

USE OF ABUSE: THEMATIZATION OF VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS IN THE CONTEXT OF THE HISTORICAL MASTER NARRATIVE OF LATVIA

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Abstract

The purpose of the article is to trace the development of the victims vs. perpetrators discourse as an integral part of the historical master narrative of Latvia since the end of the 19th century till nowadays. The narrative of abuse plays an essential role in historical master narratives of many modern national communities, as their integrity is strongly dependent on defining themselves via binary oppositions. According to Anthony Smith, in this self-identification process of a nation culture, mass communication and education play a particular role [Smith, 1991]. Maurice Halbwachs has specified that school textbooks, media and cultural production actually do not care much about the 'real history' – what is being implemented, refers to 'collective memory', adapted to the requirements of the actual presence [Halbwachs 1980]. The research paper analyses how this collective memory pattern has been shaped throughout time in the historical master narrative of Latvia as reflected in literature, media and school textbooks. The research focuses on the 'official' master narrative, as the research objective was to reveal how the past has been adjusted to present under changes of political regimes and social developments. However, in the context of the second half of the 20th century contrasting voices have been included in order to suggest the presence of the multiplicity of narratives and to pose a series of questions to the current cultural and socio-political interpretation of the past of Latvia.

Keywords: *victims vs. perpetrators, memory politics, master narratives, history instrumentalism.*

Discussion

In the 21st century, following the political, cultural and academic attempts of democracies to explain the past by respecting different viewpoints and multiple voices, the binary opposition of victims and perpetrators seems simplistic and outdated. In the context of the discussion about the European identity in making as just one sample of questioned multilateral identities, this opposition seems to be even dangerous to mention. The great collisions of the 20th century seem to be over-analysed on all levels, the Cold War positioning of West vs. East has somewhat lost its clarity, and the past seems to be finally allowed to be forgotten – we all know that *Opa war kein Nazi*. The lasting discussion about the responsibility of bystanders has smoothed the clear edges of the questions of guilt, innocence and revenge. However, as soon as to leave the safe realm of political correctness, stories about the past seem to lean towards comfortable positioning of the black-and-white juxtaposition of ‘us’ and ‘others’. By coining his concept of ‘imagined communities’, Benedict Anderson has stated that this sense of ‘us’ vs. ‘others’ is particularly important factor for self-defining of a nation [Anderson 2006 (1983)]. Pierre Nora has pointed at the intrinsic link between the rise of modern nationalism in the second half of the 19th century and the birth of history as a modern science – despite claims of history to discard its previous politically engaged function as recording chronicles of nobility and design itself as a discipline per se, it loses its purity as soon as history steps out of the ivory tower of a sheer scholarly environment and becomes a subject of curriculum at schools, universities and enthusiast circles. History seizes rights not only to tell stories from the past, but also to interpret them, claiming to explain the meaning of the past events to the contemporary [Nora 2014]. Modern nationalism swiftly grasps the options provided by the tools of history writing and even quicker gets to the idea of history rewriting according to the current needs.

Although the concept of “historical instrumentalism” as coined by Arthur Danto [Danto 1965] has been rated negatively among scholars [McCullagh 1973; Donagan 1975; Topolski 2012], the discussion on whether history has rights to interpret the past cannot be regarded as one-sided. For instance, Martin Heisler has associated rewriting of history with positive self-identification, relating history politics, another term assigned to use of history for a certain purpose, to identity politics and as such inevitable in order to sustain a community [Heisler 2008]. Another concept advocating for the bright side of ‘applied history’ is historical constructivism, to be owed to Jack Meiland, whose *Scepticism and Historical Knowledge* explicated and defended history as, roughly, “a fable agreed upon”. Meiland suggested that historians “must be regarded as constructing

or creating the past rather than as reporting the past” and constructing their accounts for other purposes than discovery of the past per se [Meiland 1965, 7]. Therefore, history should be understood as a product of the perspective-laden conventions of historians. Leon Golstein has defended history as the “primacy of knowing” as a set of cognitive-constructive processes of historians creating reality [Golstein 1977]. Pierre Nora has argued that the use of past has become particularly complex starting from the second half of the 20th century together with the rise of the impact of an eyewitness [Nora 2014]. If history suggested to create objective stories of the past and focused on teleological perspectives of the development of a community, witnessing served to breed the so-called memory politics – the main actor in memory wars, specific to the reviews of the recent history. Its dual nature can be explained by simultaneous presence of claims for subjectivity and objectivity.

It is important to note that the tendency of historical instrumentalism, inevitable as it might seem, has served as a background for memory politics and respective memory wars. One of characteristic samples is cold war dichotomy affected interpretation of the past, significant also for its attempts to ascribe history rewriting to *the other side*. However, alongside with the right-wing rhetoric spreading across the Western world, memory politics has gained more dangerous features. Culture, education and mass communication become particularly endangered as possible tools for replacing multiculturalism and tolerance with aggressive neo-nationalism and futility against the otherness. In order to prevent these processes, the representations of historical master narratives¹ particularly with respect to national myths and otherization, play a very important role, and Latvian case can be regarded as particularly interesting for study, since a number of studies have pointed at Latvia as a highly susceptible community for extreme right ideologies [Wodak 2013; Kott 2016; Bröning 2016].

In Latvia after the collapse of the Soviet Union memory wars are particularly affected by multiple and often contrasting explanations of the Second World

¹ “Master narrative”, “metanarrative” or “grand narrative” (French: *métarécit*) is a term introduced by Jean-François Lyotard in his classic 1979 work “The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge”, in which Lyotard summed up a range of views which were being developed at the time, as a critique of the institutional and ideological forms of knowledge. According to Lyotard, the postmodern was characterised precisely by mistrust of the grand narratives described as narratives *about* narratives of historical meaning, experience, or knowledge, which offers a society legitimation through the anticipated completion of some master idea [Lyotard 1984 (1979)]. As referred to history, the concept of ‘historical master narratives’ has been referred to history explanations, publicly accepted and often institutionalized as the official, predominating version of national past serving as a basis for politicized historical understanding [Wertsch 2008].

War events and the following so-called Soviet period. The narrative of victims vs. perpetrators play a particularly important role in these memory politics affected collisions, and is often supported by official state policy by supporting the national master narrative version which is rooted back, like in case with several other national communities of Europe, to the second half of the 19th century when the modern nationalism was born. The so-called Neo-Latvians similar to other national awakening movements¹, drafted the local version of the national history master narrative and localized its main elements (see Table 1).

Table 1. **Myths structuring historical master narratives**

Myth of spatial and temporal continuity of a community (“this land has always belonged to us”)
Teleological myth (“history has helped us to get here”)
Myth of integrity (“we are united”)
Myth of cultural and moral superiority (“we are better than others”)
Myth of uniqueness (“we have a special place in the world’s history”)
Manichaeistic myth (“we represent light, fairness and justice”)
Myth of ‘us’ vs. ‘others’ (“we regard the rest of the world from our perspective”)

Particularly the latter four myth elements reflect upon historical narrative as a struggle between opposite forces, where *we* represent the right side. The *us* vs. *others* opposition as a consolidating factor of Latvians as a self-aware nation required significant effort of cultural workers and social activists of the time period, contributing to what Eric Hobsbawm has described as “invention of a tradition” [Hobsbawm 1983]. What is important, that this opposition always provides positions of victims and perpetrators clarified, and *we* are always on the *right side*.

¹ The term *Neo-Latvians* (Latvian: *jaunlatvieši*) is referred to the activists of the Latvian national awakening movement in the middle of the 19th century. The movement has been named after similar national awakening movements in the 19th century Europe, for example, the *New Germans* or the *New Czechs* (both serving as role models for Latvian national awakening movement activities) [Spekke 1951].

Table 2. **Us vs. others**

US	OTHERS
If we are winners,	they are losers.
If we lose,	they are unfair.
If we are politically strong,	they are politically weak.
If we are military strong,	they deserve to be invaded.
If we are politically/military weak, then we possess a moral superiority.	If they are politically/military superior, then they are unfair and aggressive.
Defeat is just a temporary state and at the end justice will win (justice means we win).	If they win, it is an unjust, temporary state, established by violence.
The most prominent of us are heroes or martyrs.	They are unimportant (depersonalized) or oppressors.
We are never perpetrators – we are either winners or victims.	They are never victims – they are either perpetrators or losers.

Following the historical facts, the Neo-Latvians created the master narrative still present nowadays, portraying Latvians as once flourishing and prosperous nation living in the territory of Latvia from time immemorial – until evil forces, namely German merchants and missionaries (represented as *the crusaders*, *the barons* or merely *the Germans*) arrived at the end of the 12th century and enslaved the nation (sic!), destroyed its culture and value system and killed national heroes [Cīrulis 2007; Apals 2007]. However, this was just a temporary state which was going to pass soon, as, alone or with the help of Russia (see more on Slavophile tendencies among the 19th century Latvian nationalists in Plakans 1995: 100), Latvians were going to wake up from their lethargic state of oppression as the mythical hero was going to resurrect. This plot has been explained in detail in the epic poem *Lāčplēsis* (“Bearslayer”) by Andrejs Pumpurs, one of the greatest figures among Latvian 19th century nationalists [Pumpurs 2002 (1888)], trailblazing the tradition of the national narrative and significantly contributing at creating a set of fixed symbols, metaphors and epithets integral to how the narrative is reproduced over time. The epic poem by Pumpurs, but even to further extent, writings by other Neo-Latvians particularly accentuated the motive of Latvians as the nation of victims invaded by foreign perpetrators and suffering under their sway: thus, for instance, Auseklis, one of the late 19th century Latvian poets and cultural workers, depicted all Latvian

poetry as moaning to the Sun and the God about the harsh and bitter fate of the nation and provided a particularly wide array of national romanticism inspired means of literary expression for description of sufferings of the Latvian nation, the violence of foreign invaders and moaning for resurrection [Auseklis], while social and educational activist Kronvaldu Atis in his more pragmatic rhetoric described Latvians as suffering under the burdens and desperation caused by foreign forces aiming to despise and destroy other nations [Kronvaldu Atis, in: Zeiferts (1922–1930)].

This 19th century draft of Latvians as innocent victims invaded by foreign perpetrators and the respective set of symbols and metaphors has remained at the core of the historical master narrative of Latvia until nowadays. Following social, political and cultural paradigmatic changes only adjust the role of perpetrators to the actual circumstances as well as introduce slight shift of accents regarding how the victims thematize themselves. For instance, the image of the Latvian nation sleeping in the seven hundred years long sleep and awaiting the hero to wake it up has remained unchanged throughout the history even if modified according to *Zeitgeist*.

However, already the early socialist thinkers of Latvia active in the late 19th and early 20th century marked one of the above-mentioned minor shifts by criticism towards national myth as orientated towards past only. The focus in their writings was shifted from German invasion to actual social inequality, from nation to an individual as a representative of their social class – but the portrayal of victims and perpetrators stayed intact [Buceniece, 2005].

Another, more significant shift was marked by establishing state independence of Latvia in 1918. The forming of national and especially statehood consciousness as well as reminiscences of the First World War and fierce freedom fights against both German and Russian forces induced notable changes in the historical master narrative. It was also important that a distinction between history and social memory started developing alongside with former soldiers and freedom fighters sharing and recording their memories – this last factor encouraged seeing the *dark centuries* of oppression as overcome. The new narrative sounded as following: during the ages of *darkness and slavery* Latvians might have had some seeds of national self-awareness, but the oppressors had killed these seeds *in fetu* until awaited heroes – Neo-Latvians arrived and freed the nation by culture and education. Now the teleological aspect became predominating – the state of victimhood was in the past, and the nation was consequently approaching re-establishment of the lost past paradise. The rest of the world was depicted as either former perpetrators and current losers, or admirers. This narrative version swiftly expanded from political speech level to school

textbooks, literature and art history chrestomathies and media discourse [Zālītis 1921; Plūdons 1924; Melnalksnis 1925; Skujeneeks 1927]. The First World War and state independence proclamation changed not only shifts aspects in victim thematization. Perpetrators, until then pictured as a sort of amorphic evil mass of oppressors, got more specified by distinguishing their national and social representations. These tendencies developed starting from the 1920s and particularly flourished during the authoritarian regime by Kārlis Ulmanis established in 1934. Germans remained to be regarded as the main historical perpetrator, but gradually a tendency developed of looking for justifying compromises – for instance, Mārgers Skujenieks argued that the violent behaviour by German invaders in the 12th–13th century could be explained by the fact that crusades were formed mostly of déclassé representatives of the lower society [Skujeneeks 1927]. Unlike the 19th century thematization, historians dared tackling the subject of the conquest as explained by the political instability of Baltic tribes. Baltic Germans were accepted as part of local community where they participated in social, political and cultural life [Cerūzis 2015]. A new tendency of this period was related to gradually growing negative view on Russia and Russians – as a reaction to disappointment with Russia not providing support to Latvia during its struggle for national independence, marking an essential divergence from the 19th century nationalists and socialists perceiving Russia as the friend in the East, a highly developed cultural and political organization country to serve as a role model. The interwar period narrative depicted Russians as unreliable and sly enthrallers, clearly far behind Latvians both regarding culture and virtues. This was the period when the Russification narrative got drafted – for instance, Frīdis Zālītis, the biggest authority in school history textbook field, characterized Russia as a failed state in the sense of cultural, military, social and education aspects swallowed by bureaucracy [Zālītis 1935], setting background for portrayal of Russia in the years after the independence of Latvia was re-established (worth mentioning that textbooks by Zālītis were intensely republished in early 1990s). Similar rhetoric, also intensely reproduced in Latvian exile community and in Latvia after the collapse of the Soviet Union, was provided by Mārgers Skujenieks, describing 1880s as the dark and depressing ages of Russification, “sentencing the Latvian nation with a capital punishment” [Skujeneeks 1927].

Next major shift in the historical master narrative of Latvia was marked by the beginning of the first Soviet occupation period (1940–1941) and the Second World War. Certainly, the official Soviet narrative provided a unilateral regard onto historical events. A reader for elementary school kids, prepared for publishing already during the first Soviet occupation period but actually published just after the end of the Second World War, in 1946, provided a

chrestomathy instruction for restructuring of the collective memory. The reader also considered possible that both schoolchildren and their parents at that time still kept in memory the narrative inherited from the pre-war period. So, for example, the reader did not propose a clear condemnation of *fascist bourgeois* pre-Soviet occupation Latvia – this period seems to be rather *forgotten to mention*, erased from collective memory by skipping. The reader also enclosed poetry by the 19th century nationalist movement authors, claiming for freedom of Latvia, taking care of the Latvian language and culture, getting rid of the burden of foreign supremacies – here an explanation follows that the Neo-Latvians in the 19th century were fighting against the same Germans, thematized as the evil forces who had destroyed our country during the war. It is important that the editors of the book had paid special attention to individual offences committed by Germans, hence the new victim vs. perpetrator relationship was shifted from the level of collective memory to the level of individual memory – each new Soviet citizen could find his or her personal story variation in the reader. Only at the very end of the book the individual horror stories were replaced by more abstract outer enemy of the Soviet state, introducing also new categories of perpetrators, such as fascists, capitalists and foreigners in general [Lasāmā grāmata 4. klasei 1946].

Looking back on the first and the second Soviet occupation periods as well as the relatively short Nazi German occupation period in Latvia (see Table 3) is a sensitive question, as the historical master narrative after the collapse of the Soviet Union was orientated towards setting its own regard onto victims and perpetrators, introducing also a variety of bystander thematization, and since the period was still closely related to witnessing, personal and family histories, as well as guidelines of history interpretations for domestic and foreign policies, there was a strong tendency to interpret the official master narrative of the occupation powers in the 20th century as opposite to the social memory discourse in families and close environments of trustees. However, such an interpretation shall be regarded as simplified. Already starting with the first Soviet occupation period the cultural landscape of Latvia was marked by a mixture of different and often juxtaposed interpretations of both national history and current events. Consequently, also the victim vs. perpetrator dichotomy split into several versions particularly during the war period. These versions can co-exist as simultaneous alternatives not only within the framework of one chronological period, but even within an individual's cultural memory. Table 3 provides an overview of the possible models of victim vs. perpetrator thematization arranged chronologically according to the time frame between 1940 and *perestroika*.

Table 3. **Victims vs. perpetrators as reflected in the historical master narrative in the cultural landscape of Latvia (1940–1987)**

REGIME / IDEOLOGY / SOCIETAL GROUP	THEMATIZED AS VICTIMS	THEMATIZED AS PERPETRATORS	THEMATIZED AS HEROES
The first Soviet occupation period, official Soviet thematization. 1940–1941	Latvian nation and socialists in the bourgeois Latvia	Ideological agents of the bourgeois Latvia	Soviet power – the Redeemers
Nazi Germany occupation period. 1941–1944	KGB victims and their relatives	KGBs and Jews (often Jews-communists)	Nazi authorities and Adolf Hitler
The second Soviet occupation period until Stalin's death in 1953. Official Soviet thematization	Soviet citizens who had suffered during the Nazi occupation	Germans (fascists) and their supporters	Soviet power and Stalin
Popular thematization (common view by Latvian nationals) until Stalin's death	Latvians (peasants)	Russians	Germans, the West, resistance movement
The Khrushchev Thaw. 1953–1964	Victims of Stalin repressions	Stalinist terror	Soviet power and Lenin
The second Soviet occupation period from stagnation years till <i>perestroika</i> . 1964–1987	Not very explicit – a period of relative stability	Capitalist Western society, local corruption	Soviet power and Lenin
Exile Latvian community	Latvians in exile and in Latvia	Russians, communists	Awaited (potentially from the West)
Informal opposition	Latvians	Soviet power	Opposition and the West
Common view discourse in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Latvia	Individualized, mostly related to material issues and bureaucracy	Soviet bureaucracy	Material goods

Even such a brief overview still reveals the multiplicity and ambiguity of the victim vs. perpetrator narrative during this period. Paradoxically, but Soviet and Nazi German occupation periods offer more polyphonic historical master narrative presence than the period of the National Awakening after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when the relevant discourse tends to slope back to a clear distinction between *us* and *others*, similar to the dichotomic national myth structure created by the 19th century nationalist movement. Re-establishing of the independence of Latvia marked a new shift regarding victim vs. perpetrator thematization and new reconsideration of history explained and social memory. A history textbook published in 1992 provided this new version of what had happened in the past: Latvians were portrayed as martyrs who had suffered for long dark ages under foreign supremacies. However, the main enemies and torturers were Russia, communists and Russians still living in Latvia [Auns, Kostanda 1992]. This motive rapidly spread in arts, literature and education guidelines and textbooks, and got an intense support from renewed memory politics wave, as memoirs and memory sites were established with an aim to remember, document and unveil *vicious deeds by Russians*. It is notable that, particularly referring to memory documentations, Nazi occupation as well as historical presence of Baltic Germans in Latvia were often characterized more positively compared to the Soviet occupation power and Russian presence in Latvia [Noras Valteres atmiņas par notikumiem vācu okupācijas periodā 1941.–1944. gadā].

Conclusions

The historical master narrative of Latvia since its development in the 19th century has always been a subject to severe tendencies of instrumentalization of history and memory politics. It particularly refers to the dichotomy of victims vs. doers, mostly due to the presence of occupation powers in the territory of Latvia, as well as other historical collisions. Both occupation regimes and Latvian nationals have developed their versions of historical master narratives, and in complex periods such as the second part of the 20th century, those narrative versions have often existed parallelly both in collective memory and even individual consciousness. Sources witnessing those, consciously or unconsciously, instrumentalized narratives are mostly found in cultural landscape – literature, arts, communication in the public space and particularly clearly they are represented in school textbooks and readers.

Although since the collapse of the Soviet Union Latvia has re-established its independence, the tendency of keeping at a version of national master narrative adjusted to the actual socio-political reality and including the mandatory victim vs. perpetrator motive has not gone – moreover, it has been reinforced by introducing the motive of Soviet trauma as a permanent constituent of the discourse in the public

space, including history education and art space. It has also turned into a successful marketing strategy, just to mention numerous artefacts inviting audiences to commemorate Gulag camps and KGB violence. Soviet trauma has become thematized as an integral part of both domestic and foreign policy discourse, as Latvians tend to identify themselves as a community consolidated by victim identity. However, this can be a dangerous setting not only due to the complexity of the population of Latvia where only two thirds of inhabitants are Latvian nationals, but also in the context of aggressive neo-nationalist wave across Europe, which signifies a general tendency to look for common truths in old binary oppositions of *us* versus *others* and thus can lead to xenophobia, immature political decisions and even severe violence.

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