

Discontinuity and Continuity in Representations of 20th Century Estonian History

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Abstract

The theme of this article is how Estonians have described political changes in their autobiographical narratives. The discussion is based on the observation that the establishment of Soviet rule in Estonia in the 1940s is construed in the studies of life stories, on the one hand, as a discontinuity of ‘normal life’, and on the other hand, as continuity. It is remarkable that irrespective of the demarcation of state borders by political decisions, Estonian territory is still perceived as a single and eternal whole. To what extent is the perception of discontinuity or continuity related to experiencing political change and to what extent is it related to the method of narration, and to what extent does it depend on the choices made by the researcher? An analysis of the three life histories discussed in the article indicates that experiencing discontinuity or continuity in a specific historical context does not coincide with its depiction in life histories. The texts reflect both the diversity of narrative methods (coherent representation of different layers of recollections, the comparison and contrast of different situations, etc.), and the context of narratives – for example the interviewer’s effect on discussing a topic or the relation of a story to publicly discussed topics. Recollections are characterised by variability, however this may not become evident as studies focus on certain aspects of the narrative or interrelations of the topic and public discourses. The polysemic and ambivalent nature of the ‘border’ unfolds through the entangled interplay of territorial, political and cultural borders, their narrative articulation in life story telling as well as researchers’ choices.

Keywords: Cultural border, cultural continuity and discontinuity, cultural self-description, life story, the Soviet period

Introduction

This article deals with the terms ‘discontinuity’ and ‘continuity’, and ‘boundary’ or ‘delimiting’ associated with both the self-description of culture and the specifics of narrating about the past. I use the terms ‘continuity’ and ‘discontinuity’ in derivation from their narrative meaning: how these concepts are revealed when past events are organised into a coherent narrative. On the theoretical level, I rely on the approach by Juri Lotman relating to the mutual balance of the statics and dynamics of the (culturally meaningful) semiotic system: ‘how can a system develop and yet remain true to itself’ (Lotman 1992/2009: 1). In the article I pose three questions: Firstly; for what reason do life history researchers prefer to interpret the drastic changes of the 1940s in Estonia through expressions of discontinuity or continuity? Secondly; how does the mutual relation between continuity and discontinuity reveal itself spontaneously narrated life stories if the researcher does not aim to uncover either of these concepts. Thirdly; in such cases, how does the topic of changing the territorial, political and cultural borders manifests it? The texts analysed in this article are drawn from the collection of *Estonian Life Histories* preserved in the Estonian Cultural History Archives in Tartu (EKLA f 350).

The first part of the article introduces the general theoretical background for the study. The events that help to place the analysis of life histories in context will be discussed, and the question will be raised how the concepts of ‘discontinuity’ and ‘continuity’ are construed in studies of life narratives and the self-description of Estonian culture. The third part of the article is dedicated to an analysis of life histories, and in particular, how the theme of Soviet rule (a recurrent motif in these texts) is expressed in the contexts of continuity or discontinuity. Three life histories are discussed and I will compare the narrators’ descriptions of the events that altered the state borders in the 1940s, when Estonia was incorporated into the Soviet Union.

Theoretical Framework for the Study: The Interdisciplinarity of Border Studies

Traditionally, the research of territorial borders and state borders belongs to the realm of human or political geography. The boundaries presented in life stories result from the narrator’s point of view and are multi-level by nature. This article focuses on the topic of the relationships between the territorial, political and cultural borders in the context of the continuity and discontinuity presented in the self-description of culture: what role is played by the physical space (the territory), the culture, the language; and in what aspect is the geopolitically established border different from the border created by the self-description tools of culture?

To answer these questions, a view into the history of academic border studies is provided.

The convergence of different fields of research started in the 1970s, and aimed to explain how we may interpret the interactive relations between the physical (administrative) borders established by the authorities and the subjective borders of the inhabitants. This task brought geographers closer to cultural researchers, linguists and sociologists. In the renewed research context of the geographical space, Anssi Paasi underlines the socio-cultural viewpoint, in which the focal analytical framework includes the oppositions ‘we’– ‘other’ and ‘here’–‘there’ (Paasi 1996: 14). The boundary is observed in this case as the ‘general principles of territorial organization’ (Paasi 1996: 27). At the same time, cultural researchers looked for possibilities to comprehend abstract borders. In this case the border is perceived as the meeting point of two cultures, where the marker of the border is the need to ‘translate’ the ‘other’: ‘The border is a bilingual mechanism, translating external communications into the internal language of the semiosphere and visa versa’ (Lotman 1984/2005: 210). Lotman gives an example, according to which certain persons, due to their particular talent or employment (magicians, blacksmiths, executioners), may operate as ‘interpreters’ on the boundary of cultural and mythological space, while settled in the same territory (ibid: 211). Such a boundary is not physically perceivable, but exists as a border between the culturally organised world and the translated (e.g. supernatural) world. The genres marking borders of this type (for example burial laments) are usual research objects of folkloristics, where the question is how people behave in border situations, in order to arrange relationships with this world and the beyond. For example, Madis Arukask describes the meaning of lamentation based on fieldwork among the Fenno-Ugric Vepsian people who live in North Russia: ‘... the folkloric practice was represented here in its original function of restoring order, in communication with the otherworld, the border between the two realms were (re)established so as to avoid unforeseeable consequences and primarily guarantee the well-being of the living’ (Arukask 2011: 132). Being an idea that joins different border concepts, this means that beside the physical characteristics of the border, the features of the border as a place of negotiations are also important. Additionally, modern holistic border studies emphasise the role of historical factors in the formation of administratively established borderlands. For instance, Karri Kiiskinen compares two sections of the external border of the European Union: the Finnish-Russian and the Polish-Ukrainian border. He demonstrates how the borderland is not only a contact zone between the states, but also a place of recollections influenced by historical factors (Kiiskinen 2012: 30–32).

Alongside the territorial, political and narrative aspects, the linguistic aspects are also significant in border studies. Anssi Paasi refers to geography as a linguistic practice (Paasi 1996: 22). His observation concerns primarily the scientific terminology, but the same can be applied to the ordinary language level. This lat-

ter element is studied in linguistics by means of semantic fields, which are formed by the concentration of words around certain topics. Using the connection between the concentration of words and the resulting fields, it is possible to research the speakers' understanding of phenomena and their mutual relationships which are marked by the words in the semantic field (Õim 1997: 256). In this context, for example, it is significant that in Estonian, the same word – 'piir' (border) – is used to mark the boundaries of a culture, a geographical territory and a country as a political entity. It is therefore predictable that the history of the evolution of words and concepts requires particular attention in international border studies (Cohen 1994; Klusáková & Ellis 2006).

In this article the territorial aspects and those concerned with the changing of state borders serve as a general background to this approach; with the focus on perceived (historically developed and culturally created) subjective borders of 'own' land. The narrative research perspective sets forth questions about the (inter)subjectivity of truth, text creation techniques and the impact of the narrating situation on text creation (Titon 1980: 288–291; Latvala 2005: 33–36; Klein 2006: 8–15). In the case of self-descriptive texts (such as the verbal descriptions of general culture), their ideological character, the interpretative nature of facts, and emotions and ways of expression, play 'an important role in the social construction of selves and cultural worldviews' (Matsumoto 2006: 48). Autobiographical narrating is understood as an intersubjective process, in the course of which the knowledge existing in the society is exchanged, evaluated and verified (Smith & Watson 2010: 16–18). These standpoints also serve as a basis for understanding the 'truth' of self-descriptive texts, and the contents of these texts cannot be handled as facts unambiguous from real life. Rather, it is a cognitive process, which involves the experiences and knowledge of living in a certain time period and space. In Estonia, the state borders were altered so often during the 20th century that Estonians, in referring to their country's past, tend to refer to time periods (the tsarist time; the time of independence; the Russian time; the German time); and as an analogy the time of manors (for example, the time of kolkhozes). This is in opposition to a politically defined territory (Estonia as a province of the Russian Empire; Estonia as a republic of the Soviet Union, etc.). Foreign rulers have 'come and gone' but Estonia has stayed put within its territorial boundaries, and it is this ideology that reflects the bond Estonians have with their country.¹ When talking about the Soviet Republic of Estonia, 'border' is a temporal notion, rather than a territorial one. In the analysis of the life narratives presented in this article, I shall point out these aspects more closely.

The approach in which the cultural borders of Estonia coincide with its territorial borders (irrespective of the state borders imposed by foreign invaders) is associated with the national awakening movement of the late 19th century and the establishment of a nation state in the early 20th century (see: Jansen 2000: 45; Kruus 2005: 122–133, 400–402; Kõresaar 2005, 70; Nutt 2010). The interconnectedness

of the territory and cultural identity more generally characterises the development of national unity and the ideology of nation states. If the prerequisite of the state is ‘a political organization covering a particular territory’, and ‘a nation [...] is a community of people with a common identity, which is typically based on shared cultural values and attachment to a particular territory’, then ‘the nation-state is the most powerful combination of nation and state’ (Paasi 1996: 39). In Estonia however, this concept is based on historical experience that has been studied from an ethno-linguistic point of view: ‘Being *indigenous* is one of the key words used in describing relations between akin and alien because ‘we’ were here long before the ‘aliens’ started to arrive’ (Viikberg 2000: 187).

Such inconsistency between cultural and political borders in Estonia has given rise to the question of continuity and discontinuity: was the continuity of Estonia interrupted when Estonia was incorporated into the Soviet Union in 1940 or not? – in the latter case, Estonia would be one of the native regions of Russia, and the national independence of Estonia would be understood as a deviation from the normal situation; on a larger scale, this is a question of the existence and nature of the boundary between Estonia and Russia. Also, how has the influence of foreign reigns shaped Estonian culture, and with such a multitude of foreign contacts, can we talk about self-sufficiency and the consistent development of Estonian culture? These questions were raised once again in the public debates of the 1990s, which included the studies of memoirs and life histories.

Basis of the Article: ‘Continuity’ and ‘Discontinuity’ in Life Histories

On the one hand, the subject matter of the article was chosen based on the argument of researchers into life histories that the incorporation of Estonia into the Soviet Union in 1940 is described in life histories collected at the end of the last century as a ‘discontinuity’ (Kõresaar 2005).² On the other hand, we can see that cultural continuity is also a leitmotif used in depicting pivotal events. For example, similar cultural leitmotifs have been used to control, understand and describe the same periods or temporal qualities (Kalmre 2007; 2012). As a reader of life histories, I agree with the above views on discontinuity and continuity, and as a researcher of folklore, I have analysed life histories from the point of view of cultural continuity.

Controversial opinions prompted me to ask what triggers the use of one or the other concept. From a theoretical point of view, I do not see a problem in the simultaneous application of both concepts. Based on *Culture and Explosion* by Juri Lotman, various simultaneous processes (including everyday life and politics) move at different speeds, and therefore discontinuity and continuity are synchronous. A period of rapid transformation may be retrospectively interpreted as a natural course of history, so creating a concept of continuity (Lotman

1992/2009: 12–18). Therefore, life histories can be construed as cultural-ideological texts (see: Matsumoto 2006), and although these texts are based on real life, they constitute a self-description of culture, rather than an ‘accurate’ account of the past. Moreover, the ‘discontinuities’ of real life and those found in their descriptions do not necessarily overlap.

The fact that real life events may be described in multiple ways gave rise to a further question and prompted the author to analyse the subject in detail. References to studies raised a doubt that certain findings are accepted as ‘undisputable’. For example, the following statement: ‘The four and half decades under Soviet rule were viewed [in the 1990s] as a single and prevailing period of discontinuity during which normal everyday life and wellbeing, whether individual or collective (i.e. of the Estonian people), was considered impossible’ (Aarelaid-Tart 2012: 148–149). There is no reason to doubt the truthfulness of the above statement, however it does not leave any room for the parallel existence of alternative approaches or interpretations. Stories within a collection vary significantly (Matsumoto 2006: 34–35, 52). The variability becomes evident both in the diversity of methods used to construct a story and the interpretations of the past. In studying life histories and interpreting findings, it is important to differentiate between the actual events described and the way they are described. Otherwise, it would be difficult to understand why it was possible to talk in the 1990s about the pivotal events of the 1940s in different ways (both through discontinuity and continuity).

In the worst-case scenario, one description is extended to the general interpretation of the past, which casts doubt on the ‘accuracy of recollections of the Soviet time’ (Aarelaid-Tart 2012: 148). Therefore, the question of whether discontinuity or another discourse prevails in the life histories recounted in the 1990s, depends also on the background of the researcher and the context in which they place the stories. While Kõresaar’s study is often referenced when highlighting the prevalence of the discourse of discontinuity in Estonian life histories recounted in the 1990s, the type of texts studied by Kõresaar should be taken into account. These were the life histories of people born in the 1920s, drawn from the collection of life histories stored in the Cultural History Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum (Kõresaar 2005: 25). Besides defining the set of texts (and the group of interpreters of the past), it is important to define the aspects that create the context of the study. In the present case, it is the way the researcher correlates narratives with other cultural texts. Kõresaar used a dialogue in her study between life histories and the topics of public and political discussions. She emphasised that the texts were created in the late 1980s and early 1990s. It was a period when public discussions of history were characterised by the key-phrase ‘crisis of truth’ and the truth was sought from witnesses to history (Kõresaar 2005: 17).

The historian Toomas Hiio, for example, speaks about a tradition of political lectures delivered by historians in towns, villages and community centres (the so-

called ‘history road shows’), restored in 1988 and 1989: ‘When Sulev Vahtre [Professor of history at Tartu University] restored history road shows, the main topic of discussion was the epoch-making years in Estonian history. I also had to deliver a speech in Vara community centre in February 1989. It was about the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, its secret protocol and the consequences of both’. (Hiio 2010: 2.) Public discussions of Estonian political history held in the late 1980s and early 1990s were dominated by the idea of discontinuity (‘epoch-making years’). In her research, Kõresaar focusses on the axis of those debates where public discussions and approaches meet the accounts of narrators who had witnessed the events. At the same time, different discourses existed that were not in a dialogue with public life. Such stories have been analysed by researcher of folklore Eda Kalmre, concerning xenophobia in everyday life in post-war Estonia and rumours of human flesh being used in the food industry (2007). It explored the controversial feelings of Estonians about Baltic German culture during and after the war, when people hoped that the West would help to restore Estonian sovereignty (2012). In her research, Kalmre not only examines the historical context of the events recounted but, as a researcher of folklore, also looks at the international and historical spread of the motifs in the stories. She highlights the continuity of tradition: for example, the reasons for the motif of human flesh being used in the food industry becoming topical in a specific historical/political/social context (be it sausage factories in the context of food shortage, or organ donation in the context of medical progress).

The doubt that research findings are treated as undisputable arises when the researcher is referring to earlier findings, but does not show their context (which, in fact, defines the area of validity of the findings). When researching life histories, it may lead to a situation where the diversity of cultural self-description is overshadowed by the dominating discourse, without explaining under what conditions the given discourse may dominate other discourses. Whether the concept of ‘discontinuity’ or the concept of ‘continuity’ should be highlighted in the descriptions of real life and past events partially depends on the method of representation, partially on external factors existing at the time of recounting (such as different approaches to the past in society), and partially on the contexts created by the researcher and their field of research.

‘Discontinuity’ and ‘Continuity’ in the Self-description of Estonian Culture

Ene Kõresaar emphasises that the context of the discontinuity experience and its representation in the stories told in the 1990s, is a broader understanding of Estonian national history and culture – they are treated as a series of discontinuities (Kõresaar 2005: 70). In referring to the works of historians Ea Jansen and Anti Selart, she also says that ‘discontinuity and continuity are opposite poles that have

shaped the approach to Estonian national history' (ibid.). The next section of this article is dedicated to the debates concerning both history and literary science, about the overlapping of the boundaries of Estonian culture and territory, and will show how these discussions are related to the rhetoric of discontinuity and continuity. In general, historians emphasise the continuity of settlement and political inconsistency, which means that Estonian national identity can be seen as a series of discontinuities. Literary scientists deal with external factors that influence culture and result in the discontinuity of Estonian culture.

Archaeologist Andres Tvauri is of the view that the development of a nation cannot be studied based on archaeological data. He argues however, that the settlement of Estonia is considered to be consistent: '[...] there is no doubt that the people who inhabited Estonia in the second half of the first millennium are the direct ancestors of modern-day Estonians' (Tvauri 2012: 21). In popular scientific literature, Estonian culture and territory are similarly related. Indrek Rünkla for example, speaks about the inevitable connection between territory and culture. He argues that: 'territory lives together with the culture developed within it,' and continues: 'Our space as a long-term permanent culture has been shaped and reshaped by acts and stories' (Rünkla 2010: 774–775). In his essay, he highlights the connection of an individual with his culture and territory, and finds all three to be interrelated. Tiit Kärner also starts with a premise that Estonian territory and culture are interrelated, asking: 'What will happen in a multicultural society?' He explains (referring to Juri Lotman's position that culture develops as a closed space), that with a multitude of cultures, territories (cultural spaces) can be separate. According to Kärner, Estonia, too, is characterised by a simultaneous, yet isolated existence of several cultures (Kärner 2010: 819).

Literary scientist Aare Pilv (2008) differentiates between three self-descriptions of Estonian culture: interruption (periods of independence alternating with periods of foreign cultural influence); existentiality (ethnic nationality or conservation of a nation – opposition to the fear of extinction); and self-colonialism (developing one's own culture by modelling on 'others', e.g. Western Europe). All of these concepts are related to each other by the question of 'self' and 'others'. The concept of discontinuity requires preserving the self – a situation in which culture is 'interrupted' with regard to the 'other' (Pilv 2008: 71). Pilv writes in his article *Estonia of existence* that these concepts were developed based on literature and the results were extended to culture as a whole (Pilv 2011: 851). His criticism refers to the fact that the role of literature in shaping the Estonian mentality is not as fundamental and exclusive as the authors he has analysed suggest. I agree with the argument that trends in literature do not explain all aspects of the self-description of Estonian culture, and believe that Aare Pilv has reached a conclusion that goes beyond literature:

We can ask what is the purpose of the existence of nations – what is the achievement or purpose that justifies their existence. [...] If we ask that question about Estonians,

the first answer is: we have lived here for more than 5,000 years; we survived slavery and Soviet occupation; in a word, we survived, we persevered and our main achievement is that we exist (Pilv 2011: 855).

Time and again, researchers come to the conclusion that it is continuity that is most valued from the point of view of Estonian culture.

Beyond discussions about literature, Hasso Krull's concept of a 'culture of interruption' is referred to mainly in order to emphasise the controversial nature of recollections gathered in Estonia in the 1990s (Kõresaar 2005: 64, 70–71; Aarelaid-Tart 2012: 147). The referred work by Hasso Krull includes his essays on literature in which he analyses the connection of Estonian-language printed works with world literature. He deals with inter-cultural dialogue rather than political changes (although they are of course related). In his collection of essays, he mentions the political aspect of the 'culture of interruption' of the 1990s. At the same time, he emphasises continuity: 'We have to remember that the concept of interruption does not mean a single event. Interruption is always recurring, a series of countless repetitions that creates fluctuation. Therefore, interruption is actually a special case of continuity' (Krull 1996: 7).

Self-description of culture is ideological, created by cultural and sociological means. Because of its ideological nature, it does not necessarily reflect the actual situation, as is also argued by Aare Pilv in his article. He says that literature often heroizes the nation because it is a more 'constructive' idea than the actual practices of survival (Pilv 2011: 855). It should be borne in mind however, that besides being ideological, the self-description of culture is not homogeneous: the same situations can be represented differently. The next question is: how the above self-descriptions that are prevalent among the Estonian general public are disclosed in the life histories of common people.

The 1940s and the Soviet Regime in the Context of 'Discontinuity' and 'Continuity': Based on Estonian Life Histories

To enable closer study I chose real life narratives from the Estonian Life Histories collection (EKLA f 350). Also, papers by other life history researchers (including those referred to herein), are based on the same collection. The research study by Ene Kõresaar was based on one hundred stories from the Estonian Life Histories collection. The criteria for selecting the stories was that the narrators went to school in the Republic of Estonia, i.e. before the 1940s coup; and that their stories reflected the conflict characteristic to the Estonian society of the end of the 1980s (Kõresaar 2005: 18, 25–29). Aili Aarelaid-Tart used both published memoirs and biographical interviews that she herself had conducted, and explored the role of official political discourses in the memoirs (Aarelaid-Tart 2012: 142). The research by Eda Kalmre relies on published memories and materials from the Estonian Folklore Archives, which beside the recordings of rumours and folktales,

include descriptions of the milieu of the period when the stories were in circulation (Kalmre 2007: 23–24). Narratives of the same topic can be found among the texts of the Estonian Life Histories collection (EKLA f 350v, 27; EKLA f 350, 1077). The texts that I observe are basically of the same kind. However, I do not proceed from the responses in life stories to topics that are in the public foreground (e.g. in the press, politicians' speeches, or in schools), nor the milieu of descriptions accompanied by rumours. Rather I chose three stories to explore how the topical problems spontaneously emerge in them. This enabled me to follow how the topic of continuity and discontinuity is unconsciously revealed in the stories and to ask what causes the emergence of one method of description or the other. I limited the selection of texts firstly to the region, and then to the time and circumstances of narrating.

I have analysed the life histories of the residents of Kohtla-Järve, an industrial town in north-eastern Estonia.³ The collection of life histories (EKLA f 350) includes about 500 narratives related to Kohtla-Järve and the surrounding region, and I have chosen three of those narratives for more detailed analysis. Two related aspects are important in these narratives: firstly, each of the three narrators represents a different generation (the time frames of their life histories are also different); secondly, the times (and the motives) of telling the stories are also different.

One of the narrators was born in the early 20th century. He entered the political turmoil of the 1940s as a fully developed personality and was able to compare his experiences as an adult in both the pre-Soviet and Soviet time of Estonia. In 1993, he contributed four volumes of memoirs to the Estonian Cultural History Archives that he had written in the period between 1979 and 1980 (EKLA f 350, 289 I–IV). Because his memoirs were solely written for his own purpose, they do not constitute a systematic account of his life story. The memoirs consist of descriptions of selected events and situations, and the results of his research into local history. Unlike other narratives discussed here, his contribution was not influenced by post-Soviet public discourses or any questions asked by researchers.

The second narrator was born in 1926 on the island of Saaremaa, the largest island of Estonia. He got a job in the mines of Kohtla-Järve in 1948, after completing his vocational training. As a young person, he endured many hardships that were visited on him and his family by political events (for example, being arrested together with his family on the eve of WW2 and serving on the 'wrong side' during the war), but in the parts describing his adult life he focusses on adapting to life under Soviet rule. The narrative is dated 1997 and was contributed to the archives in response to a collection project *My destiny and the destiny of those close to me in the labyrinths of history*. The author has offered a story full of adventures to readers, titled: *The life and adventures of a Saaremaa man* (EKLA f 350, 643).

The third narrator is a woman who was born in 1965 in Kohtla-Järve. She started her independent life away from her town of birth but returned in the 1990s. Her story was contributed in response to a call for contributions published by the

archives in 2001 (EKLA f 350, 1080). The theme of the collection campaign of 2001 was *My life and the life of my family in the Estonian SSR and the Estonian Republic*, which brings to the fore the correlation between different ‘times’. Since the narrator has no first-hand experience of the changes of the 1940s, an important but different aspect is raised, in which she reflects on her childhood and youth but always within the framework of the Soviet regime.

While the first contribution represents recollections of selected moments in the life of the narrator and texts on local history and the second narrative is an autobiographic adventure story, the third is built on the question raised by researchers: how to compare everyday life during and after the Soviet time. I will discuss the narratives through the following key terms: monument, relations between people, state border and the definition of ‘times’. Such a representation is based on the episodes extracted from the analysed life histories. For each key word, I will also refer to the discontinuity and continuity that relates to these descriptions.

Monument as a Symbol of Discontinuity and Continuity

The narrative of the person who was born at the beginning of the 20th century includes an episode in which the narrator describes the erection of a monument in Jõhvi,⁴ a small mining town in north-eastern Estonia, which was dedicated to fighters in the Estonian War of Independence.⁵ The motif of the destruction of monuments symbolising Estonia’s independence is one of the markers in the study by Ene Kõresaar that refers to the rhetoric of discontinuity (Kõresaar 2005: 86–91). The narrative introduces the author of the monument – a local sculptor. Then the narrator describes the monument depicting the battle of Narva, which occurred on the Estonian- Russian border. The battle between Estonian troops and the Red Army took place in December 1919 and was one of the most important battles of the War of Independence. The plaque was designed to depict soldiers forcing their way towards the east, i.e. towards Russia. During the process of casting, the image on the plaque was reversed: the troops were facing west, which greatly annoyed the participants of the War of Independence. The narrator writes that he tried to cheer up the sculptor: ‘[...] ah, don’t worry, it means that they are attacking the Landeswehr⁶’ (EKLA f 350, 289-I, p. 34). This illustrates Estonia’s position between east and west: on the one hand, a fight against the Soviets (in which the troops are facing east), and on the other hand, a centuries-old antagonism with the Baltic Germans who had a higher place in the social hierarchy (and where the rifles are pointing west).⁷

The narrator goes on to describe at length the maintenance works that were done in the town in connection with the construction of the monument and reflects on the differences between a rural community and a modern urban environment.



The town of Jõhvi and Jõhvi Church in 1924. Photo: ERM Fk 461:86.



Monument to the War of Independence in Jõhvi in the 1930s.
Photo: ERM Fk 2813:76.

Because the recollections not only include reflections on urban design (which is a politically neutral subject), but also the description of a symbol of independent Estonia – a monument dedicated to the War of Independence – it is quite logical that the subsequent description of the green area around the monument is presented in a political context:

Six years passed and when the Soviets came, the monument was demolished and the pieces taken away. When the Germans came, they gave permission to restore the monument. The stones were scratched and crumbling but the monument was in its place again. It remained in place for four years and then the Soviets returned and had the monument completely destroyed. (EKLA f 350, 289-I, p. 34).

The description of the monument's 'life' in the 1940s is typical in the context of Estonian life histories and studies into local history: the demolishing of something that existed, restoration, demolition, etc.⁸ The rhetoric is also important: the (Russians, Germans, the Soviet regime, etc.) 'came' or 'arrived', meaning that the rulers 'came' and 'left' but the place remained. I concluded from such descriptions that discontinuity is perceived with regard to politics rather than one's country/neighbourhood: '[...] life histories describe political changes as interruptions; any changes in the environment or neighbourhood refer to continuity in which changes (positive or negative) form a part of natural progress. This indicates that the environment is perceived in recollections as more stable compared with experiences caused by political changes' (Jaago 2011d: 108). The analysed text supports the hypothesis that Estonia is perceived as a whole in terms of both territory and mentality, irrespective of the instability of authorities and political situations.

What about 'discontinuity'? On one hand, the episode describing the fate of the monument provides an opportunity to interpret it as a story of discontinuity: the Soviet regime resulted in the destruction of national symbols. On the other hand, the narrative is about recurring events, which obscures discontinuity (i.e. the destruction of the monument). The narrator describes the development of events or situations in different political contexts rather than contrasting situations or authorities. Therefore, it is more about continuity than discontinuity. How can this phenomenon be explained? According to Juri Lotman, any events that have created discontinuity can be retrospectively interpreted as natural progress (Lotman 1992/2009: 16–17). In the above-mentioned memoirs, the story of the monument is presented as a series of chronological events, which creates an impression of continuity. This explanation is inferred from psychological studies into relations between autobiographical narrating (memory) and self-continuity. The physical environment is perceived as the same, even when the mental environment changes. It is based on continuous contact with the same albeit changing place that creates continuous closeness. Continuous contact and closeness in turn create the accumulation of experiences that are represented in narratives as a continuous experience (Bluck & Alea 2008: 56–57). In the present example, it refers to recol-

lections related to the monument from both the 1930s and 1940s – a period during which the political regime changed four times.

Change in Interpersonal Relationships as an Indicator of Political Changes

Besides environmental and political changes, the story about the monument represents the fates of the relevant local people. The narrator informs the reader that both the designer of the monument and the person who organised the construction had passed away before the regime changed, and therefore they both escaped the psychological or real punishment that the change of the regime would have brought upon them (EKLA f 350, 289-I, p. 34).

The fates of the people who entered the period of regime change are, in my opinion, represented by the narrator in the context of continuity. In his recollections of his school years, he tells about the fate of his religious education teacher: he was executed in the first year of Soviet rule. The narrator explains this as *'personal persecution at the beginning of Soviet rule'*. In the second part of his memoirs, he describes the death of the same man as the settling of accounts between local people. He does not have any proof but he uses the phrase: 'So they said' (EKLA f 350, 289-II, p. 28). Because the person concerned is quite well known to the Estonian public, it is easy to conclude (based on the information from biographical lexicons and from interviews with local people) that the recollections are not a witness statement. The narrator's admission 'so they said' means that the matter was discussed by people. The reason for this is probably that rather than recording a situation, he associated it with emotions and moral aspects (e.g. empathy, sense of justice), as well as with practical needs (how to behave when relations between people have changed). In his recollections, the discussion of a person's fate is more important than the event itself.

Established relationships continue irrespective of a change of power, even if the roles of people in society change. Changes in role start to shape the fates of relevant people. Therefore, his narrative is carried by the idea that the regime changes the (power) relations between people rather than acting against them as an independent force.

A similar approach to the effect of changing regimes on people's relationships is used in the second narrative. The author (a man born in 1926 on the island of Saaremaa) represents the course of events in two ways. On the one hand, he mentions that WW2 began on 1st September 1939. He adds, however, that most people were not conscious of the fact that a war had begun. On the other hand, he describes changes in everyday life as a series of separate events during a longer period. The signs of changes are either visual (red flags and banners) or changed relations between people (their roles in the community). This means that political changes were perceived at the level of everyday relations, not just by acknowledging overall historical events. Further information about this latter aspect is added

in the course of narrating by connecting his story with historical events. However, the more often everyday life is depicted in the context of historical events (for example, when attention is focused on the establishment of Soviet rule in Estonia), the further away the author moves from everyday experiences.⁹

When talking about a later period, during which the Soviet regime had already become commonplace, the narrator paints a different picture of relations between people. In a situation where everyday life was politicised, it was not clear what the real motives were of people who talked about life or listened to others. The narrator describes situations in which he felt he had to be cautious. For example, in a story about a Siberian Russian who had been a prisoner of war, and was subsequently imprisoned after the war by the Soviet authorities and sent to work in the mines of Kohtla-Järve:

I am guilty of surviving the [German] prison camp, [...] he swore using foul language as is common among the Russians. He said that there were many people like him working in the mines. It was dangerous to listen to his swearing. NKVD¹⁰ informers were everywhere and it was better to make a quick exit and not to listen to him. (EKLA f 350, 643, p. 68).

The narrator uses the expressions ‘informer’ whose stories were ‘dangerous to listen to’ and that ‘it was better to make a quick exit’ to escape those stories. At the same time, it is not clear what the real motive of telling those stories was. The narrator himself was also suspected of being an informer when he visited his brother abroad in 1966. His brother took him to the Estonian House in New York – a gathering place for the local Estonian community. The narrator’s brother warned him, and he noticed it himself, that he was suspected of being an agent of the Soviet authorities. For that reason, some people (including some of his childhood friends) were reluctant to talk to him (EKLA 350, 643, p. 75).

It appears that when describing the changes of political regime, the narrators focus on changes in human relations. The reason for the second narrator also using the theme of changing relationships when talking about a stable period is an extraordinary situation – a visit abroad during the Cold War. This means that the theme of relationships is shaped by the political framework.

It appears from the above that descriptions of human relations can be interpreted in the context of continuity. In the first story, established relationships continue after political changes, yet the actions arising from those relationships are coloured by the new political context (persecution that leads to killing). Again, the level of discontinuity or continuity is obvious in the representation and both aspects are closely intertwined in the narrated reality. According to Juri Lotman: ‘In reality, these represent two parts of a unified, integrated mechanism and its synchronic structure, and the aggression of one does not subdue but, rather, stimulates the development of the opposite tendency’ (Lotman 1992/2009: 12). The fact that the theme of human relations is brought to the fore in descriptions of general social life may, according to Lotman, refer to a situation of

discontinuity/continuity in real life. According to Lotman, a period of discontinuity is also characterised, besides a rapid development of events, by the role of an individual becoming more important (Lotman 1992/2009: 15). Therefore, in these stories continuity is achieved retrospectively by describing the past events as a continuous passing of time.

The Soviet Border as a ‘Discontinuity’

A separate theme in recollections of the Soviet time is that of ‘abroad’ (relatives living in the West, visits, tourism), where ‘abroad’ was behind the closely guarded state border. The border could only be crossed under the strict control of the authorities. This component was analysed in the third story told by a woman who was born in 1965. One of the advantages of the collapse of the Soviet Union was: ‘the borders are open now; I have seen most of Europe’ (EKLA f 350, 1080). As a remark, it should be mentioned that while 1991, for Estonians, was the year when the borders disappeared (as featured in the above narrative), in the life histories told by the Russians, the collapse of the Soviet Union is associated with the creation of borders (for example, ‘when we lived in the Soviet Union, we did not know what a ‘border’ or a ‘visa’ was’) (see Jaago 2011b: 100). Finding relatives and travelling abroad (as a tourist or by invitation) is one of the chapters in the stories about the Soviet time. People describe their anxiety (will I get permission to travel abroad?) and travel impressions. A separate theme is crossing the Soviet border and meeting Soviet border guards – stereotypical protectors of the regime. For example:

It was clear without words where we had arrived – border guards [...] looked so grim-faced as if they were meeting a planeload of enemies. [...] My suitcases were searched thoroughly and when nothing was found they asked where I had hidden it. [When the narrator asked what they were looking for, he was told that he was suspected of bringing pornographic literature into the country.] (EKLA f 350, 643, p. 80).

The Soviet border represents discontinuity in these stories: it prevented people entering the territory that was perceived as a natural part of their space of movement. It is characteristic that people were treated in their ‘own’ country as enemies who posed a threat to the Soviet regime. The same story describes the consequences of travelling abroad. For example, those who had been abroad were required to share their impressions with their colleagues. It was not strictly compulsory, yet recommended and people were expected to do so. Potential contacts with authorities who checked the mentality and attitudes of those who had been abroad were more complicated, and whether or not one was allowed abroad again depended on how they described their travel experience.

The Soviet time had already stabilised during the period of the events described. There is, however, a clearly distinguishable emergency situation. On the one hand, there is confrontation between the authorities and the individual (actual

contacts with representatives of the state authority); on the other hand, there is uncertainty as to where and why ‘borders’ emerge (for example, the control of attitudes and mentality at the level of everyday life).

Delineation of ‘Times’ as a Technique of Joining Discontinuities

The contributor who was born in 1965 cannot have had any first-hand recollections about the changes of the 1940s. Since she contributed her story as a response to the archives’ call for contributions, her narrative is not based on the development of events over time. In her story, she correlates memories of everyday life with a political framework. She offers episodes from her childhood – playing hide-and-seek in a maize field, boiling heads of maize in salty water and eating them together with friends. At the same time, she is connecting those everyday episodes with more general episodes of history that were put later into words: ‘It was the Khrushchev time when maize was cultivated everywhere, even in Estonia.’ For a person familiar with the Estonian cultural context, these are concrete hints about people’s attitudes towards the Soviet Union and towards what was taught at school. When we join three aspects – the narrator’s age (she was born in 1965), her childhood games in a maize field, and associating maize with the ‘Khrushchev time’ –, we can see a discrepancy. Nikita Khrushchev came to power after Stalin’s death in 1953. Although maize had been grown in Estonia since the middle of the 19th century, the widespread planting of maize is associated with Khrushchev’s agricultural policy (Kalling 2009). After Khrushchev was ousted from power in 1964, the compulsory cultivation of maize was abolished. The narrator was born a year after the ‘Khrushchev time’ had ended, yet she associates a field of maize with that exact party leader and head of state.

The line between the Soviet period and the period of independence is marked in her story by another marker that is quite widespread in life histories – a shortage of goods (‘deficit’). The permanent shortage of goods was characteristic of the Soviet time but an unknown phenomenon before and after: ‘The elections and public holidays were the greatest. Then you could buy goods that were in short supply and see a film free of charge. In the evening, there was a dance party’ (EKLA f 350, 1028, p. 1).

Ene Kõresaar has analysed the theme of ‘deficit’ as one of the most characteristic features of the life histories that describe the Soviet time. She has defined shortage as ‘a lack of and restrictions on goods and services’ (Kõresaar 2003: 111). In everyday life, shortage was associated with a lack of choice and long queues. The goods in short supply were foodstuffs and industrial goods, including household electronics, clothes and goods that were needed on special occasions (e.g. weddings and funerals) – none of these was freely available. Besides referring to the period-specific shortage of goods, the above episode is characterised on the one hand by conventionality and commonness (people met and had a party), and on the other hand put into a political context (elections, public holidays).

A more indirect line between the Soviet time and the times before and after is drawn by the descriptions of public urban space (maintenance, behaviour). The recollections include descriptions of both how green areas and parks were created in mining towns in the 1930s, and how they were destroyed in the 1940s and 1950s (Jaago 2004: 54–58; 2012: 27). The episode concerning a monument discussed a border between rural society and creating a modern urban space, including a description of the maintenance works done in the town in the 1930s. Together with the construction of the monument, the muddy and untidy square in front of the church that had been used to tie horses was redesigned and tidied up (EKLA f 350, 289–I, p. 34). The second story (narrated by a man born in 1926) includes recollections from the early years of the Soviet rule in Kohtla-Järve: ‘When our lorry stopped in the muddy central square of the town, the first thing we saw besides puddles was a man staggering out of a beer shop characteristic of the time’ (EKLA f 350, 643, p. 67).

The author of the third story (a woman born in 1965 in the mining region of Kohtla-Järve), also writes about alcohol problems, in both her own family and in public places. She also mentions the shabby beer shops that were characteristic of the time and stood out among other buildings (EKLA f 350: 1080, 3).

The analysis of the life stories reveals that the more unequivocally the narrator has described the line between the Soviet time and the time of independence, the more obvious the discontinuity is. Among the stories analysed above, this is most clear in the narrative of the woman born in 1965. She not only describes past events but also puts them in a political context (associating the game of hide-and-seek with Khrushchev) or, vice versa, refers to the commonness of political events (public holidays and elections as a pleasant opportunity to meet acquaintances and neighbours). A different method of delineating ‘times’ requires a comparison of contexts, where events and situations characterising a certain epoch in one story are supplemented by the stories of other narrators. A comparison of life stories also showed that discontinuity and continuity as methods of narrating are connected with other methods of telling a story: for example, a comparison may show discontinuity but when the events and situations are lined up, the result is continuity.

Summary

The life stories reveal the multilevel nature of the border, where from the point of the observer (or more precisely, the observer group), territorial aspects are associated with those of culture. The border approach that is characteristic for the group has evolved over a long period and covers both historical experiences and cultural self-descriptions. The Estonian experience refers to the variability of the state border (i.e. to the alternation of periods of national independence and foreign power). Cultural self-description supports the idea of the stability of borders

(Estonia as the home of the nation). Estonians experienced the Soviet Union however, without leaving Estonia. This historical situation gave rise to a question about the relation between the borders of Estonian territory, the borders of cultural space and state borders, concentrating on the key words of ‘discontinuity’ and ‘continuity’.

This article was triggered by an observation that the life histories contributed in the 1990s and 2000s represent controversial views: in some, memories about the 1940s are represented as discontinuity, and in others as continuity. Acknowledging that discontinuity is more associated with political situations, and continuity associated with aspects common to humanity and with descriptions of the home environment, I have analysed and compared three life histories from the same region. The narratives were selected from the collection of Estonian Life Histories (the Estonian Cultural History Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum, Tartu). The narrators belong to different generations and their stories were told at different times and under different circumstances. My objective was to examine which factors referred to discontinuity and which factors referred to continuity, while the general topic is the variability of state borders and the exchange of power in Estonia.

The analysis indicated that discontinuity and continuity can be seen initially at the level of events, periods and situations; then at the level of the method of narration (an adventure story, a study, a story built on comparison); and lastly from the perspective of the researcher (how does the researcher contextualise the analysed texts).

In real life, the interrupting aspects and the aspects creating consistency in life occur simultaneously, and narrators can highlight both aspects in their recollections. If a narrator creates a consistent picture of the past, continuity is brought to the fore. Such a description is supported by the integrity of the narrator’s image of self, and his/her self-continuity. If the narrator lived in the same physical environment and experienced changes in the same neighbourhood (place), these fuse into layers of experiences and memories. Such layers create a picture in the mind of a reader (listener) of a place that is constantly changing but yet still remains the same. If the narrator emphasises differences, by contrasting and comparing, he/she creates an impression of discontinuity. For example, those narrators who had first-hand experience of the events tended to describe more everyday life and human relations. However, the narrator who did not have first-hand experience of the events of the 1940s, uses the scheme proposed by researchers (putting her recollections into a political context).

Is it possible to draw conclusions about the continuity or discontinuity of a situation (period or series of events) from recollections of the past presented as continuity or discontinuity? An indicator could be the way that narrators have described rapid changes and the new (unfamiliar) development of events. We can assume that the period (or the part describing the period) was perceived as discon-

tinuity. The same happens when the narrator describes the increasing importance of human relations at a community level, especially when political changes gave certain members of the community the power to shape the fate of others.

Whether it is discontinuity or continuity that is brought to the fore depends on the researcher's choice. What is important in the examples presented in this article is the connection between events described in life histories and the topics discussed at the same time in public (and especially in politics). Certain topics are not important for the public (such as gossip) and therefore the researcher is not able to connect the topics with each other in the process of recollection. When certain research findings are accepted as undisputable however, there is a risk that memories are schematised. For example, if an analysis is based on the interrelation between public discussions and the method of narrating, ignoring other methods that seem less important (for example, human relations compared to political opinions) or unreliable commentary (such as the rumours and urban legends about sausage factories using human flesh) in the context of public discourse. When studying memories and life histories, it is thus important to bear in mind that although the narrator's approach to the border can be attributed to a general historical and ideological background, the representations of the past may vary significantly.

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Notes

- ¹ The ways in which Estonian culture, territory and state borders are put on the subjective map of Estonian narrators and those who immigrated to Estonia during the Soviet time do not overlap. For example, autobiographical texts contributed by Russian-speaking narrators to the collection of Estonian Life Histories (EKLA f 350) indicate that the authors identify themselves with two places and the togetherness of the republics of the Soviet Union has an important role in their stories. One of the most extreme examples is the life history submitted by a woman who was born in 1935. She has titled her autobiography '*We lived in the Soviet Un-*

- ion' and her description of events and situations is based on Soviet identity (EKLA f 350v, 33). Even if the Russophone authors define Estonia in their narratives as an independent entity, it is seen as a country that 'emerged' in 1991 as a result of events that subjectively altered the world map (borders were drawn where they should not be) and led to problems related to citizenship. Estonian culture and territory are not associated with each other in those stories. Estonia is either a concrete place of residence in Valga, Kohtla-Järve or elsewhere (a level lower than the country) or one of the republics of the Soviet Union, a region in the European Union or in the historical 'Baltics' (a level higher than the country) (Jaago 2011a: 146–147).
- ² In treatments of history, political relations between Estonia and the Soviet Union are described using precise timelines, e.g. 'When Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union on 17 June 1940 and incorporated in the Union on 6 August 1940, the border between Estonia and Russia was not altered.' (Nutt 2010: 77). In memories and life histories, 'the 1940s' is a metaphorical expression and embraces several aspects of the relationship between Estonia and the Soviet Union (including war and the post-war period, repressions, the creation of kolhozes, etc.).
- ³ The texts from Kohtla-Järve, an industrial town in north-eastern Estonia, were selected in connection with my more extensive study of the narrative traditions of the region. This article forms a part of my study on Kohtla-Järve within the project 'Writing Cultures and Traditions at Borders': *Kohtla-Järve as a multicultural environment in the context of place identity and interpreting the past* (Jaago 2011b), and on multiculturalism at community and family levels (Jaago 2011c and Jaago 2012, respectively).
- ⁴ The neighbouring towns of Kohtla-Järve (granted town status in 1946) and Jõhvi (granted town status in 1938) are located in north-eastern Estonia, about 50 km from the border between Estonia and Russia (following the Narva River). Jõhvi was a district of Kohtla-Järve during the Soviet period. North-eastern settlements (including Kohtla, Järve, and Jõhvi) are first mentioned in written records (*Liber Census Daniae*) in the 1240s (Johansen 1933: 938–941). While Kohtla-Järve was created by merging surrounding villages into a single mining and industrial town, Jõhvi is a historical parish centre. Therefore, *Kohtla-Järve* is more controversial in people's recollections: historically, it was a rural region with a lifestyle characteristic of a village society. Mining and industrial landscapes, together with town houses and a lifestyle characteristic of an industrial town began to emerge gradually in the 1920s. In the second part of the 20th century, Soviet architecture, multilingualism and a multicultural environment started to prevail. The historical parish centre of Jõhvi on the other hand, has been represented as an urban environment.
- ⁵ The Estonian War of Independence (28 November 1918 - 2 January 1920) was a defensive campaign of the Estonian Army and its allies against the Soviet Western Front offensive and the aggression of the *Baltische Landeswehr* (local Baltic German forces).
- ⁶ *Baltische Landeswehr* (in Estonian: Landesveer) – The Baltic land defence was established by the Baltic Germans in 1918 in Latvia with the approval of the German occupation forces in order to fight Russian Bolsheviks. The Estonians fought the Landeswehr on their southern border, not in Narva, which is located on the eastern border.
- ⁷ In the second half of the 20th century it was the Soviet regime and the Soviet Union (which imposed and represented it) – that were considered to be 'alien'. In the 19th century and in the early 20th century however, the 'aliens' were our social neighbours, such as the Baltic Germans and clerics who were a power in the land (Kruus 2005: 67–87). This aspect comes forward in connection with another recollection by the same author – a conflict between a pro-German teacher and Estonian students in an upper secondary school in the late 1920s (EKLA f 350, 289-I, p. 6–9).

- ⁸ The monument was inaugurated on 10 July 1935; it was demolished by local communists and Red Army mine specialists on 25 October 1940; restored from fragments on 16 August 1942; completely destroyed in 1945; restored and re-inaugurated on 23 June 1993 (Lehtmets 2004: 68–69).
- ⁹ It is also important that at the level of everyday life, Soviet rule was not established in Estonia on a concrete date that can be found in the calendar. It is associated with a treaty of mutual assistance signed between Soviet Russia and Estonia in September 1939, and the establishment of Soviet military bases on the territory of the Republic of Estonia. Local people felt the presence of a foreign power and witnessed the Red Army's attacks on Finland during the Winter War (e.g. EKLA f 350, 921). In larger towns, people witnessed the communist coup d'état on 21 June 1940 (e.g. EKLA f 350, 479). The arrests and mass deportations of people in June 1941 concerned close family and are, therefore, more closely associated with the establishment of Soviet rule.
- ¹⁰ The NKVD (acronym for the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs) was the national and internal security authority of the Soviet Union (responsible for the maintenance of law and order, supervision of people's political views, intelligence activities, prisons, and the running of forced labour camps).

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