CONTESTED HISTORIES

BRONZE SOLDIER

Tallinn, Estonia

59.42168, 24.7654

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Executive Summary

In late April 2007, a series of violent street protests involving arson and looting erupted over plans to relocate a bronze statue of a Red Army soldier from a park in central Tallinn to military cemetery on the outskirts of the city. Known as the Bronze Nights, these protests exposed underlying tensions between Estonia's ethnic Russian and Estonian communities, with consequences for diplomatic and trade relations between Tallinn and Moscow. This case study will highlight the lasting consequences of instrumentalizing historic legacies for short-term political gain, and will review alternative responses that can help anticipate and avert unnecessary social and political tensions.

Introduction

In 2004, a decade and a half after Estonia regained independence from the former Soviet Union, the presence of a Soviet-era war memorial situated in the centre of the capital city, Tallinn, was called into question. The 'Bronze Soldier of Tallinn,' which stood on a burial site for Red Army war dead, provided a gathering place for ethnic Russians living in Estonia to commemorate the 20,000,000 Soviet soldiers and civilians who died in the 'Great Patriotic War.' However, the collective memory of many ethnic Estonians considered the 'liberation' of Estonia by the Red Army forces an act of oppressive and occupation. In the first years of independence, Estonia was considered a 'transition miracle' not only for its economic recovery and transition to democratic practices, but also for its ability to accommodate its large ethnic Russian population and avoid the type of violence that scarred several other transitioning countries within the former Soviet sphere of influence.

However, in the run-up to a general election, the incumbent party ran on the policy of relocating the statue and the exhumation of the war dead, exacerbating tensions that had been simmering for some time. This controversy sparked protests which snowballed into nighttime violence, from April 26th to April 29th, 2007, that came to be known as the 'Bronze Nights.' This marked a turning point in ongoing deliberations over the statue's location, as the public demonstrations prompted the rushed decision to relocate the statue in the secrecy of the night. Today, the statue stands in the Defence Forces Cemetery outside the city center of Tallinn. This case study chronicles the process by which the soldiers which stood relatively uncontested for decades was transformed into a focal point of public violence and international dispute.

Background

Soviet Occupation and Estonian Independence

Although Estonia won independence as a republic in 1920 after a two-year war against both German and Soviet armies, the country's independence was short-lived. In 1940, Estonia was annexed by the Soviet Union following the signing of a non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany concluded in 1939, nearly two years before German troops invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941..[1] Germany occupied Estonia until 1944, when the Red Army drove Nazi forces out of the territory. While the National Committee of the Republic of Estonia sought to immediately re-establish independence, proclaiming the creation of the Provisional Government of Estonia, this was ignored by the advancing Soviet forces.

This moment was to become highly controversial in the memories of Estonians, which to this day is recalled in varying different lights.[2] For many ethnic Estonians, this moment came to represent

[1] Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 104.
[2] Siobhan Kattago, "Memory, Pluralism and the Agony of Politics," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 41, no. 3 (2010): 383.

the beginning of a half-century-long oppressive Soviet occupation. However, for many of the country's Russian-speaking communities, approximately a third of Estonia's total population, this day marked liberation from the Nazi's and victory in the 'Great Patriotic War.'

Constructing the Bronze Soldier

In 1945, following the end of World War Two, twelve Red Army Soldiers were buried on a 36-meter high hillock in the Tõnismägi area in central Tallinn. The spot was officially renamed 'Liberator's Square,' and a wooden memorial topped with a star was constructed to mark the burial site. Many Estonians rejected this narrative that portrayed the Soviets as liberators. One year after its construction, the wooden star was dynamited by two Estonian school girls. Jürgenson, one of whom, later confirmed the political motive behind the attack 'How long should we watch this red star, a memorial for Russian looters?' Jürgenson stated in an interview. 'At the time when all our statues are being destroyed [...] We decided that if such robbers are raging in Estonia, they should see how one of their memorials gets blown up. We could have just doused the wooden thing with gasoline and set fire to it, but we wanted it to go with a bang!'[3]

The Soviet government rushed to replace the star with a more permanent statue that could not be destroyed so easily. A competition was held to choose the next monument, and it was an Estonian architect that won. Arnold Alas' design was a soldier, 2 metres tall and made of stone, which was revealed to the public in September 1947. Reception from Russians in the country was overwhelmingly positive, who referred to the unknown soldier as 'Alyosha' affectionate diminutive form of the name Aleksey.[4]

History of the Contestation

1945 - 2004

The Bronze Soldier remained unscathed for the half-century that followed, managing to survive through a series of re-contextualisation by the Estonian government after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. For example, the original plaques were removed that read 'Eternal honour to the fallen heroes who fell for the liberation and independence of our country' and replaced them with more generic plaques commemorating those killed in WWII.[5] There was also a competition held to design a counter monument to sit alongside the Bronze Soldier. However, none of the designs were ever built.[6]

Throughout the second half of the 20th Century, the Bronze Statue of Tallinn remained in

[3]' Rory Maclean, Pravda Ha Ha: True Travels to the End of Europe (Bloomsbury Publishing 2019), 212.

[4] Siobhan Kattago, *Memory and Representation in Contemporary Europe: The Persistence of the Past* (Ashgate 2012): 77. Alyosha commonly refers to a statue of a single soldier in a Red Army uniform. This name comes from the Alyosha Monument in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, based on the model of Aleksey Skurlatov, a soldier of the 3rd Ukrainian Front

[5] Marek Tamm, "Conflicting Communities of Memory: War Monuments and Monument Wars in Contemporary Estonia" in *Nation-Building in the Context of Post-Communist Transformation and Globalization: The Case of Estonia,* ed. Raivo Vetik (Peter Lang 2012): 62.

[6] Martin Ehala, "The Bronze Soldier: Identity Threat and Maintenance in Estonia," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 40, no. 1 (2009): 140.

Liberator's square with little discussion concerning its removal or relocation. However, that is not to imply that the statue was not intensifying friction between Estonians and Russians living in Tallinn. In 1998 the then-Estonian President, Lennart Meri, awarded the Estonian Order of the Cross of the Eagle to the two schoolgirls who dynamited The Bronze Soldier's predecessor at ages 14 and 15. The two girls, Ageeda Paavel and Aili Jürgenson were awarded the Order forty years after having been sent to a forced labour camp in the Soviet Union as punishment for their crime and was one of the subtle ways that the Bronze Statue was to become gradually recontextualised.

While the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 prompted renewed controversy surrounding several Nazi-era monuments, including one in Lihula, the Bronze Statue of Tallinn was instead officially resignified as a reminder of the traumatic experience of Estonia under Soviet occupation.[7] At the turn of the century, recontextualisation took place by landscaping to help lighten the 'ideological weight' of the statue, with the diagonal footpaths replacing the single direct access to the memorial and more trees planted in order to obscure its view. These changes were met with little opposition as they did not impose on the Russian population's ability to use the statue as a gathering site for paying respect in annual commemoration to those fallen in the Great Patriotic War.

2004 - 2007

In 2004, the conservative party, 'Pro Patria Union,' made the first serious bid for the statue's removal.[8] In an attempt to gain support, in 2005, they splattered the Bronze Statue with red paint on the 9th of May, the day traditionally used by Russians to celebrate the end of the war, often referred to as 'Victory Day.' However, the general public of Estonia was not swayed by the appeals of the conservative party, with a poll taken at the time showing that 67 percent of Estonia's population was satisfied with the memorial in its original location, and 29 percent of ethnic Estonians were actively against its relocation.[9]

It was not until 2006 when politicians began to harness the controversy of the statue to mobilise voters ahead of upcoming national elections. Despite its relative lack of controversy, the Bronze Soldier was one of the last memorials remaining from the Soviet Union, in addition to being on display in the heart of Estonia's capital. This made it the perfect target for those willing to incite divisiveness.

On May 9th 2006, one year after the statue was desecrated with red paint, protesters defaced the statue once again, this time with the colours of the Estonian flag. Two Estonian protesters also interrupted the Remembrance Day commemorations by parading a flag with the words 'Estonian people – don't forget: these soldiers occupied our land and deported our people!'[10] To

[7] Alekszandr Guzhov, *Legal Information Centre for Human Rights, 'Bronze Soldier: April Crisis'* (Tallinn: Inimõiguste Teabekeskus, 2008), 10.
[8] Ibid., 15.
[9] BNS, "Eestlased ei Poolda Pronkssõduri Omaalgatuslikku Kõrvaldamist," *Postimees,* May 23, 2006.
[10] Marko Lehti, Matti Jutila and Markku Jokisipilä, "Never-Ending Second World War: Public Performances of National Dignity and the Drama of the Bronze Soldier," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 39, no 4 (2008): 399.

avoid conflict, the protesters were quickly removed. This prompted Prime Minister Andrus Ansip to publicly reassert his position that it cannot be relocated or removed due to the statue's location on a burial site.

The question of the Bronze Soldier's appropriateness began to have a polarising effect on the population of Tallinn, with a clear ideological divide emerging between the Estonian and Russian speaking people of Estonia. To prevent further public disorder, a young group of Russian-speakers formed a Night Watch organisation, which soon morphed into a movement for political activism as tensions increased further. Exacerbating tensions, Estonian media provocatively asked why the Soviet Union flag was allowed to be flown that day on the 9th of May, but the Estonian flag was not. Further provocations included a televised interview with Estonian nationalist Jüri Böhm, who carried the flag on the 9th of May. He said he did it intending to incite controversy to 'awaken' Estonian society.

By the 20th of May that year, it was clear that despite the Bronze Statue's long stint in the capital, its location was too contentious to be continued to be swept under the rug. The crowd of protesters had grown 200 strong and consisted of nationalists and neo-Nazis whose frustrations were at boiling point. The confrontations that resulted from the protests confirmed that a re-evaluation of its appropriateness and harmoniousness with the citizens of Tallinn was required. In the following week, the Prime Minister reversed course and announced that the Bronze Statue would be relocated before Victory Day the following year. This was to become a central promise for the Prime Minister's campaign platform in the forthcoming national election.[11] Furthermore, in an attempt to ensure this put the public disorder to rest, the Minister of the Interior, Kalle Laanet, forbade any protest at the site of the statue.[12] In the week that followed, several protesters were unlawfully detained and brutalised by Estonian police, according to the European Court of Human Rights, which would hear the case in 2013.[13]

Following the announcement of the Bronze Soldier's relocation, 12 academics published an open letter in Estonian magazines warning the government of the potential fallout, both nationally and internationally, if the statue was removed. They argued that a debate was being forced onto the two predominant ethnic communities that would unnecessarily expose their differences and polarise historical narratives.[14]

The Bronze Nights

Despite the professors' plea in the media, Ansip ploughed on with the plans to relocate by covering the statue with a tent to exhume the soldiers' bodies underneath the statue. This caused a great deal of distress to many in the city, and after the election in spring 2007 a crowd

[11] Martin Ehala, "The Bronze Soldier: Identity Threat and Maintenance in Estonia," *Journal of Baltic Studies* 40, no. 1 (2009): 140.
[12] Peeter Selg, "A Political-Semiotic Introduction to the Estonian 'Bronze-Night' Discourse," *Journal of Language and Politics* 12, no. 1 (2013): 81.
[13] David Hart, "The Tallinn Bronze Soldier riots – and why Russia was in Strasbourg," UK Human Rights Blog, April 2013.
[14] Peeter Selg, "A Political-Semiotic Introduction to the Estonian 'Bronze-Night' Discourse," *Journal of Language and Politics* 12, no. 1 (2013): 91.

of 1500 protesters gathered outside the tent to chant 'fascists.'[15]

The protests turned into riots that the police could not contain, and the night became infamous for destruction in Tallinn. Bottles were hurled at police, and vehicles in the streets were overturned. The police attempted to disperse the riots using tear gas and water cannons and made arrests where possible. However, the mass chaos and destruction left 156 injured, including 29 police officers and one 20-year-old citizen of the Russian Federation, Dmitri Ganin, dead. This has come to be known as the 'Bronze Nights'.

To curb the riots in an effort to avoid a national security risk, Ansip banned the sale of alcohol, forbade any kind of public demonstration, and called an emergency cabinet meeting where it was decided that the removal of the statue would be pushed forward to that morning. In a public speech soon afterwards, Ansip said that he felt this rush decision was 'his only choice' in the face of riots.

While the City of Tallinn lost up to $3 million in material damages from the riots of the Bronze Nights, this was inconsequential in comparison to the impact on the Estonian economy caused by Russian aggression in response to the Statue's relocation.[16] Transit of Russian goods to Estonia dropped by 60%, and coal deliveries ceased entirely. In addition to the material sanctions Russia imposed on Estonia, a series of sophisticated cyber attacks were made by Russia.

Decision-Making Processes

While the crowd of over 200 protesters on the May 20, 2006 led to a seemingly snap decision to relocate the Bronze Soldier, the decision was, in fact, short-lived. It was in effect not the President's decision to make. Jurisdiction of the statue's location was instead that of the Tallinn municipality. In order to come through on his election promise to relocate the statue, Ansip needed to pass two bills through parliament: the War Graves Protection Act and the Law on the Removal of a Forbidden Structure. While the former passed, entrusting the Prime Minister with the power to remove the statue, the latter was vetoed by President Toomas Hendrik Ilves who declared that it was against the Estonian Constitution as it was an abuse of power, despite the overwhelming support that the Law on the Removal of a Forbidden Structure had in parliament with all but the Russian-Speaking representatives.[17] Legally, this meant the statue could be relocated but that the erection of future statues of a similar nature could not be prevented. However, the powers granted to the Prime Minister by the War Graves Protection Act were short-lived. In April 2007 the Tallinn City Municipality filed a complaint with the Tallinn Administrative Court in an attempt to halt plans to relocate the Bronze Soldier, stating that it would have 'irreversible consequences at the city, national and international level.' The court dismissed both this claim and the Municipality's appeal.

[15] Der Spiegel, "Soviet Memorial Causes Rift between Estonia and Russia," *Der Spiegel*, April 27, 2007.
[16] *See n12,* 181.
[17] *Sõjahaudade kaitse seadus* (Protection of War Graves Act) (10 January 2007).

On April 26, 2007 a tent was placed over the statue. The intention was initially to exhume the bodies, leaving the statue in place until a later date. This was so that a formal removal ceremony could be held for the statue's recollection, in honour of its 60 years of service in the centre of Tallinn. However, the scale of violence that ensued outside the tent on that night triggered Ansip to call an extraordinary emergency cabinet meeting where the decision was taken to remove the statue that night. In a statement to the press, Ansip attempted to justify this rushed decision stating:

> Something had to be done right away. On the night of April 26th, we had two choices – whether to take control of the situation, together with all the responsibilities relating to the future or to allow the control to be taken by those who had come to the streets for rioting. We assumed the responsibility and decided the course of events.[18]

Summary and Conclusions

The events leading up to the eventual relocation of the Bronze Soldier are perhaps best summarised by Maria Mälksoo, an expert on international security and memory politics, who explains how the conflict originated as memory divisions and then was appropriated by political groups for ideological purposes.[19] However, the magnitude of Russia's response to the affair perhaps indicates that underlying tensions existed long before politicians attempted to harness it for political gain. After the fall of the Soviet Union, it has been argued that Russia never understood the desire of Estonia to have its own statehood and identity, a sentiment that can be dated back to the February Revolution in 1917. That being said, there were other events at the time which could have contributed to Russia's aggression towards Estonia such as its 2007 decision to become members of both the European Union and NATO.

The co-opting of the debate surrounding the Bronze Soldier by Estonian politicians did not *create* ethnic- tensions but rather exposed the divide within a country that many had previously considered to be a 'transitional miracle' in regaining independence. The statue simplified the population's memories of the past century into opposing narratives which underscored the two communities' diverging understanding of the past. Had Ansip involved the two warring factions in dialogue, in addition to taking the advice of Estonia's academic community, perhaps the debate surrounding the statue would not have spiralled into such chaos, though one also needs to consider the wave of Soviet nostalgia coming from the Kremlin and the increasing tensions after Putin became president in 2000. Furthermore, rather than attempting to overturn the legislation and constitution that was in place to protect the balance of powers, the government may have benefitted from putting the stakeholders in positions of power.

[18] Andrus Ansip, "Prime Minister Andrus Ansip's Speech in Riigikogu" (Address to Riigikogu, Tallinn, Estonia, 2 May 2007).
[19] Maria Mälksoo, "Liminality and the Politics of the Transitional," in *Identity and Foreign Policy: Baltic-Russian Relations and European Integration,* ed. Eiki Berg and Piret Ehin (Ashgate 2009): 71.

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Figures

Liilia Moroz. ‘File:Bronze Soldier of Tallinn 2009.jpg.’ Wikimedia Commons, May 9, 2009, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bronze_Soldier_of_Tallinn_2009.jpg. (Cover image)

About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

Contact information

Marie-Louise Jansen
Program Director
+33 66828327
contestedhistories@euroclio.eu
www.contestedhistories.org

EuroClio Secretariat Riouwstraat 139
2585HP The Hague The Netherlands
secretariat@euroclio.eu www.euroclio.eu

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