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**QUIETLY POSTCOLONIAL: THE IMPACT OF RUSSIA'S
FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE ON CURATION
STRATEGIES IN ESTONIA**

MA Thesis

Supervisor: Dr Catherine Gibson

Tartu 2024



Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

It is widely understood that moments of great geopolitical change have a profound impact on the manufacture and treatment of the past. Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine has not only revealed the politicisation and weaponisation of history and memory, but also prompted more intensive discussions among scholars and politicians about the application of postcolonial perspectives and methods in the states with an entangled history with Russia. Two years on from the onset of the full-scale conflict, this thesis seeks to examine whether postcolonial approaches have also had a wider impact on national narratives, as reflected in museum design and curation strategies. By utilising a single-case study of Estonian National Museum/*Eesti Rahva Muuseum* (ERM) and combining ethnographic observational analysis and five expert interviews with museum workers, this thesis analyses the state of Estonian national memory in the year 2024. Whereas most previous studies on memory and postcolonialism in the Baltic states have been confined to the twentieth century, this thesis broadens these empirics and utilises a *longue durée* approach to Estonia's national master narrative in order to show the interconnectedness of the different layers of Estonia's past, rather than treating its different elements in isolation. The findings revealed that, in contrast to the wake-up call that much of academia has experienced, ERM has rather been operating in a "quietly postcolonial" manner for some time, suggesting that this public-facing institution has been ahead of much of academia and political discourse.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor, Catherine Gibson for her valuable guidance and support while completing this project. A special thanks also to everyone at the Estonian National Museum for being so welcoming and for giving up time to speak to me. Lastly, a wholehearted thank you to all my friends and family for their endless words of encouragement and humour over the last two years.

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1. Introduction

In February 2023 the Estonian parliament passed an amendment regarding the removal of Soviet-era monuments (BNS 2023). This decision reflected extensive discussions that have been occurring in Estonia regarding its memory landscape and commemorative practices since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and then, more urgently, following Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The impact of Russia's full-scale invasion has been felt across the world and in all spheres of life. Scholarship about and within the region has undoubtedly been shaken. This seismic shift has caused many academics to take a step back from their work and reflect (see Krapfl 2023; Vikerkaar 2023). Postcolonial theory and practice has been one field that although present before the events of 2022 has now gained heightened attention and increased prominence in the public domain during this moment of introspective reflection. While postcolonial theory has typically not played a huge role in post-Soviet scholarship, more and more academics are now turning to these theories to reconsider approaches to history. The intimate link between postcolonial thought and memory cultures has been propelled onto the world stage in recent years. Discussions surrounding the removal of monuments, changes in education curricula and the return of museum artefacts highlight the malleability of the past and national memory. While these issues have typically been confined to the context of the former European imperial powers, these discussions are also present and gaining attention in the post-Soviet space including in the Baltic states. This research thus takes these political and academic changes as its starting point to further explore the current state of Estonia's memory landscape in 2024.

It is long documented that changes in regime, crises and watershed moments in history greatly impact memory studies and specifically a country's own memory landscape and commemorative practices. The infamous "memory boom" of the 1990s, which was triggered by the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the fall of the Soviet Union two years later, for example, is often cited as a critical juncture for memory studies (Dessingué and Winter 2015, 1). Political shifts of such scale have also triggered the employment of transitional justice (E.-C. Pettai and Pettai 2015) and the introduction of truth committees (Brants and Klep 2013), for example. It is clear that Estonian society (Välisministeerium, n.d.) and Estonia's memory landscape has not been immune from the events of February 2022, as seen in August 2022 with the removal of the controversial monument of a replica World War II Soviet tank in Narva (ERR 2022). What remains unclear as of yet is the impact the full-scale invasion and Estonia's reaction to it has had specifically on its museums. Following the conceptualisation of the

museum as a core strand of a country's memory politics, before addressing if any changes are transpiring current exhibiting practices must be explored, leading to the first key question posed in this thesis: what national narratives are curated and being recurated?

Crucially this thesis does not only explore Estonia's contemporary memory landscape and its reaction to current events but also inserts itself within a tide of contemporary scholarship applying postcolonial theory to the Baltic states. This postcolonial lens is particularly pertinent for memory studies and museums have been at the heart of many recent discussions surrounding decolonising museums, education and national stories, as will be discussed later in chapter two. Within Estonia, Kumu Art Museum/*Kumu kunstimuuseum*'s (hereafter KUMU) 2021 exhibition entitled "Rendering Race," which explored 'how Estonian artists depicted race and racial differences in the 1920s and 1930s' can be seen as a landmark contribution to these discussions (Kumu kunstimuuseum 2021). This thesis hopes to utilise this contemporary lens to not only understand how Estonia's master narrative is curated but also better acknowledge why, in particular in relation to the changing geopolitical context. Simultaneously, this work thus seeks to also understand why those in charge of curating the narrative might feel it needs updating or changing. As a result of this the present thesis therefore seeks to assess to what extent postcolonial perspectives and decolonial practices are present in curating the national master narrative. On top of this, the third key question posed in this thesis is thus whether these museum practices or interactions with the institution are changing in light of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The Estonian National Museum/*Eesti Rahva Muuseum* (hereafter ERM), has been chosen as the medium through which to explore these questions as it represents a key manifestation of the country's memory politics. As a state-funded institution, rather than some of Estonia's other, privately funded museums (eg. *Vabamu* in Tallinn) it can be viewed as an authoritative voice of the narrative the state would like to portray. Applying postcolonial theory to an institution traditionally laden in power and authority (see p. 20, this thesis) also raises questions as to how to navigate the various colonial entanglements present in Estonia's history through such an inherently power-laden medium. The choice to study the country's national museum rather than other local or city museums with this postcolonial lens presents an interesting opportunity to see if and how these power dynamics are disrupted. Exploring the museum, its exhibits and its practices therefore gives us an insight into Estonia's present-day relationship not only to its past but also the contemporary identity it would like to project.

To summarise, this thesis therefore aims to explore Estonia's present-day memory landscape and examine the extent to which it has been impacted by Russia's full-scale invasion

of Ukraine. Through the medium of Estonia's ERM, it hopes to investigate both what is exhibited and the decisions behind the museum to understand the interconnectedness of museum practices and the country's memory culture. It seeks to explore whether the events of 2022 have prompted a change in methods or practice within this public institution. The three main research questions are thus as follows:

1. What national narratives are presented in the Estonian National Museum?
2. To what extent are postcolonial perspectives and decolonial practices present in ERM's design, exhibition and activities?
3. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, have there been any changes in the exhibition or in the ways in which museum employees and visitors interact with the museum?

My methodological approach to exploring this topic is grounded in the understanding that museums possess various levels, many of which are not seen to the average visitor. My combination of ethnographic observational analysis and expert interviews hopes to bridge the different realms of the museum and understand more deeply how and why the national narrative is curated and exhibited in the way it is. Speaking to experts at the museum also allows me to look forward and gain insight what direction they want to take the museum in. As museums are often constrained by budgets or technicalities, these conversations can provide insight into developments that may never even come to light or alternatively may take many months and years to, yet they are nonetheless valuable for understanding the curators' vision of what they want ERM to be. I have designed this project as a single-case study of the ERM as its position as the country's sole national museum provides an effective and perceptive way to gain insight into the country's relationship to its past, present and future.

1.1. Structure of the Thesis

Following this introductory chapter, this thesis is made up of four core sections and a conclusion. The first two chapters explore the theoretical and contextual information relevant for this research. This first chapter lays out the three main concepts underpinning this project: mnemohistory, narrative, and postcolonial theory and decolonial practice. By exploring pre-existing literature on these concepts and different theoretical approaches, both past and present,

this chapter hopes to create a strong theoretical foundation for the analysis. In addition to this, these concepts are explored both within the context of the Baltic Sea region and Central and Eastern Europe, and within the wider international context. This varied approach hopes to illustrate how these concepts are relevant to broader debates beyond the region and show how these concepts can be applied to different settings. Following this theoretical section, the medium to which these three central concepts will be applied is scrutinised, namely the role of the museum. Once again, this chapter explores both the regional context and the broader, international context, starting with a more general exploration of the role of the museum, including its historical role. The chapter then narrows its focus by discussing the role national museums play in our memory landscape and more specifically the museums of the post-socialist region. This chapter then concludes with an exploration of the Baltic Sea region's museums with a specific focus on Estonia. Throughout this section a wide variety of literature and approaches to museums are discussed to illustrate not only previous approaches to exploring this aspect of memory culture but also the ways in which this project may further some discussions.

The next section then discusses the research design, methods and data used for this thesis. Starting with an explanation of the choice to conduct a single case study of the ERM, this chapter provides some important context regarding the museum in question, parts of which will be important later in the empirical section of the thesis. Following this, the methods used will be outlined and justified. More details regarding the actual process of data collection and crucially data analysis are also provided here, all of which are linked to the aforementioned theoretical underpinnings of the project. This chapter ends with a brief discussion of both the ethical considerations and limitations relevant for this thesis and mentions some mitigations taken to ensure the academic and ethical rigour of the work.

The fifth core chapter of the thesis is therefore the empirical section and discusses the research findings and analysis. This section has been divided into three core sections which correlate to the three aforementioned research questions. The first section explores what national master narrative ERM seeks to project by using Marek Tamm and Elena Ivanova's respective narrative templates as a starting point. This section concludes that a different narrative template is needed to understand ERM's exhibition and so specifically explores what postcolonial ideas and decolonial practices are employed. This section is guided by three ideas, central to decolonial museum practice. This empirical chapter then explores the impact the full-scale war has had on the institution, its workers and its methods. A conclusion then follows which offers some reflection on the key findings from this thesis. Following this the thesis is

assessed in light of the contribution it hopes to make, both at a practical and academic level. Finally, some suggestions for furthering this research and exploration of the broader topic are discussed.

2. Framing the Subject: Politics of History and Memory

This chapter will explore the various key concepts at play in this thesis, namely mnemohistory, narrative and postcolonial theory. What is important for this research is not only the concepts themselves, but their relationships to one another, the various offshoots that exist, and the ways in which they are framed. As has been mentioned, with crises and changes to world order having a profound impact on memory landscapes and memory studies, 2024, two years after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine is an important moment to scrutinise and analyse these concepts and perhaps add new elements. This being said, this chapter proceeds in the following way: firstly, two main poles in memory studies will be examined, history and memory. Here, the concept of mnemohistory in particular will be considered as a way of bridging these two phenomena. The concept of national memory will also then be explored as one category of memory studies which is particularly pertinent to study using this concept of mnemohistory. Attention is then turned to the construction and maintenance of these memories and the role of narrative and narrative templates. Departing somewhat from the more landmark, traditional concepts associated with memory studies, some postcolonial theory and ideas will be introduced, which will underpin much of my own exploration of the museum itself, more broadly placing these discussions within the contemporary context of issues of decolonisation and contemporary Russia's imperial tendencies.

2.1. Mnemohistory, National Memory, and National Master Narratives

In order to navigate Estonia's complex memory landscape, it is important to first address the concept of collective memory before turning to the relationship between the concepts of memory and history, arguably the two main poles of memory studies. Introduced by Maurice Halbwachs, collective memory, as opposed to individual memory stresses the influence of 'collective frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve [...] recollections' (Halbwachs 1992, 43 in A. Assmann 2008, 51). Collective memory is thus highly constructed and heavily influenced by society's implicit or explicit values, experiences or narratives, what Halbwachs called 'social frames' (A. Assmann 2008, 51-52). This idea of

the collective is particularly pertinent when considering memory's role within a nation, as will be explored further below.

Looking more broadly at the field, the concepts of history and memory have had a complex past, and have been regarded by scholars in various ways, as compatible, divergent, or interlinked. While Pierre Nora writing in 1989 stated that 'memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition,' (Nora 1989, 8) Aleida Assmann (2008, 57) in comprehensively documenting the evolving relationship, presents a more nuanced perspective of the dialogue between the two concepts: 'the past appears to be no longer written in granite but rather in water; new constructions of it are periodically arising and changing the course of politics and history.' It is this nuanced perspective on the relationship between memory and history which is so crucial for the study of museums as institutions that ground themselves in history and factual information, but crucially also present and tell a curated narrative.

In considering this nexus between history and memory, the concept of mnemohistory emerges, which Jan Assmann (1997, 8-9, emphasis added), describes as 'concerned not with the past as such, *but only with the past as it is remembered*. It surveys the story-lines of tradition, the webs of intertextuality, the diachronic continuities and discontinuities of reading the past.' This alludes to a concept between memory and history, one that does not pit them against one another as incompatible, as Nora argues, but is full of interaction and dialogue. The study of the 'past as it is remembered' is particularly pertinent for the construction of national identity and national memory. Indeed, in Jan Assmann's (1997) flagship work on the concept he explores how Egypt has been constructed through the concept. Marek Tamm has also used this concept in his exploration of the construction of the Estonian nation and how different events and individuals are made into a 'coherent whole' (Tamm 2008 499). This concept of mnemohistory will therefore be crucial for exploring the narrative the ERM presents and how this helps construct and interact with national memory.

In light of Tamm's utilisation of mnemohistory to approach Estonia's past, it is important to consider the concept of national memory specifically. While scholars have divided up the concept of remembering (and forgetting) in numerous ways, collective memory has become the umbrella term under which various types of memory exist (A. Assmann 2008, 55), with Paul Ricœur (2006, 120) writing 'we owe to Halbwachs the bold intellectual decision to attribute memory directly to a collective entity, which he names a group or society.' One key offshoot from this idea of collective memory is the idea of national memory, which Timothy Synder has explained as the 'organisational principle, or set of myths, by which nationally

conscious individuals understand the past and its demands on the present' (Synder in Onken 2007, 37). This idea of belonging to a group is key here, with national memory enabling individuals and politicians alike to define who is part of the group and who is not, as highlighted by Heiko Pääbo (2011, 252) in his explanation of national memory as a 'politically malleable phenomenon and its alterations reflect changes in the political dimension.' National memory is thus understood as a somewhat flexible concept, which provides cohesion and unity to a prescribed set of individuals through symbols, motifs and narratives.

With this idea of national memory in mind, the concept of 'master narrative' appears, with Pääbo (2011, 253) writing that the 'national history master narrative makes national memory functional.' This idea of 'master narrative' is understood as highly constructed and flexible, interacting extensively with ideas of identity construction, building on concepts introduced by both Benedict Anderson's (2008) theory of "imagined communities" and Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (2012). Both of these seminal works on national identity reject primordialist interpretations of the nation, opting for a constructivist reading. Anderson's theory of "imagined communities" emphasises the role print capital played in how different individuals came to identify with their 'fellow-readings' through reading and hearing stories, thus forging these communities (Anderson 2008, 44). Anderson stresses the fact that what is not important with regards to these communities is how genuine they are, how factually correct they are, but rather 'the style in which they are imagined' (Anderson 2008, 6). This idea particularly resonates with Assmann's aforementioned concept of mnemohistory, exploring the way in which certain events and individuals are *remembered* rather than their strictly factual components. The same can be said for Hobsbawm and Ranger's (2012, 4) writing in *The Invention of Tradition*, where they illustrate how traditions can be invented by a community, such as by a country or religious group, through 'formalisation and ritualisation'. In discussing various symbols and traditions, such as national anthems or the national flag, the authors highlight the constructed nature of the nation and its identity and memory and how these elements can be repurposed or simply created for the sake of cohesion or legitimation (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012, 9).

Following these constructivist ideas of identity and the nation, attention can be turned to *how* these various elements, stories and symbols can become a nation's master narrative. Building on Anderson and Hobsbawm and Ranger's ideas, the nation's master narrative is thus highly selective, aiming for coherence and continuity (A. Assmann in Tamm 2008, 502). This is where the idea of narrative templates can help, with James V. Wertsch (2012, 15) explaining that they 'make sense of events, both past and present, and as such it provides a plot line for

specific narratives such that they take the shape of the same story told over and over with different characters.’

Tamm (2008, 505) has made use of the idea of narrative templates in his work on Estonia’s national identity. He focuses on a schematic narrative template, “The Great Battle for Freedom,” which connects Estonia’s various historic encounters with Germany. In tracing this narrative template through various events of Estonia’s history, Tamm argues that it is ‘more appropriate to treat history as a mode of remembering, as a mnemonic practice’ (Tamm 2008, 500), once again rejecting Nora’s (1989, 8) understanding of memory and history as opposing forces, choosing to instead emphasise how history is remembered and constructed, following Jan Assmann’s idea of mnemohistory. Elena Ivanova (2003) also utilises narrative templates in her analysis of two museums in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv, focusing on a schematic narrative template of victimhood. She shows how political change can shift these narratives as they adapt to serve a new purpose and reconsider events and individuals (Ivanova 2003, 18). It is worth considering Ivanova’s narrative template in the Estonian context as ‘inward-looking national visions of the past and narratives of victimhood [...] have been definitive to the self-image of Estonia since the end of the nineteenth century and heightened during the postsocialist era’ (Koobak and Tali 2023, 200). Therefore, while Ivanova’s template discusses Ukraine and its memory language, it can be used as a lens to explore the Estonian master narrative.

In the context of museums, narrative templates can be seen in the narrower sense as a way to follow the museum’s mission statement, and in the broader sense, especially in the context of a national museum, to curate a cohesive master narrative for the nation. This perspective thus draws our attention to the agential factor present in memory making, presenting and maintaining, a perspective which will feature heavily in this thesis in an attempt to go beyond simply what is on display but into the decision-making process that got it there.

2.2. Postcolonial Approaches to Curating the Past

Along with this idea of mnemohistory and narrative, the third central concept of this thesis is postcolonial theory and practice. Like the previous two concepts, postcolonial theory and practice are understood as a lens through which national narratives and memories can be both constructed and viewed and will be used as a lens through which to interpret and analyse ERM’s work, both in the exhibition itself and more generally in its museum practices. A

postcolonial lens can therefore be used to enhance analysis of how events are portrayed and constructed in the memory landscape. While the concept of mnemohistory and narrative are certainly not free from an agenda or politics as discussed above, postcolonial theory takes this a step further. This politically charged concept is particularly pertinent in today's society, both within the Baltic region and worldwide, making it an interesting and relevant time to utilise it as a mode of analysis.

Postcolonial theory emerged as an 'ideology of liberation' in the twentieth century (Mishra 2020, 4) and became cemented as an institutionalised academic field in the 1970s (Lazarus 2004 1). While Lazarus (Lazarus 2004, 2) illustrates that when the term first came into use it was simply to designate a period of time following the end of a colonial regime, a 'periodizing term, a historical and not an ideological concept,' this has since changed, it rather:

bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of "minorities" within the *geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South*. They intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic "normality" to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples. They formulate their critical revisions around issues of cultural difference, social authority, and political discrimination in order to reveal the antagonistic and ambivalent moments within the "rationalizations" of modernity. (Bhabha 1994 in Lazarus 2004, 2, my emphasis).

I prefer this conceptualisation of postcolonial approaches as it does not reduce the empirical framework to a binary opposition between Europe and an "Other" or West and East, unlike various other definitions which limit the framework to the traditional European Empires (see Elam 2019). Another important dimension to postcolonial theory is highlighted by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne (2012), who stress the need to look beyond postcolonial thought as exclusively an academic discipline, but rather explore the practical implications of decolonisation, with a focus on social justice and avoiding attempts to simply 'reconcile settler guilt and complicity' (Tuck and Yang 2012, 1).

It is important here to consider the two terms "postcolonial" and "decolonial," as while they are often used interchangeably and certainly stem from common ground, scholars and

activists have discussed the divergence of these concepts, such as in the Special Issue of *Postcolonial Studies: Postcolonial Responses to Decolonial Interventions* (Colpani, Mascot, and Smiet 2022). Building on their writing, while postcolonial thought has been largely considered as a Eurocentric, academic discipline, decolonial theory is often seen to have radicalised this concept into tangible practice. Although some scholars, as Colpani, Mascot and Smiet (2022) discuss, have positioned these two concepts as opposing forces, in the context of this research, I understand the concept of decolonisation within Tuck and Wayne's (2012) framework, with the focus on practical implications and going beyond academic discussion. As a result of this I see postcolonial thought and decolonial practice as existing hand in hand, especially within the context of a museum.

Internationally, postcolonial studies and efforts to decolonise curricula and institutions have been gaining pace, particularly fuelled by the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement, which gained international attention following the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer in the United States in May 2020. These developments have heavily impacted memory studies regarding debates around which voices and which events should be commemorated or prioritised and whether to change, or more radically, even destroy existing commemorative sites. Events in Bristol in the United Kingdom in 2020, for example, illustrate these discussions when a statue of Edward Colston was toppled and pushed into the water by protesters (Farrer 2020). Colston was a slave trader who was born in the city and the statue had existed in Bristol since 1895 (Farrer 2020). While the group of protesters who engaged in pulling down the statue were ultimately cleared of criminal charges (BBC 2022), the events highlight how dynamic debates surrounding memory and commemoration have become. These debates go hand in hand with the concept of counter-monumentality, which stresses the 'vulnerability of memory' and the idea that monuments are places of contestation as much as cohesion (Osborne 2017).

Instances of public institutions returning (or deciding not to return, see Jenkins 2023) pieces of art or artefacts to their original homes are also a key part of these developments. In 2022, for example, the German government decided to return around 1,100 Benin Bronzes to Nigeria, which had been looted from the royal palace of the Kingdom of Benin (present-day Nigeria) and brought to Germany (Deutsche Welle 2022). While these instances of returning or refusing the return artefacts has often been confined to the major former imperial powers, such as France (see Surtees 2022), Germany and the United Kingdom, art researcher and head of KUMU in Estonia recalled in an interview the decision to return an Albrecht Dürer painting to Bremen museum which had been initially taken by Russian troops in World War II and then

seized by Estonian authorities, ending up in the Estonian Art Museum (ERR 2024). Events such as these have not only fuelled criticism and divisive debates but also simultaneously a demand to move towards a more critical engagement with the past, putting academic postcolonial thought into tangible decolonial practice, particularly in these public-facing institutions.

Strategies to more critically engage with the past, in particular with colonial and imperial pasts, have frequently been discussed, ideas that have often been tied to the museum. The United Kingdom's British Museum has often been at the centre of these conversations (and criticisms see Hicks 2020) due to discussions surrounding returning items to their respective countries of origin (Whittington 2022). At the same time, efforts to redesign the museum's exhibitions through a decolonial lens have also been documented, such as in the collaborative redesign of the museum's collection of objects from the Pacific islands (Tolia-Kelly and Raymond 2019). This redesign involved practices such as better contextualising displays, actively acknowledging the power dynamics inherent in displaying objects and commenting on another culture, and including experts from the community in question to assist with the design and help with captions and contextual information. One more unique feature of Tolia-Kelly and Raymond's project concerned the question of using glass displays to hold objects. They note that as for the Māori people placing objects, or *taonga* behind glass or in storerooms 'deadens' them, reducing them to mere artefacts (Tolia-Kelly and Raymond 2019, 10). The 'living relationship' between *taonga* and people is thus disrupted and ruptured. In the redesign of the exhibition this is taken into account and the glass barrier between *taonga* and viewer is removed (Tolia-Kelly and Raymond 2019, 9). Decolonial practices in this example therefore ranged from specific design choices to the research behind the exhibits, all of which plays an important role in sensitively handling this material.

Another such museum project was launched by Oxford University. Taking Neil MacGregor's *A History of the World in 100 Objects* as its inspiration, the online project *Soviet Central Asia in 100 Objects* explores the Central Asia region through various objects, ranging from monuments, to items of clothing, to jars of pickles (Cabinet, n.d.). Numerous scholars have contributed to the project in an attempt to paint a more diverse and accurate picture of the region as simultaneously multicultural and multilingual, while also highlighting the dialogue between its different regions and peoples. The decolonial nature of the project is helped by its digital nature, not only enabling submissions of a varying nature but also by using a crowdsourcing approach to gather artefacts, once again broadening the scope of the project. The exhibition is also not confined to objects that can be put behind glass but can encompass

large monuments and architecture, thereby painting a broader and more informed picture of the region. Like in Tolia-Kelly and Raymond's redesign mentioned above, by embracing this co-creation of knowledge between various scholars, volunteers and local people, this project resists falling into the trap of the typical power imbalance between exhibitor and the culture being exhibited, of coloniser and colonised. Furthermore, the inclusion of residents of the region to provide explanations and commentary makes sure that the project includes more diverse and accurate representations of the region.

Turning to the Baltic region and Estonia specifically, one exhibition which has recently brought postcolonial thought and museum practice into the spotlight was KUMU's aforementioned 2021 exhibition entitled "Rendering Race." The exhibition showcased works of art from the 1920s and 1930s from Estonia, selected from the museum's existing collection with a particular 'focus on race and racial difference' (Koobak and Tali 2023, 191). The curatorial decision to rename various pieces, replacing racist titles with more neutral titles, attracted widespread criticism, both in the Estonian media and in the political sphere. This decision can be seen as part of the effort to better explain artefacts or works so as to be able to exhibit these works 'in a manner that would not offend various communities' (Hellerma 2023). While some named this decision as yet another sign of so-called "cancel culture" (Koobak and Tali 2023, 197), it also highlights the challenges facing museums and public institutions to navigate these complex histories, juggling providing enough context and explanation with retaining the integrity of the work. KUMU's exhibition furthermore ignited heated discussions surrounding Estonia's past and identity as both a colonised territory and a benefiter from colonial practices,¹ an idea that will be further expanded on below.

These postcolonial processes and projects can be understood more generally as part of new museum theory, a field that formally emerged in 1989 but was crucially inspired by the Civil Rights movement (Marstine 2006, 6). The theory underlines the power relations inherent in museums, that 'though museum workers commonly naturalise their policies and procedures as professional practice, the decisions these workers make reflect underlying value systems that are encoded in institutional narratives' (Marstine 2006, 5). The theory thus is inherently postcolonial and emphasises giving agency to multiple voices and more critically engaging with the idea of the museum as an institution of authority. This critical eye that new museum

¹ This idea has also been discussed extensively in Latvia, see Gario, Gario and Koobak (2021) 'How to See the Spots of the Leopard. An interview with Quinsy Gario and Jörgen Gario.'

theory promotes will be crucial for this thesis and explored further with regards to the methodological decisions underpinning the research.

Before turning to discussion of postcolonial thought and practice within the context of the post-soviet space and Estonia specifically, it is important to briefly summarise how I understand a *postcolonial* museum to be and what can be considered *decolonial* museum practices as this forms a vital component of my analysis in the empirical chapter of this thesis. Crucial for the conceptualisation of these concepts is Ian Chambers et al.'s work (2016) *The Postcolonial Museum: The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History*. At the centre of their discussion of the postcolonial museum is the scrutinisation and redefinition of the relationship between 'Us' and 'Others' (Boursiquot 2016, 69). This idea focuses on resisting the reduction of a national narrative to a simplistic binary, but rather emphasises exploration of the complexities between histories and experiences, an idea explored in KUMU's aforementioned "Rendering Race" exhibition, which highlighted the complex web of colonial and postcolonial traces imbued in Estonia's national story. The dialogue between these different voices and communities within the museum relates not only to what particular items are displayed, but also where they are placed in the museum, whether multiple perspectives are offered, and also how the museum has accessed the material. Another example of a postcolonial approach to curating and exhibiting the Soviet past is the digital exhibition *Soviet Central Asia in 100 Objects*, which places a strong emphasis on expanding the voices involved in selecting the objects to showcase the history of twentieth-century Central Asia. Its mission to display a variety of material can be viewed as part of this postcolonial approach to promote dialogue, interaction, and a multiplicity of perspectives, themes that will be later explored in my own ethnographic analysis of ERM.

Another idea emphasised by Boursiquot (2016, 67) which is particularly pertinent for the European context is the negotiation of this 'Us' and 'Others' in favour of promoting a sense of belonging to something broader, in this case a 'European [...] sense of belonging'. Estonia's reintegration into Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union has meant that it has had to navigate its relationship to the idea of European identity and memory, something that KUMU's exhibition explores. Thus, curatorial decisions which suggest this belonging to something pan-European can be seen as another way in which this rigid colonial framework of 'Us' and 'Others' is overcome. This is not strictly a process of denationalising the country's narrative, but rather exploring a national narrative in which ideas of dialogue, diversity, and multiplicity of perspective are central. Curatorial decisions that realise these ideas, whether that be the choice of objects to display, the captions and information provided, as well as the

sources and experts used, can all be understood as grounded in postcolonial thought and crucially part of a museum's decolonial toolkit. These decisions make an active impact on public discussion and perspective, which supports the conceptualisation of decolonial practice as a tangible political force.

2.3. Postcolonialism in the post-Soviet Space

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has ignited discussions in the post-socialist/Soviet space² about the imperial legacies in the region. This trend is illustrated in the wealth of publications that have emerged since the start of the full-scale war concerning not only contemporary Russia's imperial tendencies, but also articles looking back at Russia's own imperial past. The central question regarding how to approach Russian and post-socialist studies nowadays is at the heart of these works. Victor Peppard (2023), for example, reflects on how he and his colleagues at the University of South Florida have navigated teaching Russian studies after the full-scale invasion. He notes the importance to scrutinise the imperial legacies inherent in Russian literature and culture both for the sake of understanding them better and for affording Ukraine its deserved status as a sovereign and independent actor. Olena Palko similarly reflects on the Russia-centric nature of scholarship about the history of the region, supporting a more critical and 'genuine epistemological shift [...] a true decolonisation of the field' (Palko 2023, 143). In the Baltic region specifically, especially following their accession to the EU in 2004, engagement with postcolonial thought has also gained traction, as will be discussed below.

Contemporary Russia's imperial ambitions and mindset has prompted more parallels to be drawn between the current situation and the Soviet era (Mälksoo 2023). Vladimir Putin's arguably most well-known quote lamenting the collapse of the Soviet Union as the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century" (NBC News 2005), appears to confirm the notion that the current conflict is an attempt to gain back the land lost following the collapse of the Union in 1991. Moreover, with groups such as the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), an extreme nationalist and imperial group, reportedly fighting against Ukraine in the conflict, it is impossible to ignore this imperial element (Webber and Bertina 2023). With this in mind, it

² It is important to mention that these terms are being used here in their geographical sense, i.e. countries that were formerly part of the Soviet Union or its puppet states. For discussion about the conceptual sense of these terms, see *Postcolonial and Postsocialist Dialogues* (Koobak, Tlostanova, and Thapar-Björkert 2021).

nowadays appears much less radical to firstly view the Soviet Union as an imperial structure and secondly to therefore approach the post-Soviet space and the Baltic states specifically with a postcolonial lens, and yet this was not always the case, as will be discussed specifically with the case of Estonia.

There is no doubt that Estonia itself has experienced various waves of colonisation, such as by the Swedish, the Germans and the Russians, as Epp Annus, an Estonian scholar who has been at the forefront of utilising postcolonial theory to approach the Baltic states and Estonia in particular outlines. Beginning with German and Danish crusaders in the thirteenth century, this began a pattern of centuries of foreign control, followed by Swedish rule in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and Imperial Russian control following the end of the Nordic war at the beginning of the eighteenth century (Annus 2017, 144). The most consistent presence in the region was that of the German ruling class, which ‘kept its privileged position and carried forward the colonial message of enlightenment’ (Annus 2017, 144). Even under Russian imperial rule, the German ruling class retained its position of relative power and influence and formed a relationship with the Russian powers, a phenomenon that in the nation-building process came to be understood as ‘*double-layered colonialism*’ (Annus 2017, 145). In addition to this, Estonia’s position as a relatively new nation, composed of different ethnic groups and with a centuries-long history of being governed by different colonial rulers also draws our attention to how this state nowadays handles its minority groups or whether it continues replicate some of the colonial tendencies that were practised by empires, an idea raised by Pieter M. Judson (Judson 2016, 446 and 451) in relation to the policies of the independent states which emerged in interwar Europe after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire. In the context of Estonia and Latvia specifically the controversial citizenship laws that were heavily criticised by the international community are another feature of this characterisation.³

Therefore, building on Annus’ idea of ‘*double-layered colonialism*’ (Annus 2017, 145) and also the concept of “entangled histories,” which emphasises ‘the interconnectedness of different cultures in the region’ (Koobak and Tali 2023, 192), I would argue that Estonia can be seen to experience a complex web of colonial legacies, a series of *colonial tangles*, which can be understood as existing across three levels. Firstly, Estonia as a victim of colonial powers, as discussed above. Secondly, the role Baltic Germans played in engaging with

³ See ‘The Effects of EU Conditionality on Citizenship Policies and Protection of National Minorities in the Baltic States’ (Gelazis 2003) for a comprehensive explanation of the Baltic states’ citizenship policies and the international, namely EU reaction to them.

colonial pursuits and thirdly, how various minority groups are navigated within independent Estonia itself. Moreover, engagement with these complex colonial and postcolonial dynamics has been brought to the fore as Estonia navigates its place in the European fold, whose memory landscape considers engagement with European colonial practices to be a key sphere.⁴

The experience of Estonians under different rulers, such as the Baltic Germans or imperial Russia are simpler to label as colonial. What has been more up for discussion is whether the Soviet period spanning from 1941–1991 should be considered another chapter in this story and thus whether postcolonial theory and ideas can be used to dissect it. There are various reasons as to why scholars have been historically somewhat reluctant or simply disinterested in applying postcolonial thought to the Baltic states. As discussed above, postcolonial theory had its roots in tackling the colonies of western empires. Russia therefore ‘did not fit into this picture’ and paid little attention by these scholars (Annus 2012, 24). Another reason for this reluctance to explore the post-Soviet region with a postcolonial lens comes from what Samalavičius (2023, 17) has called an ‘inherent bias in postcolonial studies.’ As a vast majority of scholars involved in postcolonial studies sympathised with left-of-centre political views, often associated with Marxism, there was a reluctance amongst these individuals to include Russia and the Soviet Union under this label, thus meaning that scholarship was slow to begin to scrutinise the Soviet era in this way. In addition to this, internal attitudes of Baltic citizens also influenced this position. Kelertas (2006, 4) notes that Balts often resisted the label itself, preferring not to be seen as ‘colonised peoples’ but wanting to be ‘with the “civilised” part of the world.’ In the years that followed independence in 1991 this re-assertion of a European identity and culture was central in all three of the Baltic states (Kalnačs 2015, 64). Being seen as a colonised people was thus ‘unflattering, if not humiliating’ (Kelertas 2006, 4).

Moving from the colonised to the coloniser, Annus (2017, 69) is also clear to highlight the role of Russia itself in stalling the development of postcolonial studies in the post-Soviet space. Russian official history continues to promote the idea that the Russian Empire and later Soviet rule brought modernisation and ‘enlightenment to the benighted populations on its frontiers’ (Annus 2017, 69). Nevertheless, this perspective combined with the growth of imperial practices under Putin particularly since 2014 and more urgently since 2022 makes approaching this region with a postcolonial lens arguably more urgent than ever before (Pucherová and Gáfrik 2015 12).

⁴ See Claus Leggewie’s (2008) discussion on the Seven Circles of Pan-European Memory.

Writing in 2002, at a time when applying postcolonial theory to the Baltic states was more radical, Kārlis Račevskis (2002) makes a strong case for using a colonial perspective to understand the Soviet era by analysing Soviet literature. Račevskis argues that the suffering and hardship as documented in the literature of the time makes a convincing case to view the period as colonial and should thus be treated as such. Writing ten years later, Annus (2012, 37) presents a slightly more nuanced argument, distinguishing between occupation and colonisation, that while the Soviets initially occupied the territories, this developed over time into a 'period of colonial rule, as the modes of resistance turned into a hybrid coexistence with the new power.' Piret Peiker (2016) also strongly advocates for the use of a postcolonial lens to understand the region. In her article she raises the crucial connection between nationalism, national identity and postcolonialism, arguing that Baltic nationalism would be 'qualitatively better understood' with the help of a postcolonial perspective (Peiker 2016, 113).

This relationship is particularly pertinent for this study of ERM and how it presents national narratives. A postcolonial lens which considers not only Estonia's long existence as a colonised territory, but also highlights the complex web of coloniser-colonised relationships enables us to better understand Estonia's relationship to its past, present and future. In the context of museums and the ERM specifically, by considering Estonia's memory culture with a postcolonial lens, a deeper understanding of the narratives can be gained. In addition to this, considering the current climate, this framework might provide some indication of how Estonia's memory landscape may respond and how this might intersect with issues of national identity.

2.4. Conclusion

To conclude, for the purpose of this thesis memory is understood as a highly constructed and malleable phenomenon that can be created and manipulated for political and national use. What is important for this study is not what events happened but rather how they have been internalised and shaped into narratives. This idea of the constructed memory narratives will form the backbone of my own ethnographic observational analysis and also informs my decision to look beyond the museum's exhibition and explore the decision-making behind it. This project was inspired by the growing trend in scholarship, both regionally and worldwide, to apply a postcolonial lens to our exploration of national memory and so these aforementioned patterns and practices will therefore be explored in relation to the chosen case-study.

3. The Museum as a Site of Memory Making

Having explored and unpacked the concepts of mnemohistory, narrative and postcolonial theory, this chapter will now explore where these concepts will be applied. The field of memory studies can be investigated in a variety of ways, from school textbooks (Pääbo 2014), monuments (Niven and Paver 2010), to legal regulations (Brants and Klep 2013), and video games (Matei 2015). With regards to this thesis, the role of the museum as a site of memory making and dissemination will be studied. Museums play a key role in a country's memory politics. These public institutions, especially ones funded by the state as is the case in this project's case-study, present an opportunity to explore current debates and discussions in memory politics. Influenced by both academic and political discussion, museums are important sites of both the expression and negotiation of national identity. In order to understand the key role the museum plays in the field of memory politics this chapter will explore the literature on museums as memory institutions. This chapter will tackle this literature, starting from the broadest to the most specific. Work on museums and their role more generally will initially be considered and then literature about the post-socialist sphere will be discussed. The case of Estonia and its museums specifically will then be discussed, with a particular focus on the ERM. It is hoped that this approach will illustrate not only how Estonian memory studies fits into its broader European and post-socialist context, but also highlight areas that have been somewhat neglected and deserve more attention.

2.1. The Museum as a Memory Institution

The role museums play within the field of memory studies has been noted by various scholars, highlighting that they do not simply display memories but play a crucial role in their construction (Ivanova 2003, 17). They should be understood not only as 'retainers of some form of collective memory' (Stainforth 2017, 323), but active participants in its construction. Anderson (2008, 178) likewise stresses the role of the museum alongside the role of the census and the map in the official construction of "imagined communities," particularly in colonial spaces, emphasising the inherently political nature of museums. This idea is particularly pertinent for the discussion of national museums and the construction of a collective national consciousness (eg. Brown and Davis-Brown 1998), an idea that will be explored below.

The role the museum plays in society has undergone various changes. Originating from the Ancient Greek term *mouseion*, literally “site of the Muses,” ‘a temple dedicated to the nine mythological Greek goddesses of the arts,’ the museum has come to represent a wide scope of issues, from education to politics (Brecknell 2023), with Bukovská (2020, 4) defining their role as ‘acquisition, conservation, research, communication and exhibition of the material and immaterial heritage of humanity and its environment.’ With regards to memory, museums are at the forefront of both the preservation of material and the construction of memories. Museums do not simply collect and curate collections of objects that represent a people or a community, they also take part in ‘constructing the community itself’ (Seljamaa 2021, 91). What is crucial here to note is the institutional element to this construction, particularly in those museums attached to or funded by the state.

Both Emilia Pawłusz (2021) and Richard Harvey Brown and Beth Davis-Brown (1998) emphasise the importance of understanding these power relations when examining museums and that the museum ‘is an institution of power and the process of exhibiting is embedded in and reflecting power relations’ (Bennett (1998) and Knell (2014) in Pawłusz 2021, 76). In a similar vein, in their discussion of archives and museums Harvey Brown and Davis-Brown (1998, 18) note the inherently political nature of curating and archiving, emphasising the ‘explicitly political’ element of these activities. They note that while museums are typically seen as representing an objective truth, ‘each truth has a varying degree of intersubjective validity and of public legitimacy, which is established or manufactured through processes laden with power’ (Brown and Davis-Brown 1998, 22). The authors also note the various constraints, both financial and practical, that guide the decisions made in museums, which also have a vital influence on this institutional memory making (Brown and Davis-Brown 1998, 18). Museums are thus inherently political sites of memory making, making them an interesting medium to study. They perform an active role in both the preservation of memory and the construction of it and importantly are not free from political influence and constraints, but rather play a crucial role in contributing to ‘social stability and security’ (Brown and Davis-Brown 1998, 19) and nation-building. Moreover, with my interest in the formation of narrative, museums due to their dynamic and comprehensive nature are a fitting medium of study, more so than monuments, for example, which are more static and typically have a narrower focus (Gibson 2016, 46).

3.2. National Museums

National museums specifically play a central role in this institutionalised memory making. The importance of these institutions for new nations in particular cannot be ignored, as Kavita Singh (2002, 176) writes with regards to India following the end of British rule: ‘along with the national anthem, the national emblem, the national festival, a nation needs its national library, its national archive, and its national museum.’ More generally, Peggy Levitt (2015, 5) in her comprehensive study of national museums across Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and the United States notes the important role national museums play in how a nation is perceived: ‘museum displays influence how the nation and its place in the world get imagined, even among people who never step inside their doors.’

Both Levitt and Singh note the influence of European imperial museums on how national museums have typically been constructed, with Levitt (2015, 1) commenting that the opening of the Louvre in Paris to the public in 1793 marked the beginning of museums playing ‘a starring role in producing and representing the nation.’ In his study of the National Museum of India, Singh (2002) illustrates a distinction between the role national museums historically performed in imperial Europe and the role they play in new nations. While in Europe, according to Singh they were created to represent ‘world dominance,’ in the new nations they were ‘required as shrines to the *national* culture, confining their scope to artefacts produced through the ages but within the boundaries of the modern state’ (Singh 2002, 177). These institutions, through their collections of various objects, stories and documents associated with a national culture ‘help to store and create modern “imagined communities”’ (Brown and Davis-Brown 1998, 20). They play a key role in the preservation and creation of the ‘collective memory of [a] nation as a people’ (Brown and Davis-Brown 1998, 30), a key reason for why the museum as an institution can play such a significant role in decolonising a nation. Singh (2002, 194) even goes on to argue that in the context of the National Museum of India it is not the specific contents of a national museum which actually makes it national but rather ‘by the simple fact of its establishment in its particular place, in its particular place in time, the National Museum’s symbolic meaning was strong enough to serve as an assertion of India as a sovereign land.’ Thus, the establishment of a national museum in itself is a political act of decolonising narratives, a symbolic act of taking agency over one’s past, once again confirming the museum as a dynamic force of inherently political memory making.

3.3. Post-socialist Museums

As has been discussed, the establishment of national museums played a key role in nation-building and asserting a new identity in so-called new nations. This was very much the case for the nations that gained or regained their independence following the collapse of Berlin Wall in 1989 and the Soviet Union later in 1991. These seismic shifts had a profound impact on memory studies as a whole, launching new academic enquiries into the past and presenting nations with the practical task of working through the past to forge an identity and a future. These discussions even extended into the legal sphere with processes of transitional justice to try and officially deal with the past. This occurred in the Baltic states, for example in Lithuania with the passing of law denoting criminal sanctions for those convicted of involvement in “genocide” in 1992 (Pettai and Pettai 2015, 3). After the collapse of the socialist ideology, many states turned to a ‘national ideology’ and this needed a ‘new history’ and ‘new official memory’ (Ivanova 2003, 18). The post-Soviet and post-socialist spaces thus became a crucial stage on which negotiations and battles of memories would take place.

A great deal of attention has been paid in scholarship to the museums of Central and Eastern Europe and how they curate their socialist past. With this in mind, it is important to note that this process of processing and reconsidering the past began before the actual collapse of the Soviet Union, during the periods of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. Ivanova in her study of two museums in the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv notes how the heroes of earlier narratives began to be presented as ‘victims of movements and so-called victories,’ leading to the emergence of a new ‘narrative template of victimhood’ in Ukrainian memory culture (Ivanova 2003, 18). The actual collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the new independent states thus could build on these pre-existing changes in their search for a new collective memory culture.

Karolína Bukovská (2020) explores, for example, the museums of the post-socialist space in her case-study analysis of Prague’s Museum of Communism. Bukovská’s article explores the disconnect the Czech population have with the museum’s portrayal of the Communist era as “Communist kitsch” (Bukovská 2020), highlighting the fine line museum authorities must toe between profit and narrative. Museums, and particularly those representing a national narrative, are thus inherently contested spaces that illustrate not only the diverse range of stories and experiences of a population, but also how the narratives preferred by the population may not match those chosen by curators and museum directors. All of these studies demonstrate that the challenges facing these new states to forge and build their new identities

and collective memory are ongoing and contested. The geopolitical events of 1989 and 1991 may have brought these negotiations to the fore but they are far from over. On top of this, contemporary Russia's actions towards its immediate neighbours and the wider world only fuels these discussions more.

3.4. The Case of the Baltic States and Estonia

Looking at the Baltic states more specifically, the various occupation museums of the three countries have been central in the literature on museums and memory. Ljiljana Radonić (2017) has analysed memorial museums in Europe, for example, paying special attention to the occupation museums of Tallinn and Riga. Radonić analyses these museums in their European context, exploring the role memory plays in European integration. Radonić's (2017) work highlights the fact that these discussions and issues of memory and representation are ongoing. Nation-building and identity-building are not issues fixed in time. While many of these discussions were prompted by the collapse of the Soviet Union and then the accession of various post-socialist countries into the European Union, they continue to be negotiated to the present day, reminding us of Pääbo's (2011, 252) aforementioned definition of national memory as a 'politically malleable phenomenon and its alterations reflect changes in the political dimension.'

Aro Velmet (2011) also provides a comprehensive comparative study of the occupation museums of Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius. Velmet in his analysis of the three museums concludes that they represent three varying approaches to curating the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states; Estonia with a more academic, conservative approach, Latvia with a more modern, dynamic approach and Lithuania opting for a more commercial strategy (Velmet 2011). While Velmet's article is somewhat outdated now, as Tallinn's museum underwent a complete redesign in 2015, Velmet's work shows how diverse approaches to curating this period are. He also pays heed to various controversies in his analysis, demonstrating the difficulty in creating a homogeneous national narrative (Velmet 2011, 196), commenting that the museums in their efforts to present the Soviet era often 'reproduce exclusive notions of ethnicity and nationalism' (Velmet 2011, 190), a trap that that Tallinn's museum in its reorganised form would try and overcome.

Tallinn's museum, now called the Museum of Occupations and Freedom/*Okupatsioonide ja vabaduse muuseum Vabamu* (Vabamu), has received considerable

attention following its renovation after its management changed in 2015. Nevertheless, these changes were far from controversy-free. Pääbo and Eva-Clarita Pettai (2019) note that even the quest to find a new name for the museum attracted criticism and discussion. Even before the change of management the suggestion to change the museums' name to 'Museum of Freedom' reportedly attracted a great deal of backlash from 'representatives of victim organisations who saw the re-naming as a disavowal of their memories' (E.-C. Pettai and Pääbo 2019). This highlights how generational divisions continue to impact the formation of national memory. Pääbo and Pettai (2019) describe and analyse the contents and structure of the new museum, comparing and contrasting the new exhibition with the previous one. They report a heavy emphasis on the different ways in which individuals in Estonia experienced the occupations (Nazi and Soviet). The new museum also includes a greater emphasis on the Nazi crimes that were committed in Estonia, a decision which can be seen as a direct response to the criticism the older conception of the museum faced that the Nazi crimes were only included to show that the Soviet crimes were worse (E.-C. Pettai and Pääbo 2019). While the authors mainly praise the museum's reflexive approach and attempts to include various voices and perspectives, they do note some areas in which certain voices (eg. Russian-speakers) are somewhat neglected (E.-C. Pettai and Pääbo 2019), highlighting the difficulty in presenting a narrative in which all voices are heard, and all visitors can therefore relate to.

Pääbo's and Pettai's article, through comparing different versions of the exhibitions, engages greatly with one of the dominant conceptualisations of Baltic and also European memory issues, namely the tension or similarities between the two totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century – the Nazi regime and the Soviet regime. In memory studies these discussions come under the concept of 'competitive memory,' as explored by Michael Rothberg (2011, 523), the idea that 'memories crowd each other out of the public sphere.' Rothberg (2011) explores the interaction of symbols and visuals of the Holocaust in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, showing how language such as the term genocide and certain imagery can be invoked to draw parallels between traumas. In the case of the Baltic states and in various other post-Soviet countries this "competitiveness" has often been noted between representations of the Soviet regime and its crimes and the Nazi regime and its crimes. These countries have faced criticism for either ignoring or avoiding discussions regarding the Nazi regime and the Holocaust.

Scholar Anton Weiss-Wendt (2008), for example, has probed this attitude in exploring the Estonia's role during the German occupation. In Estonia discussions around the country's role during this occupation have been central in its own domestic memory battles, as

exemplified by the riots following the removal of the Bronze Soldier statue in 2007 (Burch and Zander 2010). At a more regional level, negotiating these two totalitarian regimes in Estonian memory politics has also been central for its return to the European fold in joining the EU and NATO in 2004, as discussed by Radonić (2017). While it was also crucial for post-communist countries to convince other EU member states to condemn communist crimes to the same extent as those of the Holocaust, Radonić (2017, 271) has noted that ‘narratives of Nazi occupation are often used to frame an anti-communist interpretation of history that even depicts Communism as the greater evil,’ a phenomenon that the newly refurbished *Vabamu* in Tallinn tried to overcome.

Depictions of the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century undoubtedly play a crucial role in contemporary Estonian identity and yet are often treated in isolation. This thesis aims to broaden the empirics and consider the role previous periods of colonialism also play in the construction of memory and how these diverse elements are handled in Estonia’s memory making. This *longue-durée* approach to examining the curation of history is one utilised by Catherine Gibson (2016) in her work on Latvia, in which she examines variations in narratives curated by three museums. Like ERM, the subject of this thesis, Gibson examines two museums not located in Latvia’s capital and also moves beyond the boundaries of the twentieth century, which has often been the focus of memory studies in the region.

3.5. *Eesti Rahva Muuseum*

With regards to Estonia’s national museum specifically, a great deal of both scholarly and journalistic attention has been given to the institution, particularly following its redesign which concluded in 2016. The museum’s architecture, a collaborative project by a Paris-based international team of young architects (Seljamaa 2021, 77) dominated discussions around the museum, attracting criticism and praise both domestically and internationally. Kara Brown (2018), for example, traces the history of the museum site and the significance of the building and design, more of which will be discussed later. One of the central works surrounding the ERM comes from Pille Runnel and Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt (2014), entitled *Democratising the Museum, Reflections on Participatory Technologies*. While this project, which compiled a range of studies approaching the question of ‘how participation can support museums in the process of becoming more open’ (Runnel and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt 2014, 9), was published before the opening of the new ERM, it comprehensively documents various

discussions and issues facing the design of the new museum and its permanent exhibition, *Encounters*.

While the main structure and concept of the permanent exhibition has not been changed since its opening in 2016 (Interview 1 2024), thereby not triggering a wealth of new work on it, some scholars have tackled it more recently, such as Elo-Hanna Seljamaa (2021) and Emilia Pawłusz (2021). Pawłusz (2021), for example, draws a comparison between the two exhibitions at the ERM. While in her analysis of *Encounters* she notes the changes the museum has made with regards to its inclusion of minority voices and less ethnocentric narrative, she notes that the museum's other permanent exhibition *Echo of the Urals* 'echoes primordialism and nationalism' (Pawłusz 2021, 84). 'Contrary to *Encounters*, the Finno-Ugric exhibition does not challenge the nineteenth century approaches to ethnicity, nor does it seek to contextualise the vast collection of Finno-Ugric artefacts in the political and social context of the twenty-first century' (Pawłusz 2021, 84).

Seljamaa (2021) also places the representation of minorities and inclusivity at the heart of her research of ERM. To achieve this, she combines her own observational analysis with data collected from a few informal conversations and correspondence with curators at the ERM to explore how issues of diversity and minorities are explored in the museum's *Encounters* exhibit. Seljamaa (2021, 76) notes the crucial role national museums play in nation-building and highlights their inherently political nature. While she praises some of the museum's attempts to include more diverse groups of voices, she takes issue with some of the curation choices, such as the treatment of Coastal Swedes and Old Believers (Seljamaa 2021, 83-84). Seljamaa's (2021, 76) work offers an interesting insight into how the museum had to react to match the more inclusive political agenda prompted by joining the European Union and various other global initiatives, illustrating how museums, and particularly national museums are far from neutral spaces. With this in mind, although this text was only written three years ago, published in 2021, a lot has changed and we find ourselves in a categorically different world, particularly in Europe. 2024 thus is an important time to explore the state of the national narrative. Moreover, this study aims to take a more holistic approach to its exploration of the ERM's *Encounters* exhibition and also places it within the ever-expanding world of postcolonial scholarship.

4. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology used in this thesis. First of all, the overall research design of the project is discussed, including the decision process behind the case selection as well as some important contextual information about the chosen museum. Following this, the specific methods for data collection and analysis are introduced, namely the decision to combine expert interviews with my own observations of the content and structure of the museum. As this project involves human participants and personal data, various important ethical considerations are then considered. Lastly, some limitations relevant for the project are then mentioned.

4.1. Research Design

This project utilises a single case-study of the *Eesti Rahva Muuseum* (ERM) to explore how museum practices contribute to the formation of the national narrative in Estonia. In particular, it focuses on whether, in light of the growing salience of postcolonial approaches to East European history and memory studies, approaches to curating the past in Estonia are changing and, if so, whether Russia's declaration of imperial ambitions following the February 2022 full-scale invasion has had any discernible influence on these mnemonic practices. Following John S. Odell's (2001, 163) discussion of types of case-studies, this research largely aims to be a preliminary illustration of how postcolonial approaches can be applied to museum practices in Estonia in order to put 'concrete flesh on the bare bones of an abstract idea in order to help readers see its meaning more clearly, and to convince them that the idea is relevant to at least one significant real-world instance.'

Scholars have often treated single case-studies with a certain level of suspicion (Gerring 2007, 93), despite the fact that 'much of what we know about the empirical world has been generated by case studies' (Gerring 2007, 93). Single case-studies boast various advantages. They allow a greater amount of data to be recorded than in comparative or large-N studies (Odell 2001, 171), promoting a deep rather than broad level of enquiry (Gerring 2007, 105). The level of detail acquired in a case-study is thus much greater than in a large-N project, as Gerring (2007, 106) describes: 'case studies are thus rightly identified with "holistic" analysis and with the "thick" description of events.' In addition to this, in the context of this project,

ERM is a large institution, boasting a sizeable collection of objects and artefacts. Conducting this research as a single case-study thus enabled more time to be dedicated to exploring this institution and its collections and also to speaking to the people that work there. While conducting a comparative study was considered, it was ultimately deemed unsuitable and ruled out. While Estonia does boast a number of museums, the size and scope of ERM is truly unique, with other museums opting to focus on one time period, such as the *Vabamu* Museum of Occupations and Freedom, or on one theme, such as the Estonian War Museum. A systematic comparison was thus not possible as these museums lacked parity.

The issue of time frame should also be highlighted here. While my research seeks to broaden the empirics and look more holistically at Estonian memory culture, this project aims to capture and understand Estonia's memory language through its national museum in the year 2024. Two years on from the full-scale invasion, 2024 presents a crucial time to assess the state's memory landscape. While enough time has thus passed for developments to be visible, there is every chance that the situation will develop quickly in a different direction which could heavily impact the role and message of public institutions like ERM. Nevertheless, this thesis seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the foundational trends and features of Estonia's memory culture that are unlikely to disappear even amid great geopolitical changes.

4.2. Case Selection

As discussed previously, national museums play a crucial role in the maintenance and construction of a people's collective memory. Therefore, while Estonia boasts a number of museums, differing in scale and scope, ERM is arguably the most important site of institutionalised national memory. ERM has performed this role for over one hundred years and has – and continues to – play a central role in Estonian identity- and nation-building. For this reason, it is an ideal case to study for this investigation into national memory in Estonia.

Estonia's national museum has a long and intricate history, both as a museum institution and a historical site in and of itself. It is worth spending some time considering this background as it plays an important role informing the work of ERM today. Established in 1909, the museum defines itself as a 'memory institution,' linked to the national movement (Eesti Rahva Muuseum 2017). The museum was intimately linked to the University of Tartu and worked to preserve and document ethnographic material (Eesti Rahva Muuseum 2017). At this stage the museum did not have a permanent base but was housed in various buildings. Despite this,

following the establishment of an independent Estonian Republic the museum gained its own permanent building on the Raadi manor site, which was opened in 1927 (Eesti Rahva Muuseum 2017). Nevertheless, this was then destroyed by the Soviet bombing of the city in 1943 (K. Brown 2018) and the collections moved elsewhere. During the Soviet period the Raadi manor site became the home of a military airbase, turning the city of Tartu into a closed city and transforming the site into a ‘poignant metaphor for the overall situation Estonia had found itself in during the fifty years of Soviet rule’ (Runnel, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, and Tatsi 2014, 22). The presence of the airfield would come to play a significant role in the museum’s return to the Raadi site.

Even before the collapse of the Soviet Union there were calls from within Estonia to return the museum to the Raadi site, calls that were met when in 1989 the Soviet army partially withdrew and the ‘land was appropriated for the ‘Estonian National Museum at Raadi’ (Runnel, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, and Tatsi 2014, 22), demonstrating the museum’s close tie to the national movement. Following Estonia’s restoration of independence in 1991, it was decided by the government in 2003 to rebuild the museum on the Raadi site, a move that was hailed as a return home (Brown 2018).

The building the museum is currently housed in, which was completed in 2016, continues to attract a great deal of attention. What is important to note is that this is a purpose-built structure, built with the political history of the site in mind. The building was designed by a Paris-based international team of architects who won the competition to design the new museum site (Seljamaa 2021, 77). The design embeds the site’s past as a Soviet airbase, incorporating the runway as a core part of the museum as a ‘built allegory for the country’s emerging history’ (Brown 2018). The centrality of the Soviet period in the building’s architecture attracted a great deal of criticism, as noted by Runnel, Tatsi and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt (2014, 24): ‘it had seemed unthinkable that the Soviet occupation could be part of the discourse on Estonian identity’ and yet nevertheless the inclusion of this period of the land’s history reinforces the institution’s mission as a ‘memory institution.’

4.3. Methods

As for specific methods, this project combines both my own analysis of the museum and expert interviews with various employees from ERM. While the museum boasts two permanent exhibitions; its larger exhibition *Encounters* and *Echo of the Urals*, a smaller exhibition of the

languages and cultures of the Finno-Ugric peoples, this thesis will focus primarily on the former. While *Echo of the Urals* provides an in-depth exploration of the languages and cultures of the Finno-Ugric peoples, this exhibition moves beyond the boundaries of the Estonian nation and thus for the purpose of exploring issues of national memory in Estonia does not represent a comprehensive insight into the construction of the national master narrative, but rather explores one specific element of the national story. Nevertheless, references to this second exhibition did occur during my literature review and in interviews and therefore did help shape my overall perception of the museum.

New Museum Theory (see Marstine 2006), as discussed previously, and especially Margaret Lindauer's (2006) notion of the "Critical Museum Visitor" underpins my choice of research methods and approach to data collection at the museum. Lindauer's approach provides a guide to visiting a museum which encompasses considerations of the building itself, the museum's mission statement, the order of the collection, the captions written, amongst other features. Her strategy encourages the individual to be reflective and critical:

the critical museum visitor, who studies how the visual, written, and spatial features of an exhibition collectively implicate an ideal visitor. This is entirely different from assessing actual audience reactions and characterising the typical visitor. The critical museum visitor notes what objects are presented, in what ways, and for what purposes. She or he also explores what is left unspoken or kept off display. And she or he asks, who has the most to gain or the most to lose from having this information, collection, or interpretation publicly presented? (Lindauer 2006, 204)

I made a total of five visits to ERM over a span of eight months. Three of these visits were made more for leisure and initial planning of the research and then two were explicitly for data gathering. Separate visits were then made for conducting interviews. Following Lindauer's guidance, I made sure to look at the museum website, its mission statement and history of the site prior to these visits. Taking inspiration from Samuel A Smith's (Smith 2016) work on the History Colorado Center, while visiting ERM special attention was paid to the use of space and namely how the use of space informs what narratives are told. The captions of displays and exhibits were also particularly focused on, which was helped by the museum's innovative display of text. ERM has been commended for its modern approach to curation and exhibiting (Visionect 2016). The museum's use of e-ink displays throughout the exhibition enables captions to be instantly translated into a chosen language and for these texts to then be

saved through the use of a personalised QR-code on their ticket. In general, for my data collection in the museum I recorded my observations through a combination of photos (some of which are included in this thesis) and by jotting fieldwork notes and reflections on my observations down on my phone. I also made notes on the map of the exhibition that was given to me. For the text and captions in the exhibition, I then utilised the QR-code system through the museum's "Take the Museum Home" (Eesti Rahva Muuseum, n.d.) function to read and save the pieces of text I had recorded while at the museum.

Following Brown and Davis-Brown's (1998, 22) conceptualisation of curation as an inherently political process 'laden with power,' including interviews into my methodological framework was a crucial way to explore these processes and get behind the scenes of the museum. Conducting expert interviews could thus contribute greatly to a better understanding of the decision-making and discussions that shape this 'memory institution' (Stainforth 2017), dynamics which would otherwise not be apparent from conducting an observational ethnographic study of the museum alone. The pool from which to find interview participants was relatively small. While a number of different people work in museums, for the purpose of this research I wanted to speak with people who were and are involved in the creation of the *Encounters* exhibition in some way. Those who worked in roles such as in research, education, curation or collections roles were thus focused on. In addition to this, individuals who had worked at ERM during the museum's transition period were also preferred, which also narrowed the pool somewhat. Potential interviewees were contacted initially informally, making use of the e-mail addresses published on the museum's website. While I did not intend to utilise snow-ball sampling (Small 2005, 167) for this research, in some cases this did naturally occur with individuals also recommending their colleagues, which helped create a more comprehensive list of participants.

Ultimately nine individuals at the ERM were contacted and five agreed to be interviewed, this included a senior researcher, the research secretary, the education centre manager, a community relations officer and a curator. All of these individuals had worked at the museum during its redesign in 2016. In some cases individuals declined to take part but recommended their colleagues or also recommended a colleague during their interview. In total therefore five interviews were conducted over a two-week period of time. The interviews all took place at the museum itself and lasted between thirty minutes and just over an hour. A full list of the interview schedule can be seen in Appendix 1.

The interviews were semi-structured and consisted of a mixture of open and closed questions. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to help reflect the different specialities of

the participants and to provide them with a certain amount of freedom to elaborate. The closed questions would enable clear factual information to be retrieved while the open questions allow participants the space to expand and ‘tell stories’ (Roulston and Halpin 2022, 676). Interviews can also be unpredictable and so a rough pilot interview with a friend was conducted in advance to try and iron out any problems. In addition, this provided the opportunity to test out the recording equipment and check for sound quality. The broad themes covered in the interviews were also shared with the participants before the interviews took place (see Appendix 2). This provided the participants the opportunity to not only ask any questions but also prepare somewhat in advance. This was particularly helpful for participants who were less confident speaking English as they could prepare some thoughts and phrases in advance, thus making the interviews as productive as possible.

4.4. Analysis

Following the interviews transcriptions were made from the recordings. I made all of the transcriptions manually and on completion destroyed the original recordings. Textual data from the museum itself was collated by using the QR-code system on the museum ticket. By scanning the ticket on the screens in the museum, individuals can save particular captions and view them at home. This system meant I did not have to write down individual captions as I visited the museum but rather could curate my own bank of text as I completed my visit. Text from the museum’s official website, including its declared mission, development plan and aims also formed a core part of this bank of textual material.

Key words or sets of words were then extracted from these textual sources by coding them by theme, following the principles of thematic analysis (Fugard and Potts 2020). Riger and Sigurvinsdottir (2015, 33) define thematic analysis as a ‘interpretive, inductive process of identifying themes in a textual data set.’ It is important to note that for this research the term ‘text’ is understood more broadly, following a more poststructuralist understanding of the term, as ‘anything that carries the discourse’ (Dunn and Neumann 2016, 3). In the context of this thesis this includes artefacts, audio-visual displays, layout of the museum and the building itself. These ‘texts’ were also approached with themes in mind and categorised accordingly.

In some cases these themes were decided on before data collection began, but for the most part an inductive approach to thematic coding was taken. The choice to use thematic analysis was informed by the idea of narrative templates (Wertsch 2012), as discussed in

chapter two. Elements from Tamm's (2008) "Great Battle for Freedom" template and Ivanova's (2003) schematic narrative template of victimhood template, for example, were considered in this thematic analysis as well as more general ideas of freedom, victimhood, strength, inclusion/exclusion, pride, diversity, amongst others. My interpretivist lens was particularly crucial when analysing textual material as was Brubaker's (2013) distinction between categories of analysis (as used by scholars) and categories of practice (as used by everyday people). In some instances, it was therefore key to look beyond the specific words the museum or interviewees used but rather delve deeper into the meaning behind the words.

4.5. Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues were considered throughout the process of designing and conducting this research, particularly as human subjects were involved. Research ethics covers a wide manner of issues and is generally seen to concern how research participants are treated. Anna Traianou lists key issues relating to this, such as 'minimising harm, respecting people's autonomy, and preserving their privacy' (Traianou 2014, 62). While some of these issues are more complex in medical research for example, where 'minimising harm' could relate to avoiding physical harm by administering new medications, these issues are still relevant in qualitative research, especially when people and their personal data are concerned. Although this project deals with public figures and is therefore classed as technically exempt from needing formal permission from the institution,⁵ it is still very important to discuss some of the ethical considerations at play.

Before starting this research any potential risks to participants were considered and mitigation strategies devised. As has been mentioned, while this project is low-risk there was still the chance that somewhat controversial or upsetting themes could arise, such as issues in the workplace or the current political climate. With this in mind, the entire process, from first contact with participants to the interviews themselves was approached with a high level of respect and transparency. Participants were given the time and space to ask questions and as a researcher, I was prepared to abort or reschedule interviews if it was clear that was needed.

⁵ Classified as exempt according to UCL Research Ethics Committee: "Research involving the use of educational tests, surveys, and interview procedures on human participants in the public arena (e.g. elected or appointed public officials, candidates for public office, artists)." See <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/research-ethics/do-i-need-ethical-approval>

The question of privacy was also an important consideration for this thesis. While a lot of research stresses anonymity, for this study it was preferred that occupations were noted as for this thesis I am conducting expert interviews with museum workers about their professional activities. This was primarily because complete anonymity was virtually impossible to achieve. As this thesis conducts a case-study analysis of one museum, the pool of people with which to talk and gain insight from is already very small. Moreover, a list of employees and their job titles (and even their professional contact details) can already be found in the public domain. Participants were given the option to retract their name or occupation from the thesis although it was stressed to participants that complete anonymity is unlikely due to the small nature of the industry and museum in question. One possible issue that was considered was if the interviews were to reveal disputes with employers, museum officials or the government. In this case I would actively offer to deepen the anonymity in my reporting. Nevertheless, due to the generally unproblematic nature of the topics in question, fully maintaining the privacy of individuals was not anticipated as a significant problem.

Traianou's (2014, 62) principle of 'respecting people's autonomy' is linked to the idea of *informed consent* which underpins credible, ethical research. Rose Wiles defines informed consent as the principle of 'providing participants with clear information about what participating in a research project will involve and giving them the opportunity to decide whether or not they want to participate' (Wiles 2012, 6). With this in mind, for this study participants were introduced to the topic of the thesis right from the start of the process when they were contacted by email. Once participants had initially agreed to take part, a longer email was sent with more information about the topic; a sample email pertaining to this can be found in Appendix 3. Following this, to ensure *informed consent* was obtained for this thesis a comprehensive Participant Information Sheet was created (see Appendix 4) which thoroughly outlined each step of the process, such as how data would be recorded, what would happen with the data and where it would be published. The form also gave participants contact details and the opportunity to ask questions if any clarification was needed. On the day of the interviews, consent was then recorded in written form using a Consent Form (see Appendix 5). This form asked participants to agree to various clauses, including the date before which they can retract their information from the study and importantly also asked for consent to be recorded for ease of data collection, amongst other issues. Both of these forms were circulated to participants in advance of the interview and then hard-copy versions were given to the participants so they could read them again at their leisure. Both of these documents ensured that participants were aware of what data would be collected, how it would be collected and

how and where it would be used and also provided them with the opportunity to ask questions or raise any issues.

4.6. Limitations

As with any research project it is important to also consider the limitations to this thesis. The most obvious being the issue of language; I do not speak Estonian and while the level of English proficiency is very high in Estonia, it is important to note that this is still not the mother tongue of the participants with whom I needed to speak with. Language barriers are frequently noted as an obstacle in research and one that can greatly impinge reliability and credibility of studies (see Squires 2009). Underqualified translators or issues with interpreters, for example, can interfere with data collection and harm results. For this study I was therefore lucky to be able to conduct my interviews in English, without the need for a translator. Nevertheless, the fact that participants were not speaking their native language still has an impact on what information can be collected. There is the chance that participants simplified answers or avoided speaking about certain topics due to language issues. To try and mitigate this I made sure to distribute the broad themes and topics I would be asking about to give individuals some time to get familiar with the topics. In addition to this I made it clear from my first correspondence with potential participants that the interviews would be held in English. This therefore would potentially screen out any participants who were not comfortable using English in an interview, ensuring both that participants were not made to feel uncomfortable, but also that the information collected was as accurate and reliable as possible.

The language problem also reared its head when conducting analysis of the museum itself. The main language used in the museum is, of course, Estonian, although visitors are provided with translations in various other languages, including English, Russian and Finnish. Although once again issues can arise with incorrect or incomplete translations, in the context of ERM this should not pose a significant problem as these translations will have been professionally completed and checked for accuracy. Therefore, while it is important to note that reading captions and descriptions not in the language in which they were written certainly does impact how they are understood, due to the professional level of the translations this should not undermine the credibility of the information provided.

Research involving interviews and participation from individuals can always pose problems to reliability. There is always the possibility that an individual would misremember

an event or process or deliberately misreport something. This posed a potential problem for this project as curation and exhibiting decisions often happened almost a decade ago. Issues of subjectivity are often raised when discussing the limitations of conducting interviews for research and yet for this project I want to collect opinions and differing perspectives. Curation and decision-making in museums are inherently subjective and motivated by a variety of factors. Thus, being able to hear a variety of opinions and perspectives actually aids my research.

Finally, it is also important to mention my position as a British student researching Estonia as this has an impact on my perspective on the museum and my reading of it. Having not grown up in the country, spent my childhood surrounded by stories about its past, I do not possess a personal relationship to either the country or its past. My reading of the museum and conduct in the interviews is therefore influenced by my position as an outsider. While this does not undermine the credibility of this study, it certainly is important to note as it alters the perspective. I made sure to reflect on this throughout the research process, in particular when designing and conducting the interviews. In some ways my position as a British researcher might make the analysis of the museum more objective, but in others, particular layers or sentiments have perhaps been overlooked or discarded as unimportant because of a lack of emotional connection or personal knowledge of the country. It is also possible that various cultural references might be missed by me as a foreign researcher. To mitigate this various expert accounts of Estonian and Baltic history were consulted, including by Andrejs Plakans (2011), Andres Kasekamp (2017) and Toivo U. Raun (2001). In addition to this the inclusion of expert interviews helped draw my attention to themes or issues that I might have overlooked in my analysis. Ultimately the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed participants to explain or expand on certain points if I was unsure. In addition to this, as the interviewees knew I was a British researcher, at times they offered additional information or context that I might not know as a foreigner, which again helped mitigate my lack of personal connection to the country. The combination of my own research and the inclusion of expert interviews thus gave me the best possible chance at being able to effectively and thoroughly analyse the material and draw productive and insightful conclusions.

5. Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents the empirical findings and analysis of this project and is divided into three main sections, guided by the research questions posed in the introductory chapter. To recap, these questions are as follows:

1. What national narratives are presented in the Estonian National Museum?
2. To what extent are postcolonial perspectives and decolonial practices present in ERM's design, exhibition and activities?
3. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 have there been any changes in the exhibition or in the ways in which museum employees and visitors interact with the museum?

The first section of this chapter offers an overview of the *Encounters* exhibition, exploring both the exhibition's captions and objects themselves, as well as the museum's digital material and to some extent the interview material too. This section makes use of Ivanova's and Tamm's aforementioned narrative templates and explores the extent to which these narratives are present in the ERM's exhibition. Following this assessment, a new narrative template of "colonial tangles" is suggested. This leads to the next section which tackles the theme of postcoloniality and decolonisation in the museum and its practices. A wide range of the empirical material is explored here to assess the presence of these narratives and practices within various aspects of the museum's work. The third core section of this chapter focuses on the material collected through the expert interviews with various museum workers to explore any changes or developments within the museum following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This section explores not only the structural and logistical changes, but also explores some changes in the way visitors interact with the museum and presents some concluding thoughts.

5.1. ERM's National Narratives

ERM's *Encounters* exhibition is the larger of the two permanent exhibitions housed at the museum. It was opened in 2016, coinciding with the opening of the new purpose-built museum

building on the old Raadi site. It occupies a unique long and narrow space, overlaying where the runway of the Soviet military base stood. The exhibition itself is made up of twelve main sections. The museum employs both a chronological and thematic approach in its organisation of the exhibition. Half of the exhibition, the part housed in the long central corridor of the building, follows a timeline of Estonian history, from the Ice Age to the contemporary period. Interestingly, there are two ways to access the timeline section, from either entrance A or B. Visitors can therefore choose to start their visit from the contemporary period or from the Ice Age, either moving backwards or forwards in time. It should be mentioned though that starting from the contemporary period is much more practical as the ticket office is housed at this end of the exhibition and so it is unclear how many visitors actually access the exhibition from the other entrance. The thematic sections are then housed to the left of this timeline in sections of differing sizes and cover topics such as cities, food, and rural life.⁶ The exhibition also contains an activity room, a film hall, and an open collections hall. The exhibition was designed specifically for the new museum building and the space. While small changes and additions have occurred since its opening in 2016, the main structure and format of the exhibition remains the same (Interview 1, 2024).

Before turning to the narratives the museum presents, it is important first to note the importance of the museum for the people of Estonia, supporting Singh's (2002) aforementioned discussion of the importance of national museums to new nations in particular. The museum's website notes that the institution was founded in 1909 'on the initiative and with the support of the nation – with the task to protect and develop the history and culture of Estonia' (Eesti Rahva Muuseum 2016). The website emphasises its intimate relationship with the country's national movement, writing that it is 'considered a memory institution that has emerged as part of the national movement, having served the cause ever since, though ambivalently during the Soviet regime' (Eesti Rahva Muuseum 2017). This close relationship between the people and the museum also emerged in the expert interviews, with one individual commenting the following: 'when we started the museum planning we were always thinking that for the Estonian state or Estonian people, this museum had always been something special, in the sense that we have always been in a public interest' (Interview 2 2024). These comments are reinforced in the museum's development plan, which states that 'the goal which the ENM sets in its plan is to

⁶ The full list of sections is as follows: 1. Journeys in Time, 1a. Time of Freedoms, 1b. Life Behind the Iron Curtain, 1c. Modern Times, 1d. The Era of Books, 1e. The Arrival of Christianity, 1f. The Metal Age, 1g. The Stone Age, 2. The People and the State, 3. Cities within a City, 4. My Own Abode, 5. Parallel World, Parallel Lives, 6. Rural Life and Rural Beauty, 7. The Runo Song, 8. People and the Environment, 9. The Language Brew, 10. The Food We Cook, 11. The Imprint of Time on Estonian Wraps, 12. Do it Yourself Hall.

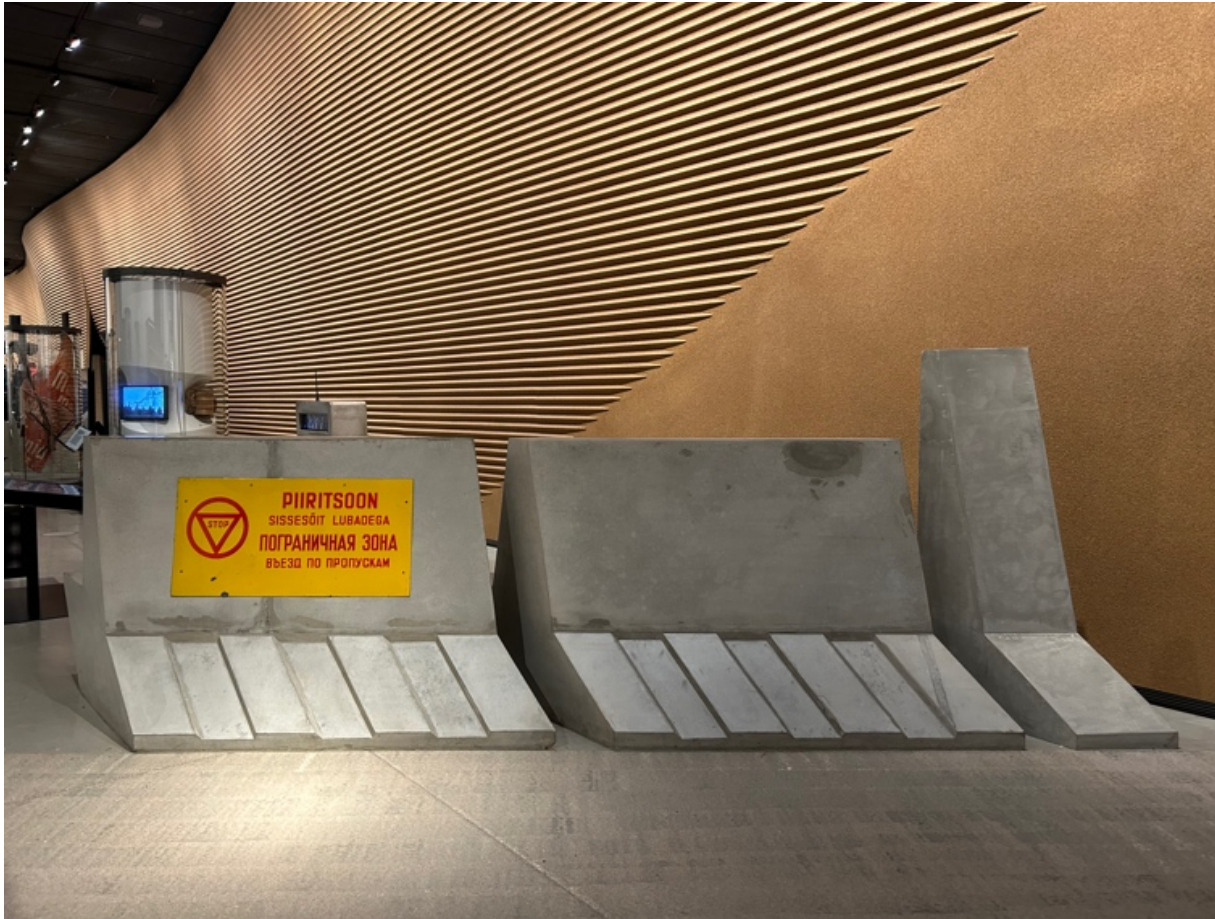


Figure 1 - Border Zone Barricade from the Soviet era (author's own photograph)

serve as a museum for the entire nation, being open and flexible and an influential voice in Estonian society' (Estonian National Museum 2021, 3). The narratives that the museum exhibits should thus be considered within this context as while the content and focus of the new museum differs from the pre-2016 conceptualisations of the institution, this intimate relationship between the people of Estonia and the museum has remained strong.

It must be said that the exhibition itself is not always the easiest to navigate. Although the visitor is presented with a map, both on paper and carved into concrete on their arrival to the exhibition, the different sections of the museum are not very clearly divided up and the museum does not use arrows to direct visitors. Nevertheless, this does provide visitors with a certain amount of freedom to move from display to display at their own pace and in their preferred order. While this lack of guidance can feel overwhelming, it also allows visitors to make their own thematic connections and bridges between different sections. This being said, two moments where a clear divide between sections is clearly visible is at the start of the section on the Soviet period and at the start of the industrial revolution section. As can be seen in Figure 1, for example, the stop sign and concrete barrier alerts visitors clearly to the change in era and makes one feel like they are physically entering this different world behind closed doors.

On entering the exhibition, one cannot help but be struck with the utilisation of technology and modern display cases. There are screens throughout the exhibition playing videos and also presenting visitors with interactive maps. The display about the Baltic Chain, for example, invites visitors to click on different locations down the chain and view photos taken there. Throughout the exhibition objects are not displayed in the more traditional way, in cabinets against the walls, but rather are housed in cylindrical glass cases, with the walls of the space left empty, a deliberate design decision I am told (Interview 5 2024). While the use of cylindrical cases may have been for practical reasons, to allow more objects to be displayed, or for visitors to get a better look at objects (Interview 5 2024), I found that this choice also encouraged me as a visitor to freely move around the exhibition and move between display cases in the order I wanted to rather than following a prescribed route. The choice to keep the walls blank also marked the museum out for me from other more traditional institutions I have visited and made me pay more attention to the size and scale of the space itself, once again reinforcing its unique placement tracing the former military runway. The exhibition was thus not just about what it contained and displayed, but the space itself was an artefact, an idea that will be particularly important in the second section of this empirical chapter.

Turning to the narratives exhibited, it can be said that at the heart of the exhibition are the people, rather than the simple conveying of facts and figures (Interview 4 2024), although it is clear from the extensive amount of context provided that the exhibition is grounded in thorough research. Screens displaying videos of individuals recounting stories or observations are present throughout. Often multiple individuals are heard discussing the same topic or events. Exploring the exhibition and the narratives it exhibits with the aforementioned concept of mnemohistory in mind is thus crucial. This idea is reflected in the very title of the exhibition, *Encounters*. The exhibition does not seek to present abstract events, but rather explore the dialogue and interaction between people and these events. This idea of the importance of the study of the past ‘as it is remembered’ (J. Assmann 1997, 8-9), rather than as a collection of abstract facts and figures brings our attention to how these different events and perspectives are woven together forming a traceable pattern. Nevertheless, as will be explained, neither Tamm nor Ivanova’s aforementioned narrative templates dominate in this exhibition. This is not to say that the museum does not present instances of themes of victimhood or suffering or encounters with hostile forces, namely German forces, but these templates are not the exhibition’s guiding force.

5.1.1. Survival over Victimhood

Themes of suffering and oppression are explored in the ERM's *Encounters* exhibition to some extent and yet visitors are also consistently provided with insight into *how* individuals and groups dealt with these challenges and obstacles. As one museum worker told me: 'people have managed in different times basically, how they have found different strategies to cope with different environmental, political, social problems, economical problems, so this what we are reflecting with our collections' (Interview 2 2024). In the Soviet section of the timeline, visitors are told about how Soviet citizens had to be practical and innovative, for example. Here a lawn mower made out of various objects is displayed to highlight this practicality. Estonia's interactions with the West during the Soviet era are also highlighted to visitors with a mockup of a radio that allows visitors to browse through various Western radio stations, as can be seen in Figure 2, showing how people living in Soviet Estonia dealt with the restrictions and censorship imposed upon them.

This is not to say that the challenges and suffering the people of Estonia have faced over the centuries are understated or ignored and issues ranging from the destruction by the crusades in the thirteenth century, to the harshness of the environment, to the oppression of the Soviet regime are explored. The deportations of 1949 by the Soviet regime is a particularly important topic presented in the museum and is one section that has been recently expanded following the 75th anniversary of the event in 2024 with the addition of new objects and the publication of a new book exploring the stories of the children who were deported (Interview 1 2024). Objects that individuals took with them into exile such as eyeglasses, a blanket, or a suitcase are displayed, reminding visitors of the human faces behind these stories.

Ideas of freedom and survival rather than victimhood and suffering can be traced throughout the exhibition and is an idea clearly presented to visitors at the start of the exhibition, regardless of which entrance they enter through. On entering the exhibition from Entrance B, visitors are initially introduced to how individuals survived the harshness of the icy climate during the Stone Age, namely how seal hunters operated on the territory of Estonia. Here visitors can watch a video showing a Netsilik Inuit person from Canada tracking and hunting a seal. While the footage is from the 1960s (and from Canada), visitors are told that this is arguably the closest comparison to the methods used in the Stone Age on Estonian

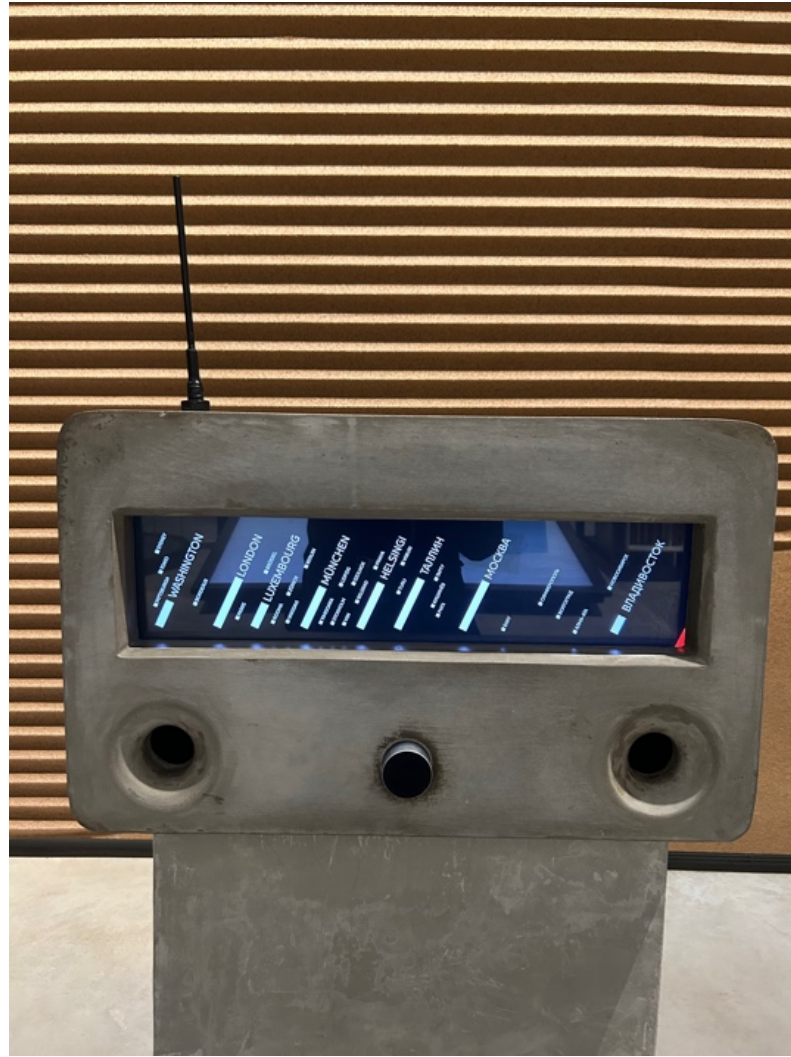


Figure 5 - Mockup of radio (author's own photograph)

territory. Various tools and a seal fur are displayed in this section, illustrating how individuals fed and clothed themselves in this harsh climate.

In a similar vein, on entering the exhibition from Entrance A this idea of freedom and survival is also introduced in the section aptly entitled *The Time of Freedoms*. In this section of the exhibition notions of freedom are explored by drawing a comparison with the freedom society experienced following independence with the restriction of the Soviet regime, as the following caption reads: ‘Speaking your thoughts publicly and taking responsibility for doing so is a brave step. Today, everyone has the opportunity to express their opinion using the Internet, one's clothing, or any street space. In Soviet Estonia, in the 1980s, this most certainly was not so.’⁷ In this contemporary section the success of Estonia’s digital industry is also presented in close connection to ideas of freedom, as seen in the caption of the display entitled

⁷ All captions were recorded by the author during two separate visits to the ERM for data collection. See Appendix 1 for details.

#Estonianmafia and e-Estonia: ‘Less than a half of the world’s population uses the Internet, but in Western information societies the internet is the central channel of communication. However, the information that circles in the internet is more important than the technologies: who has the information, has the power and freedom.’ This section entitled *The Time of Freedoms* seamlessly straddles both modern-day Estonia and the Soviet period, using this to frequently compare notions and displays of freedom in each. The exhibition also invites visitors to critically engage with the notion of freedom, as seen in the following caption: ‘We now realise that that freedom manifests itself in many ways. The freedom to live a good life is always weighed against readiness to give up certain personal liberties for the common good. Freedom is also a responsibility, and an obligation.’

Freedom is not presented as having one clear answer or definition but is left up to interpretation. The museum illustrates this multiplicity not only through video screens which invite visitors to listen to how different individuals in Estonia define freedom but also by the various displays of objects, ranging from the mundane consumer goods that Estonians could buy following the end of the Soviet era, to manifestations of political freedom. This vast array of objects and perspectives invites the visitor to consider what freedom might mean to them and stops us from perhaps idealising this abstract concept. Therefore, while the *Encounters* exhibition does not shy away from documenting the challenges and hardships Estonians have faced, from occupations to climate change, this is not presented following a pattern of victimhood, but rather a narrative of survival and freedom dominates, right from the Ice Age to the modern day.

5.1.2. Estonia and Germany

As has been discussed in the theory chapter of this thesis (specifically chapter 2.2), Marek Tamm traces the schematic narrative template, ‘The Great Battle for Freedom,’ to explore Estonian history and memory culture (Tamm 2008). This template traces the country’s various interactions with Germany, illustrating it as a key framework through which to understand the country’s past. ERM’s *Encounters* does tackle various historic interactions between the two countries and importantly even explores the Baltic German upper class, which I am told was not discussed in the museum before the 2016 exhibition and was quite a radical decision (Interview 1 2024). Nevertheless, these interactions are by no means presented as a focal narrative. Estonia is presented as constantly interacting with its various neighbours, amongst

them the Germans. In addition to this, neither the First World War nor the Second World War is specifically discussed in the timeline section of the exhibition (Interview 5 2024). Estonia's wider interactions with Europe and the world around it therefore drive the exhibition. The exhibition is not framed by these historic interactions with Germany, as Tamm's schematic narrative template 'The Great Battle for Freedom' lays out, but rather these interactions are considered as one layer of these "entangled histories" (Koobak and Tali 2023, 192) that make up Estonia's master narrative.

Estonia's interactions with its neighbours feature in various sections of the exhibition, for example in the displays about religion. Estonia's geographical location between East and West manifests itself in the variety of religious and cultural influences, and these various eras of conquest and occupation are discussed through these influences. While Estonia is reportedly one of the least religious countries in Europe (Statistics Estonia 2022) a whole section is dedicated to religion in the *Encounters* exhibition entitled *The Arrival of Christianity*. While this section does place religion and the different European confessions at the heart of it, more broadly it is a discussion of the different forces and culture that has impacted the formation of the country. Swedish, German, and Russian influences are explored through these displays and then additionally in separate displays on the Orthodox, Lutheran, and Catholic faiths that are located nearby. This cross-fertilisation of religious and cultural elements in Estonia is something that the museum is keen to emphasise as one of its strengths, as seen on the organisation's website: 'From an international standpoint, the ENM as a research institution has had a specific status due to its location between the East and the West. Experience, obtained during the long-term research of the culture of various ethnic groups located in Estonia and Russia, is of special value, namely due to its consistency' (Eesti Rahva Muuseum 2017). It is rather these interactions and dialogue that are therefore that can be traced, rather than Tamm's specific focus on German interactions in his narrative template.

As mentioned above, the exhibition does dedicate some space to the Baltic German upper classes, exploring this complex relationship between Estonia and Germany, which is described in the caption as 'marked by both mutual affinities and tensions throughout history.' Various objects and possessions belonging to the so-called Baltic Germans are on display in a dedicated case about the community. The objects, ranging from coins to badges and diplomas from university are displayed and highlight the magnitude of influence this group had on Estonian culture and society (Interview 1 2024). While the arrival of the Germans is described as 'eastward colonization' in the museum, the captions highlight the complexity of their presence: 'On one hand, the Germans brought Western culture to Estonia, but also checked the

social and national progress of Estonians.’ This colonial relationship is further complicated by the inclusion of some artefacts that Baltic German explorers brought back with them on expeditions. Here items from China, the Americas, Polynesia and Siberia are displayed in a case entitled *Cultural Exchange*. The phrasing of this caption appears slightly problematic. While the title *Cultural Exchange* implies equality between the parties, exchanging and sharing knowledge and culture, it overlooks the imperial power dynamics inherent in these expeditions. On top of this, the language throughout the caption overlooks this sentiment, using rather passive phrasing such as ‘brought back information,’ ‘passed into the private collections or societies’ and ‘some of the items from voyages and expeditions later found their way to museums established in Estonia.’ Therefore, while the inclusion of this story and objects provides an important insight into a lesser-known layer of the country’s master narrative, its subtle placement in the museum (right at the bottom of the display case on the Baltic Germans) and the lack of critical or reflective language means the exhibition falls short of truly dissecting these complicated dynamics. In contrast to this, KUMU’s aforementioned exhibition has taken a much more reflective and critical stance in addressing the colonial history of the Baltic Germans. While KUMU certainly had more space to engage more fully with this topic, ERM’s brief interaction with these historic events illustrates the difficulty in curating a country’s story, full of complex interactions and relationships and yet with limited space and resources at hand.

5.1.3. A New Narrative Template?

Neither Tamm nor Ivanova’s schematic narrative templates provide a comprehensive fit in ERM’s *Encounters* exhibition. Ivanova’s template of victimhood is thoroughly rejected in the exhibition, as instances of victimhood and suffering are discussed in terms of how they were overcome and dealt with. Likewise, Tamm’s narrative template which understands Estonia’s history as marked by its historic interactions with Germany or German forces is not obviously found. While the museum did decide to radically explore groups such as the Baltic German upper classes, the crucial omission of distinct sections in the timeline section on the two World Wars resists this characterisation of the past. While the impact of the World Wars is mentioned in relation to political oppression and the emergence of an independent Estonia, the museum does not define Estonia’s story in relation to these historic interactions. What is given pride of place are broader interactions with groups and communities. The exhibition resists providing viewers with a narrow narrative and leaves room for interpretation and dialogue. As a result of

this, while at no point in the expert interviews discussing the exhibition were the terms “postcolonial” or “decolonial” explicitly used to define the exhibition or the museum more broadly, the narrative template that in practice (Brubaker 2013) appears to run through the museum *does* appear to explore these concepts and is therefore an avenue that should be explored.

5.2. Decolonial Museum Practices

This section explores to what extent ERM and specifically its *Encounters* exhibition can be considered postcolonial in nature. Placing this concept of the renegotiation of ‘Us’ and ‘Others’ (Boursiquot 2016, 69), at the centre, this section will therefore explore to what extent decolonial museum practices are employed by ERM. This section broadly assesses three modes of practice, as informed by the literature in chapter 2.2.; embracing complexity, inclusion and dialogue, and takes into account not only the material presented in the exhibition and interviews but also the museum’s working practices and its educational and outreach programmes.

5.2.1. Embracing Complexities

Starting from a more holistic exploration of ERM, informed by Lindauer’s guidance to consider the different elements and layers of museums (see chapter 4.3.), it quickly becomes clear when visiting ERM that the institution favours complexity over a simplistic narrative, a feature which supports my conceptualisation of Estonia as a country that experiences multiple layers of colonial legacies. This idea runs through the entirety of the institution, from the museum building itself, to its curation strategies and its visitor experience. Embracing these complexities and taking agency over them therefore can be viewed as part of the museum’s decolonising methods to move beyond simplistic and exclusive narratives and encourage the cross-fertilisation of knowledge and sources, a method also utilised in Oxford University’s *Soviet Central Asia in 100 Objects* project, for example.

The museum defines itself on its website as operating as a ‘memory institution’ (Eesti Rahva Muuseum 2017), an idea reinforced in the name of the design of the 2016 building itself; “Memory Field”/“*Mälestuste väli*” (Seljamaa 2021, 77). The focus on memories rather than claiming to present absolute truths is an idea reflected in the varying reception the new building received as a museum worker who had served as project manager for the museum architecture



Figure 20 - Photo taken from within the museum showing the remains of Raadi manor (author's own photograph)

building explained (Interview 2 2024). The use of the old Soviet military airfield and runway as the basis for the new structure attracted a wealth of criticism arguing it was glorifying the Soviet occupation and regime and was even funded by Vladimir Putin (Interview 2 2024), and yet it was also praised as a ‘powerful idea,’ giving ‘new meaning’ to the museum (Interview 2 2024). Before even stepping foot in the museum, the choice to build the new museum on the Raadi site in itself embodies these complexities and layered legacies. Prior to the Soviet period, the national museum was housed in a Baltic German manor on the same site (Figure 3). This site was then used by the Soviet forces as an airfield, which now since 2016 has housed the new version of the museum. Simultaneously, one can see the new museum building, the shape of the runway and the ruins of the manor. These complexities and the possibilities of different perspectives are further reinforced by the relatively free structure of the exhibition itself, which does not restrict visitors by laying out a prescribed route. Walking through and around the museum, one is therefore constantly reminded of the web of different influences of colonisers and colonised which makes up the national story. This is then reinforced within the exhibition with the aforementioned exploration of the Baltic German upper classes and their colonial expeditions and discussions of oppressions and independence. The choice to design and build

the new museum on this site should therefore not be overlooked. This decision in itself makes a statement about the complexity of Estonia's memory landscape. The fact that the country's national museum is housed here represents the country taking agency over its past. The museum building is therefore as much an artefact and political statement as the contents of it, reminding us of Singh's (2002, 194) argument, as mentioned before (see chapter 3.2).

Within the *Encounters* exhibition itself, the very complexities of museology and curation practices are also brought to the fore. The transparency of the voice of the museum and its team can be seen as another decolonial museum practice which helps to highlight the typical power relationships and imbalances found in museums (see Clifford in Levitt 2015, 8), imbalances that have often manifested themselves in power relations between coloniser and colonised when exhibiting a national story. Right from the start of the exhibition, the presence of curators in the narratives on display is laid out in the introductory caption on the wall by entrance A:

All of the encounters selected for this exhibition have a documentary basis. Of course, documents don't create knowledge by themselves; that requires the creative contribution of researchers, curators, and designers. Encounters represents just one possible set of interpretations of the lives of people in Estonia, both the minor everyday events and the great world-changing processes that affected them. *The selection and the interpretations are a reflection of the exhibition's creators.* (emphasis added)

I was told that there was also a plan to produce a digital feature for the museum that would explain the various decisions behind curation choices and the decision-making processes behind the exhibition (Interview 2 2024). While this feature is not available at the moment, my conversation with the Education Centre Manager drew my attention to the various workshops and programmes which focused on the behind-the-scenes workings of the museum that have been run, including one focusing on archaeology and one on how curation works in a museum (Interview 3 2024). This transparency regarding the curation process and conversation around the obstacles and considerations museum workers face in selecting objects and events is an important step to disrupt this power imbalance so commonly present in museums. These

discussions underscore the possibility for multiple perspectives and interpretations of the country's story, a feature arguably not expected to be found in a country's national museum.⁸

5.2.2. Inclusion

The total redesign and reconceptualisation of ERM, which culminated in the opening of the new building in 2016, can be seen as representing a comprehensive renegotiation of the concepts of 'Us' and 'Others' (Boursiquot 2016, 69), with a special emphasis on the inclusion of different voices. Since its foundation in 1909, ERM's principal focus has been ethnography, with a clear emphasis on collecting and preserving the country's rural, peasant culture (Eesti Rahva Muuseum 2016). While these collections continue to play a key role in the current museum, the new museum, and particularly the new permanent exhibition *Encounters*, aimed to go beyond this ethnographic focus, with one interviewee describing this redesign as an attempt to 'break free' and 'expand' (Interview 5 2024) away from this narrower focus and another remarking 'all the meaning of the new museum changed' (Interview 3 2024). For this research it was therefore a logical choice to speak to museum workers at ERM who had worked at the museum since before the redesign so these changes could be discussed. My interviewees made frequent comparisons between the old and new museum, as illustrated in the following quote:

a lot of it was kind of in relation to the previous permanent exhibition in the previous building and things that we wanted to change, that we wanted not to be purely ethnology-centred and not just Estonians as ethnic groups but to take this Estonian territory (Interview 5 2024).

This emphasis on Estonia as a territory, 'Estonia with a capital E' (Interview 1 2024) and all those different people who inhabit it, was clearly at the centre of the efforts to move away from this more ethnocentric view of identity and rather explore the 'place where different communities and different people live' (Interview 4 2024). Ideas of inclusivity and moving beyond this narrow ethnocentric view of Estonia can also be traced in the museum's development plan, which states amongst its goals to 'build bridges in society' and 'serve as a

⁸ Two interviewees (Interview 2 and 4 2024) even drew parallels with museums found in other cities to highlight ERM's different approach.

museum for the entire nation, being open and flexible and an influential voice in Estonian society' (Estonian National Museum 2021). The development plan also mentions the need to 'reflect more what is happening in society and open up discussions to contribute to the creation of a more cohesive society' (Estonian National Museum 2021). Although not running nowadays, ERM also previously led a state-funded culture course aimed at both new arrivals in the country and Russian speakers in Estonia (Interview 3 2024). The programme, which ran for five years and worked with around 1,000 individuals not only promoted learning about Estonia and its culture and history, but also fostered dialogue and discussion between different groups in the territory (Interview 3 2024), something clearly at the heart of the museum's aims and its exhibition. These programmes and aims do not mean that the Estonian national story is not at the heart of ERM, but it suggests a move to explore a new and broader conceptualisation of the country's identity.

Within the *Encounters* exhibition itself attention is drawn to different groups within Estonia. One display case, for example, houses objects from coastal Swedes, Old Believers, and Baltic Germans. These displays are not large, with the Old Believers and Coastal Swedes sharing a case, while the Baltic Germans are housed in a case of their own. Seljamaa (2021, 83) in her own analysis of these cases criticised this curation decision, arguing that the Baltic Germans are shown to be more important than the Old Believers or Coastal Swedes. Along with Seljamaa's criticism, one interviewee shared her concerns, remarking that she would have liked to see more representation of minority groups in the exhibition (Interview 5 2024), a sentiment which reflects the constraints both time and space that museums face. This being said I was also told that one researcher in the exhibition is currently conducting new research on the Estonian Swedes and this is involving extensive fieldwork in Sweden (Interview 5 2024), which points towards further exploration of this minority group. The exhibition also includes voices from Russian speakers and the émigré community, for example in the section entitled *Parallel Worlds, Parallel Lives*, where visitors can hear various stories about the 1940s-1980s. Within the exhibition's section of the Cold War era attention is also drawn to these different communities, all of which have a different relationship to the period and country. Within this section there are three displays, entitled *Deportation, Immigration and Escaping*. These displays explore the different flows of people in and out of the country, highlighting the diverse experiences of individuals and families during this time. The grouping of these experiences together allows visitors to view them in a comparative manner, once again drawing attention to the different relationships individuals can have to a country.

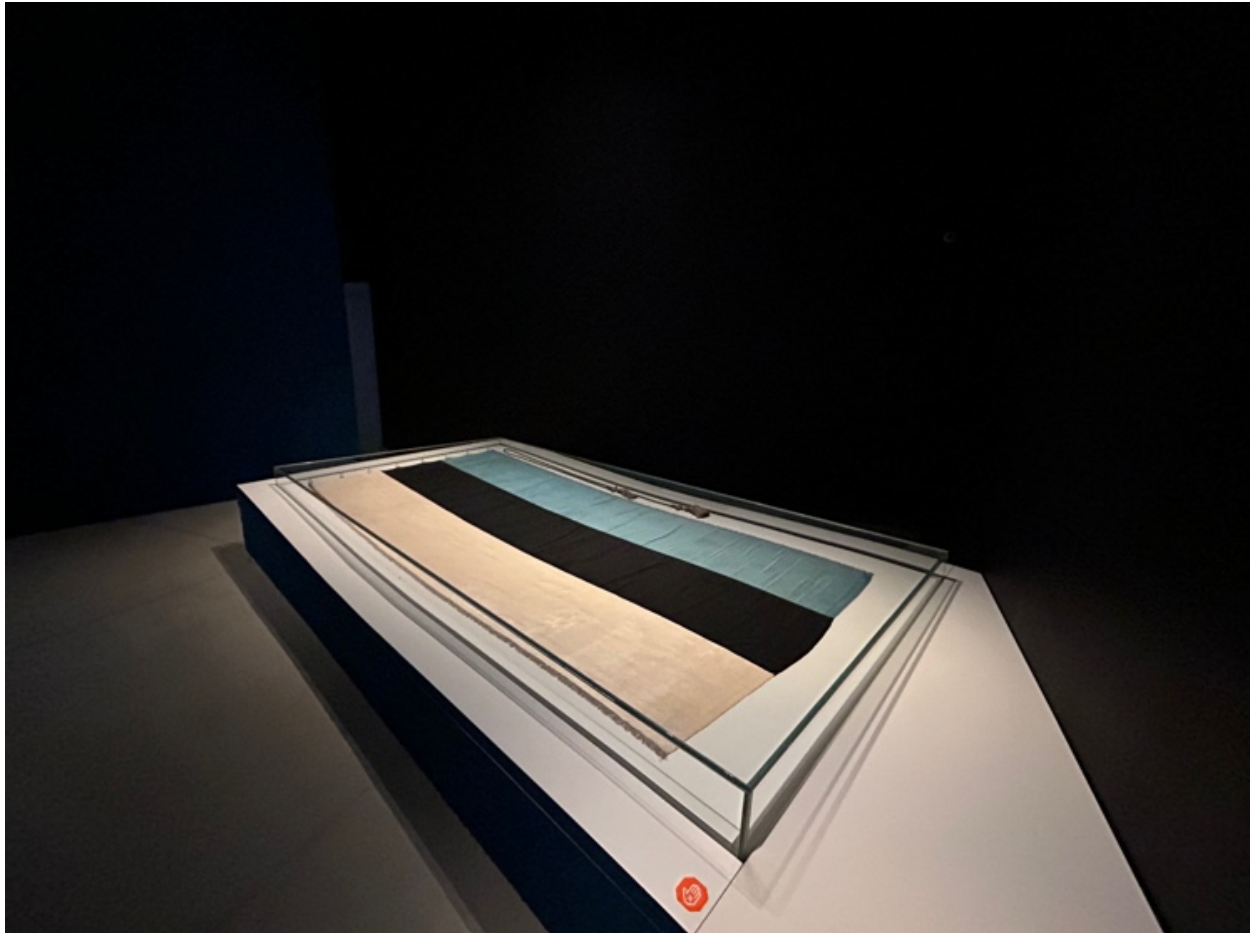


Figure 4 - Estonia's first flag, housed at ERM (author's own photograph)

One of the more striking inclusions in the exhibition is found in the room entitled *Nation and State*. This room, which houses the first Estonian flag stands apart from the rest of the exhibition. The room has dark walls, in contrast to the bright lights and displays found in the rest of the exhibition (Figure 4). This makes the room feel almost sacred, almost like a chapel to the nation. While much of the room houses objects relating to the tricolour-flag, such as a knitted jumper in blue, black and white, and various military medals, there is also a display of objects relating to Estonia's Armenian population (Figure 5). This is clearly a more recent addition, as the caption reads: 'In 2024, we focus on the richness of Estonian culture. We present the diverse culture and traditions of different ethnic groups living in Estonia as well as Estonia's own unique cultures and communities.' The description goes on to explain how the Armenian minority initially arrived in Estonia through a connection with the University of Tartu. As well as providing context for the various objects housed in the display, such as a traditional musical instrument and a coffee pot, the caption provides a quote from an Armenian woman who moved to Tartu in 1994. The significance of the placement of this display within



Figure 5 - Display case about the Armenian minority (author's own photograph)

this particular room should not be overlooked. Much of the content of this section, especially those objects and stories connected to the flag, can be viewed in the context of Hobsbawm and Ranger's idea of invented traditions (2012). Their conceptualisation of nationhood and identity as highly constructed and malleable phenomena reinforces the idea that identity and national memory can change and adapt. Therefore, by including a display on the Armenian minority in this almost sacred-like space housing the country's arguably most prized and known symbol makes a clear statement about the direction Estonia's public nation-building is going, as one interviewee told me: 'we try to build our identity more broader' (Interview 4 2024).

5.2.3. Dialogue

While museums around the world have frequently been criticised for their handling of material from different communities, ERM's long standing emphasis on focusing on people translates not only to the type of objects it collects and displays but also is reflected in its research methods. One feature which has repeatedly been emphasised within the context of decolonising narratives and the inclusion of new ones has been dialogue with the community and multi-disciplined research approaches, such as in the British Museum's redesign of their Pacific exhibits. At ERM this focus on dialogue ranges from the institution's relationship to the source material, to the exhibits themselves, and even to the visitor experience.

I am told that the team involved in designing and curating the *Encounters* exhibition was made up of various experts, including archaeologists, linguists, and biologists (Interview 5 2024). This multidisciplinary approach to designing and researching the exhibition is evident in the sheer amount of context provided to visitors in captions. While one interviewee jokingly remarked that the museum provides *too* much context (Interview 2 2024); the extensive explanations of objects and events helps the museum from falling into the trap of presenting an oversimplified narrative. I am also told that experts from various communities were also involved as part of the team, such as a Udmurtain woman who was involved in curating the Uralic material (Interview 1 2024). It is clear that dialogue with the communities within the displays extended beyond just the research experience and strong bonds were often fostered with the people behind the stories and objects in *Encounters*. One interviewee told me of a couple who submitted their story and some objects for a display in the *Parallel Worlds, Parallel Minds* section who then returned to the museum to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary as they felt a strong bond to the museum which housed their story (Interview 1 2024). The museum also has a 'correspondence network,' which it uses to put out calls to the population to send in material and stories on specific themes (Interview 2 2024). Like Oxford University's aforementioned project *Soviet Central Asia in 100 Objects*, this network allows the museum to crowdsource to increase the breadth of their material. Importantly, it has also actively worked at improving relationships with a variety of people, even those who have been more reluctant to engage, such as the Russian-speaking population in the north-east of the country (Interview 2 2024). These relationships have slowly built and grown over time, all of which has helped include a wider variety of voices and perspectives in the museum. Importantly, the focus on

these close connections between the people and the museum is not a new concept, but rather reflects the museum's origins as a site of ethnographic research.

Within the *Encounters* exhibition this dialogue is also reflected in the multiplicity of perspectives on events, once again reinforcing the institution's role as a 'memory institution' (Eesti Rahva Muuseum 2017). One section in which this is particularly visible is in the display discussing the 1905 revolution. Here visitors are presented with three different perspectives on the revolution: Marta Lepp (1883–1940), Berend von Uexküll (1879–1963), and Tõnis Braks (1885–1966). Each of the stories, which the museum presents in video form, dramatising their accounts, sheds light on the different aspects of the events of 1905, from the perspective of an activist, a Baltic German baron, and a servant at a manor. Visitors are not provided with an absolute truth or single explanation in this display, but rather encouraged to listen to the three different perspectives. The choice to tell these stories using audio-visual displays reinforces the conversation-like nature of the displays, thereby including the visitor in the discussion. Nevertheless, this approach to handling material has been criticised as one museum worker told me, with teachers, for example complaining that the museum does not say what actually happened in 1905, with the interviewee commenting that 'I'm still intrigued that there are still people who say that, no, we need one kind of story' (Interview 2 2024). These criticisms reflect expectations held amongst individuals for museums to act as a provider of a clear answer, something that ERM tries to counter.

As well as dialogue between the different voices within the displays, the museum also clearly promotes dialogue within the visitor experience. One interviewee, who is currently part of a research group focusing on museology, drew my attention to the absence of headphones within the exhibition (Interview 2 2024). In contrast to Tallinn's redesigned *Vabamu* museum, for example, in which the audio guide plays a key role in guiding the visitor, explaining exhibits and posing questions, in the *Encounters* exhibition it was decided that this would prevent visitors from speaking to each other. The museum seeks to actively encourage its visitors to speak to one another and discuss what is in front of them. Multi-generational groups were at the heart of this decision, so that grandparents, particularly when visiting the Soviet section, could reflect on the exhibits and discuss and describe them to their children and grandchildren (Interview 2 2024). The research secretary reflected on the success of this decision in recounting an instance of a Finnish family and Estonian family discussing the similarities of their national anthems when playing with the "Freedom synthesiser" exhibit (Interview 2 2024). Here one can listen to different songs by swapping floppy disks around, which prompted the Finnish family to ask the Estonian family to sing their anthem, something that most likely

would not have happened if this exhibit was experienced through headphones. This emphasis on discussion and dialogue between visitors, and particularly between different groups of visitors, is reinforced in the community work the museum does. In the autumn of 2023, the museum hosted a roundtable, for example, between the Russian-speaking and Estonian-speaking community to discuss various questions and themes. The museum plans to hold two more later this year, one again at the museum itself and another somewhere in the north-east of the country (Interview 4 2024). It is clear that the museum actively seeks out different perspectives and dialogue in various aspects of their work, thus promoting this decolonial idea of broadening inclusion and the cross-fertilisation of knowledge.

5.3. The Museum after February 2022

As has been mentioned, Estonian society and Estonia's memory landscape has undoubtedly been rocked by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Coupled with this, the growing prevalence of postcolonial scholarship within and about the region prompted me to investigate whether ERM, as a public-facing memory institution, had also experienced any changes. While the main structure and format of the *Encounters* exhibition has not undergone any major changes since its opening in 2016, the expert interviews conducted for this project did shed light on some changes that the exhibition is undergoing as well as some additions being made. One point that was mentioned by almost all interview participants was the general need for the exhibition to be updated somewhat as parts of the contemporary section, such as the sections on e-Estonia, in particular now felt out of date. In addition to this, participants were keen to reflect on the impact the war has had on their work, both within the exhibition itself and more broadly in the museum. While some changes and adjustments can be seen as closely tied to the impact of the war, as will be outlined below, the museum's mode of work appears not to have been rocked in the same way that a lot of scholarship has been. It seems to me that ERM has therefore been operating in both a quietly postcolonial and decolonial manner since its redesign, and thus while it has faced some practical and logistical adjustments it has not been required to overhaul its methods or mission, unlike many scholars or other institutions.

Before outlining these changes, the difficulty of initiating change within a public institution should be considered. It was frequently mentioned to me during the expert interviews, whether directly or indirectly, that re-designing, updating, or generally making changes within the permanent exhibition comes with various obstacles and challenges, and also

takes a great deal of time and resources. As a result of this, it is important to view these changes and potential changes within this context. Disputes and difficulties with design teams, for example, were frequently mentioned (Interview 1, 2 and 5 2024), as well as practical constraints regarding space within the exhibition hall: ‘always you have more topics than you really have space to fill’ (Interview 5 2024). One interviewee outlined these practical constraints, remarking that ‘the Estonian exhibition has a really bad format, not in the sense of creator but as a management thing,’ as she explained the difficulties in making changes or additions to the *Encounters* exhibition (Interview 2 2024).

As is to be expected, the museum on a broader level and its workers were clearly greatly impacted by the start of the war and interview participants were keen to discuss other changes and programmes which have occurred outside of the *Encounters* exhibition. The museum has not only hosted various cultural programmes, connected with the Ukrainian community, such as film screenings (Interview 4 2024), but also hosted some Ukrainian refugees on the museum site, offering jobs to some in the museum’s kitchens (Interview 1 2024). One interviewee also mentioned the increase in Ukrainian scholars now based at the University of Tartu and therefore the potential opportunity for more collaboration and future projects with them (Interview 1 2024). Various participants also noted the emotional impact the war has had on the museum and its people (Interview 4 2024), especially as some of my interviewees had experienced life under the Soviet regime. The opportunity for more projects that are closely related to these experiences and reactions was discussed in relation to the museum’s temporary exhibitions (Interview 5 2024), which due to their temporary nature are able to adapt more quickly and flexibly than the permanent exhibitions. Viewing the museum more holistically, it is therefore clear that as an institution and as a body of people the war has had a significant impact on its working and will continue to do so while this war continues.

Within the *Encounters* exhibition the changes occurring there can be grouped into two types: those of a practical nature to update the exhibition and those that relate more closely to the events of February 2022, as will be discussed below. These changes relate not only to the content on display and research practices but also to the visitor experience. As for the practical updating of the exhibition, the contemporary section of the *Encounters* timeline by entrance A is in need of some changes. One of the focal objects in this section, for example, is the chair which the founder of the computer programme Skype sat on. While at the time the exhibition was being designed the museum were overjoyed to get hold of the object and it proved a success amongst visitors, in 2024 many visitors, especially following the growth of other video-conferencing software such as Zoom, do not even know what Skype is nowadays (Interview 2

2024) and so this object does not resonate with them as much anymore. Other objects and methods are therefore being considered to update this most recent section, still with a focus on *E-Estonia*.

5.3.1. Reassessment and Additions

As well as these ongoing logistical adjustments to the exhibition, the war in Ukraine has clearly had an impact on both the exhibition itself and the visitor experience. As discussed above, the topic of freedom is extensively discussed in the section of the exhibition entitled *Time of Freedoms* and in the displays and objects is often tied to the gifts individuals could buy or the clothes they could wear. Even before the war these different interpretations of freedom which are displayed on video screens and made between 2012 and 2015 were planning to be updated and yet one interviewee revealed to me that following the outbreak of the full-scale war multiple individuals wrote in and wanted to change what they had said. The start of this war has brought issues of freedom and the consequences of freedom being taken away to the fore, as one researcher commented with regards to these individuals writing in: ‘you have totally other perspective on what the freedom really means, even if you were talking something in 2014, now with Ukrainian war this perspective has totally changed basically’ (Interview 1 2024). This reflects the intimate relationship the present has with the past, reinforcing the malleable and constructivist nature of memory. As well as this, a Ukrainian language translation of the exhibition has been added, reflecting the increase in both Ukrainian visitors and scholars (Interview 5 2024).

It was also highlighted to me in the interviews with the museum’s employees that visitor interactions with the exhibition have changed somewhat following the outbreak of the war, especially with the Soviet section. While the museum attracts visitors from Estonia and abroad, Estonian visitors have in the past reportedly paid less interested in the Soviet section of the exhibition. Yet, this changed following the events of February 2022:

the Soviet period is not something that the Estonian families would normally spend a lot of time in, so with the Ukrainian war this changed totally. So, the exhibition is kind of a new possibility to tell the story, new family stories basically because everybody decided from February two years ago that ok, we have had a neutral

position in this sense but now we have to tell the stories from the other side.
(Interview 2 2024)

This renewed engagement with the Soviet era in light of contemporary Russia's actions in Ukraine reflects the broader developments occurring in scholarship about the region towards a re-examination of the Soviet era through a postcolonial lens. Writing about Ukraine, Mälksoo (Mälksoo 2023, 473) notes that the country has been 'among the most flagrantly neglected cases of Soviet colonialism' and argues Russia's current actions 'is an epitome of its struggle to reconnect with its past imperial self' (Mälksoo 2023, 477). Moreover, she concludes that the present conflict presents a 'multi-layered postcolonial moment' (Mälksoo 2023, 471). This is not to say that Estonia was apathetic to the Soviet regime before the war. However, this reported increased engagement as reported by my interviewee among regular individuals with the Soviet section of the exhibition reflects a growing desire to critically reflect, reinforcing Pääbo's (2011, 252) aforementioned conceptualisation of national memory as a 'politically malleable phenomenon and its alterations reflect changes in the political dimension.' This increased engagement with this part of the exhibition shows how the political climate can alter what individuals prioritise in their memory landscape, changes that can then often translate into movement at the official level.

In addition to updating the contemporary section of the *Encounters* exhibition, another section which is undergoing changes is the *Parallel Worlds, Parallel Minds* exhibit. While plans to update this section and some of the preliminary work was completed before the outbreak of the war, much of the data collection has occurred following the outbreak of the conflict and was even stalled by the invasion. The particular focus of this expansion was on the mining community of the north-east of the country, a predominantly Russian-speaking and industrial area. One researcher involved in this project, who is one of the museum's leads in working with Russian-speaking communities, explained that following the war there was a four-month period of silence between the museum and the communities (Interview 4 2024). Work between these two communities was ultimately able to resume and the researcher explained that some interviewees have discussed the changes of the last two years. While this addition to the *Parallel Worlds, Parallel Minds* exhibit was therefore not planned as a direct result of the start of the full-scale conflict, its continuation amid challenges and future inclusion in the museum⁹ reflects the museum's commitment to its exploration of a broader

⁹ The opening of this new section is scheduled for August 2024 (Interview 4 2024).

conceptualisation of Estonian identity, as one interviewee put it (Interview 4 2024). The role and presence of the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia has been a divisive and much-discussed topic since independence, and especially since 2022 (Krumm, Stamberg, and Strapatsjuk 2023), and so the inclusion of a section on this community in the permanent exhibition should not be overlooked, especially considering the current geopolitical situation. While content-wise therefore this section is new, it is important to note that its conception is in line with the museum's mission and practice since its redesign. By including these new stories in the *Parallel Worlds, Parallel Minds* section, alongside the émigré community, Estonians who were deported and those who lived in Soviet Estonia, to name a few, the museum presents them as an integral part of the country's story, rather than othering them as has often been the case in political and legal discourse (Gelazis 2003). The museum therefore does not shy away from exploring these complex relationships and issues but rather embraces these tangles of influence and identity.

5.4. Quietly Postcolonial

By exploring both the material and design of ERM's *Encounters* exhibition, as well as the institution's methods and practices behind the exhibition, it appears that ERM has not experienced the seismic rupture that much of the academic and political world has been working through since February 2022. The efforts literature and various institutions are currently undertaking to include better reflection, widening of perspectives and broadening narratives appear to run through the core of ERM's work. This is not to say that their mission is complete or that the outbreak of war has not had an impact. However, for this particular institution it appears that 2016 was their moment of introspection, rather than February 2022. The museum, while it does not overtly promote itself as a postcolonial institution nor was the topic of decolonial museum practices mentioned in the expert interviews, appears to have been in practice operating in a quietly postcolonial manner since its redesign, a subtlety that can be understood according to Brubaker's (2013) distinction between categories of analysis that scholars invoke and categories of practice that everyday people use.

The museum will undoubtedly face challenges and opposition as it continues to develop its exhibitions. As seen in the divisive reaction to KUMU's exhibition (Koobak and Tali 2023, 198), much of the Estonian population appears less ready to critically engage with some of the "entangled histories" (Koobak and Tali 2023, 192) that make up Estonian identity and yet

ERM's position as the country's national museum, a site that holds a great deal of power and influence in shaping perspectives on the country, represents a move towards a more complicated conceptualisation of the nation. This acknowledgment and the move to embrace these complex tangles places Estonia firmly within the European memory landscape, where realised or not, acknowledging these different tangles and complexities is given pride of place. ERM therefore appears in many ways to be ahead of much of scholarship and other institutions in this way as it continues to work with its decolonial toolkit to explore all the different layers that make up 'Estonia with a capital E' (Interview 1 2024).

6. Conclusion

This research aimed to explore Estonia's memory landscape in 2024, two years after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This project took its inspiration from observing how the academic world has been shaken following the events of February 2022, prompting a surge in interest in applying a postcolonial lens to scholarship about and within the post-socialist space. Coupled with these developments, the Estonian government's decision to permanently alter the country's memory landscape, as mentioned at the beginning of this thesis, prompted this inquiry into the state of Estonia's memory landscape in 2024. Estonia's national museum, ERM, was utilised as a case-study for this research due to its status as a key arm of the state's memory politics and landscape. In designing this research, the various elements that make up museums were considered and thus both ethnographic analysis and expert interviews were employed to bridge these different spheres.

In the broadest sense this project sought to understand and unpick Estonia's memory landscape. In doing so ERM's permanent exhibition was analysed alongside Tamm and Ivanova's frameworks of "interactions with Germany" and "victimhood." It became clear that neither of these templates fit ERM's narrative well and so a new template of "colonial tangles" was suggested. ERM's curation and exhibiting strategies were then scrutinised in light of the developments occurring in other institutions to decolonise and more sensitively and accurately handle material and knowledge. This analysis revealed that while at no point in my expert interviews were the museum's working practices specifically categorised as postcolonial or decolonial, by looking beyond the specific language used, my own observational analysis and conversations supported the characterisation of ERM as a postcolonial institution and one that utilises various decolonial practices. These observations were also supported by my inquiry into the museum's reaction to the full-scale invasion. While many scholars and institutes have adapted or changed their methods and objects of enquiry, with many now emphasising a postcolonial perspective, it appears that ERM has not undergone the same watershed moment of critical reflection that much of scholarship has, but rather has been operating in a "quietly postcolonial" manner for some time. This is not to say that ERM's practices are perfect or fully formed, as in places they appear to fall short, nor that the outbreak of the full-scale conflict has not gone unfelt at the museum. Rather, it appears that the methods and strategies that many scholars and institutions are *now* introducing have been part of the museum's strategy since its redesign in 2016.

While this exploration of ERM did not reveal any fundamental nor methodological changes in their work, the outbreak of conflict has undoubtedly had a significant impact on the museum and issues of memory. At an individual level, the changes in visitor interactions with the museum since the start of the war, as demonstrated in the reported increase in Estonian visitors engaging with the Soviet section of the exhibition and individuals writing in wanting to make changes to their contributions to the *Time of Freedoms* section, illustrate that individual relationships to the country's memory landscape remain dynamic. Moreover, as changes can take a long time to come to fruition due to various obstacles, the individual reactions should not be overlooked and may translate into changes in official discourses at a later date. This thesis therefore offers an insight into the country's memory language and state in 2024. There is every chance that changes may occur in the coming years, changes that most likely will be influenced by how the war develops. It would be impossible to predict what specific changes we might see, but this thesis suggests that these changes will belong to this postcolonial language, with an emphasis on Estonia's position in Europe. Ideas of nationhood and identity thus appear to be becoming more complicated in Estonia and will continue to do so as the country navigates its past and present tangles.

Applying postcolonial theory and strategies to the Baltic states in scholarship has become more common in recent years. Scholars such as Epp Annus have led the way to critically engage with the Soviet period especially through this postcolonial lens. With this in mind, while the Soviet era and more broadly the two totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century have often been the focus in memory studies about and from this region, this research expanded these empirical boundaries with this idea of a narrative template of "colonial tangles" which weave throughout Estonia's memory landscape. This research supports Annus (2016) and Peiker's (2016, 113) arguments that utilising this postcolonial lens makes for a productive line of enquiry into the past, but also crucially into Estonia's present relationship to itself. Moreover, this characterisation of Estonia's memory landscape is intimately tied to the state's journey to negotiate the European memory landscape it has officially been a part of since 2004. ERM's 2016 reconceptualisation, as well as *Vabamu's* redesign, for example, reflect broader developments within Estonia's relationship to Europe. *Vabamu's* discussion of both Nazi and Soviet crimes and ERM's focus on inclusion and dialogue represent a shift towards a more complex understanding of the Estonian state and its people. This narrative template of "colonial tangles" at ERM, which is present in the building itself, in the objects shown and its working practices, firmly belongs to the European memory landscape and represents Estonia's drive to project its identity as part of this tradition.

Before concluding this thesis it is important to briefly reflect on some of the limitations to the study and the avenues which might be pursued to further it. As was noted in the methodology chapter, while single case studies offer the chance to immerse oneself in a deep study of a particular topic, it is important to caution against generalising findings too much. It would thus be interesting to further explore Estonia's memory landscape through more of its museums with further studies exploring other institutions. The Great Guild Hall/*Suugildi Hoone* section of the Estonian History Museum/*Eesti Ajaloomuuseum* in Tallinn is currently undergoing renovations; when it opens, a study of this institution would be an important further insight into how Estonia's memory landscape is developing. As has been previously discussed, changes and developments in museums face many challenges and can take a great deal of time. It would therefore also be interesting to repeat this research in a few years time to assess how the museum is changing and what additions have been made and how they have been received.

We live in a world where memory is being repeatedly weaponised and manipulated (Smeshko 2023), making us acutely aware of the fact that memory is not confined to the past but rather plays an integral part in the construction of a present and a future. With this in mind, paying attention to the construction of national master narratives and the interconnectedness of memory culture and issues of nationalism and identity has never been more important. Right-wing politics continues to gain ground in Europe and beyond, a phenomenon that Estonia has hardly been immune from. While Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in many ways demonstrated the unity within the Estonian political world, it also revealed tensions and divisions regarding identity and inclusion (Jakobson and Kasekamp 2023), ones that are likely to be exacerbated as this conflict continues. The divided and politicised reaction to KUMU's aforementioned "Rendering Race" exhibition similarly highlights a sense of reluctance among many to reconcile the complex layers within Estonian identity and history and also the difficulty in navigating and exhibiting these tangles. My exploration of ERM's *Encounters* exhibition reveals a memory culture attempting to navigate these complexities and tensions. While it is incomplete or insufficient in places, it demonstrates the direction in which the country appears to be travelling in, reinforcing the intimate relationship between the construction of the past and the construction of the future. Estonian identity is arguably only going to become more complex and gain more layers. Processes of globalisation and specifically the large influx of Ukrainians due to the war present new challenges that will continue to be negotiated. With these new arrivals there are various decisions to be made, all of which will shape the country's memory landscape and future identity. This thesis has presented the idea of "colonial tangles" as a way in which to analyse and unpick Estonian

memory culture and yet this idea is not only relevant for understanding the past. As the country navigates its new arrivals and its position in Europe, this idea is likely to remain an integral driving force within both the politics of memory and the politics of the future and will likely continue to unite and divide individuals alike.

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Data Collection

Observational Analysis conducted on 20/2/24 and 5/3/24
Eesti Rahva Muuseum

List of Interviews

Interview 1 with Senior Researcher
25th March 2024, 1pm
Office room at *ERM*

Interview 2 with Research Secretary
27th March 2024, 1pm
Office room at *ERM*

Interview 3 with Education Centre Manager
2nd April 2024, 12pm
Seminar room at *ERM*

Interview 4 with Community Relations Coordinator
2nd April 2024, 1pm
Seminar room at *ERM*

Interview 5 with Curator
3rd April 2024, 9:30am
Seminar room at *ERM*

Interview General Themes:

These bullet points are just a rough outline of some of the topics we might discuss. There is no need to prepare specific answers, this list is to just give an idea of some themes.

Introductory

- Describe role in the museum
- How long have you been working here?

‘Encounters’

- What are the biggest difficulties in curating the story of a country?
- How are different voices and different sections of society balanced?
- If you could describe the narrative the exhibition tries to lay out in 3 words, what would they be?
- Have any sections of exhibition been particularly controversial or triggered more discussion?
- Anything that surprised you about the ‘Encounters’ exhibition? (designing the exhibition or about Estonia more generally)
- What education programmes are on offer – target audience?

Looking forward

- *Possible expansion of the ‘Encounters’ exhibition? What might be changing?
- *More voices added to the story? Russian-speakers and Ukrainians?
- Any new events and objects to be added?

Sample Recruitment Email

Dear _____

I am a second-year MA student currently studying for an International Masters in Economy, State and Society. This is a dual degree with University College London and University of Tartu. As part of my studies, I have to complete a thesis. For this project I am studying Estonia's memory culture and especially how the Estonian National Museum navigates the country's history.

In addition to visiting the museum itself, I would like to conduct a few expert interviews with curators and researchers at the museums to get a broader understanding of the role of the museum and its work. I was therefore wondering if you might be interested in taking part in this study. This would not be time-consuming, likely a maximum of one hour at an agreed time and location. The interview would be held in English with me and, with consent, recorded only for the purpose of creating transcripts and making notes.

I would really appreciate your participation in this project as it would help my study greatly.

Please do not hesitate to get in touch for any additional information, my contact details can be found below.

Many thanks in advance,

Best wishes,

Cosima Ballance

Participant Information Sheet For Museum Curators and Researchers

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMATION SHEET

Provisional Title of Study: Changing practices in Estonian museums in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Department: Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu & School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London

Researcher: Cosima Ballance, Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies [REDACTED], [REDACTED]

Principal Researcher: Dr Catherine Gibson, Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, [REDACTED]

You are being invited to take part in a research project. The project is an MA project. The researcher is a second-year MA student studying for an International Masters in Economy, State, and Society. They are currently studying International Relations and Regional Studies at the Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu.

Before you decide whether to take part in this research, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what participation will involve. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

The study aims to explore Estonia's memory landscape and how its museums curate and exhibit its national story. More specifically, the research aims to tackle the question of to what extent Estonia's memory landscape has been impacted by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. It is well documented that times of crisis and great change influence debates about the past and how it should be remembered and so this study is being conducted now to explore how the most recent invasion is impacting Estonia and its museums. The research will be completed by the summer of 2024.

The researcher hopes to speak with curators and researchers to understand the role of the museum and its work more fully. These interviews will supplement their own observations from visiting the museums to provide greater insight into the decision-making processes involved in exhibiting and curating. Around ten individuals will be approached from the Estonian National Museum in Tartu to provide a broad insight into the industry.

APPENDIX 4 CONTINUED

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and refusing to take part will involve no penalty. At any point during the study, it is also possible to withdraw participation without giving any reason and again without penalty. If you decide to withdraw you will be asked what you wish to happen to the data you have provided up that point. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and will be asked to sign a consent form.

Participation in this study will likely involve just one interview with the researcher, lasting between approximately thirty minutes and one hour at an agreed time. In the event that more information is needed there is a chance a second interview might be required, but this is unlikely. A precise location will be agreed upon between participant and researcher, but would most likely be in the museum, either in an office or café, for example. It is important so say that the interviews will take place in **English** as the researcher is British. Before the interview commences, you will be asked to sign a consent form, agreeing to participation in the study and to being recorded. These recordings will only be listened to by the researcher so that transcripts can be produced and will be deleted once transcripts have been made. No one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings.

The researcher will be undertaking the write-up portion of the study between late March and early May 2024. If you wish to have your data removed from the study, the latest this could occur would be **two weeks after the interview has taken place**.

The researcher does not anticipate any specific possible disadvantages or risks of taking part in the study. Of course, if sensitive conversations are covered in the interviews, the researcher will do their utmost best to handle these with sensitivity and respect. Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will draw a light on how the museum world operates in Estonia and explore curation and exhibiting the national story at this important juncture in time.

In the case that you wish to raise a complaint, the supervisor of the project, Dr Catherine Gibson should be contacted (see email above). In the case that you feel your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, the chair of the UCL Research Ethics Committee can be contacted at ethics@ucl.ac.uk.

With your consent, your name and occupation will be noted for the study as well as which museum you are attached to. This is to help paint a picture of the museum and its workings. If you wish, your name can be anonymised for the study, but as the museum world is a small one and this study specifically looks at two museums, it is likely that participants could still be identifiable even if a different or no name is provided, and so full anonymity cannot be guaranteed. The researcher will be transcribing the interviews themselves and so no external agency is being used to transcribe data. Transcripts and any contact details will be kept in an encrypted drive on a password-protected laptop.

This study will be completed in late May 2024 and defended in early June 2024. The project will then be published by University of Tartu and stored in in the University of Tartu library DSpace. If you would like, a copy of the final project could be obtained from the researcher.

APPENDIX 4 CONTINUED

1. Local Data Protection Privacy Notice

Notice:

The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk

This ‘local’ privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information can be found in our ‘general’ privacy notice:

For participants in research studies, click [here](#)

The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the ‘local’ and ‘general’ privacy notices.

The categories of personal data used will be as follows:

Name
Occupation
Place of Work

The lawful basis that would be used to process your *personal data* will be performance of a task in the public interest.

Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. The data will be held on a secure (N)Drive for up to a year after successful defence of the project (likely June 2025). The researcher will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at data-protection@ucl.ac.uk.

In case you need any further information please contact Dr Catherine Gibson at [REDACTED] although please note correspondence will be coming from the researcher, Cosima Ballance, regarding arranging timings and location etc.

The participant will be given a copy of this sheet and a signed consent form to keep.

Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering to take part in this research study.

CONSENT FORM FOR MUSEUM CURATORS AND RESEARCHERS IN RESEARCH STUDIES

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research.

Title of Study: Changing practices in Estonian museums in the wake of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Department: Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, University of Tartu & School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University College London

Researcher: Cosima Ballance, Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, [REDACTED], [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

Principal Researcher: Dr Catherine Gibson, Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies, [REDACTED]

UCL Data Protection Officer: Alexandra Potts data-protection@ucl.ac.uk

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. The person organising the research must explain the project to you before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

I confirm that I understand that by ticking/initialling each box below I am consenting to this element of the study. I understand that it will be assumed that unticked/initialled boxes means that I DO NOT consent to that part of the study. I understand that by not giving consent for any one element that I may be deemed ineligible for the study.

		Tick Box
1.	I confirm that I have read and understood the Information Sheet for the above study. I have had an opportunity to consider the information and what will be expected of me. I have also had the opportunity to ask questions which have been answered to my satisfaction and would like to take part in an <i>individual interview</i>	
2.	I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data up to <i>two weeks after the interview has taken place</i>	
3.	I consent to participate in the study. I understand that my personal information (name, occupation, place of work) will be used for the purposes explained to me. I understand that according to data protection legislation, ‘public task’ will be the lawful basis for processing.	
4.	I understand that all data for this research will be stored securely and will be destroyed a year after the project is successfully defended (c. June 2025). Anonymity is optional for this research. Please select from the following 3 options: (a) I agree for my real name and role/affiliation to be used in connection with any words I have said or information I have passed on. (b) I request that my comments are presented anonymously but give permission to connect my role/affiliation with my comments (but not the title of my position). (c) I request that my comments are presented anonymously with no mention of my role/affiliation.	

	<p>I understand that due to the limited size of the participant sample and the research's focus on two institutions that in the instance of picking option (c), confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.</p> <p>I understand that confidentiality will be respected unless there are compelling and legitimate reasons for this to be breached. If this was the case, we would inform you of any decision that might limit your confidentiality</p>	
5.	I understand that my information may be subject to review by responsible individuals from the University for monitoring and audit purposes.	
6.	<p>I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason, without my legal rights being affected.</p> <p>I understand that if I decide to withdraw, any personal data I have provided up to that point will be deleted unless I agree otherwise.</p>	
7.	I understand the potential risks of participating and the support that will be available to me should I become distressed during the course of the research.	
8.	I understand that no promise or guarantee of benefits have been made to encourage me to participate	
9.	I understand that the data will not be made available to any commercial organisations but is solely the responsibility of the researcher(s) undertaking this study.	
10.	I understand that I will not benefit financially from this study or from any possible outcome it may result in in the future.	
11.	I agree that my research data may be used by others for future research.	
12.	I understand that the information I have submitted will be published as a report and I wish to receive a copy of it. Yes/No	
13.	<p>I consent to my interview being audio recorded and understand that the recordings will be destroyed immediately following transcription.</p> <p>To note: If you do not want your participation recorded you can still take part in the study.</p>	
14.	I hereby confirm that I understand the inclusion criteria as detailed in the Information Sheet and explained to me by the researcher.	
15.	<p>I hereby confirm that:</p> <p>(a) I understand the exclusion criteria as detailed in the Information Sheet and explained to me by the researcher; and</p> <p>(b) I do not fall under the exclusion criteria.</p>	
16.	I am aware of who I should contact if I wish to lodge a complaint.	
17.	I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.	
18.	<p>Use of information for this project and beyond</p> <p>I understand that all transcripts and data collected will be stored securely on a (N) drive on an encrypted laptop. I understand that this data will then be destroyed one year after the project is successfully defended (c. June 2025).</p> <p>I would be happy for the data I provide, as used in the thesis, to be archived at University of Tartu library DSpace.</p> <p>I understand that my data will not be transferred outside the EEA.</p> <p>I understand that other authenticated researchers will have access to my data as used in the thesis through University of Tartu library DSpace.</p>	

If you would like your contact details to be retained so that you can be contacted in the future by UCL researchers who would like to invite you to participate in follow up studies to this project, or in future studies of a similar nature, please tick the appropriate box below.

	Yes, I would be happy to be contacted in this way	
	No, I would not like to be contacted	

Name of participant

Date

Signature

Researcher

Date

Signature