



Article

# National or Multicultural? A Common Narrative about History in the Baltic States after 1991

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**Abstract:** In this article, I describe common narratives of history in postcommunist Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia and explore the intersection between multiculturalism and memory politics. I argue that dealing with history is a challenge in these countries and can be seen as part of a broader issue of memory politics in societies that have experienced trauma during the Nazi and Soviet eras. The hypothesis that I developed, based on my empirical analysis, is that it makes visible how a difficult process of negotiating competing memories can, under certain circumstances, lead to dialogical remembrance. The article also pays attention to unexpected events, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which gives a new dynamic to this process. The original contribution of this article is an analysis of historical narratives in three national museums, with a special focus on how these museums deal with the injustices and traumas experienced by different ethnic groups in the Baltic states. The final section of the article is devoted to the reaction of people in these countries to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, and how this relates to the politics of history created in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia after 1991.

**Keywords:** memory conflicts; politics of history; national identity; multiculturalism; national museums and monuments



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## 1. Introduction

The politics of history in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia after 1991 was established based on the position that these three Baltic states had been under Soviet occupation between 1940–1941 and 1944–1991. This period has been presented as a time of suffering and having been deprived of the ability to run one's own state. It became a core aspect of statehood essence after 1991. In contrast to this notion of the past, however, the period of 1941–1944, when Nazi Germany occupied these countries, is remembered as a time in which Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians were treated tolerably, albeit not free (Kuczyńska-Zonik and Wilczewski 2019). Even though individual Baltic states differed in their attitudes toward the Germans, many inhabitants had supported their Nazi occupiers and hoped the Germans would defeat the Soviets. The circumstances of collaboration with the Nazis became an important issue of contention in emigrant communities and through dissident movements in the Baltic states, as well as part of the official politics of remembrance after 1991. In this respect, dealing with history is a challenge in these countries and can be seen as part of a broader issue of memory politics in societies that have experienced trauma during the Nazi and Soviet times. The novel insight that I have gained from my research on this topic is that it makes visible how a difficult process of negotiating competing memories can, under certain circumstances, lead to dialogical remembrance (Assmann 2011, 2012).

Constructing a common narrative about history can be even more difficult in multiethnic societies, in which different ethnic and national groups develop conflicting versions of the past. According to Bernhard and Kubik (2014) patterns of memories within a community can be either homogeneous (all members of the community share the same memory), complementary (people have different, but overlapping and compatible memories), or contested (there are two or more competing memories) In the case of the Baltic states,

different memory narratives and the competition between them in the public sphere can be observed. In particular, national minorities develop competing memories and defend and promote their common memory of certain historical facts in contrast to the majority group's narrative. The competition of memories challenges national imaginations and calls into question the right of states to dictate what they deem good for the nation (Grandjean and Jamin 2011). Based on this insight, the aim of this article is to explore the common narrative about history in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia by focusing on the intersection of multiculturalism and the politics of history. This intersection can be observed very well in national museums, where historical narratives are constructed according to the official version of the past and supported by the state authorities. These narratives are often criticized by different social groups, mostly ethnic or national minorities. Studying how certain exhibits have been changed in response to such criticism can provide significant insights into how a common narrative about history is constructed in democratic societies and the role that competing memories of different groups play in it.

The original contribution of this article is in the analysis of historical narratives in three national museums, with a special focus on the way these museums deal with the injustice and traumas experienced by different ethnic groups in the Baltic states.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has strongly influenced the relationship of the ethnic majority in each of these countries to the Russian-speaking minorities. Due to this, the last section of this article describes how people in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia reacted to this war and how this relates to the politics of history created after 1991. My central argument is that common narratives of history in multiethnic societies are worked out in a long process of compromise. Unexpected events, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, can significantly accelerate changes that, under other circumstances, would be very slow or partial.

## 2. Theoretical Framework and Methods

This article is based on two key concepts: the politics of history and multiculturalism. The politics of history is the deliberate promotion of the memory of specific historical events, processes, or individuals with political intent and for political purposes (Bouvier and Schneider 2008). In democratic states, the basis of the politics of history lies in the process of social negotiation. The state's politics of history covers a wide spectrum of activities initiated mainly by rulers and state officials (Nijakowski 2008). With regard to the politics of history as a guiding concept for research, two approaches can be distinguished: the analysis of historical-political discourses and the study of materialized historical politics in the form of memorial complexes, monuments and museums, rituals and commemorations, as well as symbolizations, visualizations, and acoustic or musical forms (François Étienne et al. 2013). I chose state-owned or state-funded museums to analyze because they are both the result of and the instrument used by the politics of history. However, museums are also sites of conflicts of interpretation. Exhibitions are often the result of negotiations between many actors, some of whom have conflicting political ideas. Their reception by the public is usually not compliant or passive (Baur 2013). Analyzing these processes in selected museums will allow me to investigate the intersection of multiculturalism and the politics of history.

The methods used in this research include fieldwork and direct observation in selected museums (including taking photographs for documentation purposes), as well as narrative-text analysis. The methodological approach is based on the analysis of permanent exhibitions, guidebooks, audio guides, and websites of three museums from the Baltic region. It also draws on publications by museum officials and the reporting of online newspapers and information services at the time of major debates or events in each museum's recent history. The analysis of reactions to the Russian invasion was conducted in the spring of 2022, covering a short period from 24 February to the beginning of May 2022. Therefore, it is not based on specific newspapers or magazines, but on a wide range of media, taking into account all the news available in English or Polish at that time. The most attention

has been paid to the publications on the websites of the Center for Eastern Studies (OSW), the Central Europe Institute (IEŚ), and the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, which provide analyses, expert opinions, and forecasts. Important sources were also independent international media platforms such as openDemocracy, as well as websites of newspapers and magazines such as *The Baltic Course*, *Baltic News Network*, *New Eastern Europe*, *Przegląd Bałtycki*, and *The Washington Post*.

The concept of multiculturalism is discussed in Section 4. Section 3 introduces the historical context and the demographic composition of the Baltic societies. The main section (Section 5) is devoted to analyses of selected museums, followed by Section 6, in which I discuss the influence of the war in Ukraine on the current politics of history in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia.

### 3. Historical Context and the Specific Nature of Baltic Societies

Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia are the only European Union member states that were once part of the Soviet Union. This fact has consequences for the new constructions of national identity in the three Baltic states. Dealing with the post-socialist legacy also influences social conditions and presents their respective inhabitants with the challenge of reconciling multiculturalism and national characteristics. Latvia and Estonia only became independent states in 1918 and lost their independence to the Soviet Union at the beginning of the Second World War. Lithuania's statehood, however, looked back to the medieval tradition of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

With this historical context in mind, it is not surprising that most Lithuanians, Latvians and Estonians enthusiastically welcomed the re-establishment of their states in 1990/1991. At the same time, however, they were faced with major challenges, not only to rebuild their state structures but also to clarify the issues of citizenship and the rights of large Russian-speaking minorities and, in the case of Lithuania, also a Polish minority.

In 1991 the respective national languages of these countries were introduced as state languages and Russian was abolished as the official language. This was particularly problematic for the Russian- and Polish-speaking population, part of whom did not speak Lithuanian, Latvian, or Estonian. It must be noted that the communities of Russians in those countries are hybrid and divided into those who lived for a long time in the Baltic states and Russians who moved recently, during the Soviet times. State policy initially focused on economic and national cultural reconstruction, paying little attention to minority affairs. This led to the formation of parallel societies and the revival of old ethnic stereotypes. Although the Russian population had been privileged and had occupied a leading position in Soviet times, after 1991 they had to give way to the respective national majorities.

When, however, the three Baltic countries gained their statehood in 1918, they formed nation states with the percentage of the respective national ethnic majority comprising 80% in Lithuania, 77% in Latvia and 88% in Estonia (Steen 2006). Subsequently, the Second World War brought about immense population losses to each country. Indeed, as a result of acts of war, flight, emigration and deportations to Siberia and the interior of the Soviet Union, Estonians lost 25% of their citizens. Among Latvian citizens, this constituted 20% of the population (including 70,000 victims of the Holocaust), and 10% among Lithuanians (including about 200,000 victims of the Holocaust) (Wnuk 2018, p. 519). The postwar period brought renewed migration, either as a result of the decisions taken at the Potsdam Conference (the expulsion of Poles from Lithuania) or the ongoing Soviet occupation (anticommunist emigration to the West from all three countries and further deportations to Siberia and the interior of the Soviet Union) (Baran et al. 2012). In order to counter the consequences of underpopulation, and to secure the Soviet balance of power, mainly Russians, but also residents of other Soviet republics, were resettled in what were then known as the Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian Soviet republics. As a result, the ethnic composition of the population changed significantly. In 1989, the percentage of the respective national ethnic majority comprised only 52% in Latvia and 62% in Estonia. However, it remained relatively constant in Lithuania, standing at 81% in 1993 (Steen 2006).

This fact remained closely related to the decisions taken by the respective leaderships in the three countries on citizenship issues after 1991. Since the percentage of the Russian minority in Lithuania was the smallest, amounting to 9.4% in 1989, the Lithuanians decided without any major obstacles to grant the residents of the country Lithuanian citizenship. Latvia and Estonia chose a different path, however, and introduced requirements for naturalization. Having regarded the period of dependence on the Soviet Union as an occupation and referring to the legal foundations of their prewar statehood, citizenship was recognized only for citizens and their descendants who already possessed it in 1940. Thus, 72.7% of residents of Latvia received citizenship, while 26.5% were considered citizens of the former Soviet Union. They were allowed to keep their old Soviet passports until 1998, after which they were given noncitizen (alien) status, thus significantly limiting their rights. Since knowledge of the Latvian language was low among the Russian-speaking population and language acquisition progressed very slowly (despite state support), the number of naturalized citizens remained low. In 2004, only 77.7% of Latvian residents had citizenship. More than half of the Russian-speaking population (which then made up 35.5% of the total population) were considered noncitizens (Hyndle and Kutysz 2004). Russian-speaking residents of Estonia made up 35.2% of the total population of Estonia in 1989. In 2004, 80% of residents held citizenship, while 12.4% were considered noncitizens (Hyndle and Kutysz 2004). With time, the number dropped to 6.8% in 2015 in Estonia (Russians in Estonia 2022) and to 9.5% (in 2021) in Latvia. By far the largest ethnic group of all noncitizens in this country are Russians (65.5%), while 13.7% are Belarusians, 9.9% are Ukrainians, 3.5% are Poles, and 2.4% are Lithuanians (Distribution of the Population of Latvia by Nationality 2022).

Most Russian speakers found these requirements for naturalization discriminatory and sought help. Both the government of the Russian Federation and international organizations campaigned for them by putting pressure on Latvia and Estonia. As a result, some requirements (e.g., knowledge of the official language) were relaxed. In the view of many researchers, Russia is using the problems of minority rights in the Baltic states deliberately for political purposes on the international stage in order to place the Baltic peoples in a bad light and accuse them again and again of committing human rights abuses against Russian minorities (Hyndle and Kutysz 2004).

#### 4. Multiculturalism versus Reconstructing National Identities

I understand multiculturalism—following John W. Berry and David L. Sam—in three dimensions: as a demographic fact, as an ideology, and as part of state politics (Berry and Sam 2013). The first dimension has been shown above using statistics on the ethnic composition of the population in the Baltic States. In the second case, it is an ideology, understood as a combat concept, as “the idea or ideal of the harmonious coexistence of differing cultural or ethnic groups in a pluralistic society at its core” (Todd 1996). The ideology understood in this way has been confronted with severe criticism from many sides of the political scene in recent years and has often been rejected by its opponents because of the impossibility of its practical implementation (Sciuto 2020; Ostrowski 2012). I am less interested in the individual arguments of this ideological debate than in the value-free understanding of multiculturalism as a descriptive category, in which the coexistence of different, communicating cultural communities is presented. This coexistence within a state is a challenge for politics, which is supposed to create legal foundations, solve conflicts, and decide on privileges. This is the third dimension of multiculturalism, which is understood as part of state policy. In the case of the Baltic States, we are not dealing with typical immigration countries. For this reason, the mostly Anglo-Saxon theoretical approaches to multiculturalism can only be used here to a limited extent. The cultural diversity is historically determined, but also specific. People who came to the Baltic States after 1945 were not immigrants. They moved (or were sent) from one Soviet republic to another but remained in the same state—the Soviet Union. Many of them enjoyed a special status as experts or representatives of the communist regime. Those who decided to stay after 1991

and acquired Lithuanian, Latvian, or Estonian citizenship form the long-established part of today's population.

In the Baltic countries, the 1990s were primarily characterized by economic transformation. At the same time, however, much emphasis was placed on reconstructing national identities which had been severely suppressed in Soviet times. These respective national histories were rewritten, and many blind spots, especially those from the most recent history, were uncovered. States also needed new heroes, who were sought chiefly among anticommunists who had fought both as partisans during the Second World War and in the postwar period, as well as those active in the underground opposition. What caused trouble was the fact that this national narrative excluded sections of society and—in the case of Russian speakers—assigned them to the enemy side and collectively blamed them for the crimes of communism. As a result, some were doubly disadvantaged, namely as noncitizens and as people whose view of history no longer had a place in public life. Although at that time (in the 1990s) in Western Europe the idea of multiculturalism had many supporters and was seen as the best way of social coexistence, it initially found little interest in the Baltic States. Since old scores had to be settled, the national feeling, which had been suppressed for a long time, was now given ample space and was important for holding the majority society together. Only in recent years has there been a gradual inclusion of ethnic and national minorities in the common narrative of history. This change is clearly evident in the museum narratives. State-supported museums are one of the most important sites for the construction of national identity. The institutions selected for my analysis constructed a common narrative of history and introduced new national heroes. However, not all citizens could identify with such a narrative or these heroes. This motivated the authors of the exhibitions to work on a more inclusive narrative and to pay more attention to different minorities (for example, Russian and Polish minorities in Lithuania). My analysis of three museums is based on the question of the extent to which different ethnic and national groups are represented in the narrative of each exhibition.

## 5. National Museums of 20th-Century History

The new construction of national museums in the Baltic states can be analysed in relation to traditional conceptualizations of European nationalism which emphasize state-building through the identification of an ethnic and cultural nation situated in a particular territory (Hroch 1985). After 1991, one could observe the consolidation of a system of national state museums in the region. The Soviet-centralized administrative system was both subverted and modified to emphasize the ethnic dimension of nation-building in each country through history, archaeology, and culture. There emerged new museums, especially dedicated to difficult parts of twentieth-century history, such as the Holocaust and communist crimes. Interestingly, museums did not play an important role in public debates in the early 1990s, which deliberated on how national culture was to be revived or how the cultural sector was to be revitalized. However, reforms were soon to come to the Baltic museum sector. In addition to freedom of speech, the reforms principally entailed administrative decentralization, which granted the museums more autonomy in decision-making, while, at the same time, guaranteeing state financing through the respective national governments. For example, in 2003, a special Museum Council was organized as an advisory body of experts at the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture (Rindzevičiūtė 2011). Although “national museum” is principally a category only applicable to state-owned museums, not in all cases is there a clear-cut relation between a museum's collection and its status. The subject of analysis in this article will be national museums of 20th-century history, often termed memorial museums. The term ‘memorial museum’ was developed for institutions that, albeit not located at the site of an atrocity, took on the mantle of mostly dealing with the atrocities of the Second World War and/or the communist period. Among the many historical museums in the Baltics that have the status of national museums, I chose those that focus on the Second World War and the postwar Soviet occupation because these historical periods are at the centre of my research and their treatment causes the most

controversy among scholars. Another important factor in my choice was the location of these museums. All three institutions are located in capital cities, in representative places in the city centre. Their visitors are not only the inhabitants of the country but also a large number of foreigners. The exhibitions are also used by the state governments in each state as an important agenda item for official visitors.

According to international musealisation trends, memorial museums in the Baltic states are not neutral spaces for knowledge transfer. Rather, they are core sites for the negotiation of historical narratives and contested spaces for the manifestation of cultural patterns, inclusion, and exclusion mechanisms, as well as the delineation of social, ethnic, and religious in and out groups (Sommer-Sieghart 2006). The three museums that were selected are state-owned or state-funded institutions; The director of the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights in Vilnius ([About Museum in Vilnius 2022](#)) is appointed by the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture. However, both the Museum of Occupations and Freedom in Tallinn ([About Museum in Tallin 2022](#)) and the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia in Riga ([About Museum in Riga 2022](#)) were initiated by private foundations and cofinanced by the state only at a later stage.

The names of these museums make clear that their purpose is to present the history of two occupations, both the German and Soviet occupations in these countries. The exhibitions are a combination of two focuses: the figure of the hero–martyr and the figure of the victim. The first of these is mostly represented by those who fought for the independence of their respective state, while the second concerns the inhabitants of each of these countries who became victims of the occupiers. These museums often tell visitors individualized victim stories with the help of objects and historical photographs. Sometimes, however, the victims are represented as part of a collective, as an emotionalizing symbol of national suffering. Ljiljana Radonić calls this a strategy of presenting ‘our’ victims, meaning members of the majority society in the respective postcommunist country, while ‘their’ victims—Jews, for example—are depicted in a reserved deindividualized manner, by using only a few, often humiliating photographs, taken by the perpetrators (Radonić 2017). The creators of such exhibitions are aware that commemorating the Holocaust has become a universal imperative in Europe for the respect of human rights and a “container” for the memory of different victim groups (Levy and Sznajder 2005).

The main aim of all three museums was to ensure the recognition of the occupations first by the Soviet Union, then Nazi Germany, and then the Soviet Union again, as both unjust and not as a liberation. Paulis I. Lazda, the American–Latvian history professor who initiated the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia in 1993, insisted, that the museum should inform Latvians and other countries about the tragic history of the Baltic States which has allegedly been forgotten by the world. However, he also maintains that it also should try to subvert misinformation that dominates nationalist Russian discourses concerning the occupations of Latvia, as well as to defend the country against defamation because of its citizenship and language policies concerning the Russian-speaking population and the role of Latvians in Holocaust atrocities occurring on Latvian territory (Lazda 2022). It should be emphasized that the official historical narrative in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia has been strongly contested by Russia since the 1990s, which has opposed, in particular, the condemnation of the Soviet regime and the equation of Soviet and Nazi crimes. Since Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, harsh criticism of the Baltic states’ historical narrative has become one of the pillars of Russian activity in this area on the international stage, the effectiveness of which has been guaranteed by the skilful use of soft power. The Russian government and its supporters have deliberately spread false historical claims and a distorted view of history to undermine the sovereignty of these nations.

### 5.1. *The Museum of Occupations and Freedom in Tallinn*

Similar attempts to those described above by v Paulis I. Lazda were followed by the creators of the first exhibition at the museum in Tallinn which presented mainly Soviet crimes in Estonia and jumped from the first year of occupation to the return of the Soviet

occupation in 1944, almost omitting the Nazi occupation. Although the name of the museum appears to equate the two occupations, the exhibition used the Nazi period to portray Soviet crimes in Estonia as having been worse. Indeed, museum director Heiki Ahonen suggested that the Nazi occupation claimed fewer casualties and that the degree of oppression was not as fierce as during the earlier (1940–1941) and subsequent Soviet occupations (Ahonen 2005).

Since the exhibition was criticized domestically, as well as by mostly Russian and Jewish historians abroad, it was changed in 2018. The new one is entitled “Freedom Without Borders” and is divided into the following sections:

- Dehumanization (commemorates the deportations, the Gulag, and the experiences of anti-Semitism);
- Emigration (presents the fate of people forced to leave Estonia);
- Soviet Estonia (concerns both the experiences of the Nazi and Soviet occupation);
- Regaining independence and freedom (presenting the period of regaining independence and contemporary Estonia).

As a result of this change in the nature of the museum, space has been created for debate and a critical look at the experience of the occupation. The authors of the exhibition created a space in which two regimes, namely those based on Communist and the National Socialist ideology, as well as their functioning in Estonia, have been presented alongside each other. In this way, visitors are encouraged to see and compare the similarities and differences between the two regimes. The exhibition makes clear that many Estonians collaborated with Nazis, but also that there were numerous Estonian communists, who worked with the Soviets. For example, starting from August 1941, smaller units of the size of a battalion were formed of Estonian volunteers. These units operated under the authority of the Germans (however, the text does not specify that these units also operated among civilians, especially Jewish civilians). An estimated 10,000 Estonians joined these military units. Further on, the exhibition displays that, in August 1942, the Germans started recruiting volunteers into the Estonian Waffen-SS Legion, while not providing the number of its members. It also explains that Estonian citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, often had no choice but to submit to the top-down decisions of the occupiers. In February 1943, compulsory conscription was implemented for Estonian men born during the period 1919–1924. Later, in January 1944, general conscription followed. In the section concerning Nazi ideology, visitors can read:

Jüri Uluots, the last constitutional prime minister of the Republic of Estonia delivered a radio address in support the mobilization. His speech, and even more people’s fear of the invasion of the Red Army, encouraged thousands to join the Germans in the fight against the Soviets. (...) A total of 70,000 Estonian men served on the German side in World War II. About 10,000 of them are estimated to have died.<sup>1</sup>

The authors of the exhibition do not mention whether these soldiers shared the Nazi’s ideology and their hatred of Jews. They only describe racial repression by Germans, in which “nearly all local Jewish people (some 1000 people) and more than half of the Romani (an estimated 500 people) were murdered as a result of racial repressions. In addition, more than 12,000 Jewish people were brought to Estonia from other regions; more than 6000 of them were killed or died in forced labour camps.”<sup>2</sup> The controversial nature of this statement lies in the fact that the Vaivara concentration camp complex and its subcamp, Klooga concentration camp, where about 2000 prisoners died,<sup>3</sup> are not mentioned. Similarly, the exhibition makes no mention of the fact that Estonian soldiers and civilians were involved in detaining Jews and delivering them to those camps. When compared with the 70,000 victims of the Holocaust in Latvia and 220,000 in Lithuania, the number of such victims in Estonia may not have been very high. It is all the more noteworthy, therefore, that the museum did not seize the opportunity to settle this matter in a balanced manner.

In summarizing these facts, the creators of the new exhibition have presented two numbers to the public: “A total of approximately 14,000 civilians died in the territory of Estonia during the German occupation. Estonia lost a total of about 200,000 people, or one fifth of its population, in the Second World War (soldiers killed in action, civilian killed as a result of military operations, refugees, people who died in prison camps and in exile).” (See Note 2 above) The second number focuses the attention of the visitors on the fact that many more people were killed during the Soviet occupation.

The new exhibition is organized around individual heroes and their stories, which do not provide a contextualized and complete picture of the past. Rather, it captures the polyphony and complexity of processes and social interactions. This happens especially in the last part of the exhibition, called “Regaining independence and freedom”, in which the struggle for independence and social relations in contemporary Estonia are presented. Thanks to this mode of presentation, it deconstructs the myth of a homogeneous (in ethnic terms) nation and a single collective memory and avoids evaluating regimes and prioritizing their victims. In this part of the exhibition, a lot of attention is paid to the presentation of life stories of people of different origins, especially the Russian minority in Estonia. This effort should be assessed positively as it opens the way to the inclusion of the large Russian-speaking community in the dialogue on the history of Estonia.

### 5.2. *The Museum of the Occupation of Latvia*

The challenge of including social outgroups in the Museum of the Occupation of Latvia seems to be less successful. The exhibition presents the perspective of the political elite and only a part of society (ethnic Latvians), whose occupation is associated with both the Soviet and the Nazi regimes. Compared with the Estonian museum, the creators of the exhibition in Riga relate more specifically to the question of Latvian collaboration with the Nazis. The exhibition mentions the Latvian wartime self-governing administration as entirely controlled by the Nazi occupiers, as well as Nazi terror, Nazi anti-Semitic politics, and Soviet prisoner-of-war camps.<sup>4</sup> Regarding the Latvian participation in the Holocaust, one can find the following information:

“The Nazis plan to involve as many residents of Latvia as possible in the elimination of Jews. But the expected spontaneous Jew-baiting does not happen. In early July 1941 the Operational Group A forms a 300-man unit from local volunteers in Riga under the leadership of Victors Arajs. In the summer and fall of 1941 members of this unit kill about 26,000 Latvian Jews.” (See Note 2 above)

Furthermore, it is mentioned that similar units had been formed in Latvia’s other cities. No additional numbers of perpetrators and victims are given. Visitors can only guess that the amounts of those murdered were similarly shockingly high.<sup>5</sup> There are also efforts to explain the roots of Latvian anti-Semitism and the brutal consequences introduced by the Nazis for any support offered to the Jews: “Only a small portion of the population dares to risk hiding Jews. Some 400 Jews are thus saved.” (See Note 2 above).

The exhibition consists of 45 red information boards which depict the swastika or the hammer and sickle in the lower right corner. Fifteen of them deal with the Nazi occupation and the others with both Soviet occupations. The latest ones present the brutality of the Soviets and the suffering of the population of Latvia. The second part of the exhibition, which deals with the period after 1945, is presented as a period of Soviet occupation, stressing the discrimination and suffering faced by Latvians, who were suppressed by Russians. In portraying this period, the exhibition’s authors did not include the perspective of many Russian-speaking people in Latvia who remember the Soviet period mostly in positive terms and associate it with free education, medical care, and the high status of the Russian minority. This narrative also fails to recognize that there were many communists among the Latvians and that not all Russians were oppressors. This type of narrative follows the pattern of monological remembrance, in which, according to Aleida Assmann, a given community, in this case the national majority, focuses on its own suffering and

does not take into account the sensitivities of other ethnic groups living in the country. (Assmann 2011) Neither the portrayal of Latvians only as victims of the Soviet occupation nor the description of the Soviet period only in positive terms reflects the full picture of the past.

It is important to stress that at the time of my visit, the museum was planning to change its narrative and present a new permanent exhibition soon. The status of the institution is a combination of a national and a private museum. It is used by the state government as an important agenda item for official visitors. It has become customary for foreign state representatives who visit Latvia to come to the Museum of the Occupation. As a state-accredited private museum, it is primarily maintained by private donations and managed by the Latvian Occupation Museum Association. On the website of the museum, one can find that it has been in its temporary home at 7 Raiņabulvāris Street since November 2012 and plans to return to its permanent location in Old Riga, to a building which has since been renovated and expanded. The new museum's permanent exhibition, designed by the American–Latvian architect Gunars Birkertsis, has been opened in May 2022 ([New Opening of Museum in Riga 2022](#)). Although the state paid for the renovation of the building, the new exhibition and the museum's interior have been funded by the donations the museum has collected. However, at the time of my research, neither information on the content of the new exhibition under preparation nor who its authors are has been published on the museum's website.

### 5.3. *The Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights in Vilnius*

In the case of Lithuania, the status of the main memorial museum in Vilnius is clear. The Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights is financed by the state and is part of the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania (LGGRTC). Established in 1993, it is currently one of the most important instruments for shaping the politics of history in Lithuania, not only due to its scientific and research activities but also thanks to publishing, educational, promotional, and exhibition activities. Much controversy has been caused by the use of the term “genocide”. In 1997, the Sejm of Lithuania stated that in 1940–1990 Lithuania was occupied and that during this period “physical and spiritual genocide of the inhabitants of Lithuania” was carried out. While some scholars have focused solely on the Holocaust as a single crime that can be called genocide, others have protested the denial of Soviet genocidal policies. Group experiences of injustice are both historically distinct and deeply personal for those affected. For this reason, it seems inappropriate to compare suffering or to argue that one country should emulate another. Contemporary Russian policy in Ukraine is described by many as genocidal and comparable to Soviet atrocities. Other past injustices are also called genocide; for example, some historians speak of the genocide of Polish inhabitants in eastern Poland in 1943 by Ukrainian nationalists fighting for their independent state. The Reconciliation Committee of the Canadian Political Science Association recently declared that “genocide has been committed against Indigenous peoples by the Canadian settler state” ([CPSA Reconciliation Committee's Briefing Note on Genocide n.d.](#)). In this context, Schmidtke and James call for genocide to be understood not only as a legal category but also as a sociological one ([Schmidtke and James 2022](#)).

The main focus of the museum's narrative is placed on the fate of the Lithuanian nation and its experience of Soviet occupation. In the description of the museum's history, one can find that “it is housed in the same building where from the second half of 1940 even until August 1991 the Soviet security services, best known in the world as KGB, operated” ([History of Museum in Vilnius 2022](#)). Interestingly, the description did not mention that, in 1941–44, this building had also been the seat and prison of the Gestapo. Even if the name of the museum declares the memory of two occupations, the narrative of its history is not distributed evenly. An explanation for this imbalance could be found on the ground floor of the exhibition where the following information has been posted: “For visitors willing to get acquainted with the period of Nazi occupation in Lithuania and the Holocaust more

extensively we suggest visiting the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum” ([History of Museum in Vilnius 2022](#)).

A question therefore arises: If the authors of the exhibition decided on such a division, why did they stick to the name of the museum dedicated to two occupations? As a result of international criticism, and in public discussions on these issues in the country ([Nikžentaitis 2019](#)), some changes have been introduced. Most notably, one of the rooms in the museum was dedicated to commemorating the Holocaust, while one of the cells displays inscriptions on the wall left by a Polish prisoner held there by the Gestapo. Notwithstanding, only very observant visitors can learn in the museum that, among the victims of both occupations in Lithuania, there were also Jews and Poles.

The memory landscape of Vilnius is divided into separate ethnic groups who have lived in the city in the past. As already mentioned, the main attention in the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights is paid to Lithuanians while Jewish history and culture are presented in the Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum. This museum also includes the Holocaust Exhibition in the Green House and the Paneriai Memorial. The Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History is establishing a new department—the Museum of Culture and Identity of Lithuanian Jews. It will be located in Vilnius, at 4 Pylimo Street, in the former building of the Jewish Tarbut Junior High School. Intensive renovation works are currently underway. On completion, a modern exhibition will be opened during the second half of 2023 ([New Museum of Jews in Vilnius 2022](#)). Other initiatives of the Vilna Gaon Museum of Jewish History are the Memorial Museum of the Holocaust in Lithuania and the Vilnius Ghetto. They are planned to be opened in the former Vilnius Ghetto Library building ([New Museum of Holocaust in Vilnius 2022](#)). Polish history and culture are much less represented in Vilnius. Some aspects of Polish heritage can be viewed in the Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania, the National Museum of Lithuania, and the Vilnius University Museum. There is no museum devoted to the Polish history of Vilnius, while only some exhibitions in the House of Polish Culture, run by Poles living in Lithuania, can be viewed in the city ([Polish House in Vilnius 2022](#)). To be fair, the history of Vilnius is undoubtedly very complicated, and narratives represented by the Lithuanian, Polish, Russian, and Jewish inhabitants of the city are so different, that it is not easy to create one common story. Thus, providing a voice and space for each of these groups is at least a first step to building a polyphony of the city’s memory. Despite the multicultural character of Vilnius and its rich history, there was no museum devoted to the city’s history until 2021. Recently, due to the initiative of some of the city’s inhabitants, it became possible to create a new public institution named Vilnius City Museum ([Vilnius Museum 2022](#)). The opening of the Vilnius Museum was spurred on by the approach of a significant date; in 2023, Vilnius will celebrate the 700th anniversary of being first mentioned in written records. The new museum in Vilnius seeks to open a new page in the story of the city’s museum and hopes to be able to cover the history of the main ethnic and national groups living there in the past.

The Baltic states, like every other country, have the right to their own interpretation of history, the right to treat historical values as a guarantee of the nation’s durability, and the right to confront the crimes of the past ([Wolff-Powęska 2008](#)). As I have shown, while their narrative of recent history is not without controversy, it is important to see this as a process and to recognize the changes that have been made in response to criticism both from their own society and abroad. Even if the changes are not progressing as fast as one would expect, they are the result of a difficult dialogue with different groups of interest. In Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, dialogue serves as a stable pillar of a democratic society. Unfortunately, the continuation of this dialogue is challenged by Russia, which constantly tries to intervene in the internal affairs of these countries. This fact makes the Baltic states a special case on the stage of the European Union as they seem to be especially often confronted with Russian interventions in their politics of history.

## 6. The Baltic States and the War in Ukraine

While researching historical narratives in Baltic museums, an unexpected event forced me to consider additional circumstances. The full military aggression of Russia against Ukraine in February 2022 changed the relationship of the Baltic states to Russia and also challenged the process of integration of Russian-speaking minorities into multiethnic societies in each of the Baltic countries. As I was able to show through the examples of the museum's narratives, the path to a common narrative of history and to dialogical memory is a long-term project that leads integration in often difficult negotiations and educational work. The dynamics of this process can be changed by mostly unexpected new internal or external circumstances, as was the case on 24 February 2022. Therefore, I decided to complete my analysis by presenting the reaction of the authorities and the public in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia to the war in Ukraine. By following the events of only the first three months of this war, I was able to capture how quickly changes were taking place in the affected societies. First, the situation forced the Russian-speaking populations of these countries to take a stand against Russia. In turn, social pressure meant that those who still supported Vladimir Putin could no longer express their support publicly. Within a short time, decisions were made to remove monuments to Soviet soldiers from public spaces. The controversy over these monuments dragged on for many years and no satisfactory solution could be found because of fears of Russian reaction. (Fearing the deepening of social divisions, the authorities of these countries attempted to prevent the escalation of hostile behaviour with a view to the Russian-speaking population). Part of this group demonstrated their support for the Ukrainians very early on and expressed their antiwar views. The broadcasting of Russian TV and radio programs, which were very popular among this population, was duly abolished. To some extent, this move cut the population off from Russian propaganda. Those who want to follow it, however, still have the possibility to do it via the internet. In the view of Joanna Hyndle-Husein and Bartosz Chmielewski, young Russian speakers in the Baltic states are mostly loyal citizens of their country of residence and accept it being a member of the EU, while only part of the older Russian speakers who remember the period of the Soviet Union, support Putin's regime (Hyndle-Husein and Chmielewski 2022). In the first days after the Russian invasion, antiwar demonstrations took place not only in Vilnius, Riga, and Tallinn but also in other cities such as Daugavpils in Latvia, where the Russians consist of more than 49% of the population (Latvia-Ethnic Composition 2019), and in Narva in Estonia (with 87% Russians, Estonian Statistical Database (in Estonian) 2021).

One could also observe a great deal of social support for admitting Ukrainian refugees to their respective countries. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 51,000 refugees arrived in Lithuania up to 11 May 2022, more than 37,000 in Estonia, and about 28,600 in Latvia (UNHCR/Ukraine 2022). Although these numbers seem not to be very high, it is a lot if we consider the total size of their populations. In the case of Estonia, with 1.3 million inhabitants, this accounts for nearly 3% of the population. In all three countries, several measures were implemented in order to facilitate the integration of wartime refugees. Proof that the Russian-speaking population tends to have a positive attitude toward Ukrainian refugees is the fact that most of the Ukrainians who came to Lithuania have been settled in the region of Klaipeda whose population has a large percentage of Russian speakers. For them, it is much easier to communicate with the refugees, who very often speak or understand Russian. The refugees' children are mostly sent to Russian-language schools, while many Russian speakers in all three Baltic states are involved in voluntary work for such refugees (Hyndle-Husein and Chmielewski 2022).

The inhabitants of the Baltic countries are aware that if Russia won the war, their states, which had been part of the Soviet Union until 1991, may become the target of another Russian invasion. Due to this, Lithuanian journalist Karolis Vyšniauskas wrote in an article entitled "I am Lithuanian. Ukrainians are fighting for my future too":

"For many Lithuanians, Vladimir Putin's decision to invade Ukraine has resulted in a grim 'I told you so' feeling. (...) Lithuania's unique geopolitical situation—

with the Russian province of Kaliningrad on one side and Belarus on the other—has forced the country’s citizens to never take their independence for granted. Since 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and invaded eastern Ukraine, the country has doubled its military and defense spending and reintroduced conscription” (Vyšniauskas 2022)

Indeed, Latvia and Estonia behaved in a similar way.

The Baltic states also showed their support by providing Ukraine with military equipment and humanitarian aid. These countries’ support for Ukraine also means important political gestures, from expressly condemning Russian aggression and supporting broad sanctions against Russia, to the visit of four presidents, Estonia’s Alar Karis, Latvia’s Egils Levits, Lithuania’s Gitanas Nausėda, and Poland’s Andrzej Duda, to Kiev on 13 April 2022. Opposition to Russia’s actions is expressed not only by politicians but also by the societies of the Baltic states. An eloquent symbol of Estonian opposition has been the women’s protest against the rapes committed by Russian soldiers against Ukrainian women. Worldwide media and social networks circulated their photos in red-stained underwear, with bags over their heads, standing in front of the Russian embassy in Tallinn. This event prompted the organization of similar protests in many other European cities. An example of Estonian opposition, which was noticed and appreciated in the international arena, is also the activity of the information technology community that created the PravdaMail service, which allows one to send e-mails to random Russian addresses with information about what is happening during the war in Ukraine (Taylor 2022; Gołębiowska 2022).

An important element of the state’s historical policy is the commemoration of historic anniversaries. Victory Day, celebrated on 9 May, used to be the most important public holiday during the Soviet Union. After 1991, independent Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia discontinued commemorating this day, as according to the current historical narrative, the Soviet occupation of these countries continued after 9 May 1945. Instead, they celebrate together, with Western European nations, on 8 May and commemorate the victims of the Second World War. For many years, only a few communists brought flowers to the main Soviet monuments. The situation changed in 2005 as Vladimir Putin started holding large Victory Day parades in Moscow once again and used these commemorations as an important tool in creating Russian national identity. With the concept of *Russkiy mir*—the Russian world, which is based on the pursuit of national–cultural and historical–political integration in the post-Soviet area (Laruelle 2015)—much attention has been paid to building close relations with the Russian diaspora around the world and especially with countries of the so-called “near abroad”. Russian speakers in the Baltic countries became an important part of this strategy and have been included in spreading the influence of Russian culture. By imitating the way in which Victory Day is celebrated in Russia and Belarus, they began to gather more and more on that day and make it a demonstration of their belonging to the “Russian world”. Indeed, many used this day not only to commemorate the Second World War but also to express their nostalgia for Soviet times. The biggest crowds flocked around the Monument to Victory in Riga. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the presence of at least 100,000 people was recorded in the city, which currently has a population of just over 600,000 (Otocky 2022b). (Victory Day is an element of the dignified rebellion of the Russian minority against the authorities which are often not considered their own or favorable to them).

It is not difficult to guess, therefore, that ethnic Latvians do not like this type of demonstration. The date that best illustrates the split in Latvian society has become 9 May. After 24 February 2022, the authorities of this country decided to prohibit the use of Soviet symbols and those related to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In order to avoid provocation, the Latvian Saeima also decided that commemorations held at the monuments of soldiers of the Soviet Army would be illegal. The Russian speakers agreed that this decision should be respected. Mirosłavs Mitrofanovs, cochairman of the Russian Union of Latvia and Riga Council, declared shortly before 9 May 2022, that his union would limit itself to laying flowers in memory of the victims of the Second World War at war memorials and mass

graves. However, he did not fail to criticize the Latvian authorities as follows: “They are deliberately in conflict with Russian-speaking residents, blocking access to memorial sites and banning all organized events. For example, we were forbidden even a minute of silence at the obelisk in Riga. However, we will come privately and lay flowers.” (Otocky 2022b). At this point, it is important to note that the Latvian Russian Union is a party known to be pro-Moscow and has failed to condemn the Russian aggression in Ukraine. Moreover, some of its politicians, such as Mitrofanovs, have been criticized for their biased comments on the “referendum” in Crimea and the subsequent elections.

Considering the divisiveness of memory culture in the Baltic states, it should be remembered, however, that Latvians fought on both sides during the Second World War. Many examples are well known. One of them is the national Member of the Latvian Parliament, Jānis Dombrova, who has repeatedly publicly told the story of his family: one of his grandparents fought in the Red Army, and another in the Latvian Legion. Just as Latvians were—involuntarily—divided during the war, so is their memory divided today (Otocky 2016).

The attitude of the inhabitants of the Baltic countries towards the monuments of Soviet soldiers has been a similar challenge for many years, with many of these monuments having already been removed in the 1990s. The relocation of the monument to the so-called Bronze Soldier from the centre of Tallinn to the cemetery of Soviet soldiers in 2007 subsequently became a kind of turning point. This decision of the Estonian parliament met with strong opposition from Russia and sparked a serious conflict in Estonian–Russian relations. Not wanting to provoke further such crises, the authorities of the Baltic countries were reluctant to remove subsequent monuments. Much controversy arose in this regard in connection with the monument in the centre of Riga, bearing the official name “The Monument to the Liberators of Soviet Latvia and Riga from the German Fascist Invaders”. It is unofficially known simply as the Victory Memorial and was erected in 1985. In 2013, more than 11,000 signatures were collected on the online petition website ManaBalss.lv in order to remove the monument and reconstruct Victory Square the way it had been originally planned in the 1930s. The Saeima Mandate, Ethics and Submissions Committee rejected the petition in 2016, based on the argumentation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia that concluded that the monument was protected by the Latvian–Russian 1994 agreement on the preservation and maintenance of memorials and burial sites (Victory Square in Riga 2016). In 2019 a similar petition by the same initiator began again discussing it with different groups of interest. The facility has been fenced and remains inaccessible with the Riga city office recognizing its state of preservation as posing a danger to residents.

As a result of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the destruction of Soviet monuments has intensified in many European cities. The Bronze Soldier Monument in Tallinn was slightly damaged (poured with paint). The Victory Monument in Riga was also painted blue and yellow. In Raseiniai, Lithuania, the monument to Soviet soldiers was covered with a black cloth pending a decision by the state authorities regarding what should be done with this unwanted heritage. As with many others, it is on the national heritage list; in most cases, the Lithuanian Ministry of Culture decides to remove the monuments (Kuczyńska-Zonik 2022).

On 2 May 2022, in Riga, with the participation of the city authorities, an exhibition entitled “Glory to Ukraine, Glory to the Heroes” was opened under the fenced Victory Memorial, consisting of 16 large boards partially covering the monument. Visitors could see photos from occupied Ukraine, including those showing Russian crimes in Bucha, Hostomel, and Irpin. Russian activists in Riga commented on this on social media: “Another Latvian provocation. Wasn’t there a better place?” (Otocky 2022a). However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has changed much in Latvian society and its relationship with Russia. On 12 May 2022, the Latvian Saeima voted to remove legal barriers to the demolition of the monument and, the following day, the Riga City Council voted to remove it. (Riga City Council 2022) Statues and memorials built to glorify and commemorate the Soviet Union

and the Red Army have been torn down in several countries amid outrage at the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the Spring of 2022 ([Soviet Monuments Come Down 2022](#)).

## 7. Conclusions

Originally, Soviet monuments symbolized the liberation of the peoples of Central Europe from occupation and the victory of the Soviet Army over Nazism. However, most citizens of these countries remember first the painful experiences of the communist regime, their occupation, and the long presence of Soviet troops in Central Europe ([Kuczyńska-Zonik 2022](#)). This kind of memory is prominently presented in the national museums described above. The Russian invasion of Ukraine sparked re-evaluations of political priorities and triggered actions in the field of historical policy in those Baltic countries. Some of these were the decisions banning the use of war symbols and restricting the organization of mass events at monuments to the Soviet Army.

The crimes committed by the Russians in Ukraine also mobilized the Baltic states to introduce legislative changes to Soviet monuments and to remove them from public places. While cleansing the public sphere of Soviet symbols may take place relatively quickly, it will be more difficult to change the social awareness and memory contained in the symbolism of monuments and celebrations. However, the need to change the way of commemorating those killed in the Second World War is gradually being noticed by members of Russian-speaking minorities. Many of them have cut themselves off from the pro-Kremlin war narrative and increasingly accept the symbols, values, and national ideas of the Baltic states. This can contribute to the better social integration of the Baltic societies ([Kuczyńska-Zonik 2022](#)).

As the critical evaluation of the politics of memory in the Baltic countries indicates, the best solutions often did not come from the state and its officials but were developed in everyday practice by actors at the regional or local level. Due to the circumstances outlined above, in the case of the three Baltic countries, it is not easy to strike a balance between promoting national identity and accepting cultural diversity and the needs of national minorities. In some areas of social life, for example, among writers in Estonia, this balance already works well, while in other parts of society, the best solutions are still being sought. Most pragmatically minded Balts would probably agree that multiculturalism is less of an obstacle and more of an opportunity in their countries. Above all, however, it is a fact with which they are being confronted. In their case, the good coexistence of different but communicating cultural communities is a necessity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Source: Pictures of the exhibition taken during my visit in June 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Text from the exhibition.

<sup>3</sup> Only in the Introduction to the exhibition one can find any mention of the fact that the Germans built many concentration camps in the Third Reich and on occupied territories, some of them in Estonia (without giving their names).

<sup>4</sup> In the Baltic states, the Wehrmacht created over 100 camps for Soviet prisoners of war, against which the “hunger policy” was applied. In Lithuania, 170–230,000 prisoners died, in Latvia 200–300,000, and in Estonia about 60,000 ([Wnuk 2018](#), p. 74).

- 5 Mass murder of Jews was carried out by mobile death squads composed of groups of Einsatzgruppen officers and local policemen, sometimes assisted by Wehrmacht soldiers. They surrounded individual towns; then, all Jews were taken to the fields or to the forest and shot there. In the Baltic states, local policemen and members of paramilitary formations played an important role in the extermination process. In many villages, they carried out the murders on their own or with the help of local volunteers. Almost 80% of the Jews in Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were murdered by the end of 1941. Those who survived were imprisoned in ghettos in Riga, Daugavpils, Liepaja, Kaunas, Šiauliai, and several smaller ghettos in the Vilnius area. In September 1943, the Vilnius ghetto was the last one to be liquidated. In total, 215,000–222,000 Jews were killed in Lithuania, about 70,000 Jews in Latvia, and a thousand in Estonia. Not more than 10% survived the war. About 2500 Roma were also victims. Responsibility for these crimes is borne not only by the local police but also by the administration of local self-government organs responsible for the identification of the Jewish population and the management of their property (Wnuk 2018, p. 77f).

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