Review

Intrinsic and extrinsic patriotism in school: Teaching history after Estonia’s critical juncture

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

Article history:
Received 22 August 2014
Accepted 25 August 2014

Keywords:
Patriotism
Critical junctures theory

A B S T R A C T

It is often postulated that history as a school subject is a prominent means of identity and patriotism building in students. In fact, the subject probably does function that way in most countries, even when the stated aims of history teaching differ. But countries also differ with regard to the contentions among the present representations of their past. In Estonia, for example, there is a large minority population of Russian speakers besides the ethnic Estonian majority, and the two ethnolinguistic communities can be seen as viewing the Estonian past from robustly different perspectives. This study is about how history teachers of both groups deal with the society’s and the state’s expectation of instilling patriotism into their students. It seems that ethnic Estonian history teachers pursue this aim in a largely implicit and casual way, and based on an intrinsic motivation rather than on some external demand. Russian teachers perceive the state’s expectations much more explicitly and try to construe their students’ loyalty to Estonia by a more differentiated reference to the past Soviet realities. This and other findings are discussed in terms of critical juncture theory.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2014.08.016
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1. Introduction

1.1. An ancient freedom fight

In January 2013, a group of historians presented their new book on the Estonian mediaeval era (Kala et al., 2012). The book was a tome in a semi-popular series on Estonian history, initiated by the President in 1999 and attempting an up-to-date overview based on academic research. It came as a surprise to the authors that journalists picked up a nuance in their book – using the term ‘North-East European crusade’ instead of ‘ancient freedom fight’ – as ‘revolutionary’. The authors received harsh criticism by part of the general public, being even called ‘traitors’ in internet fora. What had happened was that the authors had not taken into account the symbolic value that Estonians put on the ‘ancient freedom fight’ as the designation for local resistance against German and Danish crusaders from 1208 to 1227. According to a popular core narrative, the heroic though lost struggle was followed by centuries of oppression by various foreign powers, but reiterated, and finally reversed in its outcomes, by the similarly heroic ‘Freedom War’ from 1918 to 1920 (see Tamm, 2008).

This episode illustrates the structure and function of national identities. Nations can be viewed as ‘narrative communities’ (Tamm, 2008, p. 502) and sharing a common past is one of the most important criteria defining them, as it provides them legitimacy by evincing a chronologic continuity (e.g. László, 2008). Narratively interlinked past events, more or less embellished for popular gusto, establish a ‘myth–symbol’ complex (Armstrong, 2004) and may take the role of founding myths (Liu & Hilton, 2005) in the popular historical discourse.

Modern states maintain a system of general education that plays a pivotal role in shaping future citizens. Besides more ‘rational’ competences necessary for participating in their national economies, states put schools also in the service of constructing the affective part of their future citizens required to create feelings of belonging and national identity. The school subjects contributing most to this will often be history, literature, and the arts (e.g. Carretero, 2011). ‘Complexity Theory’ sees history teaching as controlling the symbolic resources that set out the space of identities considered legitimate in a given political setting (Liu, Fisher-Onar, & Woodward, 2014). Thus, history teachers shoulder the task of constructing and maintaining their students’ feelings of belonging to the state and the associated national identity.

In fact, “Politicians and bureaucrats – and probably much of the lay public if they give it a thought – tend to view history education as justifying itself by providing a form of social cement” (Lee, 2010, p. xi). At the same time, the academic position that a multitude of perspectives and a critical (self)reflexivity are essential prerequisites of any serious dealing with the past, has reached school history teaching, too. It has resulted in various disciplinary, ‘post-modern’ and global approaches to history teaching (see Barton & Levstik, 2008; Carretero & Bermudez, 2012). Thus, the expectation that the subject should focus on students’ identity and patriotism building is contested, if not socially and politically, then within educational circles and curricula, and among the teachers themselves. National curricula are often intentionally opaque with regard to history’s identity building function (see also Sakki, 2014), in order to achieve a consensus of interests (Simpson & Halse, 2006).

In this paper we explore Estonian history teachers’ views on this point. On the one hand, they need to position themselves among the different understandings and aims of history teaching, as just described. Thus, we ask in which ways and to what extent do they see themselves as ‘servants’ of the state or nation – besides other possible roles and tasks such as transmitting academic findings, enhancing critical thinking, etc. On the other hand, teachers just like any other people share in personal, local and family representations that need not be congruent with either the academic, national or ‘official’ ones. This is particularly pertinent in countries like Estonia that regained independence rather recently and where some dominant interpretations of the past are visibly contested among different memory communities (e.g. Brüggemann & Kasekamp, 2008; Ehala, 2009; Kus, Liu, & Ward, 2013). In particular, among the Russian-speaking portion of the population who descend from immigrants during Soviet times, the feelings of identity, cultural belonging and patriotism differ from the titular population. Additionally, there is the ever growing plurality of representations that teachers confront due to globalisation (e.g. Christophe, 2013). Therefore we will also look at the teachers’ positions towards the Estonian national narrative and the core imagery of Estonian identity itself.

There has been much theorising on the terms ‘nation’ and ‘patriotism’ that we cannot consider at this place. We define ‘nation’ as a community of people with a shared culture and language that often coincides with an ethnic identity and which is often but not always organised as a state (cf. Smith, 2004). We understand ‘patriotism’ as a knowledge of belonging and feeling of attachment to a nation or ethnic group that may or may not include their formal organisation as a state (cf. Smith, 2002, 2004). Thus, we discriminate ‘patriotism’ as a feeling of local, ethnic or national attachment from ‘state loyalty’ as allegiance to the state.

Estonian patriotism focuses on the country’s independence and remembering the people’s long and often futile struggle against different oppressors (e.g. Tamm, 2008). However, in a globalising world and in pluralising societies, national narratives’ hegemonic position is always challenged (see above). In history teaching, a multi-perspective and inclusive view towards the past may be both enhanced and hindered by ethnically heterogeneous contexts of teaching. On the one hand,
the presence of Russian speaking students may offer a genuine plurality of perspectives in the history classroom. On the other hand, conspicuous minority presence emphasizes also the majority's affiliation and may increase out-group rejection (e.g. Deaux & Wiley, 2007; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000; Wagner, Holtz, & Kashima, 2009). Also, sensitive and contested issues may make both teachers and students wary of possible conflicts (e.g. Goldberg, Schwartz, & Porat, 2011; Kitson & McCully, 2005).

1.2. Historical backdrop

The development of a widespread Estonian national consciousness dates back to the second half of 19th century, preceded by “a gradual increase in ethnic self-consciousness” since the 1700s (Raun, 2003, p. 133). First the attention focused on cultural, educational and economic concerns. Thus, Estonian nationalism represents a cultural type of nationalism. The idea of political autonomy was first expressed openly only during the revolution of 1905, whereas “independence seemed infeasible before the fall of the tsarist regime in 1917” (Raun, 2003, p. 137). The revolution of 1905 was also the first clear landmark of broad mass mobilisation that used national arguments (Raun, 2003, p. 135).

Estonia became an independent state through an independence war from 1918 to 1920, which ended with a peace treaty with Soviet Russia. The period of nation state building ended with the forceful incorporation of the country into the Soviet Union in 1940. Following the German occupation 1941–1944, Estonia was again part of the USSR between 1944 and 1991. The Soviet era can be broadly divided into Stalinist and post-Stalinist eras, separated by Stalin’s death in 1953. The former periods were marked by terror, arrests of intellectuals, civil servants, politicians, as well as by mass deportations of civilians to Siberia in 1941 and 1949. The post-Stalinist era was marked by industrialisation, subsequent immigration of workers from other parts of the Soviet Union, ‘Khrushchev’s thaw’, ‘Brezhnev’s stagnation’ and Gorbachev’s glasnost and perestroika. After a broad popular movement expressing dissatisfaction with the Soviet Union and yearning to restore the pre-war state, the country regained independence in 1991.

This ‘critical juncture’ – and the subsequent substantial rupture with the immediate past affording significant opportunities for societal reorganisation – in Estonia’s history set the stage for an intense interplay between ethnic-nationalist interests and a Europe-centred liberalism in the following two decades (e.g. Budryte, 2005; Ehala, 2009; Kus et al., 2013).

Today, there are two rather distinct communities that largely coincide with the main ethno-linguistic communities in Estonia: ethnic Estonians (69%) and ethnic Russians (25%) as the dominant group among the ’Russian-speaking’ population (hitherto ‘Russian-speakers’). This constellation is a source of tension and conflict between the official Soviet versus ethnic Estonian history represented by the collective memory of ethnic Estonians and the ‘Estonian Russian-speaking’ community. This conflict derives from the communities’ different collective experiences with the Soviet system, together with Estonian and Soviet past. Estonian independence, and present identity politics (see e.g. Brüggemann & Kasekamp, 2008; Mertelsmann, 2008). While there is a variety of interpretations and positions among individuals and various social groups within both ‘camps’ (e.g. Raudsepp & Wagner, 2011), statistically, ethnic Estonians still tend to agree with the state’s official position that the Soviet Union was an ‘occupier’, whereas the Russian-speakers are much more divided on the topic, many of them preferring the interpretation that Estonia ‘joined USSR in 1940 voluntarily’ and was subsequently ‘liberated’ from German occupation rather than ‘re-occupied’ in 1945. The ‘mnemonic division’ is perceived as so important that the different understandings of history between ethnic Russians and Estonians have even been seen as indications of “parallel societies with conflicting memories of the communist past” (Kattago, 2009, p. 162).

1.3. History at school

Education has been one of the main playgrounds of the post-Soviet transition process. Heidmets et al. (2011, pp. 96–98) distinguish three waves: (1) from late 1980s to mid-90s when “the emphasis was on liberalising the whole system and on weakening governmental control over educational affairs”; (2) a step-by-step ‘return of the state’ since late 1990s, marked by an enhanced legal framework and other centralised regulation; and (3) ‘networking with Europe’ and its emerging common education space, manifested in increased participation in various international programmes and evaluations. All in all, neoliberal, market and assessment oriented policies have presented the strongest contrast to the former Soviet centralization. Transformations have involved all levels – curricula, teaching methods and relations between teachers and students.

Naturally, the ideologies of Estonian history teaching also underwent remarkable changes. At the beginning of the 1990s, the main aspiration of the planners of history teaching was a new and ‘honest’ presentation of the past – as opposed to Soviet versions; and endorsement of ethical values and individual agency – as opposed to ‘Marxist–Leninist’ structural determinism (Ahonen, 1992). Within this framework, the teaching of Estonian history was expected to reinforce national identity, reasserting “Estonia as a historical community through disclosing its story of the past as seen from the perspective of nation-building” (Ahonen, 1997, pp. 54–55). Simultaneously, various Western institutions exerted an influence on the history teaching landscape in Estonia. First and foremost the European Association of History Educators Euroclio, and the Council of Europe disseminated constructivist views and ideas of multi-perspective history teaching via teaching materials and teachers’ in-service education courses. They also influenced the national curricula and examinations (e.g. Oja, 2004), ‘taming Estonian nationalism’ (Budryte, 2005), at least in the official discourse. For example, the national curricula for history have been careful not to put too much weight on patriotism and nationalism as aims of history teaching (cf. Ahonen, 1992). Already in the 1990 provisional curriculum for history, the wording of the curriculum’s most identity-related aim was kept...
generic: “National feeling and love of the native country shall be encouraged in the student of history” (Ahonen, 1992, p. 113). That is, explicit mention of Estonian patriotism or feelings was avoided.

Similarly, the curriculum of 1996 promoted a constructivist view of learning where each student figures as a constructor of his or her own image of the past. The students’ identities were referred to in a generic manner, compatible with diverse nationalities: “the student /–/ shall relate him/herself with his or her home, native country, Europe, and the world” (Estonian Government, 1996, p. 2091). The authors of a modified version of the same curriculum in 2002, seem to have wished to be a bit more explicit about enhancing an Estonian identity, but still refrain from mentioning patriotism while emphasising what knowledge of the past can bring: “the student /–/ shall learn to relate him/herself with his/her place of origin, Estonia, Europe, and the world”; “the student /–/ shall define him or herself as a member of his or her nation[ality].” (Estonian Government, 2002). In 2002 and 2010, the student’s “national and cultural identity, tolerance and positive attitude towards values of democracy” were added (Estonian Government, 2002, and later).

As mentioned above, such wordings create an “illusion of consensus” (Simpson & Halse, 2006) – they can be agreed with from both multicultural as well as ethnic-nationalist positions. On the one hand, the curriculum could be presented to the West as promoting tolerance and multi-perspectivity. On the other hand, it can be interpreted also in a more ethnocentric or even myth-based way. For example, in a semi-official commentary to the national curriculum for history, Õispuu (2002, pp. 25–26) elaborates on the importance of students’ love for homeland and views Estonian history as illustration to the nation’s extraordinariness: “There are not many peoples in the world whose development would have taken place with such rootedness (põlisus) and continuity”. Also the textbooks’ dominant presentation of the Estonian past can still be described “as a long line of development, as a predetermined path to a nation-state” in which no minority narrative has a place (Ahonen, 2001, p. 183; cf. Pääbo, 2011).

There has been no broad public discussion about possible functions of history teaching, except for a polemic on textbook interpretations of the recent past (Kello & Harro-Loit, 2014). Notwithstanding, based on the conspicuous mnemonic differences between ethnic communities, there is some public concern that the ‘Russian schools’ teach ‘incorrect’ or even hostile Russian interpretations to their students (e.g. Golubeva, 2010). On the other hand, there is the concern that the Estonian history books and curricula may be too ethnocentric for Russian-speakers. Thus, the teachers of Russian-speaking students perceive their task as smoothing sharp edges and enhancing students’ understanding of the existence of different conceptions and positions (e.g. Lauristin et al., 2011, p. 67).

The context of this situation is the ethnically semi-segregated arrangement of Estonian schools. The schools divide into ‘Estonian’ and ‘Russian’, the former being ethnically mixed to various extents and the latter designed for Russian-speaking students. During the Soviet era, the Russian-language schools had their own curricula that included little if anything about Estonia and the local past. Also, teachers mainly came from other Soviet republics. Since independence, ‘Russian schools’ have had the same national curricula as the ‘Estonian’ ones, and most new teachers, though still mainly ethnic Russians, have been trained in Estonia. Both Russian and Estonian are used as the language of instruction in these schools, as the state has demanded step-by-step transition to Estonian language instruction (Masso, Kello, & Djačkova, 2011). Since the late 1980s Russian-speaking teachers have been forced to face a more serious ‘re-culturing’ (Hargreaves, 1994) than their ethnic Estonian colleagues. Many of them have had to learn Estonian language from scratch, and lately even to start teaching in Estonian. They have had to face a rupture in their identity changing from a formerly dominant position to belonging to a ‘dependent’ minority group in a new state. Like Russian-speakers in general, who tend to have more of a distance to the Estonian state and less civil empowerment (e.g. Ehala, 2009; Schulze, 2014), Russian-speaking teachers seem to have had to work harder on appropriating the new national and neoliberal ideologies that the educational transformations have brought about (cf. e.g. Golubeva, 2010; Masso & Kello, 2010; Toots, 2011).

The present paper focuses on history teachers’ positions towards state and national historical narratives: specifically, how do ethnic Estonian and Russian teachers perceive public expectations for enhancing their students’ national feelings/patriotism, and how do they navigate between the sometimes contradictory interpretations of the Estonian past in their social role as teachers.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and interviews

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with 39 Estonian history teachers. She contacted the interviewees mainly in and via schools that were chosen to provide a broad diversity of backgrounds. The teachers worked at various schools in nine different towns and villages, either in the Russian-speaking northeast (14) or the mainly Estonian-speaking south (25) of Estonia. Fourteen teachers from ‘Russian’ schools were deliberately included. Most of the teachers taught (or had taught) history at all grades at which the subject was in the curriculum (grades 5–12, i.e. from 11- and 12-year-old students to 19-year-olds), but there were also many who had taught only at either lower or upper secondary level, as well as some who had taught history only to fifth- and sixth-graders. All age groups, a variety of teaching experiences (from a young pre-service teacher to a recently retired teacher who still gave some classes as a substitute) and both sexes (8M, 31F) were represented.

The interviews usually lasted 45–90 min. All interviews began with a semi-structured conversation about the interviewee’s vision of history teaching and its contexts, their students and themselves as teachers. The interviewer prompted them...
on a variety of contexts in history teaching, while allowing the interviewee to determine in how much detail to respond. Most interviews also included a second part in which the interviewer asked the teacher to comment on 22 paraphrased quotes from articles in the Estonian teachers’ weekly newspaper Õpetajate Leht (the Teachers’ Newspaper) in the period 1999–2008. These partly provocative and partly ambiguous statements reflected a range of different views. For example, ‘History teaching does not pursue one truth – the aim is to offer the students different approaches, helping them to reach as objective an interpretation as possible’, ‘Nothing but complete and correct facts are demanded from the history teacher. Different interpretations may be added later, according to necessity and possibility’.

The interviews were private, usually at the school, in Estonian or Russian language. With the exception of two, the interviews were completely voice recorded and transcribed.

2.2. Theoretical background of the analysis

Our analysis aimed at identifying how the teachers’ responses reflect their positions. The teachers’ positions can be thought to be a consequence of their perceptions of the educational, academic and socio-political contexts of history teaching, and ways of relating to the contexts and their students. Thus, their responses combine their awareness of the teacher’s role as ‘agent of the state’ in a crucial educational context; the way they feel their own personal identity relates to different versions of history; and the situation in the class where students from different family and language backgrounds bring shades and versions of popular historical knowledge to bear.

We consider interviews as a situated activation and (re-)production of both individual and socially-shared resources that combine into the situated positions as expressed in the interview discourse. Thus, rather than beliefs attached to individuals, the study shows the range, diversity and typical patterns of teacher positions (e.g. Jansen, 2010).

The analysis was based on the well-established assumption that Estonian and Russian-speaking teachers’ subjective and objective positions are fundamentally different (e.g. Golubeva, 2010; Onken, 2010; Kirss, 2010; Kirss & Vihelemm, 2008; Lauristin et al., 2011). Thus, we looked at Estonian- and Russian-speaking teachers’ positions separately.

The analysis included a repeated reading of the interview transcriptions, keeping in mind the research focus that was refined during each reading. The investigator marked out cases where relevant topics were brought up. For example, following our own definition of patriotism and state loyalty (by ‘patriotism’ we mean attachment to the country (as place) or the nation (which for most Estonians has an ethnic connotation), and by ‘state loyalty’ we mean loyalty to the ‘machinery’ that in Estonia was created in 1918 and re-created in 1991; see above), we looked at how teachers talked about the phenomena (that we, and not necessarily the teachers) define as patriotism and state loyalty.

When drafting the findings we reviewed the respective transcription sections, attempting to depict in an adequate way both the relevant nuances of the individual opinions as well as to capture the ‘beat’ behind the spoken discourse (e.g. Wagner, 2011). In doing this, we looked for examples based on the principle of minimal and maximal contrast (e.g. Keller, 2007, pp. 88–89). In other words, on the one hand the attempt was to discover what was typical to a particular teacher group. On the other hand the attempt was to describe the diversity of positions within each group. In presenting the findings, we illustrate typical positions with those quotations which express a position most explicitly.

In the presentation of findings, the quotations are marked with the interviewee’s pseudonym. We present findings from interviews with Estonian- and Russian-speaking teachers separately as mentioned in the section headings.

3. Ethnic Estonian positions

3.1. History teaching in the service of the nation?

If the Estonian state’s interest is its teachers producing loyal citizens, then this did not figure among the main functions of history teaching in our teachers’ discourse (Kello, 2010). Only a few teachers mentioned patriotism spontaneously when asked about their main aims as history teachers – and even then in the sense of local belonging rather than state loyalty. However, if we look at their discourse as a whole, this aspect wasn’t unimportant to them, and if asked explicitly, many agreed with the objective.

A typical ethnic Estonian teacher’s way of navigating the space of Estonian identity balanced the aims of a moderate patriotism, on the one hand, and critical reflexivity towards common stereotypes, on the other. Thus, these teachers represented themselves as displaying their own patriotic views to students in a tempered way. For example, one teacher (Tii) was privately displeased with Estonian Russian-speakers attitudes. He perceived the Bronze Soldier events¹ also as revitalising the Estonians’ sense of danger. However, as a teacher, he said he didn’t present his views to his students that way. Rather,
hearing negative expressions about Russia and Russians from his students (as well as other expressions of intolerance), he attempted to counter the tendency to generalise and temper such a naïve perception in them, enhancing their analytical thinking and reflexivity, countering stereotyping and biased statements by students.

Ethnic Estonian teachers had different perceptions with regard to how clear expectations the society had towards them. On the one hand, some teachers felt clear expectations and were not particularly happy with them (cf. Kello, in press; Kello & Harro-Loit, 2012). For example, Ilme pointed to a scepticism that Soviet-time ideological education had injected into her generation, that did not allow them to take ideological teaching very seriously:

my generation is spoiled in that sense. I/- we have experienced the Soviet education so much that I am not able to do the blue-black-and-white [reference to the Estonian flag, meaning ‘nationalist’] education perhaps as much as probably the society expects, I guess. (Ilme)

In similar line, Jaanika expressed a veritable conflict between her own predilection for critical reflection and multiple perspectives, and possible societal or state expectation to teach a convenient kind of history:

There is anyway some kind of this. . . . this representation of history that is convenient to the state as well. I/- I don’t think it should be this way that we have to, that it’s like clearly defined for us, that this is how we should teach I/- otherwise we have it all black-and-white again. (Jaanika)

On the other hand, for several others, ‘society’ valued ideals of patriotism too little. For example, when asked what he thought about patriotism as an aim of history teaching, Urmet said that the expectations by the society that he perceived were negligible:

in society I/- this aspect is totally forgotten. (Urmet)

Why did only very few teachers spontaneously mention identity and patriotism related goals of history teaching as important for them, while agreeing with these aims when prompted? We think one reason could be that history teachers perceive themselves more as academically based historians, rather than ideology workers, as was the case during the Soviet period. Thus, outright patriotism teaching may be perceived as a taboo. Teachers may be wary of representing themselves as transmitters of some political ideology as opposed to more neutral knowledge and skills. Indeed, many teachers have been found to be wary of (explicit) values teaching (e.g. Frydaki & Mamoura, 2008). Another explanation could be that identity related aspects of history teaching are so ingrained and taken for granted that they don’t need to be put in words. Along this line, the students’ attaining and incorporating values, can be seen as coming about naturally as the teacher’s values will always shine through, a point that even the official curricula of history imply: “In the process of solving historical problems I/- [the students’] national and cultural identity, tolerance and positive attitude to the values of democracy develop” (Estonian Government, 2002).

This is a partial answer to the question of how the school institution ensures that students attain a positive attitude and feeling of affiliation with an abstract state. According to teachers’ discourse this goal is pursued casually and implicitly.

3.2. Estonian core imagery of ethnic identity

Teachers used certain strategies to enhance the students’ sense of connection to their country and valuing Estonian statehood, rather than taking it as self-evident. For doing this, they draw on deep-seated and wide-spread representations among Estonians. Tiit, after having been asked, stated that

where else should patriotism be enhanced if not in history teaching I/- I always give them the example that, err, let’s take how many peoples there are, well, I-don’t-know, seven, eight thousand I/- or how many states are in the world, and how many of them are more specifically nation states, and and how lucky we are here, and via this [I tell them] also that that, well, who else if not us (Tiit)

Positive social comparison, that is comparing oneself with less lucky other Finno-Ugric peoples who have no own nation state is commonplace in Estonia. In a certain sense, hence, this commonplace constitutes, if not a foundling myth, then a recurring topos2 substantiating their gratitude to their forebears fighting for Estonian independence and the feeling of keeping balance in a potentially labile position gained by a combination of coincidence and achievement. To maintain the ethnos/nation and statehood, enough people should stay in Estonia and participate in the patriotic task of preserving language and culture.

Of course, knowing one’s roots is an important motivating element in this respect, as the teacher Vaike mentioned: Asked about inter-generational continuity she said that history should teach how the predecessors felt,

what they had to go through, be it at the time of serfdom etc. Let’s imagine us into their shoes. I/- So that an Estonian remains an Estonian (Vaike)

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2 ‘Topos’ (place; Greek) means a traditional and fixed scheme, formula or image. (Apple Dictionary, v. 2.2.1; Duden Online).
Tiit connected to this representation the attempt to enhance the students’ sense of responsibility for the country, that is, 'not taking an Estonian state for granted'.

Along with other teachers, Rahel used the representation/discourse of Estonians' luck. After being asked whether she saw patriotism as an objective of her teaching, she described how she attempted to awake in her students a sense of awe in view of this wonder:

I say: ‘look at your faces, at what you look like … what a big mixture you are. … The Finno-Ugric and Indo-European stuff and then the Germans and Russians and Danes and Poles and Swedes and Germans and Russians … And and here you are on the crossroads of the winds, where anyway, the Ancient Freedom Fight [1208–27] as well as St. George’s night [1343] as well as all other sufferings have taken away the cream and the more active layer and during the Soviet period all the … cultural and economical intelligentsia have been deported or killed and creative people often fled, too. Think what this has done genetically to us … we won’t … storm banks like the Greeks. We rather endure all, … but actually we manage it all and we have quite an exemplary and all right state.’

‘think how you feel like being on a misty meadow, this dew above it and a roe deer making sounds, and thinking that people have actually lived here eleven thousand years and how our state has been here statically on this one place, and at the same time, think how is the history of the United States or be it Russia here next to us – how long we have been making our small clay pot here, and cultivating our small field.’ (Rahel)

These excerpts reflect, on the one hand, the Estonians’ preoccupation with the patriotic topos of how long the Estonian people, while suffering violent oppression, have lived at one place as compared to other European peoples. Rahel even projects the continuity of the Estonian state back over thousands of years. On the other hand, Rahel’s excerpts reflect Estonians’ preoccupation with the intelligentsia’s flight, extermination and recent emigration. They worry about the more active and non-compliant parts of the population withering away. These topoi were reflected in various shades by several interviewees and can be characterised as a ‘hot’ stable core (Wagner, Valencia, & Elejabarrieta, 1996) in Estonia’s identity and collective memory.

As Rahel immediately linked this representation to a sense of responsibility that includes defending the country in case of need, her discourse shows that ‘defence will’ is perceived as of similar value: staying in your country despite climate and economic hardships and defending instead of fleeing are two sides of the same coin. In fact, also other teachers saw their patriotic responsibility in strengthening their students’ motivation to stay in Estonia.

the society expects [from school] … smart people, talents, who don’t leave Estonian Republic. Who stay here, find a job here, rather than leave. Who study abroad, but they come back and continue to work here. (Vaike)

According to the Estonians’ principal social representation, the Estonian state is something of their own doing: made by the small people by themselves with the aim of preserving Estonian culture and language, as even stated in the Constitution. In much of their discourse, hence, they seem to conflate ‘the people’, ‘the nation’ and ‘the state’. ‘Estonian state’ sounds more like ‘our safe place’ than a ‘government and legal machinery’ in Estonian ears.

4. Russian teachers and their conflicts

4.1. Coping with the historical ‘juncture’

For Onken (2010, p. 287) Estonian Russians–speaking history teachers are “an interesting ‘double’ memory actor. On the one hand they can be seen as … a group of rather unorganised carriers of a particular social (Soviet-Russian) memory …”. But as public school history teachers, they belong to a much more specific and narrower professional group close to the processes of political memory construction”. Naturally, their image of the past was more nuanced than that of lay people. Some had encountered ‘forbidden truths’ already at a Soviet university, where professors had enlightened their students secretly, whereas others had experienced sometimes traumatic re-learning after Gorbachev’s glasnost.

For example Alina claimed to have heard such ‘forbidden truths’ already during the Soviet period, at the university, where her professors had to enlighten their students secretly. Eliana, born about 1970, told about a personally critical event during her first year at the college, which painfully broke her youthfully idealised history image.

[During the Soviet era] I was raised with films and books where the fascists were the worst enemies of the Soviet people; it was a terrible war that took my relatives’ lives. And suddenly I go to university, the first year there, our teacher shows us footages—they had just been allowed, it was the year 1986, Gorbachev had come to power, sort of glasnost—and I see a Soviet officer shaking hands with a German one, at the time when there was a common border in Poland. I even had a fight with the teacher … He tries to tell me that it was an agreement [between Soviet Union and Germany]—I am up to tears. I was 16 years old, my ideals crashed. (Eliana)

Roza, in contrast, had to re-learn at the beginning of the 1990s and describes the difficult break when suddenly finding herself in a different state, enacting a different social system, laws, symbols and history narratives. She reiterated that the
changes were particularly difficult for history teachers who had to change their way of teaching in terms of new instruction methods, relations to students, etc. Additionally they had to start teaching about totally new things, or re-name and re-evaluate events and processes they had been teaching earlier. Her interview in particular shows how deeply history teachers had to engage with the societal and ideological changes – they experienced the critical juncture of independence more as a rupture, as compared to lay people and teachers of other subjects.

Maths stays Maths; English, German, French are the same; Geography, say, well, if there were mountains at a certain place, they haven't moved, or rivers. But historians, of course, as teachers, I think, they are in a very difficult situation. (Roza)

At the same time, at least some of the Russian-speaking teachers had retained some emotional connection to the ‘Russian’ perspective. For example Roza expressed regret that the term ‘Great-Patriotic war’ had been replaced by ‘WWII’ in Estonian textbooks. Perhaps this was a feeling of loss for a deep-rooted and collectively important interpretation having become delegitimised. Also, when commenting on the statement “The current teaching of history is too ‘self-centred’ – concentrating on the Estonian and European past produces young people with narrow world views”, only some Russian-speaking teachers, and no ethnic Estonian regretted that Russia or other neighbouring countries were neglected in the curriculum (Kello & Masso, 2012).

Thus, because of their more heterogeneous points of departure from different personal convictions and varies trajectories of re-learning, their ‘personal conceptual proximity’ to the dominant Estonian narratives seemed to be more multifaceted and nuanced than that of their ethnic Estonian colleagues, who often seemed to be rather ‘comfortable’ with the mainstream narrative. While for ethnic Estonian teachers a patriotic position often – though not always – came naturally, Russian teachers were clearly more aware of their position as a servant of the state.

the teacher /–/ needs to present different opinions to the students, and, first of all, the official point of view. Because /–/ we are in, let’s say, civil/state service and we must present kind of state policy. (Roza)

4.2. Reconciling Russian-speaking students with official Estonian positions

Students’ representations of the past may be shaped by their families and by the media that carry particular narrative templates. While Estonian majority students will probably maintain templates that accord with those transmitted in school, Russian minority students are likely to have acquired alternative versions to ‘school history’. Not all families convey images or narratives about past. But in cases where ‘home history’ is strong and contradicts ‘official’ history, students may reject school history while retaining narratives that come from home (e.g. Hawkey & Prior, 2011). We can assume that besides family and media influence, the Russian-speaking students’ willingness to bring in their ‘home’ perspectives depended also on the teacher’s style and the ethnic dominance in the classroom. Possibly, the more Russian speaking students in the class, the more they were willing to speak up.

History teachers coped differently with such situations that presented challenges in educating citizens for their state (cf. Kello, in press). They could either take the students’ opinions seriously or brush them aside as distracting. Several teachers tried to avoid discussions with students, or to discuss only really important questions.

If a question is important from my point of view, then it’s possible to rearrange the lesson a bit /–/ but not much, because the discussion can take unlimited amounts of time. (Fyodor)

For Antonina, skipping those textbook spots she didn’t agree with was a way to stay loyal to her conscience as well as to avoid complicated discussions with students:

I didn’t start to judge there, so I left it out, I tried not to step into that. That is, I had moments when I played neither with the state, nor with my conscience, but I kept away, I was not sure. /–/ The discussions [with students] would lead to who-knows-what mazes here /–/. Whatever you say, there are as many opinions as there are people. (Antonina)

Tamara attempted to distinguish students’ laziness from serious concerns:

It happens that students just want to do nothing, they start talking about who knows what–that’s also possible, if only to take the topic somewhere. /–/ But if it’s about the topic; if, after all, there can be a use in the conversation, then, of course, it’s possible to continue it and try /–/ to sow the right seed somehow. But if it’s just kind of usual ‘talking-away-of-the-topic’ [zabaltyvanie], then, of course, you try [to say] that “Let’s talk about it later, let’s go back to the subject”. (Tamara)

In contrast to avoidance or ‘brushing aside’ tactics, multi-perspective teaching was another option. Multi-perspectivity and admitting heterogeneous positions boils down to demonstrating to students the essential diversity of historical truth and explanations. Several teachers shared in Viktoria’s underlining of the subjectivity of historical knowledge:

I say it constantly: “Dear ones, the book is written by two authors. We don’t have to learn it by heart. We just acquaint ourselves [with it]. These are two out of 6 billion people who have announced their point of view there.” The kids /–/ are very, very critical in this sense, and realize that yes, it’s two historians. Yes, they have worked on this issue for a long time, but they are common people (Viktoria)
It seems that admitting the inescapability of divergent perspectives was another way to ‘reconcile’ the students. Simultaneously, representing a history classroom inhabited as well as surrounded by a plurality of perspectives, indicates a less ‘authoritarian’ view of both teaching and historical knowledge. That is to say, if the textbook represents a private view of its authors rather than a state-sanctioned authority, then a plurality of views have their rightful place within the classroom. And the external contexts, too, become inhabited by a plurality of views; a plurality of historians expressing a plurality of views among them. This way, Viktoria’s position is clearly opposed to Tamara’s representation of an authoritarian textbook and knowledge:

I’m of the opinion that the textbook shouldn’t be criticized in the lesson, or, like, some kind of information, and supplanted by some other. (Tamara)

In fact, more elaborate ways of ‘epistemological explanation’ were to let the students experience it themselves. Instead of reacting to disagreements, these teachers pro-actively offered students the experience of heterogeneity in interpretations of the past among their own in-group. This could be by asking students to express their opinions in the lesson to make the diversity visible or by requesting students to conduct a survey among their family (Kello, in press). For example, Anyeta asked her students to conduct a survey on their families’ and acquaintances’ attitudes about Stalin:

they go, ask around and also do some kind of statistics. But the condition is [to include] people from different nationalities, so that there would be Belarussians, Ukrainians, /–/ Estonians, Latvians, Finns; people of different ages. /–/ and then they say: “There, you see, my granny adores him, but grandpa hates him”. And if that can be the case in one family . . . (Anyeta)

Ultimately, as compared to their Estonian colleagues, some Russian-speaking teachers utilised their more differentiated knowledge of Russian-language media and sources. This served Marina’s goal to develop in her students a critical mind and the habit of actively looking for different perspectives rather than believing a representation at first glance.

A crucial difference between Estonian and Russian-speaking teachers seems to be that whereas the first ones, as agents of the nation, could focus on furthering the students patriotic feelings, the latter focused on the students’ loyalty to the present regime. Inversely to the Russian-speaking population’s general habit of delegitimizing the present situation’s disadvantages by reference to the Soviet period (Kus et al., 2013), Russian-speaking teachers seemed to delegitimize the Soviet period at least partly by reference to its bad sides. Thus, in terms of enhancing the students’ loyalty to the current Estonian state, Russian-speaking teachers attempted to show more clearly the dark sides of the Soviet past:

Statement: Through historical knowledge it is possible to raise citizens who are aware and loyal to the state, and able to independently give values necessary for further strengthening of democracy in the country. In principle, I agree with this. /–/ Through history lessons, certain values are propagated, yes. As I always say to them: “We derive from democracy as the main evaluation criterion. /–/ Who of you would like to live in the 1930s in the Soviet Union?” (Marina)

Alina, when talking about the older generation’s positive memories of the Soviet era, referred to students whose grandparents had probably belonged to nomenklatura and had more positive memories than herself as part of the common people:

I say, well, make your own conclusions now. Life was not unilateral, [it was] multifaceted, there were totally different levels. /–/ Not everything was well, notwithstanding what your granny says. (Alina)

5. Discussion and conclusion

In the present study we bring life to the thesis that history teaching in schools serves the goal of forming values, feelings of attachment to a country and the formation of national identity in the service of the state. Even if there are many competing aims and conceptions of history teaching, one cannot escape the fact that for many, this is still an important goal of the subject. Our ‘laboratory’ was Estonia that recently experienced a fundamental transition from a former state of the Soviet Union to an independent state and member of the European Union. This is a setting that accentuates the issue of identity construction and state symbologies and the role of history teachers in schools (Leone & Sarrica, 2014; Liu et al., 2014). Apart from this, Estonia has a considerable proportion of Russian speaking immigrants in the first and second generation whose national identity is not straightforwardly Estonian.

We found that Estonian history teachers are largely aware of the task, among others, to convey a patriotic message to their classes. However, even though their teaching strategy may vary, they follow this demand more in an implicit than in an explicit way. Ethnic Estonian teachers also do this without perceiving much pressure by the state or society. That is to say, with some exceptions, they usually agreed with mainstream representations of history, thus perceived no conflict in this regard, and thus they felt free to do what they regarded appropriate. Even though they expressed a strong feeling of subjective agency in the interviews, this agency concurred with the state’s overall interests. The sense of external expectations or of being controlled is felt only when one has a dilemma with regard to what one should do, or when one would perhaps prefer to do something else than what is expected. They also perceived themselves in the service of the society rather than being a pawn of politics. Although they were well aware that patriotism is only one ideology among many, they valued these feelings.
At the same time, their task of conveying patriotism was a balancing act between Estonian core imagery that dominates the public sphere and a desirable European liberal openness. The risk of a widely shared mythical historical trajectory of luck and struggle is that it may create exaggerated feelings of nationalism that teachers were keen to avoid and dampen. They countered this representation by emphasising tolerance and anti-ethno-centric tendencies in their classes.

At Russian-language schools in predominantly Russian speaking regions the situation was markedly different. Russian-speaking teachers’ feeling of being in the ‘service of the state’ was much more pronounced than with Estonians. They perceived control by different sides, such as colleagues, the media and the parents. Additionally, those of them who had lived another reality before the transition 1991, faced the task of reconciling their personal identity with the new Estonian reality and the state’s curriculum. A similar reconciliation had to be undertaken with their students. Thus, the Russian-speaking teachers acted as intermediaries between the state – or the ethnic Estonians – and the Russian-speakers. They were the group of teachers most exposed to conflicts between different, inner and external, demands and expectations. On the one hand, the presence of conflicting memories in the classroom made the political dimension and inherent interpretability of historical knowledge more prominent in teachers’ representations of their subject. On the other hand, the social contexts and collective memories between which they are positioned are more diverse and complex than those of their colleagues from the titular ethnicities (cf. Kello, in press).

The study also illustrates the teacher’s dilemmatic position between what Hargreaves (1994) shows as the co-existence of ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ demands on education. On the one hand, both because of tradition and as as reaction to globalization, there is the state’s ‘modern’ expectation that schools contribute to the maintenance of unity and common identity. On the other hand, this same globalization, together with scientific and ideological uncertainty highlights the arbitrariness and particularity of such demands. Of course, the teachers’ situation is especially complicated and sensitive because they need to navigate their own, their students’ and many others’ (e.g. parents’) values, expectations and emotions in the case of socially sensitive and identity related issues.

History teachers are professionals who have the backing of academic research which, in best cases, follows the ideal of neutrality and objectivity. If they want to follow these ideals, they can find support in those parts of the national curriculum which are based on liberal ideas, i.e. encourage a multiperspectival approach and avoid declaring pre-defined values and identities as an aim of the subject. At the same time, there are teachers who perceive identity and nation building related expectations from the broader public or the state, and there are teachers who value such purposes privately. So there is a broad range of possible positions for individual teachers to ‘choose’ among – both in the actual teaching as well as rhetorically in the interview discourse.

The dynamics of positioning of Estonian and Russian speaking history teachers reflects their belonging to two different sections of society. These sections changed their power position during the transition: while the Russian minority represented the ruling Soviet power before, they lost their dominance when ethnic Estonians assumed political power after independence. In other words, a formerly powerful minority and a largely dominated majority switched positions. Such fundamental societal changes entail processes of groups coping with the historical loss and gain of dominance that entail typical changes in the mindset of those involved (Liu, Huang, & McFedries, 2008). It is clear that a group that loses its dominant standing in society has the lion’s share of coping. Their earlier mindset justifying dominance and social hierarchy is being replaced by a humbler set of attitudes. On the contrary, a formerly disadvantaged group that gains power by some historical change will develop an attitude set justifying asymmetric power relationships. In our opinion the discourse maintained by Russian speaking interviewees shown in Section 4 reflects this coping process in their tendency to tread on sensitive issues in a more careful and differentiated way, being more aware of the ‘watchful eye’ of society than their Estonian speaking colleagues.

In this paper we show that macro-processes as suggested in Liu et al. (2014) ‘critical junctures’ model are reflected in the behaviours and motivations of the historical subjects, that is the ‘normal people’. In the end, the task of schoolteachers is carrying their home country’s development further by educating the next generation of citizens. They do this by flexibly enacting what social structures seem to prescribe and what their own conscience allows.

Acknowledgements

The research was supported by the European Union through the European Social Fund (Doctoral Studies and Internationalisation Programme DoRa, carried out by Foundation Archimedes, and the Doctoral School of Education), the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory, CECT) and the framework of COST Action IS1205 “Social psychological dynamics of historical representations in the enlarged European Union”, as well as by the Estonian State target-financed project SF0180002s07, and Estonian Science Foundation grant project ETF9308 (‘Geographies of Media and Communication in a Transition Country’).

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