtable on Bronze Soldier", in *The Baltic Times* 07.06.06.

⁷⁵ Michael Walzer argues along these lines (Michael WALZER, *Just and Unjust Wars. A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, New York: Basic Books, 2000). Other scholars in "just war theory" – such as David Rodin (David RODIN, *War and Self-Defense*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), take a slightly more liberal stance, in that they allow for the fact that soldiers can be held responsible on an individual basis, because they have some freedom of choice even in the exceptional situation of war.

⁷⁶ In his case possibly more with the intention to relativize the war crimes committed by Soviet soldiers. I believe the purpose of relativizing the extent of a group's suffering or the gravity of the crimes committed by that group is that of whitewashing.

⁷⁷ Omar BARTOV, *Mirrors of Destruction. War, Genocide, and Modern Identity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 39. In 1993 the *Neue Wache* was rededicated as the central memorial site for the victim of war and tyranny. The plaque on the right side of the entrance reads "The *Neue Wache* is the site of memory and remembrance of the victims of war and tyranny". Subsequently, those nations and civilians who suffered and perished are listed in the same breath with fallen soldiers and with innocent victims of war (that is, killed at home, in captivity, and due to expulsion). The next section lists Jews, Sinti and Roma, homosexuals, and the mentally handicapped. Then those killed due to their religious or political beliefs are mentioned, followed by a paragraph on resistance fighters. The final section is dedicated to women and men persecuted and killed due to their resistance to the post-1945 totalitarian dictatorship. This is an extremely interesting example of an attempt to do justice to many different (that is, competing) victim groups, but the juxtaposition of victims of different periods and regimes – and here I agree with Bartov's assessment, is highly problematic, P. REICHEL, *Politik mit der Erinnerung: Gedächtnisorte im Streit um die nationalsozialistische Vergangenheit* (Politics of Remembrance: Sites of memory in the battle over the Nazi past), Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999.

⁷⁸ T.B.T., "Grave Mistakes", in *The Baltic Times*, 17.01.07.

the relocation of the Soviet-era memorial. Hence the Bronze soldier monument turned into one of the key issues in the run up to the election on March 4, 2007.⁷⁹

The “battle over monuments” in Estonia (and other Central and Eastern Europe societies) has a *longue durée* dimension, in that parts of monuments erected during the inter-war period (and symbolizing independent statehood) were rescued and hidden in the countryside during the foreign occupations.⁸⁰ It was related to me that candles were regularly lit at the remaining pediments of monuments in memory of Estonian soldiers who fought in the War of Independence which had been dismantled after the Soviet takeover. These were understood as silent acts of resistance.⁸¹

IN CONCLUSION

In this article I have argued that historical revisionism is intimately linked to the ideological and political dimension of history and that it tends to be more connected to the “public use” of history as it is targeted towards a wider public and not just to the scholarly community.

I examined three landmarks of Estonian historical culture: whereas the Estonian Occupation Museum aims at cementing the notion of Estonian suffering, the Lihula monument and the Estonian Freedom Fighters’ claims are linked more to ideas of national resistance. Through the example of the Estonian legionaries, I demonstrated how the revision of history is continuously contested and how monuments as “sites of memory” can turn into “contested terrain”, because their destruction or removal causes a “dislocation” or “displacement” of the respective group memories.⁸² Ultimately these monu-

⁷⁹ Joel ALAS, “Coalition split”. In an attempt to resolve the dispute the Estonian parliament accepted a bill banning the display of Soviet and Nazi symbols that might incite hatred in late 2006, Joel ALAS, “Free speech questioned as Estonia prepares to ban Soviet, Nazi symbols”, In *The Baltic Times*, 06.12.06. Furthermore, the Parliament adopted the “War Graves Protection Act” on January 10, 2007 to establish the legal basis for the removal of the statue. A commission on war burial sites was soon established to decide (along with the parliament) if a monument contradicts public interest or if it is located in an inappropriate public place. Eventually, the Parliament has considered a draft law on renaming September 22 as “Day of Mourning”, Vladimir SOCOR, “Bronze Soldier set to leave Tallinn as last Soviet Soldier”, in *Eurasia Monitor Daily*, 12.01.07.

⁸⁰ A similar emotional attachment can be witnessed with regard to forbidden books, indicative of the existential dimension of history.

⁸¹ Estonian historian and politician, alias OSKAR, interviewed by M. Wulf, Tallinn, Estonia, October 1, 2003.

⁸² Every collective memory is anchored (and unfolds) in a spatial framework (as well as in a social framework). See: M. HALBWACHS, *La topographie légendaire des évangiles en Terre Sainte. Étude de mémoire collective* (The Legendary Topography of the Gospel in the Holy Land), PUF: Paris, 1941; M. HALBWACHS, *La Mémoire collective* (The collective memory), New York: Harper & Row, 1980; M. HALBWACHS, *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (Social Frames of Memory), Alcan: Paris, 1925; Pierre NORA, *Zwischen Geschichte und Gedächtnis* (Between History and Memory), Berlin: Wagenbach, 1990; Pierre NORA (ed.), *Realms of Memory*:

ments are so fiercely contested, because they are sources of group identities (that is, the existential dimension of history); we can thus speak of displaced group memories or identities. These battles over monuments are battles between competing interpretive frameworks, that is, between the specific official and local Estonian points of view, the Western reading of the Second World War, and lastly pro-Russian, and dated Soviet views of the past.

I end by pointing out that I consider further comparative research in the iconography of cultural memories in post-Soviet and post-Socialist societies to be very fruitful.

ADDENDUM

In 2010 the former *lieu* of the Bronze Soldier statue at *Tõnismägi* is no more than a gash void for those busy urban dwellers who even care to remember what used to stand there up until April 26, 2007. Had it not been a burial site, the Bronze Soldier statue would have been removed earlier. However in March 2007 Andrus Ansip made its removal and relocation the key election promise of his Reformist Party. The excavations of the soldiers' graves (in preparation for their reburial) on April 26, soon after prime minister Ansip's election victory, resulted in two nights of extended youth riots unseen in Tallinn's recent history. Other repercussions included a beleaguered Estonian embassy in Moscow and an alleged "cyber-war attack" on Estonia.⁸³ The statue's relocation to a nearby military cemetery (mainly from soldiers of the War of Independence) just before the annual "Victory Day" celebrations commonly celebrated by large numbers of the Russian speaking community (on May 9) can be seen as a deliberate practice of externalizing divisive memories (and associated commemorative practices) from a public space to a nonfunctional cemetery at the city margins. The trend of eliminating those interpretations of the Second World War not in line with the official narrative furthermore illustrates that the current government does not allow for a pluralisation of memories of the war even though forty percent of Tallinn's inhabitants are Russian speakers. While the Bronze Soldier statue – as one of the last remnants of Estonia's Soviet past, was removed from the city surface, the new 28 meters high Cross of Liberty statue was finally put up in 2009 on Tallinn's prominent Freedom Square (In Estonian *Vabaduse Väljak*). Initially planned as highpoint of the ninety years celebrations of independent Estonian statehood in 2008

rethinking the French Past. Conflicts and Divisions, vol. I, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996; Pierre NORA (ed.), *Realms of Memory: the construction of the French Past. Traditions.*, vol. II, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

⁸³ Maria MALKSÖÖ's book review of PILLE PETERSOO, MAREK TAMM (eds.), *Monumentaalne konflikt: mälu, poliitika ja identiteet tänapäeva Eestis* (Monumental conflict: memory, politics and identity in contemporary Estonia), Tallinn: Varrak, 2008, in *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 2009, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 163–165; K. BRÜGGERMANN, "The politics of history and the 'war of monuments' in Estonia", *Nationalities papers*, July 2008, vol. 36, no. 3, pp. 425–448.

(strategically omitting the Soviet period 1940–1991), it represents the formerly repressed memories of those who fought in the War of Independence symbolizing the liberty of the Estonian people. The Freedom fighters are utilized as a unifying point of reference, even though this memory can also be interpreted as a divisive one, since their fight was directed against German and Russian dominance. A closer look at the Cross of Liberty reveals a hand brandishing a sword discernible in its centre. This is the Estonian Cross of Liberty (In Estonian, *Eesti Vabadusrist*), a medal to honor (military) services during the War of Independence. However its consecutive use by Estonians fighting in the Estonian 20th SS division makes the inclusion of this insignia into the design of the Cross of Liberty statue controversial. A preliminary analysis of the latest changes to Estonia's commemorative landscape and memory regime would indicate that its EU accession six years ago brought with it a new national assertiveness or confidence, leading to a shift in the core national narrative from one of struggle for freedom and collective suffering to the trope of resistance. These material re-interpretations of the recent past in post-Soviet Tallinn can thus be considered as a further, spatial dimension adding to the uses of history outlined in this article.

The Cross of Liberty



Vabaduse Väljak, Tallinn, Estonia, 2010 (photo: T. Altnurme)

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