

Voicing past and present uncertainties: The relocation of a Soviet World War II memorial and the politics of memory in Estonia

Inge Melchior and Oane Visser

Abstract: This article analyzes the politics of memory around the Estonian government's decision to relocate Tallinn's World War II memorial of a Soviet soldier. It shows why and how legitimizing national discourses resonated with and influenced personal narratives among ordinary Estonians. It also discusses discourses of Estonians who took a more critical stance on the relocation. The article argues that the dominant discourse in Estonia has been characterized by a notion of suffering and a search for recognition from the West, while turning its back to the East (Estonian Russians and Russia). In a similar vein, the relocation aimed at a breakaway from the Soviet past and its discourse, while at the same time reinforcing its perceived continuity. As such, the Estonian case gives insight into processes of remembering, amnesia, and the quest for recognition at the new border of the European Union, within a context of highly contentious minority politics.

Keywords: collective memory, national identity, politics of recognition, post-communism, statue politics

Whereas *Tõnismägi* in Tallinn was historically crowded on 22 September with singing and dancing Estonian Russians, in 2007 the place was almost empty.¹ A police car guarded the spot where the Bronze Soldier once stood, and where now only planted flowers were to be seen. Still, there were indications that something momentous had happened here, that this ground had a strong, emotional meaning. One man was nervously waiting at the corner of the square with red flowers in his hand. When the policemen drove away for a few-minute break, the man approached the flowerbed and put his flowers down as a tear rolled down his cheek.

Clearly, he had not been the only one visiting *Tõnismägi* that day: hundreds of red flowers were brought here, marking the significance of what had taken place at exactly this spot.

Five months earlier, on 27 April 2007, the statue had been removed from its original location in the city center (*Tõnismägi*) and relocated to the Estonian Defense Forces cemetery on the outskirts of Tallinn. This decision was made, according to Prime Minister Andrus Ansip, to guarantee public safety (Ehala 2009). Ethnic conflicts around this World War II memorial, erected by the Soviet authorities in 1947, started to escalate in 2006. The Bronze Soldier had become

the touchstone for conflicts between (mainly young) Estonians and Estonian Russians, accusing each other of having false collective memories. For the Russian minority who make up one-third of the population, the Bronze Soldier is important as the monument is officially dedicated to the Red Army Soldiers who died liberating Tallinn from Nazi occupation. For the majority of Estonians, the statue symbolizes the “national tragedy” of fifty years of Soviet occupation (Lehti, Jutila, and Jokisipilä 2008: 398).

Most studies explaining the relocation of the Bronze Soldier take only a macro perspective, ignoring how the political processes involved resonate with everyday discourses. This article, based on ethnographic research among predominantly young and highly educated Estonians in Tartu from August 2007 until February 2008, explores the often emotional discourses that these Estonians have drawn upon to either support or disapprove of the decision of the Estonian government to relocate the Bronze Soldier, and the political interpretations of history in light of which to understand these discourses.²

Many commentators perceive the post-1989 resurgence of ethnic nationalism as resulting from deeply rooted national identities, resilient enough to have survived decades of repression by anti-national communist regimes (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 25). However, this “return-of-the-oppressed” view is problematic. “The tendency to objectify identity makes it more difficult to treat groupness as an *emergent* property of particular structural and conjunctural settings rather than always there in some form” (ibid.: 28). To avoid this tendency, the article acknowledges the national political, socio-economic, and international context.

Most post-socialist countries saw a rise of populist nationalism after joining the European Union (EU) in the 2000s. Various authors see economic insecurity and disillusionment as underlying causes. The turn to identity and nationalism seem to follow the discrediting of class politics after 1989 and the difficulties of mobilizing on a class basis (Kalb and Halmai 2010; Ost 2005; on Orientalizing the Other, see Buchowski 2006; Repeckaite, this volume). Estonia

was particularly susceptible to a nationalist reaction to EU interference. From 1991, the country has been governed mainly by conservative parties that emphasized national identity and Estonia’s sovereignty against anything perceived to threaten it (Kelley 2004; Saarts 2008).

This article argues that the sudden revival of World War II and Soviet memories can be understood in the context of Estonia’s increasing integration into the West and its conservative, nationalist policies (Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008: 431). It explores the declining influence of Western requirements concerning minority rights after EU accession, which arguably offered the Estonian government the opportunity to follow more confrontational ethnic policies (Saarts 2008). It also shows the necessity to understand the wider “war of monuments” in Estonia, which was initiated by the erection of the so-called Lihula monument in 2004, right after the country’s accession to the EU. EU criticism of this monument, which depicted a soldier wearing Nazi symbols, did not lead to attention for the lacunae or downsides of national memory making. Instead it inspired radical, nationalist Estonians to gain support from the population for “the Estonian”—culturally exclusionist—interpretation of World War II. These recent controversial memory politics in Estonia, externally being labeled fascist, have internally not been perceived as such (Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008: 425).

Monuments, memories, and identities

Monuments are often studied as *lieux de mémoire*, places connecting the past and the present (Nora 1989). In this article, we do not depart from the idea of a monument’s “inherent” meaning, but rather from the processes and contexts in which people provide meaning to a monument. Although each person might attach different meanings to the same monument because of different life experiences, he/she does not do so in a social vacuum. The memories connected with and evoked by certain places are primarily embedded in “vicarious mem-

ory”; a perception of history as if one has experienced it him/herself (Climo 2002). In Estonia, the family is an important community in which personal memories and emotions are shared. Moreover, a wider socially constituted framework is at work here (Halbwachs 1992), first and foremost directed by political groups.

History is a key ingredient in identity politics, mobilized to make certain claims or legitimize certain decisions and power relations (Wertsch 2002: 31). By means of commemoration days, ceremonies, and monuments, political institutions provide a common framework to group members to interpret the world that surrounds them. This framework guides collective remembering as well as intended and unintended forgetting. Accordingly, the people that “write history” hold tremendous power as providers of social frameworks (Lambek and Antze 1996). Monuments therefore serve as “effective symbols for revising the past;” their rearrangement asserts the recurrence of national power and humiliates the former master, because the destruction of a statue symbolically devaluates the commemorated person or event from sacred to profane (Verdery 1999: 52).

People interact with such politically written frameworks, as they long for their stories to be patterned by a collectively shared (official) narrative. First, linking their personal memories to “official” stories provides coherency and a broader meaning (Jenkins 2004: 127). Second, it can serve as a form of recognition of the “right” to live up to the beliefs one keeps (see Fraser 2000). Without recognition, people can feel socially subordinated and become engaged in an everlasting struggle for official acknowledgement. The question “is it possible that what has happened in the past will repeat itself in the future?” might haunt them (Hodgkin and Radstone 2003: 99).

A feeling of misrecognition, may even lead to “egoism of victimization”; little or no empathy for one’s enemy’s suffering, even if the suffering on the other side is palpably evident and comparable to or greater than one’s own (Volkan 2001). This occurs in the case of “chosen traumas,” when a group does not mourn and slowly

accepts an event, but “chooses” to dwell on and mythologize the event and the suffering it caused. Consequently, the memory and its humiliation are passed on to the next generation (ibid.). The relocation of the Bronze Soldier involves precisely such processes.

From World War I to Post-Soviet Independence

Estonia is a relatively young national state. As most of Eastern Europe, its territory was ruled for centuries by non-Estonian-speaking imperial elites: Germans, Poles, Swedes, and Russians. At the end of World War I, counter-revolutionary Estonian nationalists and Russians fought a War of Independence against Trotsky’s Red Army. Estonia was declared an independent, parliamentary republic in 1920 (Hiio, Maripuu, and Paavle 2006). The new state was politically unstable, and increasingly influenced by groups with fascist tendencies. The Estonians who had fought for independence, commonly referred to as the freedom fighters or the Vaps movement, organized themselves in the “Estonian War of Independence Veterans’ League.” They instigated the drift toward rightist authoritarianism in Estonia. Kasekamp (2000) has argued that it is hard not to label these former freedom fighters as Nazis, partly because one of their leaders, Hjalmar Mäe, later became the head of the collaborationist Estonian Self-Administration during the German occupation.

Although these former freedom fighters, perceived in society as patriotic war heroes, were extremely popular, they did not gain direct political power as they lacked a charismatic leader (Kasekamp 2000: 155). In 1934, following political unrest caused by the global economic depression, all parties supported President Konstantin Päts’s declaration of a state of emergency; an in-house *coup d’état* to head off the seizure of power by the proto-fascist/opposition forces. Subsequently, Päts disbanded the parliament and established authoritarian leadership. In other words, Päts put much of the Vaps’ program into practice (ibid.: 157).

Independence lasted for twenty years until the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was signed between the Soviet Union and Germany, in which Estonia was allocated to the Soviet Union. The Estonian government resigned and was taken over by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Hiio, Maripuu, and Paavle 2006: ix). In August 1940, the Baltic States officially became part of the Soviet Union. In the following year, many Estonians were arrested and deported to Siberia. The exact number of people deported during the large-scale deportations in June 1941 has still not been established, but the list of the Bureau of the Register of the Repressed of Estonia contains 10,861 names, of which 3,150 people were executed (Kangilaski et al. 2005: xiii, 27). Between 1939 and 1941, Estonia lost about 100,000 inhabitants of whom 59,967 never returned (ibid.: 14–15, 28).³

In the summer of 1941, during the battle for Estonia's territory between the approaching German forces and the Soviet Army, thousands of Estonian men voluntarily served in the German Army (Kangilaski et al. 2005: 28). After their victory, the Germans mobilized many nationalistic Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians to carry out occupation policies in order to minimize the need for German resources to attack the Soviet Union. In Estonia, men opposing the Soviet Union had already organized themselves as "Forest Brothers." Together with former defense force members, they created the *Omakaitse*. Their main aim was to free Estonia of communists and "other hostile elements." In interwar Estonia Jews had been associated with Communism, and this parallel was revived in World War II (Kasekamp 2000: 73–74).⁴ After October 1942 the *Omakaitse* was financed by the *Wehrmacht* and expanded to a force of 40,000 men (Birn 2001: 181–83).

Omakaitse members (about 1,000–1,200 men out of the 40,000) are held responsible for many of the killings during these years (Hiio, Maripuu, and Paavle 2006: xxi). Of the 4,500 Estonian Jews, about 3,500 managed to flee to the Soviet Union (Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008). Almost all of the remaining Jews were killed by the *Omakaitse* and the Estonian police

(Birn 2001: 188; Hiio, Maripuu, and Paavle 2006: xviii). In 1942, Jews from other Central and Eastern European countries were brought to Estonia and those who were not selected to work, were shot (Birn 2001: 191; Hiio, Maripuu, and Paavle 2006: xviii). During the war, 8,500 (foreign and Estonian) Jews lost their lives in Estonia, 61,000 in Latvia, and 195,000 in Lithuania (Weiss-Wendt 2008: 476). In total, 7,800 Estonian citizens died during the German occupation, of whom 15 percent were Russian speakers and 12 percent were Jews (Kangilaski et al. 2005: 29).

In 1944, the Soviet Army approached the Estonian border again. Politicians from the pre-war era, among others Jüri Uluots who was in "authoritative moral opposition to the Nazi-installed Self-Administration" and had avoided Nazi collaboration so far, encouraged nearly 40,000 more young Estonians to join the German Army (Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008: 427–28). The battle was portrayed as a fight for Estonian survival, in which the assaults on Jews and Russian speakers in Estonia were downplayed. In some instances, Estonian men faced each other in combat; one fighting for the German Army, the other for the Soviet forces. In September 1944, the Soviet Army ended German rule in Estonia, reincorporating Estonia into the Soviet Union. The resistance of the Forest Brothers only decreased after Stalin's death in 1953 (ibid.).

World War II played an important role in the process of building a Soviet state, with World War II monuments erected all over the territory (Levinson 1998). The Bronze Soldier was one of these, unveiled in Tallinn on 22 September 1947. One year before, an earlier version had been blown up by two Estonian schoolgirls who disagreed with the official narrative of Soviet "liberation." In the Soviet Union it was difficult for Estonians and other nationalities to share their personal memories, because "the public sphere belonged to the party-state, which appropriated unto itself the rights to space, privilege, discourse and communication" (Kligman 1990: 398, as cited in Watson 1994: 10–11). The (state) politics of memory, however, was not static between

1922 and 1989. It was under Stalin's rule that the deportations of 1941—and the next mass deportation wave in 1949 to which 32,536 Estonians fell victim—took place (Kangilaski et al. 2005: 20). Stalin also drastically revised the public space, replacing Estonian independence monuments by Soviet victory monuments. Under Khrushchev's leadership, the Soviet regime embarked on a process of de-Stalinization, denouncing Stalin's purges, but this was halted under Brezhnev. In the 1980s, Gorbachev introduced glasnost, which paved the way for Estonia's independence.

At the end of the 1980s, the Estonian Heritage Society and victim organizations such as Memento were founded.⁵ Another important symbolic event took place on 23 August 1989. Nearly two million Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians formed a human chain as a form of protest from Tallinn to Vilnius, to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. In 1991, Estonia (like Lithuania and Latvia) announced its regained sovereignty in the aftermath of the failed coup of Kremlin hardliners against Mikhail Gorbachev.

Estonian historiography

After regaining its independence, Estonia drastically revised its official history. Many of the politicians who came to power in 1991 had been independence fighters (often with a history of political imprisonment), who used “[h]istory ... to restore a nation-state” (Ahonen 2001: 190). Especially the National Fatherland Party and the Estonian National Independence Party were powerful during these years (Kelley 2004: 95). Images of Estonia as a post-Soviet state were dismissed, as politicians presented the country as historically belonging to “Europe,” in particular to the Nordic countries.

Certain moments are of particular importance in Estonia's current official historiography (Pääbo 2008: 10). Despite the fact that the sovereign government of the first period of Estonian independence after 1920 was unstable and the country was enduring the economic depres-

sion of the 1930s, today the independence period is remembered as a time of economic growth and democratic progress, abruptly ended in 1940 by the first Soviet occupation (Kõresaar 2005).

The mass deportations are another crucial event in Estonia's historiography. The national sufferings caused by these deportations explain why many Estonians welcomed the Germans as liberators (Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008: 427), and why so many fought for and alongside the Germans when the Soviet Army returned. These men that were called fascists during the Soviet period, were honored as freedom fighters after 1991 (ibid.: 428).

In light of these national sufferings, a chapter on the Holocaust is completely absent from Estonian historiography. Unlike in Latvia and Lithuania, it has never become a subject of debate. According to Weiss-Wendt (2008: 475), “[m]ost Estonians think of the Holocaust as a superimposed discourse that has no direct connection to their country.” The intense remembering of the suffering during Soviet times and the partial forgetting of the sufferings under Nazi rule—although the dominant discourse does say that both regimes were “equally evil”—has created an atmosphere in which people remember the Soviet era as one long period of repression. Exactly this discourse of victimhood has become part of Estonian nationhood, which implies that public Soviet nostalgia is still a problematic and taboo issue (Grünberg 2009).

Another controversial question concerns 22 September 1944, the day the Soviet Army entered Tallinn. According to the Soviet narrative, the Red Army liberated Estonia from the Nazis that day. Estonian historiography tells a different story; Estonians had restored their independence a few days before the Soviet Union invaded, therefore it was an occupation and not a liberation (Hiio, Maripuu, and Paavle 2006; Kattago 2009; Pääbo 2008). Thus an important question arises with respect to the status of the Russian minority: Were they liberators or occupants of Estonia?

The politicians that came to power in 1991 tried to restore Estonia as the nation it had been in the interwar period. This idealized image was

used as a legitimization for a policy that did not entitle Russians who had come to Estonia after 16 June 1940 to Estonian citizenship (Kelley 2004: 95). In symbolic terms, members of the Russian minority were classified as illegal occupants and lacked a positive place in the country's history (Ahonen 2001: 180). Surveys conducted in 1994 indicate that young Russophones felt excluded from history (Angvik 1997). Besides this symbolical exclusion, their statelessness also reduced the official power of the Russian minority, as many were not able to vote or represent themselves in politics (Kelley 2004: 95). By 2002, nearly 180,000 of the Russian speakers were still stateless (Feldman 2006: 691). In Lithuania, the citizenship policies have been much more liberal than in Estonia (and Latvia), granting citizenship to everyone who applied for it (Onken 2007: 40).

Differences in valuing World War II memorials

As part of the ideal to restore Estonia as it was before 1940, many of the demolished independence monuments were re-erected and Soviet statues were either removed or changed after 1991. In the case of the Bronze Soldier, the plaque that read "Eternal glory for the heroes who have fallen for the liberation and sovereignty of our country" was replaced with the more neutral "For the fallen in World War II." It was in this context, in 1995, that the "Youth and History" surveys were conducted, in which data was gathered on the importance that people attach to World War II memorials.⁶ Figure 1 places the evaluation of WWII memorials in Estonia in relation to the evaluation in thirty different countries.

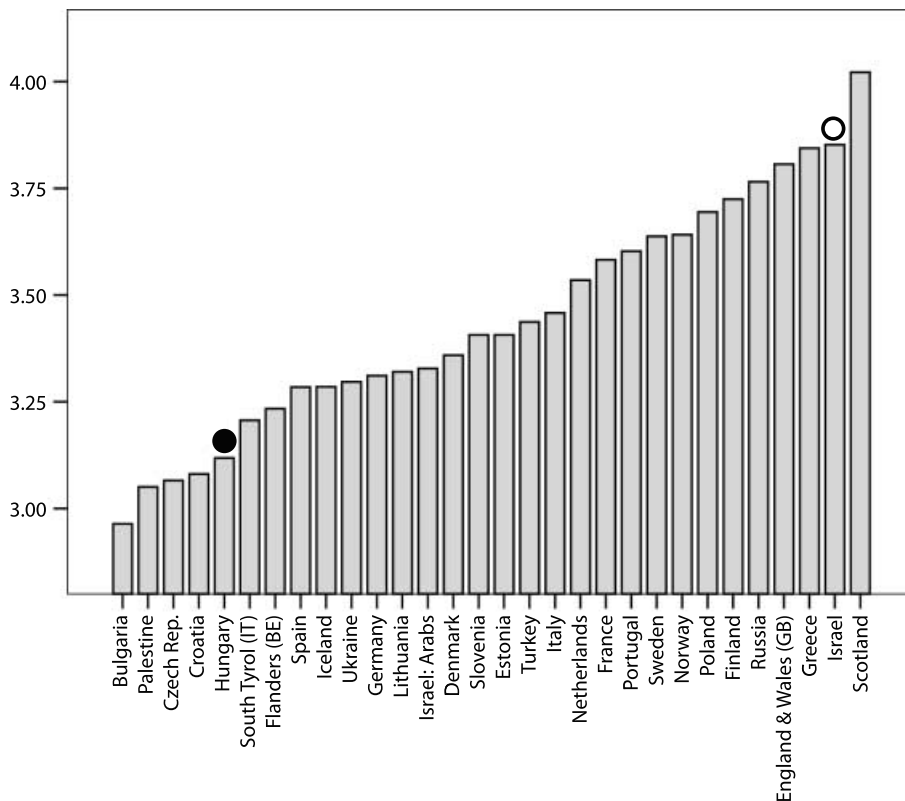


Figure 1. Importance of the preservation of World War II memorials, based on the "Youth and History" survey, 1995

Figure 1 shows that compared to other Europeans, Estonians evaluated the preservation of World War II memorials averagely (fifteenth place), whereas this was highly important to Russians (fifth place). However, when the Estonian population is split into ethnic Estonians and Estonian Russians, a remarkable difference is visible: the black dot represents the Estonians, the white dot the Russian minority. The data shows that for Estonian Russians the preservation of World War II memorials was even more important than for Russians living in Russia. Hence, the discrepancy *within* Estonia was much larger than *between* Russia and Estonia. The Estonian Russians were probably more aware of “the Russian perspective” on the past as it distinguished the minority from the Estonians among whom it was living (Jenkins 2004). Moreover, the figure shows that no single Western European country, where World War II memorials are mainly monuments intended for the victims, evaluates them less than ethnic Estonians do, where they are dedicated to (often Soviet) heroes. Generally, a clear gap between post-communist and Western European countries is visible. Below, based on the interview data, the article will delve further into the divergent ways of memory making and explain these differences in the evaluation of monuments.

From the mid-1990s on, after these data were gathered, the political climate in Estonia changed slightly. Although the government was still rightwing-oriented and nationalist, it was relatively moderate concerning ethnic issues (Kelley 2004: 97). The EU accession requirements in terms of minority rights arguably played an important role in enforcing a more moderate stance (Saarts 2008). Further, many Estonians understood that the minority was not leaving and that practical solutions had to be found to establish peaceful coexistence. Also, Russian “non-citizens” increasingly passed the language test and became Estonian citizens. By the turn of the millennium, the tense relationship decreased even further, when the economy took an upturn and relations with Russia started to normalize. People were more oriented toward material wealth and the future than toward their

past experiences (Anepaio 2002: 55; Ehala 2009: 151). The Bronze Soldier managed to survive the rearrangement of public space in the 1990s, aside from the replaced plaque and the removed eternal flame (Kaasik 2006).

Memory politics from 2004 to 2007

The Estonian *Geschichtspolitik* entered a new phase when the country joined the EU in 2004. The requirements to meet European “standards of multiculturalism” were portrayed in local media as a new possible threat to Estonian sovereignty. This was part of the more general fear that Estonia as a small country would lose its regained independence from Moscow to the new paternalism from Brussels (Mikkil and Kasekamp 2008). According to Saarts (2008), the eventual entry into the EU ended the external pressure on minority rights issues, paving the way for a more nationalist stance.

In 2002, Estonian veterans who had served in the German Army erected a monument for their fallen compatriots, but the city authorities dismantled it before its unveiling. In 2004, just after entering the EU, those veterans did succeed in erecting the monument in Lihula, which had a more confrontational mayor (Burch and Smith 2007: 913). The monument portrayed an Estonian soldier in a uniform with Nazi insignia (see Figure 2). The inscription read: “Estonian men who fought in 1940–1945 against Bolshevism and for the restoration of Estonian independence” (Lehti, Jutila, and Jokisipilä 2008: 398). The state authorities were invited to the unveiling ceremony but did not attend. Prime Minister Juhan Parts stated that although he honors the Estonian World War II soldiers, the monument was a provocation and at odds with “real history” (Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008: 431–32).

The BBC covered the event under a headline: “Estonia unveils Nazi War Monument” (Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008: 432). Under widespread protest and pressure from the EU, as well as from Russia and Jewish organizations, the Estonian government decided to remove the



Figure 2. Lihula monument at its current location in the Museum of Fight for Estonia's Freedom, source: Wikipedia, DJ Sturm, 23 June 2008

statue. Nationalist Estonians experienced the demand for dismantlement as a lack of understanding by Western Europeans of the Estonian experiences in World War II (Burch and Smith 2007: 914), and felt ignored by their national government that obeyed the “external” requests.

It was in this context that new organizations were founded to preserve “Estonian” culture. The relationship between Estonians and Russophones moreover became tenser due to certain political decisions taken at that time. In 2006, Estonian president Arnold Rüütel announced—despite contrary advice from members of Estonia’s cultural elite—that he would not attend the sixtieth commemoration of the victory over Nazism in Moscow. He stated that the end of

World War II did not mean liberty for Estonians (see Onken 2007). This was fuel for the Estonian Russians who felt ignored as full members of Estonian society. As the Soviet victory in World War II became more central to Russian identity, the Bronze Soldier and Soviet symbols became increasingly important for these Russian speakers. The eagerness to remove the statue from the city center grew among nationalist Estonians (Ehala 2009: 145). The memory conflict slowly escalated.

On 9 May 2006, the day the Russians commemorate the end of World War II, some radical Estonians came to wave the Estonian flag and put red paint on the soldier’s face. The police removed these Estonians from the Russian



Figure 3. Bronze Soldier at its current location at Tallinn war cemetery, source: Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty, 9 May 2007

crowd. In order to prevent more vandalism to the Bronze Soldier, some young Russian speakers organized a night watch to guard the monument (Lehti, Jutila, and Jokisipilä 2008: 399). The next year in the run-up to the national elections in March, the Reform Party made the removal of the monument an election promise, playing into and reinforcing the sentiments of insecurity, dissatisfaction, and fear among part of the Estonians, while bypassing the Nationalist Party on the right side (Pääbo 2008). A law was adopted to remove the monument and shortly after that, the Reform Party became the largest party in the elections.

On 26 April 2007, less than two weeks before the Victory Day celebrations, Estonian authorities put a huge tent over the monument to investigate the bodies buried under it. This act was perceived as offensive by (mainly young) radical Russophones and the timing was seen as

a provocation. Russia, which had become assertive due to its recovering economy and energy-based power, actively used its Russian language media to play into the fears and dissatisfaction of Estonian Russians. This further fueled the Estonian discourse of threat, as Estonian Russians who demonstrated and threw stones were described as instruments of the Kremlin (Lehti, Jutila, and Jokisipilä 2008). At the last minute (at 3.40 a.m.), the government decided to immediately remove the whole statue. For two more nights, people were rioting in the streets; one young Russian died in the chaos.

The meaning of the Bronze Soldier for ordinary Estonians

Ethnographic fieldwork in Tartu from August 2007 until February 2008 revealed that the per-

sonal stories of ordinary Estonians to either support or disapprove of the Bronze Soldier's relocation, clearly reflect the public discourses of insecurity and victimhood.⁷ Tatyana, a twenty-year-old Estonian Russian woman stated:

"The Bronze Soldier is more than just a symbol, he is somehow holy. That is because it is so closely connected to the history of our nation. In World War II all Russians suffered a lot. There has been no family without sufferings. My grandfather died, my great grandparents died, other family members had to flee."

Indeed, the Soviet Union suffered severely during World War II. In that sense, the Bronze Soldier has revealed a competition for victimhood of the Russian and the Estonian people. Tatyana emphasized not only the victimhood of Russians but also their victory, portraying the Bronze Soldier as a "liberator": "My grandparents fought for our liberty, they gave their lives."

This symbolism is experienced as threatening by some Estonians, because they perceive continuity between the former Soviet discourse and the perceived "false" memory of present-day Russians. For instance, Ülle, an Estonian woman in her mid-sixties, drew a parallel between the cruel Soviet soldiers and the Russian minority, while legitimating her approval of the relocation:

"It stood there all the time to honor the Soviet soldiers ... that started here to torture children and grownups and mothers and fathers. Such awful memories to [*sic*] these soldiers who said that they brought liberty. They gathered here on every victory day in the night and they said bad words, drank a lot, and shouted, and so on."

Note that Ülle did not differentiate between the "Soviet soldiers who tortured" ("they") and the people who gathered near the Bronze Soldier. The Estonian Russians as successors of the Soviets are held responsible for past suffering. Moreover, implicitly, unpleasant but not physically threatening behavior of Estonian Russians, is linked to Soviet violence and torture. In this

way, she created a discourse in which the relocation of the monuments is totally "justified"; Russian speakers had no right to complain, after what "they" had done to "us."

Further note that Ülle was not yet born in 1941 during the first time the Soviets took over the country and the first large-scale deportations took place, and she was still young when the Soviet Army returned to Estonia. Nevertheless, she spoke about "memories," due to the sense of "vicarious memory" (Climo 2002). The emotional bond between family members allows the incorporation of someone else's memories as one's own. This sense of "memory" is further reinforced by the tendency to see the Soviet era as one homogeneous period. Many of the informants did not distinguish between Stalinism and the Soviet regime at large. Thus, by having experienced some part of the Soviet era, they feel they were part of the early period of Soviet repression as well.

Interesting in this regard is that none of our Estonian informants regarded him/herself as (post-)Soviet, although Estonia was part of the Soviet system for nearly five decades. Many Estonians present their relationship toward "Europe" and democracy as a definitive break with being (post-)Soviet, as becomes clear from the following statement on an Estonian blog discussing the Bronze Soldier riots:

"It's about choosing whether you want to be a 'Soviet person,' *homo sovieticus* [*sic*] who has no respect for anything and spits on it all, or whether you want to be a law-abiding person living in [the] democratic Estonian Republic, member state of the European Union and NATO."⁸

In this context Soviet is associated with notions such as backward and non-European, a tendency Buchowski describes as "internal Orientalism" (2006; see also Repeckaite, this volume). Soviets are depicted as people who do not respect European values and Estonia's sovereignty.

Here it becomes clear how the public discourse on minority issues from the early 1990s resonates in the everyday life of ordinary peo-

ple. The decision not to grant automatic citizenship to Russians living or even born in Estonia was legitimized by depicting the Estonian Russians as remnants of “illicit colonization” (Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008: 429). Assimilation of the minority was presented as the natural order of things in a European country, whereas EU pleas for more attention for values of multiculturalism and diversity were presented as a misunderstanding of history and a threat to the new independence of Estonia.⁹

The questioned ability of Estonian Russians to speak Estonian, which is an official requirement to obtain citizenship, was a frequently mentioned topic in discussing the relocation of the Bronze Soldier. Apparently, the link between the April riots and integration issues was easily made. Linda (21 years old) for example narrated about the “unwillingness” of Russians to adapt. “I once went to buy a white bread in Tallinn, but the lady behind the desk was not able to understand me. I can’t even speak Estonian in my own country!” Not learning the language is perceived as a sign of disrespect.

Although the need for assimilation, and especially language competency, was not disputed by our informants, some of them had a more nuanced view on the minority’s willingness to learn Estonian and on its level of Estonian fluency. Sirje (25 years old) did not complain about the poor integration of the Estonian Russians. Just like Maie (21 years old), she stressed that “the Russians who live in Estonia are part of Estonia also. ... They also want to learn Estonian.” In contrast, Aino (21 years old) and Linda, who approved of the relocation, stressed that the Russian minority “does not want to learn the language.”¹⁰ They linked this perceived non-assimilation to a discourse of threat and insecurity.

The discourse of threat

The idea that allowing an open society with diverse forms of memory-making would be a symbolic, or even physical and political threat to Estonian sovereignty, was reinforced by govern-

ment actions such as sending text messages to all citizens to stay at home during the Bronze soldier riots, and a mounting public discourse of threat and fear. The Russian minority is not only being held responsible for the Soviet atrocities or for bringing up unwanted memories. In addition, the Estonian Russians, most of whom changed from “privileged migrants” (before 1991) into a “disenfranchised ethnic minority” without any political power or economic dominance, are presented as a threat.

Tiina (32 years old) narrated the sense of panic and threat she felt during the Bronze Soldier conflicts:

“In April I walked around in Tartu and I was thinking that ‘I don’t want Tartu to be destroyed again.’ ... Then I realized how easy it is to destroy something. It takes maybe one or two days and it is gone, *again*.”

Tiina was mainly concerned about the fragility of Estonia, and did not make explicit references to international security. In other narratives, just as in the public discourse, the supposed threat of internal “disloyalty” of Estonian Russians, molded with discourses of international insecurity—the threat of the Russian state. Linda stated: “We are afraid that we will be smashed again, just like this, so easily.” Jüri (23 years old) stated; “We have this smaller country next to giant Russia. That is why we have a bigger sense of danger.” Andres’s (50 years old) main fear was Russia’s unreliability: “Many Estonians experience a feeling of threat from Russia. [Because] Russia made serious decisions.” For example, Russia restricted cross-border trade, “attacked” Estonian websites, and stopped Russian trains from crossing the Russian-Estonian border (Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008; Kattago 2009). Some Estonians even drew up an escape plan because of their fears. “My mother really has a plan. She is an absolutely normal and smart person ... She has a plan of escaping when the Russians come.” Tiina, her mother, and grandmother believed that the “war of monuments” could escalate into a real war between Estonia and Russia.

A few informants had an alternative view. Those Estonians that did not support the relocation did not express discourses of fear, continuity of suffering, or negative attitudes toward the (Estonian) Russians. For Sirje the relocation was not necessary: “I didn’t experience the Estonian independence in a state of loss. ... I have this feeling of security and believe in our government.” Like Anne (24 years old), she did not see the Russian minority as (former) perpetrators but as victims, hence not forming a threat at all. Anne even felt sorry for the Estonian Russians; in general they are not treated equally and now the Estonian government decided to remove their memorial. The difference in opinions can be partially explained by the fact that both Anne and Sirje clearly distinguished between the Soviet authorities and the current Russian minority. They differentiated between Estonian Russians who were “brainwashed” by the Kremlin and those who were “normal,” and between Estonians who were “brainwashed” by Toompea and “normal” Estonians.¹¹

Despite these more critical stances, within the public discourse there has been little space for alternative voices.¹² It should be noted that because of Estonia’s small population, there is quite some overlap between politicians and the cultural and academic elite. For instance, Mart Laar, the former prime minister of Estonia and currently member of parliament, is also an influential historian who fights for the “acknowledgment of communist crimes.” The strong influence the elite have on the development of the discourse of continuity and threat became apparent from Andrus Ansip’s claim that he could not have decided otherwise with regard to the removal of the monument, because that would mean that “Estonia was still a Soviet state” (Liiv 2007). People with more nuanced views felt muted. Sirje once said that she preferred to keep her ideas to herself rather than have people think that she was not a “real” Estonian.

The discourse of being misunderstood

In the public debate on Tallinn’s World War II memorial, most attention went to Estonia’s rela-

tion with Russians and its Soviet past. However, Western Europe also played a significant role, and not only for those who approved of the relocation. For instance, Sirje—who is liberal in her ideas toward Russians—stated: “For us, the deeds and the crimes of the Nazis and the communists are *both* bad. But Western Europe isn’t very eager to comprehend it.” She experienced little understanding from Western Europeans when it came to the Estonian sufferings in World War II.

Besides being misrecognized in their sufferings, many Estonians often feel to be misunderstood in the EU when it comes to the issue of Nazi collaboration (Hiio, Maripuu, and Paavle 2006). David Feest (2007: 253) quotes the common argument in Estonia: “We didn’t fight *with* the Germans but *against* Communism.” This rhetoric of being misunderstood by the West was omnipresent in the Lihula monument discussions. Besides, this was also an internal issue; veteran groups who had fought with the German Army were disappointed that the national government had openly expressed its opposition to the Lihula monument (Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008: 425). Therefore, the erection of this monument could be seen as an attempt to be heard, both nationally and internationally (see Fraser 2000).

Instead, the Lihula monument did not lead to recognition, but to widespread international dismissal from Jewish, European, and Russian sides. In the struggle for recognition that followed, attention was soon directed toward the Bronze Soldier: if Estonia was not allowed to erect the Lihula monument because it represents a totalitarian regime, then surely the Bronze Soldier ought to be removed too (Burch and Smith 2007: 914). Such a comparison revealed a rivalry of victimhood, in which the victims of communism felt displaced by the internationally acknowledged sufferings of Jews in the Holocaust (Logan and Reeves 2009: 11; see also Darieva 2008). This public discourse appeared in personal narratives as well. For instance, when Andres was asked what he thought about the Soviet statues in Estonia, he answered by making a comparison with what he regarded to be a Western European frame of reference:

“What would you think if there would still be statues of Hitler in the Netherlands?” And to reinforce his point, he added that percentage-wise more Estonians became victims of the Soviet rule than Jews in the Holocaust.

Although the comparison between Estonian victims and Holocaust victims is highly disputable from a Western European perspective (see Levy and Sznajder 2002), this rhetoric is widely accepted in Estonia. For instance, Aino indignantly asked why the Nazi flag is forbidden and the Soviet one is not. The term “Bronze Night” (the night in which the Bronze Soldier was removed) refers to the 1938 Kristallnacht (Kattago 2009), constructing a parallel between the attack of the Nazis on the Jews and the “attack” of the Russian speakers on the Estonians. It is ironic that this comparison is being drawn between Estonians, the majority and politically dominant group, and Jews, who were a disempowered minority group in Germany at the time of the attack.

The decision to relocate the Bronze Soldier implicitly asked for a comment from Western Europe and could be interpreted as a quest for understanding: Do they allow us to act according to our interpretations of history? Aino stated about the reaction:

“I was really glad that the foreign media was on the Estonian side. I read a lovely article on BBC: ‘stop bullying the Baltics.’ I don’t like the US usually but then one high politician called Andrus Ansip and told him that the Americans are on our side.”

For Aino and many other Estonians, the reaction of Western European countries toward the relocation of the Bronze Soldier was accepted with relief, as a gesture of recognition, and as support for Estonia’s international security.

To the Estonians who supported the relocation, the power struggle with their perceived “former occupant” had finally been won. As Aino expressed it: “The most important thing is that the statue has been removed and we got what we want.” Yet, the result of the relocation was not a settlement of power relations. Instead, it increased ethnic tensions, aggravating the po-

litical polarization that inspired the relocation in the first place. Moreover, the discourse of not being understood by the EU, framed in an (in)security discourse of not being protected against Russia, should be studied more closely. In fact, Feldman (2006) showed, based on his fine-grained ethnographic research in Estonian and EU diplomacy circles, that despite (or partially thanks to) its small size, Estonia was actually quite successful in aligning the EU with its discourse of Russia’s threat. The Western support for the relocation of the Bronze Soldier monument further confirmed this.

Conclusions

After the fall of communism, all former Soviet republics in some way or another had to deal with their Soviet heritage. The conservative parties that came to power in Estonia promoted the restoration of interwar Estonia, with a strict policy on granting citizenship. Such strictness was determined necessary because of the history of the Independence War, the Nazi slaughters and brutal Soviet deportations, Estonia’s geopolitical situation and its large Russian minority. The discourse legitimizing the strict policy—depicting the Soviet period as an illegal occupation and the current Russian minority as its descendant—created a highly contentious situation when the national government decided to relocate the Bronze Soldier from the center of Tallinn.

This article has investigated how this political decision resonates within the meanings that ordinary Estonians attach to this World War II memorial. It has argued that emotional discourses on identity and memories that many Estonians drew upon to support the relocation, at first sight look like a direct result of the unleashing of a robust ethnic identity repressed by the Soviet system. However, as Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 25) have argued, such a “return-of-the-repressed view” is problematic as it is a discursive tool of policymakers that should be analyzed as such.

Accordingly, the emotional dimensions of personal stories of Estonians have not been

steady, but have been strongly influenced by political conjunctures and EU admission.¹³ As a result, Estonia saw a resurgence of ethnic identification and anti-Soviet memories in the years following independence in 1991, a subsequent abating of identity issues in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and a renewed rise of such issues from 2004 on, culminating in the removal of the Bronze Soldier.

The embedding of personal stories in the public discourse became apparent from the links drawn through time—the perceived continuity between Soviet atrocities and the behavior of the current Russian minority, and levels of agency—the perceived threat by Russia, which is translated in a threat by Estonian Russian citizens. The diversity that was present in the public discursive sphere was polarized along ethnic lines. However, this article has shown that more critical opinions exist as well at the micro-level within the Estonian community. The Estonian informants who held another view felt muted by the dominant public discourse.

The discourse on World War II and the Soviet era, which many Estonians drew upon to support the relocation, shows some remarkable paradoxes. First, whereas the Bronze Soldier was removed with the argument that Estonians no longer wanted to be reminded of the Soviet occupation, the relocation did not make the Soviet-era sufferings disappear from the public sphere, but instead brought them to the forefront. In fact, one could argue that suffering has been a central notion of nation-building in Estonia (cf. Darieva 2008), even more in a discourse of “double victimhood” (see Cappelletto 2005: 115). It seems that in addition to the discourse of national suffering, the perceived misrecognition of this suffering by significant others has been an important aspect of national identity in this young state. Volkan (2001) spoke of a “chosen trauma,” with the related lack of empathy for the suffering of others—the Estonian Russians and the Jews.

There is a second paradox related to the perceived break with the past. The dominant Estonian discourse sharply distinguishes itself from both the Soviet era and contemporary Russian

memory-making. Nevertheless, underneath its apparent distinctions, the Estonian discourse shows some striking commonalities with both discourses.

First, the discourse sketches the Soviet era as one homogeneous period, with little distinction between Stalinism, with its repression and deportations, and the later Soviet years. The whole Soviet era is characterized with one overarching terminology; repressive, in the case of the Estonians, and nostalgic for the (older) Estonian Russians. Second, the Estonian discourse, just as official discourses in the Soviet period, strives for a monolithic vision of World War II memory, with clear distinctions between heroes and victims. Third, the Holocaust gets little attention. In the Soviet era, Stalin stated that the mass murder of Jews was the suffering of Soviet citizens; thus arguing that the Russians suffered most (Snyder 2009: 2). The Jewish suffering is still a neglected topic in the Estonian discourse, as well as within the Russian one, except when it becomes applicable as a means to challenge the Estonian discourse of suffering.

Despite these similarities with Soviet and Russian discourses, many Estonians have turned their backs to the East and are facing the West in their attempts for recognition. Together with some other Eastern European countries, Estonia has tried to make its history—especially with regard to the Soviet atrocities—part of the European memory. In 2009, the Estonian Member of the European Parliament (MEP) Tunne Kelam—together with MEPs from other post-communist countries—tabled a motion for the institutionalization of a European-wide commemoration day for victims of all totalitarian regimes, thus asking Western Europeans to condemn the communist crimes officially, just as they have done with the Nazi crimes (Kelam 2010). Although this adoption was accompanied by firm discussions on equating Nazism and communism and on the overshadowing of Holocaust memories, eventually the majority of the European Parliament voted in favor and in April 2009, the resolution was adopted.

The Estonian government, as well as our informants, have focused their attention on dia-

logue with and recognition from the West. However, a future of less contentious memory-making within the country primarily depends on improvements in the dialogue with Estonian Russians, as well as with Russia. A more open internal discussion on how the communist past ought to be remembered publicly would be fruitful, as was the case in the creation of Budapest's Statue Park (Nadkarni 2003: 202).

Some recent political developments occurred in relation to Russia that provide an opening for a constructive dialogue on the past, not only in relation to Europe but within Estonia as well. The invitation to the Polish government to attend the ceremony to honor the victims of the massacre in Katyn in April 2010 was an important step by Russia in acknowledging the suffering caused by Stalinist repression. The compassion expressed by the Russian premier and ordinary Russians after the plane crash that took lives of the Polish elite on the way to the ceremony, gave another opportunity for rapprochement. In the spring of 2010, Russian president Dmitry Medvedev publicly denounced the crimes by Stalin, which led Mart Laar to award him a prize in the framework of "European Memory and Reconciliation". The visit of the Estonian president to the World War II remembrance in Moscow in May 2010, was another signal of willingness to build a better relationship and a less contentious memory-making.

Under communism, wrote Jacques Rupnik (1989), the future was certain; it was the past no one could be sure of. In post-communist Estonia, the future might be less sure, but the past still remains very much in flux.

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Inge Melchior is a PhD student in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the VU University, Amsterdam. She works on memory politics in Estonia. She holds a research master's degree in social and cultural science from the Radboud University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands. Email: I.Melchior@vu.nl.

Oane Visser is assistant professor at the Department of Anthropology and Development Studies (Radboud University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands). He conducts research on Russia and the former Soviet Union, in particular on rural transformations. He has published articles in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Focaal*, and numerous edited volumes.

Notes

1. Data for this article was gathered by Inge Melchior.
2. The focus is merely on the ethnic Estonians (not including Estonian Russians) because this allows to study the issue more in-depth.
3. According to ZEV committee (the Center for searching and Returning the Deported Persons) data.
4. Conversely, the state had passed a very progressive law (1925), providing the Estonian Jewish community with cultural autonomy (Kasekamp 2000: 73–74).
5. The first organization was founded by Trivimi Velliste, a driving force behind the regaining of independence and currently Member of Parliament; the second one by, among others, Aadu Oll (1932–2003), former political prisoner whose family was deported.
6. The question was: Imagine a highway is to be built. What is the importance of the preservation of a World War II memorial? (1 = very little, 5 = very much), number of respondents = 29,463.
7. The research by Melchior included participant observation, informal conversations, and in-depth interviews with informants selected through snowball sampling.
8. Blog "What I think of the Riots in Estonia," 30 April 2007, <http://www.jaanuskase.com/en/>

2007/04/ what_i_think_of_the_riots_in_e.html#comment-168064.

9. This is not to say that these values of multiculturalism are widely shared in Western EU countries. There are many parallels between the right-wing negative sentiments in Eastern EU countries toward the “old” minorities, and toward migrants in the West (see, e.g., Kalb and Halmai 2010).
10. Estonian is a difficult language for Russian speakers because it is unrelated to Slavic (or Germanic) languages.
11. “Kremlin” refers to the Russian government, “Toompea” to the Estonian one.
12. Societal initiatives were supportive of state policy. Aino, for instance, mentioned that a fund was opened to thank the men who volunteered as policemen during the riots. It was not clear to what extent these initiatives were grassroots initiatives or organized by the political and/or economic elite.
13. For the influence of politics and populist election campaigning on the relocation of a Soviet “liberator” monument in the Czech Republic, see Svašek (1995: 120).

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