

Introduction

SHADOWLANDS



Yea, though I walk through the valley of the Shadow ...
– Psalm 23

Ye who read are still among the living; but I who write shall have long
since gone my way into the region of shadows ... This year had been a
year of terror, and of feelings more intense than terror for which there is
no name upon the earth.
– Edgar Allan Poe, ‘Shadow – A Parable’

In his play ‘Black on White’, the German director Heiner Goebbels uses Edgar Allan Poe’s deadly vision. When read by a ghostly voice across a dark theatre stage it evokes an ominous feeling that something extraordinary – an unpronounceable catastrophe – had taken place.¹ We who live in the present exist in the shadow of this catastrophe, which can scarcely be put into words. It is precisely this atmosphere of shadows and of terror that I encountered in many of my interviews in Estonia.

Eastern Europe – the forgotten half of the continent, whose complex history is often treated in broad-brush terms by English-language writers for whom Europe means the West – deserves more attention. That is my general claim throughout this book. But why Estonia the reader might ask? Why take us on such a ‘ramble through the periphery’ of Europe, to employ the title of Alexander Theroux’s 2011 travelogue on Estonia? In fact why did Theroux pick Estonia for his first-ever travelogue? My perhaps far from obvious choice of country is indeed a way of slipping into the vast and troubling realities of the former Eastern bloc by a small side door. This is essentially what the historian Norman Davies did in his recent book *Vanished Kingdoms*, where he devoted a chapter on the Soviet Union (entitled ‘CCCP’) entirely to Estonia’s dramatic

history. Davies writes that when the Soviet empire imploded in the aftermath of the August coup, Estonia soared into free flight. But this was a country trapped in the borderlands between Germany and Russia, an ominous geopolitical position from which it has struggled to escape. Theroux appositely remarks that ‘Mother Russia, the gigantic, authoritarian overlord ... was always Estonia’s psychic or mythic opposite, its Jungian shadow’, but his statement conveys only half the truth because the German ‘Other’ played a similarly significant role in Estonia’s past.²

Historically Estonia has teetered between the German and Russian cultural and political spheres of influence. A relatively small nation, only 1.3 million people even today, Estonia has for most of its history been under the suzerainty of various ‘landlords’. With a very short experience of independent democratic statehood (1920–40 and again since 1991) but a long-term experience of alternating foreign rulers, the country’s collective identity has been fiercely contested and often in doubt. As with many nations, identity has often been shaped in opposition to a significant internal or external ‘Other’, but, with its complex history and contemporary ethnic composition, Estonia provides an interesting case of various ‘othering’ processes. Numerous traces of the Baltic-German heritage can still be found today in the language, songs, architecture, administration and legal structures, and even the food. Equally, post-Soviet Estonia retains a remarkable Soviet legacy, most visible in the form of the large Russian-speaking community, which presently amounts to nearly one-third of the total population and makes inter-ethnic relations – questions of integration and reconciliation – central issues in politics. What brought me initially to the case of Estonia was an interest in the causes of protracted ethnic conflict and the persistent stereotypes thereby generated. Later I got increasingly interested in how long-term foreign rule and military occupations shaped modern Estonian identities and in the difficult question of how this small nation managed to maintain a distinct sense of itself.

The question of what brings about social change and how this affects modern society was of key concern to sociologists of the twentieth century. Similarly, dynamics of continuity and change are also at the heart of memory studies: how does change affect memory and identity? What remains, and what gets lost over time? In the case of Estonia the dynamic process of continuity and change is amplified by a number of specific historical and political conditions, such as foreign domination, belated state formation and far-reaching demographic shifts, making the country an extremely interesting case to scrutinize.³

The political ruptures of the last century in particular challenged and contested group identities in Estonia. Traditions have been destroyed

and the repository of collective memories threatened by forced amnesia and physical destruction. In the tumultuous twentieth century, Estonians were caught up in the cogwheels of history: virtually each Estonian family has some members who fought in the German army and on the Soviet side during the Second World War, occasionally also in the Finnish army or with the anti-Soviet guerrilla fighters. The experience of forced exile to the West or to Siberia also affected every Estonian family. This meant that consequential choices had to be made about taking one side or the other, and often there was no grey zone. Such tragic stories find poignant illustration in the Meri family. Lennart Meri (1929–2006), who in 1992 would become the first president of re-independent Estonia, was deported to Siberia in 1941 because his father, Georg-Peeter, was a member of the political and intellectual elite. But his cousin, Arnold Meri (1919–2009), had joined the Red Army and he was eventually put on trial in May 2008 for genocide in connection with the forced deportation of Estonians in March 1949.

The cost of the occupations for Estonia is truly shocking: according to the official Estonian ‘White Book’ on Repression, published in 2005, in the first Soviet year alone (1940–41) the human losses (killings and deportations) are estimated at 48,000. During the German occupation (1941–44) the estimate is 32,000, before the Soviet Union regained control over Estonia a second time in September 1944. Total human losses during the whole of the second Soviet period are estimated at 111,000. In the words of the White Book, it was only on 31 August 1994, when the last Russian troops left Estonia, that the era of ‘three successive occupation regimes that had lasted 54 years and 75 days’ was over and ‘World War II has come to an end’.⁴ But the horrors inflicted by the Soviet and the German military occupations still leave the nation traumatized to this day, with many memories unresolved. In the words of Theroux: ‘During an occupation, far more than a country is captured – a national soul is possessed. Brutalized. Mortified. Hurt. Made inflexible. Freedom itself, the very idea of it, becomes victim, as well. More than self is lost, a soul harmed ... A collective unconscious is left with fears and a terrible rigidity it can never relinquish’.⁵

This book is about war and cultural memory in Estonia during and after the Cold War; more specifically, about the complexity of commemorating the Second World War and its protracted aftermath – the so-called ‘Long Second World War’. The events of 1940–44 were an intensely sensitive subject during the Soviet era. How are Estonians coming to terms with the memory of the war and post-war years after fifty years of a prescribed and one-sided memory regime? Memories of the war subsisted in private but, metaphorically speaking, they were frozen until the mid-1980s when they

gradually assumed more fluid forms during Gorbachev's thaw. But these memories were politically charged and, since re-independence, they came pouring into the public arena, like molten lava with devastating power. Different, often conflicting accounts of the past were articulated, vying for public recognition. The revision of Estonia's history – to administer post-communist justice in the 1990s – was an important feature of the transition process. This was intimately connected to national restoration, to the redefinition of post-Soviet collective identities, and ultimately to the stuff of daily politics. Post-1991 Estonia witnessed fierce battles over the interpretation of historical reality; in such cases, history acquired an 'existential' quality, as changes in the interpretation of historical facts seem fundamentally to have challenged people's group identities. My analysis of the 1991 transition period is highly instructive for the study of collective memory and national identity because, during this time, competing interpretations of the nation surfaced in the society's debate and were 'up for grabs'. This highly public process allows a unique insight into the inner workings of Estonian society (such as the storehouse of building blocks of Estonian identity and the criteria of national membership) which under less dramatic circumstances would have remained largely invisible.

At the core of the newly constructed national narrative of post-Soviet Estonia stands the traditional trope of '700 years of slavery and 700 years of survival'. Here stories of collective suffering and resistance figure prominently, with lines of conflict starkly drawn between Estonian 'victims' and Soviet-Russian 'perpetrators' or 'invaders'. Clearly the fact that the past could not undergo critical public debate for half a century left identities contorted; as a result, issues of national identity and history are heightened and amplified in contemporary Estonia. While tracing these developments, the book also shows how, two decades after the end of the Cold War, a new national narrative and memory regime have not been solidified. It is this process of negotiating and codifying a post-Soviet national history and national identity that aroused my interest and prompted this book. But my Estonian 'miniature' illustrates a bigger picture. The Estonian case helps to provide answers to wider realities of the Eastern bloc and to questions about who is writing the new post-Soviet history there: which facts are being included and why, and whose accounts are being excluded or marginalized in this process.

To answer the question of how Estonians were able to maintain a sense of national self throughout foreign rule, I have concentrated on the role of intellectuals and historians as potential 'custodians of memory' and 'carriers of meaning'. My choice was informed by the fact that many professional historians played an important role as statesmen in post-1991 Estonia, but this was part of a larger historical pattern, exemplified by the

pivotal role of intellectuals, or *literati*, during the national movements of the late nineteenth century in Eastern Europe. Moreover, professional historians participate centrally in the discourse on Estonian history – in writing the new national narrative and in negotiating, selecting and codifying the various historical accounts and social memories of the recent past. They make a fascinating object for research because, through their work, they transform social memories into political memories.

Therefore professional historians constitute the entry point to this study. It soon turned out that their societal role was both complex and sensitive. We have numerous examples of intellectuals in Central Europe who became implicated and compromised in relation to the ranks of power in times of non-democratic rule: Leni Riefentstahl, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Gustav Gründgens, Oskar Pastior and István Szabó spring to mind. Possible compromises of intellectuals in Estonia spurred my interest and I was eager to understand why they chose to become professional historians in the period after 1945, knowing that their research would be heavily constrained by the Soviet interpretation of history. I had in mind an image of a piano player who would only be permitted to play a hymn to Stalin, and I mentioned this in the interviews. One respondent replied directly: 'If you learn how to play the piano in a society where only certain tunes are allowed to be performed, you can still learn how to play it. And you may play on your own [and] secretly for your friends, and wait for the time when you can do so publicly' ('Oskar').

Shadowlands is a contribution to scholarship in two main areas. First, to historical theory by examining how professional historians make sense of historical change, and how the subjective experience of personal life influences disciplinary choices and narration of the past. Its second contribution is to the growing body of work on identity formation in post-communist societies. The book is organized around three main themes: first theory, through an intense engagement with the literature on collective memory (Chapter 1); second borderland identities, that is, the Estonian national identity formed in the interplay of Teuton and Slav (Chapter 2); and third the extended analysis of the historians' life stories (chapters 3, 4 and 5). The concluding chapter (6) returns to the main themes of identity, history and memory – connecting them to the wider discourse and highlighting some of the methodological and conceptual implications of this study for future research projects. Themes that I highlight in this conclusion include generational identity after empire, transcending national historiographies in post-conflict societies, and the prospects of a shared European memory bridging East and West.

To develop this outline in a little more detail: in order to establish the theoretical and methodological foundations of the book, Chapter

I provides the reader with concise definitions of the most prominent concepts of both collective memory and also national identity. The interrelation of these two areas of scholarship is a further original contribution of this work. Shared memories are the keys to national identity; and national identity is characterized by a connective structure linking a group's common past with its present and future. Collective memory is not homogeneous; instead various collective memories are subdivided into overlapping and competing group memories, such as generational groups. There are also different formats of collective memory, such as social memories on the one hand and cultural or political memories on the other. I introduce 'generational memory' as a form of social memory and highlight this as a central category for conceptualizing intergroup relations in post-conflict societies of the former Soviet space. Such is its centrality that, as I shall show, generational solidarities can at times supersede ethno-cultural identities. *Shadowlands*, then, addresses a lacuna caused by the predominantly West European discourse on the concepts of collective memory and collective cultural identity. It thus aims to remedy some of the shortcomings produced by the Western theoretical bias through some fine tuning of the conventional concepts, to take account of the neglected East European historical experience.

The second chapter adds history to the theory. It serves as a kind of national identity overview, outlining the formation of modern Estonian identity in relation to both the German and the Russian 'Other' – from the nineteenth century up to the regained independence in 1991. Thus, I add to the recent publications on the East European borderlands such as Timothy Snyder's *Bloodlands* and Alexander Prusin's *The Lands Between*, and also Maria Mälksoo's study of the liminal space of the Baltic Three and Poland and the politics of their becoming European.⁶ Here the book is also contributing to the growing body of work on identity formation in the post-communist space. In effect I am exploring the 'shadowlands' of memory that still haunt the 'bloodlands' of Eastern Europe.

Chapters 3 to 6 spell out my distinctive argument about how to do oral history – using the case study of professional historians in Eastern Europe and employing the method of life-story interview. Aside from the light this sheds on the Estonian story, the book also offers a practical guide for all historians who are interested in employing memory studies in their research. Some scholars have questioned the utility of oral history. The unique value of oral testimony in this case is the fact that history writing was highly censored during the Soviet period and that in the 1990s the climate of the 'nationalizing state' also constrained history writing. Thus, crucial personal accounts of Estonia's recent past remain largely unwritten and difficult to access, particularly for a non-Estonian readership.

The originality of this book stems from the analysis of the local material, namely over forty life-story interviews that I conducted with professional historians from Estonia (nearly half of all the country's professional historians). All these interviews are listed in the bibliography. I concentrated on the historian's personal life story to explore how the biographic experience influences their interpretation of historical reality and their self-understanding as professional historians. Developing the generational framework, I show how four different generations of historians (which I call the War Generation, the Post-War Children, the Transitional Generation and Freedom Children) remember the past, and how they generate historical meaning in the face of seismic political change.⁷

Chapters 4 and 5 illustrate the process of negotiating a new national narrative and point to its various building blocks. Here I am moving on from the analysis of the life-story interviews to consider both historiography (history textbooks) and the material culture (monuments, museums). The last chapter zooms in on momentous landmarks of post-Soviet Estonian historical culture, around which private and official interpretations of the war came to clash. In analysing these contested spaces, I highlight the wider context of private, local, national and international interests, all of which affect the formulation of the new post-Soviet memory regime. In these chapters I deploy empirical evidence to show the complexity, diversity and fragmentation of existing group identities in contemporary Estonia, and demonstrate how collective memory both restricts and informs day-to-day politics.

What makes the analysis of the political developments in Estonian society over the past twenty years valuable to a wider readership is that it demonstrates some of the specific challenges faced by a great number of Soviet successor societies when trying to overcome their historical legacies and move forward to a new Europe. Because, as we shall see again and again, in 'framing the past' nations are also defining their future.

Notes

1. Performed by the Ensemble Modern at the Barbican, London, in 1999.
2. Norman Davies. 2011. *Vanished Kingdoms: The History of Half-Forgotten Europe*. London: Penguin; Alexander Theroux. 2011. *Estonia: A Ramble through the Periphery of Europe*. Seattle: Fantagraphics, 10.
3. George Schöpflin. 1993. *Politics in Eastern Europe, 1945–92*. Oxford: Blackwell; Wydra in Alexander Wöll and Harald Wydra (eds). 2008. *Democracy and Myth in Russia and Eastern Europe*. London: Routledge, 15–18.
4. Estonian State Commission on the Examination of the Policies of Repression. 2005. *The White Book. Losses Inflicted on the Estonian Nation by Occupation Regimes 1940–91*. Tallinn: Estonian Encyclopedia Publishers, 16, 19, 22, 23.

5. Theroux, *Estonia: A Ramble*, 14.
6. Timothy Snyder. 2010. *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin*. London: Bodley Head; Alexander Prusin. 2010. *The Lands Between: Conflict in the East European Borderlands, 1870–1992*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Maria Mälksoo. 2010. *The Politics of Becoming European: A Study of Polish and Baltic Post-Cold War Security Imaginaries*. London: Routledge.
7. See Meike Wulf and Pertti Grönholm. 2010. 'Generating Meaning across Generations: The Role of Historians in the Codification of History in Soviet and Post-Soviet Estonia', *Journal of Baltic Studies* 41(3): 351–82.