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# Revisionist national narratives in the memoirs of Estonian and Latvian Waffen-SS Legionnaires

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## ABSTRACT

The Baltic experience of World War II is underrepresented in European and global collective memory. Therefore, selected memoirs of Estonian and Latvian Waffen-SS Legionnaires, previously not studied in depth, are analyzed. Theories of attribution and nodal points are applied to determine how national narratives are constructed and their relation to collective memory. Overall, the authors produce similar narratives that justify military collaboration with the Nazis as having been in the national interest. This supports the argument that the collective memory of contemporary Estonia and Latvia is based upon a revision of established narratives of World War II and the Holocaust.

**KEYWORDS** Latvian Legionnaires; Estonian legionnaires; Waffen-SS; memoir; attribution theory; nodal points of discourse; nationalism studies; collective memory; World war II; Holocaust

## Introduction

Since the reemergence of the independent Baltic states in the early 1990s, numerous memoirs from veterans of the Estonian and Latvian Waffen-SS Legions, who remained in the Soviet Union after World War II, have been published. Up to now, these memoirs have been used by historians to complement other sources when discussing the historical development of the legions (Ezergailis 1996b, 378; Ezergailis, 1996b 313; Hiio, Maripuu, and Paavle 2006; xviii; Kott, Bubnys, and Kraft 2017, 146) and Estonian and Latvian attitudes to the legions at the time (Ezergailis 1996a; 55, note 21; Svencs 2013, 75; Kott, Bubnys, and Kraft 2017, 146). Research on the collective memory of the Latvian Legion also cite these texts (Neiburgs 2011; Zelče 2011). Inesis Feldmanis argues that these memoirs can help illustrate historical events but do not contribute to the search for historical truth and cannot replace objective academic research, as they are subjective and incomplete (Feldmanis 2015, 6).

Ene Kõresaar, however, has studied the memoir of an Estonian Legionnaire in-depth through the lens of nationalism studies. Kõresaar analyzes the autobiography of Boris Takk using the postcolonialist concept of ‘prolonged rupture’ – a common theme in post-Soviet Estonian historical narratives. She finds that Takk presents World War II and life in Soviet Estonia as part of an abnormal historical period, during which invading foreign powers destroyed the Estonian way of life. Consequently, Estonia sought a ‘third

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way,' resisting and enduring Nazi and Soviet occupation with the long-term goal of regaining national independence (Kõresaar 2011a).

In this article, the author approaches the memoirs of Estonian and Latvian Legionnaires as Kõresaar has – to understand how national narratives have been constructed in their respective nations after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Memoirs are a useful source, as they are a popular medium through which the publics of Estonia and Latvia are acquainted with a nationalist historical perspective prohibited under communism (Rozenšteine et al. 2011; Kõresaar 2011b). The subjectivity of these texts sheds light on the Baltic experience of World War II, which is underrepresented in European and global historiography and memory culture. Their individuality opposes the homogeneity of official narratives of the war and their Baltic perspective challenges the predominance of history written by the victors (Assmann 1999, 2011; Snyder 2010). Comparing texts from Estonia and Latvia also provides an opportunity to determine to what extent a common Baltic nationalist narrative of the war exists today.

The research aim is to apply theory from nationalism studies to delve behind the superficial retelling of life stories and determine how the authors create national narratives. Two research questions are addressed. Firstly, how do the authors construct narratives and key individuals and groups? Secondly, what differences are there in the Estonian and Latvian narratives and how can they be explained? To answer these questions, firstly, historical background is provided to understand the experiences of Estonia and Latvia during World War II and the period in which the memoirs were published. Secondly, conclusions derived from the analysis of the memoirs are compared and contrasted to determine the extent to which the Estonian and Latvian authors share a common perspective on their wartime experiences. Thirdly, the issue of how this perspective relates to the collective memories and national identities of the Baltic states and Europe is discussed.

Three criteria are applied in the selection of the primary sources. Firstly, memoirs published as standalone books, rather than in journals or magazines, are chosen, because they are more substantial and thus provide more analyzable material. Secondly, memoirs by staff and general officers (those with the SS-equivalent rank of major and above) are avoided, as the intent is to focus on the experiences of relatively ordinary soldiers. Thirdly, only memoirs published by authors living in Estonia and Latvia, rather than in the Estonian and Latvian international diasporas, are used. This is because memoirs published in the diasporas were affected by different factors (Plakans 2011, 383–383) compared to those published in independent Estonia and Latvia. They should thus be considered separately.

According to the catalogs of the Estonian and Latvian national libraries, 9 Estonian memoirs (Köverjalg 1994, 2006; Gailit 1995; Põldmäe 1995; Iltal 1997; Rent 1997; Käärman 2000; Loorpärg 2006; Nagel 2011) and 12 Latvian memoirs (Kronentāls 1995, 2009; Aluts 1997; Barkāns 2001; Dreimanis 2002; Riemeris 2003; Liepiņš 2004–2006; Hartmanis 2006; Lācis 2006; Zeps 2013; Bankovičs 2014; Siliņš 2019) meet the above-stated criteria. From these, three from each country are selected to be analyzed. The author finds that many memoirs deal only with the day-to-day experience of the soldier and are not reflective. Therefore, the memoirs that are the most reflective and express different points of view regarding the topics relevant to this article are chosen.

The structure of this article is as follows. Firstly, the theories of attribution and nodal points of discourse, which have previously not been applied to the study of memoirs in Baltic historiography, are discussed. They allow the reader to understand the discursive

intent of the authors. Due to the political context in which the memoirs were published, this is understood as being the construction of national narratives. Secondly, a historiographical basis for understanding the sources is established. Thirdly, the chosen memoirs from the Estonian and Latvian authors are analyzed in separate sections. Both sections begin with background on the history of each nation during World War II and the period in which the memoirs were published. Finally, insights derived from the analysis of the memoirs are compared and contrasted to produce final conclusions. These concern the extent to which the Estonian and Latvian authors share a similar perspective on their wartime experience, and what the wider implications of this are for Baltic and European collective memory and identity.

The first theory to be applied is attribution theory, an area of social psychology. It is concerned with how behavior of the self and other individuals or groups is perceived. A number of biases are observable in attribution. Individuals tend to underestimate the influence of external factors on the behavior of others and overestimate that of internal characteristics. Conversely, they tend to ascribe their own successes to internal characteristics and blame failures on external factors. Additionally, there is a tendency to view the behavior of out-groups as having sinister motivations (Bordens and Horowitz 2012, 75, 83–4).

Yehudith Auerbach applies attribution theory to the Israeli – Palestinian conflict. She argues that modern Israel and Palestine are both relatively young nations that feel a strong impetus to legitimize themselves through national narratives, in which the above attribution biases plays a role (Auerbach 2010, 100–2). Auerbach's interpretation of attribution theory is applied to the selected memoirs in this article. It is thought that the authors will demonstrate attribution biases while crafting national narratives from their wartime experiences.

The second theory is that of nodal points of discourse (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 112). Nodal points can be understood as key, recurring themes used to establish rhetorical hegemony in a discourse. Two scholars have applied this theory to Latvian national narratives. Daina Stukuls Eglitis shows that Latvian nationalist texts reference the spatial and temporal normality of the Latvian nation. Spatial normality is Europe and the West. This refers to the geographic location of Latvia, but also its national ideology. The temporal normality of Latvia refers to its true 'place in time.' This is the romanticized period of the interwar republic (1918–40), which is referred to as a golden age (Eglitis 2002, 16–17). Kõresaar's application of the 'prolonged rupture' concept to Estonian discourse is similar to Eglitis' normalities Kõresaar (2011a, 344). Ammon Cheskin (2012, 327) refers to these normalities as nodal points of discourse and summarizes them as 'Europe,' 'democracy,' and 'prosperity.' Cheskin's interpretation of Eglitis' normalities is preferred due to its succinctness. The nodal point of 'democracy,' however, which relates to the post-Soviet aspirations of Latvia, cannot be used in the analysis of the memoirs of the Estonian and Latvian Legionnaires. This is because the period of interwar normality to which they look back was characterized by the rule of authoritarian regimes in both countries. Therefore, Cheskin's three nodal points are condensed into two for the purposes of this article: 'Europe' and 'independence' (the latter includes 'prosperity'). Consequently, it is assumed that Estonian and Latvian Waffen-SS veterans will refer to the rightful status of their nations as independent and European. It is suspected, however, that they will focus less on these themes and more on their own personal experiences (Kõresaar 2011b, 8–9), which may not conform to the nationalist historical orthodoxies of the contemporary Baltic states.

Key perspectives on European memory serve as the overarching historiographical lens through which the memoirs are analyzed. Since the fall of communism and the (re) emergence of democratic eastern European nation-states, the frozen memory of the Cold War status quo has thawed. Numerous national narratives and interpretations of history are now hotly contested (Judt 2007, 9–10). The memoirs of *Waffen-SS* veterans contain perspectives that challenge the former orthodoxies enforced by the West and the Soviet Union.

One of the fissures that has opened in European memory is between western and eastern European states (Assmann 2007, 16–17). The former view the Holocaust as their ‘foundational memory,’ while the latter construct their national identities as victims of communist oppression (Assmann 2013, 27). By contrast, the official memory of the Russian Federation is grounded on the Soviet liberation of eastern Europe from fascism and maintained through the suppression of the memory of victims of Soviet repression (34).

An important and controversial development in recent years is the campaign, led by post-communist states, for a compromise between western and eastern European historical memory at an institutional level. This is a ‘new European memory’ that equates the crimes of fascism and communism. Since the fall of communism, this view of history has become hegemonic in many eastern European states. It has been heavily criticized due to its appropriation of the imagery of the Holocaust and instrumentalization to obfuscate eastern European collaboration in the genocide of the Jews (Mälksoo 2014; Katz 2016, 2017; Radonić 2018; Subotić 2019).

Divisions within European memory have produced conflicting interpretations of eastern European *Waffen-SS* soldiers. According to the Western Holocaust and the Russian liberation from fascism narratives, these men are Nazi collaborators and former members of a genocidal organization. By contrast, in Estonia and Latvia, the Nazi occupation is typically viewed as having been less damaging to the nation than the Soviet occupations. Therefore, those who fought alongside the Nazis present themselves, and are often viewed as, national freedom fighters (Kaprāns 2016; Kõresaar 2019, 172). This perspective, however, is certainly not universal in Estonia and Latvia, even within the titular ethnicities. At an official level, the Estonian and Latvian governments have distanced themselves from commemorating veterans of the Nazi armed forces as freedom fighters, due to international pressure (Rozenšteine et al. 2011, 152; Kõresaar 2019, 188–92).

While these divides in European memory have been noted, there have also been efforts at the academic level for unification (Assmann 2013, 30). Scholars have advocated for harmonization through the focus on individual experiences of World War II in eastern Europe. They argue that the acknowledgment of the victims of both Nazi and Soviet crimes should be the basis for reconciliation (for example, Dean 2004; Snyder 2010; Subotić 2019). Reading the memoirs of *Waffen-SS* veterans should be a part of this process, due to the contested status of their authors as both victims and perpetrators. Rather than assigning them to simplistic categories, they should be understood as individuals, who made choices under conditions imposed upon them by occupying regimes. Nonetheless, this must be done while being mindful that their choices, regardless of motivation, led them to become members of a genocidal organization involved in a war of annihilation (Bartov 2003, 12). Though they, or their units, may not have committed war crimes, it is ahistorical to think that Estonian and Latvian

Legionnaires participated in a strictly conventional and 'separate' war exclusively between themselves and the Red Army, as some claim (Holmila 2013, 218).

## Memoirs of Estonian Waffen-SS Legionnaires

Upon their occupation of Estonia in 1941, Nazi authorities initially refused the formation of large Estonian military units. Estonians did, however, volunteer for Wehrmacht and SS units tasked with 'security' behind the Eastern Front (Hiio 2011, 268). Security was a euphemistic term used to disguise genocide, in which Estonian units were involved (Birn 2001; 183, 188; Hiio, Maripuu, and Paavle 2006, xviii, xxi). Due to the worsening situation for Nazi Germany and successful lobbying by Estonian students and youth, a voluntary Estonian Waffen-SS Legion was formed in late August 1942 (Raun 2002, 158).

By February 1944, approximately 15,000 men had served in the Estonian Legion (Lumans 2006, 296). In late July 1944, Nazi Germany began to evacuate its troops from Estonia. The Estonian Legion was regrouped in Silesia and Czechoslovakia, where it fought until the Nazi capitulation. Estonian Legionnaires were then captured by the Allies. Those held by the Soviets were sent to prisoner-of-war camps or executed, while those held by the British and Americans were deemed to be forced foreign conscripts and therefore able to emigrate to the West (Hiio 2011, 272).

In Estonia, public discussion of service in the Nazi military only became possible during the dissolution of the Soviet Union from the late 1980s (Kõresaar 2011a, 344). During this period, much autobiographical writing appeared in Estonia – one aspect of nationalists regaining control over historical memory. Estonia was differentiated from other post-communist countries by the numerous written, rather than oral historical, responses to public appeals for life stories from various institutions (Kõresaar 2011b, 3). Two of the memoirs chosen to be analyzed were part of one such project by the Estonian Academy of Defense (Kõverjalg 1994; Gailit 1995). Those who fought in the Nazi armed forces during World War II sought recognition that they had done so to fight for Estonian independence. While veterans wrote to justify their choices and ideologies in their wartime context, their main concern was the confrontation of their own pasts (Kõresaar 2011b, 3–9). Therefore, while having individual significance for the authors, the memoirs of Estonian Legionnaires are important sources for the way in which Estonian collective memory and national identity have been constructed after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The memoirs of three Estonian Legionnaires are analyzed. *I Survived: Memories from the War and Prison Camps* (1997) by Harri Rent was published commercially. *War and Fates: As a Schoolboy from Viljandi into the Estonian Legion* (1994) by Ants Kõverjalg is part of an educational series by the Estonian Defense Academy (Kõverjalg 1994). The two memoirs share a similar form and purpose. They begin from the childhoods of the authors and cover their time in the Estonian Legion (and, for Rent, Soviet captivity). Both Rent and Kõverjalg state broader goals in writing their memoirs. Rent intends to demonstrate the patriotic mood in Estonia during the war years, the value of tolerance, and how hatred leads to criminal acts (Rent 1997, 293). Kõverjalg admonishes contemporary Estonian youth. In comparison to the wartime generation, he feels they neglect patriotism and martial values (Kõverjalg 1994, 25). Karl Gailit's book, *An Estonian Soldier under Attack: A Reporter from the Battlefield* (1995), differs in form from those above. It is a collection of articles written between 1992 and 1994 that combines the author's

personal experiences with an operational history of the Estonian Legion. Like Kõverjalg's memoir, it was published in the educational series from the Estonian Academy of Defense. The central theme is the legionnaires' selfless defense of Estonia (Gailit 1995, 54). Although they share a similar patriotic message, the above memoirs were selected because they offer the perspectives of a conscript, a volunteer, and a war correspondent.

All the selected Estonian authors came from similar middle-class, nationalist, and military backgrounds. These are important in how they construct their memoirs and are referenced later. Rent was born in Paldiski in 1924 and was involved in the military cadets as a boy (Rent 1997, back cover text, 3). He was studying at a technical college when he was conscripted to the Estonian Legion in March 1943 (Rent 1997, 20; Sulbi 2010; Wikipedia 2020a). After the war and his imprisonment by the Soviets until 1951, Rent returned to Tallinn and worked first as a factory worker and later as a taxi driver, until 1989. At this time, he became involved in the Estonian independence movement and military history society. After Estonia regained independence, he worked in the Estonian military until 1999 (Sulbi 2010; Wikipedia 2020a). Rent died in 2010 (Pesur 2010).

Kõverjalg was born to a family of farmers in Viljandi in 1926 (1994, back cover text, 6). His father served in the Estonian army and then the national guard (7, 10). While Kõverjalg attended the gymnasium, he, like Rent, was involved in the military cadets (19, 25, 27). Avoiding imprisonment by the Soviets after the war, he became a teacher, then an academic. Kõverjalg worked at numerous institutions, including, after Estonia regained independence, the Estonian National Defense College. He died in 2017 (Uudist 2017).

The son of a miller and nephew of the writer August Gailit, Karl Gailit, was born in Võru county in 1922 (Sarv 2019; Talivee 2021). In 1943, he traveled to Berlin to attend journalism courses, then became a war correspondent with the 20th Estonian Division of the Waffen-SS (Lehepuu 1998; Gailit 1995, back cover text). After the war and his release from Soviet captivity in 1957, Gailit worked in a factory until 1993 (Gailit 1995, 8). In 1992, at the encouragement of fellow members of the Estonian Academic Military History Society, Gailit began to write numerous historical articles about the Estonian Legion. He died in 1998 (Lehepuu 1998).

### ***Attribution theory and the Estonian Legionnaires***

The three authors emphasize active motivations when explaining enlistment in the Estonian Legion. An appeal to martial values influenced Rent and Kõverjalg (Rent 1997; 8, 23, 26; Kõverjalg 1994, 7, 25, 54). Revenge was also a motivation for both men, but for Kõverjalg in particular. Under the first Soviet occupation, some of Rent's family had suffered (1997, 20), while Kõverjalg's father had been arrested, deported, and executed (1994, 40–1, 69).

According to the authors, the Estonian Legionnaires fought a patriotic war distinct from the Nazi – Soviet conflict. Their stated goal was to defend Estonian territory from the Soviets, after which the Allies would guarantee Estonia's independence, as they had after World War I (Rent 1997, 136; Gailit 1995; 9–11; Kõverjalg 1994, 86). The struggle of the Estonian Legion against the Soviet Union is presented as a national humanitarian effort, supported by the Estonian people (Gailit 1995; 27, 84; Kõverjalg 1994, 90–1, 129, 143). This argument that the Estonian Legionnaires fought a separate war mirrors that



of Finnish Waffen-SS veterans (Holmila 2013, 218). It is also similar to that of Waffen-SS volunteers from Germany and other countries, who claim they fought only to defend Europe from Bolshevism (Mackenzie 1997; 137–8; Smith, Poulsen, and Christensen 1999, 95; Carrard 2010; chapter 7; Wilke 2011, 126, 379, 405). Clearly, the ‘separate war thesis,’ or a version of it, has been universally employed by veterans of the Nazi armed forces to distance themselves from the Holocaust and emphasize their patriotism.

In the Estonian memoirs, the depiction of the Nazi authorities and individual Germans ranges from critical to positive. The behavior of the Nazi authorities is often attributed to sinister motivations, such as bellicosity, racism, narcissism, and a conqueror’s mentality. Observations about this are made after contact with German soldiers and Polish civilians in Latvia and Poland, and after hearing rumors of the brutal mistreatment of Soviet prisoners of war and Jews (Rent 1997; 10, 30, 135, 137, 150; Kõverjalg 1994, 58, 70, 101). Gailit displays only general disappointment with Nazi policy in Estonia, which he attributes to the selfish pursuit of German national interests (1995, 75, 113).

Kõverjalg, however, presents a more mixed image of individual Germans. Initial encounters with German soldiers gave him a brave and courteous first impression (Kõverjalg 1994, 54–5). He also writes that the Estonian Legionnaires admired one senior Waffen-SS officer who died trying to save wounded Estonians (74). Thus, the Germans appear to be motivated by bravery and honor. This praise, which contradicts previous criticism about German arrogance and brutality, reflects a paradox evident in many accounts by non-German Waffen-SS soldiers. That is, that men valued the opportunity to learn from and fight in the Nazi armed forces, while simultaneously being disdainful of the Germans’ superciliousness and brutality in the occupation of their countries (Carrard 2010; chapter 6; Böhler and Gerwarth 2017; Westerlund 2019, 20–1).

The three authors attribute the actions of the Soviet Union to a desire to destroy and dominate its neighbors. The authors accuse it of war crimes against civilians, such as the bombing of defenseless Estonian cities and the subsequent colonization and Russification of Estonia (Gailit 1995, 112; Rent 1997; 14, 151, 216–17, 219; Kõverjalg 1994, 35; 90, 134–5). The former narrative derives from the Nazi propaganda of the time, which constantly railed against ‘terror attacks’ by Allied air forces on German and Nazi-occupied cities (Carrard 2010, chapter 5). The latter narrative reflects the post-Soviet Baltic view that Soviet occupation represented a targeted genocide against the titular ethnicities, worse than Nazi occupation (Kaprans 2016; Radonić 2018, 483; Subotić 2019; chapter 4; Kõresaar 2019, 172).

While Rent and Kõverjalg attribute expansionism as the motive of the Soviet regime, they attribute both positive and negative motives to Soviet individuals. Rent evaluates behavior through martial values and patriotism. On one hand, he writes positively about a captured Soviet officer who kept his cool when faced with a potential lynching by Estonian Legionnaires (Rent 1997, 63–4). On the other hand, Soviet defectors in the Nazi army are perceived as traitors to the Russian nation (136). Kõverjalg, by contrast, shows sympathy for anti-communist Soviet soldiers who surrendered during the Nazi invasion of Estonia and sympathizes about their brutal treatment by the Nazis (Kõverjalg 1994, 58). These two understandings of the behavior of Soviet individuals reflect the beliefs of the individual authors but also represent a common view of the war as a Manichean conflict between a communist regime that disregarded or crushed individual spirit and a righteous Estonian resistance.



The three authors paint a rosy picture of actively and positively motivated Estonians fighting a separate war against Soviet aggressors, unrelated to the crimes of the Nazi regime. This narrative is evident in many of the postwar accounts of Waffen-SS veterans from Germany and elsewhere. The Estonian Legionnaires attribute the behavior of the Nazi authorities and some German individuals to various sinister motivations, though the image presented is not entirely negative. This reflects the conflicting attitudes held by non-German Waffen-SS soldiers about simultaneously being occupied by a brutal regime, while also being able to train and fight in its prestigious army against the hated Soviets. The behavior of the Soviet regime is attributed to one sinister motivation – the desire to destroy and dominate its neighbors. This is done so in a way that parrots Nazi propaganda and reflects the post-communist Baltic conception of the Soviet Union as a genocidal regime. The behavior of Soviet individuals is interpreted differently by the authors, yet still in a way that presents the war as an existential struggle between the evil Soviet Union and the good Estonian nation.

### ***The nodal points of independence and Europe in the Estonian memoirs***

The narratives of the three memoirs analyzed are constructed on the premise that Estonia is a naturally independent nation. Rent (1997, 12, 15–17) asserts that the first Soviet occupation was a dark period that violated the natural state of Estonian independence, which explains why Estonians initially welcomed the Nazis as liberators. Gailit (1995, 9, 11, 27) and Köverjalg (1994, 55) present the Estonian Legion as an Estonian-led venture to prevent a reoccupation by the Soviet Union. The above views reflect the predominance of the ‘prolonged rupture’ concept of the Soviet era in contemporary Estonian collective memory (Köresaar 2011a, 344).

The authors demonstrate how, despite serving in Nazi uniform, the Estonianness of the legionnaires remained evident (Rent 1997, 25; Köverjalg 1994, 100). Gailit and Köverjalg provide several examples of how the patriotism of the Estonian Legionnaires was openly demonstrated through spontaneous singing of the national anthem, refusal to leave Estonian territory, and fighting beneath the national flag (Gailit 1995; 82, 85, 87; Köverjalg 1994, 69). The idea of the separate war is evident here: the inconvenient fact that the legionnaires fought in Hitler’s army is discarded to create a tale of Estonians battling the Soviets alone. The memoirs also stress that Estonians shared an affinity with other nationalities who were victims of the Soviet and Nazi regimes, such as Poles, Jews, and Central Asians (Rent 1997; 12, 143; Köverjalg 1994, 72, 86). Such self-victimization and appropriation of the suffering of groups who were targeted for annihilation by the Nazis, with the assistance of non-German collaborators, is a common feature of Waffen-SS apologists (Wilke 2011, 126) and the national narratives of post-communist states (Radonić 2018; Subotić 2019).

To distance them from the European Estonians and Germans, Soviet NKVD soldiers are portrayed as Asian brutes (Köverjalg 1994, 35) who contrast starkly with polite, Aryan Nazi soldiers (54–5). Rent, in a racist manner, believes that “the [Germans’] pattern of behavior reflects the European way of thinking, where trust is natural, versus an Asiatic [Soviet] mind-set where... everyone is suspected” (1997, 56). Comical anecdotes about contact between the Estonians and Soviets during the first Soviet occupation depict the Soviet people as uncultured and backward (Rent 1997, 13; Köverjalg 1994, 32). Again, the impact of Nazi propaganda, which demonized the Soviet people as

a subhuman, rampaging horde, is evident (Bartov 1991, 152; Carrard 2010; ch. 5; Böhler and Gerwarth 2017).

In contrast to the explicit cultural and racial differences between the Estonians and the Soviets, the cultural and racial affinity of the Estonians and Germans is largely implicit. The authors state that cooperation between the Estonians and Germans was primarily due to their mutual enemy (Rent 1997, 20; Gailit 1995, 112; Kõverjalg 1994, 59). There are instances, however, where the authors admired the Germans, as previously mentioned (Kõverjalg 1994; 54–5; Rent 1997, 41–3). In comparison, the atrocities of the Nazi regime are largely unremarked upon. Yet Kõverjalg (1994, 101) does state that he found it ‘incomprehensible to the human mind what darkness had fallen on the largest cultural nation in Europe,’ when he learned about a concentration camp for Jews in Estonia. This statement fits with his and Rent’s interpretation of Soviet atrocities, which are understood in an opposite way: as originating from the innate Asianness of the Soviet people. Again, this reflects Nazi propaganda that framed the war as a racial conflict and aids the Estonians’ argument that their country has always been part of Europe.

The Estonian authors present the Estonian Legionnaires as having fought to restore the rightful independence of the Estonian nation. They stress that they were victims, not sympathizers, of the Nazis and appropriate the suffering of persecuted ethnicities. The Soviet Union and its people are presented as Asiatic and barbarous. Stemming from Nazi wartime propaganda, this characterization serves to contrast the Soviets with the European and civilized Estonians and Germans – both members of a superior race.

### **Memoirs of Latvian Waffen-SS Legionnaires**

Hitler was initially opposed to large Latvian military formations (Lumans 2006, 263). Despite this, SS auxiliary police units consisting of Latvian volunteers were formed to assist in the murder of Jews and other groups, from the beginning of Nazi occupation in July 1941 (266). These units were later renamed and deployed both to and behind the Eastern Front as ‘anti-partisan’ forces, where they continued to be involved in genocide (Ezergailis 1996a; 324–9; Lumans 2006; 267–8, 306–9; Kazrytski 2016, 376). As Nazi Germany began to lose the war and its need for manpower grew, Latvian units were increasingly assigned to frontline combat. The Latvian Waffen-SS Legion was created when a number of Latvian units were consolidated in February 1943 (Lumans 2006, 271–3). At the end of the war, between 110,000 to 115,000 mostly conscripted Latvian men served in the Nazi armed forces (Feldmanis 2005, 127; Böhler and Gerwarth 2017). The exact figure in the Latvian Legion is difficult to state, due to differing definitions of the formation (Lumans 2006, 296).

In 1944–5, Latvia was again occupied by the Soviet Union. Latvian Legionnaires, like their Estonian counterparts, were held by the Allies as prisoners of war. Those held by the Western Allies were absolved of any association with the criminal SS organization, due to their perceived status as forced conscripts, and free to emigrate to the West (Ezergailis 1997; 93–4; Lumans 2006, 389). The Soviet authorities, by contrast, imprisoned or executed captured legionnaires (Lumans 2006, 394).

It was only in the 1990s, when Latvia regained its independence, that former Latvian Legionnaires could freely publish their memoirs (Zelče 2011, 128). The memoirs of Latvian Legion veterans fit into the wider context of the historical reassessment taking place in the Baltic states. Key aspects of this were the redefinition of the Soviet period as

an occupation and the consideration of historical perspectives and experiences hitherto suppressed under communism (Plakans 2011, 436–40). The memoirs of Latvian Legionnaires are thus important sources regarding the issues of Latvian collaboration with Nazi Germany, Latvian involvement in the Holocaust and other atrocities, and the perception of the Soviet legacy.

The memoirs of three Latvian Legionnaires are analyzed. The memoirs of Ziedonis Siliņš and Vilnis Bankovičs, titled, respectively, *Notes of a Latvian Legionnaire* (2019) and *Los, Los! Davai, Davai! World War II in my Memories, 1940–1950* (2014), are similar in form. They are both substantial books that cover the childhood, Latvian Legion service, and postwar captivity of the authors. Additionally, Bankovičs wishes to understand the origins of the national insecurity of Latvians, which, he feels, originate from the abuses of occupying powers (Bankovičs 2014, 15).

The memoir of Visvaldis Lācis differs from the above two. It is substantially shorter (only 6 pages) and serves as part of the introduction to his book, *The Latvian Legion in the Light of Truth* (2006). This attempts to prove the innocence of the Latvian Legion against accusations that it consisted of Nazi sympathizers and participated in genocide. Instead, Lācis emphasizes that the Latvian Legion was made up of patriots, who fought exclusively against the Red Army for Latvian independence. The book is written with the contemporary political situation of Latvia in mind: the suffering of Latvians at the hands of the Soviet authorities during World War II is used to trivialize accusations of maltreatment against the contemporary Latvian state by Russian-speaking politicians (8). The more nationalist text of Lācis is compared with the more individualist texts of Bankovičs and Siliņš because, taken together, they provide a spectrum of the various perspectives of Latvian Legionnaires. These stemmed from different socio-economic, cultural, and political backgrounds.

Ziedonis Siliņš was born in 1923 to a working-class family in *Maskavas forštate*, an inner-city, ethnically diverse district of Riga. Though his family spoke Latvian, Siliņš grew up with Russian-speaking neighbors, studied Russian at school, and became fluent in the language (2019, 14). As a youth, he worked in skilled manufacturing (37). In March 1943, Siliņš responded to an enlistment order for the Latvian Legion in the newspaper (60). He lived in Tallinn after his release from Soviet captivity in 1951 and died in 1999 (Davidjants 2015, 243–51).

Vilnis Bankovičs was born to a middle-class family in Ogre in 1924. His father was a teacher and Latvian patriot (2014, 15–16). Bankovičs himself was studying at a teachers' college when Latvia was first occupied by the Soviet Union in 1940. In 1943, he and his classmates were conscripted. After the war and his release from imprisonment in 1950, Bankovičs returned to live in Latvia (377–8).

Visvaldis Lācis was born in Valmiera in 1924. He was raised and educated in nationalist, pro-state circles (2006, 7). Lācis' father had fought for Latvian independence following World War I and then became a mid-ranked state police official. His mother worked as a low-ranked civil servant. At school, Lācis was given a patriotic education and aspired to become an officer in the Latvian army. In autumn 1941, motivated by anti-Soviet sentiment, Lācis volunteered for a Latvian military company organized under the Nazi occupation. He became a noncommissioned officer in the Latvian Legion after its creation in early 1943. After the war, Lācis (2006, 8–12) avoided imprisonment by the Soviet authorities and undertook tertiary education in various

academic fields, subsequently working as a publicist, linguist, and historian. He became a nationalist politician during the Latvian independence movement and served as a member of the Latvian parliament from 2006 to 2011 (Wikipedia 2020b). Lācis died in 2020 (Delfi 2020).

### ***Attribution theory and the Latvian Legionnaires***

The memoirs of Siliņš and Bankovičs emphasize the Latvian Legionnaires' lack of control over their fates. They explain that they had little choice but to obey the conscription order (Siliņš 2019, 60; Bankovičs 2014, 43). For Bankovičs, his choice of labor, rather than military, service was not respected, as he was deployed to the front line regardless (43–4). This expressed lack of control reflects the wider view in Latvian collective memory that during World War II, Latvians were purely victims, tossed back and forth between the Nazis and Soviets (Kaprāns 2016).

While service for Bankovičs (2014, 72) was compelled by decree, he does recount how he and the other legionnaires were motivated by a duty to defend their nation. Like the Estonians, they hoped that the Western Allies would intervene to ensure the independence of their country after the war. Consequently, it was considered imperative that Latvia have some kind of national army to resist Soviet reoccupation before support arrived. The history of how Latvia first gained its independence after World War I is cited as precedent (Bankovičs 2014, 73). Therefore, obedience to the law was justified as being in the best interests of the nation. The separate war narrative (Holmila 2013, 218) is thus used to justify collaboration with Nazi Germany and distance Latvians from any involvement in its genocidal project.

In contrast to Bankovičs, Siliņš does not mention the patriotic imperative to defend Latvia from the Soviet Union. Instead, explanations for his actions are individualist. He writes that he reported for military service because he was 'young, dumb, and, most importantly, obedient to the law' (Siliņš 2019, 11). The lack of nationalism evident in Siliņš's text is probably due to his working-class background and upbringing in an ethnically diverse district, where he and his family had close connections to Russian speakers (14). The continued existence of a bourgeois, nationalist Latvian state was, therefore, not seen as something for which to die by the author and his milieu (Lumans 2006, 115).

In addition to coercion and patriotism, Siliņš and Bankovičs mention some of the more opportunistic reasons for which men joined the legion, such as a hunger for power or the chance to wear an attractive uniform (Siliņš 2019, 62; Bankovičs 2014, 73). Fear and survival are also described as major motivations. Disdain for both sides in the Nazi – Soviet war resulted in many Latvian Legionnaires cautiously biding their time, trying not to be killed before the inevitable Nazi defeat (Siliņš 2019; 60–1, 69; Bankovičs 2014, 43, 73, 135, 157). These more worldly motivations undermine the notion that Latvians fought enthusiastically for their country against the Soviets but still maintain the image of Latvians purely as victims of the war.

In contrast to Bankovičs and Siliņš, Lācis mentions patriotism and anticommunism exclusively as motivations for his voluntary enlistment (2006, 17). Rather than serving out of fear and coercion, Lācis (8) emphasizes that he and his fellow Latvian Legionnaires actively chose to fight and defend Latvia from the Soviet Union. In contrast to Siliņš, his experience was that the legion consisted of intelligent, skilled, and selfless Latvians (10–11). Lācis and his comrades worried about the prospect of reoccupation by

the Soviets and actively volunteered to return to fight in the doomed Courland Pocket (12). In his interpretation, the Latvian Legion is entirely removed from any association with Nazi Germany. Instead, it is presented as a national army, fighting a separate war of defense against the Soviet Union.

Bankovičs and Siliņš attribute understandable, human motivations to Soviet soldiers they encountered. The two authors describe them in a similar way: dirty but well-armed 'bandits,' who looted the captured Latvian Legionnaires (Siliņš 2019; 15–16; Bankovičs 2014, 185–7). They paint a comical and unfrighting picture of impoverished and war-weary Red Army soldiers. Bankovičs describes them as warm and humane, unlike the stories he had heard, and even felt some cultural affinity with them (2014, 188–9).

While Bankovičs describes ordinary Soviet soldiers positively, he depicts his encounter with an NKVD officer extremely negatively. His most traumatic memory of the war was when a fellow legionnaire, Anton, a natively Russian-speaking Latvian, was accused of being a traitor to Russia by an NKVD officer. Anton was detained and most likely executed (Bankovičs 2014, 197). The NKVD officer stands in stark contrast to the regular Soviet soldiers in Bankovičs' memoir. Rather than being driven by reasonable human motivations, the NKVD officer is depicted as a brutal fanatic. This contrast is an example of Bankovičs' consistent narrative of an evil Soviet regime that suppressed the humanity of its own people and those it occupied. As always, this nationalist narrative emphasizes the Soviets, rather than the Nazis, as the greater evil (Kaprāns 2016).

Siliņš and Lācis do not explicitly share their views on the behavior of Germans they encountered. Bankovičs only considers the motives of one fanatical Waffen-SS officer (Bankovičs 2014, 115). He philosophizes that the unconditional obedience conditioned by German martial culture was responsible for the destruction wreaked by the Nazis during the war (117). Therefore, in Bankovičs' memoir, positive actions are attributed to humane motives, while negative actions are attributed to ideological indoctrination. This shifts any blame for atrocities toward the Nazi regime as a whole, absolving individuals of any responsibility.

Comparing the three Latvian memoirs, the more nationalist author, Lācis, attributes the actions of the legionnaires to patriotism and emphasizes their personal agency. By contrast, he discusses the Soviet Union only in general terms and attributes its actions to the desire to destroy the Latvian nation. Conversely, the less nationalist authors, Bankovičs and Siliņš, attribute the behavior of the legionnaires primarily to factors beyond their control. Regardless of the motives emphasized, the effect of their narratives is to portray the Latvian Legionnaires exclusively as victims of both the Nazi and Soviet regimes, the latter being the worse for Latvia. This reflects the hegemonic national narrative in Latvia today (Kaprāns 2016). Unlike Lācis, Bankovičs and Siliņš mention and consider the behavior of the Soviet and German people they encountered on an individual basis. Bankovičs understands the negative behavior of one *Waffen-SS* officer and one NKVD officer due to ideological indoctrination, which deflects any individual responsibility for atrocities.

### ***The nodal points of independence and Europe in the Latvian memoirs***

Bankovičs and Lācis emphasize that the Latvian Legionnaires defended the independence of their nation. Though Latvia was occupied by Nazi Germany, they preferred this to reoccupation by the Soviet Union, whose army would wreak destruction upon their homeland (Lācis 2006; 7–8, 11; Bankovičs 2014, 135; 119). By contrast, Siliņš does not

use emotive language to describe the Soviet army or attributes his actions to the need to defend Latvia.

A conflicted attitude toward Nazi Germany as both a brutal occupier and useful ally against the Soviet Union is not strongly expressed by the Latvian authors. German individuals are mostly depicted neutrally or positively and described negatively only in regard to their overbearance as commanders. Bankovičs (2014, 117) is the sole author to explicitly praise the Germans, declaring his preference for German order over Russian chaos. Admiration for the Germans is only implicit in Lācis' account, as he enthusiastically volunteered for service under their command (2006, 8), and not discernible in that of Siliņš. This reflects the nodal point of Latvia being a European nation, akin to Germany.

Although Bankovičs (2014, 188–9) speaks positively about the Red Army soldiers he encountered immediately after his surrender, the depiction of Soviet individuals by the Latvian authors portrays the Latvians as superior. Siliņš and Bankovičs' amusement at the Soviet soldiers' obsession with looting wristwatches serves to contrast themselves, as more sophisticated Europeans, with the poor and backward 'Russians' (Siliņš 2019; 15–16; Bankovičs 2014, 185–7).

Lācis and Bankovičs believe Latvia to be a rightfully independent, European state that had a greater affinity toward the Western Allies than Nazi Germany. In a manner almost identical to the Estonian authors, they provide examples of the Latvian Legionnaires expressing their patriotism, despite serving in the Nazi armed forces (Lācis 2006, 11; Bankovičs 2014, 149). As mentioned above, Lācis and Bankovičs both recall the hope among the Latvian Legionnaires that, after cooperating with the Nazis to rebuild the Latvian army, the Western Allies would intervene to guarantee their nation's independence, as they had after World War I. This reference to historical precedent is intended to show that Latvia was considered an independent and European state by the West (Lācis 2006, 8; Bankovičs 2014, 73).

Of all the authors, only Bankovičs makes one small reference to the Holocaust in the chapter about his surrender to the Soviets. When NKVD officers made him and other legionnaires dig what appeared to be their own graves, he was reminded of rumors he had heard from his neighbors back home – Latvian Jews had been made to dig their own graves before they were murdered by the Germans (Bankovičs 2014, 199). This passage is important for three reasons. Firstly, Bankovičs only mentions the Holocaust in order to compare it to his own situation. He thus appropriates its symbolism for his own victimization as a Latvian Legionnaire, in a manner characteristic of post-communist national narratives (Radonić 2018; Subotić 2019). Secondly, by omitting the collaboration of ethnic Latvians in the murder of Latvian Jews, ethnic Latvians are depicted solely as victims of the Nazis as well. Thirdly, it demonstrates how the argument that Nazi Germany was a preferable ally depends on the omission of the consequences of Nazi occupation for Latvian Jews. The nodal point of Latvia's Europeanness, which led it to side temporarily with Nazi Germany to fight against Soviet 'barbarism,' thus depends on the omission of numerically greater Nazi crimes (Ezergailis 1996a, 229).

Analysis of the three memoirs suggests that the family backgrounds of the authors influenced their perception of the Soviet Union. The memoirs tend to contrast the Latvian and Soviet people. Conversely, they allude to the cultural affinity of Latvians with Germans. Nazi Germany is presented as the better ally for Latvia at the time through the emphasis of Soviet atrocities, omission of ethnic Latvian involvement in the murder of Latvian Jews, and expression of the hope that the Western Allies would

intervene to ensure Latvian independence postwar. These narrative techniques present Latvia as a rightfully independent nation that shared more with civilized, European Nazi Germany than the uncivilized Soviet Union, yet was still a victim of both regimes.

## Conclusion

The memoirs of the Estonian and Latvian Legionnaires are similar in their attribution of behavior and emphasis of nodal points. This is to be expected, as the trajectories of the legionnaires' lives were shaped by similar circumstances. Both Estonia and Latvia have steered their national discourse away from the Soviet Union and Russia toward European integration in the post-Soviet era.

For this reason, the memoirs (except that of Siliņš) seek to justify military collaboration with Nazi Germany. This is done in three ways: negative aspects of the Nazis are downplayed; negative aspects of the Soviets are highlighted, and the patriotic commitment of the legionnaires is emphasized. Latvians and Estonians are depicted as motivated by patriotism and restricted by a lack of choice. Fighting for Nazi Germany was their only option if they wished to defend the existence of their nations from the Soviet Union. Nazi Germany, though also motivated by a desire for conquest, was not an existential threat to their nations. The behavior of states is understood through a national lens. Thus, the Soviet Union served as a vehicle for the Russian nation to destroy and dominate its neighbors.

The memoirs portray Latvia and Estonia as rightfully independent, European nations. To do this, the legionnaires' affinity with other nationalities oppressed by the Nazi and Soviet regimes is highlighted (Rent 1997; 12, 143; Kõverjalg 1994, 72, 86). The precedent of how Latvia gained independence after World War I is cited to explain their preference for cooperation with Nazi Germany (Rent 1997, 136; Gailit 1995; 9–11; Kõverjalg 1994, 86; Lācis 2006, 12; Bankovičs 2014, 73). Furthermore, the legionnaires are said to have openly demonstrated their patriotism, despite serving in the Nazi military (Lācis 2006, 11; Bankovičs 2014, 149; Gailit 1995, 82; Kõverjalg 1994, 69). In opposition to their own civilized, European nations, the Soviet armed forces are depicted as destructive and the Soviet people as backward. By contrast, a relative cultural affinity with Nazi Germany is expressed (Kõverjalg 1994; 54–5; Rent 1997; 41–3; Bankovičs 2014, 117). This conception of European civilization versus Asian barbarism derives from Nazi wartime propaganda (though, importantly, the Jewish aspect, i.e. 'Jewish Bolshevism,' is dropped) and shows that European identity in the memoirs is, to a large extent, racially constructed.

A similarity between the Estonian and Latvian memoirs is that the behavior of Soviet individuals is not uniformly attributed to sinister motivations. Rather, it depends on the personal beliefs of the author. These include that totalitarian ideologies are the root of evil (Bankovičs 2014, 197; Kõverjalg 1994, 53, 58) and martial honor and patriotism lead to good wartime conduct (Rent 1997, 63–4, 136).

Another characteristic found in memoirs from both nationalities is the distancing of the Latvian and Estonian Legions from the Holocaust and other atrocities. Though Bankovičs (2014, 199) and Kõverjalg (1994, 70) refer to aspects of the Holocaust in the Baltic states, crimes associated with Estonian and Latvian perpetrators are not mentioned. The authors (except Siliņš) do, however, write about crimes committed by 'the Germans.' This portrays their military service as justifiable to defend their nations against the Soviet Union, which only makes sense if Soviet atrocities are emphasized, while the legionnaires are distanced from Nazi crimes.



Though similar overall, there are noticeable differences between the Estonian and Latvian memoirs. The Estonian memoirs have a stronger and more uniform nationalist message. In terms of attribution, active and positive motivations for enlistment are stressed (Rent 1997, 23; Kõverjalg 1994; 54–69; Gailit 1995, 27, 84) and Nazi Germany is more heavily criticized (Rent 1997; 10, 30–5, 137, 150; Kõverjalg 1994, 67–76, 101). This contrasts with two of the Latvian memoirs, in which reactive and negative factors are emphasized (Bankovičs 2014; Siliņš 2019). The perspective of the Estonian authors, however, is similar to Lācis (2006, 8), the most overtly nationalist Latvian author. Finally, the Estonian memoirs display an overtly racist conception of the nodal point of Europe, referring to superior, European Estonians and Germans versus subhuman, Asiatic Soviets (Kõverjalg 1994; 35, 54–5; Rent 1997, 56).

The stronger nationalist message in the Estonian memoirs could be due to a combination of wartime and post-Soviet contextual factors. The Nazis viewed Estonians as racially superior to Latvians, and the Nazi eastern minister, Alfred Rosenberg, was a native of Tallinn. Because of this more favorable treatment, Estonia was the first occupied eastern European nation to be granted a national Waffen-SS legion (Lumans 2006, 296; Hale 2011, 246). In addition, there was more vocal support from both interwar and Nazi-installed Estonian political leaders for recruitment (Misiunas and Taagepera 1993, 60; Ventsel 2016, 124), which resulted in a relatively more successful 1944 mobilization in Estonia, compared to Latvia (Misiunas and Taagepera 1993, 60; Lumans 2006; 282–3, 296; Kasekamp 2010, 137; Böhler and Gerwarth 2017). These factors could explain why the Estonian authors express a more stridently nationalist confidence in the righteousness of their wartime actions.

Regarding the publication of the memoirs, in Estonia in the early 1990s, discourse about World War II was fixed 'around issues such as military strategy, expressions of patriotism and national destiny, leaving little room for more complicated things such as liability, option of choice, causality, treatment of minorities' (Lehti, Jutila, and Jokisipilä 2008, 397). It was only later that alternative perspectives on the war and occupations were voiced. Lehti, Jutila, and Jokisipilä accurately describe the perspective found in the Estonian memoirs analyzed above – all of which were published around the mid-1990s. Furthermore, two of the Estonian memoirs were part of a series published by the Estonian Military Academy, with a nationalist agenda. By contrast, the Latvian memoirs were all published commercially in the 2000s. This suggests that post-Soviet Baltic memoirs could be classified into a more rigidly nationalist 1990s period, and a more nuanced 2000s period after accession to European institutions led to more discursive interaction with established European historical narratives (Assmann 2013, 27; Mälksoo 2014; Subotić 2019, introduction). More research is needed to see whether this classification could be applied to all post-Soviet Estonian and Latvian Waffen-SS memoirs, rather than just the sample used in this article.

Of all the memoirs analyzed, that by Siliņš stands out because it contains no mention of nationalist themes. This difference stems from Siliņš's working-class and ethnically mixed background, which may have led him to be less afraid of the prospect of Soviet rule. His exception proves the rule that contemporary national narratives in the Baltic states reinforce a neoliberal nationalist hegemony. The nostalgic perspective held by many older, poorer, and Russian-speaking inhabitants about life under Soviet communism (Onken 2010; Duvold and Ekman 2016; Duvold, Berglund, and Ekman 2019) has been effectively countered by institutions of collective memory, determined to

disseminate the idea of Soviet occupation as genocide (Mälksoo 2014; Katz 2016, 2017; Radonić 2018; Subotić 2019).

The findings of this article have implications for understanding Baltic and European collective memory. The studied memoirs consistently share the same themes: the Baltic states were purely victims of the Soviets and Nazis; Soviet occupation was worse than Nazi occupation for the titular ethnicities; the Baltic Waffen-SS legions did not commit atrocities; and the Holocaust was solely a German crime. As scholars have argued (Katz 2016, 2017; Mälksoo 2014; Radonić 2018; Subotić 2019), these rhetorical strategies represent an adaptation to, rather than an acceptance of, the Western narrative of the Holocaust in Estonia and Latvia. This is evident in the omission of *Jewish* Bolshevism as a threat to Europe and the distancing of Estonians and Latvians from involvement in genocide, which produces a clear-cut story of patriotic defense against the genocidal Soviet Union. The adaptation has had an effect on the wider European narrative, as increasingly more European politicians and commentators buy into the argument that communism was equal to fascism. In striving to emphasize the European credentials of the Baltic states, without accepting any responsibility for assisting – knowingly or unknowingly – in the genocidal Nazi project, Estonian and Latvian Legion veterans have produced a revisionist version of World War II history. In their narrative, which mimics wartime Nazi propaganda, collaboration with Nazi Germany demonstrated their essential Europeaness in the face of Asian Bolshevism. While they may lack some of the political correctness of official discourse, their arguments, with the exception of one author, correspond to the hegemonic narrative in the Baltic states today.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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