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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Nugin, R. (2016). Negotiating the past: some issues of transmission of memories among Estonian young people. *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, 8(2), 13-30. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-62532-3>

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Negotiating the Past: Some Issues of Transmission of Memories among Estonian Young People

Raili Nugin*

Abstract

All across Europe, the past has always played a significant role in youth activism and continues to do so, though in different countries the extent of this role may vary. This particular article deals with the question of how the issues of the past resonate in the lives of young people in Estonia. During recent decades, the tensions between hegemonic and alternative pasts have been a source of discursive as well as physical combats among the different socio-cultural groups in Estonia and are often loaded with a political and ideological burden. In 2007, these different understandings peaked with street riots, mostly dominated by young people. Thus, understanding the mechanisms of how young people make sense of the complicated past can tell us also a lot about the reasons behind their political activism (or lack thereof). The article is especially keen on exploring the questions of mechanisms of transmission of memory – how the past is socialised in different contexts (schools, museums, home), and how difficult pasts are dealt with and negotiated in groups of different ethnic and cultural background. By doing so, it will contribute to the theoretical discussions on relations of hegemonic past and communicative memory, how in different cultural contexts the hegemonic past is moulded or contested. It will be argued that young people actively contextualise and rework the matters of the complicated past in their everyday contexts. Neither hegemonic discourse nor the communicative past is absorbed without questions but constantly negotiated.

The dataset of this article consists of in-depth individual (84) and group interviews (5) predominantly with young people, but also other meaningful adults in the youngsters' lives: their parents and grandparents, teachers and the like. In addition, participant observations are used as background data. The sample involves both ethnic Estonians and Russian-speaking minorities.

Keywords: youth, transmission of memory, communicative memory, socialisation of the past, multi-cultural society.

Introduction

In April 2007, the Estonian capital Tallinn witnessed its first massive youth street riot during its post-1991 period of regained independence. A usually peaceful city, famous for its tourist attraction medieval old town, was suddenly overtaken by rioting, looting and a fighting crowd that was mostly made up of young and predominantly Russian-speaking people. The violent unrest lasted for several days, sparking a major police operation in which extreme measures, such as employing water cannons to disperse the people, closing down the streets and massive arrests, were taken to suppress the rebellion. Such riots are nothing new in a broader European context: young people from ethnic minorities and descendants of immigrants tend to be less socially secure and more apt to express their

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need to be heard in protests that can take a violent turn. What was perhaps surprising in the Estonian case was the pretext that triggered the riots: it was initiated by the government's plan to take a memorial for the soldiers (the 'Bronze Soldier') who fought in the Red Army in WWII and relocate it to the war cemetery. The event thereafter became famous as the 'Bronze Night'.¹

Though the deeper reasons for such a vast riot are definitely more complex than a particular interpretation of history (and have social and political agendas beyond the monument), this event remains nevertheless meaningful, symbolising the importance of understanding the role of the past in young people's identity in the post-socialist context. The past is thus not always a 'foreign country', (Lowenthal, 1985) but more a 'social organism in gestation' (Wydra, 2012, p. 125): it is dynamic and it shapes the present, though its presence is sometimes not acknowledged enough. It is noteworthy that the issues, which at least remotely triggered the riots, dated back to WWII: an era that none of the young people rioting (nor their parents) had witnessed. Thus, here the questions of transmitting the past become especially crucial in order to understand how difficult pasts mould and shape the identities of young people, and what role this past plays in their lives. This article is a glance at how the past is socialised in different contexts (schools, museums, home), and how issues of the past are dealt with and negotiated in groups of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. It also addresses the question of how in different cultural contexts the hegemonic past is negotiated or contested. The dataset of this article consists of in-depth individual (84) and group interviews (5) predominantly with young people, but also other meaningful adults in youngsters' lives: their parents and grandparents, teachers and the like. The sample involves both ethnic Estonians and Russian-speaking minorities.

The importance of such a study lies not only in its national context, but perhaps also in understanding the complex dynamics of memories and identities in search of the 'right to memory' (Reading, 2011: 379) in a wider context. Acknowledging different pasts often also means recognising different cultural modalities, and the latter operate not only within, but also across the national borders (Reading, 2011, 394). For instance, what happens in Russia also affects the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia. Thus, the questions of cultural memory and its transmission become especially complicated when we deal with the interrelations of generational (within a family), cultural (within an ethnic community in and outside the borders of Estonia) and hegemonic (school, museums) transmission of the past. Young people have to make sense of the past in complex discursive fields and there is no clear mechanism how these processes operate, as each single case is unique. However, in this article I will try to pinpoint some of the possible ways the transmission of memory can function, offering also some theoretical explanation for these ways. The paper will start off with theoretical insights to the problem of socialising the memory and importance of mnemonic discourses in the society. It will continue by explaining the cultural context of Estonian history and the main lines in discursive battles about the past, following the introduction of the dataset and analysis of the particular data.

Theorising memory

Socialising the past is one of the most crucial aspects in assimilating young people into their communities (Zerubavel, 2003). The past is socialised in various contexts including different media channels (internet, television, newspapers), schools, mnemonic institutions (museums), but also in everyday interactions with family and peers. Transmission of memory is a dialogic process (Pickering & Keightley, 2013, p. 121), involving constant negotiation between cultural, generational and political

¹ Youth protests in Estonia have been rare. The most famous youth protest took place during the Soviet time, in 1980, when militia forces dissolved a gathering of young people attending a punk band concert. Resistance to militia brought forth rebellion and a wave of political repressions. In the political turn of the 1990s, young people played an active role in demonstrations and protests, but mostly in events organised by adults.

boundaries. The relationship between identity and memory, thus, is never straightforward, but rather multidirectional (Rothberg, 2009). In the following, I will outline some of these directions that one needs to be aware of when dealing with studying memory transmission and that have been helpful in conceptualising the outcomes of this particular research.

Memory theorists Jan and Aleida Assmann (A. Assmann, 1999; 2006; J. Assmann, 2008) distinguish collective memory on a cultural and a communicative level. The first type of memory includes 'high culture' texts that have lasted through time; the second marks memory that is passed on in everyday communication. While the first type of memory is represented in cultural texts (museums, novels, plays) and deals with the time which none of the living generations remember at first hand, the other deals with periods that are still actively negotiated among the living generations and is, therefore, dynamic and subject to reconstruction. Though the Assmanns also distinguish the two memories along the lines of time (cultural memory dealing with topics that happened in the 'distant past' and communicative that deal with things that happened at most two generations ago), other theorists are suggesting that cultural and communicative memory should not be differentiated along the lines of time but rather genres (Erl, 2008; Welzer, 2002). In other words, rather than looking at when the cultural memory text was produced, they urge to see how the memory is passed on – whether by established 'high' cultural forms (books, films, exhibitions) or via informal communication (conversations, biographical media coverage, etc.). This research has addressed and touched on both types, analysing the construction of the past in museums (cultural memory), but also dealing with communicative memory by conducting intergenerational interviews. This distinction, however, is complicated by the fact that the exhibitions under scope dealt with topics still very actively constructed in communicative memory, thus blurring the boundaries between the two types of memory.

Collective memory is shaped by the moral agenda of the present (Poole, 2008, pp. 155, 159). When analysing the narrated stories (either in a museum, school or family context), one has to therefore bear in mind that the tales usually fulfil the needs of the present rather than the past: they serve to illustrate values or moral principles that people wish to pass on. However, as these purposes and values change along the generational lines, the narrated stories are always context sensitive and depend on the overall narrative configurations available to the storyteller (Harbus, 2011, p. 209). Personal and public memories are in constant interaction or 'circulation' (Sturken, 2008, p. 74). Thus, the interpretation of the stories by the subsequent generations may change, and the story is 'modernised' and 'adopted', structured differently and made compatible with present moral standards or meanings (Welzer, 2010, p. 14).

The questions of memory have often been related to the notion of generational consciousness (Misztal, 2003; Corsten, 1999; Mannheim, 1993 [1952]). Being born in a certain period limits people to "a specific range of potential experience, predisposing them to a certain characteristic mode of thought and experience, and a characteristic type of historically relevant action" (Mannheim, 1993 [1952], p. 36). Experiencing similar social conditions, events and environment in one's socialising years influences perhaps also the way in which those born in a certain period organise their past and future. Different generations may consider different aspects of events in history important to be remembered. However, within one generation people tend to have similar evaluations on the past and, thus, share discursive practices of how these events are depicted: whether in the key of irony, tragedy or pathos (Misztal, 2003, pp. 12-13, 83-91; Sheftel, 2011).

Thus, memory acts in multiple directions (Rothberg, 2009): for one, there is a generational understanding of the past: people born in the same time frame have similar interpretative patterns, and there are different intergenerational dynamics to memories. Yet, that does not mean generations are necessarily 'locked in opposition with one other': there is also intra-generational identification with the past, the interpretation of the past on horizontal lines within the family (Pickering & Keightley, 2013, p. 118). Young people also identify with their family history and incorporate the family stories

that happened before their lifetime to their identity. Marianne Hirsch has called the phenomenon ‘post-memory’ – when people engage events and stories that happened before one’s lifetime in their biographical stories (2008). This post-memory becomes especially relevant with migrant children, when memory is also tied to longing for home as a place somewhere else (Hirsch & Spitzer, 2002, p. 274). This longing is translated into various cultural acts, symbolic expressions and mnemonic practices, which can be stigmatised by hegemonic memory policies, however, by marginalising these practices the ‘right to memory’ (Reading, 2011) of those groups comes into question. This is exactly what happened during the ‘Bronze Night’ in 2007, when these practices were disrupted by relocating the statue that was important to the Russian-speaking community in Estonia.

The questions of how the memories that are inherited become part of identities and how they are moulded have not been looked at much. However, Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering (2012) have introduced a term ‘mnemonic imagination’ to mark the process of how we:

continuously qualify, adapt, refine and re-synthesise past experience, our own and that of others, into qualitatively new understandings of ourselves and other people, including those to whom we stand in immediate or proximate relation, and those from whom we are more distant (p. 121).

This mnemonic imagination becomes especially relevant when interpreting the transmission of intergenerational memory in family contexts. This area of research is, however, rather scarce. One of the reasons is probably that the family contexts and their everyday communicational mechanisms are not very easy to capture by outsiders (researchers). Thus, the main body of such research is usually based on interview data. One of the most well-known research projects in this field was conducted by Harald Welzer (Welzer 2005; Welzer and Linz 2011; Welzer 2010). In his research, Welzer mainly focused on how histories of family members’ difficult pasts (such as being involved in Nazi operations) are passed on and interpreted in subsequent generations in the family. In his studies, Welzer found many discrepancies between the hegemonic history treatment and the private remembrance cultures in Germany (2005, 2010). He found that the younger generations tend to re-interpret their grandparents’ stories so that they would fit into the ‘acceptable’ model of history:

The more comprehensive the knowledge about war crimes, persecution, and extermination, the stronger is the need to develop stories to reconcile the crimes of ‘the Nazis’ or ‘the Germans’ with the moral integrity of parents or grandparents (Welzer, 2005, p. 8).

In other words, if the official version of history would not enable positive identification with one’s family history, the personal pasts of the grandparents’ generations are either ignored, altered or justified with arguments such as ‘everyone did that at the time’. Also, what he calls ‘cumulative heroisation’ takes place: the grandparents’ narratives that have elements that are heroised in hegemonic discourses are amplified by each subsequent generation. This is probably because of the ‘intergenerational loyalty’ and the need for positive identification (Welzer & Linz, 2011): young people want to position their grandparents on the positive side in the picture that has been depicted by a hegemonic depiction of the past.

While many European countries share controversial history chapters, the discrepancies and conflicts are probably unique in every given context (Welzer & Linz, 2011). Furthermore, these discrepancies are made more complex by cultural dissonances of the understanding of the past in different ethnolinguistic communities. In the following, I will explain the cultural context of the Estonian mnemonic landscape.

Interpreting the Estonian past

Along with other post-socialist countries, Estonia faces problems of interpreting the contradictory and tumultuous history of the twentieth century and the legacy of communism (cf Hoge, 2010). Having been part of the Russian Empire, Estonia gained its status as an independent state in February 1918, shortly after the communist coup d'état of November 1917. This relatively short period of independence ended during the Second World War, in June 1940, when Estonia was incorporated into the Soviet Union and occupied by Soviet troops (however, the Soviet Union did not officially enter the war until the following year, in 1941). Soviet occupation was replaced shortly afterwards by German occupation in 1941, which lasted until 1944 when the Soviet regime was forcefully re-established. Soviet annexation lasted until 1991, when Estonia regained independence (Soviet troops left in 1994) and the Soviet Union was dissolved.

As the past is often the source of legitimising power, history has been rewritten and reinterpreted with every regime change during the last century, each new version trying to undermine the legitimacy of the previous order. The official memory policy discourse prevalent today was largely created at the time of the last regime change, when the Soviet Union collapsed. The political agenda of striving for an independent republic was legalised using history as a source, stressing the continuity of the legal state of the pre-war republic and depicting the era of this independence as the 'golden age' disrupted by Soviet occupation. In this narrative, the Soviet era is constructed as the age of 'rupture' or discontinuity, an age of repressions and long suffering, often using metaphors such as the 'long night' (Jõesalu 2010). This discourse constructs the nation by stressing its sufferings throughout the course of its long history, creating an aura of 'martyrdom' and underlining the stubborn nature of the nation, which survived despite all those tough times (Tamm, 2008; 2013). The central role in constructing the martyr discourse is taken by deportations (1941 and 1949), when Stalinist regime deported around 30,000 people from their homes (commonly during the middle of the night) to Siberia (Ennuste et al., 2005). Many families were torn apart and many people lost their lives in the harsh climatic and poor social conditions of Siberia.

This discourse is sometimes contested by the Russian-speaking ethnic minority² (although not unanimously so), which constitutes almost 30% of Estonia's population of 1.3 million. While the end of WWII is treated in the hegemonic Estonian discourse as the time of the loss of statehood, among the Russian speakers it is seen as victory over fascism and thereby as positive. Most of this ethnic minority group immigrated to Estonia during the Soviet period, so they tend to identify their understanding of the past with the Soviet version (Lember, 2016), which also coincides with the current hegemonic mnemonic trends in contemporary Russia. A large part of this community falls in the sphere of influence of the Russian media (Vihalemm, 2011). This different understanding of history that conflicts with the Estonian hegemonic discourse of history has deepened the cleavage between the two ethno-linguistic communities and the expansion of the construction of 'us' and 'them' in discursive fields.

However, the hegemonic narrative is also dynamic and heterogeneous. During the turn of the century, the discourse of the disrupted 'golden age' in Estonian language based discursive fields has gradually been complemented with other memory discourses. They do not necessarily challenge the official view, but rather supplement it. To bring out its nuances would exceed the scope of this article, but it is sufficient to say here that besides the uncompromising condemnation of the communists, the discourse of resistance 'from within' has appeared more vividly in the official memory discourse since

2 The Russian-speaking minority consists of different ethnicities, including Ukrainians, Belorussians, etc. The narratives of the WWII are heterogeneous and not all the Russian-speaking ethnic groups share the same evaluation to the events. However, in the context of this research, the version of the Russian-speaking past construction is used which is most common and more visible on discursive fields. Moreover, the Russian-speaking youngsters participated in this research predominately defined their ethnic belonging as being Russians.

the 2000s (Jõesalu 2012). Among the main trends that emerged during the turn of the century was one that addressed the everyday life of the Soviet time, offering certain discourses of the ‘normalisation’ of the Soviet time, suggesting that the regime also had a human side and that people were capable of happiness (Kõresaar, 2008; Jõesalu, 2005). Also, certain nostalgia (reflective nostalgia, as defined by Boym 2001) towards the era has been visible since then.

From the standpoint of this research, it is important what goes on in history lessons and, hence, in history textbooks. In Estonian schools, the official discourse of rupture and discontinuity is represented. History-related curricula are focused mainly on Europe and Estonia, creating some discontent among Russian-speaking teachers, who feel that Russian history should be better represented (Kello & Masso, 2013).³ Estonia’s past is constructed through depicting the country as striving towards independence, the events resulting in a loss of sovereignty as central in the historical narrative, and the Estonian nation as a victim of historical processes. Russia and Russians are depicted as meaningful ‘others’ and represented as being involved in most important events and wars, perceived as uninvited intruders (Pääbo, 2011). The ideological interpretations of the past differ between the two ethno-linguistic groups and, therefore, the ability to critically translate different ‘lifeworlds’ is missing in textbooks for Russian language schools (Kello & Masso, 2013).

Data and analysis methods

The article relies on the qualitative data of a recent European Commission project of MYPLACE. It analyses the three different datasets that were gathered in the framework of different work packages: (a) the qualitative follow-up interviews conducted with young people who participated in a quantitative survey (N=29 in Tartumaa, 31 in Ida-Virumaa); (b) a museum project analysing the transmission of the past in an institutional setting, consisting of ethnographic observations, focus group (N=5) and in-depth interviews (N=6); and, (c) intergenerational interviews conducted with representatives of 5 families (14 in-depth interviews). In the following, I will give a brief introduction of the data collection processes in all these different projects.

- (a) In the context of this article, it would be appropriate to look deeper into the interview parts that form the basis of this analysis. The main section of the interview that was analysed for this article was called ‘History and Memory in Everyday Life’, which asked informants to reflect upon the past of one’s country in general, but also to ponder over some events and processes that they consider particularly important. The participants of the research were also asked about their practices of commemoration and their opinions about the official memory politics. The fact that researchers at different research sites were different persons may have affected the course of an interview and the reflection of some topics over others at different sites. However, these discrepancies are not too big to distort the overall outcome of the data, also, these are balanced by the data in other work packages of the project that the analysis is based on.
- (b) The museum project concentrated mainly on two exhibitions presented in Kumu (Art Museum of Estonia). The main criterion for choosing the exhibitions was their appeal to social memory. As the fieldwork took place from February till October 2012, one of the exhibitions (‘Lets Talk About Nationalism. Between Ideology and Identity’ (N) from 4 February to 25 April 2010) was analysed retrospectively, the other (‘Fashion and the Cold War’ (FCW) from 14 September 2012 to 20 January 2013), however, was still open when the fieldwork ended. In addition to exhibitions, the dataset of this study consists of ethnographic observations in history lessons and museums, and semi-structured qualitative in-depth interviews. The observations (6.5 h) were all conducted in the framework of the FCW exhibition, since the other (N) was closed by the time the fieldwork started.

³ Roughly, 20% schools in Estonia are Russian-speaking.

The informants can be grouped as (a) experts (delivering the knowledge about the past to young people) and (b) young people (aged 17-22). In all, 27 young people were interviewed. The sample was gender-balanced with 14 female and 13 male respondents. In terms of ethnic composition, eight youngsters were of Russian and 19 of Estonian origin. Two individual in-depth interviews and five focus-group interviews (five to six participants) were conducted.⁴ The interviews lasted from 45 to 60 minutes.⁵

- (c) This project focused on five young people and their family stories. For this purpose, young people and their family members were interviewed. Altogether, the sample consisted of 14 people. In the case of three young people, one member of each generation was interviewed (the youngster, the parent and the grandparent). In one case, the only surviving grandparent was not available for the interview, and both parents were interviewed. In one case, the youngster interviewed was raised by a single mother whose parents were deceased – therefore, only two members of the family were interviewed. All of these young people had previously been involved in the research of different MYPLACE work packages. The youngsters were born in 1990-1994, their parents in 1963-1971, and grandparents in 1937-1947. In terms of ethnic background, three families were ethnic Estonians, one was Russian, and one was mixed: Finnish-Estonian.⁶ This sample of young people is not gender-balanced, since it consists of four females and one male. The same applies to the rest of the sample: the interviewed parents' generation consisted of five mothers and one father. Among the grandparents' generation, three grandmothers were interviewed. The lack of gender balance was not intentional, however, the recruitment of male youths into the research was not successful, and the consent of the parents or grandparents of possible male participants was not achieved. This may have to do with males being more reluctant in discussing their family issues or personal pasts. The female-inclined sample may have an impact on the outcome of the research, as many authors have noted the gender-based mnemonic practices (Leyesdorff et al., 1996). For instance, women seem to be more keen on remembrance of the everyday, while men prefer talking about political memories (see also Jõesalu, in press). Nevertheless, bearing in mind its gendered dimension, this study is still useful in revealing some of the processes of memory transmission, even if some of the others are yet to be researched in other studies.

All the data in three different projects was in vivo transcribed and coded with NVivo 9.2 software using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000). For analysis, directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) was used when coding tree was developed based on existing theories of memory analysis, but open coding was also used, when the text did not match the theoretical approaches. During the coding process, the core questions of the research were kept in mind when creating the codes. Hence, analysing the interviews, special interest was paid as to how the main conflicting issues of the past are treated in different contexts (what questions asked, what concepts used when talking about the past, what perspectives taken), is the conflict or discrepancy sensed by youngsters and if so, what strategies were claimed to be used to overcome these issues (engagement or disengagement). Also, in the case of family histories, the stories told by different generational cohorts were compared to each other carefully, as to what details were mentioned of the same stories, how the narrative constructs changed among different respondents and where did discrepancies emerge. All the datasets were coded and analysed differently, each with their own code tree. The code trees were then compared to create comprehensive models about the (a) difficult past and its understanding among different ethnic communities and (b) transmission mechanisms of the past.

4 For details, see Cairns and Allaste (2016, p. 108).

5 For detailed information about data collection, see report of the work package WP2.1. (Nugin et al., 2012)

6 For detailed description of data, see report WP2.3 (Nugin, 2014).

Analysis: Socialising, Adjusting, Negotiating

The Right to Post-Memory

The tensions that eventually led to ‘Bronze Night’ in 2007 could be summarised as having been caused by denial of what Anna Reading (2011) has called the ‘right to memory’ – acknowledgement of different pasts and recognition of one’s cultural identity. This cultural identity had constituted itself in the certain mnemonic practices, i.e. going to the memorial site and gathering there, celebrating 9th May as the day of victory over Nazi Germany in WWII. Located previously at the centre of Tallinn, in front of the National Library, these practices increasingly started to involve more young people every year at the beginning of the 2000s, thus showing the rise in ‘post-memory’ (Hirsch 2008), as the past they commemorated was not lived by these people themselves. In the hegemonic discourse, the celebrated event (victory over Nazi Germany) brought forth the annexation of Estonia and the period of ‘lost independence’. Thus, these cultural practices were ideologically overloaded with contested meanings, starting to cause tensions between the two ethnolinguistic groups. The cleavage with the hegemonic memory discourse was also acutely sensed by the government, who ordered the statue to be relocated from the centre of the public space to a military cemetery. During the meeting trying to prevent the relocation process, the events got out of hand and ended up in a riot.

To date, these accelerated events are still considered as the central symbol of a memory clash between the two communities. This event was also widely discussed among the informants of this research in all the three projects the dataset relies on. In the interviews, the Russian-speaking community does not often understand the commemorating activities that led to a conflict as an ideologically driven act against the official policies of Estonia, but rather as a way of remembering on a community level. Thus, the stigmatisation of such practices on the official level can cause the feeling of alienation among the Russian speaking minority, a sense of being not heard or being considered a second rate group. One such example is the following interview extract from Alek:

[/.../so, these old soldiers from the Second World War get together. Well, let them meet – why can’t they reminisce about these days? A certain country [a reference to Estonian official memory policy] is against it. When Russians simply meet – nobody ever tells them anything, you see, they just meet and that’s it. [/.../] But really, what of it, they are old people, they fought together, side by side, covered each other, helped out. [/.../] Let them meet in peace. Let them sing their songs and dance and drink – there is nothing wrong with it. (Alek, project (a))

This extract shows that when memory discourses clash, one possible way out is to stress the personal and humane side of the past interpretation. Rather than giving these meetings a political meaning of communist ideology winning over the Nazis, Alek interprets them in the sense of individuals getting together to reminisce about their personal experiences about a shared past in an act that is condemned by the state on a political level. This illustrates what Welzer (2010) described about conflicted past interpretations in a family context, when descendants reason the deeds of their grandparents depicted in hegemonic discourse as negative: young people tend to de-politicise the context and stress the humane side of the story.

However, there seems to be more to it. For Alek, stigmatisation of these meetings also means stigmatisation of his own community that he feels part of. The informant sees his own ethnic community as left out (‘nobody ever tells them anything, you see’) and as deprived of the basic human right to gather in public – a right accorded to other ethnic groups. The feelings of being left aside were expressed by other informants as well. Katerina, for example, though agreeing with the government’s decision to relocate the statue (usually resisted by the Russian-speaking community),

still points out that her community was ignored and left out from the decision making process and nobody explained the basic principles behind the relocation. This is a good example of how mnemonic policies can influence political activism, or how political attitudes are being shaped by discrepancies in understanding of the past. However, it has to be kept in mind that these dispositions of being left aside have to be put in a broader social and political context, which is not under scrutiny in this article.

The conflicting version of the past is acquired through the cultural environment in which the Russian-speaking young people are socialised. As the community is heterogeneous, the level of cleavage with the hegemonic past may differ as well. Apart from Russian media having an impact on this community, the different version of history is passed to young people by communicative memory (Assmann 2008), i.e. mainly by their grandparents or parents. Marina (focus group, project (b)) described how her grandparents read her history textbooks and wondered “well... how can this be?” The Russian-speaking focus group concluded that Estonians write history ‘the way it is useful for them’, yet noting that this is characteristic also to other nations (for example, Germans and Americans). Depicting Russians as the ‘significant other’ responsible for much suffering in Estonian history (Pääbo, 2011) has been noticed by the pupils as well:

Irina: For instance, in the Estonian textbook it is written that Russians are like, bad, that they occupied Estonian land and... in general, I don't know, they're mocking, or...

Marina: Negatively...

Irina: Well, yes, that's the evaluation. They love Germans, but Russians... they don't.

The communicative memory and official history discourse offers them two different images incapable of dialogue. Hence, the feeling of rejection is somewhat understandable.

To promote the language skills of the Russian-speaking youth in order to foster integration, the government has introduced a measure to teach 60% of high school subjects in Estonian. One such subject is history. Thus, the Russian-speaking youth struggles in these lessons both with the content (what has been taught) as well as the form (what language it is taught in). One of the respondents went as far as to suspect there was a certain scheme behind the fact that history is taught in Estonian to them:

Yes... To my mind, overall history is done [to be studied in Estonian] by Estonians for us not to know it [everybody laughs]. [To the others:] But it's the truth – we don't understand a thing when we read. I study in an Estonian school, I read and I still don't understand what is going on... (Marina, focus group, project (b))

The others' reaction (burst of laughter) indicates that the opinion was not unanimously shared as a serious intention of the Estonians. Marina might have not meant it wholeheartedly herself, but she adds that because of the language issues they know little about history and, thus, they rather listen to what they are told at home. The example shows how history lessons can be transformed into attitudes towards the state and its policies.

The dissonance in the interpretation of the past with the Russian community is sensed also among the Estonian youth. The level of distancing from and ‘othering’ of the Russian-speaking community's version differs among the informants. There are those who actively stigmatise their past perceptions, like Daniel:

But you see, it is said that in Russia people are taught that communism was good... and that Estonians voluntarily joined the Russian [i.e. Soviet] rule and... this is... what... complete crap... They learn such things and they truly think that... that Estonians really wanted communism... (Daniel, focus group, project (b))

Note that in Daniel's talk, the Soviet rule is equated with a Russian rule, a common leitmotif among the Estonian informants but also in public media (Pääbo, 2011). This can be contested by some Estonians. Oliver from Tartumaa (project (a)) talked about his mother, who was deported to Russia during the Soviet time but opposes the common (public) perception that one should blame Russians for the repressions during that era. According to Oliver, his mother has urged him to have a more open attitude towards the other ethnic group. There were others who sought to overcome the cleavage of the discrepancies of the past that cause tensions between the ethnolinguistic groups. Oskar (25, project (a)) noted that though the relocation of the Bronze Statue was necessary, he accused the government in failing to seek dialogue between the two groups in the questions regarding WWII.

Though the tensions between the different understandings of the pasts are sensed among both groups, the ways to deal with these may vary. While several Estonian informants advocated for the 'right' version of history to be explained and taught to the Russian-speaking community as the only option, there were others who sought for more balanced treatment of the past also in public media in order to soothe the tensions. Some Estonian informants spoke about the need for forgetting some of the aspects of difficult times, especially suffering such as the deportations. Again, opinions varied: some interviewees considered deportations a crucial part of the history but suggested that perhaps the victimisation of the nation based on these events is sometimes going too far. For instance, Rael from Tartumaa (project (a)) suggested that to her, the martyr-centred perception of the deportations is preventing people from seeing the events in a broader context or even planning the future. Ivar, in contrast, said that it would be better for everybody to forget the deportations altogether:

...because there is nothing beautiful in it. /.../ Rather one could accept it, yes, it was like this... and... now see to it that it wouldn't happen again. But to reproach someone for it or something... I think it doesn't make sense! /.../ people can get offended /.../ like, when in the history of some state there are for instance mass murders... or something... then this rather discredits the state... /.../and worse, if other states remember it. To my mind, it would be nice if everyone forgave and... (Ivar, project (a))

While Rael referred to the society's tendency to over-victimise the nation and thus ignore some more important things in the future, Ivar's aim is to soothe the current tensions in the society. The powerful perception of victimhood tends to create an urge to blame someone or something for the suffering, and the informant seems to indicate that the Russian-speaking community in the society might be offended by this. In his view, forgetting means forgiving.

The Russian-speaking informants tended to soothe these tensions by looking at the past in a broader framework and instead of limiting their conceptions in history to Estonian national history, they contextualised the historical events in a more global context. Some informants such as Olya (23, project (a)) suggested that Estonian history was marginal, and thus not worthy of interest, and she would have liked to learn more about Russia, 'the country very rich in all kinds of events'. Even when talking about the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it is often not seen in the framework of Estonia's regained independence in 1991 by the Russian-speaking informants. Ruslan interprets these events in developments that went beyond the Estonian Republic, more precisely, as the source of numerous ethnic conflicts across the entire post-Soviet space and beyond, thus, as negative:

Everything would have been fine... in the Soviet period, there were so many people and all of them like [lived] in peace... was it really necessary for everyone to break up and start fighting each other like... here and there, in Caucasia and so on... and this Afghanistan also /.../ well, Estonia has not been at war with anybody... in my opinion... (Ruslan, 22, project (a))

Many informants from Ida-Viru County also indicated that they are not necessarily tied to Estonia in the future, so they preferred concentrating on cosmopolitan topics that are not parochially tied to

a small country. This corresponds with other research findings, which indicate that diasporic identity and perception of the past is not necessarily tied to a specific territory (Reading, 2011, p. 384; Fortier, 2000).

In addition to this approach, there were those who tried to understand the version of both conflicting sides, as did Veronika (in-depth interview, project (b)). Owing to her fluent Estonian, she not only read Estonian media but also had many Estonian friends. She admitted that on several occasions she was the one in the company to tell the others (Russians) that they may not be right and nobody knows where the truth lies. In addition, she had attended several international events during which she had also witnessed heated debates or even conflicts over the past between youngsters from other countries (like Poland and Germany). She tended not to take sides and found that the past should not be a source of conflicts as 'people did what they had to do at the time'.

Yet another way to deal with the clashes in memory was to ignore the topic in general. Among both ethnic communities there were those who addressed their lives elsewhere without pondering too much about solving these issues:

Marina, project (b): We have completely different lives and... around us is contemporary world and we address our lives there...

Dimitri: We think more about the future than about the past.

Marina: Yes, computerised info-technological society and...

Dimitri: ...we have more urgent problems.

To conclude, one can say that the cultural context in which young people are socialised is vital, and young people have to negotiate their understanding about the past, as the relationship between identity and memory is never straightforward, but rather multidirectional (Rothberg, 2009). The extent of how much the youngsters feel the need to deal with the negotiation of different pasts differs and may have to do with how much the young people have been involved with another ethnolinguistic community. In other words, the dialogue is likely to emerge with contested pasts if the dialogue exists in these people's lives also with the cultural space where these pasts dominate. In the following subchapter, I would like to turn my attention to how these pasts are socialised.

Socialising the past

Socialisation of the past doesn't take place only in history lessons, but within various other contexts young people come across in their lives as well, including in everyday communication. Also, the school context is much broader than just the history classes. Many informants from Ida-Virumaa recalled several events organised by the school to commemorate the end of WWII. In some schools, visits to meet veterans of war were organised, some held parades to place flowers at the monument. Visiting the veterans establishes a kind of personal contact with those passing on the memory. This perhaps raises the awareness of the past more effectively: in this case, memory has a particular face and voice (as opposed to dull textbooks that are sometimes questioned even by the teachers).⁷ Visiting veterans was also a common custom throughout the Soviet period and all over the Soviet Union, so in a way preserving this practice establishes a sort of institutional continuity with the previous era. In the Estonian linguistic-cultural community, the habit has never gained any support.

Some schools, however, were opposed to such socialisation practices. According to Dimitri (project (a)), their teacher never allowed them to attend parades to celebrate the end of WWII on 9th May. Dimitri and his classmates watched these from the school window, but he said he went to take the flowers to the memorial anyhow, with his family. This indicates that even in schools that were executing the lines of hegemonic mnemonic policy (treating the victory of the Soviet Union in WWII

⁷ However, these practices are becoming to fade as there are less and less war survivors every coming year.

as the beginning of rupture in history) the environment around the schools and the home context nevertheless played a crucial role. In fact, school policies that are in contrast with the rest of the surroundings and home environment may even cause an opposite effect. Dimitri's reaction shows that he was offended that the school kept them from participating and that deepened his will to go.

Throughout the research it has been notable that a crucial aspect of understanding the past was the dialogue between the home and the institutional (school, museum) context. The messages communicated in different institutional contexts were negotiated only when they were at least partly compatible or negotiable with the version of the past in which these young people were socialised. In the case of the museum exhibition FCW, this pattern was most obvious. Here, the topic of 'normalisation' of the Soviet period and bringing more colours to it was raised by the experts who had personally experienced the period:

[The aim of the exhibition was] to show a bit more confusing pictures of reality [of the Soviet time], to simply show the situation [...] where many lifestyles, mentalities and things were existing side by side and how they quietly interacted with each other, were in certain dialogues and how this all worked... (Helju, project (b))

The 'normalisation' discourses of the Soviet period mentioned above were not missing from homes either (Kõresaar, 2008; Jõesalu, 2005). The evaluation of the Soviet era was indeed one of the most unanimously defined 'problematic issues' about the Estonian past. While in some groups the assessment of the time was undisputedly negative, there were voices that longed for more versatile treatment. For instance, Aivo (focus group, project (b)) expressed the need to have a more balanced treatment of the Soviet time and not label everything dating back at that time as necessarily negative. For him, the message of the exhibition was concomitant with the curators' aim to offer colour to the overall 'dark night' discourse.

However, there were other voices, who were critical towards the exhibition's notion of normalising the Soviet era:

For example, this exhibition... well, everyone goes there with an opinion... for instance, we go there like, thinking that all this negative era... and then we examine there everything from this negative perspective. We, like, look for negative insights everywhere... and well... our opinion remains the same... it, like, does not touch me. Even if they had... I don't know... shown how nice and cool this time has been... nevertheless, I would have come out of the exhibition hall, thinking it was a bad time. (Fred, focus group, project (b))

Also, Andrey from a Russian-speaking focus group concluded: "Well, the era wasn't reflected there in full, the good side was shown, but the bad wasn't." Hence, the exhibition did not manage to 'speak' enough with these youngsters to urge them to think further on the topic, as is the purpose of museums according to their history teacher Mart (project (b)). According to Fred, he does not discuss the issues of the past, neither with his family nor his peers. In other words, as the contrast with their perception of the Soviet era was too wide, these respondents did not 'buy' the picture of the time that they saw and considered it to be presented as too colourful and beautiful.

The depiction of the Soviet time as positive has many layers and may be generation-dependent. Our intergenerational study revealed that depending on the stage of life the Soviet time was experienced, it could evoke different connotations, both on negative and positive sides. For instance, in interviewee Tarmo Kuusk's family, Tarmo's grandmother longed for the social security the Soviet time had offered her, while Tarmo's mother recalled it just as a jolly time with friends, though condemning its general structure and basis. However, though Tarmo's mother feared that his perception about that period

could be too positive because of the jolly stories he has heard, this was not exactly the case. Though Tarmo also reflected on the joyful stories he had been told about the fun activities of a communist youth organisation (Komsomol) his parents had attended, he also spoke about his grandmother's refusal to join the party. He depicted the time as harsh in some aspects, though he was not entirely sure about it:

... I remember a story, about how during Christmas, well, at Christmas the family always gets together, [...] and then they tell the story of how [during the Soviet time] they had to hide a Christmas tree and they didn't want any Christmas decoration to be seen [from the window] and... That this was a rather harsh time or... well not that harsh, but like... those KGBs and all these things that were...but... But then sometimes I think that, like, was it such a harsh time or was it just a little thing that was regulated that harshly. That the other things did not seem to be that harsh... (Tarmo, project (c))

His confusion is a good illustration of negotiating the hegemonic history treatment with family stories. In his mother's narrative, her family did not celebrate Christmas throughout the Soviet period. However, during the time of the 'awakening', when the political pressure was loosening at the end of the 1980s, people were beginning to celebrate Christmas. She recalls that she came home for Christmas in 1987 (or 1988, she was not sure) after visiting her friend. She found that her mother had brought a Christmas tree, but the curtains were shut and her mother had still been afraid to put the decorations and candles on the tree. She recalled that she had been disappointed, since nobody hid anything at her friend's house, who lived on the first floor and had her curtains opened. In other words, Tarmo puts this story into the framework of what he has heard in hegemonic discourse, trying to contextualise his family in the narrative of the 'long night'. This is concomitant with what Welzer has called 'cumulative heroisation' (Welzer 2005), when tales that have resistance elements are 'moved' by grandchildren to eras where they seem more heroic. Such a phenomenon is not deliberate; instead, it shows that the stories are actively contextualised in the narrative configurations available in the society at the time.

Positive memories of the Soviet time are told by other informants as well. Similarly to Tarmo, these stories are negotiated on the backdrop of the mnemonic templates that are circulating in discursive fields. Thus, when recalling those positive stories, young people tend to ponder over the reasons why the stories occur (finding universal reasoning: i.e. people romanticise their youth) without the interviewer specifically asking about it. The positive memories of the first republic are not reasoned the way the Soviet era reminiscences are. The need to 'justify' the positive stories probably is in large part due to public debates that label the nostalgic memories as part of restorative nostalgia and longing for the communist regime. The same tendencies can also be followed among the older generations: they tend to present their memories while constantly referring to public discourses too.

Conceptualising the negative can also be generation-specific. For instance, when asked about the most difficult times in Estonian history, Silvia Tamm (project (c)) and her mother put forth without much doubt the time of deportations and collectivisation, which in the hegemonic treatment of the past is commonly depicted as the most dreadful period. Silvia and her mother did not recall, however, anyone close from their family having been deported. The narrative of Silvia's grandmother Hilda Tamm was, by contrast, slightly different. Rather than stressing the ideological side and political repression, she thematicised more the economic hardships of everyday life. In her view, the most difficult time was the aftermath of WWII, but not because of the repression of individual freedom (as in Silvia's narrative) or the destroying of private property (as in her mother's narrative), but because of the poverty and the difficulties that had to do with mere survival. Hilda constantly stressed the importance of remembering how people were struggling just to survive and were content with what they had, while today young people have very high demands for life without realising that it could be much worse.

During WWII, Hilda's family had to spend one summer in the forest shelter as her father hid himself in order to avoid mobilisation, and this was a vivid and traumatic memory for her since it contained the actual fear of survival. When asked about the deportations, it turned out that she had actually witnessed herself the deportation of her grandmother and uncle:

Yes, '49. And then I went to the countryside. It was school vacation. And then in the morning, fairly early, it was seven or... then the gunmen came right in. (Hilda, 1937, project (c))

Hilda's grandmother, who never returned from Siberia, and her uncle were taken away, and she stayed behind with her cousin. She recalls that she and her cousin were both only seven or eight years old⁸ and they were left in the farmhouse without food and with cattle to take care of. They had to look for food and got some loaves of bread from the neighbours. When asked if this experience left a permanent fear towards the regime, she replied:

No! ... No, no! Well, we had to manage, and we fed the cattle and milked the cows too, yeah. And we had to do it all... Then came... for the second night, one neighbour came to keep us company. When they heard that the kids were left alone... Then she came to keep us company for the night. (Hilda Tamm)

Being only a child, she was thrown into a situation where she had to worry about her own survival, rather than the fate of her grandmother. The reason why this story is not reflected in the interviews of Silvia and her mother is probably not because Hilda refrained from talking about it. All the interviewed family members described their family as an open one where nothing was hidden from each other. Rather, as can be seen from the way she presented the story in the interview, she did not consider it to be such an important issue and preferred to stress the hard everyday life after the war, and both Silvia and her mother reflected on that in their interviews as well. She probably would not have even brought up the story about the deportation herself if she had not been specifically asked. This reflects that these experiences were not as significant to her as the poverty of the time.

This is an interesting case, as it shows how the hegemonic history treatment is negotiated in a family context. For Silvia, who has studied at school according to the new curricula, the most difficult periods are, similarly to history textbooks, political and ideological repressions rather than economic hardships. For her grandmother Hilda, however, having lived through the times, the everyday life was more important. Also, she had been a child at the time so the political and ideological issues were probably not crucial for her. This dissonance of the younger generations seeing the post-war era in more political terms than their grandparents' generation also appeared in other intergenerational interviews. Similarly to Welzer's (2005) findings, subsequent generations tend to contextualise their family history negotiating with the official mnemonic discourses. Sometimes those who lived through these times do not provide illustrative stories to enable contextualising the hegemonic narrative, since for them different aspects were important at the time. The phenomenon of stressing everyday life over political issues, however, may be caused also by a gender effect, since all those interviewed from the oldest generation were female. It has been noted that females are more prone to thematising the issues of everyday rather than referring to political life (Jõesalu, in press). However, regardless of the fact that a male narration style might have a different impact, the examples nevertheless show a certain transmission pattern – how some things are left untold by the older generations, yet considered more important by subsequent generations.

All these examples have shown how the family and cultural context is important in conceptualising the issues of the past. The cultural or home context influences how the narratives about history are interpreted in a school or museum environment, but also vice versa: the stories told about

⁸ Actually, judging from her birth year, she was 12.

family history are moulded to fit the structures of the hegemonic past. In other words, memory is multidirectional (Rothberg, 2009) and to make sense of it 'mnemonic imagination' (Pickering & Keightley, 2013) is used.

Conclusion

Whenever there is a clash in cultural fields (either in conceptions in memory or in other morally loaded categories), experts always emerge who call on the conflicting sides to search for a dialogue. Indeed, dialogue is a process which shapes and moulds opinions, creates opportunities to understand, forget or forgive. However, dialogue is multidirectional – young people communicate at home, school, on a sports field, in a dancing hall, on social network sites, and different dialogues lead youngsters to different dispositions. Yet, we all prefer to talk with people we have something to share with – people with at least some common ground, to begin our talks. Shouting at each other is not a dialogue, so we rather prefer to walk out in situations like these (or end up in a senseless fight). These metaphors also appeal to the processes of transmission of memory. While young people are subjected to many discourses, they tend to mould their dispositions only when they talk to someone they understand, who 'speaks their language'. Additionally, those discursive fields are not homogeneous: the past is communicated via communicative and cultural memory narratives (Assmann, 2000). Figuratively speaking, these two modes of memory are also in a constant dialogue, as what is passed on in everyday communication influences the forms of culture (museum, literature, art) depicting the past. It also works the other way around: what we see in museums, in school or in art moulds the way we interpret the stories of our grandfathers (see also Welzer, 2010). Yet, similarly to everyday dialogues, the moulding of our perceptions happens only when there is a common ground from where to begin a dialogue. When communicative memory is miles away from the cultural (an exhibition we visit, a film we see), the message the cultural memory tries to pass on may get lost.

As memory is multidirectional (Rothberg, 2009), it always depends on a particular case of mnemonic imagination (Pickering & Keightley, 2013) and from which direction the past is moulded. Thus, even though the cultural and social conditions of certain social or age groups may be the same, the outcome of how these pasts operate in everyday lives (including political activism) is never predictable or straightforward. Young people have to make sense of the past (and the base of their identity) in complex discursive fields, and it seems that acute issues of difficult pasts are rarely accepted unquestionably. In their own ways, young people negotiate the memories and are actively creating meaning to these treatments of history in their current social and political context. The examples presented in this article may be just a few ways to deal with contested pasts, and there may be several others that this dataset did not reveal.

The past and its interpretation have always been grounds for various battles as history has been used to legitimate powers or to create a base for identities. On the one hand, politicians have been using the issues of memory to shape political and social processes for ages. On the other, perceptions of the past influence political participation and dispositions about the state policies, as well as attitudes towards other ethnic groups. The Bronze Night has been a vivid example of how the past can trigger political activism. However, as the dataset presented in this article also allows us to hypothesise, different constructions of mnemonic narratives can also create political apathy or alienation – the feeling of being left aside and turning one's back to political issues. Heroisation of some events in the past can marginalise someone else's perceptions of history. However, these issues are not something tangible or easy to put a finger on, as memories are shaped, moulded and exploited by people always in particular individual ways, some of which are illustrated in this article.

As the events during the Bronze night revealed, the most acute cleavage between the different pasts exists between the two biggest ethno-linguistic groups – ethnic Estonians and the Russian-speaking community. The hegemonic past tends to treat the events of the past in the context of national martyrdom (Tamm, 2013) and the end of WWII as the loss of national self-determination ruined by the Soviet power. As the same events, however, symbolise for the Russian-speaking community the defeat of Nazism and hence victory rather than loss, these narratives create a base for a potential mnemonic conflict incapable of dialogue. The discrepancy is further problematised by the indicative perceptions of equating the Soviet with Russian (Pääbo, 2011). Young people perceive the tensions caused by history and adopt a range of strategies to overcome them. Some de-politicise interpretations of the past (elderly people just get together to remember the times they fought together vs. the official version of commemorating the start of Estonian occupation). Some call for dialogue, while others call for ending labelling and stigmatisation on ethnic grounds and for a more balanced treatment of history. The different versions of the past can cause confusion, which can result in a lack of interest in history, but it can also lead to a deeper interest in the past or to a search for more heterogeneous or balanced memories. Interpretation of history also influences the development of identity as well as attitudes towards politics and political activism (or disengagement). On many accounts, the issues of memory gained broader context for young people, and led them to ponder over criticising the policies of the state.

All in all, one could point out three broad ways of mnemonic imaginations or negotiating the contested past: (a) personalisation of the memories, stressing the humane aspects; (b) negotiating in terms of relativisation: reasoning that we cannot know the entire truth so we must not judge; and (c) ignoring. It is probably fair to hypothesise that these strategies may also transform into political dispositions and activism (or disengagement): the will to negotiate the conflicting versions emerged among those whose political attitudes were looking towards the more balanced relations with both ethnic communities. Anna Reading (2011) has pointed out that in a contemporary world of multiculturalism and globalism, though it is causing tensions, the right to memory is an important base for communities. The otherness of the past should be acknowledged, and this right should always be 'dynamic, multi-layered and performative' (Reading, 2011, p. 392). This research, among many others, has shown that the right to memory is more than just an individual need, but it can have a wider social resonance, so it needs to be addressed in political fields as well.

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Notes

This article was additionally supported by Estonian Science Foundation Research Grant no. ETF9130 and Estonian Research Agency (IUT 3-2).