

HISTORY AS CULTURAL MEMORY: MNEMOHISTORY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE ESTONIAN NATION

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The question I want to address in this essay is a quite simple one, if not simplistic: what do Estonians remember of their past? More specifically, my intention is to analyse how the memories of different groups that make up the Estonian nation ‘are conveyed and sustained’ (Connerton 1989, p. 1). For this, I will focus mostly on the origins and nature of the narrative logic which enables one to pull a set of events from a nation’s past together into a coherent whole. However, before addressing this question, I would like to discuss the conceptual framework of my approach. In the last few decades, the theoretical language of collective memory has become increasingly important to historical and sociological research on how societies construct and understand what went before.¹ This orientation to the study of how collectivities make sense of their own present through recourse to reconstructed narratives of their past also offers important insights to scholars of national identity.

History, Memory and Mnemohistory

It is widely known that the concept of memory was introduced to current debates by way of its opposition to history. Although I would rather not open a Pandora’s Box by starting a discussion about the relationship between the two, one cannot skip this problem entirely. I do not subscribe to the view that history and memory are more or less the same thing and that distinguishing between them is a useless exercise. At the

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same time, as Klein (2000, p. 127) has observed, 'the declaration that history and memory are not really opposites has become one of the clichés of our new memory discourse'. In exploring this complex interrelationship, first, we have to remind ourselves that the notion of history and memory as distinguishable from each other is a recent invention.² It is a cultural construction which came about at a certain moment in time and which is linked to general changes in Western historical culture at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century (Assmann, A. 2006, p. 44; 2008, pp. 58–61). At that time, the idea of the past began to lose its exemplary meaning, and the concepts of the past and the present were divided. Equally importantly, historical writing became more and more the preserve of a small scholarly circle (Koselleck 2004). The juxtaposition of history with memory gained theoretical legitimacy at the beginning of the twentieth century, when Maurice Halbwachs in particular defined the concept of 'collective memory' by way of contrast to history (Halbwachs 1997, pp. 131–5).

Secondly, I find that history and memory are not equal concepts to contrast. The forced opposition between them seems to derive from an urge to validate a new historical discipline, rather than being a reflection of their actual relationship; it 'is a matter of disciplinary power rather than of epistemological privilege' (Olick & Robbins 1998, p. 110). To my mind, it is much more appropriate to treat *history as a mode of remembering*, as a mnemonic practice (e.g. Assmann, A. 2003, pp. 133–4; Olick 2007, p. 10; Olick & Robbins 1998; Suleiman 2006, p. 48). From this perspective, history is first of all a subcategory of memory. This approach was formulated best by Peter Burke in his article first published in 1989, '*History as Social Memory*'. Burke states that the 'traditional account of the relation between memory and written history, in which memory reflects what actually happened and history reflects memory, now seems much too simple' (1997, pp. 43–4). He continues by arguing that, 'many recent studies of the history of historical writing treat it much as Halbwachs treated memory, as the product of social groups such as Roman senators, Chinese mandarins, Benedictine monks, university professors and so on' (p. 45). Following Burke, but relying on concepts introduced by Jan and Aleida Assmann, I would like to argue that the most fruitful way to comprehend history is to consider it as a particular form of cultural memory.

What does the notion of 'cultural memory' mean? Jan Assmann has proposed a fourfold typology of collective memory: material memory, based on objects; mimetic memory, based on imitation; communicative memory, based on oral discussion; and cultural memory, based on written and visual carriers of information (Assmann 1999). In terms of history, the distinction between communicative and cultural memory is especially useful. While the former corresponds to the earliest phase when multiple narratives by eyewitnesses circulate and compete with each other, the latter corresponds to a much longer phase when all participants have died out, and a society has only traces and stories left as a reminder of past experience (Assmann 1999, pp. 48–65; Assmann 2006, p. 27; Rigney 2005, p. 14). Cultural memory, in Assmann's definition, 'comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose "cultivation" serves to stabilize and convey that society's self-image' (Assmann 1995, p. 132).

Cultural memory helps us to understand the formation of national identity and the role of representations of the past in that identity. Assmann writes: 'Cultural memory

preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and peculiarity. The objective manifestations of cultural memory are defined through a kind of identificatory determination in a positive (“We are this”) or in a negative (“That’s our opposite”) sense’ (Assmann 1995, p. 130). Historical writing is therefore inseparable from cultural memory. Cultural memory determines the general framework within which the past acquires a meaning and history becomes possible. Concurrently, cultural memory determines the events to be recorded and passed on. Or, in Assmann’s words: ‘Cultural memory has its fixed point; its horizon does not change with the passing of time. These fixed points are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)’ (Assmann 1995, p. 129).

However, it is important to take into account that cultural memory is not so much a reservoir in which traces of the past are gradually deposited by some ongoing spontaneous process. Instead, it is the historical product of cultural mnemotechniques and mnemotechnologies, which range from commemorative rituals to history writing (Rigney 2004, p. 366). Yurii Lotman, one of the initiators of the ‘cultural memory’ concept, had already emphasized in 1985 that ‘memory is not for the culture a passive depository, but part of its mechanism of textual creation’ (Lotman 2000, p. 676).³ Cultural memory is governed by a logic of relevance that gives priority to certain aspects of the past and sidelines others. Therefore, cultural memory studies have to focus on the multiple ways in which images of the past are communicated to and shared among the members of a community, highlighting the importance of remembering certain parts of the past and forgetting or ignoring others.

In order to analyse the workings of cultural memory, the ongoing process of shaping an identity by reconstructing its past, Jan Assmann has proposed the concept of mnemohistory. ‘Unlike history proper, mnemohistory is concerned not with the past as such, but only with the past as it is remembered’ (Assmann 1997, p. 9). Mnemohistory relinquishes a positivistic investigation of the past in favour of a research into the actuality, not into the factuality of the past. ‘Mnemohistory is reception theory applied to history’, writes Assmann, ‘but “reception” is not to be understood here merely in the narrow sense of transmitting and receiving. The past is not simply “received” by the present. The present is “haunted” by the past and the past is modelled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present’ (Assmann 1997, p. 9). This new research agenda had already been formulated by Pierre Nora some years earlier in his preface to the third volume of the famous *Les lieux de mémoire*:

The road is open for a totally different history: instead of determinants, their effects; instead of actions remembered or commemorated, the marks they have left and the games of commemoration; not events for their own sake, but their construction in time, the gradual disappearance and reappearance of their significances; instead of the past as it was, its constant re-exploitation, utilization and manipulation; not the tradition itself, but the way it was constituted and transmitted. (Nora 1992, p. 24)

A philosophical formulation of the same kind of approach can also be found in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. Gadamer argues that whenever we seek to understand

a historical phenomenon we are always already subject to the effects of what he calls 'effective history' (*Wirkungsgeschichte*). By effective history Gadamer means the history of the event or other item as understood and interpreted. In understanding a historical phenomenon, our understanding, whether we are aware of it or not, is conditioned by the history of its interpretation. Gadamer stresses also that the history of the interpretations of an event is not something external to the event but constitutes the self-unfolding of the event itself (Gadamer 2004, pp. 299–306).⁴

Narrating the Nation: Stories we Live by

As argued previously, cultural memory entails constant shaping of the past, during which it is determined what should be preserved and what should be forgotten. Several people engage in this memory work, particularly the 'six P's', as they are wittily called by Reinhart Koselleck: priests, professors, PR specialists, politicians, poets and publicists (Tamm 2007, p. 115). In modern times, it is historians who have probably been the most influential in shaping the nation's representation of the past, trading places with poets and publicists of earlier times. Jörn Rüsen notes aptly that 'modern states use academic history in order to prepare specialists for the shaping and legitimization of historic identity' (Rüsen 1989, p. 60).

But although many individuals are actively engaged in this memory work, an equally important role is played by cultural tools, such as narrative (Brockmeier 2002; Wertsch 1998, 2002, 2004, 2008). As I argue below in my analysis of the remembrance of Estonian past, narrative is one of the most influential shapers of cultural memory. A nation can be viewed not just as a 'mnemonic community' (Booth 2006; Zerubavel 2003), but also as a 'narrative community'. The narrative defines a boundary between members who share the common past and those who do not (Seixas 2003, p. 6). National identity is, to a large extent, based on 'stories we live by'.⁵ More precisely, the identity is based on narrative templates, which give coherence to a nation's past. Coherence is one of the cornerstones of collective identity: repetition and consistency constitute the two most important attributes of a nation's historical consciousness (Assmann, A. 1993, pp. 52–7). The narrative form allows the nation to be imagined as continuous, and for discrete events to be interlinked into a meaningful history, rather than letting them appear as one odd thing after another. Consequently, different historical events come to acquire meaning when included as part of a general narrative template.⁶

As noted by James Wertsch (2002, p. 62), a particular set of these narrative templates form what David Lowenthal calls a 'textual heritage'. This concept suggests that rather than learning a long list of specific narratives about the past as separate items, there is a tendency to construct the means used in textual mediation out of a few basic building blocks. Wertsch argues that these schematic narrative templates are not some sort of universal archetype, but belong instead to particular cultural and narrative traditions (Wertsch 2002, p. 62). These narrative templates do not spring from the past itself but are to be constructed only in the framework of cultural memory. Thus, in the next part of my essay, I shall address the cultural memory work

in Estonia and one of the main narrative templates which underlies the remembrance of the Estonian past.

Memory Work and Nation-building in Estonia

One can make a distinction between more active and more passive periods in the history of memory work. In the case of Estonia we can, for the sake of simplicity, distinguish three principal phases. The first is the period between the 1860s and 1890s, when, across the whole of Europe, the process of shaping the ‘genealogy of nations’ (Smith 1986, pp. 209–26) was at its most intensive. The cultural memory of Estonians was formed in the context of a radical re-writing of history, of writing Estonians into history as a nation. Another pivotal period of memory work was the two decades of independence between the two World Wars, when Estonian historical memory finally acquired a thematic backbone, which remained unbreakable even during the subsequent Soviet period. A third key moment of memory work occurred during the re-establishment of Estonian independence at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, and was characterized by a yearning to return to pre-war memory templates.

The first shapers of Estonian cultural memory were Baltic German Estophiles at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century (August Wilhelm Hupel, Garlieb Helwig Merkel etc.), with the Estonians taking the initiative in the memory work during the 1860s. This was the time when the so-called St. Petersburg patriots, i.e. Estonian intellectuals living in St. Petersburg, reached the conclusion that there was a need for a compiled Estonian history. Artist Johann Köler (1826–1899) wrote to pastor Jakob Hurt in 1863 that: ‘In order to awaken the spirit of the nation a bit, four people (Karell, Russow, Berendhoff and myself) have come to an understanding that the history of our homeland is what is needed most’ (quoted in Põldmäe 1988, p. 103). Actually, a similar sentiment was voiced a quarter of a century earlier, when Baltic German scholar Georg Julius von Schultz-Bertram declared in his speech before the Learned Estonian Society in October 1839: ‘Let us give the people an epic and history, and everything is won!’ However, this initiative of the St. Petersburg intellectuals did not immediately bear fruit. The first prominent outcome of Köler’s initiative was the ‘First Fatherland Speech’ given by a young pedagogue and cleric, Carl Robert Jakobson (1841–1882), in October 1868 in Tartu. Jakobson initiated a fundamental re-periodization of Estonian history by changing the positives of Baltic German historiography into negatives: whereas in earlier debates the period before the arrival of German missionaries and crusaders in the thirteenth century was viewed as a harsh and barbarous time, according to Jakobson Estonia was experiencing an ‘age of light’, followed, after the conquest by Germans, by several centuries of ‘the age of darkness’ which was only now changing into ‘the age of dawn’ – the new era of freedom. This new, ternary structure of history proposed by Jakobson started to shape Estonian history with unexpected effectiveness, maintaining some of its influence even today.

At the same time as Jakobson, Lutheran pastor Jakob Hurt (1839–1907) also directed his attention to Estonian history, undoubtedly spurred on by a desire to

complement and elaborate on the work of his younger and fiercer colleague. The completed manuscript, entitled *Mõni pilt isamaa sündinud asjost* [A Few Impressions of the Fatherland's History], was published by Hurt in 1871 in the form of periodical articles in a supplement of the newspaper *Eesti Postimees*, of which he himself was the editor. The book version was published as much as eight years later. This publication, proposing the first coherent survey of Estonian national history, gives a good summary of the objective of early historical writing: 'Past times and events should teach and caution us all about what we should do and what we should leave undone. That is the reason they are told of in our time' (Hurt 1879, p. 76).

During the subsequent period of the Estonian Republic, historian Hans Kruus (1891–1976) became the most persistent promoter of national historiography (Hackmann 2005, p. 128–135; Kivimäe & Kivimäe 1995). In 1930 he identified, based on the legacy of Jakobson and Hurt, 'three categorical imperatives' of Estonian historical research, which fittingly summarize the fundamental issue of memory work at that time: '(1) In learning the past of our homeland we must focus on the history of the Estonian nation. (2) The current discourse of the homeland's history has to be re-evaluated in the past orientation of the Estonian nation. (3) The homeland's history must educate the people' (Kruus 2005, p. 127). His view reflected the general opinion of the first generation of professional Estonian historians, which was summed up by Otto Liiv in 1938: 'Estonian history is foremost the history of the Estonian nation and its living space', and should 'serve Estonian interests' (Liiv 1938, pp. 300, 303). The task of early professional historians was the production of national collective memory, a memory which succeeded in achieving striking degrees of continuity over temporal distances.

After the *coup d'état* staged by Konstantin Päts and Johan Laidoner in 1934, one can observe a rise in state-controlled history politics, as evidenced by numerous monuments, new commemorations, state jubilees etc. The heroization of the Estonian past gained new importance and negative historical discourse was rejected (Karjahärm & Sirk 2001, p. 292). This new concept of history politics is exemplified by the 1938 speech given by Johan Laidoner, Commander in Chief of the Estonian Armed Forces, entitled 'History and the Current Moment', which stressed the far greater role of Estonians in the past than had hitherto been accepted. Laidoner claimed that Estonians had been a state-based nation even under the rule of the Teutonic Order, when they promoted statehood as vigorously as they were now doing in the context of the Estonian Republic (Laidoner 1995). A similar school of thought was represented by politician and legal historian Jüri Uluots, who formulated 'the theory of national legal history', according to which the Estonian state – in its central elements as a political system – reaches back to the pre-thirteenth-century period. Uluots remarks: 'Therefore, the Estonian state is not young, it is not a recent result of passing events, but a societal-political construction spanning from a primeval age to the present time through numerous historical formations' (Uluots 1940, p. 54).

The national heroization of the Estonian past was abruptly ended by World War II and Estonia's annexation to the Soviet Union. Although the Soviet period should not be underestimated in terms of memory work, surprisingly little of it has influenced the patterns of national historical memory. A new surge in the promotion of nationalistic history occurred at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s,

when, in parallel with the restoration of statehood, an active reconstruction of pre-war historical memory took place. With little exaggeration, the re-establishment of the Estonian Republic can be described as the construction of ‘the Republic of Historians’ (Tamm 2006, see also Hackmann 2003). A great many founders and leaders of the newly independent republic had received their education from the Department of History at the University of Tartu, and first garnered recognition as historical publicists. At the beginning of the 1990s, Estonia experienced a unique situation where almost all prominent positions of the state, including the president and the prime minister,⁷ were occupied by historians. ‘The Republic of Historians’ started to crumble only in 1994, with the end of Mart Laar’s first term as prime minister. The whole of the period in question was characterized by the idea of restoration, at both the political and the cultural level: the ideal was to re-establish pre-war Estonian society, including laws, pre-war ownership rights, and also monuments and interpretation of history. This brought about the restoration of one of the most prominent narrative templates of Estonian history, first formulated in the 1930s.

Constructing the National Narrative: ‘The Great Battle for Freedom’

As I have already noted, narrative is the essential device for containing cultural memory and for guaranteeing the coherence of different events of the past. Narrative binds the elements stored in cultural memory into one meaningful sequence, giving us a small collection of narrative templates, which, in a sense, remember for the nation. Estonia’s national historical narrative is inseparable from the concept of independence. Estonian national history has always, starting from the very first endeavors in this area, been analysed from the perspective of losing and gaining liberty. The history of Estonians begins with the age of ‘ancient freedom’, which precedes the thirteenth-century German–Danish conquest. This in turn is followed by the ‘700-year night of slavery’ (a popular image from the mid-nineteenth century); then, from 1918 to 1939, new independence in the form of the republic, followed by foreign occupation that only came to an end with the re-establishment of independence in 1991. This articulation of history is supported by narrative constructed with the aim of binding different battles and uprisings into one great struggle. We can conditionally call this schematic narrative template ‘The Great Battle for Freedom’, where Estonian history is characterized by centuries of struggle for liberty and against the Germans. Indeed, it is not surprising, since historical consciousness is usually closely associated with victory (or, more rarely, defeat) in battle. Military historian Michael Howard sums this up neatly when he writes that: ‘as nations came to define themselves and trace their origins, the history of their conflicts with one another became a central part of this process of definition, and the concept of the “nation” became inseparably associated with the wars it had fought’ (Howard 1991, p. 40).

The narrative of ‘The Great Battle for Freedom’ combines into one coherent plot all of the prominent conflicts with Germans that Estonians have preserved in their cultural memory, from the crusades of the thirteenth century to the so-called War of

Independence of 1918–1920. The latter was fought against the Bolshevik Red Army, but Estonian cultural memory has given prominence to the battle against the *Landeswehr* near Võnnu (Lat. Cēsis) in the summer of 1919. In this narrative template, all previous uprisings against the Germans had marked a temporary defeat for the Estonians, but Võnnu became the final victory of The Great Battle for Freedom. This narrative template is open in its nature, which means that it can accommodate a number of different conflicts. From the standpoint of Estonian cultural memory, five of these stand out the most: the Battle of St. Matthew's Day, where Estonian forces were defeated by German crusaders (1217), the St. George's Night uprising, where an Estonian insurgency was quelled by the Teutonic Order (1343), the so-called Mahtra War, where peasants revolting against the landlords were suppressed by Tsarist penal squads (1858) and, finally, Võnnu in 1919.

The narrative of 'The Great Battle for Freedom' took shape gradually following the establishment of the Estonian Republic. This provides a necessary endpoint, which, in turn, allows for a retrospective alignment of past events into one thematic thread. The tone is set on 24 February 1918, in Tallinn, with the 'Manifesto to all peoples of Estonia' by the Committee of Elders of the Land Council, the declaration of which marks the birth of the Estonian Republic. The manifesto opens with the following words:

Throughout centuries, the Estonian people have not lost their desire for independence. Generation after generation, they have preserved a secret hope that despite the dark night of slavery and violent foreign rule, there will be a time in Estonia 'when all spills, at both their ends, will burst forth into flame' and 'then the Son of Kalev [*Kalevipoeg*] will come home, to bring his children happiness'. Now is that time.⁸

The manifesto, relying on the national epic *Kalevipoeg*, declares that, with newly gained independence, Estonian history has reached its logical conclusion and that the true meaning of the events of previous centuries has finally become clear.

The national narrative template achieved its final form in the 1930s. This is when the state endorsed the notion that the battles of the Ancient Struggle for Freedom were continued in the glow of St. George's Night fires, flared up again in the unrest of Mahtra and reached their victorious conclusion in the Battle of Võnnu. This construction was given official status in 1934, when the anniversary of the Battle of Võnnu was declared a national holiday. A brochure published a year later detailed official guidelines for the celebration of the new holiday and stated unequivocally that:

On the Victory Day of June 23rd, we celebrate the realization of the determined aspirations and dreams that Estonian people have nourished for dozens of generations. ... The never-ending struggle for the continued existence and political freedom of the Estonian people which was started during the days of Lembitu [early thirteenth century], has lasted through centuries, through occupations by the Teutonic Order, Swedes and Russians, and blazed in the fires of St. George's Night, in the horrors of St. Thomas' Day, in the uprisings of Pühajärve, Mahtra and Anija. (*II Võidupüha 1935*)

The same phrasing, word by word, is used by President Konstantin Päts in his address on the Third Victory Day in 1936: 'Today, on June 23rd, the Victory Day, we

celebrate the realization of the determined aspirations and dreams of dozens of generations of Estonian people' (Päts 1936, p. 2). There was even a desire to transform the new national holiday into a cornerstone of a civil religion, as evidenced by the following extract from the 1935 brochure:

It is not enough that the victory at Võnnu has become a national holiday celebrated across the country. *Its meaning*, the historical disaster remedied and the ultimate attainment of freedom, *has to be made as comprehensible to every person, to every child even, as the meaning of Christmas*. On the basis of this understanding, the youth must be raised to courageous deeds similar to those of their forefathers in their long struggle for freedom and to those of our soldiers in the War of Independence, which all culminated near Võnnu. (*II Võidupüha* . . . 1935, pp. 19–20, emphasis in original)

In the 1930s discourse, the Battle of Võnnu marked the end of a centuries-long struggle for freedom against the Germans. This struggle, however, was later prolonged during World War II, through the work of Estonian historians and publicists working on and behind the Soviet front. The most passionate defender of this concept was Hans Kruus, a newly converted communist, whose countless speeches and writings during the first half of the 1940s were motivated by a need to link contemporaneous battles to the heroics of Lembitu and the insurgents of St. George's Night. In a speech given on 6 September 1942 in Moscow, and quite tellingly bearing the title of 'The ancient struggle of Estonian people against the German invaders is continued in Great Patriotic War', Kruus praised the bravery of Estonians in their fight against German knights and asserted that this struggle

has stayed with the Estonian people in fiery letters throughout generations, vital, encouraging and inciting; it has stayed, because the enemy stayed; the same enemy, who was led here by the robber knight at the start of the thirteenth century, the same atrocious and violent destroyer and enslaver, as is his current descendant who bears the iron cross. (Kruus 1943, p. 27)

The same idea is equally and vividly expressed in a brochure published on the occasion of the 600th anniversary of St. George's Night: 'Our fight continues the struggles of our strong and valorous forefathers from the time when the soil of our homeland was violated by the vile foot of the first German invader bringing destruction, humiliation and enslavement' (Kruus 1943, p. 3). The anniversary of St. George's Night awakened deeper layers of national historical memory with amazing effectiveness and allowed the projection of contemporary struggles on the universal background of ancient events.

It has to be stressed, however, that the most influential constructors of 'The Great Battle for Freedom' narrative were not historians or politicians, but writers. The most famous episodes of this narrative template – the Ancient Struggle for Freedom (i.e. battles with thirteenth-century crusaders), the uprising of St. George's Night and the Mahtra War – were thus etched into cultural memory by the works of belletrists. In addition to numerous novels and stories on the different episodes of the Ancient Struggle for Freedom, St. George's Night in particular owes its prominent place in Estonian cultural memory to Eduard Bornhöhe's (1862–1923) historic story *Tasuja*

[*The Avenger*] (1880) which, for the first time, presented the 1343 peasant uprising in the Estonian language. Bornhöhe soon found many followers and the uprising of St. George's Night became one of the most popular themes of Estonian historic fiction (Tamm 1998). The unrest in Mahtra during the spring and summer of 1858 was just one incident in a wider peasant movement which started from Vaivara parish in present-day Latvia at the end of April, spread to several Estonian regions during the summer and, in some manors of the Estonian Province, lasted until the end of September. Still, the events of Mahtra claim special significance in Estonian cultural memory. There is little doubt that the reason behind this is Eduard Vilde's famed novel *Mahtra sõda* [*The Mahtra War*], which was published as a feuilleton in the newspaper *Teataja* in 1902 and has become part of the school curriculum. Nor can one underestimate the role of writers in the heroization of the War of Independence. Among the large body of fiction, a novel *Nimed marmortahvlil* [*Names in Marble*] (1936) by Albert Kivikas stands out, its current relevance being demonstrated by a popular feature film adaptation in 2002 (dir. Elmo Nüganen).

Also notable is the fact that nationalistic historic fiction was one of the principal supporters of the Battle of Võnnu, understood as the last episode of the mythic struggle for freedom. This was the first battle where, by virtue of fictional idols, Estonians were aware of their historic mission and where they tried to remedy their past defeats. Politician Jaan Tõnisson had no qualms about labelling the Mahtra War as the pre-battle of the War of Independence. The war against the *Landeswehr* was equally enthusiastically linked to the example of Bornhöhe's story. Jaan Roos (1888–1965) admits tellingly that:

In me personally, *Tasuja* aroused feelings of heroism and nationalism in the form of anger against the unjust oppressors of our people. The effect of the book was especially emphasized by illustrations. Later, upon reading *Mahtra sõda*, the anger grew even deeper. One has to admit that historic fiction has had an enormous influence on our people as it has awakened the hitherto latent sense of injustice. The participants of the war against the *Landeswehr* describe the primal thrill and excitement with which they fought, the ferocious release of centuries of fury. This primal excitement and anger whipped up by historic fiction was a deciding factor in the defeat of the *Landeswehr*. A man from my home parish died in the Battle of Võnnu with a copy of *Tasuja* in his pocket. This is symbolic. (Palm 1935, p. 171)⁹

Using Heinrich Heine's famous dictum one might conclude that *Tasuja* has indeed become a 'portable fatherland' for Estonians.

Performing the National Narrative

'Cultural memory works by reconstructing,' writes Jan Assmann (1995, p. 130), 'that is, it always relates its knowledge to an actual and contemporary situation'. But cultural memory, as noted by Rudy Koshar (2000, p. 8) among others, is also ritualistic and performative. It derives its motive force not only from constant 'construction' and 'invention', but also from the repetition of culturally specific bodily practices associated with commemorations, demonstrations and other

ritual activities. Also, Paul Connerton has pointed out that a nation's master narrative is 'more than a story told and reflected on; it is a cult enacted. An image of the past, even in the form of a master narrative, is conveyed and sustained by ritual performances' (Connerton 1989, p. 70, see also Burke 2005 and Burke forthcoming). Estonian master narrative soon became performative in nature due to different commemorations and rituals. A most crucial change was undoubtedly the turning of the Battle of Võnnu into a national Victory Day in 1934. This took place just weeks before the *coup d'état* of Päts and Laidoner, who became active promoters of the new holiday and its rituals. In 1936, President Päts declared in his Victory Day address:

The fight for independence has been the largest shared act of Estonian nation. On 23rd of June, on Victory Day, we celebrate the unification of Estonian people into a nation, the return of our shared resolve and the moral reformation of Estonian people which all started with the War of Independence. (Päts 1936, p. 2)

Victory Day, which very conveniently preceded Midsummer Day, became thus part of a traditional Estonian summer holiday, an effect strengthened further by a ritual of lighting the Torch of Victory, which was then carried across the country and used for lighting the pyres of Midsummer Day. This was carried out in the hope of establishing a new national ritual, as Leo Kalmet, one of the organizers of Victory Day, admitted in 1937: 'The ancient custom of Midsummer pyres and the new ceremony of lighting the Torch of Victory are practically destined to fuse into a great, beautiful and all-inclusive national tradition' (Kalmet 1937, p. 23). As evidenced earlier, the new public holiday and its rituals were viewed as major future inciters and shapers of the historical awareness of the younger generation. General Aleksander Tõnisson placed a special emphasis on this aspect in a speech given in Tartu on 23 June 1934: 'It is important to remind people of great battles so that we can raise the upcoming generation in the spirit of courageousness. For that purpose we now have a special day – Victory Day. Let this public anniversary deepen our faith in our glorious future' (*Postimees*, 24 June 1934, quoted by Brüggemann 2003, p. 139).

However, even before the establishment of Victory Day there had been a public debate about commemorating the uprising of St. George's Night as a national holiday. The first rallies and speeches commemorating the uprising of St. George's Night were organized at the end of the 1920s, and they quickly developed into a drive to establish the event in question in the official commemorative calendar. This ignited a journalistic debate in which one side viewed the uprising as a 'day of great trouncing' and the celebration of a Christian St. George's Day as ill-suited, while the other side saw it as the Estonians' heroic revolt against the German oppressors, which, although unsuccessful at the time, came to fruition hundreds of years later. The latter view is succinctly summarized by a 1929 article published in the newspaper *Vaba Maa* (10 May): 'No-one denies the fact that the post-St. George's Night battles failed to yield *immediate* results for Estonians. The victory came as much as 576 years later, when it was realized in the historic Battle of Võnnu, magnificently started by *our* ancestors *at St. George's Night*' (emphasis in original).

A brochure commissioned by the Inter-Organizational Committee for Organizing the 1931 St. George's Night Celebrations in Tallinn strongly emphasizes this point, treating the War of Independence as directly contingent on the uprising of

St. George's Night. The same publication also posits in no uncertain terms the performative signification of the St. George's Night narrative: 'The fact that the glow of the fires of St. George's Night unites us all – that is the real reason for celebrating the Night of Our Great Struggle – that is what unites us into a nation willing to continue its battle for independence' (*Jüriöö...1931*, p. 24). Nevertheless, the supporters of St. George's Night were unsuccessful and the holiday was not marked into the official calendar. Regular commemoration of the St. George's Night uprising did not lose momentum, however, with the memory of the event being highly esteemed even today as evidenced by the Park of St. George's Night in Tallinn, the building of which started in 1935, and which frequently hosts a symbolic fire as well as various public events. Commemorative rituals also extend to other episodes of the 'Great Battle for Freedom': 1933 saw the formal opening of a major monument commemorating the Mahtra War, followed by the establishment of the Mahtra War Museum in 1969, which, albeit under the new name of Mahtra Peasantry Museum, operates to this day. There has also been a decades-long tradition of conferences and other public events commemorating the Mahtra War, especially in the context of various anniversaries.

Conclusions

As recently noted by Alon Confino, the birth of the historical discipline in nineteenth-century Europe took place just as nationhood was becoming a fundamental creed of political sovereignty and group identity (Confino 2006, p. 3, see also Berger, Donovan & Passmore 1999; Pearson 1999). Nation building and history writing became closely intertwined. This connection was, however, masked by the scientific jargon of the new discipline, which opposed history to all other representations of the past. Now we are more and more aware that history is first and foremost a highly specialized form of collective memory. History does not simply reproduce facts; rather, it constructs their meaning by framing them within a cultural memory (Zampony 1998, p. 423). This is not to undermine the scientific claims and professional skills of historians; I do agree with David Lowenthal (1985, p. 213) that 'history and memory are distinguishable less as types of knowledge than in attitudes toward that knowledge'. Therefore, I do not believe that considered as a specific mode of cultural memory, history will lose its unique epistemological status. Rather, taking this approach helps us to understand more properly and more precisely the function of historiography among other social mnemonic practices.

While it is very important to study historical events for their own sake, we also need to pay more attention to how these events are interpreted and appropriated later on. In other words, I consider the study of mnemohistory to be one of the major challenges facing contemporary historical research. The notion of mnemohistory allows one to move past the otherwise often unresolvable questions of 'what really happened' to questions of how particular ways of construing the past enable later communities to constitute and sustain themselves.

In this process of memory work the narrative plays a crucial role. Every community, including the nation, is based on 'stories we live by', on narrative

templates which give coherence to a community's past. In this way, the nation is depicted as an outgrowth of earlier periods of the community's history, establishing itself as its lineal descendant through different times (Papadakis 2003, p. 254; Smith 1997, p. 50). The nation is indeed, as Homi Bhabha has pointedly put it, 'a narrative strategy' (Bhabha 1990, p. 292).

The Estonian nation has remembered itself very much as a product of historical and literary imagination.¹⁰ There is a clear tendency in Estonian national historiography to reduce all the major political events to a narrative template which could be called 'The Great Battle for Freedom'. This narrative template is one of the main underlying stories of the Estonian cultural memory, and its significance has endured up to the present day. It forms a basic plot for representing several of the most important events in the Estonian history, from the early thirteenth-century crusades to the Second World War.

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Notes

- 1 For some recent overviews of the rapidly growing field, see Winter and Sivan (1999), Radstone (2000), Winter (2001), Müller (2002), Hodgkin and Radstone (2003), Lebow, Kansteiner and Fogu (2006). See also the first issue of the new journal *Memory Studies* (Volume 1, issue 1, 2008) and the recent special issue on collective memory and collective identity of *Social Research* (Volume 75, issue 1, 2008).
- 2 Although we can find in Greek mythology a distinction between two goddesses: Clio, the Muse of history, is the daughter of Mnemosyne, the Titan goddess of memory.
- 3 The same aspect is underlined by Michel de Certeau: 'Far from being the reliquary or trash can of the past, memory sustains itself by *believing* in the existence of possibilities and by vigilantly awaiting them, constantly on the watch for their appearance' (Certeau 1984, p. 87, italics in original).
- 4 In similar terms, Michel de Certeau has stated that 'event is not what we can see or know about, but what it becomes later (first of all for us)' (Certeau 1994, p. 51).
- 5 The expression was introduced in different context by Dan P. McAdams (1993). Also W. L. Randall speaks in similar terms about 'stories we are', arguing for the concept of 'narrative identity' which consists of 'stories we tell to ourselves about ourselves and the stories we or others tell to others, or stories that are told to others about ourselves – all the stories in which we are included'

- (Randall 1995, pp. 54–6). See also classical statements on ‘the narrative construction of reality’ by Jerome Bruner (1991, 2005) and Marc Augé’s interesting reflections on ‘life as story’ (2001, pp. 39–74).
- 6 See also Straub (2005, p. 64, italics in original): ‘Historical narrative and reflection do not simply shape subjects cognitively. Narratives, especially historical narratives formulated from the perspective of the present, are unique articulations of a continuity that creates and maintains *coherence*. This coherence is generally perceived as a meaning-structured unity of events, occurrences, and acts’
- 7 Respectively, Lennart Meri (president in 1992–2001) and Mart Laar (prime minister in 1992–1994, and again in 1999–2002).
- 8 ‘Kalevipoeg’ (Son of Kalev) by Fr. R. Kreutzwald (1853). The manifesto quotes the last lines of the poem (canto XX, lines 1047–1050, 1053–1055).
- 9 See also a vivid testimony in the very influential Estonian novel *Kevade [Spring]* (1913) by Oskar Luts: ‘Tõnisson has read only one book on the battles and subsequent slavery of ancient Estonians, but this one has had such an impact on him that he had become an implacable enemy of Germans’ (Luts 1982, p. 43). Luts probably had Bornhöhe’s *Tasuja* in mind.
- 10 However, one should not forget the importance of artistic imagination, although the role of visual culture in the construction of the Estonian nation has been less important than in many other eastern and central European countries. For a comparative survey of the visual history of nation building in Europe, see Flacke (1998).

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