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**GENDER AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: THE HISTORICAL MEMORY OF  
SOVIET-ERA ETHNIC ESTONIAN AND ETHNIC RUSSIAN WOMEN**

**Tara Godwin (Julie Ault, PhD)**

**Department of History**

ABSTRACT

After the fall of communism in 1991, Estonia continues to grapple with questions of historical memory of the Soviet era and conflict between its two major ethnic groups—ethnic Estonians and ethnic Russians. This paper explores the experiences of both ethnic Estonian and ethnic Russian women born between 1931-1989. Utilizing oral histories as primary sources, this paper examines the ways in which each ethnic group experienced gender, remembers World War II, and experienced policies of sovietization. The two groups share a similar perception of gender as both groups experienced a “double burden” caused by official Soviet expectations for women. However, ethnic Estonian women and ethnic Russian women remember WWII and sovietization much differently from one another. For ethnic Estonian women, WWII continued a struggle for national sovereignty while for ethnic Russian women the war legitimized the Soviet system. Sovietization served to increase the divide between the two ethnic groups. Estonian women deeply resented the Soviet presence and actively resisted policies meant to Sovietize the Estonian population. Ethnic Russian women, however, held a privileged status in Estonia during these years and identified as Soviet. This identification left them bereft of nationality after 1991.

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## INTRODUCTION

Locked behind an “Iron Curtain” until the dissolution of the Soviet Union (USSR) in 1991, the USSR kept strict control over its fifteen republics. The smallest of the republics in terms of population, Estonians deeply resented the Soviet presence.<sup>1</sup> Begun in the Stalinist period from the 1930s to the mid-1950s, sovietization sought to create a unified Soviet identity, placing all other forms of nationality under the umbrella of communism.<sup>2</sup> This process repressed official Estonian nationalism. Lasting nearly 50 years, Estonians born during the “Russian Era”<sup>3</sup> grappled with deep rooted issues of nationality. Those identifying as Soviet, regardless of birthplace, typically spoke Russian as a first language. Those identifying as Estonian, nearly universally spoke Estonian as a first language, thus creating a deep linguistic divide that contributed to a sense of ethnic identities between Soviets and Estonian Nationals. Women, in particular, faced unique issues centering on questions of reproductive rights, balancing communist work ethics and traditional domestic duties, and navigating married life.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, both ethnic Estonians and ethnic Russians crafted their own historical memories of the Soviet era. For Estonians, they felt the need to reclaim their national origins. The Soviet system suppressed Estonian national expression, fearing that loyalty to an Estonian nation would detract from loyalty to the Soviet Union. Consequently, Estonians felt oppressed and clung to their language and culture to preserve their collective sense of self.<sup>4</sup> Ethnic Russians struggle to claim an identity tied to a nation that no longer exists. The problem then presents itself: How did ethnic Estonian and ethnic Russian women experience gender during the Soviet period and how does each group construct its historical memory? This paper argues that ethnic Estonian and ethnic Russian women experienced gender in similar ways but hold oppositional views of the history of World War II and sovietization within Estonia. An understanding of the similarities between the ethnic Estonian and ethnic Russian gender experience demonstrates that the two groups, while often at odds with each other, possess significant common ground. Additionally, examining the differences in each group’s historical memory of World War II and the sovietization era increases our understanding of the nature of the conflict created by these differing historical recollections.

I draw primarily from oral histories to explore a relatively undocumented aspect of Estonian history by considering gender and historical memory among different ethnic groups. Documenting the oral histories of Estonian women furthers the historical discussion of life for women in the Soviet Union and allows for an examination of the relationship between gender, national identity, and memory from a “history from below” perspective. I collected these oral histories with twenty-two ethnic Estonian and Russian women living in Tallinn, Estonia, Tartu, Estonia, Rakvere, Estonia and Pärnu, Estonia

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<sup>1</sup> Andrejs Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 344.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>3</sup> Estonians refer to the period of Soviet rule colloquially as the “vene aeg” or “Russian era”.

<sup>4</sup> Toivo U. Raun, “Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Estonian Nationalism Revisited.” *Nations & Nationalism* 9, no. 1 (January 2003): 140.

over the course of a one-month research trip to Estonia.



In addition to living in different regions in Estonia, the women interviewed come from various socio-economic classes. Some received a university education and came from wealthy families; others never received any education at all and grew up in poor villages. In this paper, “Estonian women” refers to both ethnic Estonian and ethnic Russian women unless otherwise specified. In the interest of the safety of the women interviewed, all names of interviewees have been changed. Used in recent years as a new resource to social historians, oral histories provide a unique window into the minds of “witnesses of history.”

Oral history as a methodology captures a view of history from the perspective of underprivileged groups, in this case women, who may not have had direct influence over the greater political forces governing change taking place across the Soviet Union. Oral history also serves as a wonderful method to determine beliefs surrounding national identity, allowing the interviewee to explain his or her beliefs as he or she perceives them. The use of Estonian oral histories in this project ensures the inclusion of Estonian women in further academic discussion concerning gender and the Soviet Union. For the interviews conducted in Estonian, I translated these myself into English. For the interviews conducted in Russian, I relied on a translator to relay information to me. I use the translator’s English translation in this paper. Two interviews took place in English. However, both interviewees speak English as a second language. I have included their interviews verbatim to avoid diluting the speaker’s meaning. As such, quotes from each interview differ in grammatical accuracy depending on the unique circumstances surrounding the translation process.

This paper is organized thematically around three central issues that both ethnic Estonian and Russian women faced. I first provide a brief historical overview of Estonia to give the necessary context to understand Estonia's relationship with Germany and Russia as well as to nationalism more generally. I then discuss the shared gender experience of ethnic Estonian and ethnic Russian women, establishing similarities between the two groups. Following this section, I consider each group's recollection of World War II and the sovietization period, examining the origins for their respective differences in historical memory. Finally, I conclude by exploring the significance of understanding each theme in the context of present-day Estonia. I argue that ethnic Estonian and ethnic Russian women's gender experience under Soviet rule remain similar, while their memories of World War II and the sovietization period diverge.

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Estonia possess a long history of foreign imperial rule. This history ultimately shaped Estonian nationalism during the Soviet period, and by extension, ethnic Estonian historical memory after the fall of communism. For the purposes of this article, nationalism refers to the devotion of individuals to an imagined community, otherwise known as a nation. The community is imagined, according to historian Benedict Anderson, "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."<sup>5</sup> Nationalism, then, includes cultural and political expressions conveying loyalty to the imagined community, or nation. Additionally, as historian Tara Zahra contests, nationalism typically features "the assertion of essential difference between national communities".<sup>6</sup> In the Estonian case, Estonia's history of foreign occupation solidified the imagined Estonian community by uniting Estonian language speakers against outside imperial forces.<sup>7</sup> In addition to linguistic difference, Estonians interpret their history of foreign occupation in a way that creates an "essential difference" between themselves and ethnic Russians.

In the middle ages, German influence dominated Estonia. Medieval crusaders of German origin known as the Teutonic Knights occupied Estonia in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. German control continued in Estonia with the formation of a German merchants' union called the Hanseatic League.<sup>8</sup> German rule ended in 1558 when tsarist Russia conquered German and Swedish forces to establish dominance in the area, reinforcing a feudal system.<sup>9</sup> Baltic Germans, a remnant of German rule, found favor with the Russian court

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<sup>5</sup> Max Bergholz, "Thinking the Nation Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, by Benedict Anderson." *American Historical Review* 123, no. 2 (April 2018): 522.

<sup>6</sup> Tara Zahra, *Kidnapped Souls: National Indifference and the Battle for Children in the Bohemian Lands, 1900–1948*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Weindling and Björn M. Felder, *Baltic Eugenics: Bio-Politics, Race and Nation in Interwar Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania 1918-1940*. (New York: Brill | Rodopi, 2013), 50.

<sup>8</sup> Kyllike Sillaste, "Conquest and Survival: An Outline of Estonian History." *World Affairs* 157, no. 3 (1995): 119.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

and became political leaders.<sup>10</sup> While the feudal system formally ended in 1861 under tsar Alexander II the majority of Estonians lived as destitute agrarian peasants beholden to a Russian-speaking elite class.<sup>11</sup> However, a national awakening at the turn of the century produced a significant influx of Estonian literature, poetry, and scientific writings forging the beginnings of a defined national identity and inspiring literacy across the region.<sup>12</sup>

In the wake of nationalist sentiments, Estonia soon declared independence. Tsarist Russia, crumbling under the pressure of the First World War and an enraged peasant class, succumbed to chaos during the Russian Civil War, leaving the door open for Estonians to declare independence in 1919 under stipulations found in the Treaty of Versailles.<sup>13</sup> The aftermath of the Russian Civil War led to the formation of the Soviet Union—a collection of socialist states united under Marxist idealism determined to eliminate the bourgeois class.<sup>14</sup> Within the Soviet Union, Joseph Stalin, the leader of the USSR, wrought a reign of terror by purging perceived political enemies and enacting disastrous economic policies. The Second World War brought alternating periods of Nazi German and Soviet occupation in Estonia as each power battled for dominance in Eastern Europe. At the conclusion of World War II, Estonia found itself annexed into the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup>

From the perspective of the Soviet Union, the Estonian Socialist Republic needed to quickly be brought into line with the rest of the USSR. Begun in the USSR in the 1930s, collective farms (kolkhozy in Russian, kolhoosid in Estonian) socialized the countryside by turning small, private farms into the property of the state. Stalin quickly implemented a policy known as “collectivization”—a liquidation of private property to the hands of the state essentially combining neighboring farms, their assets, and their inhabitants.<sup>16</sup> Many independent farms became one large collective farm and former peasant farmers lived together on the kolhoos to work the land for the state. The process of collectivization pitted peasants against the state and proved wildly unpopular.<sup>17</sup> Across the Soviet Union, people slaughtered their livestock rather than turn their property over to Soviet officials.<sup>18</sup> The law required that collective farms deliver one-third of their harvest to the state, but Soviet officials often pressured collective farmers to relinquish far more.<sup>19</sup>

Collectivization proved disastrous for the peasantry. Those who resisted were labeled as “kulaks”. To align with the Soviet history of the struggle of the working class,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Andrejs Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 231.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>14</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 108.

<sup>15</sup> Andrejs Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 345.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 367.

<sup>17</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 25.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 242.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 243.

kulak originally referred to wealthy peasants. However, the Soviet Union never legally defined the term and kulak came to describe anyone who resisted collectivization.<sup>20</sup> In December 1929 Stalin announced his attention to “liquidate” kulaks as a class, leading to the murder and deportation of hundreds of thousands of peasants to Siberia.<sup>21</sup> Collectivization policies led to a famine in Ukraine in 1933 that killed approximately 3.3 million people.<sup>22</sup> Rural birthrates fell, divorce rates increased, and corruption, drunkenness, and violence wove themselves deeper into village life.<sup>23</sup>

As part of a process known as sovietization, Soviet authorities deported nearly 40,000 Estonians to Siberian forced labor camps, known as Gulags seeking to rid Estonia of class enemies.<sup>24</sup> This process of Soviet state building in many publications is often called “russification”, referring to linguistic russification efforts brought about by sovietization. Russification carries the connotation of ethnic Russians as occupants, which many ethnic Russians in Estonia reject. Moreover, the term russification transfers all aspects of the Soviet life onto the imagined Russian community, creating a false, direct parallel between former USSR and present-day Russia. This paper refers instead to this process as sovietization. Additionally, secret police embedded themselves in the framework of society, looking to capture and eliminate dissenters and Nazi collaborators.<sup>25</sup> While violence on this scale ended after the death of Stalin in 1953, the focus of the USSR at the time remained directed toward Russian language and culture, seeking to oppress Estonian nationalist expression.<sup>26</sup> By the middle of the 1970’s Estonians constituted only 68% of the population.<sup>27</sup>

The 1980’s ushered in policies known as *glasnost* and *perestroika*—in essence, these policies signaled relaxation of former censorship and a friendlier disposition toward the West. During this era, Estonians found favor in the communist party and rose to some standing of power of their Russian-born counterparts.<sup>28</sup> However, these policies proved ultimately unsustainable for the Soviet government and the collapse of Berlin Wall in 1989 signaled the beginning of the end.<sup>29</sup> On August 23, 1989 thousands of Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians joined hands all the way from Tallinn, Estonia to Vilnius, Lithuania in peaceful demonstration against the USSR and an assertion of national sovereignty known as “The Baltic Way” (*Balti Kett*)<sup>30</sup>. In February 1991, the Soviet Union formally dissolved and Estonia once again claimed independence. The story, however, continues after independence. In the last twenty years, Estonians and “Russians” fight to reclaim their history. This struggle plays out across the former Soviet

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>21</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 25.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>23</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 249.

<sup>24</sup> Andrejs Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 367.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 365.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 378.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 378.

<sup>28</sup> Andrejs Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 388.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 394.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 404.

Union.<sup>31</sup> Estonians assert their national identity through the maintenance of traditional dress, song, and dance and by enacting legal codes meant to exclude those who speak Russian as a first language.<sup>32</sup> They contest that ethnic Russians acted as occupiers and that, historically, Estonia has never acted as a hostile imperial force, creating an essential difference between the two national communities. Ethnically Russian Estonians, however, assert that they too fell victim to the brutalities of Soviet rule. Many still identify as “Soviet”—a people lost to time with no place to call home.<sup>33</sup> Estonia also faces questions of European integration. Now included in the European Union, this tiny nation once supported by the might of the USSR must make a name for itself on an international stage.<sup>34</sup> Tensions between the two ethnic groups continue to play out in modern-day Estonia politically, socially, and culturally. Estonians desire retribution for the suffering of the Soviet era. Some, perhaps, desire to forget the occupation took place. Ethnically Russian people desire a safe place for their minority language and culture<sup>35</sup>. It is under this context that questions of historical memory, gender, and national identity in Estonia are to be understood in this paper.

## GENDER

Given significant cultural differences and political disagreements, many people assume that ethnically Estonian and ethnically Russian women living in Estonia experienced gender differently during the Soviet occupation. This assumption, however, fails to account for the history of gender in the Soviet Union. A uniform Soviet system created a relatively unified experience of gender between the two groups, complicated by the Soviet notion of female liberation. In understanding their shared gender experience, the political gap between the two ethnic groups lessens. Both ethnic groups benefited from the Soviet system in some ways, often by gaining a higher education and enjoying a wealth of employment but suffered in other ways, shouldering a “double burden” and lacking access to reliable birth control.

The history of gender in the Soviet Union begins with its first leader, Vladimir Lenin. In addition to emancipating workers from the clutches of the bourgeois, the Russian Revolution sought the full emancipation of women as well. Lenin argued, “Petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades [the woman], chains her to the kitchen and to the nursery, and wastes her labor on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking, stultifying and crushing drudgery.”<sup>36</sup> Freeing women from the slavery of domestic labor made more hands available to build Lenin’s utopia and free all workers

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<sup>31</sup>In Estonia, those who speak Russian as a first language are considered as Russians, regardless of their actual origin of birth.

Igor Torbakov, "History, memory and national identity understanding the politics of history and memory wars in post-Soviet lands," *Demokratizatsiya* 19, no. 3 (2011): 212.

<sup>32</sup> Andrejs Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 420.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 421.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 420.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 423.

<sup>36</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 300.

from capitalist oppression.<sup>37</sup> The first iteration of the Soviet constitution, passed in July 1918, proclaimed men and women legal equals. The constitution also declared sexual equality in marriage and simplified divorce proceedings.<sup>38</sup> The USSR legalized abortion in 1920 and passed the cost of abortion on to the state.<sup>39</sup> Created in 1919, the Zhenotdel, or women's arm of the Communist Party, sought to connect women to the inner workings of the party.<sup>40</sup> The Zhenotdel worked to increase female literacy, distribute Party literature, and elect representatives to take part in "delegate meetings".<sup>41</sup> Additionally, local branches supervised the care of children and orphans, housing, and public health promotion.<sup>42</sup>

In Estonia, the communist party existed before the advent of Estonian independence, with around 100 members at the time of the Russian February Revolution in 1917. By 1924, party membership grew to 2,000 members.<sup>43</sup> However, the Estonian Communist Party (ECP) professed the explicit goal of ending Estonian independence to join the USSR.<sup>44</sup> With this radical objective in mind, political participation of ECP members in the Estonian parliament proved difficult. Consequently, Estonian communists worked underground as revolutionaries, working through various political fronts to participate in parliamentary elections.<sup>45</sup> In 1920, during the first parliamentary election in the new Estonia, the communist front won 5.3 percent of the vote. Economic troubles in 1923 contributed to the surge in popularity for the ECP.<sup>46</sup> In the 1923 election, the party won 9.5 percent of votes.<sup>47</sup> In some municipal elections, the party won up to 36 percent of the vote.<sup>48</sup>

Resolutely opposed to Estonian independence, the ECP used their popularity to stage a coup on December 1, 1924. Aided by Soviet allies, Estonian communists expected thousands of working men to revolt against the established Estonian government. Only 300-400 men participated in the armed revolt and the coup ultimately proved a failure.<sup>49</sup> The ECP never recovered their popularity, remaining leaders fled to the Soviet Union, and the Estonian government banned the party until Soviet forces took

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<sup>37</sup> Sarah Ashwin, ed. *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*. (Florence: Routledge, 2000), 4. Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 202.

<sup>38</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 203.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>40</sup> Sarah Ashwin, ed. *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*. (Florence: Routledge, 2000), 8.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>43</sup> Tõnu Parming, "The Pattern of Participation of the Estonian Communist Party in National Politics, 1918-1940." *The Slavonic and East European Review* 59, no. 3 (1981): 399, 400.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>46</sup> Toivo U. Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians*. (Stanford: Hoover University Press, 1987), 114.

<sup>47</sup> Tõnu Parming, "The Pattern of Participation of the Estonian Communist Party in National Politics, 1918-1940." *The Slavonic and East European Review* 59, no. 3 (1981): 411.

<sup>48</sup> Toivo U. Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians*. (Stanford: Hoover University Press, 1987), 115.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

control of the country in 1940.<sup>50</sup> Given its short and radical history, the Communist Party in Estonia concerned itself with revolutionary measures to secure independence rather than deal explicitly with women's issues. While the ECP certainly aligned itself with the Soviet system and with Soviet definitions of gender, its existence proved too short and its influence too minute to make any real change on women's lives in interwar Estonia.

In the wider Soviet Union, women's status proved anything but static. In the 1930s, Joseph Stalin rose to power as leader of the Soviet Union and with Stalin came major changes in family policy.<sup>51</sup> The Zhenotdel dissolved in January 1930, severing official ties between women's interests and the Communist Party.<sup>52</sup> Strong traditionalist values among Soviet laypeople and peasantry overwhelmed the opinion of urban radicals pushing for female liberation and sought a more conservative approach to women's and family issues.<sup>53</sup> Stalin encouraged the cultivation of the "Soviet family"—a family simultaneously committed to other family members, the Soviet State, and to Marxist principles.<sup>54</sup> Additionally, Stalin sought to rapidly industrialize the Soviet Union and women's labor, rather than a symbol of their freedom from domestic responsibilities, now represented a duty to socialist society.<sup>55</sup>

In order to allow more women with children to enter the labor force, the state began to build daycares and nurseries, doubling the number of nurseries per thousand women from 1928 to 1930. The number of nurseries, however, still proved inadequate.<sup>56</sup> Changes to the Soviet Constitution in 1936 discouraged divorce by complicating the divorce process, encouraged women to birth as many children as possible, and banned all abortions with the exception of cases in which the life of the mother was directly threatened, despite the woeful inaccessibility of contraceptives to Soviet women.<sup>57</sup> Reproduction became a state-function. Women who birthed more than ten children (excluding stepchildren, adopted children, and children who died in infancy) earned the title of "heroine mother" along with a medal and a monetary prize.<sup>58</sup>

Ultimately, despite the changes in policy over time, the Soviet state allegedly set up a social order divided by class rather than by gender.<sup>59</sup> The Soviet state claimed that socialism failed to transform women's personalities but instead added new qualities on top of old ones, accepting traditional male and female gender roles as inherent to human

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<sup>50</sup> Tõnu Parming, "The Pattern of Participation of the Estonian Communist Party in National Politics, 1918-1940." *The Slavonic and East European Review* 59, no. 3 (1981): 409.

<sup>51</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 235.

<sup>52</sup> Sarah Ashwin, ed. *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*. (Florence: Routledge, 2000), 8.

<sup>53</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 205.

<sup>54</sup> Sarah Ashwin, ed. *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*. (Florence: Routledge, 2000), 9.

<sup>55</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 301.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>58</sup> Sarah Ashwin, ed. *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*. (Florence: Routledge, 2000), 32.

<sup>59</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 203.

psychology.<sup>60</sup> Soviet psychologists denied the inevitability of any psychological differences between the sexes and considered any difference between men and women undesirable.<sup>61</sup> As historian Lynne Attwood notes, in the eyes of the Soviet state, a good socialist woman possessed a commitment to marriage and family but was also expected to participate fully in economic and social life with a “strongly developed sense of the greater social need”.<sup>62</sup> Attwood also points out that emancipation, rather than freeing women from a psychological straitjacket, has bound women tighter into social definitions of how they should think and feel. She argues, “Just as the grafting of professional work on to their former domestic roles has resulted in a double work-load, the grafting of a range of hitherto ‘masculine’ psychological traits onto their traditional ‘feminine’ personalities has resulted in a psychological double burden.”<sup>63</sup>

Soviet sex researcher, Igor Kon, calls this “sexless sexism”.<sup>64</sup> Kon contests, “Paradoxical though it may seem, the invariable natural result of the official sexlessness of the USSR was sexism... In the absence of social-scientific reflection on sex and gender, all the empirically observable differences between men and women that confront us in our daily lives are generally interpreted as being eternal and biologically predetermined.”<sup>65</sup> On the one hand, gender distinction ceased to exist with full legal emancipation of women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, women were expected to maintain traditional feminine roles while accepting aspects of traditional male roles and, although emancipated, women’s emancipation could not supersede male superiority.<sup>66</sup>

Stalin’s view of women both as industrialist workers with a duty to build up the Soviet Union with their hands and, as women, called to provide children for the USSR created a double burden for Soviet women as they found themselves expected to work outside the home and to manage domestic affairs.<sup>67</sup> The Second World War, in addition to mass casualty that obliterated entire families and traumatized an generation, also legitimized the Soviet system.<sup>68</sup> The defeat of the Nazis solidified and justified the Soviet world view, especially in terms of gender.<sup>69</sup> The mass destruction and casualty brought about by the war required women to continue to work outside the home to rebuild and care for what remained of their families. The war also disrupted traditional, conservative family values. Millions of Soviet women managed to survive alone while husbands fought in the war or fought in the war themselves. Many husbands never returned,

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<sup>60</sup> Lynne Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman: Sex-Role Socialization in the USSR*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 122.

<sup>61</sup> Lynne Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman: Sex-Role Socialization in the USSR*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 64.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>64</sup> Igor S. Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today*. (New York: Free Press, 1995), 129.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>66</sup> Lynne Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman: Sex-Role Socialization in the USSR*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 126.

<sup>67</sup> Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia’s Cold War Generation*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 21.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

leaving women to function completely independent of male partners.<sup>70</sup> Thus, the postwar years sought to reestablish these traditional values.<sup>71</sup> The USSR continued to uphold the 1936 ban on abortions. The state imposed a negative view of sex demanding self-discipline and familial stability for the sake of the nation and the Communist Party.<sup>72</sup>

The Soviet social order brought serious ramifications to Soviet women by denying them political power and control over their own bodies. Representation for women within the Communist Party remained dismal, exhibiting an aspect of Soviet sexless sexism. Equal in the eyes of the law, the party largely sought skilled workers and women often fell into the less-skilled category, leaving many women by the wayside.<sup>73</sup> The negative view of sexuality in the Soviet Union remained largely unaffected by changing policies.<sup>74</sup> Igor Kon notes, “All sexual activity, even marital sexual activity, was considered indecent and unmentionable, a subject only for the degenerate underground.”<sup>75</sup> Consequently, important aspects of sexuality such as birth control, abortion, and marital infidelity were never discussed publicly, resulting in serious repercussions for Soviet women.<sup>76</sup>

In 1955, the USSR reversed its ban on abortion and allowed the practice not in the name of female liberation but rather because the ban failed miserably.<sup>77</sup> The 1936 ban on abortion failed to stop women from attempting to regain control over their bodies and botched underground abortions became commonplace, posing a serious health risk to women.<sup>78</sup> The lift of the ban proved an attempt to counteract the damage done to female bodies.<sup>79</sup> Contraceptives remained mostly unavailable and abortion continued as the primary form of birth control, with approximately 10-11 million abortions performed a year in the late 1980s.<sup>80</sup>

Soviet Estonia inherited the Soviet gender order. Prior to Soviet annexation, the young Estonian republic attempted to find a place in a wider European community. Estonian women in the same moment attempted to find their place in the new Estonian republic. Following World War I, Estonian cultural values aligned largely with Western Europe by placing women in the domestic sphere, although Estonian women began to agitate for enfranchisement and began to take part in nationalist literary movements.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Dagmar Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History*. New Approaches to European History. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 98.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>73</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 204.

<sup>74</sup> Igor S. Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today*. (New York: Free Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>77</sup> Igor S. Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today*. (New York: Free Press, 1995), 178.

<sup>78</sup> Sarah Ashwin, ed. *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*. (Florence: Routledge, 2000), 39.

<sup>79</sup> Dagmar Herzog, *Sexuality in Europe: A Twentieth-Century History*. New Approaches to European History. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 101.

<sup>80</sup> Igor S. Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today*. (New York: Free Press, 1995), 187.

<sup>81</sup> Rutt Hinrikus, “Noor-Eesti ja Naised.” *Methis. Studia humaniora Estonica* 1 no. 1-2 (2008): 147.

Estonian women gained the right to vote in 1920 but laws still existed that denied women property rights.<sup>82</sup> By 1934, women made up only 35.4 percent of the labor force, with 90 percent of those women employed in domestic positions.<sup>83</sup> The women interviewed were born into a completely different world. They grew up with messages of gender equality and with opportunities to attend university and study otherwise male dominated subjects. Soviet gender order asked them to behave simultaneously as mothers and workers, as strong yet feminine women. Consequently, for women living in the Estonian SSR, the Soviet gender order proved both harmful and beneficial.

The Soviet outlook on gender harmed Estonian women through discrimination. Not always cognizant of the lack of equality, all women interviewed indicated they experienced no discrimination in the workplace based on their sex. Officially, given women's equal legal status with men, discrimination could not exist. However, this view failed to account for sexism within Soviet communities. Although not an uncommon response for Soviet women, this description of "no discrimination" does not mean it is historically accurate.<sup>84</sup> Kadri recognizes some form of discrimination: "A woman was important when she was a good worker. When she worked on a collective farm on a tractor and of course, especially, when she went into the Party.... although she had equal rights with men there was still a preference for men, like we have today. The higher-up positions were filled by men, mostly men, and single women."<sup>85</sup> In the 1950s, men comprised approximately 75% of Party members, making female leaders incredibly rare within the Party or other state-run organizations.<sup>86</sup> Women struggled to care for their children and perform in the workplace. Sandra, age 81, lost her father during the Second World War. Her mother, unable to care for all her children, sent Sandra to live with distant relatives. In order to help support her family, Sandra began work at a local factory at age 15. She never attended university or obtained technical training. Sandra remembers of her time as a single parent,

Factory work wasn't easy work. You had to do equal work with the men... There were quotas. At the end of the month you had to fulfill a certain amount of work. So we took our children to the factory with us. Where else would you put them? The daycares were closed, they closed before our workday was over. We had a quota to fulfill! So the children were at the factory. It was a very strict time. I never was a stay-at-home mom. That's my only regret.<sup>87</sup>

Stay-at-home mothers in Estonia and, more generally, across the Soviet Union were few. Soviet wage scales were such that few households could survive on a single

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<sup>82</sup> Toivo U. Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians*. (Stanford: Hoover University Press, 1987), 133.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>84</sup> Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 35.

<sup>85</sup> Kadri, interview by Tara Godwin. June 24, 2019.

<sup>86</sup> Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 54.

<sup>87</sup> Sandra, interview by Tara Godwin. July 2, 2019.

income.<sup>88</sup> Soviet women also earned less than their male counterparts.<sup>89</sup> Many women, in addition to working outside the home, raised their children as single mothers. Alcoholism plagued marriages, typically affecting husbands more often than wives. Mairi, age 55, remembers of her own childhood, “When I was a child and I came back from training classes in the evening the lights were on in apartments. I looked at the windows and the lights and I'd like to think that behind those windows are living happy people. But the truth was that most of the time there was domestic war. The men were drunk. They were violent. The women tried to keep the family together and get through life and raise the children...Everything was so broken. Humans, they were broken.”<sup>90</sup> As alcoholism and domestic violence plagued households, single mothers struggled to hold their homes together.

Rather than suffer through domestic abuse, many women, both ethnically Estonian and ethnically Russian, chose to leave their husbands. Divorce rates for the Soviet Union and Estonia vary depending on the year but divorce proved generally common.<sup>91</sup> Of the women interviewed, fifty percent divorced at least once, some as many as three times. Single mothers often sought help in the form of their mothers or grandmothers. Mothers helped daughters care for their children while the daughters worked. Maria, age 83, was raised by her grandmother while her mother worked nearby on a collective farm.<sup>92</sup> While single mothers found help in raising their children, it often impacted their relationship with their children. Marta, age 50, recalls of her childhood, “My mother worked very long days and was tired all the time. I don't know why I felt that she was always tired. My grandmother took care of the house and made dinner and took care of the garden. Our grandmother took care of us more than our mother.”<sup>93</sup>

Periodic shortages of goods in the Estonian SSR also affected Estonian women. Food, clothing, and even feminine hygiene products ran in short supply, depending on the year and the subsequent economic climate. Mairi remembers, “Basically you have to use your imagination and hands, you make what you could make and if sometimes you had an opportunity to buy something then you buy it... We didn't have tampons for menstruation. But we all survived, I don't know how! I was a veterinarian, we have gauze for animals, and we used those things...It was a hard time. Fuck, it was a hard time. Nothing was available.”<sup>94</sup> Lenna, age 54, recalls the impact of the shortages on her children in the 1980s, “I remember one summer when my son only had wool pants. He was three. He didn't have any other pants. It was so warm; I was so miserable that my children didn't have any other clothes. He had grown out of his other clothes.... Life was much poorer than it is right now, but it was also simpler. Poverty-- when my daughter

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<sup>88</sup> Sarah Ashwin, ed. *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*. (Florence: Routledge, 2000), 16.

<sup>89</sup> Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 190.

<sup>90</sup> Mairi, interview by Tara Godwin. July 10, 2019.

<sup>91</sup> Estonian Bureau of Statistics, “Divorced Persons by Age and Sex Group (1947-1999)”, Statistics Estonia, 2012, February 8, 2020.

<sup>92</sup> Maria, interview by Tara Godwin. July 17, 2019.

<sup>93</sup> Marta, interview by Tara Godwin. June 25, 2019.

<sup>94</sup> Mairi, interview by Tara Godwin. July 10, 2019.

wanted candy-- I would take her to the store and show her, 'Look, there is no candy'. Now we can't imagine it. But it was that way."<sup>95</sup>

In response to these shortages, Estonian women sewed clothes for themselves and for their children, obtained food from the countryside, and used connections with acquaintances to procure necessary goods.<sup>96</sup> Sometimes, women resorted to stealing. Katrin, age 67, recalls "People couldn't get anything, so they just started taking things from work. At some point when toilet paper started to show up, we couldn't find anywhere to buy it. If there was a roll of toilet paper in a public space, you couldn't get very upset if someone just took a roll from a public bathroom."<sup>97</sup> Whatever method women used, they found ways to obtain what they needed to survive.

Although not a uniquely Soviet phenomenon, a lack of sex education in the Estonian SSR also affected Estonian women. Anastasia, age 48, remembers, "When I was eleven or twelve years old, I was shy to say the word 'pregnant'. We knew nothing about sex. We knew absolutely nothing about it. I was 18 years old, I was already in university, when I started learning some things about it. Of course, we learned some things in biology in school-- for example, with rabbits or dogs or cats-- but we had very vague idea of what really happened."<sup>98</sup> This lack of sex education, common in conservative societies, robbed women of control over their own bodies. Anastasia recalls a story from her mother that illustrates the dangers for women ignorant of the basic facts related to sexual health. "Many girls got married with no idea of what was waiting for them. My mother told me she got married when she was seventeen years old. She married a man seven years older than her. He knew what was waiting for them. She thought they would sit on a bench in the evening, hold hands, and maybe kiss. Her husband was so bewildered that she knew nothing, that he didn't touch her for two months. He had to explain. And she didn't believe! She had to get used to the idea."<sup>99</sup>

Many husbands or boyfriends, also lacking sex education, failed to show such deference in the face of women's ignorance about sex, resulting in unwanted pregnancies or instances of sexual assault. Abortion, like elsewhere in the Soviet Union, proved the main form of birth control in Estonia. In 1970, 40,663 abortions were performed in Estonia alone, with a rate of 113.2 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15-49 and a rate of 188.7 abortions per 100 live births.<sup>100</sup> To put these numbers in perspective, 733,185 women lived in Estonia in 1970. By these numbers, 5.54% of all women had an abortion in 1970.<sup>101</sup> "Back-room" abortions were also common and incredibly dangerous, especially prior to 1955. Kadri recalls, "Officially a woman couldn't have an abortion. Maybe she had bad family relations or got pregnant outside of marriage-- many people had affairs and the state didn't support abortions...They were performed in homes with a willing doctor or other secluded places. Many of them ended in death. Women hemorrhaged and

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<sup>95</sup> Lenna, interview by Tara Godwin. June 27, 2019.

<sup>96</sup> Tarmo and Liisa, interview by Tara Godwin. June 26, 2019.

<sup>97</sup> Katrin, interview by Tara Godwin. June 26, 2019.

<sup>98</sup> Anastasia, interview by Tara Godwin. June 27, 2019.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, June 27, 2019.

<sup>100</sup> Estonian Bureau of Statistics, "Abortions by Year, Type of Abortion, and Indicator." Statistics Estonia, 2019, February 9, 2020.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, "Population by Sex, Year, and Age Group." Statistics Estonia, 2020, February 9, 2020.

the doctor couldn't call an ambulance and that was it.”<sup>102</sup> Towards the 1980s and 1990s as other forms of birth control became available, the number of abortions in Estonia dropped. By 1991, at the collapse of the Soviet Union, the total number of abortions performed in Estonia dropped to 29,406, with a rate of 77.8 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15-49, and a rate of 151.5 abortions per 100 live births.<sup>103</sup> For a total Estonian female population of 834,200, the rate of abortions per woman was 3.5%.<sup>104</sup>

The Soviet system, with all its flaws, still benefited Estonian women in some ways. Overall, ethnic Estonian and ethnic Russian women experienced gender in very similar ways. The Soviet Union ranked first in the world for women studying technological subjects at 30.8%.<sup>105</sup> Indeed, in 1987 women comprised 51% of the labor force in the USSR. Similarly, women held a 90% employment rate and the of women with a university education outranked the number of men who attended university.<sup>106</sup> Heidi, age 84, studied physics at Tartu University and went on to supervise research in physics institutes across Estonia. She recalls of the Soviet system, “The pluses were that women could attend university, women could be professionals...During the Soviet time all were equal.”<sup>107</sup> Kadri, age 89, also comments, “At that time a working woman was more important than an educated woman or a mother. They were always doing something with their hands, that was important.”<sup>108</sup> Many women found Soviet morals appealing. Anastasia, age 48, recalls, “Back in the Soviet time, one good thing was that the morals were very high... Equality, fraternity-- they were real values. In the Soviet Union, everybody was equal.”<sup>109</sup> Many women also appreciated state sponsored programs like the Pioneer Youth camps or Komsomol and hold happy memories of summer camps held in the countryside.<sup>110</sup> Some women, particularly those born after Stalin’s death in 1953, argue that the Soviet time “wasn’t all bad”, citing free healthcare, state-sponsored apartments, free sanatoriums, and an abundance of employment as just a few benefits for women during the Soviet years.<sup>111</sup>

In short, ethnically Estonian and ethnically Russian women experienced gender similarly to each other and to other regions during the Soviet era. Both the ethnic Estonian and the ethnic Russian women interviewed indicated that they felt no discrimination based on their sex. Several women, regardless of national origin, expressed an appreciation for Soviet morals of equality and the opportunities given to them. Yet, despite the professed commitment of the USSR to true equality, the Soviet Union failed to achieve complete female emancipation. Although the Estonian women interviewed responded that they felt no discrimination, discrimination continued to

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<sup>102</sup> Kadri, interview by Tara Godwin. June 24, 2019.

<sup>103</sup> Estonian Bureau of Statistics, “Abortions by Year, Type of Abortion, and Indicator.” Statistics Estonia, 2019, February 9, 2020.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., February 9, 2020.

<sup>105</sup> Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 169.

<sup>106</sup> Igor S. Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today*. (New York: Free Press, 1995), 144.

<sup>107</sup> Heidi, interview by Tara Godwin. July 8, 2019.

<sup>108</sup> Kadri, interview by Tara Godwin. June 24, 2019.

<sup>109</sup> Anastasia, interview by Tara Godwin. June 27, 2019.

<sup>110</sup> Tarmo and Liisa, interview by Tara Godwin. June 26, 2019.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., June 26, 2019.

persist. Women received lower wages than men and were less represented within the Communist Party. A duty to the state and a duty to the home placed a double burden on Estonian women, exponentially increasing their workload as they strove to be perfect Soviet citizens and exemplary mothers. Systemic shortages of goods also increased their workloads as they struggled to procure necessities, like tampons or clothing for their children. A negative, state-sponsored view of sexuality robbed women of control over their bodies and sexuality, resulting in high rates of abortion, often with deadly consequences.

## WORLD WAR II

While Soviet-era ethnic Russian and ethnic Estonian women share a common sense of gender, they differ in their construction of their national identity. While Estonian and Russian constructions of national identity began long before World War II, the war serves as a starting point for the historical memory of the women interviewed. Each group remembers the conflict differently. For ethnic Estonian women, WWII catalyzed the cultivation of a “Soviet other” in relation to an Estonian “we” in a struggle to maintain Estonian independence. For ethnic Russian women, the war legitimized the Soviet system and demonized Nazi Germany, creating a fundamental difference in the historical memory of WWII for each ethnic group and tensions over Soviet legitimacy.

Estonian nationalism as a movement tentatively began in the eighteenth century and gained significant traction in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the mid-1700s, Estonians began to use the word *Eestlane* (Estonian) to identify themselves signifying the documentation of a collective Estonian population. Additionally, the publication of Estonian-language materials increased during this period and continued to grow over the next hundred years.<sup>112</sup> With a rise in literature, culture, and an increasingly standardized language came the idea of a uniquely Estonian nation. By the 1860s, Estonians challenged regional Baltic German power and sought to remove the ruling German minority from control.<sup>113</sup> Estonian thinkers such as Jakob Hurt began to advocate for the unification of Estonian people under a shared language and culture.<sup>114</sup> Tsarist Russia quelled Estonian agitation for political autonomy in the 1880s and 1890s through the use of strict censorship but World War I and the Russian Revolution stirred up Estonian nationalism once again.<sup>115</sup> The defeat of Imperial Germany in World War I and the collapse of Imperial Russia during the Russian Revolution created an opportunity for Estonian nationalists to seize power and declare independence on February 24, 1918.<sup>116</sup> After a brief conflict with German and Bolshevik forces in a war for independence, Estonia became an autonomous, functioning nation in 1920.<sup>117</sup> The Estonian nation built on ideas of a unified culture, language, and notions of common ancestry to create the Estonian national identity and, by extension, the Estonian people as

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<sup>112</sup> Toivo U. Raun, “Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Estonian Nationalism Revisited.” *Nations & Nationalism* 9, no. 1 (January 2003): 134.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>116</sup> Toivo U. Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians*. (Stanford: Hoover University Press, 1987), 105.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

a political construct.<sup>118</sup> Estonians living or born during World War II strongly identified with an independent Estonia founded on the idea of a unified Estonian people.

World War II began in Estonia with the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, otherwise known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact on August 23, 1939. Secret protocols contained within the pact allowed the USSR to invade the Baltic littoral without Nazi interference. Rather than launching an immediate military attack, the USSR took a diplomatic approach. However, Estonia perceived its neutrality as secure.<sup>119</sup> On September 28, 1939, the Soviet Union issued a “mutual assistance pact” to Estonia. Accompanied by veiled threats, the pact allowed the USSR to place military bases on Estonian territory and prohibited Estonia from making agreements with other Baltic countries.<sup>120</sup> In return, the USSR promised to supply Estonia with armaments and to refrain from interfering with internal Estonian politics.<sup>121</sup> The USSR worked to maintain an illusion of respecting Estonian sovereignty. In reality, Soviet military bases along with a gathering of Soviet troops along the Estonian-Russian border compromised Estonia’s military integrity.<sup>122</sup> In June 1940, the Soviet Union accused Estonia of attempting to form an anti-Soviet coalition and demanded that each respective government dissolve and allow an unrestricted entry of foreign troops into the country. Soviet troops entered Estonia on June 17, 1940.<sup>123</sup>

The Soviet Union immediately began to take steps to incorporate Estonia into the Soviet Union. Soviet officials organized mock elections and by August 1940, Estonia “voluntarily” joined the USSR as a Soviet republic.<sup>124</sup> The first year of Soviet rule proved traumatic for the Estonian people. The Soviet Union’s attempts to change Estonia’s economic model to a command economy drastically decreased the Estonian standard of living.<sup>125</sup> Efforts to cleanse Estonia of suspicious anti-communist political elements culminated in a mass deportation of 10,000 people to Siberia on June 14, 1941.<sup>126</sup> When German forces invaded Estonia as a part of Operation Barbarossa in August 1941 Estonians initially viewed German soldiers as liberators, grateful for the end of Soviet rule.<sup>127</sup> Thousands of Estonian men voluntarily joined the German army, determined to drive the Soviets from Estonian territory.<sup>128</sup> As German troops advanced

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<sup>118</sup> Toivo U. Raun, “Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Estonian Nationalism Revisited.” *Nations & Nationalism* 9, no. 1 (January 2003): 140.

<sup>119</sup> Kyllike Sillaste, “Conquest and Survival: An Outline of Estonian History.” *World Affairs* 157, no. 3 (1995): 122.

<sup>120</sup> Andrejs Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 399.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 399.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>124</sup> Olaf Merelsmann and Aigi Rahi-Tamm, “Cleansing and Compromise: The Estonian SSR in 1944-1945”. *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 49, no.2/3 (2008): 321.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 321.

<sup>126</sup> Andrejs Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 347.

<sup>127</sup> Olaf Merelsmann and Aigi Rahi-Tamm, “Cleansing and Compromise: The Estonian SSR in 1944-1945”. *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 49, no.2/3 (2008): 323.

<sup>128</sup> Inge Melchior and Oane Visser, “Voicing Past and Present Uncertainties: The Relocation of a Soviet World War II Memorial and the Politics of Memory in Estonia.” *Focaal*, no. 59 (2011): 36.

deeper into Estonia, Soviet forces mobilized and retreated. By the end of 1941 Nazi German forces occupied Estonia.<sup>129</sup>

The Nazis recognized the trauma caused by the Soviet occupation to the Estonian people and allowed for some nationalist expression in Estonia. They also understood how this trauma could be used to shape public opinion of Germany. For example, the Germans permitted Estonia to fly their national flag and sing their national anthem, cultivating public support for Germany.<sup>130</sup> However, Germany remained silent on the future of Estonia. Nazi Germany designated Estonia as territory for the future resettlement of Germans and held no intentions of liberating Estonians. However, within the Nazi racial hierarchy, Estonians held a position at the top of the racial scale, possessing the “most desirable” racial qualities that led to the highest potential for Germanization.<sup>131</sup> As a result, the Nazis treated Estonians with more deference than other Eastern European peoples. Many Estonian women viewed German soldiers as polite and educated. For their part, German soldiers gave Estonians access to rare goods, such as chocolate.<sup>132</sup> Members of the German-run Estonian security police, Sipo, wore the same uniforms as their German counterparts and received equal treatment as “trusted partners”.<sup>133</sup>

German forces quickly assembled an Estonian military arm by the name of *Omakaitse* (self-defense). Kept under German control, *Omakaitse* grew to around 40,000 Estonian men by February 1942. Estonians held the largest share of the population fighting alongside German forces than any other area in German-occupied Europe.<sup>134</sup> Incorporated into the police structure, *Omakaitse* was largely responsible for carrying out Nazi racial directives, including the cleansing of communists and other “hostile” elements, as well as Jews.<sup>135</sup> In the three years of German occupation of Estonia, *Omakaitse* executed nearly 8,000 Estonians, among them Estonian communists and nearly 1,000 Estonian Jews.<sup>136</sup> Additionally, nearly 15,000 Soviet Prisoners of War (POW) and 6,500 foreign Jews were executed or died in labor camps.<sup>137</sup> Soviet POW’s received particularly harsh treatment at the hands of the *Omakaitse*. Considered “politically unreliable”, Estonian police regiments on multiple occasions dealt harsher sentences to Russians than German leaders initially commanded.<sup>138</sup> Some Estonians attempted to help Jews by relaying reports of Jewish commitment to the Estonian nation

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<sup>129</sup> Andrejs Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 349.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 350.

<sup>131</sup> Ruth Bettina Birn, “Collaboration with Nazi Germany in Eastern Europe: The Case of the Estonian Security Police.” *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 2 (2001): 182.

<sup>132</sup> Olaf Merelsmann and Aigi Rahi-Tamm, “Cleansing and Compromise: The Estonian SSR in 1944-1945”. *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 49, no.2/3 (2008): 336.

<sup>133</sup> Ruth Bettina Birn, “Collaboration with Nazi Germany in Eastern Europe: The Case of the Estonian Security Police.” *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 2 (2001): 186.

<sup>134</sup> Olaf Merelsmann and Aigi Rahi-Tamm, “Cleansing and Compromise: The Estonian SSR in 1944-1945”. *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 49, no.2/3 (2008): 323.

<sup>135</sup> Ruth Bettina Birn, “Collaboration with Nazi Germany in Eastern Europe: The Case of the Estonian Security Police.” *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 2 (2001): 183.

<sup>136</sup> Olaf Merelsmann and Aigi Rahi-Tamm, “Cleansing and Compromise: The Estonian SSR in 1944-1945”. *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 49, no.2/3 (2008): 323.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>138</sup> Ruth Bettina Birn, “Collaboration with Nazi Germany in Eastern Europe: The Case of the Estonian Security Police.” *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 2 (2001): 193.

and subsequent resentment of communism or by providing Jews imprisoned in labor camps with food. However, the final liquidation of labor camps like Klooga and Vaivara was carried out by Estonians under German command.<sup>139</sup>

Questions of collaboration and cooperation in the Holocaust remain hotly debated and incredibly complex. In the academic community, many contradictory viewpoints exist explaining why individuals participated in the wholesale slaughter of millions of people across Europe. However, Estonians viewed Nazi Germany as the lesser of two evils.<sup>140</sup> Participating in Nazi policies of genocide and cooperating with other Nazi initiatives, from the Estonian point of view, provided Estonians with their best shot at regaining independence. In cooperating with German forces Estonians hoped to demonstrate the equality of the Estonian nation with Nazi Germany.<sup>141</sup> Evidence suggests that Estonian perpetrators of the Holocaust did not subscribe to Nazi racial theory. Rather than view Jewish or Roma victims as subhuman, Estonians gave them the label “communist”, seeking justice for crimes committed by Soviet forces.<sup>142</sup> As Jews were not a part of the imagined Estonian community, Estonians killed in the name of independence.

In the historical memory of the ethnic Estonian women interviewed Estonian women focus on the war crimes committed by the Soviet Union. They largely ignore the actions of Germans or Estonian collaborators. For Estonian women born or living during World War II, supporting Nazi Germany proved an objective decision. They viewed Nazi Germany as the most direct means to once again obtaining an independent Estonia. Kadri, age 89, grew up in Ida-Virumaa near the city of Narva, near the Estonian border with Russia. Nazi German forces invaded Kadri’s village when she was around ten years old. Kadri explains the Estonian preference for the Germans in the following manner:

The Germans killed in three categories. The first was if you were a communist or part of the communist youth. If you were a Jew. Or if you were a partisan. If you weren't any of those, then they cared for you. They cared for your children... In my grandmother's third biggest house there was a German division. And the Germans had food well hidden... I don't remember those times but I'm told that when each time they ate I went to their quarters and I was given all sorts of chocolate. My childhood was during the war time. The kind of time where it is truly difficult. But, again, I never starved.<sup>143</sup>

In the Estonian estimation, if a person was not a communist, a Jew, or a partisan, the Germans treated that person well. Estonians’ experience with the Soviet Union did not leave them with the same impression. Mass deportation and political purges quickly taught Estonians that safety in the Soviet Union was primarily an illusion. Anyone, at any time, might become an enemy of the state. The Germans, at the very least, proved

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>140</sup> Olaf Merelmann and Aigi Rahi-Tamm, “Cleansing and Compromise: The Estonian SSR in 1944-1945”. *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 49, no.2/3 (2008): 323.

<sup>141</sup> Anton Weiss-Wednt, *Murder without Hatred: Estonians and the Holocaust*. (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2009), 341.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 341-43.

<sup>143</sup> Kadri, interview by Tara Godwin. June 24, 2019.

consistent in their persecution. For this reason, Soviet crimes against Estonians and Estonian autonomy remained at the foreground of the Estonian collective memory rather than the narratives of those not belonging to the imagined Estonian community.

In Russian historical memory, Nazi Germany remains resolutely fascist—the antithesis of the aspirations of communism. Soviet propaganda restyled the USSR as “the homeland of anti-fascism”, diametrically opposed to the values held by Nazi Germany.<sup>144</sup> Soviet-born ethnic Russians grew up surrounded by messages of Germany as the ultimate enemy. For their part, Nazi Germany failed to show any deference toward ethnic Russians. Adolf Hitler’s *Generalplan Ost* stipulated the repurposing of the Soviet Union to feed Germany and the cleansing of the land of all Slavic people to make room for the resettlement of Germans.<sup>145</sup> Unlike Estonians, Russians held a low position in the Nazi racial order. As German troops invaded the Soviet Union, German soldiers shot Soviet soldiers attempting to surrender and killed women in Soviet uniform for simply being female.<sup>146</sup> Annika, age 70, remembers a story passed down to her from her mother. Annika recalls, “My mom in 1944 was supposed to go to fight in the war. She was the first candidate. It was her turn to go. She had a friend who joined the army a little bit earlier and she was a spy. She had to provide information. The Germans caught her, raped her, cut out her eyes, breasts, and then burned her.”<sup>147</sup> For ethnic Russians, Nazi Germany proved a cruel and dangerous enemy.

Nazi German forces also targeted ethnic Russian civilians as military opponents and as part of Nazi racial policies. To clear land for the future resettlement of Germans, thousands of ethnic Russians found themselves in Nazi concentration camps. Soviet citizens remain one of the largest groups of victims of Nazi racial policy.<sup>148</sup> Olga, age 82, was born in a village on the outskirts of Leningrad (St. Petersburg). She was three years old when German soldiers moved her, her nine siblings, and her mother to a concentration camp in Poland. Olga recalls,

We were refugees, we tried to escape from the war. I remember the day the war started. I saw so many planes in the sky. People were scared. They started to run out of their houses. I remember that I wanted to go out but I couldn't because the steps were too high for me...We walked from village to village but there were so many people who were homeless or hungry. For half a year we were refugees and it was very difficult for us. The first half a year we were in Russia, we were refugees. The German troops came and captured us...We were sent to a concentration camp. I don't remember much from that time. I only know that it was a very unpleasant time. We spent half a year in the concentration camp. My mom was sentenced twice to be shot. She was forty two years old at the time. The children hugged her and started to scream and for some reason the Germans spared her life. Half a year later one local German, whose name was Brown, he wanted people to

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<sup>144</sup> Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 67.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 160-61.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>147</sup> Annika, interview by Tara Godwin. June 7, 2019.

<sup>148</sup> Doris Bergen, *War and Genocide: A Concise History of the Holocaust*. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 2.

work on his fields, and that's how we left the concentration camp. We worked on his fields.<sup>149</sup>

Soviet troops arrived in 1944 to liberate Olga and her family. Fortunately for Olga, her family survived the concentration camp and the war. She relocated to Tallinn, Estonia with her family shortly after the war. However, millions of Soviet citizens lost their lives in the conflict with Nazi Germany. For ethnic Russians, the suffering of the war caused by the brutality of the fascist enemy remains at the forefront of their historical memory.

Soviet forces regained control of Estonia in 1944. In once again occupying Estonia, the Soviet Union faced challenges concerning Estonian collaboration and cooperation with German forces. Attempting to denounce collaboration, Soviet propaganda labeled Estonians' who worked with Germans as "the fascists' henchmen", effectively making a distinction between the behavior of Estonian collaborators and the suffering of the Soviet people.<sup>150</sup> In labeling Estonians as fascists, the Soviet Union made divisions between the suffering of Estonians and Soviets during World War II. The Soviet Union implied that the collaborators, because they sided with the Germans, caused the suffering of the Soviet people and ignored the role of the Soviet Union in the suffering of the Estonian people. Consequently, if Estonia were to become a Soviet republic, these individuals needed to be purged from Soviet society. Cleansing operations began in Estonia in October 1944, resuming Stalin's reign of terror.<sup>151</sup> Between 1944-1945, 13,700 political arrests took place, resulting in 381 death penalties. 2,600 arrested individuals died in prison.<sup>152</sup> Soviet suspicion of Nazi Germany proved so great that even outside of Estonia, Soviet soldiers held in Germany POW camps were labeled as traitors and sent to labor camps in Siberia.<sup>153</sup>

The difference between the ethnic Estonian and ethnic Russian historical memory of WWII cultivates the idea of a "Soviet other" in Estonian society and reinforces the Estonian "we".<sup>154</sup> Estonians view WWII as a struggle for independence, thwarted by Soviet aggression and oppression. Mairi, age 55, demonstrates this dissonance in the following statement:

When I was a child then I saw that if you told the Russians, 'Fucking Russia, go away' they felt themselves very uncomfortable. And if they told us, 'Fucking Estonian' we felt ourselves very proud. Because they called us fascists. Even now they call us fascists. We never ever go to another land to take away other human homes. Every home is sacred, holy. My home is holy. Their homes are holy. Estonians never go to another country and take away their homes. And we never send them to

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<sup>149</sup> Olga, interview by Tara Godwin. July 4, 2019.

<sup>150</sup> Ruth Bettina Birn, "Collaboration with Nazi Germany in Eastern Europe: The Case of the Estonian Security Police." *Contemporary European History* 10, no. 2 (2001): 182.

<sup>151</sup> Olaf Merelmann and Aigi Rahi-Tamm, "Cleansing and Compromise: The Estonian SSR in 1944-1945". *Cahiers Du Monde Russe* 49, no.2/3 (2008): 330.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 332.

<sup>153</sup> Sasha, interview by Tara Godwin. July 15, 2019.

<sup>154</sup> Andreas Ventsel, "The construction of the Stalinist post-war (1944-1953) 'Soviet people': a concept in the political rhetoric of Soviet Estonia." *Applied Semiotics/Semiotique appliquée*, no. 25 (2010), 217.

Siberia and we never killed them we only protect our own land and our own homes and if this makes us fascist, so I am a fascist.<sup>155</sup>

For Estonians, Soviet violence continues to take precedence over Nazi aggression in the collective historical memory. Although the Germans failed to liberate Estonia, they did not persecute as much of the population as the Soviets. Estonians ignore their role in the desecration of human life in WWII, including questions of collaboration in the Holocaust, and focus instead on the actions of the Soviet Union. The shared Estonian memory of WWII reinforces Estonian nationalist ideals, cultivating a shared history and opposition to anything considered Soviet.

For ethnic Russians, World War II served to legitimize the Soviet system. The Soviet Union defeated Nazi Germany, legitimizing any efforts taken to win the war.<sup>156</sup> Ethnic Russians hold victims of fascism in the highest regard while ethnic Estonians hold a similar respect for victims of communism. Ethnic Russians emphasize their victimhood in Nazi aggression against the Soviet Union, noting the millions of Soviet POW's tortured and murdered and the millions of civilians killed during the conflict. Their version of WWII is simply unreconcilable with the Estonian memory of the war. The conflict between the two views continues to play out in Estonia today. Many ethnic Russians feel Estonia attempts to re-write official Estonian history, deflecting blame and claiming ultimate victimhood. Sasha, a native Russian speaker living in Tallinn, age 53, explains,

I was a witness myself that when Estonia gained independence in the 1990s. Old information about Estonian concentration camps was destroyed. All the evidence was destroyed. Official history pretends it never happened. I saw it in Ida-Virumaa because there was a concentration camp over there.<sup>157</sup> During all the Soviet times there were memorials that said, 'This place used to be a concentration camp where so many people died and so many people were prisoners' and I saw myself how these memorials were destroyed in an attempt to pretend it never happened. For me, I find it very offensive-- during the Soviet time there were memorials and graves of soldiers that died in Estonia and now all these graves and memorials are all destroyed. In my family, five people fought in the war-- two grandfathers, two uncles, and an aunt. I think that Estonian authorities are trying to re-write the history of the Second World War.<sup>158</sup>

On the other hand, Estonians feel that ethnic Russians, as oppressors, have no business dictating the historical memory of the now-independent Estonia. World War II serves as the origins for the present-day conflict of historical memory between the two ethnic groups.

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<sup>155</sup> Mairi, interview by Tara Godwin. July 10, 2019.

<sup>156</sup> Miguel Vázquez Liñán, "Modernization and Historical Memory in Russia." *Problems of Post-Communism* 59, no. 6 (November 2012): 23.

<sup>157</sup> Sasha is referring to Vaivara, a Nazi concentration camp located near the city of Narva.

<sup>158</sup> Sasha, interview by Tara Godwin. July 15, 2019.

## SOVIETIZATION

Following the Second World War, the process of sovietization increased the divide between ethnic Estonians and ethnic Russians living in Estonia. The Soviet Union sought to integrate Estonia into the USSR as a socialist republic. To achieve this goal, Soviet officials carefully chose Estonian communist party leaders, used deportations to rid Estonia of perceived class enemies and homogenize the population, and exercised antireligious campaigns. Similar to the ways they remember World War II, ethnic Estonians recall the sovietization period as a time scarcity and oppression at the hands of Soviet rule. Conversely, many ethnic Russians remember the time fondly, citing special privileges afforded to ethnic Russians by the Soviet system. While both ethnic groups were affected by Soviet state building policies, ethnic Estonian women experienced sovietization differently than ethnic Russian women, resulting strong Estonian national and anti-Russian sentiments among ethnic Estonian women and serious questions of nationality for ethnic Russian women.

Soviet state building policies hinged on the idea of *Homo Sovieticus*—a unifying set of beliefs, cultural values, history, and ideology within the Soviet Union that created a Soviet people.<sup>159</sup> *Homo Sovieticus* held no ties to one specific national group—their loyalties lay with the Soviet Union.<sup>160</sup> In the early days of the Soviet Union, Lenin promoted a more inclusive national policy. Non-Russian regions underwent a program of “nativization” that encouraged local people to participate in local government. The USSR possessed a bicameral legislature, with one house represented by population and the other representing different national groups. However, as Stalin increased in power, the Soviet Union transitioned into a type of empire with Russia at the center, superior to non-Russian subordinates.<sup>161</sup> Primarily the work of Stalin himself, Soviet national policy placed Russians in a position as the “first among equals”.<sup>162</sup> Stalin considered Russia as “the guiding force of the Soviet Union” among all Soviet peoples.<sup>163</sup> The USSR officially permitted the cultivation and preservation of national cultures within the framework of the socialist ideology.

Consequently, Soviet state policy toward non-Russian peoples proved contradictory. As Soviet historian Ronald Suny notes, “On the one hand, [Soviet nationalist policy] promoted national cultures and education in the union republics and autonomous republics and regions; on the other, it favored the teaching of Russian (after 1938) and restricted nationalist expression.”<sup>164</sup> For Stalin, minority nationalism proved dangerous as it carried the potential to undermine the state.<sup>165</sup> As a result, ethnic expression under Soviet rule was reduced to the policy of “national in form socialist in

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<sup>159</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism : Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>160</sup> Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 158.

<sup>161</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 161.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>163</sup> Joni Virkkunen, "The Politics of Identity: Ethnicity, Minority and Nationalism in Soviet Estonia." *GeoJournal* 48, no. 2 (1999): 84.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, 492.

<sup>165</sup> Joni Virkkunen, "The Politics of Identity: Ethnicity, Minority and Nationalism in Soviet Estonia." *GeoJournal* 48, no. 2 (1999): 84.

content”.<sup>166</sup> These contradictions led nationalities to become increasingly self-aware, better educated, demographically consolidated, and frustrated by their inability to express nationalist sentiments.<sup>167</sup>

Due to Estonia’s late entry into the Soviet Union, decisionmakers in Moscow felt that Estonia required special attention to become a true Soviet republic. To protect the fledgling Estonian SSR from doctrinal “infections” and to catch them to up speed with the surrounding republics, increased vigilance was required regarding communist party membership.<sup>168</sup> Vigilance translated to purges of party cadres. Accused of bourgeois nationalism, nearly all the pre-1940 Party leadership was purged by 1950.<sup>169</sup> Additionally, non-Estonians dominated the Estonian communist party to “help” the Estonian leadership. By 1945 only 961 of 2,409 Party members were native-born Estonians.<sup>170</sup> By 1951 Party membership in Estonia grew to 18,500 but the number of Estonian-born members remained fewer than half.<sup>171</sup> In the Stalinist years, party membership was offered only to those free of a “suspicious” background. In other words, membership was denied to those labeled as Nazi collaborators, those with deported relatives, and those who belonged to “anti-Soviet” organizations.<sup>172</sup> In the post-Stalinist period, such restrictions relaxed and by 1962 Party membership grew to 42,500 and continued to grow until the collapse of the USSR.<sup>173</sup> However, despite the existence of national cadres, Estonian Communist Party members consistently took their orders from Moscow, eliminating any semblance of Estonian autonomy.<sup>174</sup>

In addition to the manipulation of Party membership, the USSR sought to fully sovietize Estonia through the implementation of collective farms and subsequent population transfers. In Estonia, the first collective farms appeared in 1947.<sup>175</sup> Estonians reacted in a similar fashion to other Soviet peoples, unwilling to voluntarily surrender their livestock and land. Of the collective farms Tiiu, age 78, remembers “We gave away all of our animals. My grandmother, and grandfather. Our horses were taken away for sure, all of them, for work. There weren’t any tractors at that time. I remember how we gave everything away. My grandfather-- all the farms were put together and made one large, large farm...Under a new system, one year they grew potatoes another year maybe wheat. They grew everything.”<sup>176</sup> Estonia possessed as many as 136,000 individual farms in 1945 and the process of collectivization moved slowly.<sup>177</sup> To speed up the process, Stalin turned to deportation. Declaring some 40,000 Estonians as kulaks, these

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<sup>166</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 161.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 492.

<sup>168</sup> Andrejs Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 371.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>170</sup> Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 144.

<sup>171</sup> Andrejs Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 363.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 363.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 371.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, 369.

<sup>175</sup> Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 145.

<sup>176</sup> Tiiu, interview by Tara Godwin. June 25, 2019.

<sup>177</sup> Andrejs Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 367.

individuals were forcibly moved to Siberia in March 1949.<sup>178</sup> In their place, “reliable” non-Estonian workers migrated to Estonia from other parts of the Soviet Union.

For their part, many of these workers believed themselves to be employed in rebuilding Estonia after the destruction of World War II. Others were also forcibly moved to homogenize Estonia’s population to help cultivate *Homo Sovieticus*.<sup>179</sup> Regardless, these population transfers irrevocably altered Estonia’s demographic composition. Within the first five years of Soviet rule, Estonia’s non-Estonian population increased from six percent to twenty-five percent.<sup>180</sup> The immigration of non-Estonian, primarily Russian-speaking people to Estonia continued and by 1989, non-Estonians comprised thirty-eight percent of Estonia’s population.<sup>181</sup> In 1979, only thirteen percent of ethnic Russians living in Estonia were fluent in Estonian.<sup>182</sup> Many Russian speakers who migrated simply considered their migration as a change of residence within the Soviet Union. For these people, life in the USSR proved highly mobile. For them, there appeared little benefit to learning the titular language and assimilating into local communities.<sup>183</sup> Many Estonians, however, felt threatened by the marginalization of their language and culture within their homeland, laying the foundation for further conflict between the two groups.<sup>184</sup>

The Soviet Union also sought to eradicate religious practices as part of the sovietization process. Beginning in the 1920s, the Soviet state declared religion as capitalist ploy designed to suppress the worker. Prior to the Second World War, the USSR destroyed or closed most churches or monasteries, making church worship dangerous. Those who maintained religious affiliation remained on the fringes of Soviet life. For example, Orthodox priests and their family members were forbidden from joining collective farms.<sup>185</sup> Soviet officials turned churches into museums of atheism.<sup>186</sup> During World War II, the Russian Orthodox Church promised to support the war effort. In exchange, religious policy relaxed until 1958, when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev once again closed churches and intensified antireligious campaigns.<sup>187</sup>

In Estonia, Soviet state builders implemented religious restrictions. Religious repression proved particularly strong in the Stalinist period. Primarily Lutheran, Estonian religious authorities demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with Soviet authorities. Those who attended worship services, either Russian Orthodox or Lutheran, found themselves under the scrutiny of the Secret Police.<sup>188</sup> Christmas, *jõulupüha* in Estonian, became known as *näripüha*—a holiday with no religious implications. Santa Claus,

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.

<sup>179</sup> Joni Virkkunen, "The Politics of Identity: Ethnicity, Minority and Nationalism in Soviet Estonia." *GeoJournal* 48, no. 2 (1999): 84.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>181</sup> Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 155.

<sup>182</sup> Andrejs Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 385.

<sup>183</sup> Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 155.

<sup>184</sup> Andrejs Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 375.

<sup>185</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 247.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

<sup>187</sup> Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 42.

<sup>188</sup> Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 153.

*jõuluvana* in Estonian, transitioned to *närivana*, the Soviet Santa Claus.<sup>189</sup> The Soviets used this repurposing of names to dissociate religion with otherwise religious holidays. In Estonian schools, school children learned about the absurdity of religion. Anastasia, age 48, recalls of her education, “We were taught that God doesn't exist because scientists proved there is no place in the sky where God sits on his throne. We flew into space and we didn't discover him. And that is how we know he doesn't exist. It was something silly to believe in God.”<sup>190</sup> Sovietization permeated into every aspect of daily life, even in churches and in schools, tearing at the fabric of Estonian society.

In response to sovietization, many Estonians privately resisted. A brief discussion of resistance as a concept must precede an in-depth discussion of the Estonian response, particularly the Estonian female response. This paper draws primarily from the work of James C. Scott in his book *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* to establish the basis for understanding resistance movements and Estonian women's involvement in resisting Soviet rule. Scott offers the model of the hidden transcript. Scott contends that, within a power dynamic, both the subjugated party and the dominant party ignore certain aspects of their relationship in order to create a type of “public” face, a front that conforms to social norms. However, either party, particularly the subjugated party, may express feelings behind closed doors that drastically differ from those publicly expressed. This difference of feeling Scott calls a “hidden transcript”. Often bereft of the luxury of directly retaliating, subordinate groups must find other means of dealing with power imbalance within their relationships with the dominant party. This model proves particularly useful for examining resistance methods among Estonian women. Stalinist terror in the 1950s created a legitimate danger in protesting and as years progressed Soviet power solidified. Estonians attempted to conform to the ever-changing rules set forth by the Soviet system to survive. Survival, however, did not translate to an acceptance of the Soviet system or an internalization of Soviet values.<sup>191</sup> Estonian women are aware of this disparity and refer to it as “game life” or “double speak”.<sup>192</sup> Behind closed doors, Estonian women utilized language and folk traditions to preserve an Estonian sense of self. Outwardly, Estonian women held to the accepted Soviet-sponsored narrative, creating their own hidden transcript.

Language played a major role in Estonian women's resistance. In the face of a dramatic influx of Russian speakers and subsequent linguistic Russification, Estonians defended their native tongue with increasing fervor.<sup>193</sup> The Russian language was taught in school and most Estonians spoke at least basic Russian. However, many Estonians refused to speak Russian by pretending to not understand any Russian at all.<sup>194</sup> Estonians developed a form of writing that employed implicit messages meant to reach Estonians and circumvent Soviet censors.<sup>195</sup> Katrin, age 67, explains, “We were forced to read

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<sup>189</sup> Tarmo and Liisa, interview by Tara Godwin. June 26, 2019.

<sup>190</sup> Anastasia, interview by Tara Godwin. June 27, 2019.

<sup>191</sup> Andrejs Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 365.

<sup>192</sup> Katrin, interview by Tara Godwin. June 26, 2019.

<sup>193</sup> Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 158.

<sup>194</sup> Andrejs Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 379.

<sup>195</sup> Joni Virkkunen, "The Politics of Identity: Ethnicity, Minority and Nationalism in Soviet Estonia." *GeoJournal* 48, no. 2 (1999): 85.

between the lines. Then you could figure out what the truth was. All the censors were Russian who maybe understood the Estonian language, but they weren't of the Estonian mind. They didn't understand what was written between the lines.”<sup>196</sup>

Permitted by Soviet authorities because of its “nationalist form and socialist content”, the Estonian song festival (*laulupidu*) serves as an excellent example of this form of resistance. Taking place every five years, the song festival features up to 20,000 singers in various choirs and up to 100,000 spectators. During the Soviet era, the song festival proved an important event to confirm Estonian national identity and solidarity.<sup>197</sup>

Commenting on the content of the songs performed at the song festival, Katrin continues, “If it was too clear, then the song was banned. But I know there is one children's folk song, *Mägra Maja* (The Badger's House). The story goes that a badger digs himself a hole but then a second animal comes to the badger and says, ‘If you have nothing against it, I would like to live here.’ The badger says, ‘Okay, no problem. Come live here.’ Then the animal says to the badger, ‘I'll bring my wife here. And my children here. And my grandmother here.’ In the end, the badger had to move out because he didn't fit. It was a children's song. But really it was about how in Estonia when the Russians came they all came and there was no more space for Estonians. It was exciting in a way to sing about those things and as Estonians we didn't have to talk about those things. We just knew.”<sup>198</sup>

This kind of implicit double speak that outwardly seemed in line with the Soviet system but privately supported the Estonian national identity occurred in other areas outside of folk culture. In school, Estonian students learned “red subjects”—components of history, philosophy, science or other subjects that affirmed the Soviet Union’s interpretation of Marxist principles.<sup>199</sup> Katrin recalls, “When I attended university, we had classes we called ‘Red Subjects’. History, economy, things about Lenin, and so forth. We felt that we were doing it together. Together we were playing a game according to a set of rules. I never took any of it to heart. I don't know... We knew as Estonians there were official things that we had to say.”<sup>200</sup> Students patiently sat through these lectures but internally doubted the veracity of the information presented.

For Estonian women, resistance by asserting their national identity through language and cultural expressions and by refusing to internalize Soviet ideals proved the most accessible forms of resistance. Certainly, other forms of resistance existed and occurred. The *Metsavennad* (Forest Brothers), a group of partisans living in the Estonian forests, actively harassed Soviet officials up until the capture of the last member in 1971. The *Metsavennad*, however, consisted exclusively of men.<sup>201</sup> Internal Communist Party opposition or refusing to join the Party altogether also existed as another avenue to resist

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<sup>196</sup> Katrin, interview by Tara Godwin. June 26, 2019.

<sup>197</sup> Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 159.

<sup>198</sup> Katrin, interview by Tara Godwin. June 26, 2019.

<sup>199</sup> Joni Virkkunen, "The Politics of Identity: Ethnicity, Minority and Nationalism in Soviet Estonia." *GeoJournal* 48, no. 2 (1999): 87.

<sup>200</sup> Katrin, interview by Tara Godwin. June 26, 2019.

<sup>201</sup> Andrejs Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 360.

but, as discussed in the gender section of this paper, Party membership as a general rule remained less accessible to women.<sup>202</sup> However, both ethnic Estonian and ethnic Russian women utilized the power of their domestic sphere to resist the anti-religious campaigns put forth by the USSR. Within the seclusion of the domestic sphere, grandmothers and mothers taught their children and grandchildren to pray and read the Bible in both the Lutheran and Russian Orthodox faith traditions.<sup>203</sup> Heidi, age 84 remembers “My grandmother, my mother's mother, was very religious. She taught us when were children the Lord's Prayer. We knew God was real, we knew there was a Christ, and we prayed every night.”<sup>204</sup> Alisa, age 34, remembers of her grandmother, “When I went to bed, to sleep, she always stood in front of me and said a prayer. All the time, every night. So that's what I remember. She had a really, really old Bible. With black and white pictures... It was very old.”<sup>205</sup> The special nature of the home kept this religious instruction secret. Kaja, age 50, comments “If we talked about something at home, it was a secret. We were scared all the time to say anything. If someone told on you, you just never knew. It was all a secret.”<sup>206</sup> Although sometimes burdened by their gendered responsibilities, some women used their influence in the home to defy Soviet power and pass on their religious beliefs.

Estonian nationalism, among men and women, remained a spectrum with some fervently agitating for Estonian independence on one end and others assimilating into the Soviet system on the other. Heidi explains of her experience, “We weren't such idealistic Estonians that we would have tried to overthrow the government. We were just young people, we wanted to go to university, and we wanted to become people... I was like a knife through butter. I didn't have any difficulties and I didn't have any conflicts with anyone.”<sup>207</sup> Marta, age 50, comments “A lot of bad things are said about the Soviet Union. I don't share that opinion.”<sup>208</sup> While individuals existed that fervently resisted sovietization, others felt it possible to ignore.

Ethnic Russian women living in Estonia experienced Sovietization much differently than their ethnic Estonian counterparts. Russian speakers and Russian culture have existed in some form in Estonia since 800 A.D.<sup>209</sup> In this sense, the migration of Russian speakers into Estonia during the sovietization period functioned as an influx of an existing cultural minority. For the ethnic Russians that immigrated into Estonia during the Soviet era, they viewed their immigration as movement within the Soviet Union, unaware of internal borders. Many chose to move to Estonia because they considered it “less Soviet” than other republics. They never considered themselves occupants and failed to comprehend that the titular population of Estonia might consider them as

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<sup>202</sup> Joni Virkkunen, "The Politics of Identity: Ethnicity, Minority and Nationalism in Soviet Estonia." *GeoJournal* 48, no. 2 (1999): 87.

<sup>203</sup> Anu Kannike, "Creating Cultural Continuity in the Domestic Realm: The Case of Soviet Estonia." *Acta Historica Tallinnensia* 10 (2006): 212.

<sup>204</sup> Heidi, interview by Tara Godwin. July 8, 2019.

<sup>205</sup> Alisa, interview by Tara Godwin. July 16, 2019.

<sup>206</sup> Kaja, interview by Tara Godwin. July 11, 2019.

<sup>207</sup> Heidi, interview by Tara Godwin. July 8, 2019.

<sup>208</sup> Marta, interview by Tara Godwin. June 25, 2019.

<sup>209</sup> Igor Černov and Ljubov Kisseljova, “The Future of Russian Culture in Estonia”. *World Affairs* 157, no. 3 (1995): 143.

such.<sup>210</sup> Because of Stalin's preference for Russian culture, many ethnic Russians received special privileges, like receiving priority in housing queues.<sup>211</sup> However, ethnic Russians still suffered under Soviet rule. They too suffered under Soviet policies of collectivization, censorship, food shortages, and ideas of gender. The difference, then, in their experience of sovietization is that theirs remained the only sanctioned national culture and language—a culture and language that ethnic Estonians felt undermined their own.

This difference in experience leads to a crisis in national identity for ethnic Russian women in the present-day. While ethnic Russian women viewed themselves as Soviet citizens, ethnic Estonian women viewed them firmly as occupiers. Ethnic Estonian women refused to internalize the values of *Homo Sovieticus* and instead define national identity based on a person's mother tongue. To Estonians, a person born in Estonia who speaks Russian as their native language becomes "Russian" rather than Estonian, transferring all cultural Soviet features onto ethnic Russians.<sup>212</sup> Of the Russian-speaking women interviewed, none identified as Estonian, regardless of birthplace. Instead, they identify as Soviet, belonging to a nation that no longer exists. For comparison, all the Estonian-speaking women interviewed identified as Estonian. Born and raised in Tallinn, Estonia, Alisa explains the conflict of nationality for her: "I speak Russian but I am not from Russia. I speak Estonian but not fluently... Because Estonians they don't really accept us... I would like to ask them, who am I, to them? Because I had situations in the past, work experience, working in teams in companies where Estonians, they just told us straight-- go to Russia. Why? I was born here, I pay taxes here, I live here."<sup>213</sup> For many ethnic Russians, this exclusion leaves them in limbo. Anastasia comments, "For Estonians over here, I am Russian. If I go to Russia, to them I am Estonian... I always say, I am Russian but I am from Estonia. I am not Russian. I am not Estonian. I am half and half."<sup>214</sup> Most ethnic Russian women, despite this conflict, express a love for their homeland. Svetlana, age 67, also born and raised in Tallinn, lived in Moscow for a short time with her husband. She explains her fondness for Estonia in the following way: "I love Estonia-- the land of Estonia. Not the state, not the government, not the political system. I love my land. When I lived in Moscow, I heard people speaking in Estonian on the radio. I started crying. I had very strong nostalgia. I cannot live anywhere else. I can live only here.... The real Estonian is someone who loves Estonia."<sup>215</sup> Given Estonians' relationship with sovietization, many ethnic Estonians exclude ethnic Russians from the Estonian national community. However, for their part, many Estonian-born ethnic Russian profess a love of their homeland without claiming the titular culture as their own.

For Soviet-era ethnic Estonian women, the process of sovietization continued to separate them from their ethnic Russian counterparts. As the Soviet Union sought to incorporate Estonia into the USSR, Soviet policies of collectivization, linguistic Russification, and the attempt to create a shared "Soviet" historical memory sparked

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>211</sup> Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 155.

<sup>212</sup> Igor Černov and Ljubov Kisseljova, "The Future of Russian Culture in Estonia". *World Affairs* 157, no. 3 (1995): 144.

<sup>213</sup> Alisa, interview by Tara Godwin. July 16, 2019.

<sup>214</sup> Anastasia, interview by Tara Godwin. June 27, 2019.

<sup>215</sup> Svetlana, interview by Tara Godwin. July 1, 2019.

resentment among ethnic Estonian women. They resisted sovietization by adhering to their hidden transcript—that is, outwardly appearing to conform to the rules of the Soviet system while privately denouncing the legitimacy of Soviet power. They asserted their national identity through song and other forms of double speak. Both ethnic Russian and ethnic Estonian women resisted Soviet antireligious campaigns by teaching religious principles in their homes. Ethnic Russian women too fell victim to the brutality of Soviet rule, but their culture held a privileged status in Soviet national policy. As a result, many ethnic Russians never learned the Estonian language and never assimilated into Estonian life, sparking further resentment among ethnic Estonians. Ethnic Russians view themselves today as “Soviet” or “not Russian or Estonian”, leaving them without a concrete national identity.

## CONCLUSION

After the fall of communism, Estonia continues to grapple with questions of how to remember and portray its own history. Recent events surrounding WWII memorials demonstrate the conflict in memory between the two groups. The Estonian government only built memorials to commemorate murdered Estonian Jews in 2002, reluctant to acknowledge Estonian-Nazi collaboration.<sup>216</sup> In 2004, Estonian veterans of the Germany Army constructed a monument in Lihula for their fellow soldiers killed in battle. The inscription on the monument read: “Estonian men who fought in 1940-1945 against Bolshevism and for the restoration of Estonian independence”. The Estonian soldier figured in the monument wore a Nazi uniform.<sup>217</sup> In 2007, riots of ethnic Russians in Tallinn broke out after Estonian officials moved a monument to unknown fallen Soviet soldiers, known as the Bronze Soldier. Ethnic Russians perceived the moving of the monument as desecration—a defilement of the graves of Soviet heroes.<sup>218</sup>

Laws regarding Estonian citizenship place Russian speakers at a disadvantage illustrate Estonian resentment over sovietization. Initially, ethnic Russians who entered Estonia after June 16, 1940 were denied Estonian citizenship. Most of these individuals were born in Estonia and as such failed to qualify for Russian citizenship, leaving them without citizenship. As of 2002, nearly 180,000 ethnic Russians remained stateless.<sup>219</sup> Debate surrounds the teaching of Russian as a foreign language in Estonian-speaking schools and allowing the existence of Russian-speaking schools to continue.<sup>220</sup> Many ethnic Estonians feel that ethnic Russians are ambivalent about integrating into Estonian culture. Ethnic Russians, however, feel they are part of a homeless Soviet diaspora and desire to preserve their own culture.<sup>221</sup>

Understanding the ways in which Estonian women construct their gender and national identity furthers dialogue between ethnic Estonians and ethnic Russians. While

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<sup>216</sup> Anton Weiss-Wendt, *On the Margins: Essays on the History of Jews in Estonia*. (New York: Central European University Press, 2017), 253.

<sup>217</sup> Inge Melchior and Oane Visser, "Voicing Past and Present Uncertainties: The Relocation of a Soviet World War II Memorial and the Politics of Memory in Estonia." *Focaal*, no. 59 (2011): 39.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>220</sup> Igor Černov and Ljubov Kisseljova, “The Future of Russian Culture in Estonia”. *World Affairs* 157, no. 3 (1995): 144.

<sup>221</sup> Toivo U. Raun, “Estonia after 1991: Identity and Integration.” *East European Politics and Societies* 23, no. 4 (November 2009): 531.

the two groups may not share a common language, Soviet era born Estonian women share significant similarities in their experience of gender. They experienced the double burden of professional expectations and domestic responsibility. They lived lives as wives, mothers, and workers—battling divorce, alcoholism, and repressive state reproduction policies. They fought food and clothing shortages to provide a life for themselves and their children. They appreciated the ideal of equality of the sexes within the Soviet Union and found opportunities to further their education yet recognized that, regardless of official Soviet policy, men dominated the communist party and political life.

World War II serves as the beginning point historical memory for both ethnic Estonian and ethnic Russian women. Ethnic Estonian women view WWII as a continued struggle for independence. In their recollections of history, they portray Nazi Germany as liberators from the horror of Soviet rule. Many express that they wished Nazi Germany won the war. For these women, Nazi Germany proved the lesser of two evils. As such, they largely ignore questions of Estonian collaboration in the Holocaust and instead emphasize the collective suffering of Estonia as a nation at the hands of the Soviet Union. This emphasis creates a sense of a “Soviet other” in conflict with an Estonian “we”. Ethnic Russian women, however, perceive Nazi Germany as the enemy. Many lost fathers, mothers, and siblings during the war. Some found themselves the victims of Nazi racial policy, imprisoned in concentration camps across Eastern Europe. They view the Soviet Union not as an oppressor but rather as a force for good, fighting fascism across Europe. For them, ethnic Estonians attempt to disfigure one of the most patriotic chapters in their history.

Sovietization increases the divide in memory between the two groups. Ethnic Estonians remember the period as a time of extreme repression and censorship. They resisted linguistic russification by refusing to speak in Russian and resisted censorship by using forms of implicit speech to speak their minds. They professed their loyalty to their national community through song festivals. They deeply resented Soviet policies regarding collectivization. Both groups of women used religion to resist Soviet anti-religious campaigns. While many aspects of sovietization proved disadvantageous for ethnic Russian women, these women enjoyed a more privileged status than their ethnic Estonian counterparts during the Soviet years. However, rather than trampling on Estonian nationalists, many failed to perceive internal borders within the Soviet Union. For them, the Soviet Union was a country made up of a unified Soviet people. Their imagined community was comprised of Soviet peoples. As such, many women never assimilated into Estonian culture. This failure to assimilate stirs resentment in Estonians, seen as a token of disrespect to their sovereignty. For ethnic Russians, they view themselves as Soviet citizens and struggle to understand their place in a world where the Soviet Union no longer exists.

Estonia today, like most post-communist countries, struggles to reconcile Estonian historical memory with the historical memory of ethnic Russians. This struggle is exemplified in various controversies regarding WWII memorials presented at the beginning of this section. Neither group agrees on a singular narrative for the events that transpired during WWII and the sovietization period, creating tensions between each respective community and separating neighbors. Understanding the basis for conflict between the two groups and how each ethnic group views their gender, World War II,

and the sovietization period allows for the groups to find common ground. Examining the similarities and differences each group's historical memory allows each ethnic group to understand the other's perspective without dismissing it as false or offensive. Understanding the experiences of both ethnic Estonian and ethnic Russian women and treating these experiences with respect places each group on equal footing with each other, allowing them to transcend misunderstanding to work together to create a more integrated and multiethnic Estonia. Ultimately, gender highlights the complicated politics of historical memory and nationalism in Estonia and provides a lens with which to understand the experiences of women in Soviet Estonia.

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