

Soldiers of Memory: World War II and Its Aftermath in Estonian Post-Soviet Life Stories. Ed. by ENE KÕRESAAR. Rodopi. Amsterdam and New York 2011. 441 pp. ISBN 9789042032439.

“Soldiers of Memory” is a fascinating combination of focused scholarly analysis and World War II participants’ memories in the first voice. The editor of the volume is Ene Kõresaar, who has long participated in the field of Estonian memory studies and currently works as a researcher at Tartu University (Institute of Journalism and Communication). The book contains eight life stories and the same number of articles by leading Estonian scholars from the diverse fields of literary studies, anthropology, sociology, and history. Each biography in the book is paired with a scholarly analysis. In addition, the editor offers a comprehensive introductory article to the volume. Central, however, remain the stories of eight Estonian men, born 1914–26. These are men from rather “ordinary” but often comparable backgrounds, of whom five are to fight in the German and four in the Soviet Army, one escapes to the Finnish ranks, three serve in the Estonian army prior to the war, and two are sent to Gulags after the war. Some of them switched sides or avoided conscription, some tried actively to make the best out of a bad situation, whereas others were content with the hand that fate dealt them. Everyone, however, both then and now, needs to explain what was happening to them in the face of radical social changes; and regardless of all the hazards, they are all survivors. They were also all to live in the Soviet Union and it is only after the collapse of the Soviet Union that the men were able to tell their stories.

These eight life-stories have been written in the atmosphere of the Eastern European “memory boom” of the 1990s. That period was “heavy with remembering, collecting memoirs and revising history.”¹ It was a time for telling the previously hidden, untold, or forbidden stories about the past. Building on this momentum, the Estonian Literary Museum organised various autobiography competitions; out of these, “My Destiny and the Destiny of Those Close to Me in the Labyrinths of History” (1997) and “One Hundred Lives of a Century” (1999) were perhaps the ones that gained the widest publicity and resulted in several published volumes in Estonian.² “Soldiers of Memory” draws on these traditions of writing and collecting autobiographies – seven life-stories in the book were principally gathered in such manner – but also on the network of scholars that has formed around

¹ RUTT HINRIKUS: Eesti elulugude kogu ja selle uurimise perspektiive [The collection of Estonian life stories and their research perspectives], in: *Võim ja kultuur*, ed. by ARVO KRIKMANN and SIRJE OLESK, Tartu 2003, pp. 171–214.

² *Eesti rahva elulood: sajandi sada elulugu* [Estonian life stories: hundred life stories of the century], Vol. 1–2, ed. by RUTT HINRIKUS, Tallinn 2000; *Eesti rahva elulood: elu Eesti ENSV-s* [Estonian life stories: life in the ESSR], Vol. 3, ed. by RUTT HINRIKUS, Tallinn 2003.

the Estonian Life Stories Association.³ It should be noted that the book under review is not the first collection of Estonian life-stories in English. One focusing on traumatic events entitled “Soviet Deportations in Estonia” appeared in 2007.⁴ Two others, “She Who Remembers Survives” (2004) and “Carrying Linda’s Stones” (2006) explicitly centred on the experiences of women.⁵ Another large collection of 25 “Estonian Life Stories” (2009) was compellingly introduced, translated and edited by Tiina Kirss;⁶ it scrutinized mostly the memories of the “interwar generation” (born 1915–40) as does the collection under review here. The current collection stands out, however, with its thematic focus on the war experiences and with a strong emphasis on scholarly interpretation of the materials at hand.⁷

After the annexation of independent Estonia to the Soviet Union in summer 1940, the 1941 German occupation was greeted as a kind of lesser evil by the majority in Estonia.⁸ The onslaught of the Red Army in 1944, conversely, was feared by many, so much so that every tenth inhabitant of Estonia escaped to the West and many more attempted to do so but were too late. Indeed, the Stalinist distrust of borderland populations continued to bring much suffering and culminated with the March 1949 deportations to Siberia. This is the basic context of historical “cogwheels” and “twists” on whose background the narrators tell of their personal “hopes”, “wonders”, and “lucky stars” (if one is to use some of the catchwords from the biography titles in the book).

³ See Estonian Life Stories Association web-page, URL: <http://www2.kirmus.ee/elulood/en/eng.html> (25.10.2011).

⁴ Soviet Deportations in Estonia: Impact and Legacy, ed. by KRISTI KUKK and TOIVO RAUN, Tartu 2007.

⁵ She Who Remembers Survives: Interpreting Estonian Women’s Post-Soviet Life Stories, ed. by TIINA KIRSS, ENE KÕRESAAR and MARJU LAURISTIN, Tartu 2004; Carrying Linda’s Stones: An Anthology of Estonian Women’s Life Stories, ed. by SUZANNE STIVER LIE, LYNDY MALIK, ILVI JÕE-CANNON and RUTT HINRIKUS, Tallinn 2006–2009.

⁶ Estonian Life Stories, ed. by TIINA KIRSS, Budapest and New York 2009.

⁷ It should be noted that two Estonian language collections of autobiographies have appeared with an explicit focus on the German occupation and WW II in Estonia. These books deal with the stories of similar age cohort as “Soldiers of Memory,” there are yet no overlapping autobiographies. See for reference: Sõja ajal kasvanud tüdrukud. Eesti naiste mälestused Saksa okupatsioonist [Girls who grew up in wartime. Estonian women’ memories of German occupation], ed. by RUTT HINRIKUS, Tallinn 2006; Sõjas kasvanud poisid. Eesti meeste mälestused sõjast ja Saksa okupatsioonist [Boys who grew up in wartime. Estonian men’ memories of war and German occupation], ed. by RUTT HINRIKUS, Tallinn 2011.

⁸ OLAF MERTELSMANN: How the Russians Turned into the Image of the “National Enemy” of the Estonians, in: Pro Ethnologia 19 (2005), pp. 43–58. In addition to Soviet repressions of 1940–41, strong historical ties to the former German *Kulturträger* as well as the minuscule Jewish population of Estonia make this idea both more understandable and “digestible”. Out of approx. 4,500 Estonian Jews 1.000 were murdered in the Holocaust, around 500 repressed by the Soviets before Nazi occupation, and slightly less than 3,000 escaped to the Soviet rear, on time.

Returning to the central theme of the collection, it is worthwhile to pay attention to the cover picture of “Soldiers of Memory”. It depicts two Estonian conscripts, probably friends from neighbouring villages, posing together for a photograph somewhere in Estonia in 1944: one wearing a Soviet uniform, the other in a *Waffen-SS* uniform. Indeed, in these years, neighbours and classmates often set out on radically differing paths that potentially “reunited” them again on opposite sides of the front line. This image, therefore, carries the central theme of the book as representative of young men’s social situation at the time; it is about the intermingling of rapidly changing historical conditions, limits to individual agency, and the often life-saving nature of circumstantial effects, such as luck. But this photo is also exceptional as there was almost no way to meet each other in peace at the end of the war; that is the picture of what never took place, when Estonia was annexed to the Stalinist Empire where right and wrong were retroactively established both by discourse and coercion. Further in time, from the present-day perspective, the forty years of Soviet dichotomy of truth and silence laid down much mnemonic dust that the autobiographers need to work through to tell their life-story in the conditions of the “memory-boom” of the restored Estonian republic.

In summary, two problem sets prevail in the book: first, the one of complex links between the individual and the “big structures and large processes” (in wartime Estonia); second, biographical construction of the self and collective-personal memories (in contemporary Estonia). The theoretical frames of memory studies help scholars to place individuals in the “social framework of remembrance,” to handle “how subjectivity is constituted,” to be sensitive both to “personal experience and to pre-existing narratives” as well as to “post-factum” memory-politics.⁹ The autobiographies are compared to unpublished parts of texts, sometimes to archival documents, to the interviews with narrators’ relatives or to other sources.

As for specific contributions by scholars, Aili Aarelaid revisits her former idea of “double mental standards” of the interwar generation (b. ~1910–30). She describes it as a mechanism that allowed the people to deal with the “cultural trauma” caused by the establishment of radically different Soviet order and actually to achieve relative success within these new frames. How much of a post-factum construct – here meaning post-Soviet – such standards are remains an open question. Ene Kõresaar uses her earlier concept of a prolonged “rupture” to focus on the conditions of memory boom in the 1990s. She argues that “rupture” becomes a discursive mode with which that same interwar generation marks the 40–45 Soviet years in their autobiographies reorienting one’s self according to the rhythm of rise fall and rise of the Estonian Republic. Olaf Mertelmann takes a

⁹ ENE KÕRESAAR: Introduction: Remembrance Cultures of World War II and the Politics of Recognition in Post-Soviet Estonia: Biographical Perspectives, in: *Soldiers of Memory*, pp. 1–34, here: p. 17.

colourful narrative of a Soviet army deserter (not the only one in the book!) and lucky wartime adventurer as an illustration of “Homo Sovieticus” in the making. Aigi Ra hi-Tamm rebuilds historical context of an autobiography by comparing her informant’s story to the initially “similar” biographies (all are German Army conscripts) and to their randomly different post-War outcomes. Ra hi-Tamm is rather empathic towards the protagonist, while at the same time revealing from the archive that the autobiographer had concealed his service in the Estonian SS battalion. There is yet another story in the book, whose author hid Home Guard service during the Nazi occupation both from his narrative and also from his daughter as shown by Terje Anepaio, who conducted several interviews with the biographer’s descendants. Tiiu Ja ago makes extensive use of other texts and interviews, as well, discussing the narrative moments of sense of individual agency and sense of “things happening around.” Rutt Hinrikus brings in an interesting dimension by discussing Soviet Estonian public texts regarding WW II from the 1960s and 1970s; even if pushed aside in the 1990s, their motives find their way into contemporary memory culture. Hinrikus shows how then the tropes of Red Army veteran heroism, Soviet labour battalion dark reality, and sceptical Estonian nationalism diffuse in a life-story. Tiina Kirss outlines a specific micro-cohort of the Estonian German army conscripts – the “Czech Hell” survivors. Consequently, she brings a reader close to retaliatory brutality unfolding on Czech lands in May 1945, where all the wearers of a Nazi uniform were potentially subject to revenge by the local partisans. Somewhat ironically for the general frames of the book, the 18-year old narrator escapes death due to an intervention by the Soviet Army officer.

War experiences and remembrances are naturally connected. As Ene Kõresaar explains in her introduction, the WW II veterans’ roles have primarily been evaluated in Estonia today by the contribution to the mythical “battle for Estonian national independence.”¹⁰ With this approach, the assigned labels are the following: the German Army conscripts chose “between two evils” while fighting the Soviets, the Soviet Army veterans claim to be “equal victims” of rough circumstances, and the so-called Finnish Boys who escape to fight the Soviets from Finland, who are in search of a “third way.”¹¹ One can notice a certain tendency for appreciating a German rather than a Soviet “path” both in some veterans’ stories and scholars’ historical contextualisations. This might be explained by the mentioned Estonian wartime realities and by the conditions of remembering after the collapse of the USSR and its legitimising myths. Therefore, Nazis are the “lesser evil,” and even if seeking the “third way,” people would rather end up fighting for or supporting Germans over the Soviets. In a problematic

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 14. Kõresaar refers here to JAAK VALGE: Eesti meeste valikud 1941–1944 [The choices of Estonian men, 1941–1944], in: Sirp, 2.11.2007.

¹¹ KÕRESAAR, Introduction, p. 15.

way, it transpires that siding with the Nazis was not a good idea, mostly because they would not *actually* support the “battle for Estonian national independence”; but what if they had supported this “battle”? “Soldiers of Memory” is agent-centred, largely emic and empathic in interpretation – helping the reader to understand actors’ circumstantial difficulties, even as these created certain “moral blinders.”¹² However, while reading the articles in the second half of the book, one sometimes misses clearer scholarly framing within grand debates, this would help to avoid biographers dispositions “spilling over” into the analytical parts of the book.

As for the selection of biographies in the book, it is a little surprising that there are no stories from more “extreme” sides: by people who either escaped from Estonia in 1944 or by people who had more successful Soviet lives. The first cohort could add to our understanding of how “small” wartime decisions radically altered individuals’ post-war paths. The second cohort might help to clarify how the Soviet collective memory project functioned, under which the Estonian public sphere was subsumed for 40 years.

Although the book offers a well edited and balanced analyses there are some minor issues with its presentation that should perhaps be mentioned. First, the time frames of the life-stories and some articles demonstrate a certain disconnect. For example, Mertelsmann focuses on the idea of “Homo Sovieticus,” whereas his informant tells the reader strictly of the wartime struggles. Kõresaar deals with the narrative rupture in depictions of the Soviet period and Kirss focuses on the war events; the autobiographies their analyses refer to, however, deal conversely either with the war or offer interesting accounts on post-war Soviet life. At times, this leaves the reader wanting more background knowledge that the scholar obviously has from other materials. At times, however, it is hard to understand the link between the life-story frames and the analytic concepts used (e.g. how the wartime survival techniques relate to being “Homo Sovieticus”). Second, the book includes a life-story that is not an autobiography, but is born out of a dialogue between the informant and the scholar and, therefore, represents a different genre. This variety potentially enriches the book, but it also poses questions of authorship, voice, and the nature of remembering. Third, it is sad that the publisher has decided for endnotes over footnotes, moreover, some endnotes refer to the others as “see note X after author Y essay” without a page number. As the editor has thoughtfully commented

¹² “Moral blinders” depict selective interpretation schemes by which the actors choose their larger frame of reference in a manner that does not hurt their sense of “right and wrong”. Such “blinders” are often part of the contemporary grand historical narrative of Estonia that circles around the mentioned leitmotif of the “battle for Estonian national independence” and thereby pays little attention to, for example, contextualising WW II battles in Estonia within the frames of liberating Nazi extermination camps. For more on the “battle for Estonian national independence” see: MAREK TAMM: History as Cultural Memory: Mnemohistory and the Construction of the Estonian Nation, in: Journal of Baltic Studies 39 (2008), pp. 499-516.

on terms and context in endnotes, the potential of making the distant world of war veterans more accessible to readers is partially lost by the cumbersome nature of consulting the notes. Fourth, the book has several translators, consequently the styles vary, sometimes towards rather technical and non-colloquial English, even if the original Estonian language biographies read smoothly.

In summary, “Soldiers of Memory” is a result of an interesting collaborative project by the leading Estonian scholars united by their interests in biographical studies. It is a comprehensive account that balances well between different disciplinary perspectives and historical actors’ voices. Life-stories in the book are captivating and their analyses well founded, they raise challenging, if not omnipresent, questions about historical agency and ethics of decision-making. All in all, “Soldiers of Memory” is a valuable contribution to the field of memory studies and to the debates surrounding World War II and its legacy in Eastern Europe.

UKU LEMBER

Pēdējais karš: Atmiņa un traumas komunikācija [Der letzte Krieg: Erinnerung und Kommunikation eines Traumas]. Hrsg. von MĀRTIŅŠ KAPRĀNS und VITA ZELČE. Latvijas Universitāte – Sociālo zinātņu fakultāte – Sociālo un politisko pētījumu institūts. [Riga] 2010. 299 S. ISBN 9789934819407.

Der vorliegende Sammelband ist der erste in einer Reihe von Publikationen, die im Rahmen eines multi-disziplinären Projekts zu „sozialem Gedächtnis und Identität“ entstehen. Das Projekt ist Teil eines staatlich geförderten Forschungsprogramms „nationale Identität“, in dem überwiegend Wissenschaftler verschiedener lettischer Forschungseinrichtungen zu Aspekten lettischer nationaler Identität, Kultur und Geschichte forschen. Dieser Band nun befasst sich mit dem Thema des kulturellen Traumas und seiner Kommunikation im öffentlichen Raum und präsentiert die Forschungsarbeiten von überwiegend jüngeren lettischen Wissenschaftlern der Geschichts- und Kommunikationswissenschaften. Die Arbeiten beziehen sich auf die Ereignisse der Jahre 1939–1949, die in der heutigen lettischen Wahrnehmung von besonderer Bedeutung sind: der Verlust der Eigenstaatlichkeit 1940, die deutsche Besatzung, der Widerstand, die Partisanenkämpfe und die Massendeportationen von 1941 und 1949. Gemeinsames, durchaus praxisorientiertes Anliegen der Autoren ist es, so die