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The republic of historians: historians as nation-builders in Estonia (late 1980s–early 1990s)

Marek Tamm

School of Humanities, Tallinn University, Tallinn, Estonia

ABSTRACT

The restoration of the Estonian Republic in late 1980s and early 1990s can be described as the construction of the Republic of Historians. A great many founders and leaders of the newly independent republic had received their education from the Department of History at the University of Tartu, and first gained their public renown as leaders of the national heritage movement and publicists on historical issues. The whole of the period, often called the ‘new era of awakening’, was characterized by an ideology of restoration, worked out by politically minded historians and historically minded political dissidents. In essence, all the political steps taken were motivated by a desire to return to pre-war laws, traditions, and institutions – to rehabilitate and restitute everything that had been destroyed or condemned to oblivion in the Soviet period. The major role of historical arguments and restoration ideology in the Estonian independence movement was not without several important sociopolitical consequences, especially in the realm of citizenship and property policy, which departed from a strict idea of legal continuity.

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Introduction

On 20 August 1991, as the Estonian Parliament declared that after a half century of Soviet annexation Estonia no longer formed part of the Soviet Union and was once again an independent state, an interesting fact began to emerge – namely, that the leadership of the restored republic consisted, for the most part, of historians. The then prime minister, one of the figureheads of the Estonian independence movement Edgar Savisaar (b. 1950), had studied history at the University of Tartu. The same was true of the opposition leaders – right-wing...
party leaders Mart Laar (b. in 1960), soon to become the next prime minister, and Tunne Kelam (b. in 1936), vice speaker of the next parliament. The foreign minister, a year later the first President Elect of the restored Republic, Lennart Meri (1929–2006), had likewise graduated from the University of Tartu with a degree in history. Numerous other historians are to be found both in the government formed by Mart Laar in 1992 (including the expatriate Estonian professor of history at Kiel University, Hain Rebas, as minister of defence, and Chairman of the Estonian National Heritage Society, Trivumi Velliste, as minister of foreign affairs,1) and in the next parliament (Küullo Arjakas, Rein Helme, Mart Nutt, Lauri Vahtre, and others). Transitional Estonia thus offers a superb example of the importance of ‘engaged historians’ in public life, and the Estonian ‘Republic of Historians’, as one might call it (Tamm 2008, 505), deserves a closer look in the present special issue. I will focus primarily on the question, why did the restoration of the Republic of Estonia take the form of a Republic of Historians, or, put differently, how can the major role assumed by historians in restoring independence and leading the state be explained? In order to answer this question we must, however, also examine the importance of historical arguments and role models in the Estonian politics of the late 1980s and the first half of 1990s.2

‘A new era of awakening’: heritage protection and nation building

The fountains of the Estonian independence movement spring from two currents that gradually assumed an increasingly articulate shape in the 1980s: the protection of the environment and the protection of national heritage. These two popular movements, initially lacking any clear political ambitions but encouraged by the perestroika, prepared the ground for an extensive mobilisation of Estonian society. Although the importance of environmental protection for the awakening nation’s political awareness must not be underestimated, particularly with respect to the so-called Phosphorite War that broke out in 1987 to 1988 and involved public resistance to the Soviet Union’s central authorities’ plan of opening phosphorite mines in north-east Estonia (see Kaski 1997; Auer 1998; Aare 1999; Liikanen 2001, for a wider perspective, see Galbreath 2010), it must be admitted that the impact of the national heritage movement was longer lived and more significant. The national heritage movement was the first true mass movement in Soviet Estonia, supplying the framework for formulating a political programme for the restoration of independence and providing the foremost political platform for the historians willing to contribute to the restoration of independence and to leading the country.

The roots of the Estonian national heritage movement go back to the second half of the 1970s, when several informal societies aimed at systematising and popularising the Estonian national heritage sprang up in Tallinn and in the university town Tartu (Tamm, J. 2012). Although these societies may seem
apolitical at first glance, their activities relating to the systematisation of national heritage – emphasising as they did the value of national history and cultural milieu – clearly had political significance in a totalitarian society. As the political conditions eased up in 1986, the movement became better articulated, and formal policies were adopted for creating a common organisation – The Estonian Heritage Society. The first joint meeting of 12 heritage clubs, with their total of a few hundred members, was held on 18 October 1986. Less than a year later, the number of clubs had risen to 31 and that of members approached one thousand; and by the end of 1988, there were 185 clubs with about 6000 members (Laar 1998, 397).

The Estonian Heritage Society was officially founded on 12 December 1987, when the statute of the Society was adopted and a chairman, board and council were elected. There are good grounds for regarding the Society as the first nationwide democratic mass organisation in Estonia during the Soviet period. The Society’s main objective is formulated in point six of the new statute: ‘The Estonian National Heritage Society seeks to maintain the continuity of culture, to preserve and reinforce the nation’s historical memory, and maintain a living environment humane and amenable to a culture that agrees with the historically evolved values of the people.’ (‘Eesti Muinsuskaitse Seltsi põhkiri’, 1988). While the wording in the statute is understandably restrained, the speeches made at the inaugural meeting were far more vigorous. Sulev Vahtre, professor of Estonian history at the University of Tartu and former teacher of many of the future politicians, declared from the podium: ‘For more than forty years, Estonian history has not been taught in Estonian schools, or it has been taught very little, very deficiently.’ He added: ‘We ought to try and find practical ways for diminishing the damage done over decades. What we need is to offer a full account of Estonian history as a whole. (…) The final objective is to become true masters of our past.’ (Kask and Tiivel 1988, 281). The final objective, as formulated by Vahtre, epitomised well the main pathos of the national heritage movement: to restore the Estonians’ control over ‘their past’ or, as phrased by Mart Laar, the future prime minister, ‘to restore to the people their expropriated history’ (Laar 1988b, 11).

Yet, at that same inaugural meeting, even more radical speeches were made, with the more audacious among them expanding the concept of ‘heritage’ to the nation as a whole. Thus one of the delegates, Helmut Elstrok, insisted that ‘the number one heritage must be the land and people of Estonia, together with everything created by the people’ (Kask and Tiivel 1988, 280). If the memoirs of Mart Laar, written almost thirty years later, are to be believed, the leader of the heritage movement, Trivimi Velliste, declared that the main objective of the Society was the restoration of the Republic of Estonia as ‘the greatest heritage’ already in October 1986, at the first meeting of the heritage clubs (Laar 2015, 18). In a similar vein, Sulev Vahtre also identified Estonia as ‘the
greatest historical and cultural monument to be protected by the national heritage movement’ in his speech at the national heritage days’ meeting held in Tartu on 14 April 1988 (Laar et al. 1996b, 424). These declarations vividly demonstrate how the heritage movement rapidly became politicised and began to set up the objective of independent statehood.

In February 1988, the newly founded Estonian Heritage Society published its first call for collecting historical traditions entitled ‘Is It a New Era of Awakening?’ This phrase, ‘a new era of awakening’, quickly became the most popular name for the period as a whole and is repeated in the recent general academic overview of Estonian history (Vahtre 2005, 376–379). The ‘Era of Awakening’ is a historical term referring to the process that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century, which gave rise to the evolution of Estonian national self-consciousness and the gradual emergence of a national intelligentsia (see Raun 2003; Jansen 2004). The call by the Heritage Society opens with a quotation from one of the leaders of the nineteenth-century national awakening, Jakob Hurt (1839–1907), and observes that Hurt’s words about the great changes of the mid-nineteenth century are still relevant today; that, once again, an ‘awakening mentality’ is discernible. The anonymous authors of the call (there is reason to believe that the leading author was Mart Laar) answer the question posed by the title in the affirmative, ‘because the present age has a familiar air for the historians’. They add: ‘However, the spirit of the Era of Awakening holds obligations for us, too. First and foremost, it obliges us to be worthy of our forebears, to celebrate and honor this age not only with monuments and acclamations, but also to live up to it, spiritually.’ They then go on to point out that the central watchwords of the new era are ‘history’ and ‘memory’: ‘It is the struggle for our history, our memory, that seems to emerge as one of the most resonating ideas of the “new era of awakening”’. (Eesti Muinsuskaitse Selts 1988, 257–258)

It is not in February 1988 that the ‘new era of awakening’ was born as a general name for the period, however; to the best of our evidence, that phrase was first launched by Rein Veidemann, literary critic and editor-in-chief of the cultural magazine Vikerkaar, in his article ‘In the Era of Re-Awakening’, published in the daily paper Edasi on 16 January 1987. Admittedly, Veidemann is still rather restrained in drawing parallels, and uses the phrase in quite a figurative manner:

Of course, in Estonia ‘awakening’ itself is surrounded by a definite tradition (the national awakening of the last century), however, this should not prevent us from terming the present era in the same way, since in a deeper sense its content is one and the same, namely the people’s (and every single individual’s) realization of themselves, their coming to a consciousness that they are masters of their own destiny to the extent that it is really and truly possible to have a say in important matters of societal development. (Veidemann 1987)
Despite this initial restraint, the new name spread like wildfire and can be encountered in numerous contemporary speeches and articles; among others, Mart Laar observes in April 1987: ‘Recently there has been very much talk about the “new era of awakening”. It indeed seems that there is a great surge of interest in the past of our land and people, including in the age of the national movement and the ideals that inspired it.’ (Laar 1987, 553) The ‘new era of awakening’ is thus semantically a very loaded concept: on the one hand, it refers to a strong idea of continuity, to a notion that the struggle that had started in the mid-nineteenth century was being continued at the end of the twentieth; on the other hand, however, it perpetuates the old romantic notion of an eternal, although perhaps dormant nation, just waiting to awaken from its slumber.

One of the more popular initiatives of the Heritage Society, the collecting of oral histories bears testimony to a quite conscious emulation of the nineteenth-century age of awakening. In early 1988, the council of the Society convened and decided to initiate, from February 22 on, a nationwide campaign to collect ‘historical memories’. The date was not chosen casually: exactly 100 years earlier, Jakob Hurt had published an appeal inviting all Estonians to record oral traditions and send their records to him. Hurt’s appeal proved very popular, it launched the first nationwide collecting campaign and yielded almost 115,000 pages of folklore of all genres (Viidalepp 1980; Laar 1995, 144–176). The Heritage Society’s initiative followed the example set by Hurt while linking the recording of historical memories to the pathos of ‘giving history back to the people’:

By writing down one’s own or one’s ancestors’ memories, everyone can participate in giving our history back to our people. Because it is of these individual destinies that the great mosaic – the history of Estonia – is made up of. And even if we sometimes, perhaps, dislike that history, it is still our own, and by remaining ignorant of it we ourselves cleave asunder the roots that attach us to our native soil. (Laar 2012, 252)

A few months later, one of the main initiators of the undertaking, Mart Laar, commented on the aims of the initiative: ‘The aim is to obtain truthful facts about the history of Estonia, to preserve memories of the past for future generations, to safeguard and protect our historical memory.’ (Laar 1988a, 76) The collecting campaign proved a success, with thousands of people contributing, and according to the organisers it yielded within a few years more than 100,000 pages of all sorts of historical materials, now held in the archives of the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu (Laar 2012, 255).

‘The return of the repressed’: national trauma work

While the heritage movement at first aimed primarily at preserving material patrimony, the second half of the 1980s saw an increasing tendency towards recording traumatic experiences of recent history. The ‘Questionnaire of
Historical Tradition’, drawn up by the Heritage Society in 1989 and intended as an aid in the campaign for collecting oral histories pays great attention to everything that had occurred during and after World War II (Ajaloopärimuse küsimustik 1989, 4–6). At the same time, more and more memories and analyses of the traumatic aspects of the past were featured in the press: repressions, deportations, guerilla warfare, the tragic fate of the political elite, and so on (see Anepaio 2002).

A few years earlier, traumatic, and formerly taboo, historical themes had begun to surface in fiction – including plays performed very successfully on numerous stages. I have previously described the intense contemplation of past sufferings that is characteristic to those years as ‘the return of the repressed’ (Tamm 2013, 653) because that was then all the experiences and traumas repressed by half a century of Soviet power, all of a sudden, came to the surface.

In November 1988, as Mart Laar drew up the first interim review of the Heritage Society’s campaign for collecting historical memories, he entitled the resulting article ‘The Time of Horrors’, focusing on the repressions of the 1940s. The tone of the piece is set by the opening sentences:

Many phenomena and periods (the War of Independence, the huge significance of the Republic of Estonia to our nation’s survival, etc.) are beginning to find their appropriate place in our nation’s historical consciousness. Yet this largely remains information acquired, as it were, on the emotional level; frequently people are unable to give these facts any specific content or meaning. And what is worst: it seems to me that we are still unable of realising the extent and horror of the sufferings that have befallen our people. We must finally come to grips with the fact that there is practically no family in Estonia that has not had to see some of its members deported to Siberia, killed, repressed, or flee into exile. (Laar 1988a, 76)

Laar’s article attracted an unexpected amount of attention and even lent a hint of martyr’s glory to his activities because, a few months later, the prosecutor’s office of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) decided to open a criminal case against him, accusing him of presenting and publicly disseminating historical falsehoods. The decision was met with sharp criticism, with both historians and jurists vocally opposing it (e.g. Lindmäe and Sootak 1989). According to Laar, the decision was motivated by the hope that he would choose to remain in exile (the proceedings were announced while he was abroad); instead, he decided to return home and present evidence to support his claims (Laar 2012, 254). A year later, after rapid changes in the political situation, the prosecutor’s office quietly dropped the allegations.

The outpouring of memories, analyses, and artistic expressions of the repressions culminated in March 1989, on the 40th anniversary of the great deportation of Estonians to Siberia in 1949. That tragic anniversary was commemorated with various mass ceremonies, extensive media coverage, and the rehabilitative joint ‘Address to the Inhabitants of Estonia’ by the then institutions of power (‘Pöördumine …’ 1989). On March 25 of the same year, the Memento Union, an organisation uniting and representing the victims of repression, was founded.
and tasked itself with protecting the legal and social interests of the repressed, as well as recording and perpetuating their memory. Some months earlier, on 7 December 1988, the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian SSR had passed a law ‘On the Extrajudicial Mass Repressions in Soviet Estonia During the 1940s and 1950s’, which declared, among other things, that ‘the extra-judicial mass repressions carried out in Soviet Estonia in the 1940s and 1950s must be completely and unconditionally condemned and denounced as unlawful acts and crimes against humanity’ (Tamm 2013, 653). To put it briefly, in the Estonia of the late 1980s, history became both a stock of positive models and an object of trauma work; the past at once inspired and frightened, but left no-one indifferent.

The restoration of Estonia’s independence by restoring historical truth

It was not only in the framework of the heritage movement that history became the battleground for political struggles, historical arguments also played a major role in the early stages of the political independence movement in Soviet Estonia. Dissident activities had had relatively little influence and only a limited number of participants; if they gained wider resonance in 1987, it was primarily through interest in historical topics. On 15 August 1987, a small number of former political prisoners founded the first political association in the Soviet Estonia, The Estonian Group on Publication of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (MRP-AEG). The main aim of the group was to make public the contents, and effect on the Baltics, of that shady agreement that Hitler and Stalin made in 1939. The first public event of the MRP-AEG was held in Tallinn on the anniversary of the pact, 23 August 1987. Even though authorities pressured a move away from the main square of the Old Town into a neighbouring park, the meeting drew unexpectedly large crowds and is considered to have been the opening signal of the Estonian independence movement (Niitsoo 1997, 157; Niitsoo 2002, 10–16; Tannberg 2007; Graf 2008, 216–224). The meeting was opened by a lengthy speech by the main organiser, Tiit Madisson, which constituted primarily a history lecture on the pact between Hitler and Stalin and on Stalinist repressions in Estonia. The speech ended with a call for publicising ‘the true history’:

We must honestly make public the history of our nation. In the process, many things will have to be reassessed. All the crimes against humanity must be decisively condemned. The Stalinist executioners, many of whom are currently drawing personal pensions, must be taken to justice. Only then can we be sure that all this will not play itself out, once again. (Pärnaste and Niitsoo, 1998, 13)

Energised by the unexpected success of this meeting, the MRP-AEG decided to target another important historical date, namely February 2 (1920), when Soviet Russia and Estonia signed a peace treaty by which Russia officially recognised Estonia’s independence. The public meeting, held in Tartu on 2 February 1988, took place under the control of the security forces and under otherwise
complicated circumstances (several organisers were arrested before the event and the crowds that turned up for the meeting were scattered with the help of militia units and dogs); nevertheless, it had broad resonance and communicated a new actuality to the Tartu Peace Treaty (Pärnaste and Niitsoo, 1998, 232–262; Niitsoo 2002, 25–31). Following up on this success, the next anniversary targeted was the 70th jubilee of the Republic of Estonia, on February 24 – one of the greatest historical taboos under the Soviet regime. The ruling regime went to great lengths in order to prevent the activities of MRP-AEG ahead of that anniversary, both by isolating the organisers and through a vigorous media campaign. In the media, the chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian SSR, Arnold Rüütel – later the president of Estonia – weighed in, recognising the people’s growing appetite for history in the first part of his speech, while warning against the abuse of that interest in the second:

It is quite another matter when interest in history is used in a way that can only be described as an incentive for exacerbating topical problems, so as to oppose our society’s course towards renewal; as nothing but an irresponsible attitude towards the issues related to our own, as well as all other Soviet nations’ future and destiny. (‘Eesti NSV Ülemnõukogu … ’, 405–406)

Nevertheless, on 24 February 1988, the MRP-AEG succeeded in bringing an estimated 20,000–30,000 people into the streets of Tallinn, who moved around the town in a procession, listening to spontaneous speeches here and there (Niitsoo 2002, 31–38). The MRP-AEG continued its actions aimed at actualising various historical events in the days to come, commemorating, for instance, the anniversary of the 1949 great deportation of Estonians to Siberia on 25 March 1988.

The activities of the MRP-AEG were not, however, very long-lived – the group soon merged into a new political party that was being created. That party, initiated mainly by former dissidents and political prisoners and called The Estonian National Independence Party, was officially established in August 1988, although preparations for it had begun already at the beginning of the year. It was the first non-communist party in Soviet Estonia. Although the party at first lacked a programme, this was substituted for by a declaration adopted at the inaugural meeting, which formulated the final aim of the party as ‘the restoration of Estonian nation-state independence and sovereignty’ (Pärnaste 1988). It is worth noting, however, that this important document also envisaged the restoration of Estonian statehood through a restoration of historical justice, as the opening chapter of the declaration emphasises the importance for Estonia of ‘a restoration of historical truth’ (see Pettai 2004, 60–61). In an interview given a few months later Tunne Kelam, a leading author of the declaration and one of the new party’s leaders, stressed how the political changes of recent times had materialised thanks to a new understanding of history:

In the events of the last two years a very important role has been played by the making public of Estonian history. I believe that this has changed in people’s
(especially young people’s) consciousness their understanding of our actual situation. We became conscious of the 1940 occupation, of the fact that the official hierarchy is illegal, that in 1940 a special kind of coup d’état took place in Estonia (...). (Kelam 1989, 646)

Historians in power: the triumph of restorationism

By the end of the 1980s, Estonian society was clearly on its way to regain independence, with the growing conviction that the aim was not to create a new independent state but to restore the old pre-war Republic of Estonia, based on the idea of legal continuity. In other words, the predominant ideology tended to be one of legal restorationism, worked out by politically minded historians and historically minded political dissidents. In essence, all the political steps taken over the next few years were motivated by a desire to return to pre-war laws, traditions, and institutions, to rehabilitate and restitute everything that had been destroyed or condemned to oblivion during the Soviet period (see Lagerspetz 1999; Aleksahhina 2006; Pettai 2004, 2007, 2010). The restorationist ideology took on very specific and diverse forms. One of the earliest examples was the restoration of the War of Independence memorials, in the course of which more than 100 monuments were reconstructed or built up anew (Strauss 2002, 307–308; Tamm, J. 2012, 57–59). In parallel, most of the pre-war names of places, streets and institutions as well as the pre-war calendar of holidays were reinstated at the end of the 1980s. The reburial of several politicians of pre-war Estonia into their native soil drew great public attention, most significant of these surely being the search for the grave of the first President of the Republic, Konstantin Päts (1874–1956), in the village of Burashevo near Moscow in 1988–1989, and the bringing of his remains back to Estonia in October 1990 (Lõugas 1991). The spirit of restoration was also expressed in the historiography of the transitional period, both in history teaching (Ahonen 2001) and in academic studies (Kivimäe 1999; Kivimäe and Kivimäe 2002), but most clearly perhaps in the short popular overview of Estonian history, entitled “The Story of Home” (Kodu lugu), written by Mart Laar, Lauri Vahtre and Heiki Valk and published in two slim volumes in 1989 (see Kaljundi 2009). The book happily captures the historical credo of the time: ‘By clinging to their past, the Estonians in fact constructed for themselves a path into the future.’ (Laar et al. 1989, 66) Even a quarter of a century later, Mart Laar still recalls the struggles of the late 1980s in the same register: ‘The past had again become real and was creating the future.’ (Laar 2015, 20) Meike Wulf and Pertti Grönholm succinctly summarise the attitude of the Estonian historians of that period: ‘they turned to the past to find guidance for the present and the future’ (Wulf and Grönholm 2010, 372).

However, restoration ideology was not the only political choice on offer at the end of the 1980s, since a new political association, the Popular Front established on Edgar Savisaar’s initiative in October 1988 and quickly evolving into a great
mass organisation, preferred the political strategy of creating an independent state on the basis of the Estonian SSR (Eestimaa Rahvarinne 1989, 16). Trivimi Velliste, head of the National Heritage Society, has very clearly formulated the dilemma faced at that time: ‘By the beginning of 1989 the idea of independence was widespread in Estonia. (...) But now the entire question became: independence, yes, but of what kind, on what basis, to what degree?’ (Laar et al. 1996a, 325) Although the leader of the Popular Front, Edgar Savisaar, was also a historian by education, historical arguments had no great role to play in the rhetorics of this movement, created in support of perestroika and dedicated to first obtaining economic independence and then gradually founding a new independent state, with citizenship based not only on continuity with that of the pre-war Republic of Estonia, but on residence in the territory of Estonia (see Veskimäe 2008). Regardless of the great support for the Popular Front, the restorationist ideas of the opposite camp finally came out on top.

The interesting thing to note about this debate – a debate that, unfortunately, is too complex to be discussed in full here – is the way in which historical models were employed to legitimate differences over current political issues. Thus, for example, Mart Laar, who, as a historian, paid particular attention to how and why the Estonian national movement split up, frequently likened the twentieth-century standoff between the Heritage Society and the Popular Front to the nineteenth-century conflict between the nationally minded and uncompromising followers of Jakob Hurt and those of Carl Robert Jakobson (1841–1882), who appealed to the support of the Russian Tsar and represented what could be called Realpolitik (Laar 1989, 943). ‘Probably the dilemma of Jakobson and (...) Hurt (...) has worked its way into the present, too,’ he observes in 1988 (Laar 1988c, 678).

On 24 February 1989, the Estonian National Independence Party and the Estonian Heritage Society launched an appeal for creating committees of the citizens of the Republic of Estonia, with the aim of registering legitimate Estonian citizens and convoking an Estonian Congress to represent their will and restore the Republic of Estonia on the basis of legal continuity (Pärnaste 2000). The process of politically implementing restorationist ideology was thus officially launched. From this modest start, the formation of committees and registration of citizens surged massively during the spring, and by mid-July 1989 71 citizens’ committees had been founded and almost 150,000 Estonian citizens and applicants for citizenship had been registered; three months later, the latter number had risen to 314,521. In only a few months the restorationist ideology had been introduced so successfully that the masses embraced it; to the extent that, when the elections for the Estonian Congress were held in February 1990, more than 520,000 registered citizens, or the majority of Estonians, went to the ballot boxes (Vahtre 2005, 385). Although the Estonian Congress was acting in a legal vacuum, since according to the constitution, the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian SSR (whose new composition had been elected in March 1990) was
still the only legitimate parliament, subsequent events confirmed that ideologically, the doctrine of legal continuity advocated by the Congress had prevailed over the conception of creating a new state preferred by the Popular Front and the Supreme Soviet. The beginning of a coup in Moscow on 19 August 1991, created a singular historical opportunity for Estonia to regain national independence. The Estonian Congress managed to persuade the Supreme Soviet to declare independence based on legal continuity, and thus, on 20 August 1991, the Supreme Soviet declared Estonia’s independence restored de facto. Historical thinking had prevailed over pragmatic thinking. When the new parliament convened a few months later and the president was elected, it became clear that all the key offices of the restored state, beginning with prime minister Mart Laar and president Lennart Meri, were held by historians and former leaders of the Heritage Society.

**Conclusion: a Proustian project and its consequences**

Well-known Estonian novelist Tõnu Õnnepalu has asserted aptly that:

> In the year 1991, we decisively set out on a road leading into the past; from then on, everything happened under the label of restoration, of restitution. Parishes, schools, monuments, street names, property, money. The new was only allowed to be the old regained; the Republic of Estonia became a truly Proustian project: a journey into time regained. (Õnnepalu 2011)

The struggle for the ‘restoration of true history’ was integral to the Estonian struggle for independence; at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, history spoke not only about the past, but ‘became an argument in regaining national independence’ (Kõresaar 2005, 20). Recalling recently the activities of the Estonian Heritage Society, Mart Laar considered them very successful because ‘not only had national memory and the bond between various periods been restored, not only had the Estonian people regained its history, it had also regained its statehood’ (Laar 2012, 255). It must be admitted that never before had history and historians played so material a role in shaping Estonia’s political destiny.

The Estonian independence movement as a whole proceeded very much under the guidance of historians, a great deal of the political activism was carried by a desire to reinterpret Estonian history. In the spirit of the times, historian Ea Jansen wrote as early as February 1988 that:

> At present, a shortage of history, indeed a hunger for history is emerging in the Estonian, and all Soviet, public sphere, related not just to immediate political projections, the so-called blank spots in treatments of recent past. A general deep (re) interpretation of historical processes has become acutely topical, in order to find an answer to the question: who are we, where have we come from? (Jansen 1988)

A popular figure of speech during that period was, as Jansen points out, one of ‘filling in the blank spots’ of history – something that was seen as the main
task of historians. Strictly speaking, however, history during the transitional period was decidedly not about simply introducing previously unknown or forbidden historical episodes and personalities to the general public, but also about shaping a new politics of history and memory. As sociologist Mikko Lagerspetz has rightly pointed out:

The new historical awareness of the late 1980s did not merely bring forth a filling up of the blank spots, the revelation of historical facts hitherto unknown by the public at large. What took place was not only a reconstruction of the historical memory: it was also a process of construction. Not only were new facts presented to the public, but also what was previously known came to be interpreted in a new way. (Lagerspetz 1995, 279)

History became the influential ‘science of legitimation’ (Schöttler 1997) in transitional Estonia, helping to gain, justify and preserve power in a new social situation. Needless to say, the major role of historical arguments and of restorationist ideology in the Estonian independence movement was not without several important sociopolitical consequences that have continued to shape Estonian society up to the present day (see Pettai 2007). To name only a few of the most important realms that were affected: the restoration doctrine shaped Estonia’s very strict citizenship policy, automatically depriving nearly a third of the society – the immigrants of the Soviet period and their descendants – of citizenship. The restoration doctrine is also behind Estonia’s property policy, which departed from a strict idea of legal succession and dictated that Soviet-nationalised property be returned to its former owners. This decision basically annulled half a century of property use and forced many people to move out of their homes in return for compensation. In ‘the Republic of Historians’, the principle of historical justice overruled that of social justice. The historians’ influence began to wane in Estonia only after 1994, when Mart Laar’s government fell and the prospect of joining the European Union and NATO shifted attention from the past to questions of the future.

Of course Estonia was not the only country that began, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, to construct its new identity with historians at the steering wheel and taking its cue from historical continuity. As Stefan Berger has rightly stated, while mapping the return of national histories in post-Cold-War Europe: ‘For the new states in post-Communist Eastern Europe, it was important to construct continuities which demonstrated the historicity of their nation states. History everywhere became intensely politicised.’ (Berger and Conrad 2015, 329; see also Berger 2015; Kopeček 2008) Thus, we find many historians at the core of the Solidarność movement in Poland, many of whom later became renowned politicians (see Górny 2007). Historians and historical arguments similarly played an important role in post-Communist Hungary where ‘centre right-wing governments have persistently promoted nationalist history, whenever they have been in power since the 1990s’ (Berger and Conrad 2015, 327; see also Ivanišević et al. 2002; Trencsényi and Apor 2007). Nor should
we underestimate the importance of dissident historians in the independence movement of Czechoslovakia, where the politics of human rights were smoothly entwined into the construction of a new canon of national history (Kopeček 2012, 2013).

Looking at Estonia’s closer neighbours, Latvia and Lithuania, it can be said that ‘setting straight’ historical injustice and filling in ‘the blank spots’ of the past formed an inseparable part of the process of regaining independence. Similarly to Estonia, but unlike Lithuania, Latvia also engaged very strongly in restoration politics and re-established the state following the principles of legal continuity (see Onken 2003; Budryte 2005; Pettai and Pettai 2015). Yet in none of the above-mentioned states did historians gain similar positions to those they held in Estonia, nor did historical examples and arguments acquire such great political weight. Estonia’s peculiar position as a ‘Republic of Historians’ will certainly be worth a more thoroughgoing comparative analysis in the future.

Notes

1. Velliste in fact had graduated from the university as English philologist, but gained his public renown and political capital in the 1980s as the leader of the national heritage movement and a publicist on historical issues.

2. In recent years, Estonian history and memory politics have attracted the attention of several scholars but research has mainly centred on the developments of the 2000s (e.g. Onken 2007; Brüggemann and Kasekamp 2008, 2009; Wulf 2010; Smith 2011; Tamm 2013; Selg and Ruutsoo 2014) and the transition period of the 1980s to 1990s has largely lain fallow; among the few attempts made are Lagerspetz 1995; Ruutsoo 1995; Hackmann 2003.

3. Sulev Vahtre (1926–2007) offers a perfect example of an academically committed historian and long-time university professor, who did not think it too much to contribute actively to the restoration of the Republic of Estonia and thereby to the building of the new Republic of Historians. In an interview from 1996, he recalled how his social engagement began, considering the speech made at the Tartu Heritage Days of 1988 to be the starting point: ‘But as to the delivery, I considered myself quite successful. From then on, I had more and more invitations to speak: the openings of all those War of Independence memorials, and very often just invitations to speak about Estonian history. It was a kind of popular university, sometimes I even had to speak just in the street, every now and then somebody would ask, hey, historian, tell me how this or that actually happened? So I felt like a travelling preacher that year. It was rather strenuous, but also very uplifting! It was a very fine time!’ (Laar et al. 1996b, 316).

4. Aadu Must (2010, 81) has made a very similar point: ‘Historians played a disproportionately significant role among the leaders of the movement to re-establish independence, and in parliament.’ It is true that historians also played an important role in the foundation of the Republic of Estonia at the beginning of the twentieth century, yet this is not comparable to their importance in the restoration of the republic. It is worth noting that in 1994, Sulev Vahtre dedicated a whole article to the political role of historians over the ‘critical years’ of Estonian history, 1918/1919 and 1987/1989 (Vahtre 1994). More recently, Jörg Hackmann has also analysed historians’ political activity in Estonian history,
focusing on the roles of Hans Kruus (1891–1976) and Mart Laar (Hackmann 2005; see also Hackmann 2010).

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Notes on contributor

Marek Tamm is Professor of Cultural History and Senior Researcher in Medieval Studies at the School of Humanities in Tallinn University, Estonia. His primary research fields are cultural history of medieval Europe, theory and history of historiography, and cultural memory studies. He has recently published a companion to the Chronicle of Henry of Livonia, Crusading and Chronicle Writing on the Medieval Baltic Frontier (2011, co-edited with L. Kaljundi and C. S. Jensen) and an edited volume, Afterlife of Events: Perspectives on Mnemohistory (2015), as well as numerous articles in various anthologies and journals.

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