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War Memorials and the Politics of Memory: the Soviet War Memorial in Tallinn

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During the interwar years, the Austrian novelist Robert Musil brazenly wrote that, “monuments are so conspicuously inconspicuous. There is nothing so invisible as a monument.”¹ Musil is partially correct – monuments all too easily fade into the landscape and are visible for either tourists looking for signs of historical interest or as meeting places for local residents. But what happens when a monument which was once asleep suddenly comes to life and is made painfully visible? Such was the case of the Bronze Soldier war memorial built in Soviet Estonia (1947) to commemorate the liberation of Tallinn by the Red Army. Nicknamed the “Bronze Soldier” by Estonians and “Aljoša” by Russians, the Soviet monument stood in the city center amidst apartment buildings, the National Library and a trolley stop. The handsome and melancholic statue suddenly came to life in 2005 sparking heated debates between Estonians and their Russian-speaking minority and in between Estonia and the Federation of Russia. In many ways, the riots surrounding the controversial relocation of the monument to a military cemetery on the outskirts of Tallinn by the Estonian center-right government in April 2007 fulfilled Marx’s prophecy that “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered and inherited from the past. The tradition of all the generations of the dead weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.”²

How a statue representing an Estonian soldier in a Red Army uniform became a heroic cult for the Russian community in Estonia and Putin’s government demonstrates the enormous power of cultural symbols. The clashing interpretations of liberation versus occupation, victory versus trauma, attest to the fault lines in the East European memory landscape. In a resurgent Russia, the Great Patriotic War is an event of mythical importance *separated* from communism. For Estonians, however, monuments to that same war are deeply linked to the historical experience of Soviet occupation, deportation and loss of national independence. Two different understandings of the recent past are represented visually in the same war memorial. The conflict over the Bronze Soldier and the riots surrounding its relocation demonstrates that monuments are founded on a paradox. As places of memory, they are supposed to symbolize events from the past for future generations. As works of art, they are supposed to make time stand still. However, since time marches on and societies change, the attempt to freeze time visually into space is fraught with difficulty.

War memorials are cultural symbols reflecting the human instinct for aggression towards one another. While they may have many different interpretations, all war memorials are attempts to make sense of the senseless: violent death at the hands of others. Death is not commemorated due to natural catastrophe or illness, but due to war. Drawing on the insights of Reinhart Koselleck and George Mosse, war memorials are visual representations of modernity linked to the development of the modern nation-state. Divided roughly into three time periods, memorials built before World War I tend to commemorate heroic leaders who died in the name of the nation. After World War I, the democraticization of the modern



The Bronze Soldier, Tallinn, Estonia.
“Monument to the Liberators” (1947);
Renamed: “To Those Killed in the Second World War” (1995)

nation-state and national memory accompanied the commemoration of ordinary soldiers – culminating in the tombs of the Unknown Soldier as holy places of national identity. After World War II, negative or counter-monuments emerged in the West representing military death as overwhelming loss without positing a higher cause to legitimize it. Soviet war memorials, however continued and even deepened the mythical importance of military death as heroic transfiguration in the name of the nation.

When historical events such as World War II are divisive and instill different memories, the past can take on a nightmarish quality that is prone to exaggeration, romanticization and mythology. Furthermore, the past becomes a tool for politicians to play upon the fears and insecurities of individuals reconstructing their social identities in transitional societies such as postcommunist Estonia. Former communist societies, such as Estonia are only now free to examine their recent past exposing the different interpretations and memories of World War II, Nazi occupation (1941–1944) and Soviet occupation (1940–1941, 1944–1991). The decision to move the Soviet monument along with the exhumed remains of Red Army soldiers from the center to a military cemetery outside of Tallinn effectively replaced the pure myth of victory over fascism with a more open and universal sentiment of mourning. The symbolic struggle over the meaning of the Soviet monument is more than a sign of local integration problems between Estonians and their Russian-speaking minority and is instead part of a larger reassessment of World War II and the communist past in Eastern Europe. Two memories of the past conflict with one another: an East European (Estonian national narrative) and a Soviet-Russian narrative. If the Estonian narrative emphasizes Estonia as a victim of history and Soviet-Russian aggression, the Soviet-Russian narrative is of Russian

victory over barbaric fascism de-linked from the crimes of communism. Both narratives are factually true; however as the conflict over the Bronze Soldier monument reveals, the politicization of memory tends to freeze historical events into myth thereby dismissing the complexity of the historical context.

1. Representing Death in the Name of the Nation

War memorials are about the transfiguration of death at the hands of other individuals. As the historian Reinhart Koselleck argued, “dying happens alone; killing another takes two.”³ Whether figurative or abstract, war memorials are attempts to represent violent death in a rational and meaningful way. War memorials continue the religious (particularly Christian) tradition of martyrdom in which death is a passageway from one form of existence to another. Echoing Benedict Anderson’s argument that although the nation emerges with the decline of religion, the social need to provide death with collective meaning doesn’t end, but is instead transformed. “The decline of a Christian interpretation of death thus creates a space for meaning to be purely established in political and social terms.”⁴

War memorials recall military death as “death for something.” The universal meaning is that death was not in vain but served a greater (often national) purpose. Yet, as Koselleck importantly and pragmatically notes, monuments are made by survivors in memory of the dead. “(The) establishing of meaning ex post facto can just as likely miss the meaning that the deceased may, if at all, have found in their death. For the death of the individual cannot be redeemed.”⁵ War memorials are caught in what he calls a “double process of identification.” The dead are supposed to have died for the same reason as what the survivors think that they died for. However once a memorial is built, it tends to take on a life of its own: controversial or silent, visible or invisible.

Koselleck’s theory of war memorials is linked to his semantics of historical time. War memorials are visual representations of a modern sense of time. Discussions of the emergence of modernity include modernity’s break with tradition, the secularization of society, and the differentiation between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. Koselleck, however, goes beyond such analyses by calling attention to how the break with premodernity involved a qualitative shift in our understanding of time.⁶ For him, the French Revolution brought about an acceleration of time and a different understanding of the futurity of the future. The acceleration of history and distinction between traditional and modern society herald a fundamental shift in our conception of time and historical consciousness. In other words, the French Revolution not only meant a different understanding of time in general but a different sense of future.

Since the late 18th century, a new time consciousness has developed in Western culture. While premodern time is cyclical and contains the Messianic promise of redemption and the end of the world, modern time is oriented towards an accelerated and open-ended future. The shift to modernity means that “. . . time is no longer simply the medium in which all histories take place; it gains a historical quality.”⁷ Koselleck goes beyond discussions of the increasing complexity and standardization of society and calls our attention to how modernity entails a fundamental shift in modern understandings of temporality and historical consciousness. The late 18th century understood the modern age as a period of transition to the future. Such a conception of the current epoch as transitory meant a completely different understanding of past and future. Modernity entails a reversal of the structure of temporality, whereby the future becomes more important than the past. Since the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, belief in progress and the perfectibility of science and reason are filled with

utopian hopes for a future that is eminently better than the past. Acceleration, initially perceived in terms of an apocalyptic expectation of temporal abbreviation heralding the Last Judgment, transformed itself – also from the mid-eighteenth century – into a concept of historical hope.⁸ Koselleck's "semantics of historical time" is part of his lifelong project, the *Geschichtliche Begriffsgeschichte* (the historical history of concepts).⁹ More than a lexicon of historical concepts, Begriffsgeschichte is a method of historical understanding. The purpose of his project is to examine "the dissolution of the old world and the emergence of the new in terms of the historico-conceptual comprehension of this process."¹⁰ By studying the *Sattelzeit* or dawn of modernity, Koselleck is able to gain insight into modern historical consciousness and temporality.

How, in a given present, are the temporal dimensions of past and future related? This query involves the hypothesis that in differentiating past and future, or (in anthropological terms) experience and expectation, it is possible to grasp something like historical time.¹¹ For Koselleck, the past means the "space of experience," while the future can be conceptualized as "horizon of expectation." The spatial metaphors that Koselleck uses are helpful in understanding why places of memory such as the Bronze Soldier monument in Tallinn become so politicized. The past is a topography or kind of map onto which historical experiences are captured both visually and spatially in museums, monuments, photographs and film. Thinking of the past as a space of experience suggests completeness while the future is unknown and not yet experienced. "Hope and memory, or expressed more generally, expectation and experience – for expectation comprehends more than hope, and experience goes deeper than memory – simultaneously constitute history and its cognition."¹²

Before World War I, memorials commemorated triumphant victory epitomized in the Arc de Triomphe or the Brandenburger Tor. When commemorating national defeat, the monuments tended either to follow the Christian motif of martyrdom or monumental self-sacrifice as exemplified in the Völkerschlachtdenkmal in Leipzig. Military death is not represented as an end in itself, but as a passageway to another state of existence. War memorials commemorate the sacred and mythical origins of the nation. As Anthony Smith argues, memorials to "the Glorious Dead" are key elements in the symbolic landscape of the modern nation.¹³ Heroic figures tend to easily fade into the background and become part of the public landscape of everyday life.

2. Tombs of the Unknown Soldier and the Democratization of Death

The steady increase of war memorials dedicated to ordinary citizens killed in action began with the French Revolution as the building of monuments became part of the process of nation-building. Moving from the realm of churches and cemeteries, memorials have become part of open urban spaces and the public landscape. As a Christian interpretation of death declined, a space opened for political and social understandings of military death. Individual names or the numbers of dead were often inscribed onto the monuments. As differences between class and estates diminished, war memorials increasingly represented what Koselleck calls, "the democratization of death." Through military death, even an ordinary person's life gains meaning in the name of the nation. "The tombs of the 'unknown soldiers' – one for all – are the last steps in this democratization of death."¹⁴

Because remains from known and unknown Soviet soldiers were buried near the Bronze Soldier in the center of Tallinn, the memorial shares some common features with tombs of the Unknown Soldier built to commemorate World War I. As Benedict Anderson famously wrote,

“No more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than cenotaphs and tombs of the Unknown Soldiers. The public ceremonial reverence accorded these monuments precisely because they are either deliberately empty or no one knows who lies inside them, has no true precedents in earlier times.”¹⁵

The tomb of the Unknown Soldier is the highest symbolic link between nation and individual death. The reverence given to the Unknown reflects the growing democratization of the nation-state and the ubiquity of death after World War I. Jay Winter and George Mosse have carefully researched the different ways in which the Great War was integrated into a common European narrative.¹⁶ Both emphasize the novelty of tombs of the Unknown in linking military sacrifice and the modern nation. Name and military rank are secondary to the honor of anonymous death. Indeed as Mosse argues, tombs of the Unknown are part of the wider “cult of the war experience.” Monuments to World War I represent the war with a combination of mourning and heroism. “The Myth of the War Experience was designed to mask war and to legitimize the war experience; it was meant to displace the reality of war.”¹⁷

The culmination of the myth of the war experience is found in the tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Imbued with pious reverence, tombs of the Unknown Soldier transfer the medieval understanding of death to the modern world. Just as relics (teeth, bones and hair) of saints are entombed in Church altars, so remains of unknowns are buried beneath monuments built in their honor. An eternal flame, symbolizing a life that will never be put out and forgotten, burns eternally before the monument. Depending on the tomb of the Unknown Soldier, there may be a rotation of young soldiers guarding the Unknowns demonstrating both mourning and the power of the nation-state. Unknown anonymous death becomes transcendent: from nothingness and obscurity to eternal sacrifice for the greater good of the nation. “The cult of the fallen, in the course of the war, came to symbolize the ideal of the national community as the camaraderie among members of equal status.”¹⁸

The idea of bringing the remains of an unknown to the national capital occurred simultaneously in France and England. France was the first country to discuss the creation of a tomb to the Unknown Soldier. The unknown was buried beneath the Arc de Triomphe in 1920. The burial ceremony achieved a high level of political symbolism when the heart of Gambetta, the leader of the final stand against Prussia, was taken temporarily from the Pantheon and placed opposite the casket of the unknown. As Mosse notes ironically, “the statesman who was said to have saved France’s honor in defeat was now next to those who gave the nation its victory.”¹⁹ After the ceremony, Gambetta’s heart was returned to the Pantheon and the Unknown Soldier remained alone. The English Unknown Soldier was taken from a French battlefield and buried in Westminster Abbey on the same day that the French Unknown Soldier was buried beneath the Arc de Triomphe. The Cenotaph in the middle of London’s Whitehall was simultaneously unveiled. The Cenotaph, meaning empty tomb was erected by the British government as a sign of national cohesion and as a surrogate gravesite. Within three days, 400,000 people visited the Cenotaph.²⁰ Even though the actual tomb of the Unknown is inside Westminster Abbey, the Cenotaph became a kind of surrogate Unknown. In a public space, it was more approachable than the Unknown overwhelmed by the grandeur of Westminster. After World War I, tombs of the Unknown Soldier linked anonymous death with the highest symbolic meaning of national sacrifice. As Mosse notes, “There was a new consciousness at the war’s end that a democratic age had dawned, an age of mass politics, where national symbols – if they were to work – had to engage popular attention and enthusiasm.”²¹

3. Contemporary War Memorials: Negative Monuments and Moral Trauma

Because trench warfare was the hallmark of World War I, the cult of the fallen soldier was represented in military cemeteries, war memorials and tombs to the Unknown Soldier. World War II, though marked a different kind of warfare in which civilian death, genocide and a destroyed divided Europe often overshadowed the death of fallen soldiers. The Second World War was a different kind of war that would blur the distinction between the front line and the home front, which know no trench warfare – so important in the evolution of the myth – and where defeat and victory were destined to be unconditional.²² Memorials to the Second World War are less about heroic military loss than about victimhood, martyrdom and overwhelming loss. A new genre of memorial emerged in the West with Holocaust memorials commemorating genocide and the loss of a people.²³ Such abstract monuments commemorate loss, with an underlying injunction never to forget. The negative monuments reflect on the fragility of memory and the senselessness of human violence towards one another.

In German, Denkmal denotes a monument which is meant for reflection and thought (*denken*). Remembrance (*gedenken*) of the victims includes some kind of empathy and mourning for the victims without trying to identify with them. In contrast, the word *Mahnmal*, often used in reference to Holocaust memorials is a reminder and admonishment (*mahnen*). Such memorials are warnings about the violence of recent history and the possibility for a return to such violence. Unlike war memorials which represent the violence of soldier against soldier as part of the national narrative, Holocaust memorials are warnings about a deeper break in civilization.²⁴

Whereas World War I war memorials could still render military death as honorable, the motif underlying many war memorials in Western Europe after World War II was of incomprehensible senseless death.²⁵ Debates surrounding the construction of Holocaust memorials, most notably the memorial in central Berlin are acutely aware of the limitation of any artistic representation to fully capture the events of National Socialism. “The annihilation not only of the living but also of physical bodies during air raids and even more in the German concentration camps necessitated the renunciation of the old arsenal of forms for war and victory memorials. Victims condemned to senselessness required, if at all, a kind of negative monument.”²⁶ Negative abstract monuments intentionally leave a place for individual reflection that figurative heroic monuments occlude. Since death is private, memorials which try to posit a clear identity between the fallen soldier and larger cause might fail. As Koselleck notes, the dead can simply be identified as dead, and often nothing more.²⁷

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: Separating Death from Political Cause

Robin Wagner Pacifici’s assessment of the Vietnam War as an example of a “moral trauma” for the United States is a fitting metaphor for how World War II is remembered in former communist countries such as contemporary Estonia. As Wagner-Pacific and Schwarz argued in reference to the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial in the United States, “negative events are moral traumas: they not only result in loss or failure but also evoke disagreement and inspire censure.”²⁸ The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC in 1982 heralded in a new kind of war monument which separated individual death from ideological cause. Built on the private initiative of veteran groups who felt that their military service was undervalued in American society, the famous black wall of names become “the wall that heals.” Metaphors of healing a divided American nation, of finding common ground through

the universal sentiment of mourning opened up a new space in the vocabulary of war memorials.

Unlike traditional war monuments which valorize death in the name of a unified nation, the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial was able to *sidestep* legitimating the cause of the war from loss of human life. The memorial is ambivalent in how it represents the war. It is different from other memorials because it is not heroic; however it fits in with the genre of war memorials by reminding viewers of national loss. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial set a precedent against which subsequent war memorials have been measured. In many ways, the memorial is an example of a postmodern monument which does not judge how one should represent the nation: as victorious and heroic or dejected and destroyed. The names on the wall represent individual death. Death is not abstracted into a higher cause: the dead are not liberators, occupiers, perpetrators or victims – simply individuals. The abstraction of the monument rises above political rancor to dignify what all humans have in common: mortality. Maya Lin, the designer of the monument emphasized that the aim of the monument was to honor loss of life and leave the meaning of that death to individual interpretation. Brought to a sharp awareness of such loss, it is up to each individual to resolve or come to terms with this loss. For death, is in the end a personal and private matter, and the area contained with this memorial is a quiet place, meant for personal reflection and private reckoning.²⁹

The Neue Wache: Remembering all the Victims of War and Tyranny

Similar to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the Neue Wache (1995) in Berlin universalizes death in the “Central Memorial of the Federal Republic of Germany for the Victims of War and Tyranny.” However, unlike the abstract black wall, the Neue Wache returns to the Christian image of the Pieta. The blow-up of Käthe Kollwitz's private sculpture of a mother holding her dead son became the national symbol for Germany's central war memorial by controversially separating ideological cause from individual death.³⁰ Given the fact that Kollwitz's own son was killed in World War I and that much of her art was autobiographical, the image is one of the personal unintentionally becoming political. The mother (who now represents the German nation) is Kollwitz herself. The choice of a Pieta rather than male soldier was deliberate. A mother holding her dead son doesn't symbolize violence, but suffering and mourning.

Likewise the inscription “To the Victims of War and Tyranny” did not distinguish between the death of soldiers, concentration camp prisoners or civilians. In the attempt to find a common memorial to represent unified German memory, all victims of war and tyranny were to be remembered in one central location. Furthermore, the location of the Neue Wache was itself historically important because it had gone through numerous reconstructions as a military memorial during Prussia, Weimar Germany, Nazi Germany and East Germany. The decision by Chancellor Helmut Kohl to remake the Neue Wache yet again was to recognize the historical importance of the Neue Wache as a physical place of German national memory and the necessity to bring together East and West German memories of war and tyranny.

After a long and heated debate about the meanings of the memorial and of 20th century German history, two plaques were added to the exterior of the Neue Wache memorial from President von Weizsäcker's speech commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the end of World War II on May 8, 1985.³¹ The plaques differentiated the different categories of victims and the historical responsibility of Germany for that loss. With the naming of each category of victim and of National Socialism and communism, an attempt was made to honor the uniqueness of each death. Communism would not be equated with National

Socialism, nor a Jew with a German civilian; rather each historical context would be recognized in its uniqueness. The common theme linking all of the dead was one of irrecoverable loss.

The debates in Tallinn about what the Bronze Soldier represented raised similar questions as those surrounding the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial and the Neue Wache. How should military death be represented in a society that is different from the one in which the original monument was built or in which the war was fought? Should Soviet war memorials to the Great Patriotic War be updated to also include Estonian occupation by the Red Army or does such a change dishonor Soviet soldiers who died in the name of liberation?

4. Soviet War Memorials to the Great Patriotic War

While abstract counter-monuments emerged in the West after World War II, the heroic image of the fallen soldier dominated in the Soviet Union. Soviet memorials were mammoth, Social Realist in style and unabashedly heroic. Mythical victory over fascism in the Great Patriotic War legitimized the very existence of the Soviet Union and expansion of communism into Eastern Europe. Although the war memorials commemorate death for the higher cause of defending the Soviet Union against fascist invasion, the monuments are still within the Russian national tradition. The very naming of the war as the "Great Patriotic War" signified historical continuity of the defense of the Russian people against foreign invasion. Stalin's reference to the war as "patriotic" (1941) linked it with Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812. As Valentin Bogorov argues, Soviet war memorials invoke two cultural sources: a universal classical style of triumph and a Russian imperial tradition honoring the nation.³² The classical motif of a pantheon is represented in Moscow's Red Square with the entombment of Lenin and carefully tended graves of former Soviet leaders, most notably that of Stalin. Death as heroic transformation is visible with the remnants of Lenin carefully maintained and preserved for public reverence. The war memorials thus establish continuity between pre-revolutionary imperial Russia and the Soviet Union.

Not only the Soviet Union re-established a symbolic continuity with the pre-revolutionary Russian history, but Stalin firmly situated himself in the context of the Russian imperial tradition. Finally, one may not be but struck at what was missing in the Soviet memorials of this period: the actual memory of the millions, particularly the civilians, who fell victim to the enormous calamity of the war. Far from being concerned with their fate, the first Soviet war memorials had a much different agenda: to celebrate the prowess and the newly redefined image of the Soviet state.³³

The numerous Soviet war memorials in Estonia commemorate death in the name of victory over fascism. The war which is named and remembered is different in West and East. If World War II is remembered in the West with the years 1939–1945, the Great Patriotic War began in 1941 when Hitler invaded the Soviet Union and the years 1939–1941 when Hitler and Stalin were allied together is not represented in the Soviet memorial landscape. Likewise the independence of Estonia from 1918–1940 is forgotten under the weight of liberation and victory. Immediately after the war, war memorials such as the Bronze Soldier (1947) were built in Estonia commemorating the Great Patriotic War, while Estonian monuments and military cemeteries to the War of Independence 1918–1920 were destroyed and defaced by the Red Army.³⁴

5. The Bronze Soldier War Memorial: Symbol of Liberation or Occupation?

Depending upon who is telling the story: Tallinn was either liberated from fascism by the USSR or occupied by the same USSR on September 22, 1944. The monument conforms to the general model of Soviet war memorials in Soviet city capitals – located in the center and close to Red Army gravesites.³⁵ From forensic tests conducted in 2007, it was determined that 11 men and 1 woman were buried near the monument.³⁶ According to Soviet archival records, the Bronze Soldier memorial was the burial place of Soviet soldiers who died fighting Nazi soldiers. The Soviets erected a provisional wooden obelisk with the communist red star to commemorate the liberation of Tallinn. An architectural competition for the monument was announced and the choice was made for the current Bronze Soldier mourning for other fallen Red Army soldiers. In October of 1945 a contract was signed between an Estonian architect and sculptor, Enn Roos for the memorial design. By May 1946, young Estonian schoolgirls brazenly shot and blew up the temporary wooden obelisk. A restored monument was soon erected with 11 known soldiers and no unknowns inscribed.³⁷

Legends abound as to who served as the model for the Bronze Soldier, but either way rumors concur that the model was Estonian. Some argue that the model was an Estonian Olympic wrestler, Kristjan Palusalu. Others point to a worker Albert Adamson, who served neither in the Nazi nor Soviet armies. If it was Adamson, then legend has it that he is mourning for his own brother, who died fighting on the side of the Soviet army. The monument was completed and dedicated on September 22, 1947 commemorating the anniversary of the “liberation” of Tallinn. At the unveiling, the Bronze Soldier was officially named “Monument to the Liberators” (*Vabastajate Monument*) with 11 names and 2 unknowns inscribed on memorial plaques. In 1964 an eternal flame was added before the sculpture. In 1979, the unknowns were identified and a new plaque added listing the names of soldiers buried near the monument.³⁸ While one might argue that the artistic design of the statue is more mournful than victorious, the monument became a ritualized place to commemorate not only Soviet victory over fascism, but particularly after Estonian re-independence, a place to celebrate the Russian nation.

With Estonian re-independence in 1991, the issue of the Bronze Soldier was not immediately touched. In 1993 a discussion took place regarding the memorial. A city inspection of the archives couldn’t conclude how many people were buried next to the Bronze Soldier monument. The decision was made to preserve the monument, remove the eternal flame and remove the inscription “Eternal Honor to the Fallen Heroes, who have Fallen for the Liberation and Sovereignty of our Land.” The Soviet inscription was replaced with “To those killed in the Second World War” in both Estonian and Russian languages. The new inscription was similar to the Neue Wache because all the war dead, regardless of nationality or ideology were remembered together. Likewise the war was named “the Second World War” without mention of liberation or victory. In 1995 different proposals were presented to modify the Soviet style of the monument. In the end, nothing happened. Why? One might argue that integration issues in 1995 were even more fragile than currently. Furthermore, similar to other East European countries, the goal of European Union and NATO membership unified the society. Since European Union and NATO membership in 2004, questions about how to interpret the communist past have become more prevalent in Estonia and other Eastern European countries. Likewise the growing assertiveness of Russian nationalism under Putin has created a space where symbols such as war memorials to the Great Patriotic War literally came to life. Since 1991, the Bronze Soldier continued to be a traditional place for Victory Day celebrations among the Russian community in Tallinn.

With the controversy surrounding the 60th anniversary commemoration of May 9th in 2005, the symbolic importance of the Bronze Soldier increased. Due to clashes between Russian and Estonian nationalists at the Bronze Soldier monument leading up to the May 9th commemoration, it was cordoned off and guarded by police for the summer of 2006. Once the statue was open to the public and no longer under police protection, it was adorned almost daily with flowers and candles. The importance of the monument as a place of Russian national honor and symbol of victory was visible in the active attendance of Russian veterans, schoolchildren from Russian-speaking schools and Russian families. In the winter of 2006 and spring of 2007, a roundtable was formed to study the monument and legislation was passed changing the jurisdiction of war memorials from that of the city to the state.³⁹ This legal change was important because the city of Tallinn has a large Russian-speaking population who favored keeping the monument in the city-center. The center-right government however decided to move the monument and the surrounding remains to a less controversial place. On April 26, 2007, under riot police protection, forensic specialists began to exhume the gravesites and two days of riots followed. On the first evening of the riots, the statue was relocated to the Defense Forces Cemetery on the outskirts of Tallinn.

In its new setting, the memorial commemorates not only World War II with the plaques on either side of the soldier in Estonian and Russian, "To Those Killed in the Second World War" but also the Great Patriotic War with the headstone "To the Unknown Soldier, 1941–1945" engraved on black granite before the monument. Like many of the military cemeteries in Estonia, the Defense Forces Cemetery of Tallinn was originally a cemetery for those killed in World War I and the Estonian War of Independence 1918–1920. After 1945, many of the gravesites of Estonian soldiers and monuments to the War of Independence were destroyed by Soviet authorities and reused by the Red Army for their own soldiers. After Estonian re-independence, the British gravesites that were destroyed by the Soviets in the Defense Forces Cemetery were restored and the Russian Embassy financed the black headstone to the Unknown Soldier 1941–1945. In the cemetery setting, the meaning behind the Bronze Soldier is open enough to commemorate both the Great Patriotic War and World War II. Moreover the cemetery setting tends to emphasize loss rather than victory.

6. Victory Day as Foundational Myth for Contemporary Russia

The conflict over the Bronze Soldier crystallized around how not only the war but also the subsequent communist period should be remembered: as heroic victory or traumatic loss. The 60th anniversary commemoration of May 9th revealed ambivalent fissures in how World War II is remembered in Europe after the fall of communism. For those countries under Soviet occupation, one could argue that the war really ended when independence was restored and Soviet troops left in the early 1990s. President Vladimir Putin's invitation to participate in the 60th anniversary commemoration of the Soviet victory over fascism on May 9th, 2005 sparked heated debate in the Baltics about whether to participate or not. The debates were about the politics of memory both domestically and internationally. The East European experience of communism and occupation clouded the Russian commemorative ceremonies. In the end, only the Latvian president attended the commemoration, while the Lithuanian and Estonian presidents refused to participate.⁴⁰ The absence of the Estonian president only increased the importance of the Bronze Soldier as a Russian symbol of victory over fascism, which is under appreciated by other countries (East European ones in particular).

For Russian national identity, the Great Patriotic War is growing in importance as other Soviet achievements are declining. As Russian social scientist Lev Gudkov writes, "In the

opinion of Russian inhabitants, this is the most important event in their history: it is the *basic image of national consciousness*. (sic) No other event compares with it.”⁴¹ In response to the question posed in 1996, “What makes you personally proud of our history?” 44% of those surveyed answered the Great Patriotic War. In 2003, the figure was 87%. As Gudkov notes, “There is nothing else left to take pride in: the disintegration of the USSR and the failure of the post-Soviet reforms, the noticeable weakening of mass hopes, and the disappearance of the illusions of Perestroika have furnished the content of traumatic experience of national failure.”⁴² Attitudes to the war are transmitted through mass media, schools, state commemorations, film and literature. If, as Gudkov argues, Victory Day is the only positive symbol left in contemporary Russia, it makes sense why the war has become such an important point of social cohesion and collective pride.

Victory does not only crown the war, but as it were purifies and justifies it, at the same time withdrawing its negative side from any attempt at rational analysis, tabooing the topic. It makes it impossible to explain the causes and courses of the war, or to analyse the actions of the Soviet leaders and the nature of a regime that subordinated all spheres of social existence to its preparations for the war.⁴³

Interestingly enough, growing pride in the Great Patriotic War, correspond to increasingly positive views of Stalin in contemporary Russia: from 19% in 1998 to 53% in 2003.⁴⁴ Gudkov importantly contrasts the commemorative mood of May 8th and May 9th. While May 8th is a somber day of reflection in France, Germany and Great Britain, it is predominantly a day of victory in Russia. “Victory Day has not become a day of mournful commemoration of the dead, the human suffering, and the material destruction. It is literally a day of victory, of the Soviet army’s triumph over Hitler’s Germany.”⁴⁵

7. Conflicting Memories of War and Communism

The rewriting of history after 1991 is part of the redefining of collective identities in post-communist societies.⁴⁶ During perestroika and immediately after the Soviet Union collapsed, there was a similar interest in dealing with the communist past in Russia. Solzhenitsyn’s banned books were published, the citizens’ initiative Memorial was formed to remember the victims of Soviet repression and films such as Mikhakov’s *Burnt by the Sun* portrayed the terror of the Stalinist years.⁴⁷ However as Tatiana Zhurzhenko deftly points out, interest in the ills of communism quickly waned as the economic and political chaos of the Yeltsin years merged with the nationalism of Putin’s government. Democratic open debate about the communist past seemed to undermine Russian national pride. “But the collapse of the Soviet empire and the subsequent claims of the former satellites and Soviet republics for ‘victim status’ left Russia practically alone with the historical responsibility for the crimes of world communism – a burden too heavy for the post-imperial Russian elites.”⁴⁸ Putin effectively normalized the Soviet communist past into Russian nation history. His model of “sovereign democracy” harkens to a Russian Sonderweg or unique democratic path different from that of the West.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Putin’s remark that the breakup of the Soviet Union was one of the greatest disasters of the 20th century effectively severed the crimes of communism from the greatness of the Russian nation. The issue of historical responsibility for the consequences of the war was officially dismissed and replaced with mythical heroism.

While Putin-era Russian elites internalize the war as the triumphal foundational myth of the new Russia, the same war represents traumatic occupation and loss of national

identity for the Estonian postcommunist narrative. The heated debates over what the Bronze Soldier represents in Tallinn are heavily framed within a true/false, national/communist interpretation of the communist past. Reflecting the conflation of Soviet and Russian time, false is defined in Estonia as either Soviet or Russian, while true means Estonian. Likewise, from the Russian side, the war memorial represents the truth of the liberation of Europe from fascism and ungrateful Estonians are cast as fascist sympathizers who falsify history.⁵⁰

The restoration of independence, the return to Europe and the return to the West were important parts of the Estonian post-communist narrative in the 1980s and 1990s. The Second World War and the Soviet occupation of Estonia are represented as a “rupture” of Estonian national time. Even colloquial language signifies who owns Estonian national history. The years of independence under the First Republic (1918–1940) are colloquially called “*Estonian time*” (*eesti aeg*) and are contrasted with Russian time (*vene aeg*) or Soviet time (*nõukogude aeg*). In everyday language, Russian and Soviet time are interchangeable, while Tsarist time (*tsaari aeg*) is distinguished from Russian or Soviet time. The conflation between Soviet and Russian is an important one which reflects the close association between Russian and Soviet in the Estonian naming of their communist past. The different markers of historical time are testament to Benedict Anderson’s emphasis on the importance of measuring time for the modern nation. As with modern persons, so it is with nations. Awareness of being imbedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet of “forgetting” the experience of this continuity – product of the ruptures of the late eighteenth century – engenders the need for a narrative of “identity.”⁵¹

The narrative of identity is one which draws heavily from the past in order to construct a stable identity in the present. Each occupation of Estonia is accompanied by a different narration of time: from Czarist, Estonian, Soviet/Russian, German, Soviet/Russian, to a re-establishment of Estonian time. Each occupation marks a rupture in the narrative of Estonian national identity.

In her study of Estonian collective memory, Ene Kõresaar argues that Estonian memories of 20th century history are guided by “memory pictures” in which the First Republic is idealized and represented in Estonian literature through country life, the thatched roof farm, small villages and intact families. The farm and village are the images of an ideal harmonious society. The pre-war farm signifies childhood security, social ties and community and is heavily contrasted with modern Soviet society represented by uncertainty, broken social ties and rupture. In oral history narratives, the “memory picture” of the farm is contrasted with the “memory picture” of Soviet tanks rolling into Estonia. Memory pictures are ideological pictures or snapshots which crystallize and capture the emotions and feelings of a period. Influenced by Maurice Halbwachs’ notion that memory is framed by social groups, memory pictures become life ideologies through which individuals narrate their life histories. With such a snapshot understanding of history, time literally stands still. The past becomes mythical and frozen.⁵²

The Soviet rupture of Estonian rural society entailed deportations, destruction of farms, collectivization, and Russification along with dramatic industrialization and urbanization. While the latter two features are common to modern industrial societies, the others remain core features of the Sovietization of society. Kõresaar’s work emphasizes the conflict of historical images present in both Soviet and post-Soviet Estonia. Truth meant regaining, restoring and repairing the history which had been taken away by Soviet occupation. “At the end of the 1980s and in the 1990s when ‘rupture’ as an historical image was being broadly articulated, it was a question of ‘true’ and ‘false’ fact-centered remembering – and by its

very existence, a fact contained a meaning which could only be ‘true’ (national) or ‘false’ (communist).”⁵³

While one can speak of the legal restoration of the Republic of Estonia, contemporary Estonia is ethnically, socially and territorially different from the pre-war Republic. After Russification, deportations and war – the ethnic composition of Estonia has changed from 94% ethnic Estonians in 1945 to 61% ethnic Estonians in 1989.⁵⁴ As of the last census in 2000, there are 67.4% ethnic Estonians, 26.2% Russians, 2% Ukrainians and 1.4% others living in Estonia.⁵⁵ Thus the discourse of return encounters the truisms that “one cannot step into the same water twice” or that “you can’t go home again.” The discourse of return is not only particular to Estonia, but a larger feature of East European consolidation of democracies. As Lagerspetz argues “If we see the idea of return as a means of enforcing people’s identities and legitimating the institutional order, it becomes easy to see why it has been so topical in postsocialist Europe.”⁵⁶ By returning to a non-Soviet past, the Soviet past (1940–1991) is externalized in favor of continuity with the time of the Estonian Republic (1918–1940). However, in reality the narrative of return to a pre-Soviet Estonian past is complicated by the integration of Russian speakers into contemporary Estonia.⁵⁷

The current phase of Estonian economic and cultural stabilization is accompanied by changes in the symbolic environment, rapid Westernization as well as weakness in civil society, growing differences in living standards and an ongoing integration of the Russian-speaking minority into Estonian society. Integration of Russians into Estonia produces the unintended consequence of what political scientist, Raivo Vetik terms “reactive identity.”⁵⁸ Reacting to the socio-economic and symbolic changes in contemporary Estonia, Russian minorities react by either accepting or rejecting parts of Estonian identity. Reactive identity is more clearly manifested through language barriers. Since Estonian is the official language, those who do not speak Estonian are marginalized. Such marginalization contributes to reactive identity, rather than integration. In recent surveys, the amount of Russian speakers who think that Estonia willfully joined the USSR in 1940 has risen from 43% in 2002 to 56% in 2005.⁵⁹ Given the fact that Estonians overwhelmingly view the USSR as an occupier, such different understandings of history between Russian-speakers and Estonians indicate parallel societies with conflicting memories of the communist past.

Conclusion

Since the Second World War is often cast as a struggle of civilization against barbarism, it is not surprising that war memorials are so pernicious. World War II is more of a moral trauma in Estonia because it has different conflicting meanings beyond the liberation of Europe from fascism: Soviet occupation, loss of national independence, deportations, destroyed cities, military and civilian death as well as resistance to the Soviet Union among the Estonian Resistance Fighters. The Bronze Soldier controversy in 2007 challenged what was politically acceptable as a form of representation. Are there double standards for fascism and communism? From the Estonian side, both Nazi and communist regimes were totalitarian because they attempted to liquate the individual through terror and ideology. The different meanings which the Bronze Soldier monument symbolized confirms Tony Judt’s argument that Europe after 1945 is full of shifting myths and mis-memories.⁶⁰ The debates surrounding the proper place for the Bronze Soldier demonstrated that grand narratives about winners and losers of World War II are political tools in the symbolic landscape of Eastern Europe. It is not just the memory of war which is at stake but the entire communist period. Both the Western narrative about World War II (1939–1945) and Soviet-Russian narrative about

the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) cannot fully capture the complexity of what the war and communism means in the different East European countries.⁶¹ The decision to move the monument along with the exhumed remains from the city center to the Defense Forces Cemetery outside of Tallinn effectively replaced the Soviet-Russian narrative commemorating Soviet victory over fascism with a post World War II sentiment emphasizing individual death separated from ideological cause.

In the cemetery setting, the memorial represents both the democratization and silencing of history in contemporary Estonia. Democratization, in the sense that narratives of Estonian history no longer need to answer to Moscow – the repressed occupation of Estonia is foregrounded as part of the awful truth of World War II. The cemetery setting also represents a certain degree of silencing in the sense that the vocal opinion of many in the Russian community in Estonia was spatially marginalized from the center to the periphery. When social identities are fragile and unstable, the past becomes a treasure chest to be ransacked. The controversy surrounding the true meaning of the Bronze Soldier monument emerged when both sides refused to compromise on a common understanding of World War II. Both Russians and Estonians link war memorials to national identity and national loss: the Estonians to Estonian national identity and the Russian minority in Estonia to Russian and Soviet identity. Both sides claim a Rankean version of history: “the way it really was.”

In its new location in a military cemetery, the message is of mourning without glorification of national or ideological cause. It serves as a kind of counter-monument for individual reflection while downplaying heroic transformation. In the city center, the monument had two competing meanings: liberation and occupation. When solely interpreted as “liberation,” history was flattened and the “truth” of Soviet occupation, deportation and loss of Estonian independence forgotten. Likewise, when the Bronze Soldier was only interpreted as “occupation,” the important but complex role of the Soviet Army in the liberation of Europe from fascism was repressed. Moreover, those Estonian men who were conscripted to fight on either the Soviet or the German side were forgotten. The removal of the Bronze Soldier from its original Soviet location by the Estonian government was more than a demonstration of state power to represent national history. It was also a symbolic gesture to push communist symbols and the ideological version of history that they represent into the background. By moving the monument to a military cemetery, questions of liberation or occupation were rendered secondary to individual loss of human life due to war. Likewise in its new location, the Bronze Soldier is next to the headstone of the Unknown Soldier presented to Estonia by the Russian Embassy.

Although the monument may be said to be quietly resting in the cemetery, the conflicted interpretations surrounding World War II and the communist past are still deeply politicized in Estonia and post-communist Europe. As Koselleck suggests, it is impossible for war memorials to completely capture the various meanings of war. The only thing that war memorials can represent with any degree of certainty is death itself, while death “for something” changes over time.

NOTES

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