Summary

Guardians of living history: the persistence of the past in post-Soviet Estonia

The strong emotional response in Estonia to the April 2007 removal of the so-called ‘Bronze Soldier’, a WWII memorial erected by the Soviet authorities in 1947, signalled the need for a better understanding of the emotions attached to the past and memory politics in Estonia. As many novelists and memory studies scholars have argued, as long as the past remains emotional, people cannot fully live in the present. I witnessed the emotional response and was especially fascinated by the fact that younger Estonians also felt so strongly connected to the past at that time. In my doctoral dissertation I interrogate how Estonians – as a people who live in a society with an extremely complicated, violent past and only a short period of independence – encounter and deal with that past in their everyday lives and secondly why this past is still so emotional for them.

In order to answer these questions, I engaged in ethnographic fieldwork from April 2010 to June 2011 and during the summers of 2007-2012, and 2014. During most of this time, I lived in Tartu, Estonia’s second largest city and main university town, but I also spent two months in the countryside, as memories turned out to differ there significantly from those in the city. I also used life stories and historical documents from the personal archives of my informants for the analyses. In addition, I have contributed questions relevant to my research to the 2011 run of a longitudinal representative survey by Tartu University (2003, 2005, 2008, 2011). Finally, I have constructed two small-scale surveys, which I distributed among former deportees and among high school students respectively.

In the seven empirical chapters of the thesis, I gradually unravel how different groups in Estonia relate to the recent past. In Chapter 1, I explore the ties that my informants perceive to have with their ‘soil of origin’ and national culture, and how these ties relate to their understandings of ‘being Estonian’. In Chapter 2, I explore what it means to have a public, collective story for those who have themselves lived through historical trauma, in this case the deportees to Siberia. In Chapter 3 I describe the historical process in which the Estonian past became a public story. I trace the main mobilisers of history writing and address the groups in society that did not have the power to contribute to the new history. In Chapter 4, I question the ways in which stories of the past can be passed on from one generation to the next. I attempt to answer the question why the past is so emotional even for the younger generations by elaborating on their sense of moral obligation. In Chapter 5, I explore the stories of the ‘memory activists’ in order to see what drives them to invest so much of their time in the production of a public story of the past. I also seek to explain why these ‘patriots’ are taken rather seriously in society, even though their discourse seems fairly radical. In Chapter 6, I zoom in on a group in society that feels that their stories are not reflected in the collective story: my informants living in the countryside. I have shown how public closure on the past
always excludes the stories of some and what this does to the people whose stories ‘do not fit’. In Chapter 7, I focus on the Estonian debate on the memory of WWII and how the hegemonic version of that memory in Europe is perceived to threaten the Estonian story and approach towards the past.

What I argue throughout the thesis is that on the one hand my informants long for an established collective story about the past as a form of closure, but on the other hand that closure is perceived as a threat to the survival of Estonian culture and independence. This is a fear shared by virtually all my informants, and has its roots – as I show – both in the period of National Awakening in the late 19th century when Estonians’ national identity became based on folklore and language as well as in the period of the ‘Singing Revolution’ in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During the Singing Revolution almost every Estonian citizen was confronted with the emotional history of their relatives and compatriots that suddenly could be openly discussed, as a ‘belated postmemory’ rather than a settled history. The official history of the young nation-state was literally built on these personal life and family stories. Due to the central position of intellectuals and dissidents in rebuilding the nation, counter-memories were completely absent in the early 1990s. However, a safe space for counter-memories has emerged again in public since the late 1990s and intellectuals and cultural figures increasingly address narratives about ‘normal Soviet life’. I thus emphasise the heterogeneity of the Estonian population when it comes to practices of memory and to their ideas of what and how to remember. The ideas of the young intellectuals and my informants living in the countryside turn out to be much more liberal. Yet at the same time I show that during periods when my informants feel that national identity is under threat, which is quite regularly the case, the sense of unity, ideology of restorationism and ideal for cultural preservation of the early 1990s again prevail. In other words, closure on the past would heal the wounds and make it possible to fully live in the present. Yet by fully living in the present, my informants fear that Estonians will lose the power tool of a small people – cultural unity –which they have used since their very beginning as a people in the late 19th century.

This thesis engages with and contributes to the wide scholarship on collective memory and remembering. Previous studies have often focused on the processes of getting to terms with the past, closure and recognition as desirable end-states. I show that people might long for closure, but in practice not aim at closure. Even though they desire to move on from their family’s and compatriots’ painful pasts, they fear what they will lose as individuals and as community if they do.