HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF RESISTANCE TO HOLOCAUST EDUCATION POLICY IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE: THE CASE OF ESTONIA

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ABSTRACT

The failure of foreign efforts to promote Holocaust education in Estonia and other parts of Central and Eastern Europe can be attributed in part to a failure to understand the historical and cultural factors that contribute to national resistance to Holocaust education. The Estonian non-implementation of its Holocaust Education policy is examined in order to elucidate the importance of historical and cultural context in attempts to advance Holocaust education in post-communist societies.

Holocaust education efforts have often lagged—if not failed miserably—in Estonia and many other countries of Central and Eastern Europe. They have failed despite intensive foreign efforts, in part because those making these efforts failed to understand the cultural and historical roots of resistance to Holocaust education in post-communist socities. These roots must be well understood if renewed efforts to promote the teaching of the Holocaust in the contexts of Central and Eastern Europe are to be more successful.

Central and Eastern European countries often share characteristics that contributed to a different trajectory in societies' historical awareness and understanding of the Holocaust. The communist legacy in particular had many facets. Communist countries generally ignored the Holocaust, or if it was mentioned, emphasized the political rather than the racial dimensions of the persecution. To the extent that it was dealt with at all, the Holocaust was represented not as the product of anti-Semitism, but as a natural consequence of fascism and capitalism. In addition, historical inquiry was generally suppressed. Societies were not forced to grapple with the history in the same way that the countries of Western Europe, the United States and Israel had. Further, the fresh memories of long suffering under communist rule rooted in direct personal and family experience often take precedence in people's minds. This feeling of victimization often framed people as powerless, while the historical reality

of collaboration on the contrary insists that individuals were responsible for their actions under tyrannical regimes. These dynamics were exacerbated by the strict censorship of foreign materials, denying residents access to the unfolding understanding of the Holocaust in the West.

Despite these commonalities, there is considerable diversity in the history of the Holocaust in post-communist countries, and in the contemporary levels of Holocaust awareness and receptivity to Holocaust education. For these reasons, the author and Deborah Michaels of Grinnell College have assembled a group of scholars who work in the region to produce a book, to be completed later this year, on issues surrounding Holocaust education in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

For the author, research into Holocaust education in Estonia was somewhat accidental and indeed circuitous, but came full circle to the encounters with racism and anti-Semitism that spurred the original research project. A former doctoral student in Classical languages and cultures at Indiana University, the author experienced at one degree of separation three racially-motivated multiple homicides in a period of nine months, including one perpetrated by his former Latin student. That experience challenged fundamental assumptions about the power of education to transform deeply held anti-social attitudes and dispositions: how could a student from an excellent high school and university subscribe to an utterly discredited racial ideology? A research agenda emerged that explored the relationship between individual attitudes, social transformation and systemic change.

It was possible for students to emerge from otherwise excellent American schools with racist ideologies intact because there was nothing in the curriculum to engage and challenge such anti-social dispositions. Indeed, the American Supreme Court Decision to outlaw the segregation of black and white students into different schools, Brown v. Board of Education in 1954, represented a profound legal and institutional transformation. But its success faltered: the institutional transformation was never fulfilled by a parallel social and psychological transformation. There had never been a nation-wide attempt to overcome racism in American schools. What would such an attempt to fulfill profound institutional and political transformations through education look like? I selected an oblique case: the attempt to fulfill the profound democratic and market-system transformations that emerged in the wake of the Soviet collapse by cultivating citizenship in schools in the most successful post-Soviet state: Estonia.

It was unsettling to encounter graffiti swastikas soon after arriving in Estonia during September, 2001, the first of 27 months spent in Estonia researching civic education in its international context and local practice. For the author, the swastikas were symbols of hate and of the greatest evil in human history. How then, to understand that this graffiti was directed not at a Jewish community, which never exceeded 4,000 in Estonia, but rather targeted the large Russian minority? Relations between ethnic Estonians and ethnic Russians, never easy, reached their nadir during the Second World War, when the Soviet's triumph over Nazi Germany meant for Estonians a half-century of Soviet occupation. For the Russians, the Estonians—most of whom perceived with the Nazis as liberators from their first experience of Soviet occupation—were no more than fascist collaborators. The attacks of September, 2001, seemed to herald a geopolitical shift towards Russia, which was n longer seen to be an enemy to be contained by NATO, but rather an ally in the War on Terror.

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American policy in the region shifted towards two ends: improving relations between Estonia and Russia and advancing Holocaust education. The Baltic defense ministers were presumably stunned when they were told in April, 2002, that the "hard work—not just words but concrete action" that would make them "ready and able to contribute to European security in tangible ways" and hence worthy of accession to NATO, meant not upgrading their weaponry or training, or sending troops to Afghanistan, but rather "dealing with the history of the Holocaust" and "fully integrating ethnic Russian-speakers into society" (Embassy, 2002). The paradox of these two directives is that the history of the Holocaust hit squarely at the root of ethnic tensions between the Russians and Estonians in the country, and assumed a hierarchy of evil that aligned much more closely with Russia's (and the Soviet's) understanding of history than with Estonians' own.

A Holocaust education day policy was understood to be the fundamental criterion for security from Russian aggression—in the words of one commentator, "Holocaust day is the entry-ticket for NATO " (mauri [sic], 2003)—and despite broad public resistance, it was officially adopted by the Estonian government on August 6th, 2002. While the U.S. recognized that such efforts might entail "significant political cost" (Embassy, 2002), it apparently did not

anticipate that the policy would be not only an utter failure, but would actually be designed to fail.

The historical context of the Holocaust in Estonia and of Estonia's experience between the Nazis and Soviets from 1933-1991 shed light on the contemporary attitudes towards Holocaust education today. Estonian national identity took shape in a context of Russian domination during the 19th century. Estonians faced pressure to Russify, and rebelled unsuccessfully against the Russian empire in 1905, finally gaining independence after World War I while Russia was reeling from the aftereffects of the October revolution. Independence was short-lived: within two decades, unknown to Estonians, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact allotted the Baltic states and part of Poland to the Soviet Union. Unaware of German complicity in their loss of independence, Estonia was quickly overrun.

Estonians endured a difficult year of occupation under the Soviets, losing approximately 60,000 of its million people to Soviet murder and deportations, including 10% of the pre-occupation Jewish community of approximately 4,000. When the Nazis broke the pact and attacked the Soviet Union, driving its forces out of Estonia, the prospect of recovered independence and the opportunity to fight the Soviets led many Estonian men to enlist with the Germans. More than 3,000 of the remaining Jewish population withdrew into the Soviet Union when the Soviet army retreated, and because the relevant archives are not open to inspection, their fates are still generally unknown. 969 of Estonia's Jews are known to have lost their lives, and at the Wannsee conference, Estonia was declared Judenrein.

The Nazi occupation lasted three years before the Soviets returned in 1944, renewing their annexation of Estonia and, years after the Soviet collapse, Russia finally withdrew its troops in 1994 from a much changed country. "[B]etween 1940 and 1945 the population seems to have declined by a minimum of 200,000" (Raun 1991: 181). If this toll was terrible, the "demographic consequences of Stalinism in peacetime proved even more devastating to the population of Estonia than the upheavals of World War II" (Raun 1991: 181). By the time the Russian troops left the country a half-century later, Estonia—formerly a homogenous country with a 90% ethnic Estonian population—had approximately 1.4 million people, nearly 40% of them ethnic Russian or Russian-speaking. The sense of national victimization and powerlessness under overwhelming foreign power is quite strong among Estonians, and was exacerbated by the Soviet Union's attempts to Russify the population. For Estonians, like the other Baltic states, this history is known as the "Soviet genocide."

With Estonia's experience of Soviet occupation, it isn't difficult to understand why the country would be ill-disposed towards embracing a version of history much more closely in alignment with Soviet propaganda than with its own national self-understanding. The emphasis on the Holocaust seemed to Estonians to create a hierarchy in which some victims were more important than others—namely, Jews were more important than Estonians—and a corollary that Nazi Germany was a greater evil than the Soviet Union, a position that Estonians were unwilling to concede. They felt instead that many nations had suffered, and that each nation should recognize and commemorate its own suffering.

More problematic for Estonians, however, was that the premise underlying the promotion of a Holocaust day included an acknowledgement of culpability in Nazi atrocities, a view they could not reconcile with the fact that Estonia had lost its independence. A history that held Estonians responsible as perpetrators could not co-exist with the country's view of itself as a nation of powerless victims. This discrepancy between Western European, American and Israeli understandings of the Holocaust and Estonians' understanding unfolded in a broader context of Estonian resentment of foreign interference in its domestic policies, its feeling that no one understood or respected its language, culture, history or suffering, a continuing fear of Russian aggression, and a frustration with its Russian minority, "who have been here for half a century and never learned Estonian," a sentiment heard regularly around the country (Stevick, 2007, p. 226).

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The government formally adopted the policy that it felt was necessary to secure EU and NATO membership, despite the fact that, on a straight domestic vote, it could never have gained the support necessary to pass. Estonia paid lip service to Holocaust education, particularly in English-language press releases for foreign audiences, while both subtly challenging the premises of Holocaust education supporters and systematically ensuring that virtually nothing would actually be done in schools.

The clearest example of the struggle over the meaning of the Holocaust came in choosing a day for the Holocaust. Estonia chose January 27th, the day of the liberation from Auschwitz. This choice, however, was a way of rejecting culpability and denying an Estonian connection to the

events of the Holocaust. No Estonian Jews were sent to Auschwitz, and no Estonians worked at the camp (Zuroff 2005). Efraim Zuroff of the Simon Wiesenthal Institute, the leader of the attempt to prosecute Nazi war criminals from the Baltic states and an advocate for Holocaust education, had advocated for a locally meaningful day:

> Estonian officials rejected a suggestion by the Simon Wiesenthal Center that they choose either 20 January, the date of the infamous Wannsee Conference in 1942, at which the implementation of the Final Solution was discussed and Estonia was declared Judenrein (free of Jews), or 7 August, the date on which the 36th Estonian Security Battalion murdered Jews in Nowogrudok, Belarus. (Zuroff 2005)

The announcement itself was made on the August 6th, the timing of which could well have been symbolic since it was both the anniversary of the annexation of Estonia into the Soviet Union and the day before the anniversary of the atrocities at Nowogrudok.

The government justified its decision not on the basis of the importance of teaching its children about the Holocaust, but instead, "According to a Ministry of Education statement, its observance would foster understanding of genocide and would underline 'as an important foreign policy factor, solidarity with the European and trans-Atlantic community'" (City Paper's Baltics Worldwide 2002). While the decision was justified on foreign policy grounds, the choice of the word genocide instead of Holocaust was deliberate; since Estonians see themselves as victims of a Soviet genocide, they could refer to their own experience, not that of Jews or other victims of the Holocaust. This more inclusive use of language to challenge the foreign notion that the Holocaust is unique was a persistent feature of the rhetoric surrounding Holocaust education day in Estonia.

School directors from two of Estonia's most elite high schools promptly condemned the policy, announcing publicly that they would not observe the day in their schools (Baltic News Service, August 26, 2002). The Ministry was silent; there was no public reprimand, an early indication of the Ministry's intentions. Teachers followed suit later in the academic year (Nielson 2003). The Ministry offered no support about how one might teach the Holocaust, and it soon purged the announcement of Holocaust education day from its otherwise intact press release archive (Stevick, 2007, p. 230).

The Ministry of Education continued to struggle against the notion that there was anything intrinsically unique about the Holocaust that merited special attention. As the date of the first Holocaust education day approached,

> 'Education Minister Mailis Rand in a circular sent to the schools…noted that not only the Nazi crimes against Jews but also all other victims persecuted for ethnic, racial, religious, and political reasons should be remembered. The ministry gave the schools a free hand in deciding how and in which classes the subject should be handled' ("Baltic States Report," 2003).

Victims of the Holocaust were not to receive any special attention, but were to be lumped together with all other victims of persecution.

More notable, however, is the selective deployment of a choice mechanism. The Minister gives teachers and schools "a free hand in deciding how and in which classes the subject should be handled." Knowing that the population was overwhelmingly opposed to Holocaust education day, this 'choice' was a phony one. It merely affirmed teachers' general intentions to do nothing. If people's behavior will be almost completely predictable, than offering a choice is in effect a form of policy fiat. In this case, it was a license to do nothing, and that is what happened. A specialist in the national curriculum center was interested in how the day was implemented, so he provided as a homework assignment to 30 school directors with whom he was working,

> to examine the way the Holocaust Day was spent the first time in Estonia in 2003. We asked them to get the information from another school: to ask how it was spent and what people were thinking about the Holocaust Day. People were very bitter, most of the people in their responses, they were very direct and very honest, saying that this is not the day that is celebrated in Estonian school, and not in a nice way. But public opinion and the opinion of teachers and head directors was that this came from outside…and from these 30 answers that we got, we had zero responses that this was an important day that we need to have in our school system (Interview transcript).

"Basically, Holocaust Day does not exist in Estonia."

Although very little occurred on January 27th, Holocaust issues stayed in the public eye during 2003 as the Simon Wiesenthal Center conducted "Operation Last Chance" to find and to prosecute Nazi war criminals. Issues of collective vs. individual responsibility stayed at the fore. The text, which included the line "During the Holocaust, Estonians murdered Jews in Estonia as well as in other countries" (City Paper's Baltics Worldwide 2003) was perceived to be so inflammatory that Estonia's Jewish community opposed its publication:

> Chairwoman of the Estonian Jewish community Cilja Laud, Chairman of the Association of Former Prisoners of Ghettos and Concentration Camps Vladimir Perelman, and Rabbi Shmuel Kot sent a letter to the Media House advertising agency asking it not to publish the advertisements of the Simon Wiesenthal Center. ("Baltic States Report," 2003).

While Zuroff found the refusal "shocking" and "unheard-of" ("Baltic States Report," 2003a), Peeter Torop, the chair of the Semiotics Department at Estonia's top university, felt "that although the text of the advertisement does not call for violence, it instigates ethnic hatred and 'accuses Estonians as a nation of murdering Jews'" (City Paper's Baltics Worldwide 2003).

The foreign pressure and investment in Holocaust education had accomplished little, and there was no sign in the public discourse that understanding and awareness of the Holocaust had improved as a result. It had instead become intensely politicized, and hit at the heart of ethnic tensions between Russians and Estonians in Estonia.

Estonia was admitted into NATO and the EU, and the government became more adept at dealing with the foreign perspective on the Holocaust. In an English-language press release, the Foreign Ministry wrote just what foreign advocates wanted to hear:

> During the Second World War, the Nazi regime systematically eliminated on the occupied Estonian territory both Estonian Jews, and those that had been brought here from elsewhere. There is no justification for the participation of anyone in these shameful and morally condemnable acts. Even if they have not directly shed the blood of anyone, they are nevertheless morally responsible. Knowing the past teaches tolerance and helps to achieve that the crimes of the last century will never be repeated. (Estonian Ministry 2006)

With the context of the Holocaust firmly established, the Foreign Ministry immediately notes that, "The Ministry of Education and Science called on all Estonian schools to explain to students the tragic events of the last century.'" Indeed it did. But this was a sleight of hand: foreign readers would inevitably conclude from the context that the "tragic events" referred to the Holocaust, but the phrase is a shifting signifier: Estonian listeners would immediately think of Estonians' suffering, not the Holocaust.

The author returned to Estonia in the same year for some follow-up research. This time, the curriculum specialist confidently pronounced that, "Basically, Holocaust Day does not exist in Estonia."

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