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COMMEMORATING LIBERATION AND OCCUPATION: WAR MEMORIALS ALONG THE ROAD TO NARVA¹

Siobhan Kattago

Keywords: Memory; Europe; Estonia; Narva; war memorials

When the time is right, an era of the past may serve as a screen on which new generations can project their contradictions, controversies, and conflicts in an objectified form. (Krzysztof Pomian, quoted in Rousso 1991, p. 5)

The side-road from the resort town of Narva-Jõesuu to the city of Narva offers a compressed glimpse into the different interpretations of recent Estonian history. The war memorials dotted along the Narva River between Estonia and Russia are testament to the different layers of Estonian history: Swedish, Tsarist Russian, Estonian Republic, Nazi and Soviet occupations. The Soviet war memorials and German military cemetery remind one of how Estonia was caught within the ideological struggle between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Given the context of the conflict over the Lihula monument in 2004 commemorating Estonian soldiers who fought on the Nazi German side against the Soviet Regime, the debate over the 60th commemoration of Soviet Victory Day in 2005 (Onken 2007) and the relocation of the Soviet 'Bronze Soldier' from the center of Tallinn to a military cemetery (2007), different narratives have emerged: return to history, occupation versus liberation, victim versus perpetrator, and the unsettled end of World War II as 8 or 9 May.

Are the Soviet war memorials merely outdated and antiquarian pieces of stone or does the ideological version of history which they represent potentially block the integration of Russian postwar emigrants into modern-day Estonia? Why do some Soviet war memorials to fallen Red Army soldiers such as the Bronze Soldier in

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Tallinn inspire conflict, while others such as the Soviet tank outside Narva remain invisible? After the Bronze Soldier riots in April 2007, Estonians seem to have one memory of World War II (1939–1945) and communism (1940–1941 and 1944–1991) emphasizing victimhood, occupation, deportation and national suffering at the hands of two dictatorships and Russians another, emphasizing the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) liberation, victory and national suffering at the hands of Nazi fascists. This essay will argue that the conflict over war memorials is not simply a domestic issue for Estonia, but is part of a politicization of the past in contemporary Europe about how to come to terms with two different, but interconnected aspects of the recent past: the role of the Red Army in World War II and the criminal nature of the Soviet regime. Conflicts over Soviet war memorials thus become screens in which many of the blank spots of 20th century history are sharply contested.

Narva: A City Scarred by War and Socialist Planning

During World War II, Narva's vulnerable location caused it to become a military target for the Soviet Regime and Nazi Germans. German military authorities ordered the civilian evacuation of Narva between 25 January and 3 February 1944. Although damaged by land combat in 1941 and smaller air raids throughout the war, Narva was still relatively intact until February 1944 (Tannberg 2000, p. 276). The Soviet Army heavily bombarded Narva on 6 and 7 March 1944 and destroyed most of the baroque town. By the air raids of 25 July 1944, 98% of Narva had been destroyed, and only the Kreenholm factory remained relatively intact. The ruins of the city were taken by the Red Army on 26 July 1944. In the 1950s the Soviet Regime decided not to reconstruct the baroque old town of Narva, but to rebuild it as a modern 'socialist city' (Brüggemann 2004). Similar to Königsberg/Kaliningrad, the original residents of Narva were not allowed the right to return to their native city. Likewise, Narva and the rest of northeastern Estonia underwent a rapid industrialization process and immigration of Russian-speaking workers from other parts of the USSR (Burch & Smith 2007, p. 922; Mertelsmann 2004). Narva was thus forcibly transformed into a Russian-speaking town. From a population of roughly 70,000 only 3,000 are Estonians, with the majority of contemporary Narva composed of first- and second-generation Russian-speaking immigrants.

From 1945 to 1989, the percentage of ethnic Estonians in Estonia dropped from 94% to 61% due to the Soviet policy of mass immigration of industrial workers from Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, who then predominantly settled in places where large industry developed – in northeastern Estonia and Tallinn. Death due to war, the Stalinist mass deportations of Estonians in 1941 and 1949, along with the emigration of Estonians to Western countries such as Sweden, the United States and Canada also contributed to the dramatic population drop of titular Estonians. As a result of these large demographic changes, ethnic Russian-speakers now constitute about 26% of the entire population in Estonia (Lagerspetz 2005, pp. 8–9).

The demographic changes in contemporary Estonia are most visible in the border town of Narva. In 1934, Estonians accounted for 79.1% of the population of northeastern Estonia (Ida-Virumaa) and 54% of the population of Narva

TABLE 1 Ethnic composition of Narva, 2006

Estonians	4.02%
Russians	79.76%
Ukrainians	2.62%
Belorussians	2.26%
Finns	0.81%
Tatars	0.53%
Others	10.00%

(Population Registration Office of Narva City government, Narva in Figures 2006)

(Rand 2004, pp. 369–70). Today the city of Narva is overwhelmingly Russian-speaking, with only 4% of the population made up of ethnic Estonians (Table 1).

Estonia, like other former communist countries, is rewriting its history to reflect its ‘return to Europe’ and ‘return to the West’ after 50 years of Soviet occupation (Lagerspetz 1999; Vihalemm & Lauristin 1997). While Estonia is returning to its democratic independence, the narrative of return is a longer and more complicated process than initially anticipated. After re-independence in 1991, Estonian citizenship was granted to those residents who could trace their ancestors back to the first Republic of Estonia. All others could become citizens after taking a citizenship test, passing an Estonian language test and fulfilling the five-year residency requirement. In Narva, 44% of the city residents have Estonian citizenship, 33.4% have Russian citizenship, 21.64% have grey ‘Alien’s passports’ and the rest have other national passports (Narva in Figures 2006).

War Memorials and Representations of the Past

Historical places of commemoration and sites of historical events are the living topography of the nation. National spaces become sacred and symbolic, imbued with mythic reverence and piety. ‘Landscape is central to nationalism, since territory becomes inscribed with history and temporality’ (Outhwaite & Ray 2005). Landscape and monuments become as Bakhtin notes, ‘chronotypes’ – or fusions of time and space (Bakhtin 1981). Some monuments are fiercely remembered, while others fade into the background – forgotten and overgrown.

Given Estonia’s complicated history through the different occupations, memorials tend to chronicle the history of Estonia through the eye of the occupier. One could simply pass by the memorials as outdated remnants of another time, but somehow it is difficult not to notice them because they are so numerous and large. As the Austrian writer Robert Musil has noted, monuments have a dual ability to attract and repel at the same time. Musil in his short essay reflects on the inadequacy of monuments to represent the complexity of history. They are too one-sided and flat. Instead of inspiring memory, they often engender forgetfulness. They fade into the background and become part of the local landscape.

Monuments are so conspicuously inconspicuous. There is nothing in this world as invisible as a monument. They are no doubt erected to be seen – indeed, to

attract attention. But at the same time they are impregnated with something that repels attention, causing the glance to roll right off, like water droplets off an oilcloth, without even pausing for a moment. (Musil 1987, p. 61)

War memorials represent a particular type of memorial because they commemorate military loss in the name of the nation. As Anthony Smith argues, war memorials refer to the sacred origins of the nation. Memorials to 'the Glorious Dead' are part of the symbolic landscape of the modern nation (Smith 2003, pp. 218–53). Offering more than concrete factual information – dates, places of battles, names of soldiers killed – war memorials offer a reason *why* these particular soldiers and/or civilians were killed (Koselleck & Jeismann 1994). Military cemeteries and memorials do not only honor individual death, but are sacred places of national honor and mourning. Whether the war memorials commemorate victory or defeat – the emphasis is on a national narrative. Without a coherent story, the numerous graves become overwhelming and senseless. In response to the question: 'why did so many soldiers die on this day?' War memorials provide a single answer: 'for our nation'. The memorials present a certain version of history that often borders on national mythology. War memorials, particularly Tombs of the Unknown Soldier, are symbolic places of national identity and collective memory.

Although war memorials have existed since the days of ancient Greece, they were built in great numbers after World War I. In particular, Tombs to the Unknown Soldier were created after World War I and served as quasi-religious sites to honor the dead of particular nations (Inglis 1993, pp. 150–71). As the historian Eric Hobsbawm has pointed out, it is not accidental that the proliferation of war memorials after 1918 coincided with the independence of many European nations during the interwar period – Estonia among them. National monuments are firmly rooted in the identity and self-understanding of the modern nation (Hobsbawm 1992).

War memorials become important places of memory or *lieux de mémoire* for families of lost soldiers and war veterans (Nora 1996). Whether in large military cemeteries such as Verdun or Arlington, or smaller national cemeteries throughout Estonia – cemeteries have a highly symbolic presence. War memorials often become surrogate gravesites for those families whose relatives are buried elsewhere. The memorials can be traditional sculptures of a soldier or non-traditional monuments to national loss such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC. Traditional memorials emphasize national cohesion and a seamless national narrative. Non-traditional monuments such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial separate individual death from governmental policy and the ideological reasons of war (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwarz 1991).

Because the creation and re-creation of memorials is often more about *how* the present society wishes to remember itself than about what really happened, war memorials take on an important cultural dimension. They become cultural reminders of how the past is linked to the present. As the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs noted in the 1940s, collective memory is malleable and often based more on the needs of the present than on the facticity of the past.

Society from time to time obligates people not just to reproduce in thought previous events of their lives, but also to touch them up, to shorten them, or

to complete them so that, however convinced we are that our memories are exact, we give them a prestige that reality did not possess. (Halbwachs 1992, p. 51)

War memorials are made by the survivors in memory of the dead. As Koselleck thoughtfully notes,

The only identity that endures clandestinely in all war memorials is the identity of the dead with themselves. All political and social identification that try to visually capture and permanently fix the ‘dying for . . .’ vanish in the course of time. For this reason, the message that was to have been established by a memorial changes. (Koselleck 2002, p. 289)

Soviet War Memorials to the Second World War: Antifascism as Foundational Ideology

Like other war memorials, Soviet memorials serve as places of collective memory, social cohesion and national identity. However memorials to the Great Patriotic War in the Soviet Union represented not only the enormous loss of life from the Soviet side, but, more importantly, mythologized the very existence of the Soviet Union. Moreover, the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) serves as the foundational mythology for the legitimate expansion of the Soviet Union. War memorials did not valorize a national hero, but the Soviet hero or *Homo Sovieticus* – a person linked through class rather than through the traditional bonds of nation, language, religion and culture. Just as the Soviet Union was an empire rather than a nation, common bonds had to be forcibly created from above by Soviet elites. National, cultural and linguistic ties were broken, while a new social bond was created.

In socialist Estonia, as in other communist countries, antifascism was one of the many ideological justifications for the existence of the Soviet Union. As Antonia Grunenberg outlines, antifascism is a binary that divides the world into two camps: fascist and antifascist (Grunenberg 1993, pp. 120–44). Antifascist mythology was heavily used for the ideological justification and superiority of both East Germany and the Soviet Union. Antifascism operates on the level of mythology. Roland Barthes’ theoretical conception of myth captures the way in which antifascism was ideologically used: ‘Myth hides nothing: its function is to distort, not to make disappear’ (Barthes 1957/1972, p. 121). Myths simplify and distort the complexities of a historical moment. Particularly within the complex relationship between the USSR and Nazi Germany, myth simplifies the changing of alliances and the actions of soldiers during the Great Patriotic War.

In passing from history to nature, myth acts economically: it abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with all dialectics, with any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world which is without contradiction because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves. (Barthes 1957/1972, p. 143)

In many ways, war memorials are more about how the present society remembers and understands itself. They are symbolic representations of the past. Soviet war memorials represented the needs of Soviet elites to mythologize the glorious foundation of the Soviet Union. The valor of Soviet heroes against fascism was emphasized for the new collective identity of the Soviet citizen. The Soviet memorials replaced the deliberately forgotten annexation and occupation of Estonia with the central memory of Soviet martyrdom to fascist aggression.

The memory of 'victim' is particularly difficult in Soviet war memorials because the soldiers were also 'victims' of fascist aggression and of their own ruling elites. Conscripts on both sides of the ideological battle can be viewed as victims of the period in which they lived. But 'victimhood' is too singular and one-sided because it does not allow for the victimhood of Estonians under Soviet occupation. Either one has a hierarchy of victimhood or a leveling of victimhood in which all victims of war are memorialized together.

The contentious debate surrounding the redesigning of the *Neue Wache* in Berlin in 1993 into the central German memorial highlighted many of the problems of victimhood. As historians such as Koselleck carefully pointed out, the label of victimhood erases the horrible complexity of German society during National Socialism (Koselleck 1993, pp. 200–3). To honor a Nazi soldier next to a concentration camp victim and civilian is problematic, as the debates which raged in German newspapers demonstrated. Likewise in Estonia, the label of 'victim' blurs the important historical distinction between Soviet occupation and liberation from Nazi Germany. The final variant of the German national memorial in Berlin (*Neue Wache*) represented German victimhood with an enlarged pieta of a mother mourning her dead son. Modeled on Käthe Kollwitz's sculpture of the artist mourning her own son killed in World War I, the private pieta became a national symbol of German national mourning. However, the plaques on the side of the memorial listed the different 'victims' of Nazi aggression who were mourned. The intention was to maintain the complexity of German history and respectfully mourn those who died in the name of the German nation (Stölzl 1993).

Because some Soviet war memorials in Estonia serve as places for Russian-speaking families to honor their dead, it is difficult to alter or remove them – particularly in areas with a Russian majority, such as Narva. The commemoration of World War II in contemporary Estonia is an example of a 'moral trauma' or 'negative event' that has conflicting and multiple meanings. As Wagner-Pacifici and Schwarz argued in reference to the Vietnam Veterans 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. But these traumas cannot always be ignored without denying their noble side, without forgetting commitments and sacrifices that would be considered heroic in the service of other ends. (Wagner-Pacifici & Schwarz 1991, p. 384)

Both Russians and Estonians link monuments to national identity and national loss: the Estonians to Estonian national identity and the Russian minority to Russian and, at times, Soviet identity.

Topography of Memory: War Memorials Along the Narva River

The commemorative road driving south from Narva-Jõesuu to Narva (Figure 1) begins with a Soviet military T-34 tank posed with its gun towards inland Estonia. Similar to other Soviet military memorials in the region, a carefully tended path of red stones leads the visitor to the well-preserved monument. The inscription remains unchanged since Soviet days:

On 25–26 June 1944 the Leningrad front advanced into this region of the Narva River, broke through the fascist German defense and liberated the city of Narva.

25–26 juunil 1944 a. forsseerisid Leningradi rinde väed selles rajoonis Narva Jõe, mürdsid fašistliku-Saksamaa vägede kaitse ja vabastasid Narva linna.

The Soviet tank (Figure 2) is without graffiti and adorned with red carnations. Unlike the large Soviet military monument in the Maarjamäe suburb of Tallinn, with its extinguished eternal flame, the Narva war monuments are active memorials adorned with fresh flowers and well preserved. On the one hand, the tank is an actual piece of history and a fossil from the old Soviet empire. Unlike the Bronze Soldier monument in Tallinn, it is not a site of conflicted or politicized memory between Estonian- and Russian-speakers. Although the memorial represents Soviet military



FIGURE 1 War memorials along the Narva River.

(1) German Military Cemetery; (2) Monument to the Northern War. The Estonian Military Cemetery to the War of Independence is adjacent and across the street; (3) Soviet T-34 Tank about 4 kilometers from Narva, with the Soviet memorial to fallen soldier Grafov, nearby towards Narva.

Map: Eesti matkarajad. Narva jalgrattamatk, available at: <http://matkarajad.maaturism.ee/index.php?pg=object&id=148>, accessed 3 September 2008.



FIGURE 2 Soviet tank (Photograph by Meelik Kattago).

victory, there has not been any discussion in Estonia about removing it. It serves as a commemorative place for the glorification of the Red Army, a place for newlyweds to tie their ribbons around the gun and a place for honoring military death. Likewise it preserves how the battle for the city of Narva was officially represented during Soviet Estonia: as liberation from fascism and legitimation of Soviet power. Unlike the Red Army tanks in central Berlin at the *Sowjetisches Ehrenmal* in Tiergarten, the Narva tank is not part of a larger burial ground for Red Army soldiers. Because the tank is pointed inland towards Estonia and Europe, its message of liberation remains hauntingly within Cold War hostilities. For those Estonians who know about the tank, it symbolizes occupation, while for Russian-speaking war veterans and some Russian young who come to tie their wedding ribbon around the gun, the tank symbolizes the bravery of the Red Army and the strength of the Russian nation during the Nazi German invasion of the Soviet Union.

A short drive from the Soviet tank, one finds another war memorial (Figure 3). Again with red stones before the clean memorial and the red star, the visitor reads the following inscription:

In this place on 22.2.1944, a Hero of the Soviet Union, Lieutenant Igor Grafov committed his heroic act.

Siin sooritas 22.2.1944 a. oma kangelasteo nõukogude liidu kangelane n. Leitnant Igor Grafov.

The issue is not that this particular soldier's death is being commemorated, but the way in which his death is mythologized in the name of the Soviet Union. The soldier's death not only memorializes military loss of life, but specifically commemorates death for the greater good of the Soviet Union. The soldier is valorized as a hero for the Soviet Union during the battles to capture Narva from Nazi Germans and Estonians. The term 'hero' (*kangelane*) is problematic due to the two Soviet occupations of Estonia: first in 1940–1941 and later in 1944–1991. Numerous accounts portray the 'liberation' of Europe by the Red Army with looting, killing



FIGURE 3 Memorial to Igor Grafov (Photograph by Meelik Kattago).

and mass rape (Beevor 2002; Naimark 1995). Unlike the Bronze Soldier in Tallinn, this grave to a fallen Red Army soldier does not have a wider meaning beyond this individual soldier's death. It fades into the background as a memorial gravesite representing the period in which it was constructed. It commemorates individual mourning as well as victory.

Continuing another few minutes along the road to Narva, against the background of the Narva River and Russia, one sees a monument commemorating Russian defeat in the battle between Swedes and Russians during the Great Northern War for the city of Narva in 1700 (Figure 4). The monument was built in 1900 to commemorate Russian loss of life as well as the victorious recapturing of Narva in 1704 (Mälestise koond, Monument Põhjasõjas 1700, 1995). 'The Monument to the Northern War 1700' was restored after the Second World War and has been officially listed under heritage protection since 1995.

After seeing the Soviet 'liberation' tank and the monument to the Soviet hero, this monument continues the narrative of Narva as a part of Russia – whether in its Tsarist or Soviet incarnation. The monument commemorating Russian defeat to Sweden emphasizes military death and loss in the name of the Russian nation.

Almost across the street from the Northern War monument, one sees an Estonian military cemetery dedicated to those Estonian soldiers killed during the War of Independence (1918–1920) (Figure 5). The individual crosses have been crudely knocked off the gravestones, which stand destroyed and maimed. In the center of the cemetery is a classical memorial sculpture restored in 1995 with an inscription commemorating the soldiers buried in this cemetery.

To the memory of brave defenders of the Fatherland who died in the War of Estonian Independence 1918–1920 at the Narva Front. With gratitude, Narva, September 1921.

*Eesti vabadussõjas 1918–1920 Narva väerinnal langenud vapratele kodumaakaitsetele.
Tänulik Narva september 1921.*



FIGURE 4 Monument to Fallen Soldiers killed in the Northern War, 1700 (Photograph by Meelik Kattago).



FIGURE 5 Narva Garrison cemetery, memorial to those killed in the War of Independence (Photographs by Meelik Kattago).

However, only when the visitor walks around the monument can one find a small plaque narrating the important history of this military cemetery. The cemetery was dedicated in October 1919 and the memorial was added in 1921. During the fall of 1940 the memorial was blown up by the Soviet Regime, the crosses were crudely knocked off and given over to a metal scrapheap in the 1960s. In the 1970s the cemetery was cordoned off and the first rows of the graves were grown over with weeds. In 1995 the restored foundation of the destroyed memorial was erected along with a plaque explaining the history of the monument and graveyard. By 1996, the cemetery was restored to its current status (Mälestise koond, Narva Garnisoni kalmistu, 2006). The cemetery is one of many throughout Estonia in which the

physical memory of the War of Independence was destroyed by the Soviet Regime with the intention to erase the event of Estonian independence from history. The cemetery in Narva is not unique but part of a systemic policy of the monumental destruction of the Estonian nation during which numerous monuments to Estonian independence were destroyed and crosses removed from military graves (Erelt 2007).

The desecration of the gravesites is made even more visible because a Russian cemetery with well-preserved Orthodox crosses is directly adjacent to the Estonian military cemetery. The brutal destruction of Estonian gravesites along with the blown-up memorial to Estonian independence by Soviet Regime hauntingly recalls George Orwell's famous quotation that 'Whoever controls the past, controls the future'. In its current form, the Estonian military cemetery to the War of Independence demonstrates the depth of Soviet occupation over Estonia.

The Estonian military cemetery is starkly contrasted with the final memorial on the road to Narva; that of the Nazi German soldiers cemetery (Figure 6). Abstract and simple, the cemetery honors the death of German soldiers killed, without mention of communism or fascism. The cemetery commemorates the death of German World War II soldiers with the inscription: '*Narva Deutscher Soldatenfriedhof 1939–1945*'. Originally built in 1943 as a cemetery for the *Wehrmacht*, the site became a central cemetery for German soldiers killed on the Narva Front. The major reconstruction of the cemetery and the addition of granite crosses and names were completed in 1999 by the Organization of German Gravetakers (*Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge*). Groups of three stone crosses stand together commemorating military death. Granite slabs are engraved with the names of 4,000 soldiers who are buried in the cemetery. The central symbol of the cemetery is a cross 4.5 meters high overlooking Russia and the Narva River.²

Individual death is remembered, without glorifying the ideological cause of fascism and without the linkage to heroism. Instead the cemetery signifies the



FIGURE 6 Narva German military cemetery (Photograph by Meelik Kattago).

historical context of German military loss with the historical dates of World War II. The German cemetery in many ways reflects the larger debate in unified German society as to how to commemorate German military death without praising fascism or making German soldiers into national martyrs. By simple mention of dates and subsequent plaques with the names, birth and death of each soldier, the visitor is given the chance to reflect on the magnitude of loss during the Second World War. The soldiers are not described as heroes, liberators, aggressors or occupiers, but remembered as German individuals, who died for their country. The cemetery seeks to avoid monumentalizing history and instead offers a minimalistic reflection on World War II. One might question whether the dates 1939–1945 will be sufficient for future generations. However, the aim of the cemetery is to honor German soldiers who were killed in the battle for Narva during the war. The emphasis is on mourning and loss without grandeur or heroism.

Past Politics: Coming to Terms with Communism in a Changing Estonia and Europe

Attempts to cast European memory within a single grand narrative silence the many different experiences of World War II and the Cold War which divided the continent. Indeed as Tony Judt has elegantly argued, postwar Europe is full of shifting myths and mismemories (Judt 2002, pp. 157–83; Judt 2005) Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, debates about war memorials and the narration of recent Estonian history have been part of a reassessment of the many meanings of World War II and communism. The recent past is politicized and linked to contemporary identity formation in rapidly changing societies. Past politics in north-eastern Europe after 1989 tends to focus on three overlapping points: the blank spots of history, victims versus perpetrators and the relevance of national history in contemporary society (Hackmann 2003, pp. 82–9).

The debates in Estonia surrounding the Lihula monument (2004) and the Bronze Soldier monument in Tallinn (2007) were screens onto which many of the blank spots of twentieth-century history were projected. While the Lihula monument demonstrated that it is politically incorrect for an Estonian soldier to be remembered wearing a German military uniform, the Bronze Soldier monument demonstrated that an Estonian soldier can be remembered wearing a Red Army uniform. The German military uniform is taboo because it symbolizes Nazi aggression, whereas the Red Army uniform is polysemic, symbolizing liberation, aggression and occupation. The Lihula monument was removed by the Estonian government and relocated to a private museum outside Tallinn. The intention of the monument was to honor those Estonian soldiers who fought on the side of Nazi Germany against the Soviet Union. The Soviet Bronze Soldier monument in Tallinn was also removed by the government during contentious riots in April 2007, but relocated to a military cemetery outside Tallinn city center.

Contemporary Estonian debates surrounding monuments to World War II raise similar questions to those of the West German Historians' debate in the 1980s:

- Whether communism can and should be compared with National Socialism, or whether the two ideologies are *sui generis* different and utterly incomparable.

- The criminal nature of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union.
- Distinctions between victim and perpetrator.
- The different interpretations of the role of the Red Army during World War II and communism.

Given the context of the growing importance of the Great Patriotic War in contemporary Russia, the rehabilitation of the Soviet melody for the Russian national anthem, Putin's claim that the break-up of the Soviet Union was the greatest mistake of the twentieth century, and the *Nashi* nationalist youth movement in Russia, different historical narratives about World War II are emerging which reveal dramatically different understandings of the recent past. All of the narratives though share similar Manichean distinctions between good and evil.

In the Western narrative, National Socialism is represented as the main evil. Since the 1960s, one could argue that the Holocaust is viewed as the primary trauma and victim of Nazi aggression. The 8th of May marks the end of World War II, and the defeat and eventual division of Germany. Communism, while also viewed as negative through the prism of the Cold War, cannot be compared to the inherent criminal nature of National Socialism. Moreover the Holocaust is a unique defining feature of National Socialism.

In the Soviet-Russian narrative, encouraged by Putin's government, fascism (National Socialism) is the main evil and the Russian people are the primary victim of Nazi aggression, rather than the Jews. The Red Army soldier is the hero and liberator of Europe. 'The war' is not World War II, but the Great Patriotic War (1941–1945) whereby the years when Stalin and Hitler were allied, namely 1939–1941, are downplayed and even arguably forgotten. Finally, 9 May marks the end of the war as Victory Day, not 8 May.

In the post-communist, post-Soviet narrative that one finds in countries such as Estonia, both National Socialism and communism are considered evil; however, communism is *the* main evil. Estonian national victimhood is the primary trauma, not Jewish. The Red Army soldier is an occupier, not liberator of eastern Europe. The end of the war is more concretely seen in the re-establishment of national independence and the withdrawal of Soviet troops. Narratives of return to history, Europe and the West dominate the national narrative.

The Holocaust is not interpreted as a central part of Estonian memory; rather, it is seen as peripheral and more of a German or European problem than an Estonian one. Estonian politicians tend to draw attention to the forgotten suffering of Estonians during the Soviet deportations as well as the secret Molotov–Ribbentrop pact of 1939 when Estonia was occupied by the USSR. Whereas one might argue that the genocide of European Jewry has been internalized into a Western narrative about the Second World War, for the Soviet-Russian and post-communist Estonian perspective, the Holocaust is seen as external to their central narratives of the same period: 1939–1945.

The different narratives about the Nazi and communist pasts are related to a generational change which affects what is remembered. As many of the survivors and veterans who experienced the war are dying out, most people learn about it

second-hand in a form of what Jan Assmann calls 'cultural memory'. Thus, media images, photography, film and docudramas, as well as history books are the dominant sources of how the recent past is represented and remembered (Assmann 1995).

'Islands of the Past'

In his reflections on history, Nietzsche described different ways of remembering the past. Keenly aware of the power of historical interpretation, Nietzsche emphasized three different types of historicization. Monumental history is the most common. Great leaders and events are mythologized in the name of the nation. History is recalled via the Napoleons and Bismarcks – via the different wars and historical epochs. But this version of history is limited and leaves out the complexity of the past.

Thus, whenever the monumental vision of the past *rules* over the other ways of looking at the past, I mean the antiquarian and the critical, the past itself suffers *damage*: very great portions of the past are forgotten and despised, and flow away like a grey uninterrupted flood, and only single embellished facts stand out as islands (Nietzsche 1980, p. 17, italics in original)

Soviet war memorials in their glorification of the Great Patriotic War and of Soviet military liberation of Narva indeed damage the past by not acknowledging the other interpretation of history, namely, the Soviet occupation of Estonia and Eastern Europe. Thus with the monuments, 'only single embellished facts stand out as islands' (Nietzsche 1980, p. 17).

Antiquarian history preserves and reveres the past with a certain piety and respect, without questioning whether past traditions should be continued. For Nietzsche, antiquarian history becomes excessive when the past dwarfs the present. 'Thus it hinders the powerful resolve for new life, thus it paralyzes the man of action who, as man of action, will and must always injure some piety or other' (Nietzsche 1980, p. 21). The monuments on the way to Narva contain aspects of both a monumental and antiquarian sense of history. The past is revered and mythologized in the tank as a relic of history and the gravesite of a Red Army soldier.

Critical history, on the other hand, is the condemnation of the past and the severing of past from present. From time to time, a critical view of history is necessary for individuals to be able to live fully in the present.

Here it becomes clear how badly man needs, often enough, in addition to the monumental and the antiquarian ways of seeing the past, a *third* kind, the *critical*: and this again in the service of life as well. He must have the strength, and use it from time to time, to shatter and dissolve something to enable him to live: this he achieves by dragging it to the bar of judgment, interrogating it meticulously and finally condemning it: every past, however, is worth condemning – for that is how matters happen to stand with human affairs: human violence and weakness have always contributed strongly to shaping them. (Nietzsche 1980, pp. 21–2)

In its extreme form, critical history severs the link between past and present without acknowledging their intrinsic connection. As Nietzsche emphasizes, whether we like it or not, we are always linked to the actions of previous generations. 'If we condemn those aberrations and think ourselves exempt from them, the fact that we are descended from them is not eliminated' (Nietzsche 1980, p. 22).

For Nietzsche, all three different types of historical reflection, monumental, antiquarian and critical, are necessary – not for the sake of the past – but for the sake of the present. History is in the service of present and future generations. Historical reflection should not burden one to the past but provide meaning for present and future generations. In his terse reflections on history, Nietzsche emphasizes the need for a balance between the historical and unhistorical, between memory and forgetting: 'the unhistorical and the historical are equally necessary for the health of an individual, a people and a culture' (Nietzsche 1980, p. 10).

'The Past in the Present'

In many ways, the restoration of the Swedish Lion monument in 2000 commemorating the Swedish victory over Russia for the city of Narva in 1700 was an example of antiquarian history. As Stuart Burch and David J. Smith argue, the commemoration recalling Russian loss of empire in an overwhelming Russian-speaking city could only be peaceful because the events were seen within the context of Narva's 'Golden Age' as a baroque jewel of the East (Burch & Smith 2007, pp. 920–1). The Swedish Lion commemoration downplayed national politics and instead emphasized the wider context of shared cultural links in the city of Narva. Since the Great Northern War was perceived by the majority of Narva residents as the distant past, it avoided the conflicts surrounding commemorations which referred back to World War II or the Soviet era. '...[U]nlike the events of 1940s, the Great Northern War is *the past* rather than – as Michael Ignatieff puts it – the "past in the present"' (Burch & Smith 2007, p. 932).

The Soviet memorials surrounding Narva are examples of both antiquarian and monumental understandings of history. As relics of the Soviet empire, they represent Narva within a Soviet narrative and thus reflect the period in which they were built. As national monuments, they are mostly invisible because they are located in the periphery, not in the center of the Estonian nation. Are they simply examples of invisible monuments to a bygone age that have faded into the local landscape, or does the ideological version of history that they represent block a more nuanced understanding of Estonia's recent past? The fact that there is not any discussion about removing the Soviet tank testifies to its curious invisibility. While an actual piece of recent history, the meaning is less about mournful loss than defiant victory. The Bronze Soldier in Tallinn, on the other hand, was more of an example of monumental history because of the sharp conflict between liberation and occupation that the statue inspired. Once moved to a military cemetery, the meaning of the memorial charged from monumental to antiquarian and reverential.

Although the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991 means the juridical continuity of the Republic of Estonia, one cannot go back in time to the first Republic. Due to Nazi and Soviet occupations, the newly restored Estonia is territorially, demographically and socially different from the first Republic of 1918. The reassessment of war memorials is part of the rewriting of Estonia's complex and multi-layered history. One vitally important step towards social integration in restored Estonia, particularly in Narva, is a common understanding of twentieth-century history. Such an understanding would be less Manichean and more open to the complexity of the past. Acknowledgement of the criminal nature of the Soviet regime also entails a more nuanced appraisal of the Red Army. The fact that Russia refuses to acknowledge the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states only perpetuates the different interpretations of history within Estonia. As Mart Laar, historian and former Prime Minister of Estonia, wrote:

During recent years Estonia alongside the other Baltic republics has repeatedly raised the issue of the necessity to condemn communist crimes on an international level. Regrettably, Russia has stuck to the concept formulated already in the time of the Soviet Union, according to which Estonia was not occupied, but it voluntarily joined the Soviet Union – consequently, neither the Soviet Union nor its legal successor Russia can be responsible for the crimes against humanity which were committed in Estonia. (Laar 2005, p. 47)

For Estonians and ethnic Russians living in contemporary Estonia, World War II is a moral trauma and negative event symbolizing *both* liberation and occupation. The future lies in memorials which can aesthetically and visually represent the complexity of Estonian history. Rather than emphasizing World War II as either liberation or occupation, contemporary monuments face the challenge of representing the liberation of Europe from Nazi Germany by the Soviet Union *and* the occupation of Eastern Europe by the Soviet Union.

Notes

- 1 A shorter version of this essay was presented at a conference in Tallinn, Estonia 'Places of Memory in Northeastern Europe: National – Transnational – European?', 21 September 2007. The author is grateful for reviewer comments and criticism, as well as those by Jörg Hackmann and Johanna Söderholm.
- 2 'Deutsche Kriegsgräberstätten von Ägypten bis Usbekistan', available at: <http://www.volksbund.de/kgs/stadt.asp?stadt=1903>, accessed 29 March 2008. 'Narva Deutscher Soldatenfriedhof 1939–1945', available at: <http://vana.narva-plan.ee/vananarva/soldatenfriedhof/indexd.htm>, accessed 29 March 2008.

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