Different Meanings Applied to May 9th Victory Day in WWII: Russian and Baltic Perspectives after 1989

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to disclose and analyze two different meanings of May 9th. The first meaning – as the liberation of Europe from Nazi evil – is prevalent in Russian society as a Soviet legacy. The other meaning of May 9th – as occupation of the Baltic States – is prevalent in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. In these Baltic States some politicians insist that the evil of Nazism must be equaled to the evil of Soviet totalitarianism, which is hardly imaginable in the political discourse of Russia.

These two opposing perspectives indicate the dichotomy between the discourses of liberation and occupation in East Central Europe. In other words, when any of the Baltic State Presidents refused to attend the 60th or 65th Victory Day commemoration jubilees in Moscow, their refusal was based on established historic argumentation of double occupation and colonization after WWII.
Two meanings applied to May 9th of 1945

For the Russian mass consciousness any anniversary of a victory in the Second World War means a Soviet cultural victory and the greatness of the Russian nation. It is perceived as a heroic victory. Millions of lives, an estimated 27 million, were sacrificed. Even if it was Stalin’s strategy to use his population recklessly, still the enormous numbers of casualties were caused by WWII and its purpose was victory over against Fascist Germany. Along with the celebrations of Victory Day on May 9th starting in 1945, an entire Soviet culture of military parades and accolade to the war veterans had developed.

Until the collapse of the Soviet Union these military parades and commemorations of May 9th were obligatory in the Baltic States. Questioning the meaning of May 9th was forbidden under the Soviet regime. The dissidents who questioned it either ended up in mental hospitals or jail. With some luck one could be sent out to the West. The partisan war in Lithuania, which lasted for 8 years after the 1945 “liberation”, was erased from Soviet history books. The very existence of the partisan war was reduced to the primitive explanation of bandits in the woods. The term “bandits in the woods” in Soviet times had a similar meaning that we keep in mind today when we hear the word “terrorists”. From the Baltic perspective partizans were freedom fighters against the Soviet Communist regime, although not without the stories of informers, local robberies and killings, lack of hope and depression, alcoholism, KGB conscripted insiders. This is well portrayed in a documentary film Smogikai [The Soviet Hitmen].

With the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the Soviet Union, the year 1989 became sacred in the political culture of the Baltic States. Annus mirabilis 1989 signifies the end of occupation, the beginning of unification with Western Europe, transition from imposed communism to democracy. By raising the issue of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, the Baltic States inevitably deconstructed the sacred meaning of May 9th as of liberation day for Eastern Central Europe. In other words, the collapse of the former Soviet Union together with the abolition of obligatory commemoration of the May 9th became political liberation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

A famous suggestion by Timothy Garton Ash that the new Eastern European societies can only truly succeed if they confront their past cannot apply to Russia, because this suggestion is too

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rational. For that Timothy Garton Ash would have to explain what that past of Eastern European societies is and what May 9th is for Russia. Does he intend to say that it is possible to confront the past once and for all as if the ghosts of the past would never haunt new generations, as if it was possible to end history with one final interpretation? Sometimes Garton Ash like approach is also shared in Lithuania by wishful thinking: “if only Russia could admit its guilt...”. This approach neglects the historic contextualization of Russian imperialism, not to mention cultural obstacles.

Firstly, Russia did not lose in WWII and the winners usually do not feel remorse; the narrative of Russian as well as Ukrainian memory since 1945 has been constructed in terms of the glorious victory in the “Great Patriotic War”. It is believed that unique Russian spirit for self-sacrifice in such “city heroes” as Leningrad or Volgograd saved “Mother Russia” and East Central Europe from Hitler’s fascism. Secondly, it was in Yalta where the big three – Josef Stalin, Franklin Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill – officially divided Europe according to the concept of the Iron Curtain and that was a “global” betrayal of Eastern Europe, not solely the start of Soviet occupation.

Yalta in 1945 – on the basis of already established Ribbentrop-Molotov pact in 1939 – gave all the blessings to Stalin for re-annexation of the Baltic States. But the Baltics do not commemorate Yalta betrayal, only Ribbentrop-Molotov pact do. When the Baltic States in 1989 on August 23 created a live human chain – called the Baltic Way – stretching from Vilnius all the way up to Tallinn in order to mark the 50th anniversary of Ribbentrop-Molotov pact (known as the “Black ribbon”) made in 1939, it was one-sided finger pointing at the Soviet Union, not a word on Western Allies. When did the Baltic States create a live human chain to commemorate Yalta's Black Ribbon?

The Baltic States do not have the “Black ribbon” commemoration of Yalta. That would cast a shadow on the Western allies who in official rhetoric had never acknowledged annexation of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia. This is the Baltic perspective – less talk about the Yalta pact, more talk about Ribbentrop-Molotov. But was it the Yalta pact or the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact that enabled the former Soviet Union to establish the victorious Communist charade about the Soviet liberalization of Eastern and Central Europe?

Two radically different perspectives – one is Russian, the other is of the Baltic States – comes from different initial premises that are rooted in national interests. Moreover, the symbolic thinking is
different. In the hermeneutic philosophy of Paul Ricoeur it is important to embrace premises in order to grasp the origin of a subjective worldview. Then the Other's symbolical and mythological thinking should be comprehended passionately, refusing to maintain “objective“ distance from the object. Only then can one comprehend the value of “mistakes“ in the thinking of the Other. In those “mistakes” or falsity of the Other lays the possibility to grasp the subjectivity and authentic perspective. What is falsity in your memory might be the truth in the memory of the Other.

A closer look at the Soviet symbolical legacy in contemporary Russia may lead us to a deeper comprehension of the Russian perspective on the meaning of May 9th. For instance, in Moscow the dominance of Soviet patriotic symbolism is on public display as national cultural heritage. Hammer and sickle decorate the carved archways of Moscow’s metro system that was built in the Stalin era. The metro station, Square of Revolution, has the monument of a bronze worker who holds a jack-hammer. That alone is an enormous reference to the post-war Soviet project to build the so called “great Soviet Union” with the hands of the proletariat accompanied by its communist values, mentality, and culture.

Soviet legacy permeates local Russians as well as tourists everyday through symbols. Who could call the world of these symbols falsity? If it is falsity, then from whose perspective? Probably from the perspective of those who would claim that Russia in the early 1990's had an opportunity to remove all Soviet symbols. But the Soviet symbols are natural in Russia, they refer to the Russian national historical heritage. The name of the metro station, Square of Revolution, or the symbols of hammer and sickle are not mere leftovers from yesterday that somehow are left to remain where they used to be. They are there not because of indifference. These symbols were not removed after the collapse of the Soviet Union because Soviet political culture and mentality has never collapsed. These symbols are left because they are culturally cherished.

Moreover, as prominent Russian sociologist, Lev Gudkov, argues, symbolism that refers to the Soviet Victory in WWII, serves as a central element of collective identity. Victory over German Nazism means the triumph of the Soviet army, which has to be understood within the framework of Russian patriotic self-determination. The title of Lev Gudkov’s essay The fetters of victory: how the war provides Russia with its identity, indicates his main thesis – the narrative of victory in WWII

provides Russia with its identity, but since this narrative underlines patriotism overlooking Stalinism with its evil, WWII victory is mentally and culturally fettered.

Here are the actual words of Lev Gudkov that formulate this key thesis for Russia’s fettered victory:

“[…] every time people mention "Victory", what they mean is a symbol that appears to the vast majority of those surveyed, and thus to society as a whole, as a central element of collective identity, a point of reference, a gauge that sets a certain perspective for evaluating the past and, partly, for understanding the present and the future. The victory of 1945 is not simply the central junction of meaning of Soviet history, which started with the October Revolution and ended with the collapse of the USSR; it is in fact the only positive anchor point for post-Soviet society's national consciousness. Victory does not only crown the war, but as it were purifies and justifies it, at the same time withdrawing its negative side from any attempt at rational analysis, tabooing the topic […] Victory Day has not become a day of mournful commemoration of the dead, the human suffering, and the material destruction. It is literally a day of victory, of the Soviet army's triumph over Hitler's Germany. Russians address the intentional meaning of victory exclusively to themselves; it only has a meaning within the structures of Russian self-determination.”

These lines by Lev Gudkov were published in 2005, the year of the 60th anniversary of Victory over Nazi Germany. Today we know that in 2010, the year of the 65th anniversary, in Moscow's Red Square the troops of Western allies, even those from the Welsh, marched along with the Russians as if to negate Lev Gudkov's thesis that “Russians address the intentional meaning of victory exclusively to themselves; it only has a meaning within the structures of Russian self-determination.”

But here is a “detail”: on May 9th, 2010, for the 65th anniversary 10,500 Russian soldiers marched in historical uniforms, some of them carried red banners with Lenin's portrait. The banners also had the letters USSR on them. And that was in front of German Chancellor Angela Merkel (not Barack Obama since he did not attend), that was in front of Estonia’s President Toomas Hendrik Ilves and

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Latvia’s President Valdis Zetlar (not Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaitė, since she did not attend either).

**Is there a Baltic paradox in treating May 9th?**

It is important to notice that the newly appointed Latvian Foreign Minister Aivis Ronis spoke positively of the Latvian President’s visit to Moscow: “May 9th is a good day as it ended bloodshed in Europe, and brought peace”. These diplomatic international relations modify the official rhetoric of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact and the meaning of 1989. On a conceptual level positive treatment of May 9th on the 65th anniversary raises additional questions as to what extent Estonian and Latvian perspectives differ from the Russian regarding liberation discourse? Estonia and Latvia have not outlawed Soviet symbols, including its flag, for public display. Thus, there was no self-contradiction when in the Red Square on May 9th in 2010 the Latvian and Estonian presidents watched the parade with the Soviet patriotic symbolism. But this is not Lithuanian approach: in this Baltic State Soviet symbols are prohibited by law and if the Lithuanian President had attended the Moscow parade, then it would have been the Lithuanian paradox – Soviet symbols are banned, but May 9th commemorated in Moscow. This paradox did not occur. Instead we have two different approaches in the Baltics to the Soviet symbols and May 9th commemoration – one is Latvian/Estonian, the other Lithuanian.

Absence of the Lithuanian President in Moscow for the 65th anniversary causes a dichotomy in the position of this Baltic State. Obviously the Baltic States have no unity in terms of commemorating Victory Day in Moscow. For the 60th anniversary in 2005 Lithuanian President Valdas Adamkus did not go to Moscow either. The Lithuanian message regarding May 9th has been unequivocal and consistent. However, this position may ignite a worrisome question whether in Lithuania or in the Baltics fascism is total evil or not? If yes, then why not commemorate that victory? These questions were raised by Boris Kapustin in the conversation with me titled *In Search of a post-communist Future*. Here is the excerpt:

Boris Kapustin: “Are you really saying that the greatest distinction between the Russian approach to May 9th and that of the Baltic nations consists in the former defining evil as fascism whereas the latter identifies it with communism? Let me not discuss the true percentage of Russians who praise (Stalin's) communism or why the latter has become more popular recently, after the ravages of

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"liberal capitalism" in the 1990s. But I am curious: does the aforesaid antithesis concerning the interpretation(s) of May 9th mean that the Baltic perspective does not see fascism as evil?"

Tomas Kavaliauskas: “I need to clarify that question: of course fascism in the Baltic States means total evil – Lithuania has acknowledged its collaboration with the Nazis in the extermination of 220,000 Jews in Lithuania. What I wanted to highlight is that because of the experience of triple occupation between 1939 and 1945 – first as a result of the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact in 1939, then by German fascists, which was regarded as liberation from the Soviets, then reoccupation by the Soviet Union which lasted until 1990, also in the name of liberation – May 9th does not denote victory. That is why I was keen to talk about a hermeneutic effort to be sensitive to different perspectives of May 9th, to understand the processes of memory.”

Boris Kapustin: “Perhaps, for many of the former Baltic Waffen-SS members and their backers and advocates, fascism is not evil at all. But this can hardly typify the Baltic perspective as such, since, for example, Lithuania officially acknowledged the guilt of its collaboration with Nazism and its complicity in the extermination of Lithuanian Jewry. If so, why is May 9th one-sidedly seen as an emblem of occupation and as a source of grief, as if there were nothing commendable in what this victory symbolizes? What does this one-sided interpretation of May 9th tell us about the ongoing projects of nation-state building in the Baltic region, in particular about the 'founding fictions' legitimizing those projects (recall my earlier remarks about Derrida's conception of such 'fictions' and about the Russian employment thereof in the case of May 9th)? Are they not also regrettably crude? More generally speaking, can nation-state building which is based on the old French formula for this – 'one and indivisible' – avoid being overly crude, and hence fragile in our age of multiculturalism and globalism?”

This conversation highlights Lithuanian paradox – fascism is condemned, but the Soviet victory over fascist Germany is not shared in Moscow. But is it a paradox or a pure logical conclusion not to celebrate the end of WWII, since it marked the new beginning of oppression?

The Estonian President did not go to Moscow for the 60th anniversary in 2005 either, but the Latvian did. The lack of unity in this political position raises doubts about the integral unity of the Baltic perspective regarding May 9th as occupation, not liberation. The Lithuanian inexorable resistance to the May 9th commemoration and the Latvian/Estonian diplomatic approach to it bespeak two Baltic attitudes regarding their memory. But then we may always ask: why the Bronze

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soldier Alyosha was removed in Tallinn in 2007 if May 9th is respected to the extent of its commemoration in Moscow? Why not tolerate May 9th celebration in Tallinn, if it can be celebrated in Moscow with the Estonian President? Perhaps there is an Estonian paradox as well as Latvian in capital of which, Riga, May 9th celebration has been growing for the last 10 years ending with the New Year like firework show. In this sense we can talk about the revival of the Victory Day in the Baltics where Ribbentrop-Molotov pact day is also commemorated.

**Russian identity and WWII memory**

Since Vladimir Putin came to power we have been witnessing the Kremlin's open declaration of its attempt to forge a new Russian identity on the basis of the Soviet legacy using Soviet symbols on May 9th. Suffice to recall restoration of the Soviet anthem in 2005. But usage of the symbols of communism in Russia has nothing to do with a new Russian identity. In fact it is the old Soviet identity that naturally fits contemporary Russian mentality. Who is insulted hearing the restored Soviet anthem aside a few intellectuals playing a dissident's role?

On this old Soviet identity depends honour of the May 9th military parade as well as honour and the image of Russian patriotism. The images of the WWII anniversary emphasize the greatness of the WWII Russian veterans: the veterans stand dressed in Soviet uniforms covered with awarded medals for courage fighting Nazis, while the tanks made during WWII go by displaying the emblems of the former USSR. For the moment the “former USSR” is no longer “former”, but alive and re-experienced in its all Stalin like glory. Today’s Russia seems to be a conscious successor of the former Soviet Union, but not because of mere rational choice by Vladimir Putin, but also because of cultural and mental identity.

On a symbolical level spiritual closeness between the former Soviet Union and of contemporary Russia can be well illustrated by the fact that the parade for the 65th commemoration anniversary in the iconic Red Square started by carrying two flags – the one of today's Russia (white, blue, red) and the second of the former Soviet Union (red with a hammer and sickle). The parade itself was loaded with Soviet symbols on tanks and military uniforms. The tone and the vocabulary of the parade’s commentator on Russian TV was not merely reminiscent of the Soviet times, rather it was identical. And that was the year 2010. The annexation of the Warsaw Pact countries suddenly
evaporated, instead the commentator provided a list of liberated European countries by the Red
Army in 1945. Aside Baltic States, Poland, Hungary, even Austria was on the list amongst liberated
Warsaw pact countries.

This kind of image-rhetoric and the tone of a proud voice recreates a legitimization of the Soviet
Union era, portrays it as live in contemporary memory. Indeed it is the identity story of
contemporary Russia – identity that is based on the legacy of the Soviet Union, in particular of the
victory in WWII. The marching troops of the Western allies are merely a diplomatic gesture. As
above quoted Lev Gudkov warned, “Russians address the intentional meaning of victory
exclusively to themselves; it only has a meaning within the structures of Russian self-
determination.”

But this observation by Lev Gudkov has to do with a much more complicated process of
construction and reconstruction of Russian individual and collective memory:

“If individual memories are set out as chains of biographical or family circumstances,
they are attached to the level of private history with its key values and standards of
assessment. Collective conceptions, on the contrary, are constituted by certain values
common to the entire community and reproduced by means different from those used
for passing on the stories of private persons. Usually they are stripped of all traces of
their origin and process of production, and are perceived as 'obvious' opinions that
emerged 'no one knows when': corporative or mass consciousness is not just
uninterested in the genesis of these ideas but, on the contrary, does everything to
protect itself from any attempt to subject them to rational analysis, to suppress all traces
of their ideological production, and to taboo their sacred status as symbols of collective
identity. Therefore collective conceptions cannot be viewed as a sum of individual
memories and concrete details of past events. They are always entirely different
'reconstructions' of historical processes and events, whose function is linked either to
the rituals of collective (national or group) solidarity or to accounts of collective myths
and ideological beliefs designed to give legitimacy to certain social institutions or
political actions.”

Here we are left with an impression that the real trauma and bloody drama of WWII is distorted and twisted into a new mythological Russian version. But whatever the “truth” of WWII is, in whichever perspective – be it Baltic or Russian – that truth is exceptionally hermeneutical. According to Gianni Vattimo, in hermeneutics there is nothing beyond interpretation. We may always wait for a better interpretation, but not more. In that sense hermeneutics’ vocation is nihilistic as Nietzsche’s philosophy without God, i.e. without ultimate Truth.⁷ May 9th is stripped of the ultimate truth because its “truth” is interwoven with contradictory experiences and meanings. May 9⁰ of 1945 – not May 9th of 1950, which is Europe’s Day – seems to be cursed to have contradictory layers of interpretations, conflicting perspectives.

**Russian messianism and the impossibility of an apology**

Whatever Soviet images and rhetoric there were in the Red Square during the 65⁰ commemoration parade, they appealed to the hearts and souls of many Russians and Ukrainians as well as to the Russian speaking populations in the Baltics. The established narrative of Europe’s liberation from Nazism thanks to the sacrifice of the Russians is based on the belief that it was indeed liberation. As the Estonian author, Maria Mälksoo, has formulated it, “the commemorative ceremonies of Victory Day, as it is called in Russia, are thus one of the main reservoirs of the modern Russian collective memory, sustaining the progress—glorifying messianism that communist Russia tried to embody in the course of the twentieth century, and perhaps even retaining an age-old Russian general messianism that predates communism.”⁸

Russian faith in Russia’s messianism in Europe during WWII has a prehistory. Suffice to recall the writings of Dostoyevsky or the silver age of Russian 19⁰ century literature that abounds in the messianic superiority of a mission to bring Asia and Western Europe together through the spirituality of Russia. Western Europe of the 19⁰ century was portrayed as too rational and too industrial, void of spirituality when contrasted with the Russian soul and inner goodness. Very contrary to all this context of a superior role of Russia in the world, Russian dissident Sergej Kovaliov stated clearly in Vilnius on March 11th, 2010, for the 20⁰ jubilee of Lithuania’s independence in the Parliament that Russia has to acknowledge occupation and apologize for it. For

him there is no question of messianic liberation of the Baltic States and Central Eastern Europe. However, is this apology possible for the Russian spirit when mentality is rooted either in spiritual superiority or Bolshevik proletariat messianism? Can the Russian nation possibly have a collective will for acknowledgment of occupation? It means reversing its historic role, instead of a messianic meaning, this nation would be left to apologize for political and moral evil. After all, theologically speaking, apology implies remorse. Needless to say, the perspective of the Baltic States and of such Russian dissidents as Sergej Kovaliov is so distant from the spirit of the Red Square on May 9th that a larger gap between these worldviews is unimaginable.

First of all acknowledgment and apology, not to mention remorse, requires will. The Political will of the Kremlin’s elite and that of the Russian nation’s collective will are two different things. We may imagine a change in the political elite’s thinking with a follow up of this desirable apology. However, political elites come and go, but the political culture and tradition as well as mentality of the nation remains. Maintaining the tradition of May 9th with its military ritual unites the Soviet Union with contemporary Russia, fortifies the perception of Russia as Great Nation (this expression is used also in Great Britain and the U.S., e.g. Great American Nation). “The Great Nation” of Russia, unlike Japan and Germany, for whatever reason, was not defeated, humiliated in WWII. Consequently even Stalinism for many Russians shines in spite of his cruelty to his own nation. In this context the words of the dissident Sergej Kovaliov calling Russia to apologize the Baltic States is no more than a sign of an honest dissident, whose voice is an exception to the rule. But his dissident call for apology standing in the Parliament of Lithuania fortifies Baltic perspective of the May 9th interpretation as occupation.

**Hermeneutical approach to Russian and Baltic perspectives**

In the book *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics* Paul Ricoeur argues that passionate relation to the symbols is essential. It is necessary to leave the distant and objective position of an observer. One has to enter into the aura of a meaning. Hermeneutical thinking should be not be beyond the symbols, but on the basis of them. And when it comes to understanding a myth, Paul Ricoeur calls to accept the falsity related to it. Instead of deconstructing a myth as an irrational narrative, we have to embrace its illogical story and look for the mythological meaning that is in the story. One of the examples of Paul Ricoeur is the myth of Adam and Eve. The grass-snake or the serpent that seduces Eve to eat the forbidden fruit means that a human being does not start evil, rather Eve finds it already existing. But Adam and Eve continue the evil that they
discovered. For Paul Ricouer this story established tragic myth that survived the rationality of Greek philosophy and the theology of Christianity.\(^9\)

Just like Adam and Eve encounter already existing evil, today one may discover May 9\(^{th}\) as a historically given evil, i.e. occupation, but the other may easily find it as historically realized Patriotic War for European peace that can be shared with the Western Allies.

**The Bronze Soldier case**

The Bronze Soldier (in Estonian *Pronkssõdur*, in Russian *Бронзовый Солдат*), originally Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn (in Estonian *Tallinna vabastajate monument*, in Russian *Монумент освободителям Таллина*), sometimes called the Tõnismäe Monument or Alyosha, is a Soviet memorial unveiled on 22 September, 1947.\(^{10}\)

Political differences over the interpretation of the monument delineated Baltic Russians and ethnic Estonians as well as the Russian Federation and Estonia respectively. The disputes regarding the relocation of the monument caused riots (known as the Bronze Night) and besieging of the Estonian embassy in Moscow for a week. The events caught international attention and led to a multitude of political reactions.

The case of the Bronze Soldier in Tallinn in 2007 illuminates the drama between the two opposing WWII memories and interpretations. As we know, the Estonian government had made a decision to remove the Bronze Soldier which was a symbol of the Soviet liberating army in Estonia. The monument was removed from the city center to the military cemetery of Tallinn. The riots followed – one dead, 153 wounded, 800 arrests. The riots that followed in protest signify an enormous conceptual gap between Russian speaking Estonians and Estonian nationalists. This is exceptionally well pictured in the documentary film *Alyosha*.\(^{11}\)

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\(^{10}\) For this information regarding Estonian and Russian names of the Monument as well as for some references regarding the “Bronze Soldier” case, I am indebted to Tatiana Seravnina, a Master's student of Turku University, Finland.

The Pink Tank case

But the war over Soviet symbols can take place without a Russian speaking ethnic group. Czech artist, David Černý, who made a sculpture called Entropa, which caused a big scandal in Brussels, is also the author of “The pink tank”. He coloured a Soviet green tank in pink color in 1991 to indicate the Soviet rule was over; Soviet tanks are toys now; the brave masculine soldier has turned out to be somewhat gay. The idea of the pink tank is not a lapse of memory, but the belief that the war is over, subjugation belongs to the past.

Consciously or subconsciously the artist created more meanings for the pink tank by placing it on a floating pontoon in Prague's Vltava river in June, 2011, on the occasion of Freedom Week. The real tank of 47 tons was replaced on the river by the hull of a tank's imitation. Recalling Heraclitus' thesis of panta rhei, we may interpret the floating pink tank as being in the river of time – the new waters of history keep streaming past this military toy. And so new interpretations of the past stream forth.

On the night of April 27–28, 1991, Černý and his friends painted the Soviet tank (that was a leftover Soviet present from 1945) in pink and erected a huge finger in an obscene gesture. “Three days later, the Czechoslovak Army had it repainted military green; 10 days after that, a group of 15 members of the newly elected Parliament repainted it pink again. The paint war over the Monument to Soviet Tank Crews would no doubt have continued had the authorities not removed the (still pink) tank.”

This Czech memory war was in 1991 without a Russian speaking population involved.

Berlin's “normalization” case

In Germany the protest against destruction of the Soviet symbols took place as early as 1990. A Political Monuments initiative was founded in 1990 by art history students. Their goal was to preserve GDR monuments, which was supported by another initiative called the Lenin Monument. They were against removal of a granite Lenin statue 19 meters high in East Berlin's anonymous square. Historians, journalists, and local residents to whom the Lenin monument had become a

familiar landmark, signed the protest. The project of Berlin's “normalization” was counterpoised by the post-communist need for memorization.\textsuperscript{13}

Mateo Bertele observes that removal of Soviet monuments to a special park in Berlin like it was done in Moscow, Budapest and Grūto Parkas in Lithuania, “had originally been rejected – the need was for preservation. Among 23 monuments that were under consideration only four were removed.\textsuperscript{14}

**Lithuanian Green bridge case**

Thus, we see that Central Europe has been shaken by its memory issues in various countries at various transitional post-communist periods. In the case of Lithuania, the dispute among local intellectuals over the Soviet symbols in public spaces became heated with considerable delay. A member of the New Left, Nida Vasiliauskaitė, nicknamed the ultra-nationalist Talibbeans those intellectuals and politicians who want to remove the sculptures of the Soviet soldiers from the Green bridge of Vilnius. According to her, in the city there should be room for the overlapping of ideologies; she is against the dominance of a Lithuanian independence leitmotiv which has been serving national interest.\textsuperscript{15} Vladimiras Laučius could only offer to Nida Vasiliauskaitė to go to Moscow to bring to Lithuania and the Baltics the “Sun of Stalin”\textsuperscript{16}; he offered this to another intellectual, L. Žigelytė, by reacting to her similar suggestion to keep Soviet “peace keeping” soldiers on the Green bridge intact. An offer to bring the Sun of Stalin is an insinuating reference to Lithuanian poetess, Salomėja Nėris, who has written a poem about Stalin comparing him to the shining Sun and in 1939 volunteered to travel to Moscow to declare an application in the name of Lithuanian nation to join the USSR as if there had been no annexation through Ribbentrop-Molotov pact.

Lithuanian philosopher residing in Iceland, Eglė Wittig-Marcinkevičiūtė, summarized the dispute over the Soviet monuments on the Green bridge as follows:

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. p. 194.
“Whether we decide to remove the sculptures on the Green bridge or to leave them, stress marks will be left in any choice. If we leave the monuments, we will show our tolerance (or apathy) to occupation. If we take them out, then we will demonstrate our intolerance to occupation. No matter which decision we make, we will make one or another evaluation of history. But this does not mean that history is not accepted as it was. [...] In other words, if we tolerate ‘the tools for Soviet indoctrination’, then most likely we no longer perceive the evil that happened to us. But if we do not regard Soviet occupation as evil, then perhaps we no longer perceive ourselves as sovereign nation?”

Interestingly, more than twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 there is no political nor cultural consensus over the treatment of Soviet monuments, its past. The complexity of the arguments regarding the monuments that inevitably refer to occupation/liberation polemic is the main characterization of twenty years transition from communism to democracy: nothing has been resolved once and for all, but rather new layers of interpretations and symbolical thinking have been evolving since 1989.

**Back to the Bronze Soldier Case**

A year before 2007 riots in Tallinn, on May 9th, 2006, Estonian Russians celebrated WWII Victory Day as well as Estonia’s liberalization by waving the flags of the Soviet Union. Maria Mälksoo commented it as follows:

“The events of May 9th at the Bronze Soldier therefore came to be seen as a celebration of Estonia’s occupation, and a denial of the resulting suffering of the Estonian nation. While ritual is generally meant to enliven the memory and thereby aid perception, it can also change perceptions of a past event by its choice of the selective principles of remembering and modification of original experience.”

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Evidently we are dealing not only with two different perspectives, but also with their physical clash. Clashes can modify original experiences, but also strengthen the original biased convictions. Speaking in the terms of Michel Foucault, who regarded discourses to be discontinuous, conflicting, sometimes coexisting and yet sometimes ignoring each other or even warding off, the role of the Bronze soldier can be regarded as a means for consolidation of the discourse of Soviet liberation and as a means to discontinue Baltic discourse of Soviet occupation. Russian/Soviet discourse on liberation can be just as successfully warding off the Baltic discourse on occupation as the latter tries to ward off the former.

These two opposite to each other discourses create two antagonistic geopolitical sides, whereas geographically speaking the river Dauguva has always been running through Latvia and Russia, the river Nemunas – through Lithuania and Belarus, lake Peipsi-Pihkva – between Estonia and Russia also remain as it was. Discourses neither push nor pull rivers to one or another side, but they have the might to remap rivers and lakes geopolitically. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Baltic States worked hard to join NATO because of the experience of occupation. Since the day of membership in NATO, 2004, the feelings of insecurity diminished, but they surface back as soon as powerful frictions between two discourses of liberation and occupation destabilize the platform of Baltic identity of independent states.

**Surplus meaning of May 9th**

Evidently Paul Ricoeur was right when he called our attention to the surplus of a symbol’s meaning. In his book *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* Ricoeur contends that a symbol functions because of its surplus meaning. A sea in the ancient Babylonian myths means more than water territory from coast to coast; sunset in Wordsworth’s poetry means more than meteorological event. Namely interpretation reveals that there is a wider meaning in a symbol. The surplus of a meaning is what remains after verbatim interpretation.

A verbatim interpretation of WWII Victory Day is impossible due to the dichotomy of the Baltic and Russian/Soviet perspectives. This dichotomy of two radically different perspectives relativizes the “truth” of May 9th. Consequently, the surplus meaning is also different, but both meanings share suffering and historic drama, although in different contexts and political traditions. Russian/Soviet surplus meaning includes extreme famine in the Leningrad/St. Petersburg or extreme battles in the

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heroic cities of WWII such as Volgograd. Millions of lives were lost and millions of families destroyed. Hundreds of thousands of those who survived remained handicapped. Destroyed cities had to be rebuilt after 1945.

Yet the Baltic surplus meaning includes other atrocities: deportations of the locals to Siberia along with annexation of the territory, imposed Russian language and communist political ideology along with socialist economy, falsified history, religious persecution, mental asylums for the dissidents, controlled and censored literature, deindividualization and obligatory collectivization. True, Stalin’s regime was equally cruel to the Russian people as well, but May 9th Victory Day does not symbolize any of it for Russia/Soviet Union, whereas for the Baltic States it does.

Lithuanian Europarlamentarian and former leader of Lithuanian independence movement Sąjūdis, Vytautas Landsbergis, required in Brussels to have a law for the denial of the communist crimes just as there is a law for the denial of Holocaust. Sandra Kalniete, Latvia Europarlamentarian at the Leipzig Book Fair on 24 March 2004 shocked both Russians and Western Europeans stating that Nazi crimes and Soviet Communist crimes are equally evil.

Interestingly, the law banning Soviet symbolism in Lithuania was passed after 18 years of independence. The question is: why Soviet symbols were not banned immediately or within a few years of independence? Most likely the answer lies in the recent rise of May 9th popularity. Apparently the discourses of “liberated” Baltics and of “occupied” Baltics are in competition. The politics of two distinct memories compete and try to ward off each other in a geopolitical dominance game. In any case, the fact that Soviet symbols were banned 18 years after Lithuanian independence indicates transitional insecurities and fragility of identity. Apparently joining NATO in 2004 was not sufficient in terms of security; the dimension of symbols also had to be controlled. But with the control of the symbols it seems that there is an attempt to control their surplus meaning as well. The removal of the Bronze soldier in Tallinn is an example of executed control over symbolic order and political discourse behind it.

**Lenin’s Mausoleum case**

Interestingly enough the first seven years after the collapse of the Soviet Union under Boris Yeltsin’s presidency had a completely different direction in terms of the treatment of the Soviet legacy. Yeltsin even had a plan to remove Lenin from the Red Square mausoleum and bury the
“Bolshevik” mummy-body in St. Petersburg. Now – compare this removal idea with the actual removal of the Bronze Statue in Tallinn... Can we really compare the scale and the magnitude of these two removals? Lenin is an actual communist icon body, the Bronze Statue is a piece of metal that signifies the signified of the Soviet liberator.

The tendency is obvious on both sides– to dig in the graves of memory.

The idea to remove Lenin caused outrage – resistance was immense by the die-hard Russian Communists. In 1997 Alexei Abramov, the head of the Lenin’s mausoleum fund, commented:

“"When the fascists were attacking Moscow in the Second World War, our young warriors took their oath to the Red Army in front of the mausoleum. They swore that if necessary they would protect the mausoleum with their bodies," Abramov said. "How could those soldiers of 1941 have imagined that all these years later, the site would be attacked from the rear by their own sons, grandsons and even the president?""21

Evidently at the end of 1990s Russia was at a crossroad in distancing itself from Soviet legacy. Soviet symbolism was the target and a new contemporary Russian identity was to be built independent of the Soviet past. But it did not happen.

**Pan-European narrative – utopia or a possibility?**

Conclusively, the geopolitical battle over the “correct” interpretation of historic facts, injustices and patriotism between Russia and the Baltic States overlooks the possibility for a passionate approach to hermeneutical interpretation of symbolical thinking and the value of subjective premises on both sides. Awareness of relative perspectives could lead to a dialogue and mutual understanding.

“What is urgently required is not a common history, but that the space in which competing interpretations and national narratives can be heard is not threatened,” argues Karl Schlögel.22 Pan-European narrative that would sum up these experiences and traumas that May 9th contains in its surplus meaning is desirable, but hardly possible. Karl Schlögel being realistic does not even

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propose common history creation, rather he calls for the safe-h(e)aven space where interpretations could compete, but would not be threatened.

But why would interpretations compete? Would they compete because of existing perspectives and interests to maintain those perspectives? When these perspectives are also geopolitical ones and involve sacred surplus meanings that differ dramatically from each other, then even common space for safe competing interpretations is in question.

From a hermeneutical point of view, what we can hope for is a better interpretation, but not elimination of subjective perspectives. May 9th perspectives will remain contextualized within geopolitical framework. This geopolitical framework setting apart perspectives at a radical distance may always be diminished when Presidents of the Baltic States commemorate May 9th in Moscow. To what extent it is illusory of a deeper dialogue between two sides remains to be seen. The transitional period of 20 years has shown that everything is at flux here. From 2010 to 2030 much more will happen both with the treatment of symbols and the interpretation of their surplus meaning.