

Coming to terms with the past: The example of Estonia

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Though it is a member of NATO and the European Union, Estonia remains relatively little-known. Estonia is the smallest and northernmost Baltic state, with just 1.3 million inhabitants. This country of mainly Finno-Ugrians, speakers of Estonian, belonged since the early 18th century to the Russian Empire. Today it covers mainly the former tsarist governorate of Estonia (Estland in German, Estlandiia in Russian) and the northern part of the governorate of Livonia (Livland in German, Liflandiia in Russian).

The region was part of the Russian Empire but was dominated by Baltic Germans. This is why Baltic Germans were long portrayed as Estonians' national enemy, exemplified by the saying that Estonians suffered 700 years under the German yoke.

The independence of the Republic of Estonia was declared in 1918 and finally secured in 1920, after the War of Independence against Soviet Russia. Initially, Estonia was a democracy with model rights for ethnic minorities (Russians, Germans, Swedes, and Jews) and underwent a successful period of state- and nation-building.

Due to the 1934 coup d'état by one of the state founders, Konstantin Päts, in cooperation with the head of the army, Johan Laidoner, Estonia became an authoritarian regime, like most of Central Eastern Europe. This coup is still discussed today but mostly seen very critically. Nevertheless, social and economic development continued under the new regime, and the country was in the process of catching up with Western Europe until 1940.

The pact between Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin in August 1939 sealed the fate of Estonia and the two other Baltic states, as well as of Poland. The country became part of the Soviet sphere of influence in Eastern Europe; after Moscow's September 1939 ultimatum, Estonia had to allow Soviet troops to be stationed on its territory, in numbers larger than those of the Estonian army. Initially, the Soviets were not supposed to interfere in domestic politics, but this changed after a second ultimatum in June 1940 in the shadow of Hitler's successes in Western Europe. Estonia was first occupied by the Red Army and then, in August 1940, annexed to the Soviet Union after sham elections and the installation of a Soviet-friendly government. Sovietization started swiftly and was accompanied by mass arrests, a severe decline in the standard of living, and, in June 1941, a mass deportation.

The situation in the annexed Baltic states was so desperate that the locals greeted invading German troops as liberators when the German attack on the Soviet Union, known as “Operation Barbarossa,” started. Three years of German occupation followed, in which Estonian hopes of gaining autonomy or regaining independence were dashed. Approximately 8,000 inhabitants of Estonia were killed, and nearly all Jews who did not take part in the Soviet evacuation perished.

The Third Reich built a system of exploitation and suppression, but as an irony of history, it was milder for ordinary people than Stalinism. This is why the German occupation is still remembered as a “lesser evil.” Estonians also participated as auxiliary units in genocide and war crimes. Actually, more Estonians fought on the German side in World War II than on the Soviet side. Estonian participation in German crimes mostly became an issue again after the turn of the millennium. In fall 1944, the Soviets returned. Seven percent of the population voted with their feet and left the country via the Baltic Sea, heading mostly to Sweden and Germany. From there Baltic exiles later moved to the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia.

The second Sovietization was as brutal as the first one and more thorough. Agriculture was forcibly collectivized in 1949, accompanied by another mass deportation, this time of 2 percent of the population. Stalinist repression hit 12 to 14 percent of Estonia’s inhabitants; approximately 4 percent lost their lives or were killed in the process. In addition to the massive propaganda efforts of the Soviet state, the complete reconstruction of life and a huge influx of immigrants (more than a fifth of the population by the 1950s), Estonians also faced a slow recovery from war and Soviet exploitation. Not until the mid-1960s did the standard of living recover to the level of 1939. It is thus understandable that Stalinism remains an important issue of the Estonian past. For many Estonians, Russians represented the hated Soviet order, and they turned into the new image of a national enemy.

After Stalin’s death, the situation began to normalize. Contacts with the outside world were re-established, and people returned from the gulag or places of forced settlement. People’s general tendency was to accommodate to the given circumstances, and Estonia, like the other Baltic republics, became a model republic of the USSR. According to Soviet statistics, the Baltic republics were among the most developed parts of the USSR.

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During the Soviet period, two competing narratives of Estonia's history were developed. One was the voice of the exile community in the West. Old divisions over authoritarian rule continued, often according to former party affiliation. Some authors criticized the regime of Päts, while others idealized it. Concerning the German occupation, the exile community opted mostly to portray the Estonians as sheer victims. Concerning Stalinism and later Soviet rule, the exile community produced some very accurate accounts and, of course, a lot of criticism. Despite political bias by some authors, the exile community's research on Estonian contemporary history was more accurate than that inside the country. The Estonian SSR initially closely followed Stalin's history policy. The interwar era of independence was denounced, the authoritarian regime was labeled fascist, and becoming part of the Soviet Union was depicted as a salvation from bourgeois suppression and capitalism—a never-ending success story. Later Soviet Estonian historiography became a bit more nuanced, but the Soviet master narrative still dominated.

In contrast with the official narrative, many Estonians had their own story on the family level. Some families stayed silent about the past, while in others, stories of serving in the Waffen SS or being deported to the gulag were passed on to all members. Those private stories formed an alternative to the official version and led to further questions.

In addition, Soviet censorship was strict but could not destroy all the printed matter of the past. So some people were able to read old journals and newspapers and forbidden books from the interwar period and thus form their own view of history. Additional information came in with letters from relatives abroad or, in the later Soviet period, with their sporadic visits.

Moreover, the influence of Cold War broadcasting should not be forgotten. The Voice of America and Radio Free Europe broadcast their own Estonian-language programs every day. Those who understood foreign languages well could listen to Scandinavian or German stations or to the more extensive programs in Russian on the Voice of America or Radio Free Europe.

All this did not really help the country come to terms with the past, but it formed a competing memory landscape. The questions of authoritarian rule, the German occupation, and especially of Stalinism were not really historicized, but people had a certain image about it depending on their private view often being at odds with the official perspective. Those who accepted the official version might have been quite satisfied, but the majority of Estonians felt that the past remained unresolved.

Under Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*, the time came to reassess Estonia's contemporary history. Thanks to *glasnost*' (transparency), censorship decreased, and Stalinism was widely discussed in the newspapers. In 1989–1990, two important books appeared in print: *The Estonian People and Stalinism (Eesti rahvas ja stalinlus)* and the two-volume *Home Story (Kodu lugu)*, offering a new narrative of Estonia's history and including many views previously expressed only in private. The latter book became an all-time bestseller in the field of history in Estonia and was influential in subsequent years.

History was an important part of what author Anatol Lieven called the “Baltic Revolution,” whether in the form of the preservation of monuments, the reassessment of past events, or the discussion of the violent deeds of Stalinism. One of the most important events of the Baltic Revolution was the Baltic Chain, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact and uniting about 2 million Balts from the Estonian capital, Tallinn, to the Lithuanian one, Vilnius. It might be argued that the positive memory of interwar independence was an important factor in the Baltic race towards autonomy, sovereignty, and ultimately independence in the years from 1989 to 1991.

Also in this period, reconciliation with the Baltic Germans, who left the country in 1939–1941, was sought and found. Later in the 1990s, independent Estonia was the first and only Central Eastern European state to automatically grant the former German minority and their heirs citizenship, officially invite them back, and offer the restitution of property rights in case of Soviet nationalization. This was an impressive gesture in the century of expulsions in Europe, but since the approximately 16,000 Baltic Germans from Estonia were long settled in Germany and other places, few responded to this generous invitation.

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When Estonia regained independence after the failed Soviet putsch of August 1991, the difficult processes of post-socialist transformation and nation- and state-building started. After history was such a driving force in the Baltic Revolution, one would expect history to take a prominent place now. Of course, history was used in politics, and new school textbooks coming slowly would, it was hoped, instill a new version of the past. But due to the difficulties of the post-socialist transformation, academic history needed a longer period of time to readjust to the

new conditions. Nevertheless, the first history commissions and the NGO known as Memento, a victims' organization, started work. In the beginning, it was important to find out about the number of victims of foreign rule and their fates.

In the 1990s, the German occupation was still something of a taboo subject. When I started considering future postdoctoral projects, my Estonian friends advised me kindly not to look into this topic, because it would involve extensively covering the issue of Estonian collaborators, and that would not be good for my career. Research on Stalinism did not really take off either; the first period of independence received more interest.

Coming to terms with the past also included the restitution of property rights, which was part of the privatization process. Enterprises and large houses in towns had been nationalized in the 1940s, and agriculture was forcibly collectivized. Now the rightful owners had to claim their property back; the difficult process took more than a decade, and only after two decades was the problem of tenants in formerly nationalized property solved. The majority of Estonian families were involved in some way in the restitution of property rights. This and the swift move to neoliberal capitalism marked a clear distancing from the socialist past.

Although the first government of Mart Laar, who played an important role in placing Estonia on the path of thorough reform, announced it would remove communists from public office, and many years later, a stupid T-shirt appeared that called for putting "communists into the oven," the regime change occurred peacefully. Nearly no one from the late socialist elite ever had to appear in court, and many individuals were able to keep their positions.

Transitional justice occurred in the case of some of the surviving perpetrators of Stalinism, mainly the co-organizers of mass deportation. Curiously, the case of Arnold Meri, cousin of President Lennart Meri, came to court very late, although he was then obviously the highest-ranking surviving Stalinist perpetrator. For crimes committed under German occupation, no one was accused, because no suspects seemed within reach of the law. The main German war criminal in Estonia, Dr. Martin Sandberger, a real mass murderer, died peacefully in Germany, thus evading justice. He served in prison after the war but the now available archival documents in Tallinn provided new evidence against him. Those accused in court and punished had served in much lower positions than the two aforementioned individuals.

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During the period of regaining independence, two models to re-establish the Republic of Estonia were discussed: a restoration of the state, which was said to be occupied for half a century, or a new founding. Legally, Estonia opted for legal continuity, including pre-1940 citizenship. Concerning the constitution and the legal system, it was decided not to use the interwar period as a model. A new constitution and a new legal system were worked out. For both the Federal Republic of Germany served as one model. In that sense, Estonia's statehood is based on continuity, but the content is, to a large extent, newly founded. Concerning institution-building, Estonia opted to copy best practices and adapted this to local circumstances. Some lessons were learned from the failure of democracy in 1934.

Already under the Soviets, two cultures lived a partly separated life, the Estonian and the Russian one, each with its own school system and media. Because of censorship, Estonian- and Russian-language newspapers or television programs were not much different from each other.

During independence this changed. Russian-speakers, one-third of the population, watch television channels from Russia as their most important source of information, while Estonian speakers have turned to increasingly Western-oriented Estonian newspapers, owned mostly by Swedish media enterprises, and Estonian television channels. In that sense, the media landscape has split into two, and the division between Russian and English internet use has deepened this split. This is not to say that the split neatly divides people according to their native language. But this split is one reason why most Estonian-speakers and most Russian-speakers do not share a common view of the past. Of course, historical memory and interpretation are individual.

For historical memory, monuments are important. After independence, the interwar Republic of Estonia tore down some monuments of the tsarist period, such as a huge monument to Peter I in Tallinn, and erected new ones to commemorate the War of Independence. When the Soviets took power, they tried to erase the past. They destroyed not only all kinds of monuments related to the Republic of Estonia and the War of Independence but also traces of older history, extinguishing, for example, a great deal of Baltic German heritage, though not as much as was eliminated in the "new Western territories" in Poland, where steps were taken to erase the German past completely. The short German occupation witnessed mainly a renaming of streets and squares, such as Adolf Hitler Square. After the war, in Estonia, just as in the rest of the Soviet Union, the Soviets erected monuments and renamed streets or even entire towns after revolutionaries. More than 250 monuments to "liberation in World War II," which for Estonians meant the second period of Soviet rule, went up across the country. When independence was re-

established in 1991, Lenin statues were removed, streets renamed, and new monuments installed; often they were restored old monuments or copies thereof from the first period of independence. Some monuments are controversial, like those dedicated to Konstantin Päts or Johan Laidoner.

A symbolic coup was the replacement of Tartu's Lenin monument a couple of years later by a fountain and monument of two kissing students on Town Hall Square. When you meet in downtown Tartu, the second-largest town in the country, you do it there. Often a rendezvous is involved; the new monument serves the location much better than the grim revolutionary did, and indicates a somewhat relaxed approach towards the past.

Tartu, officially nicknamed the “city of good thoughts,” also indicates the problems of this relaxed approach. A tourist will be unable to find the location of the former German concentration camp or the largest Soviet site of executions in the former Tartu prison. Even most of my history students at the University of Tartu do not know the location of those places. They simply do not mesh with the notion of a “city of good thoughts.”

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The year 1998 marked an important shift in memory politics. Estonia, like the other Baltic states, sought membership in NATO and the European Union but faced criticism from Western countries for not dealing with its history properly, especially collaboration during the German occupation and participation in the Holocaust. Thus President Lennart Meri established the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against Humanity, headed by Finnish elder statesman Max Jakobson and with other prominent members from neighboring countries. This commission met to come to conclusions concerning crimes against humanity against Estonian citizens or conducted on Estonian territory; in practice, the commission also looked into several crimes outside Estonia. A group of historians was hired to work for the commission, and their research forms the backbone of the commission's result.

As a historian, I have criticized the two large volumes published by the commission after the turn of the century and dealing mainly with the years 1940–1953, because they are too descriptive, not analytical enough, and not well written. The idea was that the international commission was responsible for interpretation and that the historians should simply provide facts. This is, of course, impossible; historians do not provide “only facts.” By the way, the presidential commission in Latvia suffered from similar problems. Historical truth cannot be simply

reconstructed. This criticism aside, the historians of the Estonian commission uncovered a wealth of material, and their work effectively ended the taboo on discussing the German occupation.

In the 21st century, history research in Estonia became consolidated, a younger generation emerged, and many older researchers continued their work. The field began to follow more international trends and, through the hiring of foreigners like me, became more internationalized. Not only Stalinism and the German occupation but also the interwar period have been covered thoroughly, unearthing new information and generating new interpretations. Now the frontier of research is moving towards the 1960s and 1970s. This step has also been anticipated by the presidential commission, which has now turned into the Estonian Institute of Historical Memory and is investigating human rights violations in the late Soviet period.

Historical topics that were still “hot” in the 1990s no longer stir up much emotion in public. I can confirm this from my experience teaching at the University of Tartu and regularly giving lectures to the general public. There are, of course, some ground-laying positions, such as the illegality of half a century of “occupation,” which might be more accurately referred to as annexation. In a sense, the historicization of contemporary history seemed quite successful. Nevertheless, outsiders find it quite strange to learn that, for instance, the Estonian parliament seriously considered granting Estonians fighting on the German side in 1944 the status of “freedom fighters.” The ongoing struggle over the past with neighboring Russia is also a bit disturbing, but admittedly, the historians paid by the Russian state to engage in this struggle are not highly qualified or convincing. Justifying Stalinist mass terror as did Russian historian Aleksandr Diukov is, indeed, troubling.

This seemingly positive situation of coming to terms with the past was disrupted in 2007 by a clash of memory often described as pitting Russian-speakers against Estonian-speakers. The government moved a Soviet war monument, the “Bronze Soldier” mourning the death of his comrades, from the city center of Tallinn to a military graveyard on the outskirts of town. This resulted in a brief riot in the town center, which shocked society. What would be a more or less regular event in Berlin, Amsterdam, or London, where street riots could occur several times a year, shook Estonians deeply.

One might, of course, argue that this was the first riot after the fall of socialism over a socialist monument in Central Eastern Europe, but one should not overestimate the importance of the incident, as some of the scholarly literature did. People commemorate World War II in different ways, and one way was to place flowers at a Soviet monument on May 9. When the

government tried to disrupt this tradition, perhaps this was not at all about history but about attracting support from Estonian voters. Never did any Estonian government gain such high approval ratings as after the removal of the Bronze Soldier. The erection of a big and, to many observers, tasteless monument to the War of Independence on Freedom Square in central Tallinn followed some years later. Nevertheless, the struggle over monuments in Estonia now seems finished. Most of the Soviet war memorials are still standing in place, and few new monuments have been erected.

To sum up, Estonia has made progress toward coming to terms with history and has had to accept that people's memories are different and are often tied to personal or family experiences. The country still has a long way to go, but in general, I am optimistic.

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