Memory of socialism and the Russian Orthodox believers in Estonia

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This article focuses on the mnemonic practices of Russian Orthodox believers in Estonia. Raising a general theoretical problem of confessional memory, the article proceeds to discuss of the representation of the past in autobiographical interviews with the older generation of Russians in Estonia, born between 1910 and 1930. The mnemonic practices of the ethnic minorities are shown to differ from the public narratives (both Russian and Estonian), thereby showing heterogeneity in the memories of the Soviet past. Thus, the article concludes that the ethnic Russians in Estonia are not a coherent mnemonic community.

Keywords: Religion; Orthodoxy; Estonia; Russian Orthodox Church; religious memory; autobiography; migrants; Soviet Union; diaspora; emigration; secularization

This article analyzes the representations of the twentieth century in the oral history interviews with older generation members of the Russian Orthodox Church who live in Estonia. The dual aim in this study is to highlight the characteristics of the memory of the members of an ethnic minority as well as to underline the significance of the religious element in their life stories. This case study will shed the light on the broader issue of how religious belief affects the ways of remembering how members of marginalized ethnic groups deal with memory. Generally, the study asks whether or not the past is remembered differently by the representatives of the ethnic minority compared to those of the titular nation group. In particular, how was the Soviet past remembered by ethnic Russians, who are regarded by ethnic Estonians in literature and popular discourse as a whole ethnic group to be instrumental in the Sovietization of the Baltic? What can be drawn from the memories of the Orthodox believers about the memory of Estonian Russians as a group? Can specific religious or theological concepts be found in the believers’ narratives of the past?

Religion as mnemotechnics

The mnemonic practices of the Russian Orthodox Church have not received sufficient theoretical or empirical study. This article proposes to focus on a specific aspect of this
theme while seeking guidance from the theoretical works of memory studies: the relationship between individual memories of believers and the Orthodox Church’s doctrine and practices. In order to approach the issue of the memory of an ethnic minority with a focus on religious beliefs, one needs to look at the broader theoretical framework while keeping in mind that it is impossible to provide a full account of the problem of religion and memory within the scope of this article.

The leading theoreticians of memory studies, primarily Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann, were also religious studies specialists who had no difficulty in evoking religion to support their theories. Halbwachs considers whether religious memory operates in the same way as collective memory ‘that is nourished, renewed, fortified and enriched, without losing any of its existence’ (Halbwachs 1992, 98). Drawing on Halbwachs, the French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger argues, ‘In the case of religious memory, the normativity of collective memory is reinforced by the fact of the group’s defining itself, objectively and subjectively, as a lineage of belief’ (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 125). She brings an example of the Christian anamnesis (which refers to commemoration of Christ’s Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension in the church ritual of Eucharist), which she uses in a broader sense as a form of ritual recalling of memories. Jan Assmann identifies ‘invisible religion,’ a term coined by Thomas Luckmann (Luckmann 1967), with cultural memory, persuasively showing how the history of world religions can uncover the paradigmatic forms of cultural mnemotechnics (Assmann 2006). Perhaps, as one of the signs of secularization or the ‘mutation of religion’ (Davie 2000), religious memory that once dominated the world is no longer taken for granted but is interpreted as just one of the forms of cultural memory.

Cultural memory and religion are closely related. Cultural memory, according to Jan Assmann (2011), is distinct from *ars memoriae* (the art of memory, or variety of mnemonic techniques, used in Antiquity for training of memory and in rhetoric) and from communicative memory. Cultural memory is organized, collective, grounded in the past, dependent on the writings and on the ‘specialist carriers,’ embodied in rituals, ceremonies, festivals, and imbued with an element of the sacred. Cultural memory is basically synonymous with ‘invisible religion’ (Assmann 2011). More confusion arises from the close semantic meanings of memory and tradition. As a concept with multilayered meanings (Noyes 2009), ‘tradition’ is closely linked with the issue of cultural memory. Peter Berger considers that religious tradition ‘mediates the experience of another reality, both to those who have never had it and to those who have but who are ever in danger of forgetting it. Every tradition is a collective memory’ (Berger 1980, 49). Therefore, religious traditions can be approached as mnemotechnics through which a community may make claims to their right to represent the true heirs of the sacred origin. For example, for the Russian Old Believers, the seeming immutability of medieval traditions and rituals served as important instruments to make their claim to their right to represent the Byzantine Orthodoxy.

The cultural memory of a religious group may include tradition and rites, but it also includes history, historiography, memoirs, literary texts, and the liturgy. Religion, on the other hand, provides specific religious mechanisms such as theological postulates, sacraments, or a sense of community, to cope with traumatic memories. For example, for a Christian, an empathic association with the suffering of Christ and a commandment to love one’s enemy may serve as a psychological coping mechanism for
personal trauma. The sacrament of confession in the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches may also alleviate a sense of guilt or grief.

It is possible to distinguish between institutional and autobiographical modes of remembering: the former refers to the institutional practices of commemoration and official narrative of the past; the latter works at the personal level of individual believers. These modes may interact and overlap, but never coincide completely. The autobiographical memory often operates with the narrative schemes that can be found in religious teaching, while the individual experience of suffering and violent death can be incorporated into the ‘institutional’ memory as martyrdom.

This theoretical framework allows a more nuanced interpretation of the autobiographical material in this article and offers a novel vista for understanding the Russians in Estonia, not only just as former Soviet citizens and members of the marginalized ethnic minority but also as believers. Religion is only one aspect of personal identity, but it is not an insignificant one. The Christian narrative provides a framework to interpret and understand the events and experiences that occur during one’s lifetime, thus bringing together individual memory with the broader framework of collective religious memory.

Marginal memories and the Russian diaspora

One can distinguish, broadly speaking, two trends in approaching the Russian minority in the former Soviet republics. First is the study of the ‘New Russian Diaspora’ (Shlapentokh, Sendich, and Payin 1994; Kolstoe 1995; Laitin 1998; Kosmarskaia 2006). The study of the ‘New Russian Diaspora’ focuses on the trauma of the fall of the Soviet Union as the basis of the social and cultural identity of the Russian minority. The specific position of the Russians, those ‘children of Empire’ (Kosmarskaia 2006), in the former Soviet Republics is defined not as much by their shared language and culture as it is by their shared sense of loss of their former privileged position. The fall of the Soviet Union resulted in a ‘cultural trauma’ for these Russians (Aarelaid and Hatshaturjan 2006), in the sudden disenfranchisement and social and cultural marginalization in the aftermath. The second trend emphasizes shared Russian culture as a basis of this common identity and focuses on the cultural production, institutions (such as schools, the church, theater, and other cultural organizations), and associations among the Russian minority through 1918–1941 (Belobrovtsesva 2008, 2010; Pribaltiiskie russkie 2010; Danilevskii 2010). This type of study of the Russian memory in the Baltic, emphasizing shared culture, forges a sense of continuity between the Baltic Russians before the Soviet occupation and those of the post-Soviet era; proposing rhetorically to protect what appears to be the vanishing ‘Russian’ heritage in the Baltic, especially material and literary culture, including architecture, icons, books, and newspapers. The studies that represent the second trend predominantly focus on the period before 1941 (the White armies, cultural institutions, the Old Believer settlers, literati, musicians, actors, etc.), and mostly exclude the Soviet era.

Neither of these trends explicitly discusses religion. David Laitin’s confidence that the Russian ethnic minority is largely secular has not yet been challenged (Laitin 1998). However, the statistical data reveals that Orthodox Christianity is an important marker of identity for Russian speakers in the Baltic. This signifies an ongoing process by which Orthodoxy, with its own language and culture, can be perceived as an element
strengthening Russian identity among the ‘new Russian diaspora.’ The 2011 population census showed that 47% of the ethnic Russians in Estonia identified as Orthodox, an 8.5% increase since 2000 (Statistikaamet).¹

This article attempts to highlight the religious dimension of the Russian minority’s identity and demonstrate its relevance for the problems of cultural memory, the Soviet era, and ethnic identity. The analysis below can be described as a collective portrait of the Russian Orthodox who belonged to the same generation (those born in the 1920s and 1930s). For the purpose of this article, I focused on the autobiographical accounts produced by lifelong members of the Orthodox Church who lived through the Soviet era.

In general, the efforts of scholars to highlight the cultural memory of Russians in the Baltic are supported by autobiographical reflections to a lesser degree than when compared to the Estonian-speaking population. The massive national endeavor since 1989 by the Estonian Cultural History archives has built up a collection of 2500 autobiographies written by people responding to life-writing competitions. The Russian language life narratives featured in this collection make up only a meager 4% (94 stories) (Jaago 2011, 144). The efforts of a group of committed individuals resulted in the collection of a large proportion of these Russian narratives (Estonia – moi dom 2009).² The coordinators of life-writing campaigns and scholars rarely admit that the absence of narratives from the Russian-speaking population may be a result of the discord between the lives of Russian Estonians and the dominant memory culture, including the alternative memory culture of the Russian cultural elite constructed by the efforts of the academics in Slavic departments.

Since the soliciting of written stories from the Russian-speaking subjects has not been successful, life history interviews remain an important method to gain insight into the subjectivity of the Russian-speaking citizens. The main sources for this article were long-life story interviews with seven men and women born in the 1920–1930s, conducted between 2006–2013; published memoirs complemented these primary sources (Estonia – moi dom 2009; Kornilii 2009; Miljutina 1997; Tallinskii pastyr 2001; Ivanen 2001). The interviewees, as well as the authors of the memoirs, were lifelong members of the Orthodox Church, so-called cradle Christians. Among them were representatives of the Russian diaspora in Estonia, born during the period of Estonian Republic (1918–1941) either to families of the refugees from Soviet Russia or residents in the territory of Pskov, Petsery, and Prichud’e (Peipus) Lake area, on the Estonia–Russia border. Among the interviewees were also some Russian migrants who came to Estonia either during the war or after 1945. Despite the Soviet atheist policy, some of these men and women had been baptized as children and actively practiced their faith.

This study highlights the main narrative themes in the interviews and autobiographical accounts of the Russian Orthodox. These themes are analyzed against the backdrop of the narrators’ experiences as believers, Soviet citizens, and as members of the marginalized ethnic minority.

**Idealization of the prewar past**

The life stories of older generation Russians in Estonia were characterized by a certain unity in their narrative themes, even though these themes were not always explicit. In parallel with the Estonian life stories, there was a certain idealization of the prewar
period. The place of origin of the memoirists also determined the style of the autobiographical narration. The memoirs of the Russians born in Pskov, Petšery, or Peipus – the rural territories populated mainly by the Russian speakers that belonged to Estonia during the interwar period – often seem rooted and grounded in the local landscape. Religious life in these territories was deeply connected with the life of the village community, with a sense of local identity, and was an important source of collective and individual ethics.

Three examples from written autobiographies demonstrate pervasiveness of religious worldview among the rural Russians who lived in the Estonian territories before the war. Margarita (b. 1935), born on a farmstead in Pskov Oblast, remembered her grandfather, who was regarded as a kulak (a rural capitalist) by the Soviet authorities. He told her that the kulaks were hardworking people; he instructed her to do good works and never envy others, as it was a great sin (EKLA, f. 350, V-22). Economy, morality, and Christianity were intertwined: wealth was a result of hard work, while poverty was not sin. For a simple woman, Taisiia, born in a village near Petšery in 1930, the church was the center of rural culture. She remembers the feasts of their patron saint celebrated collectively by the entire village. Children would be dressed in their best clothes, but on their way home, they would walk barefoot so that they would not spoil their best shoes. Ariadna, born in 1937 in the village Mitkovitsy in the Petšery region, described Orthodoxy as a unifying culture for the two ethnic groups that inhabited Petšery: the Russians and the Seto. ‘Seto like the Russians were Orthodox. We called them half-believers, in a sense that their faith was the same as ours but the language was different. We had the same church feasts’ (EKLA, f. 350, V-60).

The urban milieu has been generally characterized by a higher degree of secularization than rural society, yet the urban families of the Russian émigrés in the prewar Republic of Estonia managed to make religion the center of their family life. The Russian émigrés and their children were actively involved in the liturgical and social life of the Russian Orthodox community. There were special Orthodox classes, study groups, conferences organized by the Russian Student Christian movement, and pilgrimages. The Orthodox children and young people formed lifelong friendships and found their marriage partners through church connections (Kornilii 2009; Anna b. 1922–2011; Natal’ia b. 1930).

Confessional schools were closed after 1918, but religious education continued to be an important part of the school curriculum until 1940 and during the Nazi occupation from 1941 to 1944. In the Russian schools, the Orthodox clergy normally taught the Orthodox Catechism. Valentina (b. 1929), who attended a private Russian school in Tallinn before the war, remembered that the school day started with the prayers of ‘Our Father’ and ‘Heavenly King.’ She was given the task of bringing out an icon of Mary before the common prayer at her school.

Memories of the prewar era are characterized by a certain sense of nostalgia because most of the interviewees were teenagers before the war. These individuals fondly remembered family, friendship, school, and the sense of community among the émigrés, but they did not have similar positive memories of the Estonian Republic or the Orthodox Church in Estonia. Memories of the hardship and difficulties for the émigrés, who had to adapt to the laws of the Estonian republic, and the sense of being unrecognized for their contribution to the state, can be found in personal accounts (Boris, Vladimir). Metropolitan Kornilii states that despite the freedom of religion during the period of independence, the ‘spiritual needs were quite limited’:...
people took communion and made confession infrequently and evening services were not celebrated in many churches. In schools, the task of bringing out the icon before girls, as boys, often performed the start of classes wanted to avoid doing this. Some school children had already stopped going to church and some teachers collected popular science literature published in the Soviet Union and shared it with their students (Kornilii 2009 and oral communication). Thus, we can distinguish between an idealized cultural portrait of the Russian diaspora and the state of the Estonian Orthodox Church, which is implicitly characterized as spiritually stagnant. The spiritual revival did not begin until after 1940 (Kornilii 2009, 45).

The autobiographical narratives of the Russian ethnic minority in Estonia provide an idealized picture of their social life before the Second World War, in which the Orthodox identity served as Gemeinschaft (community), a connection that was lost during the Soviet era. Religious rituals, collective feasts, and the veneration of patron saints serve as a basis of collective identity that was grounded in tradition. The use of religious ritual in the urban environment, in the schools for the Russian minority, suggests that, despite secularization trends, the Russian ethnic minority tried to establish a mnemonic continuity with the past. We can distinguish two aspects in which religion is significant in the memories of pre-Soviet period. One is the visible expression of religiosity in contrast to what can to be perceived as atheistic era of the Soviet period. The other is the tacit form of religious narration present in autobiographical accounts of this era, in which the period before the war and before Stalinism was the Biblical prelapsarian time, that is the time of Paradise before the fall of Man, the time of innocence and happiness, the time that coincides with childhood and early youth of the memoirists.

**Sovietization and repression**

For the age group of interest, who were in their teens before 1940, World War II and the subsequent annexation of Estonia by the Soviet Union were important events, but not completely life changing. One can hardly discern the ‘narrative of rupture,’ typical of Estonian life stories (Kõresaar 2004), within these testimonies. Many of my respondents were still children or students. The memories of the war on the borderlands, like Petšery and the Pskov region, were entangled. Contrary to official Russian narrative of the war, the local population often did not make a distinction between German and Soviet forces: Margarita remembers that local peasants hid in the forest first from the Russian partisans as well as later from the Germans. Natalia remembers the prisoners of war being executed and that her parents lived in anticipation of arrest. It is not clear, however, whether the Germans or the Soviets were perceived as the bigger threat. It seems that, as children who experienced the trauma of the war, they could not clearly distinguish between the ‘good’ and ‘bad’ invaders. In one interview, a respondent could approvingly speak about ‘our’ (Soviet) armies, referring to the advance on Narva, and then accusatively mention the Soviet bombing of Tallinn (Svetlana b. 1930).

However, in most cases, the change of political power inevitably led to personal tragedies. Boris, as stated above, was arrested as a young man in 1945 for his service in the German army. His friend Vladimir’s life was marked by the fact that wore the German uniform during the war (Natalia). Many male relatives, schoolteachers, and acquaintances were imprisoned and some were executed. Viacheslav Jakobs only
learned that his father had been executed in 1941 when he was arrested 15 years later in 1956. The Russians living in Estonia, who had been drafted into the German army during the war, served different sentences in the camps and some were deported as kulaks. Many of the Russian émigrés, who returned to the Soviet Union after the war, enticed by the promises of the Soviet authorities, ended up in prison and labor settlements (Tallinskii pastyr 2001). Even though many respondents were still children or young people, they remember their fear of air raids and of the military and some recall their parents’ fears of the deportations and mass executions of prisoners of war. The war and subsequent change of political power altered the destinies of the members of the Russian Orthodox community; many were sent into exile, prison, or labor camps, thereby splitting families and destroying lives.

This interpretation of the Stalinist repression and postwar retribution differs from the dominant view that the repression was intended to be the genocide of the Estonian nation. The counterargument to the genocide argument deemphasizes that the repression was targeted at the Estonians as a nation, by showing the supra-ethnic character of communism and its harmful consequences for the Russians themselves. According to Boris (b. 1924) and Vladimir (b. 1930-2013), ‘as soon as the Soviet Power had injected itself in 1940 it started with the arrests of the most decent and most distinguished Russian émigrés.... The Soviet power was not just Russian but Estonian too because the communists were, by and large, [ethnic] Estonians, the local ones’ (Interview, 4 January 2010). Metropolitan Kornilii states that the representatives of power and the floods of migrants from the USSR, who came to Estonia in 1940 and again in 1945, were not Russians, but the ‘Soviets’ (sovetskie) (personal communication, see also Kornilii 2009).

Among the ‘local Russians,’ it is difficult to judge how widely accepted the distinction between the local ‘Russians’ and ‘Soviet Russians’ was. The newcomers could not speak Estonian and were regarded as less cultured and refined than the representatives of the prewar Russian diaspora (Kornilii 2009, 74, 152; Valentina). Distinctions made between the ‘Soviet Union,’ which is an unconditionally negative term, and ‘emigration’ was a typical meta-narrative of the mnemonic culture of the Russian diaspora (Fedorov 2010, 12). Valentina said that the atmosphere at her school changed. Even though the new teachers from the Soviet Union were experts in their subjects, they did not believe in God (interview, 4 May 2012). However, there are more positive evaluations of Sovietization as well. The newcomers from Russia brought with them new expertise and skills. Anna spoke with respect about a surgeon from Moscow, whom she assisted, and who encouraged her to become an urologist. In her case, Sovietization also meant the possibility of specializing in Moscow and other top clinics in the Soviet Union. Another reason for a positive reception of the annexation of the Baltic was that, after 1945, the Estonian Russians were reunited with their relatives in Russia, many of who were thought to be dead (Svetlana, Natalia). In addition, the younger generation of Russian émigrés in Estonia, who worshiped classical Russian culture, was given the opportunity to study in the Soviet Union and visit the museums in Moscow and Leningrad. ‘I was walking on these streets [in Leningrad] and day-dreaming that Pushkin or Onegin would appear around the corner’ (Svetlana b. 1930).

The memoirists emphasize the role of strong interpersonal networks and communality during the Soviet period. There were two aspects to this idealization of community. On one hand, being a member of a religious group made one part of a wider
network of ‘brothers and sisters in Christ.’ Anna and Valentina, who traveled widely across the Soviet Union attending professional conferences, made contacts with other members of the Orthodox Church. Seminary graduates used these informal networks across the USSR to search for future wives among good, pious Orthodox girls.\(^5\) Natalia (b. 1930) from Pechery, a daughter of the church choirmaster, had three suitors, from Moscow, Ukraine, and Tallinn, who made marriage proposals after their first meetings with her. The parish had often represented a combination of liturgical and social life where matters were often solved ‘over a cup of coffee’ at a parish priest’s house (Kornilii 2009). During the Soviet period, when the number of believers was relatively small and the administrative structure weak, the relationship between the bishops, the clergy, and the parishioners was familiar and informal (Svetlana b. 1930, Interview March, 10, 2010). Attempting to avoid contact with informers in public places (including the church), believers visited their priests at home for confession, spiritual advice, or for a simple friendly chat (Tallinski pastyr 2001; Kornilii 2009; Natal’ia b. 1930). This emphasis on the relationships between the believers reflects the general prevalence of informal relations in everyday life for Soviet citizens (Ledeneva 1998). Church connections provided an additional form of support for the believers: someone in church always knew someone else who could help with one problem or another.

The narratives of war and occupation in the interviews lack the perspective of the official Soviet view, which presented the Second World War as a messianic event that liberated Europe from the evil of Nazism. This official view had very clear religious overtones and also emphasized the great sacrifice that the Russian people had made during the war. Given the omnipresence of this narrative in Soviet culture, one can understand the confusion of the Russian ethnic minority whose own experiences of the war may not have been so heroic as presented by Soviet propaganda.

**Religious commitment, resistance, and compliance**

While churchgoing was part of upbringing and culture for ‘cradle Christians,’ some of my interviewees experienced a religious conversion during the war. Valentina’s husband, who was conscripted by the Nazi army, was walking in his German uniform in Berlin, feeling totally alone, when he stumbled across the Orthodox Church of St. Nicholas. When he entered the church, he suddenly felt that he was no longer alone. While in the gulag, Boris had found great consolation in reading the Gospel which his mother had managed to smuggle into his parcel, and which the prison authorities had failed to confiscate.

Churchgoing was not only a way of preserving one’s cultural identity, it was also a resistance to the norms and values of the new socialist society to some extent. In this respect, Russian Orthodox believers were similar to the Estonian Christians of the same generation (Altnurme 2006, 101–150; Paert 2012). This resistance was presented in autobiographical narratives not as heroic defiance of the regime but as small acts of noncompliance. Believers had to be inventive so that they could avoid Soviet parades and public events scheduled on the significant days of the Orthodox calendar.

During the May Day parade, I told my friend that we should be in the first row so that everybody could see us. I was marching and thinking: ‘It is Great Saturday [Saturday before Easter] today. I cannot forgive myself if I miss the Mass’. So together with my friend we changed our place, moving to the back of the procession, until finally we were out of it. We ran as fast as we could. (Natalia b. 1930)
Rather than emphasizing their heroic role in the fight against totalitarianism, Russian Orthodox believers underlined the arbitrariness and injustice of the Soviet system. Metropolitan Kornilii, who was arrested in 1956 for keeping religious literature published by émigrés, challenged his accusers about their lack of evidence, for deliberately tampering with evidence, and for introducing bias. (Kornilii 2009, 103)

The tightening of the Soviet policy on religion after 1958 led to the strengthening of ideological pressures against the church. Despite the constitutional right to worship and believe, families of the clergy and active parishioners were affected by the informal rules discriminating against believers. The wife of a Tallinn priest, Vasilii Lysenko, lost her job as a kindergarten teacher (Kornilii 2009); Natal’ia (b. 1930) could not continue studying music in the prestigious Gnesin sisters’ music college in Moscow because of her marriage to a priest. The singers in church choirs, who could receive some reimbursement for their work, often avoided being formally registered so that their day jobs were not affected. During Christmas, it was not unusual for some ideologically minded activists to visit the homes of their Christian colleagues from work to check whether there was a Christmas tree, interpreted as a sign of religious belief (Valentina b. 1929). New regulation of the Orthodox Church in 1961 minimized the role of priests in the management of parish affairs and gave significant power to church councils (svety) consisting of lay parishioners. The clergy joked about this regulation, calling it ‘All Power to the Soviets’ (which was a well-known slogan of the revolution of 1917). This was the cause of many conflicts between priests and parishioners.

Nevertheless, depending on the profession and the time period in question, keeping one’s career and personal faith was not incompatible, especially in the Baltic republics, where the control of the party concerning religion was perhaps more relaxed than elsewhere in the Soviet Union. This coexistence is illustrated in the responses from several interviewees. Anna (1922-2011), one of the top surgeons in Estonia, served for 11 years as a supervisor (starosta) in one of the Tallinn Orthodox parishes. She believes that her colleagues and the authorities knew that she was a churchgoer. Valentina and Anastasia, who also were doctors, never made an effort to hide their faith. However, Svetlana (b. 1930) who worked as a teacher – a more ideologically sensitive profession – could not attend church openly but had to hide in the balcony of Alexander-Nevsky Cathedral with the church choir.

The Orthodox Church preserved the memory of the pre-Soviet years that was expressed in the veneration of the saints, including the saints associated with the royal family, such as John of Kronstadt and Seraphim of Sarov. The literature published by émigrés could be regarded as anti-Soviet; many members of the Russian diaspora had relatives and friends abroad who provided them with spiritual literature in Russian published abroad. Estonia was a meeting point for the Orthodox Soviet underground and the Russian émigré Orthodox culture, providing spiritual answers to the searches of the dissenting intelligentsia of the 1970s.

While there was no emphasis on heroic resistance, there was even less of an attempt to discuss in interviews the problem of collaboration and compliance with the regime. One case seemed to be an exception, which was a case of apostasy by the Orthodox priest, Aleksandr Osipov. He underwent a remarkable career trajectory, beginning as an Orthodox priest in Estonia to a professor of the Leningrad Spiritual Academy, and finally to a leading figure in the Soviet atheist campaign. It was not a secret that Osipov became a collaborator, reporting to the Committee for State
Security (KGB) about church affairs in the late 1940s, long before he formally split with the church in 1959 (Firsov 2004). In the memoirs of those who knew Osipov, his case is singled out as a personal apostasy, even though it became clear how much influence he had on the careers of some of the Estonian clergy. Nevertheless, the believers suspected that there were other informers within the church during the Soviet era. Metropolitan Kornilii believed that his home in Vologda, where he briefly served as a priest, was bugged by the KGB (Kornilii 2009). Vladimir remembered that his father-in-law, the priest Valerii Povedskii, had been called to the commissioner’s quarters in Tallinn and confronted with the accusation based on a citation from his sermon. ‘What kind of “dark forces” did you have in mind when you preached in church last Sunday?’, asked the commissioner, trying to figure out the hidden political meaning of the sermon that dealt with the spiritual state of a Christian during Great Lent (Vladimir b. 1930-2013). Someone who was in church must have recorded the sermon. Despite this, Father Valerii had little fear of the authorities, perhaps knowing that his reputation of an ‘anti-Soviet priest’ could not be damaged more than it was already. Ordinary believers also demonstrated small acts of resistance by attending the church despite the danger, and by observing Christmas and other feasts.

Religion was treated as form of resistance in the studies of the Soviet era. However, in this section, we attempted to show religious memory as resistance. The simple acts of reading a Gospel, praying, and keeping the church feasts and commemoration of deceased relatives could be understood as acts of defiance. These acts of defiance have strengthened their sense of belonging to a Christian community.

**Secularization**

The worldview of young people was rooted in religion and the church during childhood, but religion increasingly became a matter of personal choice for young people and adults during the Soviet era. The secular worldview may not have been dominant, but it could conflict with the traditional way of life. A. Prostatov, a sailor born in Tallinn, was evacuated during 1941 (when the Soviet troops retreated from Estonia) to a village in Pskov Oblast. He was brought up in a traditional Orthodox family, decided to join the All-Union Communist League of Youth (Komsomol) in 1952. Prostatov’s mother took her son to see a holy man, a monk named Simeon, at the Pskov-Pecherskii monastery.

I was struck by the unusual simplicity and modesty of the elder, by his humble abode that had a small window and a little lamp in front of the icon. He told me kindly and as a fatherly advice: “you don’t have to become a Komsomol member”. But I went against the advice of the elder and my mother. (EKLA f. 350, 66)

The public spaces in Soviet life – the school, the army, the workplace, and places of entertainment – became the sites of nonreligious forms of memory, including the official memory of the revolution and the Second World War. The church also had to adapt to the official ideology. During the Second World War, the Russian Orthodox Church assumed a new patriotic role, which to some extent was a continuation of Patriarch Sergii’s declaration of loyalty in 1927. The policy of Metropolitan Nikolai (Jarushevich) was especially significant in endorsing the official Soviet version of the Second World War. His patriotic speeches have been regularly published in the central church periodical, the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* (Jarushevich).
Valentina (b. 1929), who completed her school studies under the new school’s leadership after 1945, used Metropolitan Nikolai’s sermons for her school essays without disclosing the source. A letter from Bishop Isidor to the Russian émigrés in 1948, copies of which were collected by the Commissioner for Church Affairs, bears the same mark of the emerging official narrative of the war, characterized by the sacrifice of the people and the Russian mission to humanity (ERA, R 1961, 2/12, 48–49).

**Memories of the Russian newcomers to Estonia: Anastasia’s story**

The local population regarded the Russians who came to Estonia after the war as representatives of an alien and threatening culture and value system. In the late 1940s, many of these newcomers were representatives of the party, military personnel, technical intelligentsia, teachers, and doctors. Even though it was not always evident, some of the Soviet newcomers were also brought up in religious families and surreptitiously professed belief in God. Below is the case of Anastasia Pavlovna (b. 1924). She came to Tallinn on the medical staff of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD). It is difficult to treat her case as typical or untypical, but it adds interesting details to the collective portrait of the Russians migrant to the Baltic state and gives a glance to the scarce memories of ‘perpetrators.’

Born to the large impoverished family of a factory worker in Izhevsk, Anastasia was one of eight children. The family was pious Orthodox, but this did not prevent the children from becoming Pioneers at school. After graduating from medical school, Anastasia was recruited to the NKVD as a doctor, serving first in Stalingrad, then at prisoner of war (POW) camps. She recalls one of her achievements as saving the lives of captured Germans who were dying from malnutrition and disease. Under the Potsdam Agreement, she accompanied trains transporting the POWs back to Germany.

After the war, Anastasia was directed to Estonia, where she accompanied the trains of the people deported from Jõgeva to Omsk in Siberia. She remembered the great secrecy of the assignment: her superiors did not tell her what the aim and task of her journey was – they only warned of its potential hardship. Anastasia vividly described the pitiful conditions of the deported people who were densely packed on the train; many of the alleged ‘kulaks’ were clearly from poor backgrounds. There were old people as well as small children. As a doctor, she felt responsible for providing basic medical care for those on the train, and she expressed compassion and selflessness beyond the call of duty. During the journey, she helped deliver two babies, providing all the necessary conditions for birth despite the restrictions of the special train. By chance, she was also pregnant with her first child at this time. Even though she had no authority to do so, she tried to help the deportees by giving advice and making appeals to the local administration, as she felt that injustice had been done toward some of the arrested people. On her return to Tallinn, she was commended for her work, especially for ensuring the health and safe delivery of the deported to Siberia. She kept her participation in the deportations a secret. She could not say anything about this to her Estonian friends and neighbors. The sense of injustice and tragedy remained with her and she stopped working for the NKVD as soon as she could. When I asked her about the death of Stalin in 1953, Anastasia remembered having mixed feelings of sorrow and indignation at Stalin’s crimes. ‘People sincerely mourned his death. They knew, however, how much beastliness took place, but we did not want to
go deep into that. It was not up to us, to discuss this. We all felt that there were abuses of power. How many people had perished, for no reason!

Both of Anastasia’s children were baptized and she began to attend church regularly in the 1960s. Religious literature and prayer books were scarce, but she shared books with some other religious women. Some colleagues disapproved of her churchgoing, but she persisted. The church provided her with much firmer concepts of right and wrong. When asked about whether her husband was religious, she replied that he had a much stronger sense of morality by disapproving of abortion, which he regarded sinful. However, for women in the Soviet Union, abortion, which was illegal until 1956, was often the only way to survive, as they could not afford to bring up more than one or two children. As a doctor, she helped her female friends terminate pregnancies. This navigation between the innate sense of moral wrong and the practical need to survive was typical for many Soviet people. Anastasia’s memory of Stalinism is characterized by the same dualism: on one hand, even before the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in February 1956, she recognized the crimes of the regime because her best friend had lost her father during the Great Purge. On the other hand, she is not able to share collective responsibility for the purges; in fact, the thought of collective responsibility has never occurred to her. This tension between a personal feeling of guilt that could be connected with religious identity and the lack of responsibility for the crimes committed by the regime is not atypical but reflects the memory politics of the Russian Federation.

Orthodox religion and the reflection on the past

Individual memory within the Orthodox Church cannot be understood without an awareness of the Orthodox concept of repentance (pokaianie). Normally, Christians take responsibility for their own sins. Repentance, which is expressed through confession to a priest, is essential in the Orthodox system of salvation; a profound, sincere repentance is compared to a second baptism that can totally wipe out all sins and impurities (St Isaak the Syrian). The influential ecclesiastical writer, Bishop Ignatii Brianchaninov (1807–1867), believed that all mortal sins (including apostasy, blasphemy, murder, adultery) could be repented, with the exception of suicide.

Even though repentance is usually regarded as pertinent for personal salvation, there are historical precedents when repentance is used collectively. The entire ‘nation’ can be called to repent publicly for collective sins. In 1607, the Orthodox church performed a ‘Rite of All-Nation Repentance’ for the massive apostasy during the ‘Time of Troubles,’ when the Polish and Swedish armies invaded Muscovy. In the 1920s and 1930s, some bishops demanded collective repentance from the group of the clergy who collaborated with the Bolshevik regime and modernized the church rituals (the so-called rennovationists). Bishop Ioann (Shakhovskoi) of San Francisco has also demanded ‘all-nation repentance’ from the Russian people for the sins of communism. In present-day Russia, some marginal groups within the church perform ‘the Rite of All-Nation Repentance’ that promotes collective repentance in the sin of Tsar-murder (the execution by the Bolsheviks of the Tsar Nicholas II and his family in 1918), a practice much criticized within the church (Kormina and Shtyrkov 2011). Artists have also creatively used the concept of repentance; for example, the Georgian filmmaker Tengiz Abuladze in his 1984 award-winning film Repentance (Pokaianie) that deals with the theme of Stalinist terror. In this film, the disinterment of the body of the dictator
Varlam symbolizes the Christian and political themes of repentance, justice, and retribution.

However, the prevailing image of the Orthodox Church today is that of a Church Martyr that suffered collectively under the yoke of communism. Ordinary people, therefore, have no responsibility for the crimes of Stalinism and the communist regime in general. The poet Bella Ahmadulina performed an eccentric act of repentance in front of the Estonian bohemian public in the 1980s. In a café in Tallinn, after her poetry reading, she made a deep bow in front of Estonian artists and poets asking personal forgiveness for the Soviet occupation (Skul’skaia 2003). It would be difficult to imagine ordinary people performing such acts of public exposure. The majority of the people I interviewed had low-level, nondecision-making positions. They had not been confronted with the question of responsibility. The interviewees, with some exceptions, were quite open about discussing their personal lives, perhaps, using the interview as a form of a ‘secondary’ confession that dealt with an issue they no longer felt to be a burden on their conscience.

**Conclusion**

The studies on the Russian diaspora in the Baltic republics are characterized by the excessive emphasis on Russian cultural elites before the war, whose collective identity is largely defined as secular. These studies fail to include the life stories of believers and encompass the Soviet as well as the interwar periods. Having focused on a small group of Russian Orthodox men and women born before the war, I have found several internal contradictions, discontinuities, and paradoxes that question the value of attempts to provide a coherent and unified memory identity on the basis of one religion or one ethnicity.

The autobiographical memoirs of the Russian minority in Estonia challenge and complement the existing mnemonic communities and institutional memory in several aspects. In contrast to the dominant narrative of the Second World War, typically viewed as a messianic and heroic event, the autobiographical memories of the interviewed subjects convey the messiness of the war and the arbitrary sense of injustice of postwar retribution, fear, and grief. The Soviet era lacks a clear-cut unified characterization. Stalinist repression and the Second World War stand apart from the Soviet period as a whole, as outstanding, nontypical events when martyrs and heroes were produced. Even though some respondents reflect on the violent and unjust character of the purges and deportations, they, as members of the Russian ethnic minority, do not assume any personal responsibility for the crimes of the regime. The gaps and inconsistencies concerning the memory of Stalinism in the individual life stories could be a result of the incomplete process of commemoration of the victims on the part of the Russian cultural memory politics (Etkind 2013).

Sovietization had positive and negative aspects. Socialism was a time of opportunity for professional careers and, paradoxically, either despite the ideological campaigns or because of them, the Orthodox believers had a sense of strong interpersonal links, a spirit of mutual support and authenticity. In contrast to the memories of the same generation of Estonians, the Russian memories tend to use the narratives themes of ‘rupture’ and ‘suffering’ less (Kõresaar 2004).

Religion constitutes an important part of cultural memory. The memories of the Russian ethnic minority rely implicitly or explicitly on the Orthodox understanding of repentance and forgiveness. The tacit character of these underpinnings presents problems for the researcher but it cannot be dismissed as nonexistent. These findings
suggest that a more substantive contribution from theology and ethics than has been done hitherto is required for the development of interdisciplinary memory studies.

Notes

1. These calculations do not take into account the number of ethnic Estonian Orthodox (18,517 in 2000 and 20,585 in 2011).
2. The respective attempts to collect Russian-language life stories via public appeals were made by the Estonian Cultural History Archives in 1989 and in 2006–2007.
3. Metropolitan Kornilii of the Estonian Orthodox Church of Moscow patriarchate.
4. Olga Chavchavadze, born in 1934 in Paris, had returned to the USSR in 1947 following the call of Bishop Nikolai (Jarushevich), who convinced many émigrés that there was no persecution of religion in the USSR. As soon as they moved to Russia, Olga’s stepfather was arrested and disappeared. She and her mother, like many other returnees, were deported to Central Asia. Only in 1956 was Olga able to leave the settlement. She eventually moved to Estonia in 1963 where she worked as a church cantor until the early 2000s. Today, she is a nun in France.
5. According to the Orthodox canon law, if a priest does not marry before ordination, he should remain celibate.
6. It was suggested that Osipov repented before his death, but those who knew him doubt that this was true.
7. Bishops had to present a copy of their sermons to the commissioners whilst ordinary priests did not have to.

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References


**Interviews**

Anastasia (b. 1924) born in Izhevsk, came to Estonia in 1945. Worked as a doctor in the POW camps, in the security forces; after retiring from the forces worked in the prison service. August 6, 2011.

Anna (1922-2011), was born to a family of Russian émigrés, graduated from the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Tartu, worked in the central clinic in Tallinn, took monastic vows some years before her death. Interview December 17, 2008.

Boris (b. 1924), born in Tallinn, arrested in 1945, served a sentence in an Inta labor camp. Graduated by correspondence from a polytechnic institute, worked as a chief engineer in a mine. In 1986 returned to Estonia. Interviews March, 10, 2009; April 6, 2010. During the interview on April 6, 2010 Vladimir (b.1930-2013) was also present.

Natal’ia (b. 1930), a daughter of a choirmaster in the monastery in Petsery. Graduated from a music college in Leningrad, worked in Dnepropetrovsk before marriage to a priest. Worked as a choir mistress in Estonian churches. Interview September 1, 2006.

Svetlana (b. 1930), was born in Tallinn, graduated Leningrad Pedagogical Institute, worked as a schoolteacher of physics. Interview March, 10, 2010.


Vladimir (b. 1930-2013), born in St Petersburg, lived in Estonia with his émigré-parents, worked as a driver, was married to a priest’s daughter; during his spare time repaired broken gravestones in the old cemetery. Interview March 10, 2009.