

To Whom Does History Belong? The Theatre of Memory in Post-Soviet Russia, Estonia and Georgia

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses different processes of appropriation of history in three former Soviet Republics. It provides a context for the recent historical retrofitting by taking the re-monumentalisation of the past in Estonia, the popularity of pseudo-history in Russia, and the current state of the Stalin museum in Georgia as symptomatic of wider social processes. New forms of convergence are shown between the historical and the political by the replacement, emptying of meaning, and remixability of past symbols. The author concludes that the Soviet world has been put to political and communicative uses as a familiar context to refer to; also that the process of retrofitting historical narratives is not over yet in any of these societies.

KEYWORDS

collective memory, historical narratives, politics of history, post-socialism, ethnography of historicity

The history of the people belongs to the Tsar (Karamzin 1969: xvi).

Memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre (Benjamin 1979: 314).

A Past That Is Not Perfect

In January 2017 the ambassadors of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania wrote to German media asking them to stop referring to these countries as ‘former Soviet republics’. A few months earlier, the Russian Foreign Affairs Minister Sergei Lavrov said in an interview that the Baltic countries have shown no gratitude to Moscow for ‘letting them go in peace’ in 1991. Here I use both statements as a trigger to look comparatively at how the politics of history plays an important role in three post-Soviet countries, paying attention to the sociopolitical influences underlying the production of histories in a sort of ethnography



of historicity. We can learn how the past has been put to political and communicative uses in all three countries; indeed, not simply history has been re-narrated differently but also the very retrofitting of the past has been done variously.

It is relatively obvious to point at the ‘collapse’ of the USSR as the decisive factor in generating the Eastern European shifts in historical perspective. However, and despite taking place at the same time and in a regional scale, this phenomenon was far from homogenous. As this article illustrates, we can recognise diverse forms of rewriting the past within post-Soviet societies, depending on the *mise en scène*, utilitarian goals and cultural specificities. Furthermore, the affective management of history in these countries is not based on a similar understanding of memory but on parallel processes (globalisation, neoliberalism) and contingent factors (distinct arrival of postcolonial and postmodern theories) that contributed to give shape to the distinct historical shifts.

Through examples from Russia, Estonia and Georgia (countries that used to share the same imperial past), this article proposes a comparative exercise, in order to contribute to the debates on the critical study of history and the political use of the past in post-Soviet countries. Strategies to retrofit the past is especially important in a society once the authority of traditional historical narrative that had previously been taught is undermined by some dramatic political changes. As exposed by Katherine Verdery in her work on the post-socialist afterlife of dead bodies (1999), in Eastern Europe history had to be rewritten and the immediate past rejected because of the unusual need to create new political identities as well as the will to persuade Western audiences to contribute with aid and investment in the reconstruction of these countries. Accurately, Victor Shnirelman has called such revision of the past as a ‘competition for ancestors’ (1996), an extended phenomenon not just among Russians but also among all the former Republics of the Soviet Union. This is still happening in post-Soviet Russia, Estonia and Georgia, in all of which the 1991 dissolution of the USSR has created a competition to fill the narrative vacuum by developing a variety of new historical paradigms that typically react against each other as well as against the previous ones.

Otherwise, new historical approaches within post-Soviet societies resonate with the arrival, almost at once, of postcolonial theories, post-modern ideas and neoliberal agendas, as well as the renaissance of the Eurasian anti-paradigm (Chari and Verdery 2009; Engelstein 2002; Morozov 2015; Young 2007). Agreeing with Maya Nadkarni and Olga

Shevchenko (2004), post-socialist memory practices may have quite distinct nuances in the cultural environments of various post-socialist societies, since the precise meaning of past elements is highly dependent on context. In Estonia, we find, for instance, a modern rewriting characterised by historical restoration through monuments, museums and laws; in Russia a postmodern recreation and rediscovery of and within the past, in which performativity appears as the ultimate truth; in Georgia, the past appears as a handy resource for muddling through an arid present, merging existing narratives and figures with new occurrences, as well as locally translating global processes and demands.

This study provides a summary and context for recent historical retrofitting, investigating the institutional possession of the past and the articulation of historical narratives. Drawing on the assumption that divergent views of the past held in Estonia, Georgia and Russia lay at the basis of public debates and play an important role in both domestic affairs and international relations, the research develops an open-ended combination of empirical and theoretical research questions, including: Should authority about the past rest solely with professional historians? And should the narrativisation of the past follow a purpose? For instance, be a vehicle for social justice, the need to build up a state, or to be turned into a resource for mobilising people? In this way, the article reopens the debate on the ownership of the past in post-Soviet countries, capturing the fundamental relationality of knowledge of the past by examining the processes by which histories are created, reworked and communicated.

The dualism of history and tradition has been explained by Eric Hobsbawm as a product of modernity (1983). The emergence of the nation state brought with it 'the invention of traditions', a sought-after resource to embody state values and make people feel in terms of identity. According to Hobsbawm, a tradition establishes an epic continuity with the past, seeks to inculcate norms of behaviour by repetition and adds a suitable history to a society. The familiarity of tradition is crucial to articulate imagined communities (Anderson 1991). Social constructions, such as the nation and tradition, make people perceive themselves as part of a limited group, sovereign and in contraposition to a figurative 'other'.

Certainly, we can find a state-sponsored version of history and encoding of the past in every country, as states represent themselves as having powers of temporal redirection. It is my contention, however, that post-socialist societies share particular ways in which past and present are woven together. The most striking one is the pattern of

replacement–rejection–restoration, arguably related to the wars, occupations and abrupt ruptures of the twentieth century. In Eastern European countries, the past has been coming and going like a merry-go-round. The revision of history became thus a cyclical pattern in the region, turning a problematic past into an historical problem.

The concept of ‘mastering the past’ (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) has been mostly discussed in relation to the ways that German society has struggled to deal with the legacy of the Third Reich. In that literature, the mastering refers to coming to terms or overcoming the negatives of the past, assuming thus that there is a problem with it (in the psychoanalytical sense of ‘what the past has done to us’). Retrofitting however points at a reaction from the present backwards, reshaping historical narrativisations in relation to present political needs and available cultural forms, and by adding something new to existing versions of the past.

Homeless Monuments

In comparing Russian and Estonian approaches towards the recent past, we find two opposite cases, parallel yet different in their interpretation, ambition and *mise en scène*. Eventually, these epistemological differences about historical facts refer to a geopolitical positioning as well as to the tumultuous road towards the formation of statehood. Both societies have articulated new continuities and discontinuities, reactivating familiar forms from the past in order to correlate it with the present: in the case of Estonia, as a replacement of symbols accompanied by restitution laws and new museums and rituals, following the objective of presenting the country as a European state; in the case of Russia, by emptying past forms of meaning and fostering its remixability, following the objectives of reinforcing emotional connections within the society and re-establishing a higher opinion of the role of the country in the world. The Georgian case appears as inbetween, as there have been several attempts to replace Soviet symbols, yet past forms prove to be obdurate and useful still, even if emptied of meaning. An example of this is the way the Georgian government changed the name of several streets and squares in Tbilisi in the attempt to reconfigure historical discourses, yet local people keep using the old Soviet names (i.e. Akhvlediani/Perovskaya; Baratashvili/Kolmeurneoba; Abkhazi/Leselidze; Zhvania/Gagarin; Freedom/Lenin Square.).

Paradoxically, the year 1991 is presented as a great break in all the three cases: in the Estonian accounts as the landmark of independ-

ence, in Russian accounts it appears as a source of chaos, and in Georgian accounts as a mix of both – freedom and chaos. Whilst, in the Russian case we can recognise the absence of any positive ideological construction of the socialist break-up, for Estonia 1991 meant a re-appropriation of its suppressed past, partly practiced as an anti-reaction against the Soviet world (Martínez 2016a). An example of this is the attempt by the Estonian government to seek Western support for pressuring Russia ‘to acknowledge the troubled legacy of communism in the region’ (Mälksoo 2009b: 66) and ‘apologize for the crimes of Soviet totalitarianism’ (Mälksoo 2009a: 662). These attempts to rewrite the European narrative of how to remember the socialist experience has been explained by Maria Mälksoo (2014) as a search for recognition within the EU, since Eastern European countries feel themselves reduced to junior partners, required to take on the values and view of history of their Western colleagues. Yet the past was reconsidered and history reinvented, not just to create a new community or legitimise the new government but also to attract investors, customers and tourists (Pozniak 2015).

The history of Estonia, and in general of all post-Soviet states, has been constructed on the basis of current political perspectives. Indeed, the interpretation of history has become ‘a battleground’ between the peripheral Republics and Russia (Kasekamp 2010). As Brüggemann and Kasekamp note, Estonian society is still characterised ‘by divisions on ethnic lines and historic memory’ (2008: 427). Likewise, Merje Kuus (2012) suggests that in recent decades the Estonian identity has been constructed as being under threat, as an endangered entity that must be protected from non-Estonians and the foreign. This makes that Estonian identity appear as persistently portrayed in security terms, as well as fused with the state. We can even say that the different approach towards the recent past is a frequent source of misunderstandings and tensions in Estonia. The break-up of the USSR produced very different reactions from the varied communities present in Estonia: for most Estonians, it was perceived as an opportunity to restore and secure their cultural identity and independent state, while for most Russian speakers this instead had the effect of producing an identity crisis, thus increasing difficulties for adaptation and integration (Kirch 1997).

Indeed, using the Soviet period as a constitutive Other has led in Estonia to the demonisation of all elements connected to the recent past, presenting it as Russian and brutal, in contraposition with the harmonic first Republic, familiar and rural (Kattago 2009). Also, the subsequent process of restitution of properties to prewar owners was

fundamental for the legitimisation of the new state, symbolically meaning the negation of the recent Soviet past. Indeed, the first leadership of the restored Estonian republic consisted, for the most part, of historians, who used terms such as ‘to restore truth’ and ‘the Estonians’ control over their past’, which had been ‘expropriated’ (Tamm 2016). Overall, post-socialist transformations in Estonia involved the revival of the events of the interwar Republic, relegating memories and visions of Soviet modernity to removal or oblivion. During the last decades, this society experienced the dismantlement of the recent past (state socialism), invoked by a non-recent past – the first Republic in the interwar period from which the state bases its legitimacy and builds institutions. The long historical episodes in which foreign forces occupied the country were thus presented as an exception, articulating instead narratives that highlighted the short experience of independence and downplayed the foreign domination.

In her study of the ‘threshold generation’, Raili Nugin argues that the delegitimisation of the Soviet era was ‘needed’ in the 1990s to build the new Estonian state up. She also observes how the ‘clear-cut and black-and-white version’ of the past changed in the 2000s, when an alternative version emerged, indulging in details without challenging the hegemonic treatment of the Soviet time: ‘Yet the already established dominant narrative was too strong to be questioned, as that would have meant questioning the political base structures of the entire society’ (Nugin 2015: 126). In a similar vein, Tamm describes this articulation of memory politics as an ‘ideology of restoration’, according to which all memory-political measures (in their legal, institutional, commemorative and monumental dimension) were dedicated to return and restore prewar traditions and institutions, leading to:

the massive restoration of monuments to the War of Independence, the reinstating of prewar place, town, street, and house names, the re-institution of old anniversaries, or the re-interment of politicians in their homeland from the interwar independence period. But the same sentiment was also expressed on the more general level of historical interpretations, such as a return to the prewar national romanticist models (Tamm 2013: 654).

On a symbolic level, a historical rush appeared to erase any physical representations of the Soviet era from the city centres. Monuments represent the past in the present; their removal facilitates the rewriting of historical narratives through a dematerialisation of the past. Monuments have a unique impact on temporal regimes, almost magical; they create a ‘chronometer of history’, a sort of sacral zone that affects the

course of time (Yampolsky 1995). Raising new monuments and tearing down the socialist ones was thus part of a process of giving new values and re-signifying the space in order to reconfigure temporal regimes (Verdery 1999). The institutional strategy to rearticulate the public space of Tallinn through new historic references became evident with the removal of the Soviet Bronze Soldier (also called *Alyosha*), originally placed in the city centre and since 2007 standing in a military cemetery. The presence of ‘Alyosha’ in the centre of Tallinn materialised different understandings of national identity and collective memory. The removal of the statue commemorating the ‘Soviet liberation of Estonia’ enforced the new zone of monumental ‘freedom’, drawn from the Parliament to the museum and Freedom Square (intertwined with symbols of the interwar period and the regained independence).

Figure 1: The Bronze Soldier in its original location. O. Juhani (1967). Photo by Rahvusarhiivi filmiarhiiv.



For instance, since 1991 the Bronze Soldier became the gathering point for both celebrations that honoured Soviet traditions and Estonian nationalists who protested against honouring the Soviet regime. Nevertheless, the riots that broke out during the removal of the Soviet monument were not merely about how to interpret the past. Also, several accounts have claimed that the engagement was not as simple

as ‘Estonians fighting against the Russian minority’, but there were other concerns (Norman 2009). As Andres Kurg (2009) points out, the monument’s removal from its site undermined Tallinn’s public space (in the widest political sense), since the Bronze Soldier filled the gap in representational politics for the Russian-speaking counter-public. The removal can be understood therefore as a disruption of the dialogue between the marginal and hegemonic parts of the society, making the minority even more ostracised.

The past is part of the present not only discursively but also through remains. The discussion around the monument serves as a reminder that Estonia is faced with the difficult question of what to do with its Soviet heritage, an uncomfortable issue often mingled with ideological confrontations, power relations and marginalisation, which is transferred onto space and echoed in representational politics. The Bronze Soldier was turned by the Estonian government into a symbol of waste that had to be made invisible, following a view of the Soviet world as a historical accident and a burden.

Figure 2: A forgotten statue of Lenin in the backyard of the Museum of History. Photo by Alex Bieth (2014).



In addition to the discussion of sacrifices and the afterlives of monuments, we can observe the topographical routes followed by the mon-

uments of Lenin in Estonia and the redesigns undertaken once the monument vanished (Lillepõld 2014). For instance, between 1952 and 1990 there was a bronze statue of Lenin on the intersection of Riia and Võru streets, which is currently occupied by the NATO Baltic Defence College. After its dismantling (23 August 1990), the statue was taken to Tartu's central square, where a placard was hung, stating 'Socialism equals Fascism'. In the 1990s, the local government tried to abolish the heritage status and sell the sculpture in an auction; however, the plan failed. Meanwhile, the statue was moved swiftly to various warehouses, with its last location being the site of a waste company (108 Tähe Street). In 2005, the statue was transported to the backyard of the Estonian History Museum, where it lies on the ground alongside statues of other comrades. On the website of the museum they are defined as 'homeless monuments'.

Vernacular Trials of the Past

Memory is often materialised through monuments, objects and rhetorics of display, which also forge a sense of belonging. Yet, as Sharon Macdonald notes (2013), museal engagements with 'the past' do not always entail 'remembering' but might rather follow political agendas and marketing strategies of commemoration. In many cases, institutions in charge of governing memory intend to package the past as something controllable and useful for the present, reducing the traces of historical heterogeneity in order to articulate an effective narrative. The discussion around the new building of the Estonian National Museum (ENM) offers an interesting case study in this regard. In this country, the ENM has the mandate to establish how the past is conceptualised and represented, as well as to articulate historic narratives. This is done through publications, public displays and events, and also through the very building of the museum and the place where it stands. By all these means, it delineates the memorable and projects a sense of belonging, marking who is included and excluded by the double task of a memory work – remembering and forgetting.

Whilst the ENM functions as a traditional gatekeeper of what is to be considered a historical legacy in Estonia, the new (foreign) architectural project takes the site of this former Soviet military base as a meaningful legacy. The concept of 'memory field' ignores the nationalist understanding of the museum, making present a memory that was meant to be forgotten. Significantly, many of those who believe

the role of the ENM is to define identity in the country were disappointed with the open character of the memory field. For them, the building should have been a contemporary expression of Estonian-ness. There were even those who felt that such a decision was humiliating, undermining Estonian identity and, somewhat, perpetuating the occupation. Several people claimed that the museum's representations of the past should be a string of 'beautiful events and secure symbols' and that the 'memory field' project only served to glorify the occupation and open up old wounds (Martínez 2016a).

Right before its opening, I had the chance to visit the new building, which has a multifunctional ambition as a centre of entertainment, documentation, branding, workshops for children, a tourist attraction as well as home for nationalism simultaneously. This potpourri of activities also evidences the paradox of being an over-politicised institution which is asked however to sustain itself through commercial activities. ENM might have been created in the sunset of romantic nationalism, but has to survive financially in a context of neoliberal ideology and austerity policies.

Another example of distinct memory politics is the way Museums of Occupation were established differently in Tallinn and Tbilisi. Whilst in the Estonian capital the 'Museum of Occupations' was erected by a private initiative and financial support of the Estonian diaspora, testifying to a pervasive preoccupation with their history and the will to reconnect past and present (Burch and Zander 2010), in Georgia, the 'Museum of the Soviet Occupation' followed instead a direct decree from the then President Mikheil Saakashvili, 'set up with a propagandistic agenda and has not increased public knowledge about the Soviet era in general and the Stalinist period in particular' (de Waal et al. 2013). Furthermore, Saakashvili's orders to remove the Stalin monument from the centre of Gori, destroy a Second World War monument in Kutaisi, as well as redesign and change the name of the Stalin Museum to the Museum of Stalinism are symptomatic of the half measures, false starts and contradictions of memory politics in Georgia (Gottfredsen 2013; Kabachnik and Gugushvili 2015). Otherwise, as a form of historical critique, they both share an emphasis in the oppression and violence suffered under the Soviet regime, instead of uncovering sources of subaltern agency within the structures of domination – which have been characteristic of postcolonial studies during the last decades (Oushakine 2013b).

Within the post-Soviet world, museums dedicated to enhance revolutionary figures or promote the communist ideology were often

turned into national exhibitions glorifying a distant past. One of the most significant exceptions to the ‘recycling’ of the Soviet world is the Stalin museum of Gori, built between 1951 and 1956 in an opulent Roman-Gothic style by the head of the NKVD secret police Lavrenti Beria. The pavilion is located in the site where Stalin was born (in 1878, as Iosif Dzhugashvili) and the displays of the exhibition have not changed since 1979. The museum was closed during the *perestroika*, yet reopened in the late 1990s by local authorities, once they understood its touristic potential. There is no shortage of souvenirs such as Stalin pens, pins or T-shirts in the museum shop. ‘What sticks out at the Gori museum’, writes Marcos Farias Ferreira, ‘is the lobby where synthetic Stalin memorabilia is exhibited and sold: small-size Stalin busts, 40 Lari; Stalin mugs, 10 Lari; Stalin snow globes, 15 Lari’ (2016: 209). As he notes, Stalin has become a bestseller commodity in the country, being used by locals in their survival struggles despite the ideological stance of this polemical figure.

In my case, I visited the museum three times in 2015, each time with a different guide. Twice the tour was in English, once in Russian. This info is not as banal as it might sound, since depending on the guide the visitor gets one tour or another (e.g. in the Russian tour the memorial of repression, open right after the South Ossetian war, was simply not shown); also, the figure of Stalin as such will be more or less praised depending on these factors, as well as on the background of the visitors. For instance, in the Russian tour the visitors mostly asked for details about the childhood of Stalin, whilst in the English tours German and Polish visitors rather questioned the approach taken by the guide and even existence of the museum. One of them was my friend Pablo, from Berlin, who already at the beginning asked the guide how ‘neutral’ a presentation of Stalin’s life can be. The guide kindly answered that her job was to talk about Stalin ‘in a neutral way, with his achievements and mistakes, because he was not a god, he also made mistakes. But personally, I think that he was a great statesman who cared about the fate of his people’. Pablo insisted by saying that he could not imagine a ‘neutral’ explanation about Hitler, nor a museum about him in Germany; ‘many Georgians would be upset for comparing Stalin with Hitler’, she replied, before praising Stalin’s austere life: ‘Look, he just had simple furniture and wore simple clothes’.

According to the official statistics, the Stalin museum of Gori is the most visited gallery in the country by foreigners (over 31,000 visitors per year). As Georgi Sigua, head of the Georgian National Tourism Administration, explains: ‘Stalin is a part of our history and therefore

a tourist attraction. There are billions of people globally for whom Stalin is a historical character and Georgia will use this for its economic benefit'. Otherwise, the museum is not simply keeping the memory of the Soviet leader alive (at the entrance there is a banner informing visitors that the museum is an example of Soviet propaganda falsification of history), but it has rather become a site of pilgrimage, a mix of grotesque curiosa and veneration, as the comments in the guest book manifest:

27.08.2008, by a visitor from Georgia: 'Our beloved leader, the world and your country need your genius mind. Your justice has been varnished and ignored. We will always stay true to your ideology, which is the future of the world. All glory to you, the great leader'.

11.08.2011, by a visitor from China: 'Stalin was a great revolutionist and an outstanding Marxist. He gave important help to the Communist party of China and China as a whole. We will never forget him, he will always be the friend of Chinese people! And his contributions to people in the Soviet Union were historically influential. I believe that Soviet people, especially Georgians, will always remember him too' (Retrograd 2015).

In the popular website *Tripadvisor*, the Stalin museum appears as the 2nd touristic attraction in Gori (after the 'Uplistsiche Cave Town'). Within the 218 reviews of the museum, we can read:

8.09.2015, by *wanderer_scotland*: 'The impression I got in Tbilisi that people did not really care for Stalin all that much, yet as soon as we got to Gori that suddenly changed. Really informative place and the guides are really good, though have to say a little intense, as though they do not paint him out to be a hero, you can tell that they are extremely proud of the "local boy done good!". Museum is full of Stalin's personal items, complete with his birth house located in the back yard of the museum'.

1.05.2015, by *jujwjujw1, Indiana*: 'Surprise! Interior photos are permitted. And English-speaking guides are available. The one thing that was pointed out over and over is that the local population is not happy the museum is there... but there are still some that like him. There are displays of gifts that were presented to him from nations all over the world... most quite valuable'.

After the South Ossetian conflict, Saakashvili planned to transform it into the 'Museum of the Russian Aggression', yet local officials raised concerns about the impact of this decision in tourist revenues. Finally, he decided to add a small exhibition with references to the GULAG and with photographs of the bombing of Gori by Russian planes in 2008.¹ For Nikoloz, the driver with whom I went to Gori all three times, the figure of Stalin was 'embarrassing', noting however

Figure 3: Tour guide in the Stalin Museum. September 2015. Photo by Fran Martínez.



that all foreigners want to visit it, so it is an important tourist attraction to a town with few sources of income. A similar sentiment was shared by the neighbours with whom I talked, who were not proud of the town being known because of this figure, but who recognised that the local economy depends on the museum to a great extent.

In line with Farias Ferreira (2016), the figure of Stalin has become a paradoxical commodity for fixing the brokenness of Georgian society. This para-chronic figure comes out as a first-order resource for muddling through and filling the post-Soviet void. In fact, more than evoked, remembered or praised, the Soviet leader is used: ‘Stalin becomes more oddity than father figure, more commodity than hero, whereby the cult of personality is transmuted into a material and symbolic resource for local communities’ (ibid.: 210). This shows that not only Georgia is still struggling to come to terms with its past, but also to build up a functioning state and economy, forcing local people to oscillate between creativity and constraint, anxiety and possibility (Martínez 2016b).

After twenty-five years of paradoxical deconstructions and multiple transitions, Georgian society seems to be made of contrasts and ill-organised forays of improvement, engaged in a never-ending process

of repair (Martínez and Agu 2016). The recent political history of Georgia is quite a mixture of continuities, breaks and reconfigurations. Martin Frederiksen describes it as being affected by temporal disjunctures and short circuits. As he demonstrates in his ethnography about unemployed young men in Georgia, widespread feelings of marginality and frustration are due more to present stagnation and negative expectations about the future than to questions about problematic pasts (2013). Likewise, in her study about the multiple nostalgias found in Gori, Katrine Gotfredsen (2013) considers Georgian politics as evasive and led through antitheses. As she points out, every time that political realities change, interpretations of the past are turned into a battlefield and history is represented in new ways.

Figure 4: Soso at the entrance of the Stalin Printing Museum of Tbilisi. March 2015. Photo by Fran Martínez.



In this context, the figure of Stalin appears as a myth to hand that helps to cover up an actual lack (Barthes 1957). Yet the afterlife of the revolutionary leader, after the death of the body, is not only uncontrollable but also works back on the political, influencing discussions and imaginaries through affects at the micro level (Frederiksen and

Gotfredsen 2017). Collective memory appears therefore as a vulnerable ‘work in progress’, contingently assembled by residents and other actors who draw on local and global resources to patch up contemporary malfunctions. Unforeseen affective outcomes occurred every time a new political power has arisen since Georgia’s independence, leading to the circulation of peripheral spectres of affects, such as shame and cynicism (Khalvashi 2015)

We can also see it in the Printing Museum of Tbilisi. Behind gritty automobile repair garages and a hospital, and looking like a dodgy bar, the museum honours the printing scheme that Stalin created to crack out anti-Tsarist literature from the cave below the well. Despite not receiving any funding from the Georgian state, Isidor ‘Soso’ Gagoshvili, the guardian, says that he takes care of the place ‘to preserve the memory of the man who saved the world and to keep the museum alive until the moment when the Soviet Union will be restored’. Pointing at the cracks on the ceiling, Soso asks me rhetorically, ‘do you think is right to treat Stalin like this?’ During the guided tours, Soso first explains how unique this museum is; then he vociferates against ‘American Imperialism’, Gorbachev, Western spies and shows an ID card that says (in English): ‘Officer of the KGB’. Later, he engages with the audience, and depending on their origin he mentions figures such as Dolores Ibarruri *Pasionaria*, Rosa Luxemburg or the Portuguese Carnation Revolution. At the end of the tour, he laments the current material condition of the museum and asks for a donation. It is not my intention to cast doubts on the revolutionary zest of Soso, yet what I saw is that he survives from these donations and lives in the very museum, sleeping in a small backside chamber packed with Russian newspapers, old clothes and detective films.

Nostalgic Modernisation

Museums are institutions in which reinterpretations of historical facts and political changes are explicitly at play. Particularly in national museums we can clearly recognise the intimate entanglement of power, knowledge and memory. As an example, Anatoly Khazanov remarks that rather than a fundamental break from Soviet interpretation of the past, Moscow historical museums have developed a sort of multifocused approach to the Russian past (2000). Following the huge surprise produced by the sudden break-up of the USSR, Russian society in the 1990s experienced a huge exercise of deconstruction of his-

tory. Reflecting upon this sort of postmodern exercise, Mikhail Epstein describes it as characterised by ‘quotationality instead of self-expression, simulation instead of truth, playing with signs instead of reflecting on reality; difference instead of contradiction’ (1999: 466). Relying on this assumption, Dobrenko and Shcherbenok point out (2011) that the articulation of post-Soviet culture occurs through suturing beliefs and suspensions, which complement unstable narratives and connect the old and the new emotionally.

For Sergei Oushakine, it is the familiarity of old forms that here becomes crucial, making the complex and troubling past more user-friendly. Old shapes generate a ‘positive structuring effect’, producing an already known effect of recognition by evoking a shared experience and pointing towards a common vocabulary of symbolic gestures (2007: 457). In this frame, the main goal of an affective management of history is to link remembering people together, and not to match a symbol with its content (Oushakine 2013a). The familiarity of the forms facilitates retrofitting strategies, which happen almost by inertia.

Oushakine (2007) describes several rituals of selection and combination of old forms, concluding that what is taken as serious in Russia is the mimicry of the past, not the past itself (presented as a resourceful pastiche). In this sense, what appears as sacred is neither history nor the study of past events, but old forms, taken as borrowed meaning reappropriated for the present. The paradox remarked by Oushakine is that this ‘occupying’ of recognisable forms from the past is accepted by the Russian society in an extremely serious way, not merely as a *carnavalesque* interpretation. The reactivation of old forms follows an attempt:

to ‘complete’ the past in order to correlate it with the present. Constructed as an assortment of ‘consumable images’ [...] Signifiers of the past, they are turned into ready-made objects, able to produce an appearance of historic continuity and stylistic coherence (ibid.: 455–458).

Historical forms appear therefore as ‘empty signifiers’ (Laclau 2005), subject to radically diverse interpretations and grouping together diverse concerns (a ‘quilting function’). Yet at this point, it is convenient to distinguish between two of the forces behind this phenomena:

(1) A deep scepticism within the society of much of what is presented as history. In Russia, both the monumental and mythical have been replaced in a perennial way. We know, for instance, the level of manipulation of history in the Stalin era (already revealed to the Soviet public by Khrushchev’s speech in 1956). Also, during the perestroika a flood of reports in the popular press washed away remaining certainties about Soviet history. The extended disbelief towards Soviet institutions, social

media and scholarship led to members of the intelligentsia as well as amateur historians to dedicate their time to recover and reconstruct memory (Faraldo 2003). If we look back to the glasnost (transparency) and perestroika (reconstruction), we might note how Russian memory and the study of history were already appreciated yet sharply divided. Indeed, the most important civil organisations coming into existence at that time, Memorial and Pamyat', deployed a contradictory account of the Russian past. The first one was focused on human rights and recognition; the second one sought to honour and recover the past. Later Pamyat' served as a base for a nationalist party and Memorial became the most relevant NGO in the country.

(2) A postmodern understanding of truth and evidence, in which origin and veracity become secondary, in favour of borrowing and mixing. Postmodernism and the tendency of public memory to become commercially organised helped to pave the way for self-educated amateur explorers of the past; popular history-makers who, rejecting the importance of academic historians, have been raising unfamiliar and uncomfortable questions of their own (Black 2005; Rosenfeld 2009; Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998). As Roy Rosenzweig aptly put it (1998), in the digital era everyone is a historian; critical methods are being transformed and the assumption of academic authorities as possessors of historic knowledge does not apply on the web.

In this frame, the study of the past acquires an instrumental character that can serve pre-established personal or governmental goals. This paradigm relies also on the practice of stretching official discourses to cultural production through films and pseudo-history. There are many examples of contemporary historians using digital media to promote their ideas and aiming to show that the greatness of Russia extends far back in time, that its influence reverberates from Eurasia to the New World, and that the standard historical narrative has been falsified and forced upon Russia by the West. Figures like Panarin, Dugin, Tsymbursky or Karaganov promote a new interpretation of history with not dissimulated political aims and a sense of historical progress towards a divine goal; yet the list is even wider, like a cultural tsunami. Russian history-makers draw the circle of the 'we' more broadly than the current borders of the Russian federation, presenting Russia's past as shared with its geographical neighbours.

In examining popular history in Russia, I foreground how the practice of borrowing historical forms is not just motivated by a need to create a new collective identity, yet builds also on the late-modern commodification of knowledge and the pattern of continuous discontinuity experienced for centuries by Russian society. On the one hand, this pattern has created a highly sceptical approach towards the veracity

of history; on the other, an obsession with retrofitting and completing the past. My second point here is that critical studies of history are being simultaneously conditioned by both the demands of current neoliberal markets and the emotional encoding of the past promoted by official discourses. The past thus becomes an object increasingly commodified and a product of active indoctrination. My third point is that in the case of Russia the fixing of history is not an entirely new phenomenon – merely circumscribed to post-socialism, but quite rooted in a perennial need of complementing the past. The continuous discontinuity experienced by Russian society has reinforced the pattern of historical revision, conditioning any attempt to approach the past critically.

During the last decades, practices of borrowing and mixing historical facts from different periods have been prominent, with the past being used as raw material for creating social connections in the present (Kalinin 2013). The official rejection of the perestroika and Yeltsin's years has been accompanied by efforts to resurrect historical symbols which appear decontextualised and emptied of political meaning – reduced to a visual template that creates an automatic sense of connection. Reflecting on this sort of postmodern performativity of the past, Oushakine points out that 'the new' in post-Soviet Russia has been the assumption that there is 'nothing new' but performative rituals characterised by their capacity to join (Oushakine 2013a: 301) and a warehouse of 'tradition' that one could use selectively (Dobrenko 1998). Oushakine even argues that historical re-enactments in Russia are less inspired by historical veracity than by a search for synchronised collective emotions: 'Facts and events of the past are not registered for their historical significance; they are emotionally relived and reenacted (*perezhivaiutsia*)' (2013: 274).

This historical re-enactment is manifested for instance in the modification of official festive days in the calendar – keeping the Second World War (in Russian discourse 'the Great Patriotic War') as a unifying collective event. The strategy to make use of the past through pervasive pains in order to rule in the present has been defined by Alexander Etkind as a 'warped mourning' (2013). These practices of re-creating and complementing Russian history result in a neutralisation of the past (objectified, decontextualised) and the propagation of nostalgia, integrating old forms into a new national patriotism (Oushakine 2010). The problematic past turns thus into a historical problem, but also a resourceful tool to articulate a political hegemony. The state-sponsored politics of history in Vladimir Putin's

Russia can be compared with its dependence on natural resources; a limited and precious store that Russian authorities exploit in a zero-sum game (Kalinin 2013). When the discussion refers to the Second World War, we can even talk of geopolitics of memory because of the transnational implications.

As Ilya Kalinin points out (2014), the Kremlin approaches history as a fossil fuel waiting to be dug out of the ground. Behind this official strategy to rewrite Russian history, there is an attempt by the current Russian government to capture the traumatic energy of loss and live up to their regime. Accordingly, Kalinin has coined the term ‘Nostalgic Modernisation’ (2010) to define how ongoing endeavours of modernisation in Russia project the future towards the past, creating a horizon based on a quotational memory (instating a relationship of organic – but limited – continuity). An example of this is the way the Kremlin expends resources and time discussing how the past should be written. For instance, Sergei Shoigu, Emergency Situations Minister, started a discussion of how to interpret the Second World War following the anniversary of the Katyń forest massacre. In his view, the Federal Duma should approve a law threatening prosecution of those who make inaccurate remarks about the role of the USSR in the Second World War, as in the case of Estonia, which officially denies the liberation by the Red Army and instead presents these events as the beginning of the Soviet occupation.

Following international isolation, the Kremlin has articulated a tougher cultural policy that narrowly defines Russian culture with a nostalgic emphasis on heritage and tradition. Even so, the claim for a new History for Russia is not new: from Lomonosov, Karamzin or Tatishev, who criticised the excessive ‘Germanism’ in the interpretation of Russian history; to Vasily Rozanov (2003), who lamented that Russia got no sun and no past; or Pyotr Chaadaev (1991), who criticised that Russia does not have an appropriate past for becoming a modern Western country. The central myths of Russian history, as they have been written and rewritten over the last two centuries, have accumulated layer upon layer of politically conditioned significance. Accordingly, the dramatic post-Soviet transformations have also affected school education in Russia, as the former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has acknowledged:

There are many textbooks nowadays, and they give completely different views of history that can cause the head to spin [...] This is bad because the result will be that school children’s heads will turn to *kasha* [porridge] (see Mikulova 2009).

Historical knowledge has always played an important role in social life, informing patterns of transformation and even being used as a political instrument. In post-Soviet Russia, historians acquired a new role: the therapist, being in charge of suturing the post-imperial wound. At first glance, Medvedev's, Shoigu's and other similar approaches may look like attempts to move forward by rewriting past events, activating old forms and finding a suitable history. However, what they demonstrate is exactly the opposite: the recurrent relying on the past and its retrofitting simply delivers a recognisable frame without suggesting an obvious ideological stance and in which historical accuracy plays a secondary role. As Oushakine put it, reliance on past forms has a 'positive structuring effect that old shapes could produce, even when they are not supported by their primary contexts' (2007: 454).

Epic Revisionism

Anatoly Timofeevich Fomenko (Donetsk, 1945–) is a renowned mathematician, staff member of Moscow State University and of Russia's Academy of Sciences. He specialised in applied physics and mathematics and has authored 180 scientific works. In the field of Humanities, Fomenko is known as one of the founders of the *New Chronology*, which aims to revise Russian and world history. He claims that conventional chronology is bedevilled with errors and deliberate falsifications, since early modern scholars added thousands of years to the story of civilisation and filled in the gaps with the mythology that we know today as ancient history. Also, Fomenko argues (2003) that the Russian struggle with the Mongols is a retrospective fabrication of the Romanov dynasty, and he asserts that almost nothing in the traditional view of Russian history prior to the fourteenth century can be factually verified.

In his view, Russian and Mongol empires were one and the same entity during the 250 years wrongly referred to as the 'Mongol yoke'. Thus, for Fomenko the Russian Horde was a multi-tribal entity, and the confusion over the name resulted from the fact that the term 'Mongol' is a corruption of 'Mogol', which should be translated as 'Great' rather than referring to a specific area or people. He also emphasises the fact that 'Tartar' means 'horror' or 'hell' in Greek; so 'Tatar-Mogol' meant 'Great Horror', which was the reaction of the West to the raids of the 'Russian' Horde. As Fomenko puts it, the Romanov dynasty manufactured the myth of a historic confrontation between ethnic

Tatars and Russians in the medieval period in order to apply tactics of 'divide and rule', although ethnic Tatars always lived side by side with the Russians. For Fomenko, churchmen and German professors developed the story of the Slavic origins of the Russians who were first humbled by and then schooled in the Mongol invasion (Fomenko and Nosovsky 2008: 68).

Fomenko studied the astronomical phenomena recorded in Ptolemy's *Almagest*, a text from the second century AD that catalogued the positions of 1,028 stars and introduced the concept of the 'epicycle' to explain the retrograde motion of the planets.² Fomenko believes that the *Almagest* actually records astronomical phenomena from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries AD. This is one of the reasons why he claims that Byzantine history from 1143–1453 AD is a mistaken duplicate of history from 830–1143 AD. Based on that argument, he concludes that the traditional (Scaliger's) history loops backwards on three occasions, creating three chronological shifts of 330 years, 1,050 years and 1,800 years. As a consequence the same event is potentially replayed three times. So, in his view, the events described in the Bible and Scaliger's history mostly did happen, but the historians have misplaced them both spatially and temporally. Other suggestions of Fomenko are that Columbus was a Cossack; that Jesus was the Emperor Andronikos I Komnenos, lived in Byzantium in the twelfth century, and was crucified on Joshua's Hill; that the Trojan War and the Crusades were the same historical event; that the Temple of Solomon was the Hagia Sofia in Constantinople, and that the Biblical Solomon was Suleiman I the Magnificent; and that the image of Ivan Grozny was formed from the conjunction of four different kings.

Meanwhile, his opponents claim that he selects just the records that are useful to his theory, and uses them out of context, adding that some such proofs have no value or credibility. Also they criticise that he does not recognise the scientific radiocarbon dating method. Following the publication of his work in English, his publisher, Delamere, announced that it had received venomous complaints. To respond to the critics, Delamere issued a press release challenging scientists to disprove Fomenko's assertions. For that they offered a \$10,000 'cash reward' to anyone who could prove that any human artefacts existed prior to the eleventh century AD with the condition of not using any archaeological, dendrochronological, paleographical and carbon methods. Delamere asserted that excepting such scientific methods, the rest of the proofs had the same academic level as Fomenko – making use of myths for the resolution of social problems.

Fomenko's publisher boasts that hundreds of thousands of copies of his works have been sold at a time when ten thousand is considered an excellent print run for monographs on history. On the other side, some critics have humorously labelled Fomenko 'The Terminator of World History' because so many accepted periods, events and personalities have been expunged from his version of the past. Nonetheless, many scholars in Russia do not take Fomenko's work as a harmless joke (Kharitonovich 1998). For instance, Leonid Milov (1999), a specialist in Medieval Russian chronicles, asserts that the conclusions of New Chronology are 'insane', declaring his 'emotional repugnance' towards Fomenko. Another claim from the established historians is that Fomenko gets too much social attention, since he appears on TV and his books are in the best places of the bookshops.

Historian Dimitry Volodikhin (1999) has made a parallel between the rise of interest in pseudo-history and the rise of interest in occultism in Russia. In his view, this manifests a reaction to the restrictions of the Soviet period and the supposedly strong folk culture tradition in Russia. Other historians define the success of Fomenko as an example of the 'declining standards in Russia', while 'the funding and resources of educational programs in schools have declined and much of the ideological baggage from the Soviet era remains' (Sheiko and Brown 2009: 93). For instance, historian Valentin Yanin (2000), member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, asserts that the current secondary school education in Russia is spawning semi-educated intellectuals who attack official History Departments despite their obvious lack of expertise.

Not an Appropriate Past

The break-up of state socialism generated a world without any obvious interpretive grid, filled with multiform dangers and unidentifiable enemies, characterised as well by an atmosphere of suspicion (Laruelle 2012) and the need to unmake or deconstruct the recent past (Humphrey 2002). This section explores how, in the aftermath of the Soviet Union, the writing of Russian history entered a new phase, in which the society seemed to be hunger for alternative versions of history and 'what if' narratives. Also, the removal of Soviet-era censorship made the publication of nonconformist books much easier, and the widespread disbelief in the official historical narrative created more room for publishing and more public interest in various alternative

versions and conspiracy theories. Hence, the rupture happened in both the production and the reception of pseudo-historiography. As a matter of fact, amateur historians have bloomed in Russia, and thousands of informal memoirs, biographies and historical novels are being published in the country. Often these works are simplistically presented as motivated by nostalgia or by a will to influence contemporary politics and public opinion. However, this popularity seems to be much more complex than that, showing distinct practices of ‘borrowing’ and ‘mixing’ historical facts.

In Russia the number of popular history publications has increased exponentially, despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that the country has begun to regain its lost prestige and confidence. This phenomenon might also be contextualised within two broad factors. The first of which may be described as the *zeitgeist* of post-socialism. Stories about the past speak to actual failures. The second factor is the tendency of pseudo-history to reflect the preoccupations of common people. Foremost, two technological factors have shaped the way pseudo-history has flourished. The first is the development of visual forms, allowing ‘historical documentaries’ to be presented on television. This has fed the public appetite for history, including topics for which there is little empirical evidence. The second has been the emergence of the Internet as a forum in which both the learned and the ignorant can express their views. This has encouraged writers with poor professional training to engage in speculative endeavours in areas of history about which little is known. For those following strict historical methodologies, it is a challenge therefore to compete with pseudo-historians in the market and in the media (Melleuish et al. 2009).

Particularly around periods of crises and breakdowns, there is a retrofitting move back to past forms. Whilst for professional historians the importance of the freedom that began with glasnost was that archives could be consulted, for popular writers the archives were less interesting than the blank pages occulted by the Soviet regime (Sheiko and Brown 2009: 87). Anatoly T. Fomenko, leader of the New Chronology Movement, is here presented as a symptomatic example of attempts to retrofit history in Russia, a phenomenon which is rooted in several factors, as already mentioned above. This article lays no claim to testing definitively the truth or falsehood of the ideas put forward by Fomenko; rather it emphasises the perennial need in Russia to complete its past. Fomenko and his followers use mathematical analysis to claim that the history of human civilisation is several centuries shorter than it is traditionally assumed, and that old chronicles

often provide us with multiple somewhat repetitive versions of one and the same historical event – only narrating it as happening several times, in different cultures and centuries. Paradoxically, Fomenko's publications have received dismissive responses from professional historians, yet attracted numerous groups of amateur followers and generated impressive sales at bookstores.

The proliferation of pseudoscience is a never-ending story somewhat correlated with modernity. Nonetheless, the intensification of the circulation of information and abbreviated thinking make societies more favourable to fast simplified answers to the complex matters that affect them. Indeed, critical studies of history are increasingly asked to reproduce market logics everywhere. So what makes the Russian case different? First of all, we can say that Fomenko's ideas are popular because he finds in history a simple answer to questions such as who the Russians are and how to connect nation and empire (Sheiko and Brown 2009), a matter that is still in the making in Russia. Also, Fomenko tells an old story about Russian identity in a new way, resonating with debates existing in Russian culture for centuries (Sheiko 2004). In Russia, history has traditionally been approached as serving to organise and explain the present, to suture failures and link people emotionally. Specifically, Sheiko and Brown (2009: 25–6) found seven factors explaining the popularity of Fomenko:

- He taps into existing Russian self-identity, specifically the belief in the positive qualities of empire and the universal mission of Russia.
- He addresses the key issue of Russia's origins, important because Russians tend to believe that the past holds answers to the future.
- He has capitalised on new knowledge about Russia's close relationship to Asia, long denied by Church chroniclers, Romanov propagandists and Communist officials.
- He addresses the present geopolitical reality of Russia, which must deal with its relative weakness in relation to the West and its new Asian location.
- He offers seemingly plausible answers to hidden aspects of Russia's conventional history.
- He inspires an audience among the dispossessed, especially the vast reading public that once formed the Soviet intelligentsia.
- He has borrowed from previous attempts to establish a Russian identity, ranging from Slavophilism to Eurasianism.

Conclusion

This article discusses historical thinking in three states that were part of one empire, accounting for how they deal differently with the post-Soviet unravelling. The research takes the displacement of monuments in Estonia, the popularity of pseudo-history in Russia and the re-use of the figure of Stalin in Georgia as symptomatic of wider social processes. Through all these cases, I look at the different responses to the deluge of memoristic material, the new political demands and the emerging canons and practices of commodification of knowledge. The article proposes a synthetic comparative exercise by focusing on the different *mise en scène* of three post-Soviet countries. In Estonia, the re-staging of history has been characterised by the symbolic restoration of the interwar period through the replacement of monuments and restitution laws. In Georgia, we can recognise a handy hybrid retrofitting, recognised in vernacular trials and the haunting of polemical figures. In Russia, the process manifests a post-modern remixability and is conditioned by an imperial logic and a strategy by the government to mobilise the emotions associated to historical forms.

Historical heritage is something that unites and mobilises emotions. Unsurprisingly, the past has been employed to create new political identities and legitimate emerging hegemonies. A large rethinking of history was precipitated by the Soviet ‘collapse’, showing new forms of convergence between the historical and the political. The rewriting of history has been one of the sensitive aspects on which post-Soviet societies were built, yet not only did efforts to articulate collective memory take place but also strategies of constructing history. After the break-up of the USSR, a process of identity creation through the inversion of the past began, a phenomenon which was widespread within the whole former Soviet Union. Recent social and political changes in all these countries have correspondingly produced enormous rifts between new and old memories and regimes of historicity. The variety of experiences is here explained as the product of contingent factors, specific conjunctures, historical patterns and geopolitical positioning. Nonetheless, the process of retrofitting historical narratives is not over yet in any of these societies, as they have not as yet sufficiently solidified and are still undergoing occasional reversals.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Siobhan Kattago, Marcos Farias Ferreira, Pablo Zerm and Nikoloz Gambashidze for their comments and support during the elaboration of this article. Also to Ullrich Kockel and the copy-editors of the journal for their excellent work.

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Notes

1. The show was located in a small chamber under the stairs and in the dark, as the guide had to open the door and turn the lights on for us to come in. In 2011, the government passed a lustration law to open up old records from the KGB archives. Yet some files had to be held back since they contained details of at least 22,000 Georgians who were reportedly working as KGB informers, among them priests of the Georgian Orthodox church.
2. Fomenko insists that his new dates are the result of complex mathematical research of the so-called quantitative features of ancient texts and chronicles. He is not the first scientist to question world chronology. Isaac Newton (1643–1727) wrote *The Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended* in which he took issue with the chronology of the ancient Greeks and used astronomy to recalculate well-known events. Thus, Newton thought that the siege of Troy needed to be moved two hundred years forward from 1183 BC to 965 BC. Newton concluded that national vanity caused the Greeks, Romans, Babylonians, Assyrians and Egyptians to extend the timelines of their histories. These claims were also followed by Russian astronomer Nikolai Morozov (1854–1946). To support his suggestions, Fomenko provides arguments in the form of statistical tables, references to ancient texts and astronomical studies, as we can read in the seven volumes: *History: Fiction or Science?*

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