



Working

**RESISTING HEGEMONY: TRANSFORMATIONS OF  
NATIONAL IDENTITY UNDER FOREIGN OCCUPATION**

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**RESISTING HEGEMONY: TRANSFORMATIONS OF NATIONAL  
IDENTITY UNDER FOREIGN OCCUPATION\***

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## **ABSTRACT**

How does the content of national identity change under foreign occupation? Using historical sources and analysis of Estonian nationalist discourse in the late Soviet period, this article demonstrates how and why Estonians built identity boundaries to delegitimize Soviet occupation. Adapting the content of their national identity in order to emphasize that “we” are the opposite of “them,” Estonians adopted attributes of their own identity formed in dialectic opposition to perceived Russian attributes. However, not all “others” are equal: under occupation, identity development is oriented in opposition to the negative “other” rather than positive “others” toward which the occupied might aspire.

## **RESUMEN**

Como cambia el contenido de la identidad nacional bajo una ocupación extranjera? Usando fuentes históricas y un análisis del discurso nacionalista estonio en el período soviético tardío, este artículo demuestra cómo y por qué los estonios construyeron límites identitarios para deslegitimar la ocupación soviética. Adaptando el contenido de su identidad nacional a fin de enfatizar que “nosotros” somos lo opuesto a “ellos,” los estonios adoptaron atributos de su propia identidad formados en oposición dialéctica a los atributos percibidos como rusos. No obstante, no todos los “otros” son iguales: bajo la ocupación, el desarrollo de la identidad se orienta más en oposición al “otro” negativo que a “otros” positivos a los que la población ocupada puede aspirar.

## INTRODUCTION

The role that nationalism played in bringing about the destruction of the Soviet Union—Lenin’s empire of national republics—is now well known (Suny 1993; Beissinger 2002). The outburst of nationalist sentiments, especially in the Baltic Republics of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, were a reflection of profound forces at work within Soviet society and the individuals therein. As Anatol Lieven writes of the period, “no-one, Balt or non-Balt, who witnessed the great pro-independence demonstrations of 1988–1991 will forget them or the tremendous emotional impact they had: the songs, the tears, the sense of relief as people were able to say in public things which for years they had been scared even to whisper in private” (Lieven 1993, 219). While the scholarship on national identity formation is vast and reflects an appreciation of the incredible motivating power that nationalism wields, scholars have devoted less attention to the general question of the circumstances under which the content of national identity changes, particularly when under foreign occupation. Do the attributes of a certain national identity change when the nationality is repressed for so long, and if so, how does it change? Looking at those dramatic demonstrations in the Baltic republics in the late 1980s and early 1990s suggests that the identities of the Baltic peoples were deeply affected by the Soviet occupation. The purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretically informed empirical exploration of the effect that Soviet occupation had in shaping and changing the content of Estonian national identity.

## CONTENT AND CHANGE IN NATIONAL IDENTITY

This article explores how the content of national identity—the collective attributes that members of the nation use to describe and understand themselves—changes when that identity comes into contact with an external hegemonic identity. Anthony Smith defines national identity as consisting of “1.) ...myths and memories of common ancestry and history of the cultural unit of population... 2.) the formation of a shared public culture based on an indigenous resource (language, religion, etc.)... 3.) the delimitation of a compact historic territory, or homeland” (A. D. Smith 1994, 381).<sup>1</sup> It is these myths, historical memories, public culture, and ties to a historic homeland that constitute the attributes of national identity; these attributes define what it means to be a member of a nation. While many scholars have explained how national identification

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<sup>1</sup> Also see A. D. Smith (1992).

arises, fewer have given attention to the dynamic transformation of identity in counter-reaction to an external stimulus (such as foreign occupation).

Michael Hechter discusses state-building nationalism: the nationalism “embodied in the attempt to assimilate or incorporate culturally distinctive territories in a given state. It is the result of the conscious efforts of central rulers to make a multicultural population culturally homogenous” (Hechter 2000, 15). This type of nationalism, Hechter argues, has given birth to several other types of nationalism in response to the centralized homogenizing version carried out by the state. Important among these second-generation nationalisms is “peripheral nationalism,” which “seeks to bring about national self-determination by separating the nation from its host state” (Hechter 2000, 70). But what happens to the content of the peripheral nation’s identity as it struggles against the central nationality? Gellner’s (1983) classic offers a clue. In describing his fictitious peripheral nationality, Gellner writes that “the Ruritanian nation was born of [the] contrast” between their culture and that of the Megalomanian, and this contrast “taught them to be aware of their culture, and to love it” (Gellner 1983, 58–62).

A burgeoning literature has emerged that devotes greater attention to the role of the “other” in nationalism. In fact, as Triandafyllidou (1998) notes, many classics of the nationalism literature assume the existence and opposition of the “other” without engaging the dynamics of interaction between the nation and the “other” in great depth. The discussions above of Gellner (1983) and Hechter (2000) suggest this to be the case, but examples can also be found in such works as A. D. Smith (1981, 1986, 1993), Deutsch (1953), Greenfeld (1992), and others. More recently, several scholars have addressed more directly the role that the “other” plays in identity processes (Neumann and Welsh 1991; Eriksen 1992; Billig 1995; Therborn 1995; Duara 1996; A. D. Smith 1998; Reicher and Hopkins 2001). Several authors have sought to disaggregate, define, and classify various “others,” identifying *present aliens, past aliens, and notional aliens* (Hobsbawm 1992), *internal and external significant others* (Triandafyllidou 1998), *historical and generalized others* (Sampson 1993), *potential others and hidden others* (Duara 1996), *real or imagined essential others* (Zukier 1996), and *positive and negative others, both internal and external* (Petersoo 2007).

These works have advanced our understanding of the role of the “other” in nationalism in important ways. However, many of them have focused more on the construction, definition, and classification of “the other.” Similarly, they have explored the conditions that cause particular

others to become salient and how otherness has been constructed by the identity in-group. Less attention has been given, both theoretically and empirically, to how the interaction with the other defines the identity of the self.<sup>2</sup> Hopf (2002) does consider the “situation wherein the Self regards the Other as its negation, its opposite.” Suggesting the dynamics between the Estonian self and the Russian other that I explore in this article, he notes that “this particular rendition of identity relations is associated with critical theorists, who argue that ‘dichotomies are exercises in power’” (9).

### **Toward a Theory of National Identity Transformation**

Building on these previous works, I offer a theoretical account and empirical examination of how one type of other—an external occupier—can lead to a transformation of the attributes used by occupied nations to describe and understand themselves. I call the theory I propose the “anti-hegemonic theory of national identity.” In this theory, a nationality with an already-established national identity comes under political control by a foreign entity. Central to the theory is the fact that the foreign hegemon is not the same nationality as the occupied nation; there must be some basis of identity differentiation between the two populations. Unless there is considerable autonomy granted to the occupied nation, Hechter’s “peripheral nationalism” will result: The occupied nationality will struggle against the hegemon in various realms (political, economic, cultural, etc.).<sup>3</sup> As a form of resistance the occupied nation will seek to differentiate itself as much as possible from the hegemon by building new boundaries between national identities and by reinforcing existing boundaries. The people of the occupied nation will establish a sharp dichotomization between themselves and the hegemon across multiple attributes of national identity in an attempt to maximize the cultural distance between “us” and “them.” This is done to highlight and increase the illegitimacy of the hegemon’s occupation. More importantly, it is also a mechanism to ensure the survival of the occupied nationality in the face of possible efforts at forced assimilation by the hegemon. By maintaining a difference between us and them, the occupied nation ensures that “we” continue to exist. In the face of forced assimilation, the

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<sup>2</sup> One important exception is Triandafyllidou (1998), whose main focus is definition and classification of “others” but who briefly explores certain transformations of identity in interaction with the “other.” However, her account of Greek nationalism emphasizes the appropriation of ancient historical myths rather than the actual attributes or “descriptors” of identity that may arise during interaction with the “other.”

<sup>3</sup> At this point we might ask why some cultural groups engage in anti-hegemonic behavior while others do not, as in Laitin’s (1986) original model of culture and hegemony. For a compelling answer, see Darden (forthcoming 2014) and Darden and Grzymala-Busse (2006). The question is also discussed in greater detail in Person (2010).

occupied nationality will only push back harder to resist the melting of boundaries between the two groups.

Throughout the protracted struggle over identity, the occupied people will reinforce existing boundaries between their own identity and the identity of the hegemon. Thus, if the occupied nation has an existing reputation as being an industrious, hard-working people, they will emphasize this aspect of their national identity while contrasting it with an image of the hegemon as lazy and backward. Existing attributes of national identity can take on greater significance as a result of the cultural resistance described above. Similarly, the occupied nation can find new attributes of identity upon which to establish a dichotomy between themselves and the hegemon. Taking Gellner's classic (1983) example, perhaps the Ruritians never before spoke of themselves as Europeans, but during their occupation by Megalomania (which is rather non-European) they use their geographically ambiguous position between Megalomania and Europe to define yet another distinguishing attribute of their identity: Ruritians are Europeans, Megalomanians are not.

Using the two examples just provided above—emphasizing existing dichotomies and creating new ones—one should observe two significant transformations of identity within the occupied nation: the work ethic has become more important and “European-ness” has been created as a significant attribute. This process is precisely the shift in collective identity content that I seek to explain and observe. Over the course of the occupation the content of what it means to be a member of the nation has been altered in opposition to the identity of the hegemon. Note that the process is largely internal to the occupied nationality: it matters neither how the hegemon perceives the occupied nationality nor how the hegemon perceives itself. What matters for the theory is how the occupied nation perceives itself and how it perceives the hegemon. It is the intersection of these two factors that results in shifts in national identity along the lines described above; it is at this intersection that identities change.

In the case at hand, it is clear that the occupied nation of interest is Estonia. But who is the hegemon? Because there was never a “Soviet” nationality, despite Moscow's efforts to create Soviet patriotism, this is not a straightforward case of pitting one nationality against another. At the same time, a survey of Estonian nationalist rhetoric reveals that the terms “Soviet” and “Russian” are used almost interchangeably by Estonians.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it would appear that Estonians

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<sup>4</sup> See Lauristin (1997, 247).



during the Soviet era made little distinction between that which was Soviet and that which was Russian—“Soviet” and “Russian” were different words for the same foreign occupier. This idea of a blending of Russian and Soviet identity is one that was common during the Soviet era, and not just for the peripheral regions of the empire (Virkkunen 1999, 84). Under Stalin the construction of a new Soviet historical narrative began, one that placed Russian state-building throughout history at the center of the narrative. The Soviet state reached into the pantheon of pre-Soviet Russian heroes for symbols of its statehood, cementing the ties between the Soviet regime and the Russian historical and cultural tradition.

In order to test the theory, it will first be necessary to map out the content of Estonian national identity prior to the Soviet occupation. This “content,” which consists of the constructed attributes of national identity shared by the national group (myths, historical memories, public culture, etc.), will serve as a baseline for comparison when I examine Estonian national identity during the late Soviet period. Under the theory I expect discussions of national identity to emphasize the divide between Soviet/Russian and Estonian identity attributes. As such, I would expect discussions of Estonian national identity to refer frequently to the Soviet hegemon, framing the discussion in terms of a dichotomy between attributes of Estonians and attributes of Russians. Furthermore, I expect the actual content of national identity—the specific myths, historical memories, and cultural attributes that are addressed during discussions of Estonian national identity—to differ from the content of the pre-Soviet identity. National attributes that existed prior to 1940 will be given added emphasis, and new categories of differentiation will emerge in an effort to set the Estonians apart from their Soviet occupiers. Thus, I expect that the self-understanding of Estonians will change between 1940 and 1991, largely in oppositional reference to the Soviet Union.

### **HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ESTONIAN NATIONAL IDENTITY**

How does one observe the attributes of Estonian national identity held by members of the Estonian nation prior to 1940? The endeavor is somewhat difficult for a variety of reasons. First, since Estonia is one of the smallest European nations, documentation relating to identity is scarce—there is simply little source material available. An even smaller amount of material is available outside the Estonian language, limiting access for non-Estonian speakers to primary

sources through which attributes of national identity might be observed. As such, I must rely on secondary sources discussing Estonian history and culture in order to get an idea of what aspects of national identity were salient before Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union. Though these aspects of identity cannot be measured quantitatively, historical sources can suggest which attributes were defining aspects of Estonian identity.

### **Exploring Pre-Soviet Estonian National Identity**

By most accounts, the seeds of Estonia's "national awakening" began to germinate in the early decades of the nineteenth century, although it wasn't until the 1850s and 1860s that these seeds of nationalism began to sprout and grow. Raun writes, "The appearance of the first Estonian intellectuals can be dated from the end of the second decade of the nineteenth century, but it was another twenty years before they began to play a leading role in Estonian culture.... [T]he working language of all educated persons was German, and Estonian remained an underdeveloped instrument for communication. However, the crucial distinction is that some intellectuals of Estonian origin now began publicly to declare themselves to be Estonians" (Raun 2001, 56). Raun goes on to conclude that the term "national awakening" accurately describes the period from the early 1860s to the mid-1880s, this being "a period of conscious agitation by a growing number of activists who sought to convince others of the merits of a modern Estonian nation and culture" (Raun 2001, 57). Hroch, whose work deals heavily with the timing of nationalist movements, concurs: he concludes that by the 1880s phase B (the period of patriotic agitation and national revival) in Estonia was already concluded and phase C, the mass phase of nationalism, had already begun (Hroch 2000, 23–25, 76–77).

As Robert Kaiser notes, "a minimal level of social mobilization appears to be a necessary precondition for nationalization to become mass-based" (Kaiser 1994, 66). Kaiser's extensive statistics on the Baltic region of the Russian empire at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries demonstrate that Estonia was characterized by such a level of social mobilization. For example, the Baltic region was the most urbanized of the Russian empire (excluding the capitals) with 25.7 percent of the population residing in cities in 1897 and 33.1 percent in 1914. Equally important is the fact that the Baltic cities were becoming increasingly indigenous: Estonians constituted 52 percent of Tallin's population in 1871 and by 1913 this number had risen to 72 percent (Kaiser 1994, 62, 65). Thus the cities gradually became

concentrated centers of the Estonian population, providing rich soil for the growth of nationalism. Additionally, the Baltic region was characterized by the highest literacy rates in the Russian empire, even surpassing the imperial capitals of Moscow and St. Petersburg. According to the 1897 census, 91 percent of Baltic residents were literate (Kaiser 1994, 69). Furthermore, the Baltic provinces had among the highest level of educational attainment in the empire, with 390.8 students per 1,000 people aged 10–19 in 1911. As such, mass education and communication became possible, making the spread of nationalist ideas and identification easier (Anderson 1983; Darden forthcoming 2014). The result of the social mobilization arising from high urbanization, literacy, and education was that the Baltic people were well suited to take on a nationalist outlook by the start of the twentieth century, an outlook that was lacking in the rest of the empire where identity was still based at the local level (Kaiser 1994, 75).

What composed the content of Estonian national identity in the early twentieth century before Estonia was annexed by the Soviet Union? Perhaps the deepest seated and longest running theme in Estonian national identity at the time was the contentious relationship between Estonians and the Baltic Germans who made up the ruling elite of Estonia both before and after Estonia's incorporation in the Russian empire in 1710. This Baltic German elite was descended from German crusaders who conquered the Baltic region and enserfed the peasantry in the thirteenth century and from the immigrant German merchants who had arrived in the region during the same period (Raun 2001, 15–23; Raun 2003). Prior to the national awakening of the 1860s, to become educated meant becoming Germanized since the entire upper strata was shaped by the German cultural world (Raun 2003, 134). Thus, the Estonian national awakening and cultural revival begun in the nineteenth century necessarily meant that the elevation of Estonian culture to elite status would create tension with the German elite. Given this situation, it is no wonder that the earliest signs of Estonian national identity and cultural expression opposed the hegemony of German culture. In a notable speech delivered in 1868 in Tartu, the Estonian nationalist leader Carl Robert Jakobson tellingly divided Estonian history into three periods: light, pre-German conquest; darkness, Baltic German rule and hegemony; and dawn, the present (Raun 2003, 141). This depiction of Estonian identity in reference to German rule manifested itself in literary culture as well, where the most popular genre in the 1880s consisted of romanticized historical novels depicting the Estonian struggle against the German invaders. This suggests that one of the earliest and most significant struggles for Estonian national identity took

place in opposition to German domination, much as the delimitation of Estonian national identity in the late twentieth century took place in opposition to Soviet domination. As such, I suggest that being opposed to German culture was itself an important attribute of Estonian national identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Closely tied to the opposition to German hegemony was the role religion played in Estonian national identity. According to the 1925 census, 78 percent of Estonians were Lutheran (Hope 1994, 45). Nevertheless, a Lutheran religious heritage failed to become an integral part of Estonian national identity. Jakobson, like many Estonian nationalists, considered the Lutheran church to be an institution that buttressed the cultural domination of the Germans (Hope 1994, 65). While some scholars have credited Estonia's high literacy rates to the Lutheran religious tradition, the close association of the Lutheran church with the Baltic Germans was too strong to allow for the integration of Lutheranism as an attribute of national identity for Estonians (Raun 2003, 130, 42). The Baltic Germans dominated the Lutheran church just as they dominated other aspects of Baltic life, making the church an alien institution brought to the Estonians "through fire and sword" by the Germans (Johnston 1993, 245; Raun 2003, 142). What is interesting is the fact that Estonians were practicing Lutherans while rejecting Lutheranism as a native institution. They did in fact decisively reject Lutheranism as a component of national identity, and by 1881 there was "little question that Jakobson's anti-German position had succeeded in winning over the great majority of Estonian public opinion" (Raun 2001, 65).

What is interesting is the lack of reference to Russia, despite the fact that Estonia at this time was part of the Russian empire. Raun writes, "during the 1870s and before the onset of any serious attempts at cultural Russification, the Estonian view of the tsarist government and of Russians remained distinctly positive" (Raun 2003, 135). In fact, leading Estonian nationalists, including Jakobson, actively sought the aid of the Tsar and the Russian authorities in the struggle against the Baltic Germans. Russia was an ally of the Estonians as they sought to fight the cultural hegemony of the Germans; early stages of Russification were supported by Estonian intellectuals because they were initially aimed against the Germans. The combination of minimal cultural Russification plus the absence of a large Russian population in the Baltic provinces kept the focus on the Germans as "the other," not the Russians. As of 1880, the Germans were the effective rulers of Estonia, with the Imperial government ruling through the German elites.

This state of harmony between Estonians and the Russian empire came to a quick ending in the 1880s as the government of Alexander III began an intensive campaign of political and cultural Russification in the Baltic provinces. White notes that Russification became one of the government's principal social policies of the time, and it was aimed at the full integration of the Baltic provinces into the Empire, restructuring the local administration, judiciary, and education system on the Russian model (White 1994, 19). As several scholars have asserted, this drive at the Russification of Estonia was a complete failure. Most authors agree that the policy failed because by the time Russification began the Estonian national identity was already too strongly developed (Kaiser 1994, 139). Thus the policy of Russification was not one in which a local identity was replaced by a Russian identity; rather, the Estonian national identity was to be replaced by a Russocentric identity. As would be predicted by the anti-hegemonic theory of national identity, the Russification campaign only served to promote Estonian national consolidation and solidify national awareness among the newly nationalized masses (Raun 2003, 139; Suny 1993, 54). Kaiser writes the following: "Russification, a policy of forced acculturation pursued most intensely in areas where the indigenous nationalization process had proceeded furthest, was almost certain to produce a strong nationalistic reaction... Russification was a centrist policy that had the unintended consequence of helping both to crystalize national self-consciousness and to activate a national territoriality that was anti-Russian and increasingly anti-Empire" (Kaiser 1994, 139).

In response to cultural Russification, Estonian language and education became an important aspect of national identity. Raun writes, "for a people small in numbers, language is typically a key factor [in national identity] since it clearly divides the nation from other and helps legitimize its existence" (Raun 2003, 140). Nationalist leaders such as Jakob Hurt frequently emphasized the uniqueness and importance of the Estonian language, especially in the face of larger, more dominant languages and cultures like German and Russian. The importance given to the Estonian language was reflected in rising numbers of books published in Estonian: an annual average of 148 books were published in the 1880s, rising to an average of 254 per year in the 1890s. Despite imperial censorship, Estonian newspapers reached more people than ever. The first Estonian daily, *Postimees*, appeared in 1891 and was extremely popular. Thus there was a concerted effort to protect and spread the Estonian language precisely because it was a cornerstone of the small people's identity.

The development of a uniquely Estonian national culture was also an important component of the nationalist project. The cultural realm was important to nationalists because the Estonians were a small people and culture was the one area in which they could achieve some level of prominence (Raun 2003, 140). Estonia's efforts at cultural development were reflected in the establishment in the late nineteenth century of an Estonian Alexander School Society<sup>5</sup>, the Society of Estonian Literati, and national song festivals. These song festivals, first held in 1869, became an important expression of Estonian culture and national identity. Six song festivals took place between 1879 and 1919 at uneven intervals, with festivals subsequently occurring at regular five-year intervals through the independent (interwar) period beginning with the 1923 festival (Vesilind 2008, 33). Interestingly, the song festivals were also allowed during the Soviet era, though the performances generally followed Moscow's cultural prescription of "national in form, socialist in content" (Raun 2001, 188). Songs performed at the festivals were expressions of national culture, and like most cultural forms of the time (literature, music, art) they expressed a nationalist romantic tone idealizing the Estonian people (Raun 2001, 59). The song festivals were truly a mass phenomenon as well, uniting the Estonians as a people: in 1894 the audience numbered 50,000, while the 1938 festival boasted an incredible 17,500 performers and 100,000 attendees (Raun 2001, 76, 137).

On the question of myths, one important aspect of Estonian identity was the myth of common ancestry: "Following the German conquest of the thirteenth century the native elites either became assimilated or declassed, and the Estonian-speaking population was relegated to the status of an underclass, mainly in the countryside and to some extent in the towns. This situation encouraged a myth of consanguinity, which Hurt, for example, viewed as typical of any nation along with common physical and mental characteristics" (Raun 2003, 141). This myth of the Estonian people as being of common descent and tied together through blood constituted a strong and salient attribute of national identity. Not only did this conception encourage a differentiation between Estonians and Germans and later between Estonians and Russians, it also provided a basis for future post-Soviet calls for "Estonia for the Estonians."

Up to this point, the discussion of Estonian national identity has focused largely on the cultural realm, with little reference to political aspects of national identity. This omission is not

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<sup>5</sup> The Estonian Alexander School movement of the 1860s–70s, ironically named after Tsar Alexander II, was a precursor to the St. Petersburg Estonian School Society founded in 1885. The purpose of both organizations was to support the establishment of Estonian language schools (Duke 2000, 362–3).

accidental and reflects the development of Estonian identity itself. For much of the late 1880s the debate over political control in Estonia was subsumed in the struggle between the Baltic Germans and the Estonians. As such, expressions of political nationalism called not for autonomy or independence from the Russian empire but rather for the removal of Baltic Germans from positions of power. In fact, demands for political autonomy in Estonia did not emerge in any significant respect until the Revolution of 1905. This can be traced to the late development of antagonism between Estonians and the Russian empire, as well as to the utter imbalance of power between the two entities: it was simply impossible for Estonians to imagine succeeding in a political struggle with Petersburg. Only within the context of the empire-wide reforms of 1905 was it possible for Estonians to express and push for political autonomy in addition to cultural autonomy. It was not until the radical redrawing of Europe's borders following the First World War that Estonians were able to realize their goal of independence.

### **Independent Estonia**

Though Estonian independence could not have been achieved without the collapse of the Russian and German empires following the First World War, this does not mean that independence came easily or without high costs to the Estonian nation. From 1918 to 1920 Estonia fought a war of independence against alternating occupying forces of Germany and Soviet Russia. Peace and independence would not be secured until the Tartu Peace Treaty was signed between Estonia and Russia in February 1920 (Kasekamp 2000, 4–12). The blood shed by Estonia's soldiers gave the veterans of the War of Independence significant moral authority during the independent period. This moral authority, captured by the *vabasussõja vaim* (War of Independence spirit), was translated into political power by the Veterans' League political movement. As Kasekamp notes, "the idea and myth embodied by the War of Independence—solidarity, fraternity, and self sacrifice—was central to the project of nation-building" (Kasekamp 2000, 64). This hard-fought struggle for independence and its influence on Estonian identity helps explain why (as will be shown below) the Soviet occupation became a central focus of oppositional nationalism throughout the Soviet period.

With the removal of Russian and Baltic German hegemony during the independent era, many of the cultural aspects of national identity development in Estonia turned inward where they focused on the continuing development of Estonian language, publication, and education

(Taagepera 1993, 52). Hope details the “massive expansion of free primary schools: in 1927 there were 1,398 of them.... An extensive network of public libraries and well-organized archives also constituted one of the notable achievements of independent Estonia. In 1927, there were 818 public libraries, in contrast to none before independence” (Hope 1994, 53). Tartu University was reorganized as an Estonian-language university in 1919, and a second institution of higher education, the Tallinn Technical Institute, was founded in 1918 (Raun 2001, 134–35).

Independence also brought about a shift in focus away from the “negative others” that had been the focus of Estonian nationalism prior to independence—Russia and the Baltic Germans<sup>6</sup>—and toward the “positive others” of Western Europe. Strong cultural ties were developed between Estonia and countries such as Sweden, France, and Great Britain during the independence era as the pressure relieved by the removal of the hegemonic “others” allowed the Estonian cultural movement to turn *toward* more benevolent “others” rather than simply reacting against the hegemon (Laar 2006, 141; Laur et al. 2000, 248). As will be noted in the conclusion, this situation—the removal of hegemonic “negative others” allowing greater room for “positive others” to play a role in national identity development—mirrors dynamics of the late twentieth century once the Soviet occupation was ended.

With the establishment of the Estonian Republic in 1920, Estonia was also finally able to create its own political culture and political identity independent of Russian or Baltic German rulers. If the constitution of 1920 is an indication of the political culture that the Estonians were trying to create, it would appear that Estonians saw their future as a democratic nation. While the appearance of democracy in Estonia happened abruptly, democracy was embraced by the founders of the Republic who based their constitution on models provided by the Weimar, Swiss, French, and US constitutions. The seeds of democratic culture were planted in 1920 and managed to grow during the next 14 years, but Estonia’s democratic system was not strong enough to survive the worldwide depression of the 1930s, which brought dictatorships to power across Europe. Estonia too succumbed to the wave of authoritarianism, and while the authoritarian regime under Konstantin Päts was not fascist, it is a fact that Estonia spent its last six years of independence under dictatorship. This makes it hard to argue that a democratic political culture

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<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that the cultural hegemony of the Baltic Germans was forgotten overnight once independence was achieved. For example, Estonia’s Victory Day, established in 1934, commemorates the June 23, 1919, victory in which Estonian troops allied with Latvian forces to defeat the German military forces occupying Latvia. As Kasekamp (2000) writes, “the victory over those perceived as their oppressors of seven centuries had great symbolic significance for the Estonians” (11).



was an integral aspect of Estonian national identity by 1940. However, the idea of Estonians as a democratic people had been planted in 1920, making it possible for future generations of Estonian nationalists to emphasize the democratic period of Estonia's history in their struggle against their authoritarian oppressor.

This concludes the analysis of the components of Estonian national identity during the period ranging from the national awakening in the 1860s to the occupation by the Soviet Union in 1940. To summarize, the early development of Estonian national identity was defined in opposition to the Baltic Germans. Thus, struggle against German culture itself was an important part of the Estonian identity. It is this struggle against German hegemony that explains the minimal salience of Lutheranism as a feature of Estonian national identity. During this period Germans were considered "the other," while Russia was considered an ally against the hegemony of the Germans. This relationship began to change in the 1880s, when the tsarist regime began pursuing Russification in the Baltic provinces. While the Estonian/German cleavage remained ingrained in the culture of the Estonians, the Estonian/Russian cleavage became the new dimension in relation to which the Estonians defined themselves. In the face of Russification policies, the possession and protection of the Estonian language and a uniquely Estonian national culture took on particular importance. Simply having a language and a culture were important components of Estonian identity, because the possession of these factors is an attribute of nationhood. Closely tied to the nationhood of the Estonians are the myths of common descent and racial purity, myths that tie the national community together in much the same way that a national language, culture, media, and education system do. Finally, one sees the beginnings of the development of a political facet of Estonian national identity during the years of the independent Republic of Estonia, which lasted from 1920 to 1940. Though "democratic" as an attribute of Estonia was only weakly developed at the time of the authoritarianization of Estonia in 1934, it would provide a symbol of resistance for future generations of Estonian nationalists, to whom I turn my attention now.

### **Estonia during the Soviet Era**

Although this article is not intended to be a history of Soviet rule in Estonia, it would be useful to paint in very broad strokes the cultural and identity-related policies pursued by Moscow in

Estonia and the reactions of the Estonians to those policies.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the greatest threat to Estonian national identity and the nationalist movement during Soviet rule came from the changing ethno-demographic balance of the ESSR (Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic) following the Second World War. Throughout the postwar era, Estonians were increasingly under threat of losing their majority status in the republic. Had they become the minority in their own republic, this would have had disastrous consequences both for the *de jure* status of Estonia and its people in the USSR and for the *de facto* status of Estonian culture and its ability to continue in existence.

The erosion of the Estonian majority began immediately following the war. Though accurate numbers are difficult to come by, an estimated 41,000 Estonians were deported to labor camps throughout the USSR in 1945–1946. An additional 50,000–80,000 Estonians were deported in 1949 during the collectivization of agriculture in the republic. Finally, approximately 3,000 “bourgeois nationalists” were deported in 1950–1951. While these numbers may pale in comparison to the total of Stalinist repressions in the USSR, consider that the entire population of Estonia in 1945 was an estimated 830,000–854,000. Thus, within just a few years Estonia had lost up to 15 percent of its population *in addition to* those Estonians who died during the war itself (Raun 2001, 179–81).

The mass deportations of ethnic Estonians only tell half the story of the demographic crisis faced by the Estonian nation, however. Postwar Sovietization of Estonia also included a massive and deliberate influx of ethnic Russians, which was a key factor in reducing the percentage of Estonians living in the republic. While the stated goal of this mass migration was the support of the industrialization of the republic, Taagepera (1993) questions this logic: “It made no economic sense to deport tens of thousands of skilled [Estonians] from a labor-short area...and then import so many more Russians” (82). Taagepera, like many of his compatriots, saw a different motive: “colonization became a goal in itself rather than a means of industrialization” (83). The “colonizing forces” included Soviet Red Army troops, of whom there were an estimated 120,000 stationed in Estonia by the early 1980s (Sinilind 1984, 40).

The triple forces of Russian immigration, Estonian deportations, and low Estonian birth rates had a stark effect on the percentage of the population of the ESSR that could claim to be bearers of the Estonian national identity: In 1945, 94 percent of the republic’s inhabitants were

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<sup>7</sup> For more details on the Soviet era of Estonian history, see Lieven (1993), Misiunas and Taagepera (1993), Raun (2001), G. Smith (1994), Taagepera (1993), and Virkkunen (1999). Also see Laar (1992) for an account of the armed resistance to Soviet rule that continued in Estonia until the mid-1950s.

ethnic Estonian. By 1953, that number had fallen to 72 percent (Taagepera 1993, 84). Though the deportations ended with Stalin's death, the influx of Russians (and to a lesser degree Ukrainians and Belarussians) continued throughout the Soviet period, as reflected in the following figures concerning the share of Estonians in the republic: 1970, 68 percent Estonian; 1979, 64.7 percent Estonian; 1989, 61 percent Estonian (Taagepera 1993, 84, 96, 103; D. Smith 2001, xxiii). Thus, by the late Soviet period there was a real threat that Estonians would eventually become a minority group in their own republic, a threat that caused great concern among Estonians and became a driving force of the nationalist movement in the 1980s.

The erosion of Estonians to minority status could potentially have had serious consequences for the republic and its titular nationality:

Should Estonians become a minority of the total population, it would appear logical on the part of the central authorities to deprive the Estonian Republic of its SSR [Soviet Socialist Republic] status—with all of its concomitant benefits in terms of cultural autonomy and employment—and amalgamate the territory to the neighboring RSFSR [Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic]. A precedent for this already existed in the form of the heavily russified Karelian-Finnish SSR, which in 1956 was stripped of its union republic status and transformed into an autonomous republic of the Russian Federation. (D. Smith 2001, xxiii)

But beyond the legal consequences that the loss of an Estonian majority could bring, there were even more grave cultural consequences that could result. Many Estonians feared the eventual extinction of the Estonian language in the face of Russian “colonization” and cultural/linguistic Russification (the latter of which will be discussed in greater detail below). Statistics confirm this fear: by the late 1980s, only 12 percent of the non-Estonian population could speak Estonian (D. Smith 2001, xxiii). Thus, the Estonian language, long one of the central pillars of national identity, was slowly dying out as a consequence of Russian immigration and the promotion of Russian as the lingua franca of the Soviet empire. This constant pressure on the core of Estonian identity helps explain the empirical results obtained below, in which the preservation of the Estonian language appears as a major focus of nationalist discourse in the late 1980s.

As suggested above, the threat to Estonian national identity that came with Soviet occupation was not limited to the immigration of ethnic Russians; it included direct threats to the culture through Russification policies as well. Following the conclusion of the Second World

War, Stalin and his cultural henchman Zhdanov vigorously pursued a policy of Russification and Sovietization in the Baltic republics. This policy included the Russification of the arts, whereby Baltic writers were forced to praise the Russian language. A systematic rewriting of history was also undertaken to portray Estonian-Russian relations as being intense and friendly throughout history, though the Russians were always portrayed as the elder brother of the Estonian people (Misiunas and Taagepera 1993, 118). During this period, neutrality in the arts was impossible, and Stalinist purges of the Estonian cultural elite ensured that those who survived took the appropriate line in their public work. The consequences of this cultural onslaught are evident in a post-Stalin Soviet anthology of Estonian poetry: fewer poems are selected from the years 1949–1951 than any other period. As Misiunas and Taagepera write, “Even according to the Soviet criteria 20 years later, the last five years under Stalin were less creative and productive than the war years or the early postwar reconstruction period, not to mention the years of independence” (Misiunas and Taagepera 1993, 124). While the Estonian song festivals continued into the Soviet period and Estonian compositions continued to predominate in the festivals, the programs were carefully controlled by the Soviet leadership and an increasing number of Russian compositions appeared as well. More importantly, the majority of compositions, Estonian or Russian, adhered to the principle of “national in form, socialist in content,” replacing traditional national themes with Soviet ideological content (Vesilind 2008, 81–85; Raun 2001, 188).

During Khrushchev’s leadership, the cultural “thaw” reached Estonia as well. While keeping certain topics and cultural expressions off limits, Khrushchev’s thaw removed many of the constraints on Estonian cultural development, ushering in an era of cultural rebirth and vitality. Though this relaxation of control generated some goodwill among Estonians, it was clear that there was tension between the Estonians and the Russians looming beneath the surface. One poem from the era muses, “We listened to the roaring rapids of time. Behind Tartu loomed suddenly the dark Tartaroski” (Taagepera 1993, 94). The protagonist of the poem then declines an invitation to become extinct at the hands of the transparently “Tatar-Russian” figure, instead choosing to fight for survival. Another poem of the era tells the story about a kindergarten teacher Masha (a Russian name) who, while being good at heart, persisted in bossing all the children in her class around. Importantly, all the children in the class have Estonian names whose initials spell the Estonian word for “nation,” revealing the poet’s sentiments about the Russians (Misiunas and Taagepera 1993, 158). When Estonia’s leading cultural monthly commemorated

the 50th anniversary of the October revolution, one poem in the issue lamented, “And yet I keep thinking about a small country.” At the end of the poem it was acknowledged that this small country was now “tacking” with the “October wind,” hardly an enthusiastic show of support (Misiunas and Taagepera 1993, 158).

After Khrushchev’s ouster from power in 1964, the cultural revival in Estonia came to an end as well. Estonian historians mark the end of Estonia’s cultural thaw with the invasion of Czechoslovakia, at which point the republic braced for a purge. While the expected purge did not come, “Brezhnev’s regime had squandered the fleeting goodwill” developed during the thaw (Taagepera 1993, 97). The years of hope were over and the years of dissidence began. Dissidence against the Soviet occupation took many forms at differing levels of public expression. The most personal is what Virkkunen calls the “double reality—adopting certain national and territorial meanings at home and other meanings at school and work” (Virkkunen 1999, 86). This is what might be termed “kitchen nationalism”—expressing nationalist or other dissident ideas with one’s family and close friends in the safety of one’s home. Sometimes expressions of dissidence took more public forms: “The Balts frequently refused to speak Russian in public, even when they were capable of doing so. Parents opposed intermarriage with Russians. Baltic tourists refused to pass for ‘Russians’ in the East Bloc countries and even managed to complain in the press of being introduced as such when abroad” (Misiunas and Taagepera 1993, 177). In their everyday lives Estonians also sought to differentiate themselves from their Soviet masters by engaging in a westernization of culture and lifestyle made possible by their closer proximity to Europe. Through these kitchen discussions and everyday demonstrations of defiance, along with the flow of *samizdat*<sup>8</sup> literature, the Estonian national identity survived and evolved in response to the continuing domination by Moscow. It was during this period, Woods writes, that Estonians “tended to compare themselves with the rest of Europe rather than with the USSR. Estonians felt that they would be performing better both economically and culturally if they were left to ‘get on with it.’ Sovietisation had distorted the natural course of Estonian history, without which Estonia would have become part of the Western economic and democratic ‘club’ much earlier” (Woods 1999, 275).

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<sup>8</sup> The Russian term *samizdat* can roughly be translated as “self-published.” *Samizdat* copies of unauthorized, censored, and oppositional texts were generally passed between friends throughout the post-Stalin period of Soviet history and were an important cornerstone of the dissident movement in Soviet society.

As was the case during the 1880s Russification campaign, the Russification campaign introduced by Brezhnev in 1978 provoked a strong negative reaction among the Estonians. The Russification campaign was focused on education and language, a fiercely guarded sphere for the Estonians. Russian was now taught in Estonian schools in the first grade rather than in the third grade as before. Preschools were ordered to use Russian for half the day, as were high schools, universities, the media, and theatrical groups. Greater numbers of Russian-language teachers for Estonian-language schools were trained, but no teachers of Estonian were trained for the Russian-language schools in Estonia. During the 1980 Estonian song festival, all speeches at official receptions were in Russian only, a blatant slap in the face for a treasured Estonian tradition (Taagepera 1993, 100). The reaction of the Estonians to this attack on their language and culture was swift and clear: in the 1979 census, the percentage of Estonians who declared fluency in Russian dropped from 29 percent to 24 percent; all other republics in the Soviet Union reported an increase in Russian fluency (Taagepera 1993, 101). “Such policies,” G. Smith (1994) writes, “did much to heighten concerns over the likely future role of the local languages and cultures as reflected in growing dissident activities during the 1980s connected with issues of linguistic Russification.”

Only with the end of the Brezhnev era did the Russification campaign relax, eventually giving way to the historical opening under Gorbachev. With greater and greater boldness Estonian nationalists were able to express the views that had long been simmering and evolving during the Soviet era, revealing that the meaning of Estonian national identity had indeed changed in the course of 50 years of occupation. Through the interaction between the Estonian “self” and the Soviet/Russian “other,” the myth of Estonian nationalism had evolved. This, Zaslavsky (1992) writes, was “the myth of normal development brutally interrupted by the Bolshevik experiment or the Russian aggression or both.” The empirical evidence presented below will confirm this interpretation and provide a more detailed picture of the content of Estonian national identity as a result of the interaction between the “self” and the “other.”

### **IDENTITY TRANSFORMED: OBSERVING NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE LATE SOVIET PERIOD**

Relative to the qualitative endeavor undertaken above, observing and measuring the content of Estonian national identity during the late Soviet period is somewhat more straightforward. This

will be done using content analysis of Estonian nationalist discourse, as described below. By focusing on the discourse of those who are talking about national identity—Estonian national elites and public opinion leaders—one can get a sense of the presence, intensity, and frequency of characteristics relating to Estonian national identity. Furthermore, content analysis allows us to do this in a systematic, quantifiable way.<sup>9</sup>

Fortunately, the late Soviet period was characterized by a nationalist revival in the Baltic republics and a liberalization of press freedom. National leaders were able to express their views openly in the Soviet press, providing a rich cache of texts to analyze in search of markers of national identity. The Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS) Soviet report was selected for analysis because of its depth and level of detail (FBIS 1989). The daily publication is a translation of selected articles from media sources throughout the Soviet Union provided by the Central Intelligence Agency. This includes translations of complete, unabridged articles, interviews, and editorials. More importantly, the FBIS reports translate regional news sources in addition to central news sources, including reports in the Estonian press and on Estonian radio which are more likely to address nationalist issues than the central Moscow press, making the resource particularly attractive for this analysis.<sup>10</sup>

For the content analysis, I analyzed FBIS articles from 1989 to give a snapshot of Estonian national identity attributes at the end of the Soviet era. I selected 1989 for analysis because the policy of *glasnost* was already well established and thriving in Moscow and the

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<sup>9</sup> One might question the link between elite discourse on the attributes of Estonian identity—as mapped out through the content analysis described below—and the everyday lives, actions, and identities of ordinary Estonians. To respond to this critique, I would point to Hopf's (2002) discussion of social cognitive structures, which are "akin to Geertz's web of meaning, viz. a sociotemporal historical site within which there is a collection of intersubjective meanings to the discursive practices of its members. Within this space there are logics of intelligibility, thinkability, and imaginability that operate like (linguistic) structures—they push and pull people to conceptualize, and so discursively to act, in a finite set of ways" (21–22). National elites who make public claims about the Estonian identity are key members of the society who shape and are shaped by the discursive practices of nationalism. They contribute to the construction of intersubjective meanings (i.e., the content of national identity) that make up the social cognitive structure of Estonian nationals and which "push and pull" Estonians to act in certain ways.

<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, one might be skeptical about the objectivity and scope of FBIS coverage, calling into question its suitability as a source for content analysis. Leetaru's (2010) meta-analysis of global FBIS coverage from 1979–2008 helps allay such concerns. A targeted analysis of coverage from 1992 to 2004 shows coverage from multiple print, broadcast, and web sources within monitored countries, with Russia claiming the largest share of FBIS-translated articles of any country. It is safe to assume that during the late Soviet period just preceding the period of Leetaru's analysis, the Soviet Union would have been the best-covered country in the world. Furthermore, Leetaru shows that coverage came from a wide variety of media outlets, ensuring that the FBIS was not reliant on just a few select sources. Furthermore, an analysis of article subject tags that began appearing in 1999 confirms that coverage was widespread and balanced across a large array of topics, suggesting that the selection criteria for articles to be translated was not unduly skewed toward or away from particular subjects. These characteristics of FBIS coverage suggest the service's reliability as a rich and unbiased object of content analysis.

Baltic republics. Thus, one can be confident that a sufficient liberalization of the Estonian press had taken place to allow nationalist leaders to express their views. Furthermore, Beissinger's analysis shows that 1989 was characterized by numerous national demonstrations, thereby ensuring a higher amount of coverage of nationalist issues in the press (Beissinger 2002, 167). Also, it is important to note that because I am interested solely in the interaction between the occupied nation and the hegemon, it is more appropriate to analyze a year in which the occupied nation is still formally dominated by the hegemon. To put that into context, it is better to analyze Estonian national identity in 1989 rather than in 1995, because the dynamics of identity formation will have likely shifted in response to the disappearance of the Soviet hegemon by 1995.<sup>11</sup> In the parlance of content analysis, the unit of analysis is Estonia in the year 1989 with an eye to assessing the frequency of certain attributes in the discourses of nationalist leaders throughout the year.<sup>12</sup>

The unit of data collection for this study is the individual article. I examined all FBIS articles about Estonia in 1989. Of those articles, only those that dealt with the variables of interest (see below) were coded for their content. These articles often included statements by national leaders, interviews with these elites, reportage of the opinions of national elites, nationalist op-ed pieces, reportage of nationalist platforms, and other expressions of nationalist sentiment. These "national leaders" included cultural leaders, leaders of emerging national political movements and parties, and in some cases even elites in the Estonian Communist Party, many of whom took increasingly nationalist positions as time went by. A selection criterion for an article was that the speaker/author/subject be Estonian and speaking from an Estonian nationalist point of view. Thus, for example, a Russian speaking about Estonians or an Estonian toeing Moscow's line against nationalism (as did the First Secretary of the Estonian Communist Party) would not be considered in the analysis. These selection rules resulted in the coding and analysis of 84 articles appearing from January through December 1989.

Twenty-five variables or potentially salient attributes of identity were coded for in the analysis. I selected these variables following a preliminary examination of secondary sources that suggested certain cultural traits, myths, and historical memories that would likely be important

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<sup>11</sup> To be sure, content analysis of Estonian nationalist discourse in the mid 1990s, 2000s, or today would be an informative exercise in tracing how identity has continued to change in the post-Soviet era. Though not possible in the current article, the results of the present study discussed below suggest important future research in this direction.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the methodology of content analysis, see Jenner and Titscher (2000), Neuendorf (2002), Popping (2000), Potter and Wetherell (1987), and Yates, Taylor, and Wetherell (2001).



components of Estonian national identity. Other variables were included because of their importance to pre-Soviet Estonian identity. Finally, other variables measure the direct dichotomization of Estonian and Soviet/Russian identities and the definition of Estonian identity in oppositional reference to the Soviet Union. Coding consisted of counting the number of times that a particular variable appeared in an article. Because the FBIS archives covering the time period of interest were available only on microfilm, machine coding was not possible; all coding was thus done by hand. These 25 variables are summarized in Table 1.

What were the contours of Estonian national identity by the end of the Soviet era? The results of the content analysis of nationalist discourse in 1989 are presented in Figure 1.

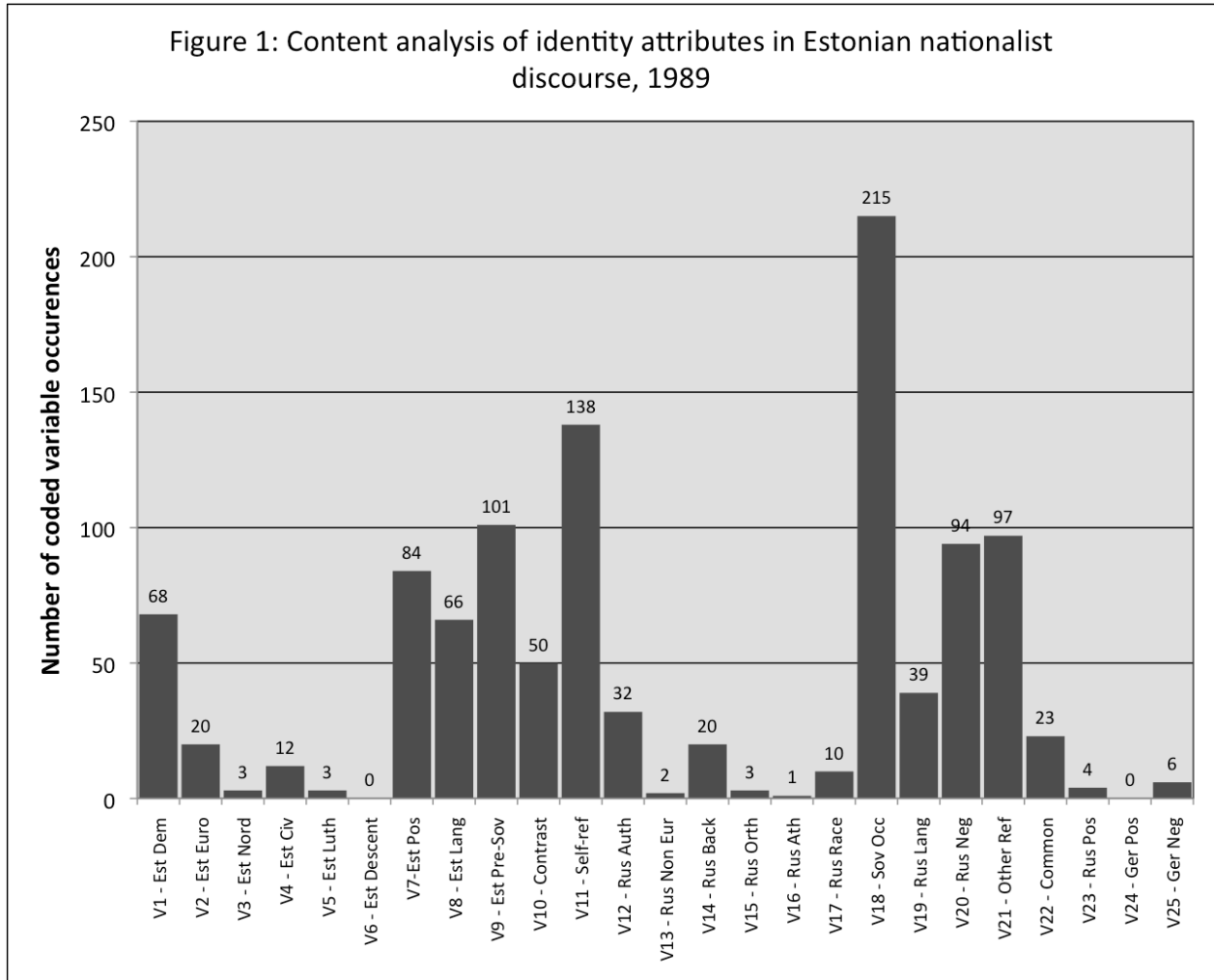
A total of 84 articles were coded with a total of 1,091 variable occurrences. The vertical axis of Figure 1 represents the number of times each variable occurred within the universe of coded articles. The exact number of variable occurrences is given at the top of each bar in Figure 1. For example, throughout the 84 articles coded, speakers quoted in the articles referred to the Estonian people as democratic or referenced Estonia's democratic history (V1) a total of 68 times. By mapping out the results of this content analysis of identity attributes in Estonian nationalist discourse, one can get a clearer picture of the contours of national identity content at the end of the Soviet period.

TABLE 1

## CODED IDENTITY ATTRIBUTE VARIABLES

Variable	Description	Contrast	
V1	<i>Estonians as Democratic</i>	References to Estonians as democratic, references to democratic political history, demands for democratization in Estonia	V12
V2	<i>Estonians as European</i>	References to Estonia as a European country, Estonians as being European, or Estonian culture as being European	V13
V3	<i>Estonia as Scandinavian</i>	References to Estonia as being a part of Scandinavia or sharing a common culture with the Scandinavian countries	N/A
V4	<i>Estonia as Civilized or Advanced</i>	Descriptions of Estonians as being culturally advanced or civilized	V14
V5	<i>Estonia as a Lutheran Country</i>	References to Estonia's Lutheran religious tradition	V15, V16
V6	<i>Estonia's Common Racial Descent</i>	References to the common descent of Estonians, references to the racial purity of Estonians, and references to the genetic characteristics of the Estonians	V17
V7	<i>Positive Descriptions of the Estonian People</i>	Any other positive references to the Estonian people as a whole not already coded in another category	V20, V23
V8	<i>Reference to Estonian Language and Native Culture</i>	References to the Estonian language, Estonian speakers	V19
V9	<i>Reference to Pre-Soviet Estonian Independence</i>	Mentions of the pre-Soviet independent Republic of Estonia	N/A
V10	<i>Direct Contrast of Estonians and Russians/Soviets</i>	Direct contrasts of Estonia and the Soviet Union, or Estonians and Russians, or clear dichotomization between Estonian and Soviet	V22
V11	<i>Self-Reference of Estonians</i>	Occurrences of self-referential markers such as "we," "us," and "ours." Only cases where it is clear that the speaker is referring to the Estonians as a people are coded.	V21
V12	<i>Russians/Soviets as Authoritarian</i>	References to the authoritarian political system of the Soviet Union and characterizations of the Russian people as authoritarian	V1
V13	<i>Soviet Union as Non-European</i>	References to the Soviet Union as not European, characterizations of Russian culture as non-European	V2
V14	<i>Russians/Soviets as Backward or Uncivilized</i>	References to the Soviet Union or Russians as backward and uncivilized	V4
V15	<i>Russia as Orthodox</i>	References to Russia's Orthodox Christian religious tradition	V5
V16	<i>Soviet Union as Atheist</i>	Reference to the Soviet Union as an atheist country	V5
V17	<i>Russians as Racially Mixed</i>	References to Russians as being of mixed descent and references to Russians as racially mixed or genetically inferior	V6
V18	<i>Reference to the Soviet Occupation and Repression</i>	References to the Soviet occupation of 1940, references to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, and references to Soviet repressions	N/A
V19	<i>Reference to Russian Language and Culture</i>	References to the Russian language and Russian speakers	V8
V20	<i>Other Negative Characterization of Soviets/Russians</i>	Other negative descriptions of Russia, Russians, or the Soviet Union not already coded	V7, V23
V21	<i>Other-Reference</i>	Occurrences of "other references" when discussing Russians: "them," "they," and "theirs." Only cases where it is clear that the speaker is referring to Russians or the Soviets as a collective are coded	V11
V22	<i>Commonalities</i>	References to shared history, attributes, and periods of cooperation with Russians and the Soviet Union.	V10

V23	<i>Positive Description of the Soviets/Russians</i>	Positive characterizations of the Russians or the Soviet Union	V20
V24	<i>Positive Description of German</i>	Positive characterizations of Germans	V25
V25	<i>Negative Description of Germans</i>	Negative characterizations of Germans	V24



When examining the data, one observes several interesting phenomena. Looking at V24 and V25, it appears that tension between Estonians and Germans had ceased to be a relevant component of Estonian identity given its absence in national discourse. In the 6 instances in which nationalist leaders did make direct (negative) reference to the Germans, the comments were relating to the Nazis, not to the Baltic Germans. This would suggest two things: that the memory of domination by the Baltic Germans had been erased by 40 years of imperial Russification, 20 years of

independence, the absence of Germans in the Baltic republics after the Second World War, and 50 years of Soviet hegemony. At the same time, the “meaning” of Germany had changed drastically by 1989. At that point, (West) Germany was an advanced, democratic, prosperous nation. It was a part of the West that the Estonians of the late Soviet period were trying to emulate and therefore would not hold in negative regard. Nevertheless, the main battle of 1989 was against the Soviet Union, leaving nationalist leaders little time to comment on their opinions of Germany, resulting in very little discourse on the matter.

In keeping with the tradition established in the nineteenth century, religion does not play a large role in Estonian national identity: there are very few references to Estonia’s Lutheran tradition (V5, 3 occurrences), nor are there many references to either Orthodoxy in Russia (V15, 3 occurrences) or atheism in the Soviet Union (V16, 1 occurrence). More surprising is the fact that the importance of the common descent and racial composition of the Estonian people was absent from nationalist discourse (V6, no occurrences). Although references were made to Russia’s racially mixed and inferior population (V17, 10 occurrences), the data suggest that common descent and blood ties had ceased to be a pillar of Estonian national identity by 1989.

Surprisingly, the national identity attribute of Estonians as European (V2) does not appear to be particularly salient in 1989, occurring only 20 times in the coded articles. Similarly the perception of the Soviet Union as a non-European country is practically unrepresented in my sample. This, of course, suggests that a European identity was not a major component of Estonian national identity, resulting in the lack of a dichotomization between Estonia and the Soviet Union along this dimension. Estonia as a Nordic or Scandinavian nation (V3, 3 occurrences) was an even less salient attribute of identity, indicating that a regional identity had yet to be developed in Estonia.

The perception of Estonians as a civilized and advanced people (V4) appeared infrequently in the sample with 12 occurrences. However, the perception of Russians as backwards (V14) occurs more frequently in nationalist discourse with 20 occurrences. This suggests that while the civilized/backward dichotomization is less important in Estonian national identity relative to other attributes, there still is a contrast between Estonians and Russians along this dimension.

With 66 references to Estonian language (V8), it is clear that language continues to be an extremely important part of being Estonian.<sup>13</sup> Only democracy (V1, 68 occurrences), pre-Soviet independence (V9, 101 occurrences), and other positive descriptions (V7, 84 occurrences) outweigh language and culture in importance to Estonians when discussing themselves substantively (excluding self-references). The dichotomization of Estonia and Russia over language is demonstrated by the fact that significant discourse was centered around the Russian language (V19, 39 occurrences).

The data suggest that the “democratic seed” of political national identity planted in the interwar period in fact grew in importance for Estonians during the Soviet period: in the coded articles speakers referred to Estonians as a democratic people (V1) 68 times. One can contrast V1 with V12, the perception of Russians and the Soviet Union as authoritarian. While national discourses do not address the nature of the Soviet regime type as frequently as they do the Estonian democratic tradition, there were 32 references to authoritarianism in the Soviet Union and Russia.

It is informative that when the Estonians speak about themselves, they most frequently refer to the interwar period when Estonia was an independent nation (V9, 101 occurrences). This suggests that the memory of independence and national sovereignty made a deep impression on the Estonian national identity and that this was one of the most salient facets of that identity. Similarly, the overwhelmingly most frequent issue raised in Estonian nationalist discourse is the Soviet occupation of 1940 and the Stalinist repressions that followed (V18). Mentioned 215 times in the coded articles, it is clear that the Soviet occupation left a deep scar on the national identity of Estonians. When one considers the memory of the independent Republic of Estonia and the memory of the Soviet occupation that erased Estonian independence, it becomes clear that Estonia’s status as an illegitimately occupied nation was a central attribute of Estonian national identity at the time.

What of the variables that attempt to measure the dichotomization of Estonians and Russians? When one compares positive descriptions of Estonians (V7) with negative descriptions of Russians (V20), it appears that the dichotomization is strong. In fact, more negative references to Russians were observed (94 occurrences) than were positive references to Estonians (84 occurrences). There was little attempt by Estonian nationalist leaders to say nice things about the

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<sup>13</sup> Also see Petersoo (2007, 125)

Russians (V23, 4 occurrences). These data certainly lend support to the idea that Estonians attempted to construct a cultural boundary between themselves and Russians, portraying the former as essentially good and the latter as essentially bad.

The data on self- and other-references support the conclusion that there was an active attempt to separate Estonian from Russian/Soviet. There were 138 instances of Estonian self-reference (V11), using words like “us,” “we,” and “our” when discussing the Estonians as a collective group. The incidence of other-references (V21), using words like “them,” “they,” and “theirs” to describe the Russians or Soviets as a collective group was almost as high, appearing 97 times. This use of dichotomizing language that separates Estonians and Russians into in- and out-groups further serves to reinforce the boundary between the two, emphasizing that above all else, Estonians are separate (and perhaps superior) to the Russians.

Cases of direct contrasts of Estonian and Russian/Soviet characteristics and instances that portray Estonians and Russians in direct conflict with each other (V10, 50 occurrences) outweighed discourse emphasizing common history and cooperation (V22, 23 occurrences) by a wide margin. This further suggests that the Estonian nationalists in 1989 were actively working to reinforce their cultural boundaries and portray Estonia and the Soviet Union as diametrically opposed.

### **Assessing the Anti-hegemonic Theory of National Identity**

The anti-hegemonic theory of national identity seems to hold up when put to the empirical test. To be sure, the theory’s generalizability remains limited for the time being due to the nature of this single-case study. Further testing against additional cases is warranted, though the findings in this paper are consistent with related work utilizing representative survey data in Estonia’s Baltic neighbor, Latvia (Person 2010). As would be predicted by the theory, important aspects of Estonian national identity in the pre-Soviet era, such as the ability to use Estonian language and the ability to create expressions of Estonian culture, continued to be of central importance. These attributes became even more important when threatened by Russification. Other attributes, such as the young democratic culture founded in the 1920s increased in significance as Estonia was occupied by a nondemocratic country. At the same time, several new dimensions of boundary construction and dichotomization appear as a result of new historical memories and shared experiences. In particular, the loss of Estonia’s independent status in 1940 through the Soviet

occupation was a powerful dimension along which Estonians defined themselves. While it is true that this event was not available to pre-Soviet Estonians as an aspect of national identity by virtue of historical chronology, this does not rule out the use of such historical events to widen the cultural gap between occupied and occupier. By keeping the occupation and loss of independence at the forefront of nationalist discourse, the Estonian nationalist elites of the late Soviet period constantly reminded their compatriots of the foreignness of the “other” and the illegitimacy of its rule.

Nevertheless, there are some surprising instances where an attribute of identity that was salient in the pre-Soviet period was no longer salient by 1989. These include the idea of Estonia’s common descent and racial purity. Yet with theories of racial superiority and purity discredited following Nazi Germany’s collapse, it is possible that the role of racial purity in the Estonian project of national identity was pushed to the fringes. Certainly, by 1989 claims of racial superiority would be quite unusual coming from mainstream political leaders.

More puzzling are certain attributes of national identity—Estonia as a European culture, Estonia as a Scandinavian culture, and Estonia as a Lutheran country, for example—that one would expect to be mobilized but that did not appear to be salient attributes of Estonian national identity in 1989. This might come as a surprise, as Petersoo (2007) identifies Europe, Finland, and the Scandinavian countries as major “external positive others” through which Estonian national identity is influenced (126–27). I would not disagree that the “return to Europe” narrative<sup>14</sup> is an important part of national discourse, especially when Petersoo was writing in 2007. However, the failure of these narratives to appear in nationalist discourse in 1989 emphasizes the immense power the Soviet occupier held as the focus of Estonian anti-hegemonic identity transformation. Adopting Petersoo’s terminology, when the “external<sup>15</sup> negative other” is so dominant in the lives and identity politics of the occupied nation, less attention is paid to “external positive others” such as Scandinavia; attributes from these positive others are therefore less likely to be appropriated into the definition of the “self” under such conditions. One can speculate that with the end of the Soviet occupation in 1991, the resulting shift in power has allowed for the greater incorporation of “external positive others” into Estonian nationalist discourse. However, Jaan Kaplinski’s assertion that “the pressure [to develop national identity] is

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<sup>14</sup> See Feldman (2001).

<sup>15</sup> One could, of course, argue that Russians/Soviets were an “internal negative other,” though for the sake of consistency with my argument I consider them to be an external entity that inserted itself into Estonia.

simply never there in a free society” (Subrenat 2004, 161) also suggests that the post-Soviet nationalist movement in Estonia may lack direction, a situation that was observed by Aareleid-Tart and Kannike (2004) in their study of cultural trauma: “It was no longer necessary to defend this oppositional ‘own’ against anybody, since the Soviet ‘alien’ had ceased to exist. As a result, the [singing nationalism] that in Soviet Estonia had largely become synonymous with national identity...started to lose its value rapidly” (207).

Thus, I would argue that under certain conditions such as occupation and assimilation pressure, during which the survival of the nation is most imperiled, the dialectic process of identity transformation is strongly focused on the threatening hegemon and less on the positive alternatives that may be available. In other words, not all “others” are equal. This certainly explains the overwhelming focus of Estonian nationalist discourse in 1989 on the historical events of the twentieth century that had the greatest impact on Estonian national development: the loss of independence and the Soviet occupation of 1940. As such, these events and the resulting antagonistic relationship between Estonian and Soviet/Russian were the dominant narrative of Estonian nationalism at the end of the Soviet period.

The explanation provided above also accounts for the disappearance of the German question in late Estonian nationalist discourse. Recall that tension and hostility toward the Baltic Germans were present prior to Soviet rule but did not constitute a salient aspect of Estonian identity discourse at the end of the Soviet era. With the Germans no longer a hegemonic threat to Estonian nationalism after the Soviet occupation, attention was shifted toward differentiating Estonian national identity from the Soviets.<sup>16</sup> In other words, one “negative other” was replaced by another, more threatening, negative other. As the Estonian national identity discourse shifted toward defining the “self” in opposition to Russian/Soviet, hostility toward Baltic Germans ceased to be a relevant component of national identity.

The failure of religion to be a salient attribute of identity in distinguishing the Estonian “self” from the Russian/Soviet “other” is more difficult to account for. While one might speculate that the lack of emphasis on religion may be linked to the German question—recall that Lutheranism was not a pillar of Estonian national identity even in the Tsarist era because of its perception as the religion of the Baltic German elites—the question remains as to why this notable distinction with the Soviet Union was not activated. This confirms that future research

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<sup>16</sup> This finding is consistent with Hackman (2003), who argues that a shift in the perception of Baltic Germans in nationalist discourse has led Estonians to “embrace the heritage of the German past” (91).



will be required to gain a clearer understanding of why certain attributes of identity are activated at a certain time and not others. The results of this study at a minimum suggest a productive starting point for such an inquiry.

The findings presented here suggest that once the existential threat from the occupying “negative other” is removed (or at least significantly reduced), new opportunities and challenges to the national identity program emerge. On the one hand, there is more room for “positive others” to influence identity development in a favorable way. On the other hand, nationalist movements and the identities they both harness and shape may lack the unifying impetus that a threatening “negative other” provides, particularly when most of the nation’s history has taken place under foreign occupation. This discussion suggests that further research is warranted to explore how and when different others—“external positive others” such as Europe or Scandinavia—define the identity of the “self” once the hegemonic threat is lifted. Post-Soviet Estonia will provide a useful case study on this subject. Some, including Feldman (2001) and Petersoo (2007), have laid the foundation, but significant additional theoretical and empirical work remains.

## CONCLUSION

Returning to this article’s empirical question, the data presented here do suggest that an important shift in the content of Estonian national identity took place during the 50 years of Soviet rule. This shift was made largely in opposition to the perceived nature of the Soviet Union and its leading nationality, the Russians. That this should have happened makes sense: recall that my definition of national identity’s content stressed common myths, historical memories, and culture as essential components of the attributes that nationals use to describe and understand themselves. For 50 years the Soviet Union was a dominant factor in Estonia’s creation of historical memories, culture, and even myths. As new cultural developments take place and new memories are added to the “archives,” it is to be expected that national identity will be updated accordingly. As has been demonstrated, cataclysmic events in a nation’s history can have a major effect on national identity, an effect that is still felt today.

Indeed, the dichotomization of Russian and Estonian has continued through the 1990s as Estonia has sought to establish itself once again as an independent nation. The contentious relationship between the Estonian population and the Russian-speaking population, so well

documented by Laitin (1998), demonstrates that language continues to be an essential component of Estonia's national identity. The reclamation of Estonian history also looms large in the post-Soviet era, reflecting the overwhelmingly negative assessment of the Soviet period in Estonia's history.

Unfortunately there continues to be tension in relations between Estonians and the Russians left stranded in Estonia by the collapse of the Soviet Union, as evidenced by the 2007 controversy over the Soviet "Bronze Soldier" monument in Tallinn.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, as Laitin's work on linguistic identity shows, identities in post-Soviet Estonia are continuing to develop even 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This article presents evidence that identity is in fact in constant flux, changing in relation to the historical circumstances in which a nation finds itself. However, certain strands persist for long periods in defining aspects of that national identity. As this article has demonstrated, the Soviet occupation of Estonia from 1940 until 1991 is the strand that came to define Estonian national identity. There is something rather ironic in this fact: no matter how hard Estonians work to purge all things Russian and Soviet from their culture, the Soviet occupation will continue to be a part of them by virtue of its effect on their own identities.

I have proposed a theory of change in the content of national identity that explains the specific identity attributes of the "self" by virtue of the attributes characteristic of the "other." Only by referencing who "they" are can we define who "we" are. By exploring the content of Estonian national identity prior to and at the end of the Soviet occupation, I have shown that our theoretical and empirical discussion of the "other" must go deeper than accounts of when, how, and why particular groups are framed as the "other." Rather, scholars must devote attention to the dialectic nature of otherness, understanding that the nation's own attributes are often an inverted but uneven reflection of the other's attributes. Further research remains, particularly in developing our understanding of when and how "positive external others" lend attributes to national identity development. Fortunately for social scientists, the world abounds with cases of occupier and occupied, negative and positive other, internal and external other. Whether in Estonia, Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere, the universal question remains for exploration: "who are we?" and, equally important, "who are we *not*?"

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<sup>17</sup> See Brüggeman and Kasekamp (2008).

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