



Faculty of Social Sciences, Johan Skytte Institute of Political Studies

Oral Histories of Estonian Americans: Leadership and the Future of the Diaspora After the Cold War

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Leah Johnson
1199680

Supervisors:

Radosław Rybkowski, Prof. dr. hab., Jagiellonian University
David Ilmar Lepasaar Beecher, Lecturer in Political Thought and Cultural History, University of Tartu

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Abstract

The Estonian American National Council (EANC) was founded in 1952 by Estonian immigrants to the United States who had chosen exile over repatriation to Soviet-occupied Estonia. Their mission was to preserve Estonian culture in exile and to advocate for Estonian independence to the US government, which had already refused to recognize the annexation of the Baltic States. The restoration of Estonian independence in 1991 witnessed the accomplishment of at least part of the EANC's founding purpose, which prompted reflection within the diaspora as to whether the organization was needed after the Cold War had ended. This MA thesis takes this pivotal moment as its point of departure and investigates the work and significance of the EANC leadership as community organizers through the memories and experiences of second-generation Estonian Americans affiliated with the organization in the 1980s and 1990s. These oral histories attest to the profound value of diaspora work supported for creating spaces where Estonian identity could be practiced in exile and for preserving a connection to Estonia amongst the second generation. Arguments in favor of the EANC's continuation stated that its work was not done but had changed shape as the need for cultural preservation persisted and Russia continued to pose a security threat to Estonia. This MA thesis also finds that Estonian Americans wished to be participants, not just as visitors or tourists, in rebuilding Estonia, which prompted new organizational and individual activities to reconnect with the homeland.

Estońsko-Amerykańska Rada Narodowa (EANC) została założona w 1952 roku przez estońskich imigrantów w Stanach Zjednoczonych, którzy wybrali wygnanie zamiast repatriacji do okupowanej przez Sowietów Estonii. Ich misją było zachowanie estońskiej kultury na wygnaniu i opowiadanie się za niepodległością Estonii przed rządem USA, który już wcześniej odmówił uznania aneksji krajów bałtyckich. Przywrócenie estońskiej niepodległości w 1991 r. było świadkiem osiągnięcia przynajmniej części celu założycielskiego EANC, co skłoniło diasporę do refleksji nad tym, czy organizacja jest potrzebna, teraz gdy zimna wojna dobiegła końca. Niniejsza praca magisterska przyjmuje ten kluczowy moment jako punkt wyjścia i bada pracę i znaczenie kierownictwa EANC jako organizatorów społeczności poprzez wspomnienia i doświadczenia drugiego pokolenia estońskich Amerykanów związanych z organizacją w latach 80. i 90. XX wieku. Te ustne historie świadczą o głębokiej wartości pracy diaspory wspieranej w tworzeniu przestrzeni, w których estońska tożsamość może być praktykowana na wygnaniu, oraz w utrzymywaniu więzi z Estonią wśród drugiego pokolenia. Argumenty przemawiające za kontynuacją EANC wskazywały, że jego praca nie została zakończona, ale zmieniła kształt, ponieważ utrzymywała się potrzeba ochrony kultury, a Rosja nadal stanowiła zagrożenie dla bezpieczeństwa Estonii. W niniejszej pracy magisterskiej stwierdzono również, że estońscy Amerykanie chcieli być uczestnikami, a nie tylko gośćmi lub turystami, w odbudowie Estonii, co skłoniło ich do podjęcia nowych działań organizacyjnych i indywidualnych w celu ponownego nawiązania kontaktu z ojczyzną.

Introduction

“As a little kid going to the Estonian independence commemorations every February and hearing the speeches...hearing ‘when we go back to Estonia’ – and this was in the 1950s – that was kind of a scary thing for a little kid. What is this place? It was like a fairytale place...People always had good memories - obviously there were bad things that happened...but it was like a fairytale.” Gilda Karu, EANC Board Member.¹

Gilda Karu is the longest serving member on the board of the Estonian American National Council (EANC), having joined in the late 1970s, and was a leader within the Estonian American diaspora through the Cold War, the restoration of independence, the uncertainty of the 1990s, and to the present day. She, and other board and council members active in the 80s and 90s, were primarily of the second generation, meaning they were either born in the United States to at least one Estonian parent or had immigrated before the age of five and had no personal memories of Estonia. These second-generation leaders were shaped by profoundly different conditions than their parents and elders of the first generation, who had grown up in the interwar Republic of Estonia and lived for years in displaced persons (DP) camps² before choosing exile in the West over repatriation to Soviet occupied Estonia. This led to different mindsets when it came to diasporic work, as evidenced by Karu’s quotation above in which she explained the promise of one day returning to Estonia was “a scary thing for a little kid.” For the first generation, they organized and fought to *return* home to Estonia, however the second generation was *already* home in the United States.

¹ Gilda Karu, (Treasurer, EANC, Present), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

² Displaced persons (DPs) referred to individuals who were refugees or internally displaced due to the events of WWII. Many lived in camps across Europe, primarily in Allied-occupied Germany. The responsibility for their care was assigned to the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, and many refused to be repatriated to their countries of origin due to fear of political, religious or ethnic persecution. The USSR demanded the repatriation of Soviet citizens, which the Allies complied with, but because the Allied forces never recognized the annexation of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania by the Soviet Union, they refused to repatriate unwilling DPs from those countries.

Growing up in the United States did not make these young leaders any less committed to preserving Estonian culture and fighting for Estonian independence. Instead, they viewed their American identities as a resource they could leverage in support of Estonia. Whether it was attending the ESTO festivals which brought together Estonians from around the world to celebrate their culture or making their voices heard at the ballot box during pivotal elections, Estonian Americans sought to incorporate all aspects of their multicultural upbringings in their diasporic work. For them, being an active member of the diaspora meant also being an engaged US citizen who exercised their civic responsibilities. Just as the first generation were shaped by their time in the DP camps and the experience of immigrating to a foreign country, the second generation were shaped by growing up during the Cold War. The memory of free Estonia, which Karu likens to a ‘fairytale,’ inspired many people to volunteer time and resources towards the diasporic mission articulated by prominent organizations such as the EANC. These missions were to advocate for independence and to preserve cultural heritage so that future generations would still see themselves as Estonian. The restoration of independence in 1991 was a moment of triumph, but also prompted debate within the diaspora as to whether the need for diasporic organizing and advocacy persisted once Estonia was free from Soviet occupation and whether the diaspora had a responsibility to help Estonians at home with rebuilding.

This MA thesis investigates political advocacy as a forum negotiating dual identities in a multigenerational, diasporic context and examines the arguments and strategies employed by diaspora leaders to redefine their organization’s purpose and to stay relevant to their constituents post-Cold War. The impact that the restoration of Estonian independence had on diaspora dynamics in the United States is investigated through oral histories of Estonian American leaders affiliated with the Estonian American National Council in the 1980s and 1990s. The second

generation EANC board members I interview joined the organization under its original missions to “provide a free voice for the Estonian people and fight for independence of Estonia and human rights for its people” and to “preserve the Estonian cultural heritage in the United States and provide mutual assistance for the ethnic group members.”³ During the 90s, they were the ones who would be determining the future priorities of the EANC and shaping the next decade of Estonian American diasporic work. Understanding their motivations for joining the EANC, the resonance its mission had with their personal values and beliefs shaped by the Cold War, and how Estonian diasporic work fit within their American lives is essential context for investigating how the diaspora leadership made the case to its constituency that its relevance persisted beyond the Cold War context it was founded in. Ultimately, this MA thesis seeks to understand what role activists who had dedicated their early adulthood to fighting for independence imagined their diaspora could play in a world with a free and accessible homeland. Furthermore, if the diaspora did have a role to play, would it prioritize the internal development of Estonian American society or externally support Estonia rebuild and transition to democracy?

The members constituting the leadership team of the EANC are fascinating subjects of study, particularly during the time of change and uncertainty precipitated by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The EANC has a 72-year history (1952-present) in which it has supported a variety of political and cultural activities and represented Estonian American interests in the highest offices of the United States, including that of the US President. Council and board members are elected every four years, making the EANC a democratic body operating at the national level. Its election process conferred greater legitimacy upon itself within the diaspora to speak on their behalf, but also within the context of American political norms. The organization

³ Jonathan H L'Hommedieu, "Exiles and constituents: Baltic refugees and American Cold War politics, 1948-1960," PhD diss., (University of Turku, 2011): 89.

supports local Estonian institutions and societies through funding and collaborates with other national groups, such as the Joint Baltic American National Committee (JBANC)⁴ and the Estonian World Council (EWC). The EANC positioned itself as a leader within the diaspora for coordinating political advocacy on behalf of the homeland and supporting the preservation of Estonian culture in exile, making it a particularly interesting subject of study in the decade following the end of the Cold War when independence has been won and exile lifted.

The use of oral history methodology is a departure from the norms in the literature, which tend to take a top-down approach by examining US government documents and materials produced by Baltic American interest groups to determine the effectiveness of advocacy on US foreign policy. However, the focus of this MA thesis is not on measuring their impact on US foreign policy or on determining whether diasporas are instruments or agents in the wider geopolitical maneuvering of superpowers. By contrast, the oral history approach takes an individualistic, bottom-up perspective that prioritizes the voices and memories of those who lived the history and how they tell their story thirty years later. Conversations with leaders in the EANC reveal what inspired them to join, what their work meant for them within the context of their lives, and how their perspective on the diaspora changed following independence. These are fundamentally different insights than what can be gathered from archival documents and shed light on the internal reflection occurring as members of the second generation prepared to take

⁴ JBANC is formed from three organizations, the Estonian American National Council, the American Latvian Association, and the Lithuanian American Council (est. 1915), who combined their efforts towards the realization of independence for their respective countries. JBANC is a platform through which the presidents of each interest group could meet regularly to share information and coordinate activities. JBANC also frequently represented the three organizations in public settings, such as Congress, State Department, or White House meetings in which the three groups wanted to present a united front. It is critical to note that the Lithuanian American Council is a separate entity from the Lithuanian American Community. The Lithuanian American Community (est. 1951) is a much larger organization that engages in a variety of cultural, political, economic, and social programs for Lithuanian Americans however it is not a member of JBANC.

on the mantle in the 1990s of preserving Estonian culture in the US and re-establishing connections with the country of their parents.

The following sections will discuss the diaspora theoretical framework developed by Rogers Brubaker and the usage of the oral history methodology. The third section will chronologically engage with the history of Estonian American activism through the voices of the activists themselves. It will provide a brief background on Estonian settlement patterns after WWII to provide context for the communities my interviewees were raised in before analyzing the advocacy strategies employed by second generation activists in the final decade of the Cold War and the impact of the restoration of Estonian independence on the diaspora's traditional relationships with their members, the American public, US institutions, and finally, newly independent Estonia.

Theoretical Framework: Diaspora as an Analytical Concept

The terms used to describe the Estonians who immigrated to the United States after WWII and their descendants are quite diverse. In the English language literature, terms such as ‘exile’, ‘immigrant’, ‘displaced person’, ‘refugee’ are usually applied to the first generation, and terms such as ‘Estonian American’ or ‘American of Estonian descent’ are more commonly applied to the later generations to reflect the increased integration of the exiles and their American-born children into American society. In Estonian, the common term is the *väliseestlased* (foreign Estonians). This MA thesis will use the term ‘Estonian Americans’ and refer to the ‘diaspora’ to describe the Estonian Americans active in the project of cultural preservation and political advocacy in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s. As will be demonstrated, the term ‘diaspora’ is definitionally appropriate to the Estonian American case study and offers a useful analytical framework for understanding how this group built a diasporic consciousness and engaged in their diasporic project over time.

Diaspora: Towards a Definition

The concept of diaspora has generated much scholarly discussion within the last 30 years, particularly with regards to how this concept can be distinguished within “a larger semantic domain that includes words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guestworker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community.”⁵ Theorizations of the term have offered up definitions, features, attributes, and qualities to try to define the origins and perpetuation of diasporas. Rogers Brubaker in his article “The ‘diaspora’ diaspora,” offers his own contribution to the diaspora debate in which he proposes a definition and presents an analytical framework for

⁵ Khachig Tölölyan, “The Nation-State and Its Others: In Lieu of a Preface,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* vol 1, no 1 (1991): 4.

engaging with diasporas as subjects of academic study. Brubaker's impetus for writing this piece is his criticism of the "application of the term diaspora to an ever-broadening set of cases: essentially to any and every nameable population category that is to some extent dispersed in space..."⁶ He proposes the following 'core elements' that constitute a diaspora: dispersion, homeland orientation, and boundary maintenance.

Brubaker defines 'dispersion' as "forced or otherwise traumatic dispersion" or "broadly as any kind of dispersion in space, provided that the dispersion crosses state borders..."⁷ Brubaker's definition allows for both voluntary and involuntary forms of dispersion, indicating that the diaspora's origins do not necessarily have to be traumatic. However, a prominent component within diaspora consciousness and narratives is that of the 'victim tradition', which Robin Cohen explains is the narrative of victimhood that features heavily in diaspora narratives of their dispersion, exile, and settlement. He writes, "All scholars of diaspora recognize that the victim tradition is at the heart of any definition of the concept..."⁸ This narrative of 'victim tradition' can serve a binding function deriving from shared experiences as well as a call to action if evoked as an external threat to the diaspora's culture or way of life that they have a duty to protect.

Brubaker introduces the term 'homeland orientation' which he defines as the "orientation to a real or imagined 'homeland' as an authoritative source of value, identity and loyalty."⁹ The concepts of authority, authenticity, and legitimacy are central to the diaspora building process. Within the diaspora, leaders seek to justify their own claims to represent the whole group by

⁶ Rogers Brubaker, "The 'diaspora' diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol 28, no 1 (2005): 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁸ Robin Cohen, "Diasporas and the nation state: from victims to challengers," *International Affairs*, vol 72, no 3 (July 1996): 513.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

appealing to their personal affinity for the values, traditions, and beliefs of the homeland. William Safran expands on this idea further when he investigates the ‘myth of return’ that appears as a frequent narrative amongst diasporas. Safran conceptualizes the myth of return as serving a solidarity function at times when “the cohesiveness of the local community is loosened, and when the family is threatened with disintegration.”¹⁰ Therefore, the homeland is conceptualized as the ultimate source of authenticity and legitimacy, and diaspora leaders can confer that onto themselves by evoking their connection to the homeland. Tension can arise along generational lines as competing claims to authority arise.

While homeland orientation seeks to define the relationship between the diaspora and their homeland, boundary maintenance refers to “the preservation of a distinctive identity vis-à-vis a host society (or societies).”¹¹ The criterion of boundary maintenance has both internal and external implications. Internally, it refers to how the community imagines itself and constructs a sense of fellowship and solidarity that makes it a cohesive ‘group’. Externally, boundary maintenance refers to how the community maintains its distinctiveness from the host society that justifies its treatment as a separate group. Brubaker notes this can be achieved through “deliberate resistance to assimilation...or as an unintended consequence of social exclusion.”¹² Therefore, a core tension within the literature is how diasporas negotiate boundaries to be internally inclusive to their own members and externally exclusive with their host society to maintain a distinctive group identity. For diasporas, integration or assimilation pressures can threaten the external boundary between them and the host society. Additionally, competing

¹⁰ William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* vol 1, no 1 (Spring 1991): 91.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹² Brubaker, “The ‘diaspora’ diaspora,” 6.

articulations of a diasporic identity can threaten the internally inclusive boundary and create fragmentation within the diaspora.

As Brubaker acknowledges, the notion of ‘boundary maintenance’ is as indispensable for definitions of diaspora as it is difficult to theorize. A core tension emerges between what he calls “boundary maintenance and boundary erosion”, which results from the forces of change and assimilation that occur through time to result in hybrid, fluid identities.¹³ Bruneau takes up this line of thinking and makes what he calls “long-term sedimentation” a necessary definitional element of a diaspora, and offers a distinction between diaspora and terms such as ‘exile’, ‘refugee’, or ‘transnational community.’ Bruneau argues that diasporas are “firmly rooted in their various places of settlement.” These roots are often tied to physical spaces of communal gathering and celebration.¹⁴ He writes, “All diasporas are socio-spatial networks necessarily undergoing territorial expansion because they aggregate both places of memory and places of presence.”¹⁵ Boundaries, therefore, are only an interesting subject of study, when they persist over generations as a result of resistance to assimilatory pressures and physical communal spaces play a critical role in this temporal-spatial establishment of diasporas.

A critical response to Brubaker’s diaspora ‘core elements’ comes from Pnina Werbner, who further elaborates on the issue of diasporic boundaries. Werbner argues that Brubaker has undertheorized the element of ‘boundaries’ with regards to diasporas and proposes that “Rather than any sharp boundary defining the ethnic or diasporic group, it is the center that imagines the boundary.”¹⁶ Werbner introduces a ‘center’, understood to be a diaspora’s leadership, who is

¹³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴ Bruneau, “Diasporas, transnational spaces and communities,” 3.

¹⁵ Michel Bruneau, “Diasporas, transnational spaces and communities,” in *Diaspora and Transnationalism: Concepts, Theories, and Methods*, eds R. Bauböck and T. Faist (Amsterdam University Press, 2010): 1.

¹⁶ Pnina Werbner, “The Boundaries of Diaspora: A Critical Response to Brubaker,” *Diasporic constructions of home and belonging* (2015): 41.

responsible for articulating ideas, beliefs, stances that construct the boundaries and delineate members from non-members. She highlights that boundaries are constantly shifting, driven by dynamic social contexts and that modern diasporas are not centralized units, but clusters and networks that have multiple boundaries that are stressed situationally.¹⁷ She evokes the sociological tool of ‘situational analysis’, which theorizes that “people bear multiple identities and that determining which identity is performed, stressed, or highlighted depends on, indeed is often determined by, the social situation.”¹⁸ This allows Werbner to examine the nuance between the politically and culturally motivated core activists versus the periphery of passive onlookers, and how certain events such as crises or celebrations can mobilize the normally disengaged or passive members. It is in these moments of crisis or celebration, Werbner argues, that the boundary of the diaspora “periodically surfaces as a momentary reality.”¹⁹ Therefore, the core argument that Werbner makes is that “diasporas do have boundaries, but that the boundaries of the diaspora are defined and highlighted situationally, dialectically and over time, in action, through performance and periodic mobilizations.”²⁰ This theorization argues that diasporas have imagined, socially constructed boundaries, that are dynamic and evoked situationally based on the conditions of the environments they find themselves in.

Diaspora as a Project

Following from the definition above, diasporas can be understood as populations that experienced either a voluntary or involuntary dispersion, seek to preserve a connection to their country of origin, and maintain a distinctive identity vis à vis their host society. There is a core

¹⁷ Werbner, “The Boundaries of Diaspora,” 36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

tension in the literature, however, as to whether diasporas are “something that is ‘out there’ and can be explicitly defined and measured” and those that treat “diaspora as a social construction – a process through which spokespersons create and appropriate diasporic discourse, consciousness, and identity and use them to claim and mobilize putative constituencies.”²¹ Brubaker situates himself with the second school of thought and cautions against using ‘diaspora’ interchangeably with ‘ethnic community’ because it obscures the critical nuance between the people that are *active* in preserving a connection to the homeland and distinctiveness from the host society, and those that are *passive* and opt not to participate in such practices. Brubaker cautions against treating “...‘a diaspora’ or ‘the diaspora’ as an entity, a bounded group, an ethno-demographic or ethno-cultural fact...”²² Instead, diasporas are formed on the basis of voluntary participation, which people opt in to donating resources and time to. There is a necessary distinction between those who choose to participate and those who do not – with the people who choose to engage in diasporic initiatives being in the minority, and those that choose to *lead* being even fewer still.

Brubaker argues that in most diasporas, what he calls the “actively diasporan fraction” or “diasporists” is the *minority*, and that the majority “do not adopt a diasporic stance and are not committed to the diasporic project.”²³ This is further affirmed by Khachig Tölöyan, who argues that “diasporists rarely form more than a small percentage of old ethnic or new immigrant dispersions...”²⁴ This framework facilitates consideration of a more interesting line of questioning into the motivations and aspirations of the actively diasporan fraction, how they define their internally inclusive identity and draw upon cultural resources to mobilize their peers,

²¹ Jonathan Grossman, “Toward a definition of diaspora.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol 41, no 8 (2019): 1264.

²² Brubaker, “The ‘diaspora’ diaspora,” 13.

²³ Brubaker, “The ‘diaspora’ diaspora,” 13.

²⁴ Khachig Tölöyan, “Rethinking *Diaspora* (s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment.” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, vol 5, no 1 (Spring 1996): 19.

and how they navigate maintaining their connection to the homeland through generations.

Therefore, Brubaker proposes that instead of treating diasporas as inevitable ethno-cultural social formations, analysts should instead engage with diaspora as a project, akin to a nationalist project, in which claims to ‘groupness’, authenticity, and authority to speak on behalf of the whole ethnic community must be critically interrogated.

An important aspect of the literature on nation building and nationalism is that of the public sphere as the space where identity is contested and reproduced, symbols and narratives evoked, and communities imagined. Tölöyan and Werbner argue diasporas construct their own public spheres, “composed of a plurality of associations, media, cultural societies and so forth”²⁵ through which their homeland identity can be reproduced and reaffirmed within the broader context of their host society. It is constructed through the voluntary “efforts and investments by members of the diaspora. It requires labor and funding...But in being focused around shared celebrations, predicaments and places, or arguments of identity, the diasporic public sphere creates bounded arenas or spaces of focused communal value.”²⁶ It is in the public sphere that scholars can see the diasporic project in action, where events, celebrations, meetings, publications, protests, etc. demonstrate how a sense of ‘groupness’ and shared identity are performed and reinforced. Tölöyan writes that, “diasporic individuals must not only have identities that differ from those prescribed by the dominant hostland culture, but also diaspora-specific social identities that are constructed through interaction with the norms, values, discourses and practices of that diaspora’s communal institutions, honoring some and transgressing others.”²⁷ As Tölöyan argues, diasporas are engaged in creating an almost parallel

²⁵ Werbner, “The Boundaries of Diaspora,” 47.

²⁶ Werbner, “The Boundaries of Diaspora,” 39.

²⁷ Tölöyan, “Rethinking *Diaspora* (s),” 29.

society based on that of the homeland, where a plurality of values, beliefs, and practices exist alongside each other just as they do in the host society.

Political Activism and the Affirmation of Diasporic Identity

The performance of cultural activities, such as commemorating events or holidays, maintaining language education, organizing song and dance groups are important mechanisms through which shared diasporic identity is consolidated and practiced by active members. Political activism is another mechanism through which diasporic identity is negotiated and reproduced. As units of analysis, diasporas do possess legitimacy as a form of stateless power where if they are citizens of their host society they can engage in host society politics and also politics of the homeland.²⁸ In the United States context, this manifests itself in the emergence of ethnic based lobbying groups who can exercise their civic rights as Americans to encourage their elected officials to adopt a stance favorable to their homeland.²⁹ This requires the mobilization of a constituency, which, following Brubaker's framework, is not an inevitable conclusion of a shared ethnic background. Instead, an actively diasporan fraction must engage in political entrepreneurship and seek to align political objectives with the cultural resources they are drawing on, and then communicate this to their putative constituency via the constructed diaspora public sphere. Shubha Kamala Prasad and Filip Savatic argue that "That the mobilization of diasporas is the result of a top-down process, as opposed to a bottom-up grassroots movement. Political entrepreneurs—individuals with the knowledge, networks, and resources to navigate the challenges associated with establishing a formal interest group

²⁸ Tölöyan, "Rethinking *Diaspora* (s)," 29.

²⁹ Maria Koinova, "Diasporas and democratization in the post-communist world," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol 42 (2009): 47.

organization and engaging in political activities—catalyze mobilization.”³⁰ This invites questions such as what cultural resources these political entrepreneurs invoke to mobilize the broader community, what political issues emerge as important to the diaspora, and what strategies are used to facilitate mass action?

It is useful to note that political activism has particular salience with regards to the question of boundary maintenance. It furthers the articulation of a diaspora identity and stances, but also encourages deeper engagement with the institutions, norms, and practices of the host society which may facilitate greater integration over time.³¹ In their respective studies of Cold War diasporas from the Baltic region, Gatrell and Ciubrinskas also highlight the “patriotic responsibility” felt by diasporists to be active on behalf of their homeland because they had left behind friends and family at home, usually in turbulent situations.³² Ciubrinskas writes, “Nevertheless the zeal of to be of use to your own country was instrumental, at least among the Lithuanian born generation. It revealed itself in different charities as well as political and civic campaigns to help occupied Lithuania.”³³ They find that practicing the homeland culture in exile was often paired with a responsibility felt by diasporists to act on behalf of the homeland politically or financially.

Political activism, therefore, is a forum in which their homeland identity could be practiced in the host society’s public sphere, but its methods are shaped by the institutions and norms of the host society. Ciubrinskas writes, “So actually the American-born generations’ way

³⁰ Shubha Kamala Prasad and Filip Savatic, “Diasporic Foreign Policy Interest Groups in the United States: Democracy, Conflict, and Political Entrepreneurship,” *Cambridge University Press on behalf of the American Political Science Association*, vol 21, no 3 (September 2023): 832.

³¹ Östen Wahlbeck, “The concept of diaspora as an analytical tool in the study of refugee communities,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28, 2 (2002): 227.

³² Gatrell, “Population displacement in the Baltic region,” 48.

³³ Vytis Ciubrinskas, “Diaspora as a Resource of Homeland Nationalism Forged Overseas and Contested Back Home,” *Diasporas as a Resource. Comparative Studies in Strategies, Networks, and Urban Space*, Wien: LIT Verlag (2013): 115.

of practicing Lithuanian-ness is to accommodate elements of ethnic culture into modern narratives and cultural commodities of mainstream America.”³⁴ This speaks to the tension of boundary maintenance versus boundary erosion that diasporists face, in which to become better activists on behalf of the homeland, they must understand and engage deeper with the host society. In the American context, engagement in civic duties like voting, writing letters to Congress, and grassroots organizing all contribute to the diaspora becoming further integrated with the American host society. To be an active diasporist is to be an active US citizen. Therefore, political activism emerges as a potential area of tension, where maintenance of a distinctive identity and assimilatory pressures are put into conflict.

Mary Bernstein in her article “Identity Politics” engages primarily with social identity movements, however her insights into the mobilization of identities have relevance for studying diasporas. She discusses how “activists alternatively emphasize similarities to or differences from the norm because of the interactions among social movement organizations, state actors, and opposing movements...”³⁵ Therefore, it can be expected that diasporic activists would vary when they stress the *similarities* between their homeland and American identities vs when they stress *differences* between their homeland and American identities. Political activism is a useful forum through which to see this balance of dual homeland and host society identities in action, and the second generation of diasporists are particularly interesting subjects of study because of their deeper immersion in the host society than their parents and second-hand connection with the homeland. As will be demonstrated in subsequent sections, the stressing of identities in different contexts during the course of political activism, as well as the strategy of drawing

³⁴ Ciubrinskas, "Diaspora as a Resource of Homeland Nationalism," 113.

³⁵ Mary Bernstein, "Identity Politics," *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol 31 (2005): 61.

parallels between their Estonian and American identities, features prominently throughout the literature and in the experience of my second-generation interviewees.

Summary: Application to the EANC

At its core, Brubaker's framework offers three characteristics of diaspora (dispersion, boundary maintenance, and homeland orientation) that speak to the emergence of diasporas as a form of social organization, their relationships to their homeland and host society, and to their perpetuation through time. His theorization underscores the essential questions and sources of tension within what he calls the diasporic project. This theoretical framework offers guidance when engaging with the EANC as a diasporic project and its leadership as diasporists. Werbner's and Brubaker's identification of the "diasporan fraction" and the "center imagining the boundary" provide justification as to the relevance and analytical value of studying the motivations, ideas, and work of EANC leaders who were responsible for articulating a mission and organizing voluntary participation. Brubaker invites scholars to look deeper into the strategies and messages used by diasporists to encourage participation in the diasporic project by challenging the assumption that social organization such as this is inevitable. Instead, 'diaspora' and the organizations it inspires are the result of voluntary work, time, and resources devoted by self-styled or elected leaders seeking to call their constituents to action in service of a mission relevant to the context of their host society and homeland.

In these respects, Brubaker's theorization alongside contributions from Bruneau, Grossman, and Werbner, are applicable to the case study of the Estonian American National Council, which is an organization that resulted from a desire to engage in a diasporic project and then contributed to advancing this project through generations. Brubaker's three characteristics

resonate with the experience of the EANC, which was founded after the dispersal event, when 70-80,000 refugees left for Western countries, of which approximately 12,000 settled in the United States.³⁶ The drastic increase in Estonian population size in the US after WWII, and its concentration in the mid-Atlantic area, inspired more community organizing due to greater demand for Estonian language spaces – including church congregations, community centers, media, and schools. The desire for more sophisticated organizing was also prompted by the threat to Estonian culture posed by the Soviet Union, which had forcibly occupied the Baltic States.

To speak about boundary maintenance and homeland orientation as separate characteristics misrepresents the point of the two terms. They are fundamentally interrelated, for example, how best to maintain one’s distinctiveness from the host society than by preserving the language and culture of the homeland and continuously reaffirming that connection in daily life. Where the two terms differ is with regards to the relationship they are defining – boundary maintenance describes the diaspora’s relationship with its host society and homeland orientation describes the relationship with the homeland. As Bruneau and Werbner’s contributions argue, boundaries are dynamic, stressed situationally, and often erode through generations leading to the emergence of hybrid identities. When does such hybridity destroy the diaspora and when does it serve as a resource? The homeland, especially when inaccessible during the diaspora’s development, is the ultimate source of authenticity. Affinity with it offers leaders legitimacy to speak on behalf of the diaspora and define its mission. However, claims to authority can be challenged, particularly across generational lines as connections to the homeland become increasingly indirect.

³⁶ Tammaru et al., “The Formation and Development of the Estonian Diaspora,” 1167.

Therefore, this theoretical framework points to some core questions and areas of tension which must be investigated within the scope of the EANC's history and the experience of the diasporists that make up its leadership team. The theoretical characteristics shed light on the components of the EANC's mission, which can be summarized with two terms used in the diaspora's discourse, including the 'välisvõitlus' ("the struggle from abroad")³⁷, defined as the political efforts to support Estonia and bring about its restoration of independence³⁸ and the preservation of 'eestlus', which Merivoo-Parro translates into English as 'Estonianness' or 'Estonianism.' The preservation of *eestlus* refers to the imperative of preserving authentic Estonian culture in exile.³⁹ These terms encapsulate the diaspora's broader political and cultural missions that go beyond the mission statements of individual organizations.

This framework provides direction when analyzing the motivations and objectives of the EANC through a time of change, in which the notion of boundaries is being challenged by the political advocacy strategies of the second generation and the diaspora-homeland relationship has been fundamentally altered by its accessibility post-independence. In addition to the *internal* communication of identity and mission, political advocacy also requires *external* engagement with the host societies norms, political traditions, and institutions, which facilitates diaspora leaders engaging deeper with the civic practices of the United States. Therefore, diasporists may

³⁷ Translation of "välisvõitlus" to "the struggle from abroad" in English is based on Dr. Tõnu Parming's translation of the term as it appeared in his article "Estonia Abroad: Problematics of the Second Century," *Esto America*, Sept-Oct 1984, 12. From the personal collection of Maria Pedak Kari.

³⁸ Arne Kalm, "Historical Review of American Estonians' Past Political Activities," Remarks presented at Estonians in America: Past, Present and Future Panel Discussion, Stamford CT, September 2014.

³⁹ In her study of Estonian American cultural development, Merivoo-Parro finds that the word 'eestlus' was invoked frequently in publications and scholarship applications, but never defined or explained, which she argued indicated that writers could assume their readers were operating with the same mental space and understood the term intuitively. She explains that it is occasionally used as a noun, in which 'Eestlus' is something that Estonians abroad must carry on, preserve, and assist others in achieving. [Source: Merivoo-Parro, "Claiming Ethnicity in Overlapping Diasporic Conditions: Estonian Americans and Academic Mobility During the Cold War," *Acta Historica Tallinnensia*, 21 (2015): 114.]

be mobilized to act on the basis of their responsibility to the homeland, but the act of political activism facilitates greater integration into the host society because they participate in the civil rights afforded to them by their American identity. The ensuing analysis will engage with the notion of boundaries through the experiences of my second-generation interviewees both during and after the Cold War and investigate how the sudden accessibility of Estonia brought into sharp relief similarities, and differences, between the diaspora and homeland Estonians.

Methodology: Oral History

This thesis is situated within the discipline of history and will employ historical source analysis and oral history methodology when working with primary source materials. There is rich documentation from the EANC and JBANC stored in the University of Minnesota Immigration History Research Center Archive. The documents exist in a mixture of English and Estonian languages. Included in the collection are meeting minutes, newsletters, bulletins, pamphlets, correspondences, Congressional letter templates, and newspaper clippings that the EANC and JBANC have sorted by year. Meeting minutes and newsletters from the EANC tend to be in Estonian while their external correspondences are in English. Almost all JBANC materials are in English due to it being the shared language between the Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian diaspora organizations. Due to my limited Estonian language proficiency, I use Estonian sources in a limited capacity and predominantly use English sources.⁴⁰ Given that the interviews are the primary source materials for this MA thesis and were conducted in English, this does not detract from the research objectives.

The archival documents are an excellent source of knowledge on the official positions of the EANC, its rhetoric, its strategies, and activities. However, the documents lack the greater context of the lives of individuals who make up the EANC and are unable to answer questions about their motivations, hopes, fears, and the impact of advocacy on their lives. I will complement the archival sources with seven oral history interviews that I conducted with current and former members of the EANC who are of the second generation and were active with the organization in the 1990s. The interviewees I have chosen are *not* meant to be a representative sample of Estonian Americans at large – in fact, their views might not even reflect all the diverse

⁴⁰ Translations from Estonian to English come from either the author's own translations with the assistance of an Estonian-English dictionary or Sõnaveeb.ee.

viewpoints within the EANC itself. However, each person has stories to tell about how they got involved in political and cultural advocacy, balanced their Estonian and American identities on a daily basis, built a connection with Estonia, and participated in the restoration of Estonian independence and what came after. They were chosen because of their first-hand experience of the events in question and for their authority to give expert accounts of what was occurring in the EANC in this period. I also interviewed Paul Goble for his service as the special advisor to the US Secretary of State, James Baker, on Soviet nationality issues from 1989-1992. Over the years, Goble has written extensively on the Baltic Question during the Cold War and the non-recognition policy, developed informational training material for diplomats from the US sent to the Baltic States, and had a close relationship with the EANC/JBANC during the 1980s and 1990s. His interview complements the other seven by providing US government insights and a non-Estonian American perspective on the diaspora organizations and their members.

My interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 1-2 hours. Before the meeting, the participants were encouraged to bring photos or documents from their personal collections that were particularly important to them. Many did so, which enriched the stories they told. The interviews progressed chronologically and spanned the participants' lives, covering their earliest memories of Estonia, motivations to get involved in political and cultural activities, the significance of the 1990s for them, and how they feel looking back on the struggle for independence in their youth. The interviews will serve as the foundation of the empirical analysis, which means that the analytical objective of this MA thesis is not to examine the high politics of the Cold War or narrate the progression of historical events, but instead to examine how participating in history is remembered by my interviewees and the impact that it had on their lives. This type of qualitative data analysis aligns with two of several aims identified in the

Sage Qualitative Data Analysis Kit, including investigating the “subjective experiences of a specific individual or group” and “comparing several cases (individuals or groups) and what they have in common or the differences between them.”⁴¹ My seven interviews were conducted within the methodological and ethical guidelines of oral history best practices, outlined by the Oral History Association and greatly enrich the findings from the archival sources.⁴² The thesis received ethical approval through the University of Glasgow.

As a methodology, oral history is defined as, “primary-source material created in an interview setting with a witness to or a participant in an event or a way of life for the purpose of preserving the information and making it available to others.”⁴³ Its value is in making “history come alive”⁴⁴ through the words and stories of people who lived it, and provides insights as to not only what happened, but also how people looking back tell the story of their life. As a historical medium, oral history is interactive, meaning that the interviewer takes part in the storytelling through questioning the subject about their experiences. It is the responsibility of the interviewer to elicit memories and stories through questions, but to balance this with letting the interviewee direct the conversation so that the interviewer does not guide the interviewee in predetermined directions. Done correctly, oral history can draw on memory to gain a “different understanding of a past experienced both individually and collectively” than can be observed through documents.⁴⁵ This creates a valuable historical document in the form of the interview. Oral histories as a source of historical knowledge are particularly useful when researching

⁴¹ Uwe Flick, “Mapping the Field,” in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis*, eds. Norman K Denzin and Yvonna S Lincoln, (2011): 5.

⁴² OHA, “Oral History Best Practices,” *Oral History Association*, accessed 09/06/24, <https://oralhistory.org/best-practices/>.

⁴³ Barbara W Sommer and Mary Kay Quinlan. *The Oral History Manual*, 2 ed. (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc: 2009): 1.

⁴⁴ Sommer and Quinlan. *The Oral History Manual*, 3.

⁴⁵ Joanna Bornat, “Oral History,” *Qualitative research practice* (2004): 35.

memory transfer, family stories, and life narratives due to the possibility of directly asking questions to a participant as the interview develops organically.⁴⁶ Sommer and Quinlan argue in *The Oral History Manual* that, “It allows researchers to probe beneath the surface of the written record to discover not just what happened but how and why, to explain anomalies, to provide convincing evidence or tantalizing clues that enhance understanding of a past time and place.”⁴⁷ Therefore, the historical value of an oral history complements the insights from written sources, and suits the research aims of this thesis.

Oral history can present ethical concerns, which must be carefully considered by the researcher to ensure that the process of collecting the interview and then reproducing the individual’s words in an academic work do not cause harm to participants or their community. To this end, transparency and informed consent must be given at all stages of the process so that participants are aware of the context that their words are being used in. There is an inherent power imbalance within the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee. The interviewee does not hear the stories told in other interviews and in many respects relinquishes control of their story to the interviewer in the process of telling it. The responsibility of the interviewer is to be cognizant of this power imbalance, and to be careful to represent stories in proper context. A common criticism leveled at oral history is that it is a “positivist, fact-driven and uncritical approach to memory and the past.”⁴⁸ It is in this regard that oral historians need to be cognizant of best practices of eliciting stories and information from interviewees, and also be aware when using sources what the values and limitations of the interviews are. There is

⁴⁶ Ene Kõresaar and Kirsti Jõesalu, "Estonian memory culture since the post-communist turn: conceptualizing change through the lens of generation," *Generations in estonia: Contemporary perspectives on turbulent times* (2016): 128.

⁴⁷ Sommer and Quinlan. *The Oral History Manual*, 4.

⁴⁸ Bornat, “Oral History,” 39.

historical value to recording how the past is remembered, as well as the objective event, which is the advantage of the oral history approach. When engaging with my interviews, I rely on the documents and secondary literature for objective information and allow the interviews to enrich this information with testimony from the interviewees about their personal involvement, emotions during events, opinions, and aspirations. Their stories are contextualized by their current lives in the present which impact how they regard their past. This is inevitable when engaging with human memory of events and it is important to acknowledge when working with oral histories. Oftentimes my interviewees made direct connections to present day events, such as their current advocacy work on behalf of Ukraine, which made this link between the past and present direct.

As a methodology, oral histories offer many advantages to both the interviewer and the interviewee. There is great historical benefit to the collection of interviews, as described above, but the process of participating in an interview can also be valuable to the interviewee. In her critical reflection on the interview process, Kathryn Haynes remarks that both she and her participants found the process an “insightful and therapeutic experience, in terms of a process in which we came to understand previous experiences in different, and potentially more positive, ways that promote a changed sense of self.”⁴⁹ Therefore, the opportunity to tell stories, relive old memories, and share reflections on the past with an attentive listener can be a positive experience to those involved. For participants, the past still holds meaning which impacts them in the present, and it is the responsibility of the oral historian to tease out this entangled meaning through inquiry and listening.⁵⁰ In this respect, oral history is a collaborative project, which

⁴⁹ Kathryn Haynes, "Other lives in accounting: Critical reflections on oral history methodology in action," *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 21.3 (2010): 23.

⁵⁰ Bornat, "Oral History," 38.

prioritizes the voices of those involved. This thesis will seek to reflect the methodological strengths of oral histories by foregrounding the stories told by my interviewees in their own words, while contextualizing their experiences in the broader institutional context of the EANC, domestic context in the US, and global Cold War and post-Cold War context.

As further motivation for this methodological choice, it is useful to note that life storytelling has particular resonance within the Estonian context. Individual accounts contributed to writing a ‘counter history’ during the Estonian independence movement and challenged the dominant Soviet narrative of history. Jõesalu studies memory practices and culture in Estonia, and describes how the collection of life stories through interviews and short autobiographical texts submitted to the Estonian Cultural Archives in 1989 contributed to the delegitimization of the Soviet narrative of history, and began to build an *Estonian* narrative that rested on the accounts of everyday citizens.⁵¹ Jõesalu and Kõresaar refer to this process as the re-democratization and diversification of remembering, and this campaign to gather life stories from across Estonia continued into the 1990s as Estonian society sought to reclaim the past from the Soviet Union.⁵² Therefore, life stories have particular relevance in the context of Estonian independence as vehicles through which collective history can be reclaimed through the narratives of individuals. Throughout the following text, direct quotations will be pulled from interviews to either frame a central theme of a section or will be engaged with directly in-text. Occasionally, observed context from the in-person interviews, such as laughter, gestures, facial expressions, intonation will be directly described so as to faithfully recreate their storytelling below.

⁵¹ Kirsti Jõesalu, "Dynamics and tensions of remembrance in post-Soviet Estonia: Late socialism in the making," Phd. diss., *Dissertationes ethnologiae Universitatis Tartuensis* 6 (2017): 42.

⁵² Kõresaar and Jõesalu, "Estonian memory culture," 128.

Estonian Americans and the EANC: The Diasporic Project

“So, for example, every Estonian outside the homeland had to make a decision to stay an Estonian or to forget his heritage and start a new life, in a new country, as a new being.”
Vaike Lugus, EANC Board Member.⁵³

The Estonian American National Council originated from a desire to unite the many different Estonian societies, clubs, educational, and cultural groups across the United States to better coordinate and support the initiatives of these organizations. This section will provide a brief overview of the origins of the EANC before discussing the Cold War advocacy my interviewees engaged in, and outcomes of the existential debate prompted by the restoration of independence in 1991.

When asked about the role of the EANC within the broader Estonian American community, Marju Rink Abel (EANC president 2006-2023) remarked, “We were there to support *other* organizations in their events...Our mission was to represent Estonian Americans in advocacy, to support camps, children's programs... to support whatever was happening that needed support...”⁵⁴ Rink-Abel explained to me that a lot of Estonian American events were driven by the initiative of local organizations or individuals and the EANC would contribute by sponsoring or supporting that activity with resources or connections. Therefore, when it came to cultural or political activities, the EANC would provide funding and support but often the organizers would be motivated individuals or local chapters of Estonian societies or houses. Where the institutional weight of the EANC could be felt, however, was when it came to advocacy meetings and conferences with other diaspora interest groups and with US government

⁵³ Vaike Lugus, “Olla või mitte olla?” *Vaba Eesti Sõna*, Translated by Author, no.15 (09/04/1992): 1. Original Estonian Text: “Nii näiteks iga eestlane väljaspool kodumaad pidi tegema otsuse, kas jääda eestlaseks või unustada oma pärvus ja alustada uut elu, uuel maal, uue olevusena.”

⁵⁴ Marju Rink Abel, (EANC Vice President 1994-2006, President 2006-2024), in discussion with the author, September 2023.

officials. In these contexts, the EANC claimed the authority to speak on behalf of all Estonians in the United States and act as the free voice of Estonians in Estonia.

The formation of the EANC in 1952 by newly arrived immigrants followed from the tradition of exile organizing that began in the DP camps. Tonismäe explores the fate of Estonian DPs in different camps, and finds that “the Geislingen DP camp became a totally integrated and fully functioning Estonian community, a ‘little Estonia’ as it were, in which we set up and operated all the civil institutions required for daily life.”⁵⁵ Within the camps, Baltic DPs created political structures to advocate for their rights and to preserve culture through education, folk traditions, and song.⁵⁶ In October of 1945, the Estonian National Assembly Center (ENAC) was established to promote DP cohesion by organizing self-administration “based on democratic principles and directed by the usage of traditions and principles of the Estonian period of independence.”⁵⁷ Exiles often emphasized Estonian democracy that had existed during the interwar period to better align themselves with the Allied forces and prospective Western host societies. Tonismäe finds that critical engagement with the authoritarianism introduced by Konstantin Päts and Estonian collaboration with Nazi forces were eschewed in the Estonian DP press in favor of a historical narrative emphasizing Estonians as a “freedom-loving nation.”⁵⁸ Therefore, political and historical traditions were born in DP camps that were continued in their new countries of settlement, such as democratic political organizing and the celebration of independence days. Additionally, new commemorations, including the 1940 Soviet annexation

⁵⁵ Tonismäe, “Estonian displaced persons in post-war Germany,” 24.

⁵⁶ Laura Hilton, “Cultural Nationalism in Exile: The Case of Polish and Latvia Displaced Persons,” *The Historian*, vol 71, no 2 (2009): 297.

⁵⁷ L’Hommedieu, “Exiles and constituents,” 56.

⁵⁸ Tonismäe, “Estonian displaced persons in post-war Germany,” 33.

and the 1941 mass deportations made their debut in the DP camps.⁵⁹ These traditions can be observed in the founding of the EANC and its subsequent activities.

The desire to organize was partly driven by the self-governance that originated in the DP camps and was further aided by the close settlement patterns of Estonians in the United States. Immigrants arriving after WWII secured employment predominantly in the New Jersey and New York areas, and their arrival was aided by a large pre-war Estonian community in New Jersey who had moved to the region to farm chickens in the 1930s.⁶⁰ The pre-war Estonian population of New Jersey and New York actively supported the immigration process of Estonian DPs through the Lakewood Estonian Association, which sponsored Estonians moving to the United States.⁶¹ A similar process occurred in New York as one of my interviewees, Eric Suuberg recalled. Unlike the others I spoke with, Suuberg was from an Old Estonian family, who had settled in the US prior to WWII, and he offered a different perspective on Estonian American organizing in which he highlighted the work that preceded the massive migration following WWII. He said, “My mother was always very active in Estonian organizations...She worked for a short time at the Estonian Consulate in New York and was also a translator on Ellis Island for when the big wave of émigrés came...My grandmother was actually one of the co-founders of the Estonian Relief Committee in New York, and they played a role in setting up the infrastructure.”⁶² The Estonian Relief Committee (*Eesti Abistamiskomitee*) was founded in 1941 and aided newly arrived exiles in New York, by setting them up with resources and supplies.⁶³

⁵⁹ L'Hommedieu, "Exiles and constituents," 60.

⁶⁰ Priit Vesilind (ed), *Estonians in America: Exiles in a Land of Promise, 1945-1995* (Odenton, Maryland: Gasch Printing, 2016), 230.

⁶¹ Vesilind (ed), *Estonians in America: Exiles in a Land of Promise*, 231.

⁶² Eric Suuberg, (Council Member of the EANC and President of Vaba Eesti Sõna), in discussion with the author, September 2023.

⁶³ Tõnu Parming, “Estonia Abroad: Problematics of the Second Century,” *Esto America*, Sept-Oct 1984, 12. This magazine was provided to the author from the personal collection of Maria Pedak Kari.

Therefore, the pre-existing Estonian American structures and the people who became known as the ‘Old Estonians’ facilitated the arrival of the newcomers.

The key insight from this historical background is that the diaspora mission expressed by the EANC had its roots in the experience of exile and immigration of the first generation, who had chosen exile over repatriation to Soviet Estonia. Central components of this mission were resistance to communism and promotion of democracy, which defined the stances and accepted political orientation of the mainstream diaspora for decades to come. Pre-existing Estonian aid groups founded by the Old Estonians facilitated the migration of the WWII exiles, which impacted settlement patterns and resulted in large congregations of Estonians on the eastern seaboard. Finally, the EANC was the result of a desire to coordinate the already existing Estonian interest groups so that they would be more organized and effective. The second generation of diasporists were raised in this diasporic environment, in which they were recipients of the cultural consciousness that the first generation sought to preserve.

Estonian American Advocacy and the Cold War

“Some were convinced that as the Cold War hardened and the world lurched from crisis to crisis, war between the superpowers was only a matter of time... Thus, they argued, it was foolish for Estonians abroad to waste energy building firm structures in the West. Others wanted to prepare for the long haul on the central question of Estonia’s future. They envisioned complex organizational structures, intensive involvement in national political affairs, and strategies to develop contacts with international institutions.”

Estonians in America: Exiles in a Land of Promise.⁶⁴

Over the course of the Cold War, the first generation sought to transfer knowledge and practices of Estonian culture, history, language, and traditions to the second generation of Estonian Americans growing up in the United States so that they would continue to see

⁶⁴ Vesilind (ed), *Estonians in America*, 81.

themselves as Estonians. The following sections will contextualize my interviewees' Estonian upbringings within the secondary literature and explore different factors motivating them to join the EANC, such as connection to the culture, visits to Estonia, physical location in the US, and participation of family and friends. My interviews uncover how this multicultural upbringing impacted their advocacy strategies and priorities, such as the importance of advocacy the American way, which occasionally brought the second generation in conflict with the perspectives and traditions of the first generation as competing claims to authority and authenticity were made within the diasporic discourse.

Establishing Cultural and Community Organizations for the 2nd Generation

The dramatic increase in the Estonian population in the US, and its concentration in areas like New York, New Jersey, Baltimore, and Washington, DC meant that the demand for Estonian community organizing grew after WWII. The majority of my interviewees grew up in these areas, which facilitated their childhood immersion in the language and culture. They cited this as a critical motivator for becoming involved in diasporic activities as adults. However, socialization in the exile community did not guarantee participation in diasporic work later in life, as exemplified by Karu's siblings who chose not to engage actively with the diaspora.⁶⁵

Maarja Merivoo-Parro investigates the 'recreation' of Estonia abroad through scouting organizations, summer camps, scholarships, and mobility programs, and her research provides valuable context for the multicultural environment that my interviewees grew up in. She notes that two prominent Estonian camps in the US, *Kiusküla* and *Järvemetsa*, trace their history back to the mid 1950s.⁶⁶ What made these cultural organizations possible was the entrepreneurship of

⁶⁵ Gilda Karu, (Treasurer, EANC, Present), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

⁶⁶ Maarja Merivoo-Parro, "Estonian by Recreation: Forging Ethnic Imagination through Communal Experience in Urban, Rural, and Musical Spaces," *Zeitschrift für Ostmitteleuropa-Forschung* 67.3 (2018): 379.

Estonian exiles and sympathetic conditions in the United States. The US headquarters of the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides granted Estonians permission to form their own units in 1949, and by 1952, 350 Estonian Boy Scouts were registered.⁶⁷ Furthermore the Estonian Students Fund was established in the early 1950s and started giving out loans to struggling Estonian students. Receiving a scholarship was predicated on articulating both one's financial need but also commitment to the Estonian nation, and so, Merivoo-Parro argues that it served as "external institutional validation" of one's "Estonianness."⁶⁸ Practicing and receiving validation from the community as to one's Estonian credentials was increasingly important for subsequent generations who had indirect connections to Estonia. These cultural institutions were critical for sustaining the "imagination of the homeland, its culture and its people...all of which were unreachable" and transferring those memories to the 2nd generation through daily practice of Estonian identity. Merivoo-Parro's observations about the significance of cultural institutions for creating a group identity and providing spaces where 'Estonianess', *eestlus*, could be passed on to the American-born children of exiles were reiterated in my interviews with Estonian American diaspora leaders who were the first participants in the diaspora project the first generation embarked on following immigration.

Participating in Estonian school, folk dance groups, Boy Scouting and the Girl Guides, and Estonian celebrations instilled in the second generation a connection to Estonia, which helped maintain the boundary between them and mainstream American society. This perpetuated the diaspora as a group distinct from their American peers even as Estonian immigrants integrated into American society. It was in these communal spaces established by the first generation that "performing 'Estonianness' ...can be said to have been the defining experience for

⁶⁷ Merivoo-Parro, "Estonian by Recreation," 380.

⁶⁸ Merivoo-Parro, "Claiming Ethnicity in Overlapping Diasporic Conditions," 113.

the second generation of exile Estonian Americans who had no personal memories of the homeland.”⁶⁹ These activities were critical for preserving a connection to the homeland amongst a generation of Estonian Americans who had never seen it for themselves. When speaking about her experience in Estonian school, Karu commented, “We had language classes, grammar, spelling, geography, history...songs, folk dancing, religion that were all part of the classes. It was an overall immersion in Estonian culture...It’s interesting because the other Balts – Latvians, Lithuanians – they all had Saturday schools too. When we meet each other, it’s like, did you go to Saturday school? Yes! And it is a fun thing now.”⁷⁰ Karu describes how the experience of the Saturday classes was something shared with other children of Baltic immigrants that created a sense of solidarity amongst them. However, she reflected that her memories of these Saturday schools were more positive in hindsight than she experienced them at the time. Karu recalled thinking, “It’s like, why do we have to go to this stupid school? Why do we have to talk this language? Because nobody knows about it, and kids are cruel. They make fun of you.”⁷¹ As a child, the significance of attending these lessons was not clear as she struggled to fit in with her American classmates. Upon retrospect, Karu valued the immersion she had in Estonian culture and that it gave her the language and cultural resources to participate in the diaspora later in life. As a child however, Estonian classes only served to set her apart from her peers.

Pedak Kari shared that the social aspect of these cultural activities, such as folk dancing, were very important to her growing up. She remarked, “There’s a whole social side to being a dancer. I danced and we had festivals all over the world - we went to Melbourne in

⁶⁹ Merivoo-Parro, “Estonian by Recreation,” 376.

⁷⁰ Gilda Karu, (Treasurer, EANC, Present), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

⁷¹ Gilda Karu, (Treasurer, EANC, Present), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

Australia...we were in Baltimore, and I danced in many countries...not well, but I danced anyway! Really, folk dancing was the glue that held us together.”⁷² Participating in folk dance was a fundamentally social activity, and served as a space where Estonian American youth could engage with Estonian identity with their peers outside of their home or a formal classroom setting. Traveling around the world and socializing with other Estonian diaspora members through dance enabled Pedak Kari to feel part of something global. Merivoo-Parro argues that exiles sought to recreate a ‘Little Estonia’ abroad and the experiences of my interviewees attest to their positive memories of having spaces where they practiced Estonian identity socially, where being Estonian was simply part of their everyday life and interpersonal relationships.

Motivations for Becoming Involved in Estonian American Issues at the National Level

Most of my interviewees grew up around Estonian culture and institutions of the Estonian American community, however, following from Brubaker’s theoretical framework, assuming that Estonian heritage alone would be a call to action on behalf of Estonia would obscure the complicated interactions of community, personal, and situational factors that inspired their political advocacy. Furthermore, choosing to not only participate in cultural and social events, like celebrations and folk dancing, but to become politically active as well, placed them within a minority even within the diasporan fraction of Estonian Americans. Pedak Kari recalled that her father “really did instill a love of the country and a love of history. We all grew up with the history of Estonia, the injustice of what happened...And as I was growing up, there was a constant need to explain to people, what is Estonia? Where is Estonia? It’s not on a map...And so, growing up explaining that was ingrained.”⁷³ All her life Pedak Kari had been explaining

⁷² Maria Pedak Kari, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

⁷³ Maria Pedak Kari, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

what Estonia was to those around her, and so, transitioning from advocating at a personal level to advocating at the national level was no great change. Being raised with a responsibility to Estonia, and a feeling of kinship with those in the homeland, was instrumental in encouraging the second generation to become involved in political advocacy later in life. Pedak Kari explained how Estonia and its circumstances were explained to her. She recalled, “Estonia had been a myth for all of my life. It was wonderful. It was youthful. It was a paradise until it was taken away.”⁷⁴ Pedak Kari was motivated by the loss instilled in her during childhood from stories told by her parents. This speaks to the imagining of Estonia in the diasporic consciousness as an idealized memory, and Pedak Kari’s evocation of the word ‘myth’ echoes Karu’s usage of ‘fairytale’ to describe the Estonia they encountered in their youth.

In addition to the sense of loss and responsibility instilled in my interviewees as children, they also identified more personal factors, such as a prior interest in politics, work with the US government, and involvement in other areas of American politics as critical to why they self-selected into advocacy work. Maria Pedak Kari, Gilda Karu, and Mari-Ann Kelam all expressed their prior interest in politics as a key motivating factor for getting involved with the EANC in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Karu explained that she was in college during the Vietnam War protests, and observed what strategies and techniques were used at those protests that she could apply to Estonia’s cause. Karu remarked, “I picked up on tactics that were being used in protest of the war and was able to adapt them to use in demonstrations for freedom for Estonia. I saw that you have to do something catchy...something a little bit different. When we had demonstrations in New York during Captive Nations week or something like that, I would make a bear or something that was very eye-catching.”⁷⁵ Learning from other political organizations

⁷⁴ Maria Pedak Kari, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

⁷⁵ Gilda Karu, (Treasurer, EANC, Present), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

operating in the American context was very important for Karu, who was politically active outside of the Estonian diaspora and eventually pursued a career as an attorney and federal civil servant.

Likewise, Kelam explained that she was politically active long before working with the EANC and would organize demonstrations and lobbying on her own. It was this independent work that inspired her friends to suggest she run as a candidate for the EANC leadership. Kelam explained her decision to get involved as follows, “The reason that they offered to me that I should be a candidate was that I am active and this way I will have more clout. I will have an organization behind me. I thought, that’s a good idea...Then every time there were elections, I won...Since I lived in the Washington area...I became the representative from EANC to JBANC.”⁷⁶ Therefore, prior interest with American politics emerged as a central motivator for my interviewees as to why they got involved in the EANC. Being an engaged US citizen and active in the diaspora were often one and the same.

However, this is certainly not the case for everyone volunteering with the EANC. For example, Rink-Abel expressed that politics was something she had little interest in, and instead, the mission of cultural preservation and maintenance of Estonian cultural institutions was more important to her. She remarked, “Political advocacy actually was new to me, and it was certainly not the reason that I wanted to join. It was more an interest in seeing what was going on at a broader level and getting involved in Estonian American issues at a national level.”⁷⁷ Due to being located in DC, however, Rink-Abel acknowledged that the political side of Estonian American diasporic activities became something she was involved in for many years. However, she emphasized that political advocacy was only a fraction of the EANC’s work.

⁷⁶ Mari Ann Kelam, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, March 2024.

⁷⁷ Marju Rink Abel, (President EANC, 2006-2024), in discussion with the author, September 2023.

As Kelam and Rink-Abel hinted in their quotes above, physical location was also an important factor. In her own experience, Kelam had very limited involvement in the Estonian American diaspora when she lived in Ohio simply because there were so few Estonians nearby. In fact, she shared an amusing anecdote about how her family learned another Estonian family had moved in down the road and they walked for what seemed like hours only to discover they were actually Latvians. However, when she moved to the East Coast of the US she “started meeting Estonians because there were many more in the Washington area.”⁷⁸ Lya Karm agreed with Kelam about the importance of being in the Washington DC area and remarked that she wasn’t able to be active in upstate New York, but started getting involved in protests after she moved to Washington, DC.⁷⁹ Additionally, the involvement of family and friends played a very significant role, as evidenced by Suuberg who explained that he was more occupied with his engineering studies and career but his brother got a job working on Capitol Hill and got him more involved in politics in the early 1980s.

Finally, almost all of my interviewees emphasized that their first visits to Soviet occupied Estonia in the 60s and 70s were instrumental in getting them more involved in Estonian American issues upon their return to the United States. An important distinction between the attitudes of the first and second generation must be made here, namely that the first generation tended to view returning to Soviet occupied Estonia as acceptance of the regime.⁸⁰ The second generation, however, were motivated by curiosity and the desire to see the country of their parents for themselves. This does not hold true for every member of the second generation, of course, as one of my own interviewees, Kelam, refused to visit Estonia and apply for the Soviet

⁷⁸ Mari Ann Kelam, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, March 2024.

⁷⁹ Lya Karm, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

⁸⁰ Merivoo-Parro, “Claiming Ethnicity in Overlapping Diasporic Conditions,” 118.

visa until her participation in the Congress of Estonia. However, despite the controversial nature of visiting Soviet occupied Estonia within the diaspora, almost all of my interviewees made at least one visit before 1991, usually while studying abroad in Sweden or Finland.

Pedak Kari visited Estonia for the first time in 1969. She had finished her spring semester at the University of Turku in Finland and decided to apply for a Soviet visa for the summer in order to see her Estonian relatives for the first time. She received her visa and recalled in our interview, “I met all my living relatives - my aunts, my cousins. I met all of them in one swoop. I represented the American side of the family, and they were the Estonian side of the family. And I thought, oh my God, oh my God, they are going to judge everything about my parents from the perspective of how I behave, which made for an interesting visit.”⁸¹ Pedak Kari found her visit deeply rewarding and explained how emotional it was to be reunited with family for the first time. However, she did realize that she was representing her family and her community, and that everything her relatives would know about the American side of the family would come from her. Including, how ‘Estonian’ American-raised Pedak Kari acted. She remembered being inspired by the quiet, but “strong sense of identity, which said you’re not going to make me un-Estonian. You’re not going to make me Russian. You’re not going to make me Soviet.”⁸² Seeing Estonia for the first time was very impactful for Pedak Kari, and she carried the memories of what she saw back with her upon her return.

However, she explained that her trip was not well received at home in the United States, “Well, I came back and at that time, the community was not really happy about anybody going back and forth. They all were considered communists, which gave me an interesting title. But I

⁸¹ Maria Pedak Kari, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

⁸² Maria Pedak Kari, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

had been so active before I went that any criticism didn't stick."⁸³ Accusations of being communist, or sympathetic to the Soviet regime, could be leveled at anyone who visited Soviet Estonia. The accepted, mainstream viewpoint was that traveling there was incompatible with the resistance to communism and the struggle for freedom that was embodied in the first-generation choosing exile over repatriation. Suuberg spoke about this in the context of his own travel to Estonia. He said, "Again, in '78, those were the days when it was not popular among the Estonian community to visit. Many did, but there were still those that said you are tacitly supporting the regime by going even as a tourist to visit."⁸⁴

Karu understood the divided sentiment in the Estonian American community regarding visiting Estonia, however, she instead viewed the experience as a learning opportunity, which increased her effectiveness as an activist. Like Suuberg, she visited in the 1970s, and remarked, "What I saw made me angry...But it was also a fascinating trip because I got to meet all these Estonian relatives...and fortunately my mother had written down in a little notebook who was who and how they were related!" Similar to other interviewees, Karu expressed her delight at meeting relatives for the first time. She reflected on the controversy around visiting Soviet Estonia and argued that visiting gave her more authority to speak about Estonia as an activist. She explained,

Politically, it was very controversial to go to Estonia because it was, like, well, you are accepting the Soviet rule...and they'll indoctrinate you, and there were things like that. But to me, it was really important because when I came back, I could speak with authority. I had seen it myself. So, when somebody argued with me about what a wonderful worker's paradise it is, I'd say have you been there? Have you *seen* it?⁸⁵

⁸³ Maria Pedak Kari, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

⁸⁴ Eric Suuberg, (Council Member of the EANC and President of Vaba Eesti Sõna), in discussion with the author, September 2023.

⁸⁵ Gilda Karu, (Treasurer, EANC, Present), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

For Karu, her visit to Soviet Estonia became a resource she could draw on when advocating for Estonian freedom in the United States with people who, oftentimes, had never been themselves.

Karl Altau visited Estonia in 1985 when he was 25 and studying in Stockholm. He was studying Nordic politics, and his class was doing a trip to Finland. Altau remarked that he knew he had to at least try to arrange a visit to Estonia during that trip. He reminisced about stepping off the boat and said, “I’ve talked with other people who’ve been in my shoes, that you go from a color world into a black and white world...everything seemed ramshackle and broken down. But through all of that, the splendor of Tallinn and its Old Town, the churches, the spires, and all that...that was still there. So, it was still, even though it was crumbling, it was still very magical.”⁸⁶ Similar to Karu and Pedak Kari who described Estonia as a ‘myth’ or ‘fairytale’, Altau characterized the unreal feeling of physically being there for the first time as ‘magical’. The experience for him was transformative, and he said that even though he spoke Estonian at home with his family, he understood that he was fairly Americanized. However, after this trip he “became a reborn Estonian” from seeing Estonia in person and meeting his relatives for the first time.⁸⁷

My interviewees all had the privilege of visiting Estonia at different time periods, which shaped their visits. This was most visibly illustrated by Karm’s account because she visited multiple times. When asked about what differences she noticed between visits, Karm explained, “Every time I went, it was a little different. The first time, 1985, we were in an apartment and my uncle looked outside the window to see if it was okay to talk. The second time, he started talking first, then he looked outside the window. By 1990 he was just talking.”⁸⁸ Karm’s observations

⁸⁶ Karl Altau, (Executive Direction, JBANC, 1998-Present), in discussion with author, August 2023

⁸⁷ Karl Altau, (Executive Direction, JBANC, 1998-Present), in discussion with author, August 2023

⁸⁸ Lya Karm, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

about the increasing boldness leading up to 1990 speak to how she observed the changes occurring in Estonia during her brief visits.

Their visits to Soviet Estonia were a resource for my interviewees to draw on upon returning home. Seeing Estonia - the reality, not the myth - was a call to action for some interviewees and a reinforcement of the necessity of their advocacy for others. As Karu explained, these visits were also a source of authority, from which they could provide their own testimony as to life in Estonia. Upon returning home for the first time, my interviewees were no longer active on behalf of a country they had never seen, but for a place, family, and friends they knew from personal experience.

Therefore, the cultural immersion they experienced growing up in Estonian community centers enabled the second generation to continue identifying with their Estonian identity while growing up in the United States. When it came to deciding to join the EANC, personal and situational factors also played a role, as demonstrated above most of my interviewees had a prior interest in politics and also lived in places where Estonian American activity was being organized, which lowered barriers to them getting involved. L'Homedieu writes that, "As a new generation of émigrés grew into their political consciousness during the early 1960s...Perhaps the greatest legacy of the first generation of exiles was to allow a second generation to develop and continue to perceive themselves as a unique group of ethnic Americans who had a singular political mission towards the home countries, which they had fled as small children."⁸⁹

Therefore, the 1960s saw the rise of young Estonian American adults with both the commitment to the Estonian cause and political structures to operate within who would take on the mantle of diaspora leadership in the 1990s.

⁸⁹ L'Hommedieu, "Exiles and constituents," 343.

Advocacy the American Way: Synthesis of American-Estonian Dual Identity

Being raised in the United States impacted the advocacy strategies employed by my interviewees, who emphasized the importance of framing their cause in-line with American interests and acting consistent with political norms in the United States, such as organizing protests, getting out the vote for key issues, and interfacing with members of the US government. A central theme that emerged across interviews was the importance of advocating ‘the American way’, i.e. making use of American civil rights and institutions as well as adapting the content of Estonian American messaging to reflect US Cold War narratives and interests. When it came to advocating the American way, my interviewees had a substantial amount of experience they could draw on from their lives in the US context. Karu explained to me,

I’ve been in the League of Women Voters⁹⁰ since 1976, so I know how to advocate for things...Through the League, I had learned about advocacy – how to put together a letter, how to frame it so that you have your main point first...I actually did, at some of the Estonian gatherings, little seminars on how to contact your representatives and things like that, and talk to people about going a town hall meeting...These were things that growing up in America and also being involved in other organizations, you picked up on.⁹¹

During our interview she explained that her work with the government allowed her to understand how bureaucrats think and emphasized the importance of understanding the system in order to be effective. When it came to the content of Estonian American advocacy, Karu also underlined the importance of reaching an American audience. She said, “It doesn’t do us any good to be preaching to the choir and giving these nice speeches at Estonian Independence Day or John’s Day or anything like that. We need to get out there and really do it the American way and write

⁹⁰ The League of Women voters is a nonprofit founded in 1920 to support and empower Americans to exercise their democratic right to vote. The League is engaged in all 50 states and is involved in advocacy, education, and litigation to protect the right to vote. (Source: <https://www.lwv.org/about-us>)

⁹¹ Gilda Karu, (Treasurer, EANC, Present), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

letters...At the Estonian American National Council annual meeting we would adopt resolutions that we would send to the President and to Congress asking for their continued support for Estonia and Estonian independence.”⁹² Connecting with an American audience required understanding which arguments would resonate with them, and as American citizens raised in the US, the second generation was in a unique position to serve as cross cultural communicators. L’Hommedieu argues that Baltic diasporic activists played a significant role in aligning the Estonian struggle for freedom with American values and Cold War narratives, which enabled them to “maintain their loyalty to their homeland while demonstrating American patriotism.”⁹³ The notion of advocacy ‘the American way’ challenges the conceptualization of boundaries as static, and presents evidence to dynamic boundaries through which aspects of Estonian or American identity are stressed situationally.

Karu’s point about understanding the American political system was echoed by Kelam who, throughout the interview, referred back to the importance of communication. Similar to Karu, Kelam understood the importance of extending the EANC’s audience beyond the Estonian-speaking sphere. She explained,

There were the usual problems which could come up in discussion, such as do we need to keep this all in Estonian or do we need to open up to English speakers, which I preferred. You have to keep the language [Estonian], but you can’t exclude people who are interested...My whole thing is we’ve got to *communicate*...usually it’s approaching someone in their own language and on their own interests...You have to find the points of interest and points of commonality...Some people are very interested in hearing the Estonian language, but I can’t lobby [in Estonian]...English is my tool of choice and of necessity, because most of the world speaks English.⁹⁴

⁹² Gilda Karu, (Treasurer, EANC, Present), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

⁹³ L’Hommedieu, "Exiles and constituents," 241.

⁹⁴ Mari Ann Kelam, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, March 2024.

Part of that process, as Kelam says, is finding ways to communicate the Estonian cause meaningfully to an American audience. My interviews highlighted the unique role the second generation could play in bridging this cultural divide by using their intimate knowledge of the United States from their upbringing in the country in service of the diaspora's political advocacy. An example of this idea in action was presented by Pedak Kari, who said one of the accomplishments she was proudest of during her tenure at the EANC was a black and white pamphlet she designed alongside Karu and another woman on the council. Pedak Kari remarked,

It was a great project...This is what I'm the most proud of in my Estonian career...And so I was on the board, Gilda was on the board, Mari was on the board, three token females, all of the younger generation with this crowd who are at least 50 years older than we are, who really don't believe women can do much of anything. And who represented a generation gap...So anyway, so we're on the board, and the three of us, the three kids, the children on the board had all these great ideas, wonderful ideas, and we would've put the energy into them. One idea after another was voted down or out or delayed. You want something done -- referred to a committee. Anyway, one of the things we said was that the pamphlet that they had was old. It didn't speak to people, it didn't speak to Americans, let us create a new pamphlet. And they said, fine, go do something. And this is what we did...And we updated it, and we said, okay, now this you can take out to the world to explain what Estonia is.⁹⁵

When discussing the pamphlet's creation, Pedak Kari highlighted some of subtler divisions within the EANC, including gender representation on the council and the generational divide. She remarked that for most of its history, the EANC was composed of men, and that this only started to change in the 1980s and 1990s. Now, the composition of board members is more diverse, but back in the 1980s the older men from the first generation tended to dominate the affairs of the EANC and younger members seized opportunities and took initiative where they could. Karu made a similar comment with regards to gender roles in the EANC during her

⁹⁵ Maria Pedak Kari, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

interview when she explained that political advocacy was considered a ‘meeste asi’ (men’s thing).

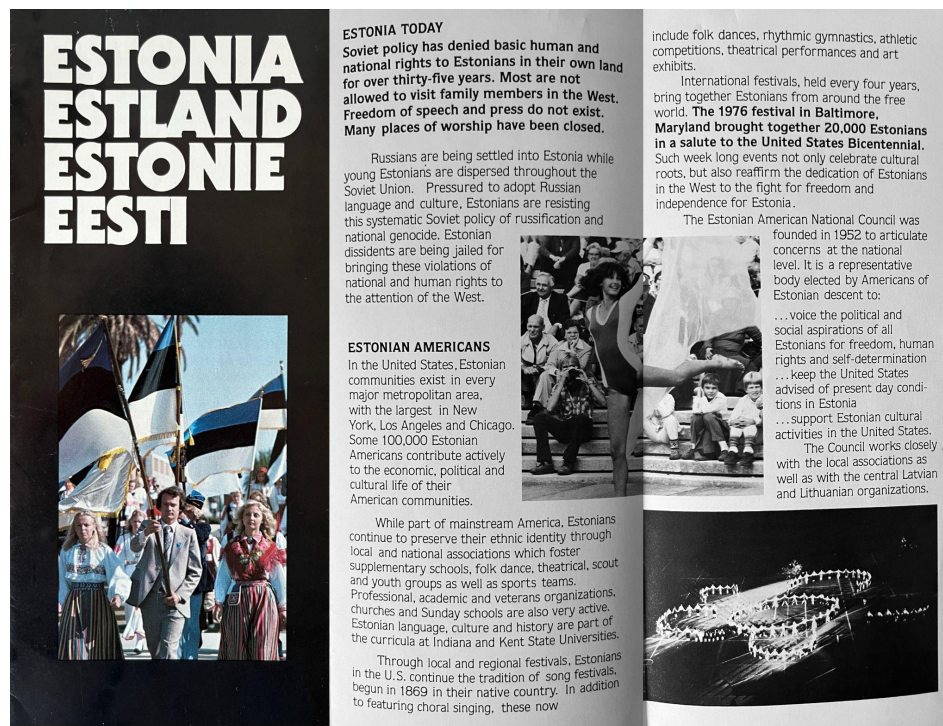


Figure 1. Gilda Karu, Mari Linnamaa, and Maria Pedak Kari (eds), “Estonia”
Estonian American National Council (1979). From the personal collection of Maria Pedak Kari.

Pedak Kari’s remarks above highlight how despite having many ideas and the energy and passion to execute them, there was a “generation gap” between my interviewees and the older contingent on the council who had been running the organization since the 1950s. The obstacles she faced on the council made Pedak Kari feel prouder when she was able to collaborate with other female council members to redesign the pamphlet that the EANC would distribute on Capitol Hill to Congressmen, to reporters, and to other interested Americans. As the public face of the EANC, Pedak Kari wanted the pamphlet to “speak to Americans” and knew that cross-cultural communication was a strength the second generation could bring to their work at the EANC. The use of colors, photos of the Estonian flag and national dress, complemented detailed text that addressed specific areas of ignorance or misinformation Americans might have towards

Estonia. These included misinformation as to Estonia's incorporation into the USSR and linguistic differences between Estonian and Russian.

The generational divide between those born in Estonia and those born in the United States permeated Estonian interest groups and complicated claims to authority to speak on behalf of Estonians and what constituted an 'authentic' Estonian identity. These generational differences extended into the realm of who had the 'right' to speak on behalf of Estonians, as demonstrated by a correspondent in an opinion piece for *Esto America*, one of the few bilingual (predominantly English) Estonian diaspora publications. The magazine's mission statement was to "offer a forum for honest and constructively critical interpretations of the past, present, and future of *eestlus*."⁹⁶ Therefore, its editorials often feature opinion pieces and editorials on Estonian cultural development in North America. It was not affiliated with any particular Estonian organization and encouraged "dissenting and independent views," meaning that it could be a space for voicing dissent and opposition to official, top-down Estonian diaspora leadership views. The September/October 1984 edition published an opinion piece titled "Quo Vadis *eestlus*?" by Epp Aruja, in which she described her disappointment and frustration with intergenerational cooperation on Estonian diaspora events and issues. The article arose as a response to her experience on the ESTO '84 committee which was in charge of putting together the ESTO festival. She wrote,

The majority of Estonians born in Estonia use their birthplace as a weapon with which to lash out at the younger generations. Because they were born in Estonia, they feel that everything they do in the community is for the good of *eestlus*, regardless of reality. Worse still, anything done by the younger generations, just because they were *not* born in Estonia, undergoes constant scrutiny, and is viewed with suspicion...In other words, the

⁹⁶ ESTO America, "ESTO America" *Esto America*, vol 2, no 9 & 10, Peeter Ristsoo (ed), (September/October 1984): 1.

older generations doubt whether the younger ones are *eestlased* enough to keep *eestlus* alive...⁹⁷

The status or authenticity difference between the first and second generations with regards to ‘Estonianness’ is laid bare throughout Aruja’s piece. She asserts that commitment to Estonian cultural preservation is insufficient, the reality of being born in the United States makes one less Estonian than those born in Estonia. While Aruja’s viewpoint may not resonate with every member of the second generation active in the Estonian American diaspora, it does represent a counter perspective on the internal functioning of diaspora organizations, that provides more context to some of the challenges faced by second generation diaspora leadership. As a prescription to the problem, Aruja suggests,

The importance of the elders must change – they shouldn’t be leading, but teaching...One must face the fact that those not born in Estonia don’t have an automatic and desperate need to be Estonian. The desire for knowledge and *eestlus* is usually there, but this must be cultivated and nurtured...However, if that desire to be Estonian is presented as a duty, and any new ideas browbeaten, belittled and insulted, then I fail to see how anyone can be surprised at the eventual demise of this culture in exile. And that would be the worst thing that could happen not only to us, but also to the Estonians in Estonia. They need our support!⁹⁸

Aruja concludes her piece with a call for the first generation to step back and allow the second generation to take over leadership for the sake of the continuation of the Estonian diasporic project. She critiques the presentation of Estoniannes as a ‘duty’ and argues that the closed mindedness of the older generation is an existential threat to the very culture they seek to maintain. Ultimately, she makes a similar argument found in diaspora theory which is that membership in the diaspora is ultimately an act of voluntary participation and not inevitable

⁹⁷ Aruja, Epp, “Quo Vadis *eestlus*?” *Esto America*, vol 2, no 9 & 10, Peeter Ristsoo (ed), (September/October 1984): 21.

⁹⁸ Aruja, “Quo Vadis *eestlus*?” 31.

based on one's ethnocultural background. If the Estonian diaspora is to continue, it must adapt to make itself more accessible and appealing to subsequent generations by lowering the barriers to identification with Estonianness.

Part of the conversation occurring in the 1980s around the accessibility of the diasporic project revolved around the use of language and many of my interviewees still active in the council to the present day remarked that the English versus Estonian debate is ongoing. Not all 2nd and 3rd generation Estonian Americans acquired Estonian language as well as my interviewees did and the inability to speak Estonian posed a significant barrier to participation in the diaspora project for people. In fact, Rink-Abel was reported in *Esto America*, as causing "quite a stir" at the ESTO '84 Youth Conference for "suggesting we accept the fact that the majority of the Estonian community in North America is now English-speaking."⁹⁹ The issue of English versus Estonian language use did not fall exclusively along generational lines, however, there was vocal support within the community to make the Estonian diasporic project more internally inclusive of later generations by using English more frequently and simultaneously expanding Estonian language education opportunities.

The question of communication strategies, both within the diaspora and externally to the broader United States was a significant theme across my interviews with the activists. Pedak Kari outlines this further when she described the political work JBANC engaged in,

JBANC worked around the clock to form contacts and it is not easy...I was part of that, Maido¹⁰⁰ [her husband] was certainly part of it more than I, and they also brought in interns every summer, young people...who worked in the offices in Rockville and learned the ropes of what happens when you go to the Hill – how do you approach a

⁹⁹ "Panorama" *Esto America*, vol 2, no 9 & 10, Peeter Ristsoo (ed), (September/October 1984): 9. Copy provided to the author from the personal collection of Maria Pedak Kari.

¹⁰⁰ Maida Kari (deceased, 2007) was the husband of Maria Pedak Kari and was very active in Estonian American issues throughout the Cold War. He represented Estonian Americans in 1990 at the Estonian Congress and after independence worked in the Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He also served as the President of the EANC in the 1990s, following Juhan Simonson and before Marju Rink Abel.

Congressional office? How do you get to know a chief of staff? How do you get to know who handles foreign affairs? It's all a process...And it's more than just showing up. It's knowing what the issues are, knowing who the people are, knowing how to approach them, and having the confidence to do that. I think the 60s, 70s, and 80s for all of us in the Estonian American community was a period of confidence building.¹⁰¹

In this passage Pedak Kari speaks to the political learning process that lobbying and working on Capitol Hill facilitated amongst Estonian American institutions. She explains how institutional knowledge and history supported this process because it was centralized and organized in such a way that people with experience could pass it on to younger generations. Working within an institution offered benefits to Estonian American activists - a point echoed earlier by Kelam about why she joined the EANC - including a wealth of contacts in DC that had been built over the course of the institution's history and the name recognition to open doors with people in Congress. When asked about the value of organizations in advocacy, Karm agreed with Pedak Kari's point above and reiterated the importance of, "knowing how to approach people in government, how to approach people in power."¹⁰²

Congress was the main vehicle through which Estonian American activists could engage with US domestic politics. Rink-Abel remarked, "You can affect policy in Congress. That is really the key. Certainly, you have got the 50 states, and you have various parties presented, and various committees and so forth. You have to target who you are talking to as to what their areas of interest are...and keep up the contacts that way. So that is where the real work is – in Congress – because they can pass legislation. It doesn't matter what the President wants to do or not do if *there is no Congressional support*."¹⁰³ Kelam seconded the importance of the EANC and JBANC's relationship with Congress when she explained, "Congress was our most

¹⁰¹ Maria Pedak Kari, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

¹⁰² Lya Karm, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

¹⁰³ Marju Rink Abel, (President EANC, 2006-2024), in discussion with the author, September 2023.

important ally – and Democrats and Republicans both at the time... basically it was bipartisan support.”¹⁰⁴ As American citizens, leaders of the EANC or later JBANC could exercise their civic rights through political advocacy on behalf of Baltic Americans. This very issue was summarized succinctly by American Latvian Association president Gunārs Meierovics¹⁰⁵ in a JBANC leadership meeting preparing for their meeting later that month with the State Department. He remarked,

To reiterate an earlier point, the State Dep. is inviting us to this meeting because we are the ones who have ‘clout’. We have the resources and people; we are the ones who can call out a large protest and can raise hell in Congress. The diplomats do not have this capability, and if they do, they must still go through us. The State Dep. can act as they want with the diplomats and perhaps does even have to reckon with them. But the State Dep. does have to reckon with us and the Baltic American public opinion which we represent.¹⁰⁶

Meierovics’ invocation of the ‘clout’ that the Baltic American groups possess as *American* organizations, who have the power to call protests, initiate letter writing campaigns, and as he states, “raise hell in Congress,” is an important aspect of the authority and legitimacy that the diaspora organizations could claim as representatives of *Americans* versus the diplomatic legations who represented *Estonians*.

¹⁰⁴ Mari Ann Kelam, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, March 2024.

¹⁰⁵ Gunārs Meierovics was the son of the Latvian Prime Minister during the interwar period, Zigfrīds Meierovics. His family immigrated to the United States during WWII and Meierovics became active in the American Latvian Association, serving as its president for many years. He was also involved in the founding of the Joint Baltic American National Council and the World Association of Free Latvians. After Latvian independence, he returned to Latvia and was elected to the Saeima in 1993. He served as Minister of State of Baltic and Nordic Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia [Source: Delphi, “100 years since the birth of the Latvian politician and exiled activist Gunārs Meierovics,” *Delphi*, (11/05/2020).]

¹⁰⁶ JBANC Meeting Minutes, “JBANC Meeting” by JBANC (06/03/1979), Folder 11 Correspondence -State, 1977-1984, Box: 4, Joint Baltic American Collection, Immigration History Research Center Archive, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA.

From the US government perspective, Paul Goble agreed that the influence diaspora organizations had in the executive branch – such as the State Department or the White House – was limited, but their work in Congress was critical for the Baltic cause. He remarked,

It was the diasporas that worked on Capitol Hill. Before Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania had real embassies in Washington, it was the diasporas who did much of the legwork of going to committee meetings, seeking to testify, providing expertise and whatnot...I think the Baltic organizations played a critical role on the Hill. I think that they didn't play nearly as big a role as some have suggested at the other end – at the executive branch.¹⁰⁷

The importance of building a relationship with Congress and an institutional tradition and history of lobbying practices in the 60s and 70s served the diaspora well during the course of the independence movement, in which these long-term connections could be used to place pressure on the US to support Baltic independence.

Action When it Mattered: Advocacy During the Independence Movement

During our interview, Suuberg summarized the involvement of diaspora Estonians in the independence movement as follows, “This was really an effort that was born and had its center of gravity over there [Estonia]. But we are happy if we can play a small role in helping move it along and making sure that it went in the right direction at critical times.”¹⁰⁸ From 1987-1991, Estonian Americans were involved in internationalizing the movement to make sure attention was on Moscow and the Baltic States, demonstrating in major US cities in solidarity with those risking their lives behind the Iron Curtain, connecting Estonian dissidents with US Congressmen and Senators, and finally, sending an American delegation to the Congress of Estonia as the body

¹⁰⁷ Goble, Paul. (Special Advisor on Soviet Nationality Problems, US State Department, 1989-1992), in discussion with the author, November 2023.

¹⁰⁸ Eric Suuberg, (Council Member of the EANC and President of Vaba Eesti Sõna), in discussion with the author, September 2023.

sought to pursue independence. Estonian American activists were able to act when it mattered in the late 1980s because of the 30 years of advocacy, building contacts, and political learning that preceded that moment.

In her in-depth analysis of the high politics between the central actors - Tallinn, Riga, Vilnius, Washington, and Moscow, Bergmane underlines the domestic pressures the US executive branch was facing to come out with a position on the events in the Baltic States. She writes that “the Baltic question was not just an American foreign policy issue; domestic and transnational actors such as the US Congress and Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian diasporas actively pushed for a stronger US stand on Baltic independence.”¹⁰⁹ US leaders did not only have to navigate the uncertainty vis à vis their relationship with the Baltics and with Moscow, but also had to contend with domestic actors such as the Baltic and Eastern European diasporas, who placed pressure on Washington via Congress to support Baltic independence. This pressure was made possible because, “Constant advocacy for a stronger US stand on the Baltic question gave former refugees a sense of purpose and continuity. Over the years, the Baltic diaspora had established strong links with several members of the US Congress. During the crucial period of 1989-1991, these senators and representatives actively advocated for the Baltic cause.”¹¹⁰ Therefore, Bergmane finds that the relationships that Baltic diasporic activists had built with Congressional allies during the Cold War mattered during the independence movement when Congressmen placed pressure on the White House to take a strong position on the prospect of Baltic independence.

¹⁰⁹ Una Bergmane, *Politics of Uncertainty: The United States, the Baltic Question and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Oxford University Press: 2023): 2.

¹¹⁰ Bergmane, *Politics of Uncertainty*, 15.

On the grassroots level, the independence movement inspired a strong response from the diaspora, in which previously inactive members got involved in the momentum of what was occurring. Suuberg recalled, “I’ll never forget, Paul [Goble] basically said that re-independence of the Baltic countries is not a question of if, but *when*...I think that had a huge impact on the psyche of the organization because suddenly what everybody had been saying was their cause and what they’ve been working for, in many cases, almost an *adult lifetime*, suddenly they were being told [it’s happening]...And so that kicked off a whole lot of new kinds of activism in the organization.”¹¹¹ When speaking about the surge of activism from 1988-1991, Karu remarked on the distinction between those who had been involved pre-independence, when the Soviet Union was believed to last forever, and those “who came on afterward, who had sort of almost made fun of those of us were involved during what I would call the bad times or the dark times.”¹¹² This moment of crisis, but also of hope, encouraged Estonian Americans to feel their Estonian identity more profoundly, when the very meaning of ‘Estonian’ and ‘Estonia’ was being challenged and contested on the global stage by their kin at home.

All of the Estonian Americans I spoke with felt a great deal of solidarity with the demonstrating Estonians in Tallinn and did what they could to express that solidarity at home in the US through letter writing campaigns, editorials, demonstrations, and synchronizing protests. On August 23rd, 1989 about two million people formed the Baltic Way, a human chain from Tallinn, through Riga, to Vilnius in “solidarity against the Soviet regime and in remembrance of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.”¹¹³ The event was strikingly visual, and received tremendous

¹¹¹ Eric Suuberg, (Council Member of the EANC and President of Vaba Eesti Sõna), in discussion with the author, September 2023.

¹¹² Gilda Karu, (Treasurer, EANC, Present), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

¹¹³ Daina S. Eglitis and Laura Ardava, “The Politics of Memory: Remembering the Baltic Way 20 Years after 1989,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol 64, no 6 (2012): 1033.

publicity in the Baltic States and internationally.¹¹⁴ In solidarity with their demonstrating peers in the Baltic states, Karu recalled how she and other Chicago-based Baltic Americans created their own chain in Daley Plaza with candles and signage and she gave interviews with the local Chicago press explaining the demonstration's significance. Karu remarked, "We also hoped that our actions would help to draw attention to what was happening across the Baltic States. At the time, it was very difficult to get news about the Baltics. This massive demonstration, however, caught the world's attention."¹¹⁵ She estimated that around 500 people attended to stand in solidarity with the people standing in the Baltic chain. Karu remarked that the demonstrators in Chicago didn't know if their peers in the Baltics would hear about them standing with them from across the ocean, but she knew the US news was watching, and Soviet leadership would be monitoring public opinion in the United States. This was a chance to "send a message to the Soviet leadership that we were well aware of what was going on and were supportive and vocal in our demands for the end of Soviet occupation."¹¹⁶

The advocacy strategies employed by the EANC was very reminiscent of their work done throughout the Cold War and is a continuation of the traditions of advocacy they developed since the founding of the diaspora organizations. The late 1980s brought about the possibility for Estonian dissidents to travel to the United States and interface directly with diaspora organizations and Congress. Estonian American diaspora leaders were critical in connecting Estonian dissidents with US Congressmen and Senators interested in discussing the developments in the Baltic States. Karu emphasized the importance of the EANC's institutional history and reputation. She said, "Having connections, having people in the know, and having

¹¹⁴ Eglitis and Ardava, "The Politics of Memory," 1041.

¹¹⁵ Gilda Karu, e-mail message to author, May 23rd, 2024.

¹¹⁶ Gilda Karu, e-mail message to author, May 23rd, 2024.

people who know how to introduce them [Estonian visitors] to Congressmen and Senators from the beginning – that was really important.”¹¹⁷ Rink-Abel elaborated on the EANC’s role in making connections between the Estonian visitors and Congress, “Marju Lauristin, Tunne Kelam, Mart Niklus. There were others, but basically all the big names showed up in Washington. They wanted to meet with the Congressional representatives and talk about what was going on. It was the Washington Estonian Society that was the organizer for events where they came to speak.”¹¹⁸ Rink-Abel was a member of the Washington Estonian Society (as well as the EANC) at the time, and that organization developed events where Estonian leaders could speak both to US politicians and diaspora members.

In 1989, Tunne Kelam and other Estonian leaders founded the Citizens’ Committee movement, which was formed to develop alternate power structures to the existing Soviet structures. These new authorities would be elected by people who declared themselves citizens of Estonia. This committee facilitated a grassroots movement which involved the registration of hundreds of thousands of individuals to vote in elections forming the Congress of Estonia, an alternate legal body to the Estonian Supreme Soviet claiming the authority to govern Estonia. These developments were observed carefully in the diaspora, and Kelam recounted to me how she and five other diaspora Estonians were elected as delegates to the Congress. She recounted her memories of this early grassroots initiative in Estonia,

But the thing that really got it off the ground was when they came so far as to take this illegal occupation and take it to its logical conclusion, if we're under occupation, that means our citizenship still exists. We are still Estonian citizens, and therefore we have a right to decide about Estonia's future. So, in a grassroots movement here [Estonia], they registered individually – and despite government interference to some degree – they registered 700,000 people who said, I am an Estonian and I am not a Soviet citizen.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Lya Karm, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

¹¹⁸ Marju Rink Abel, (President EANC, 2006-2024), in discussion with the author, September 2023.

¹¹⁹ Mari Ann Kelam, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, March 2024.

By the restoration logic, diaspora Estonians had a valid claim to Estonian citizenship and the right to vote in the Congress election because either they personally, or their parents were citizens of the interwar Republic of Estonia. In concert with the registration occurring in Estonia, Kelam recalled how Estonian diaspora organizations facilitated the same process in the United States. She remarked, “...they also registered Estonians abroad. We were all involved in this. We were also citizens and among us in the West, we had our own election as to who would be able to go to Estonia as a delegate to the Congress of Estonia. I ended up being one of them!”¹²⁰ Kelam explained that serving as a delegate was the natural next step, given all of her work with Estonian diaspora issues. During our conversation Kelam lit up as she spoke about her work with the Congress in 1990, saying, “It was just like a normal conference in a way, except it was much more emotional. The delegates were all of different political persuasions...and these 10 sessions became a hotbed of teaching people how to do politics, to give speeches, and debate.”¹²¹ As a diaspora Estonian who had been committed her whole life to seeing Estonia restored, Kelam was incredibly grateful for the opportunity to represent Estonian Americans in the Congress. Her stories demonstrate how diasporists in the US actively participated in the events in Estonia as an extension of the work they were already doing domestically in the US.

The failed August 1991 coup attempt gave the Baltic states the chance they had been looking for to reclaim their sovereignty. On August 20th, the Supreme Soviet of Estonia proclaimed the restoration of full independence, which was recognized by Yeltsin a few days later.¹²² The United States hesitated to recognize independence given the tumultuous situation in Moscow with regards to Gorbachev and the USSR’s future, but other European states did

¹²⁰ Mari Ann Kelam, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, March 2024.

¹²¹ Mari Ann Kelam, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, March 2024.

¹²² Bergmane, *Politics of Uncertainty*, 156.

recognize their independence later that week.¹²³ However, by September the Baltic States had received Soviet and American recognition of their independence.¹²⁴ When asked about what these global events meant to her at home in the United States, Pedak Kari recalled, “It was very heady. It was ... God, I remember those hours, those days when all that was going on...I was working in a public library at that point, and we had this really wonderful woman – she had baked a cake that was black, blue, and white and I started crying...It was much more emotional than we realized, and Estonians don’t get overly emotional! So, it felt very good, and then a little numbing.” In addition to the euphoria and optimism felt at this time, most interviewees expressed concern at the continued presence of Soviet troops on Estonian soil and what the next few years would bring. However, the sense of triumph overrode most trepidation, and when asked what they were most proud of during their advocacy, many interviewees answered participating in Estonian independence.

The goodwill was reciprocated, as an October 7th, 1992, declaration adopted by the Riigikogu that was translated into English and faxed to Kelam in Washington read,

The Riigikogu proclaims: Estonia’s period of transition, which was proclaimed in March 1990, has come to an end. The constitutional authority of the Republic of Estonia has been restored...The Parliament affirms that Estonia is ready to develop relations with the countries and peoples of the world on the basis of mutual understanding and trust...We say to the Estonians abroad: the door to [your] home is open! Estonia, you stand once more on the threshold of a promising future.¹²⁵

The invitation to return home to Estonia was taken up by many Estonian Americans, who returned either to travel and reconnect with family, or on a more permanent basis. The

¹²³ Bergmane, *Politics of Uncertainty*, 157.

¹²⁴ Bergmane, *Politics of Uncertainty*, 161.

¹²⁵ Photocopy of a declaration adopted by the Riigikogu “Declaration of the Parliament of the Republic of Estonia on the Restoration of Constitutional Authority” by the Riigikogu and translated by Dr. Tõnu Parming (07/10/1992), Box 15 1990-3, Estonian American National Council Collection, Immigration History Research Center Archive, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA.

transatlantic movements of Estonian American activists and how an open, inviting Estonia impacted the work and mission of the EANC will be discussed further in the following section.

The End of the Cold War: Estonian American Diaspora and Estonia

“I think what happened to us here is that we went through all this soul searching in ‘91, ‘92, ‘93, and people shifted. Activities shifted. Some people dropped out, some organizations died, and that’s pretty normal. I think we realized that Estonia still needed support in a revised way. It needed support to become a member of the EU. It needed support to become a member of NATO. It needed financial support.” Maria Pedak Kari, Former Board Member of the EANC.¹²⁶

The changed domestic and global context in the United States brought on by the end of the Cold War had significant ramifications for the EANC and inspired a series of debates within the organization as to whether it was still needed. Decades of grassroots organizing, relationship building in Congress, and political learning meant the EANC had the resources and contacts when it needed them from 1987-1991 to support homeland Estonians from afar. The impact the diaspora had by internationalizing the struggle, connecting dissidents with Congressmen and Senators, and organizing demonstrations across the US was made possible because of the work of decades past to build institutional reputations for the EANC and the JBANC.

This organizational history is fundamentally rooted within the context of the Cold War, in which the ideological struggle between the US and the USSR in the Cold War era moved the Baltic Question from the margins of US domestic discourse and to a more central role as a symbol of Soviet aggression and imperialism. The elevation of the Baltic Question in US domestic and foreign politics elevated Baltic American interest groups as well, enabling them to secure meetings with members of the legislative and executive government branches as high up as the United States President. This raises the question of how this Cold War organization, and

¹²⁶ Maria Pedak Kari, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

its Cold Warrior members, would adapt the EANC to the new domestic and global context. The interviews, EANC documents from the 1990s, and editorials from the diaspora newspaper *Vaba Eesti Sõna* reveal the debates around the organization's future, how its purpose was to be redefined, what role it would play in the United States, and how it would seek to reconnect with Estonia. Argumentation as to the continued necessity of the EANC evoked the persistent threat of Russia and the need for Estonian admittance to NATO to ensure security as evidence that the EANC was still needed to coordinate political activities in the US. Furthermore, EANC members used newsletters, speeches, and editorials to redefine the responsibilities of Estonian Americans as not just protecting Estonian culture abroad in the US, but also articulated a responsibility to be active in the restoration of Estonia.

Mission Accomplished? The Need for the EANC after Estonian Independence

The restoration of independence and the amelioration of the perceived cultural threat to Estonians posed by the Soviet Union prompted a period of reflection within the EANC about the role and purpose of the organization going forward. In a speech to the Baltic Women's Council in October 1993, Mati Kõiva (EANC President 1996-2006) addressed the existential debate faced by Baltic interest organizations during the transformative years of 1991-1992 directly,

In the announcement about today's meeting in the Estonian language newspaper, your President Mrs. Juta Kurman stated that the question 'to be or not to be', i.e., whether there is or is not a need for the organization, has arisen in the Baltic Women's Council as it has in most Baltic organizations outside Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania since our ancestral homelands regained their independence. I sincerely hope that your choice is 'to be.' Events over the past year have shown that the need for **joint** Baltic activism is needed as much now as it was three years ago or thirty years ago...¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Speech notes "Remarks to the Baltic Women's Council" by Mati Kõiva (31/10/1993), Box 14, Folder 7 1992-3, Estonian American National Council Collection, Immigration History Research Center Archive, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA.

Kõiva went on to discuss the wealth of contacts and networks Baltic interest groups have established and the need to not let these fade away now that independence has been achieved. In his speech he refers to Russia's more assertive foreign policy in the former Soviet space and failure to remove Red Army troops from Estonia as evidence that the threat to Estonia had changed but persisted. As elaborated in diaspora theory and demonstrated throughout the Cold War era, the evocation of an external threat is a powerful unifier for diasporas and can help encourage mobilization and participation. When asked about whether the need for the EANC persisted after 1991, my interviewees echoed the words of Kõiva and explained the need for its existence along the lines of threats to Estonia and issues of security.

Suuberg explained these arguments succinctly and highlighted that Kõiva's military credentials made him an appropriate president when the EANC's mission shifted towards NATO admittance. He remarked,

There were, of course, the people who liked to ask the provocative questions – well, is there any point to having this [EANC] anymore? And they were doing it sort of tongue in cheek because we all knew that for one thing, until the Russian troops were out and until Estonia was in NATO, there was no security. When Mati Kõiva took over from Juhan Simonson, that was the main thing...he was a former military man [and] could push with great credibility and did so very strongly and successfully, fortunately.¹²⁸

The persistence of the Russian threat in the form of troops, the articulation of the 'near abroad', and the rhetoric around Estonian violation of the human rights of its Russian speaking population coalesced to create a precarious situation for Estonia, in response to which many in the Estonian American community felt they needed to mobilize their resources to address. The emphasis on security reflected the expertise of the EANC's leadership and its traditions of political advocacy. As Suuberg remarked, Kõiva served in the US Army Reserves and was instrumental in creating

¹²⁸ Eric Suuberg, (Council Member of the EANC and President of Vaba Eesti Sõna), in discussion with the author, September 2023.

the State Partnership initiative between the Maryland National Guard and the Estonian Defense League.¹²⁹

In addition to an increasing focus on security, Altai, who joined the JBANC in the late 1990s explained a generational shift was also occurring within the leadership. He said,

When I first came on in the 1990s, the people who were the old Cold Warriors were the ones involved up to the point of when the countries had their independence restored and said, ‘okay, our work is done, thank you very much, I’m retired.’ Then the second wave was the NATO enlargement, so a lot of people who were very involved then really pushed very hard to have that part of their legacy...the Baltics are independent again, but there has to be security, and we could only get that with NATO.¹³⁰

Altai describes the generational shift during this time, where some of ‘Cold Warriors’ of the first generation shifted out of leadership positions and turned those over to second generation, who viewed Estonian inclusion in NATO as an existential imperative. The EANC’s new president, Kõiva, was at the younger end of the first generation because he left Estonia when he was eight years old and lived in a DP camp for 5 years before immigrating to the United States in 1949.¹³¹ Both Suuberg and Altai introduce in their statements some of the emerging viewpoints amongst the EANC leadership as to how the organization should redefine its mission and priorities, namely, the diaspora still needed to be vigilant and proactive in defense of Estonian security.

Pedak Kari elaborated on this by discussing the different arguments she heard both for and against the EANC’s continuation. Similar to Suuberg and Altai, she underscored how independence did not solve all of the problems Estonia was faced with, and the diaspora had a responsibility to not just see them to independence but help them rebuild. She remarked,

I think for a while, one reaction was, well we’ve achieved that [independence]. We’ve

¹²⁹ Vaba Eesti Sõna, “Remembering Mati Kõiva, Former President of the Estonian American National Council and JBANC” *Vaba Eesti Sõna* (06/06/2020), accessed (05/08/2024).

¹³⁰ Karl Altai, (Executive Direction, JBANC, 1998-Present), in discussion with author, August 2023.

¹³¹ Vaba Eesti Sõna, “Remembering Mati Kõiva.”

helped with it, they've [Estonians] got what they want, and they got what we also wanted, and now it's up to them and they don't need us anymore. So that was one line of thinking – okay, it's over. The second line of thinking was, well, we certainly don't need our local Estonian organizations anymore. We can go to Estonia...now we can send our kids, and we can go, etc. – it's all there. And the third line of thinking was, oh, damn, they need an awful lot of help.¹³²

The viewpoints that Pedak Kari outlined speak of an existential debate occurring within the EANC's constituency and leadership as to what its role should be. Summarized, the first viewpoint makes the case that the political mission has been accomplished, therefore, the need for national-level coordination of political advocacy is no longer needed. However, there were also counter viewpoints which argued that the EANC has important resources that should be preserved and mobilized on behalf of Estonia as it rebuilds. This is further articulated by Rink-Abel, who commented, "Honestly, I think a lot of people felt that what was the reason for EANC after Estonian independence had been achieved? What else was there to do? My own feeling was that we still needed to keep up with the contacts with Congress, with the advocacy...we never know when we might be called upon to take up the mission again, so to speak."¹³³ Regardless of the Estonian security situation at the outset of independence, Rink-Abel articulates that what the EANC has accomplished – its networks, contacts, and reputation – have value and should be preserved so that they can be activated when needed. However, she acknowledged that the decade following independence was difficult, "Yes, there was a period there where the donations to the council...they didn't *dry up*, but they certainly decreased. The financial support and interest in the council waned. And it was difficult, I think, to convince people that we were still needed...people didn't really appreciate the value that EANC had or could bring when it was

¹³² Maria Pedak Kari, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

¹³³ Marju Rink Abel, (President EANC, 2006-2024), in discussion with the author, September 2023.

important.”¹³⁴ Rink-Abel highlighted how the EANC had a communication challenge to overcome the perception within the Estonian American diaspora that the organization was no longer needed. When I asked Rink-Abel what she was most passionate about working on during the 1990s, she laughed and said, “to be honest, my focus was on keeping EANC alive!”

The second viewpoint Pedak Kari presented addresses the cultural mission. As the diaspora theory and secondary literature suggest, exiles founded cultural institutions to preserve authentic Estonian culture abroad and this was partly driven by the threat to that culture in occupied Estonia due to Russification and Sovietization. Has this threat to Estonian culture faded with independence and is there still a value or need to recreate and preserve Estonia abroad? After 1991, Estonian Americans could more freely travel to Estonia to experience and practice authentic Estonian culture in the homeland itself. However, the counter view espoused by my interviewees was that the value of building community by having cultural organizations and events where Estonian Americans can interact, socialize, and build relationships around Estonian language and culture does not change with independence. When reflecting on this question, Andres Simonson said, “We just had a party because the Iron Curtain fell, but now what do we do? It’s [EANC] become more of an umbrella organization for all the smaller organizations like this clubhouse [Lakewood Estonian House] is more focused on culture and language...so money to camps, boy scouts, girl scouts, summer camps, singing groups and such there’s big value for it. All those people that have hours to donate and those funds...and put it into the cultural endeavor is huge.”¹³⁵ For Simonson, preserving community spaces for people to gather and socialize had tremendous value. Simonson became involved in the EANC’s work much later

¹³⁴ Marju Rink Abel, (President EANC, 2006-2024), in discussion with the author, September 2023.

¹³⁵ Andres Simonson, (EANC Board Member and son of Juhan Simonson, former EANC President), in discussion with author, September 2023.

than my other interviewees – he only ran for the council in the early 2000s and was chosen as an interview subject to share the experiences of his late father, Juhan Simonson, who served as the EANC’s president for many years during the Cold War. I asked Simonson what motivated him to join the EANC and he said he was inspired to when his oldest daughter was born,

Simonson: When I saw her, I said, I gotta keep it going. I knew she was going to be going to this camp here [Lakewood Estonian Summer Camp]...

Leah: As you did as well.

Simonson: Exactly. Carry on that legacy.¹³⁶

Simonson engages with the notion of the EANC as a legacy of the first generation that was passed onto their children and is now being passed onto the third and fourth generations, and he described how knowing his daughter would have the same experience growing up in an Estonian environment meant a lot to him. Pedak Kari and Rink-Abel presented the arguments they observed at the time – both against and in favor of the EANC’s continuation – which gives an overview of some of the different viewpoints prevalent in the diaspora post-independence.

It is important to note that my interviewee pool is the subset of individuals who chose to stay involved through the 1990s – they were not the people who chose to leave, and so naturally their perspectives will attest to the continued relevance and value of the EANC. Ultimately, their interviews conveyed that the EANC (and JBANC) had relevance beyond the Cold War context that they were founded in. Politically, the need to advocate for Estonian security through admittance to NATO replaced the mission of restoring independence as a salient issue within the diaspora. However, the clarity of mission provided by independence was gone and diaspora leaders did struggle to mobilize their peers with new issues such as Estonian security and NATO.

¹³⁶ Andres Simonson, (EANC Board Member and son of Juhan Simonson, former EANC President), in discussion with author, September 2023.

Culturally, building and maintaining community were perceived as being an important legacy left by the first generation of exiles that should be maintained for future generations.

Therefore, a re-articulation of the EANC's mission in the new global and domestic post-Cold War context emerged from 1992-1993. Its leaders sought to make the case to the diaspora that the EANC remained relevant and had a service to provide to the community. A letter from Juhan Simonson addressed to Estonian Americans presents the revised call to action,

While Estonia was under Soviet occupation, it was EANC that played a key role in gaining the support of American officials for Estonian self-determination. Now that Estonia is again free, EANC's role has shifted, somewhat, to helping Estonia rebuild its democratic institutions...Undoubtedly, Estonia will face situations in the future where strong organized support from the West will be important.¹³⁷

A significant aspect of J. Simonson's letter is the role that the EANC articulates for itself in Estonia's transition, which is to assist Estonia in re-joining the West. The concept of 'rejoining the West', and therefore leaving the Russian sphere of influence, was very prevalent rhetoric within Estonia and within the diaspora. Gilda expressed this desire as follows, "We, especially in the early nineties...I felt, and there were others too who felt, that it was very important for Estonia to become part of these bigger organizations so that they would have that kind of support."¹³⁸ Helping Estonia to get into the EU and NATO became priorities for Estonian American activists and they made use of the same advocacy strategies and institutional connections that had served them during the Cold War. Goble argued that the non-recognition policy was critical for the process of Estonia's admittance into Western institutions because it served as the groundwork for treating the Baltic states differently from other former Soviet

¹³⁷ Letter, "Dear Fellow Estonian" by Juhan Simonson (n.d.), Box 15 1990-3, Estonian American National Council Collection, Immigration History Research Center Archive, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA.

¹³⁸ Gilda Karu, (Treasurer, EANC, Present), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

republics. Goble, who served as special advisor on Soviet Nationality Problems and the US Department of State, commented,

I believe very strongly that the non-recognition policy has mattered far more since 1991 than it did before '91, because it provides the justification for treating Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania differently than the other former Soviet republics. And that difference not only defends their particular approach to citizenship questions, but also opened the way to membership in western institutions like the European Union and NATO...but I absolutely believe that without non-recognition policy, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania would not be in NATO, would not be in the EU, and that there would've been a great deal of pressure, even from the United States, that they join the Commonwealth of Independent States much as pressure was put on Georgia.¹³⁹

Goble's opinion is informed by his career with the Department of State and work in DC as an authority on Soviet nationality affairs, and offers a different, external perspective from my other interviews. He maintains that the diaspora's strong defense of the nonrecognition policy during the Cold War had positive implications for Estonia after 1991, namely that it provided justification for the Baltic States to be treated differently than other post-Soviet countries. Estonian American leaders felt that the diaspora had a valuable role to play in this process as the bridge between Estonia and the 'West', which began with their fervent defense of the non-recognition policy throughout the Cold War and continued into the 1990s through their externally focused objectives, activities, and the individual actions of EANC board members. The following section will engage with the specific priorities outlined in the EANC's 1992 action plan, and how this plan defined the future of the organization's relationship with Estonia.

Action Plan 1992: The Internal and External Objectives of the EANC

From 1991-1992, the EANC board members sought to redefine the organization's mission and objectives in the post-Cold War world that reflected the needs of the diaspora in the

¹³⁹ Goble, Paul. (Special Advisor on Soviet Nationality Problems, US State Department, 1989-1992), in discussion with the author, November 2023.

US, and the needs of Estonians at home. Reviewing the Activity Program reveals the balance between internal objectives, namely the development of the Estonian American community, and external objectives, including providing support for the Republic of Estonia. Previously, the work of the EANC, even when focused on the political mission of restoring Estonia's sovereignty, has been largely domestic. Lobbying and activism occurred in Washington or other major cities and cultural activities took place in local chapters of Estonian societies. There was international diaspora cooperation in North America and in Europe, but due to the Iron Curtain, the EANC's ability to work directly with or in Estonia was extremely limited to collaboration with Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty broadcasts, occasionally cooperating with the US intelligence community, and assisting people with sending packages to Soviet Estonia. After independence, direct relationships between Estonia (its government, people, businesses, etc.) and the diaspora could be developed— and the EANC was in a position to facilitate those relationships.

The April 9th, 1992, edition of *Vaba Eesti Sõna* published an op-ed by then Vice President of the EANC, Vaike Lugus, titled “*Olla või mitte olla?*” (Eng: ‘To Be or Not to Be’), articulating that an active versus passive role of the diaspora in the affairs of the Republic of Estonia was of primary importance. While her article was directly addressing the need to continue organizing ESTO festivals for World Estonian Days, Lugus expanded her defense to include all Estonian organizations, societies, and diaspora initiatives. Lugus wrote,

...we do not want to be only tourists and visitors of relatives, but we want to be collaborators in restoring the Republic of Estonia. We believe that we can be of greater help to our homeland as an organized society, than as an individual. The Republic of Estonia needs support from foreign countries, be it economic, political, or moral. Here

foreign Estonian societies can be valuable collaborators with their knowledge, skills, and experience.¹⁴⁰

In this editorial, Lugus argues for Estonian Americans to be “collaborators” in rebuilding Estonia, not just “tourists and visitors” and that this is best achieved through organizations as opposed to the efforts of individuals. As mentioned previously, independence brought about a fundamental change for the diaspora in which the previously inaccessible homeland was now accessible. However, the nature of this relationship, and whether Estonian Americans would be part of the nation building process occurring at home was an open, and ongoing question that still persists.

Therefore, the Estonia-oriented, external objectives were new territory for the EANC in the 1990s and reviewing the organization’s objectives in tandem with the individual initiatives of Estonian American activists reveals how the diaspora re-situated itself in relationship with the homeland. The 1992 Action Plan was divided into four sections that were dedicated to preserving Estonian culture, supporting democratic development in Estonia, promoting human rights, and managing domestic activities.¹⁴¹ The objectives listed in the action plan highlight the organization’s intentions to continue their role as mediator or bridge between the United States and Estonia by connecting business contacts in the two countries, encouraging Estonian Americans to serve in the Peace Corps in Estonia, sending people with expertise valuable to Estonia overseas, and supporting visitors from Estonia to come to the United States.¹⁴² The

¹⁴⁰ Lugus, “Olla või mitte olla?” 1. Original Estonian Text: “...meie ei taha olla ainult turistid ja sugulaste külastajad, vaid et me tahame olla kaastöölised Eesti Vabariigi taastamisel. Me usume, et saame olla oma kodumaale suuremaks abiks organiseeritud ühiskonna, kui üksikisikuna. Eesti Vabariik vajab välisriikide toetust, olgu see siis majanduslik, poliitiline või moraalne. Siin saavad Välis-Eesti ühiskonnad olla väärtuslikeks kaastööliseks oma teadmiste, oskuste ja kogemustega.”

¹⁴¹ EANC Memo “Tegevuskava 1992,” by EANC (1992), Box 24, Folder 3, Estonian American National Council Collection, Immigration History Research Center Archive, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA.

¹⁴² EANC Memo “Tegevuskava 1992.”

EANC supported transatlantic exchange in the late 1980s and early 1990s as culture groups and dissidents took advantage of the USSR's reforms to travel abroad, however, the changing global conditions created opportunities for a more varied relationship with the newly independent Estonia. Due to their networks, experiences, and multicultural backgrounds, Estonian Americans with the EANC found themselves equipped to act as interlocutors.

The majority of the objectives listed in the action plan have an external focus, whether it was working with the embassy, contacting like-minded organizations in Estonia, supporting independent press and groups fighting for democracy, or sending individuals from the US to Estonia to provide expertise.¹⁴³ This indicates a desire amongst the leadership to seize the new opportunities available to them with an accessible Estonia to develop new relationships with the government and civil society of the homeland. The action plan indicated the relationships that the EANC hoped to build, particularly with regards to increasing transatlantic travel between the two countries on the basis of sharing knowledge and expertise as well as developing partnerships to support Estonia's democratic transition. The section on preserving Estonian culture was the most inward-oriented of the four, however, even this section identified opportunities to make Estonia a part of the diasporic project by supporting Estonian culture figures to perform in the USA and encouraging Tallinn TV to report on diasporic activities.¹⁴⁴

One critique of the action plan appeared in *Vaba Eesti Sõna* in a letter to the editor article written by Dr. Endel Uiga, an Estonian American scientist, in which he pushed back against uniformity of political opinions that exist in the EANC and its representatives to the Estonian Congress. He wrote of the section on promoting democracy in Estonia, "Why not start with democracy and free press here in America? So long as we send representatives to the Estonian

¹⁴³ EANC Memo "Tegevuskava 1992."

¹⁴⁴ EANC Memo "Tegevuskava 1992."

Congress who are not elected but appointed and who belong exclusively to one of the extreme minority parties, it is clearly hypocritical to speak of democracy being transmitted from us.”¹⁴⁵ Uiga questions the EANC’s authority and capabilities to serve as a model for democracy or to send ‘experts’ on democratic practices to Estonia given that (from his perspective) the EANC does not represent a plurality of political opinions. This critique has merit given the findings of secondary scholarship on the Estonian diaspora during the Cold War, as evidenced by Merivoo-Parro who discussed how holders of leftist opinions and anyone who had immigrated from the USSR to the US were often excluded from the diaspora project.¹⁴⁶ Uiga’s critical article speaks to another about the role Estonian Americans should play in Estonia’s future and whether the EANC had a right to the monopoly of determining what that relationship would be.

A relationship with Estonia operates in two directions, and there was certainly some questioning and debate as to how Estonian Americans would be received by kin at home. Was there a desire within Estonia to include the diaspora in the West as part of the Estonian nation-building project in the 1990s? This question is too large for the scope of an MA thesis; however, it was a part of the discussions occurring amongst the leadership of the EANC as they met with Estonian government officials. In an interview published by *Vaba Eesti Sõna* on the 11th of June 1992, K. Jaak Roosaare, an EANC board member and regular columnist for *VES*, discussed the future of diaspora-homeland relations with the newly elected Estonian Prime Minister, Tiit Vähi.

K. Jaak Roosaare: It appears to me that the difference between you and Mr. Savisaar is like the difference between night and day, that Mr. Savisaar did not take well at all to Estonians living abroad and maybe even feared them more than the Soviet army... You, on the other hand, have greeted the Estonians living abroad on Estonian Independence

¹⁴⁵ Endel Uiga, “ERKÜ 1992 aasta tegevuskavast,” *Vaba Eesti Sõna*, translated by author, no 16 (16/04/1992): 10. Original Estonian text: “Miks mitte alata demokraatiaga ja vaba ajakirjandusega siin Ameerikas? Nii kaua kui saadame Eesti Kongressi esindajad, kes ei ole valitud vaid määratud ja kes eranditult kuuluvad ühte äärmuslikku vähemus parteisse, on lausa variserlik rääkida demokraatia edastamisest kodumaal meie poolt.”

¹⁴⁶ Merivoo-Parro, “Estonian by Recreation,” 389.

Day and have received Mr. Juhan Simonson, Mr. Mäido Kari, and now me. Please tell me what, in your opinion, was the role of Estonians living abroad, what should be their current role, and what do you hope from Estonians living abroad in the future?

Tiit Vähi: First, I think we are all Estonians; we have had different fates. I was born in 1947 in Estonia and have lived here in these circumstances. Estonians living abroad have had a different fate. Some—during the war—after the war—have had to emigrate; some have been born into those emigre families. But I think we are all Estonians and now in these new circumstances we must really cease making distinctions and I think this is a uniquely good opportunity to—because we know how things and circumstances are here but we really do not know market economics, we do not have contacts in other countries and I think that in these areas Estonians living abroad and Estonians living in the Republic of Estonia should work together.¹⁴⁷

Roosaare frames his question to acknowledge the frustrations felt by the diaspora towards Edgar Savisaar (First Prime Minister, in office until January 1992) and Estonian politicians in the Supreme Council of the Republic of Estonia¹⁴⁸ who opposed granting *väliseesti* the right to vote in the 1992 Riigikogu elections. Roosaare goes on to ask what the newly elected Prime Minister Vähi envisions for the future of diaspora-homeland cooperation. Vähi's response reaffirms that “we are all Estonians” and cites specific areas where the diaspora can be of assistance to the Republic, notably in economic restructuring and international contacts with the West – further demonstrating the opportunity for the diaspora leaders to act as interlocutors between their homeland and host society in the coming decade.

The interview was published in advance of the 1992 Riigikogu elections in September and followed the April decision by the Supreme Council to annul their previous decision to “approve the distribution of Estonian citizenship certificates as a legal means to determine the electorate,”¹⁴⁹ which meant that Soviet passports would be required in the upcoming election.

¹⁴⁷ K. Jaak Roosaare, “New Estonian Prime Minister Tiit Vähi on Politics, Economics, and Himself?” *Vaba Eesti Sõna*, Translated by K. Jaak Roosaare, no. 24 (11/06/1992), 7.

¹⁴⁸ Formerly the Supreme Soviet but was renamed in 1991 when Estonian declared itself an independent republic.

¹⁴⁹ Valerie Kalabugin, “Council of Estonia,” *Vaba Eesti Sõna*, no.20 (04/05/1992): 7.

The consequence of this decision for Estonians abroad was to exclude them from the electorate. This meant that “Estonian citizens who live in exile because of the Soviet occupation, were declared not to be eligible voters any more, while, on the other hand, all present residents of Estonia were declared to be legal citizens and persons eligible to vote.”¹⁵⁰ This decision sparked condemnation from the Estonian Committee in charge of issuing identity cards and in the diaspora, who wanted to participate in the rebuilding of the Republic of Estonia. This exclusion of the diaspora directly conflicted with their hopes of participating in rebuilding Estonia, and after much protest in and outside of Estonia, was eventually reversed.

A political cartoon drawn by Pulitzer Prize winning Estonian American cartoonist, Edmund Valtman illustrated the betrayal and frustration felt by the diaspora at their exclusion from voting.



Figure 2. Edmund Valtman, “Väliseesti,” *Vaba Eesti Sõna*, no 19 (07/05/1992): 3.

¹⁵⁰ Kalabugin, “Council of Estonia,” 7.

Estonia, personified as the man in the cartoon, who's arm, the *Ülemnõukogu* (Supreme Council), used a saw saying "*Valimisõiguse tühistamine*" (Withdrawal of voting rights) to sever the *väliseesti* from Estonia. The second cartoon authored by Kasesalu in 1992 expresses a similar frustration that despite their political and economic contributions towards maintaining the non-recognition policy during the Cold War and the restoration of Estonian independence, they were excluded from the right to vote in Estonia.

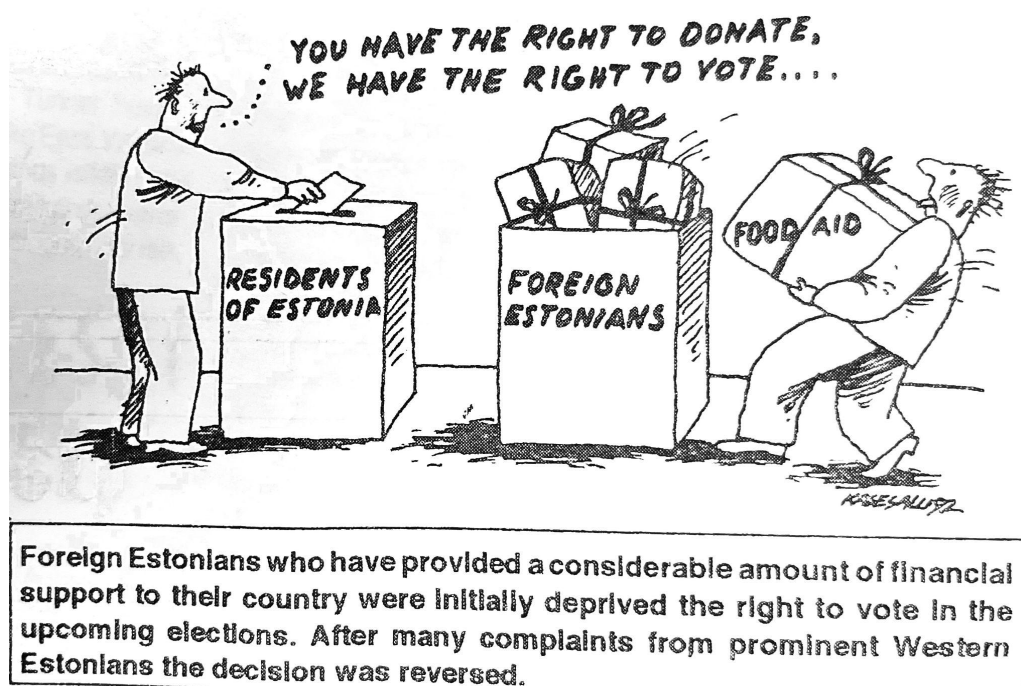


Figure 3. Kasesalu, "You have the right to donate, 1992," EANC Uudiste Ülevaade, Box 18, *Immigration History Research Center Archive*.

The cartoons both responded to the initial decision from the Estonian Council to exclude foreign Estonians from the right to vote in the upcoming Riigikogu election. The text "You have the right to donate, we have the right to vote" voices the criticism that Estonians were interested in foreign Estonian contributions insofar as it included aid and food but were not interested in including them in Estonian nation building. As the text that compliments the cartoon in the *Uudiste Ülevaade* (News Overview) states, the decision was reversed and Estonians were

allowed to vote in the 1992 elections on the basis that either they, or their parents, held pre-war Estonian citizenship and that citizenship was passed to them.¹⁵¹ Therefore, 1992 was an eventful year for the EANC as they sought to update their new mission statement and prepare an action plan articulating their objectives in the new geopolitical climate. The process of building an organizational relationship with Estonia was complicated and by no means an inevitable outcome of the fall of the Iron Curtain, engagement with events happening in Estonia was a choice made by diaspora leaders who sought to be a part of Estonia's rebuilding.

Discussing how these efforts were received amongst the complex processes occurring within Estonia of reclaiming history, identity, and citizenship from the Soviet Union is beyond the scope of this paper, however, my interviewees did share their *perceptions* of how Estonians at home viewed the diaspora. Pedak Kari questioned whether people in Estonia needed them and said, "They've got what they want...and now it's up to them and they don't need us anymore."¹⁵² During her six months in Estonia from 1992-1993, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, Pedak Kari recalled two opposing sentiments within Estonia, "...there was a sense in Estonia that I picked up on of 'Don't come tell us what to do.' Then there was a...sense of, 'please come and help us!'...So you had a lot of streams of reaction. I think for a long time there was a sense that there's a real division...There are Estonia-Estonians and then there are all the rest of us. That's not a very good feeling."¹⁵³ Pedak Kari's observations about the distinctions between foreign Estonians and 'home' Estonians echoes Vähi's statement presented previously that "we are all Estonians...we really need to cease making distinctions..."¹⁵⁴ Rink-

¹⁵¹ Bernard Groffman, Evald Mikkel, and Rein Taagepera, "Electoral Systems Change in Estonia, 1989-1993," *Journal of Baltic Studies*, vol 30, no 3 (Fall 1999): 231.

¹⁵² Maria Pedak Kari, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

¹⁵³ Maria Pedak Kari, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

¹⁵⁴ Roosaare, "New Estonian Prime Minister Tiit Vähi," 7.

Abel offered more insight into the EANC's contacts with the Estonian government in the 1990s, and said that, "The only contact line was the embassy in Washington and it really depended upon the ambassador as to whether or not they were interested in Estonian Americans... To be honest, the importance of Estonian Americans, I think, didn't become visible to the Estonian government until much later. In the 1990s, I don't think they thought about Estonian Americans."¹⁵⁵ Similar to Pedak Kari's anecdotal recollections about her time spent in Estonia, Rink-Abel highlights the mixed reactions from Estonians in the 1990s when it came to re-establishing links with the diaspora. Rink Abel explained that the EANC scheduled a welcome meeting with each new ambassador as they came to the US, and for some that was sufficient. However, others engaged with the diaspora more holistically and invited them to events at the embassy.¹⁵⁶

At the institutional level, connections between the EANC and the Estonian government were limited but there was will on both sides to finding ways to collaborate on rebuilding Estonia. Additionally, much more transatlantic activity was occurring at the individual level. My interviewees shared their stories of returning to Estonia on either a temporary or permanent basis during the early 1990s and explained what being able to contribute their personal and professional skills directly in Estonia meant to them as lifetime activists.

The Return Home: Using Personal and Professional Skills in Estonia's Transition

To complement the institutional perspective offered above through EANC documents and editorials in *Vaba Eesti Sõna* with regards to rebuilding a relationship with newly independent Estonia, my interviewees also shared their personal stories of return. Almost all seven traveled to Estonia at least once between 1992-1994 either to visit family, attend the Song Festival, or to

¹⁵⁵ Marju Rink Abel, (President EANC, 2006-2024), in discussion with the author, September 2023.

¹⁵⁶ Marju Rink Abel, (President EANC, 2006-2024), in discussion with the author, September 2023.

perform a professional service in Estonia. This section will discuss the experiences of Suuberg, Pedak Kari, and Kelam, all of whom returned to Estonia on a temporary basis (or a permanent basis in the case of Kelam) to perform a professional service in Estonia. These experiences afforded them to combine their professional American lives with their Estonian background, which they cited as extremely rewarding.

Kelam moved in 1992 to Estonia to run for the first Riigikogu election and served in the 1990s in different capacities in the newly formed Estonian government. She remarked of the experience of being one of the democratic trailblazers,

When I moved here [Estonia], I was plunged immediately into election campaigns and trying to teach Estonians how to do an election campaign. This was something that you don't do – knocking on doors in the Soviet Union, like 'Hi, I am so-and-so, so vote for me!'...but even just organizing a rally and trying to get people to come there...go where the action is and spread your word...simple things, and not being afraid to be standing out on the street leafleting and talking to people. That was a big job.¹⁵⁷

Democratic traditions and norms that Kelam had taken for granted during her time in political organizing in the United States simply did not exist in Estonia in the early years following independence. Therefore, this period was a learning curve for her, but it was also a space where she could put her expertise in politics and political organizing to use in Estonia.

During my conversation with Suuberg, he explained that given his background in engineering and ability to speak Estonian, he was hired in 1992 as a consultant for an American company interested in investing in the Estonian oil shale industry. He was brought along to interpret for the company and provide his expertise both professionally, and as someone familiar with Estonian culture. Suuberg described his visit to Estonia in 1992 as “fascinating” given all of

¹⁵⁷ Mari Ann Kelam, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, March 2024.

the changes and transitions occurring in the country that year.¹⁵⁸ This trip also helped him to identify other ways that he could assist Estonia in the early 1990s. He commented, “One of the things I saw that was in need of some help was the educational system – my background here [in the United States]. So, I knew how to read things there, and so, I went to some of the academics who I ran into on this trip and said, ‘Hey, look if you’ve got good students, I’m happy to support them. Send them to me.’ And they did.”¹⁵⁹ He explained that he’s had three PhD students from Estonia come over to the United States and he’s helped them get established and connected in the country. Educational institutions were an area that Suuberg had a lot of expertise in due to his professional background as a professor, and wherever possible he has tried to combine his Estonian background with his professional skills. He recalled, “In ‘95, ‘96, as part of the EANC, I helped establish some scholarships, very small amounts of money, but they’re still of some significance to Tallinn Tech and Tartu...Just trying to help them build up this concept of endowing with financial resources the student bodies, so that it enables people regardless of their means to come and study at universities. That was my agenda in the early nineties in the EANC.”¹⁶⁰ Finding ways to employ one’s professional background in Estonia was a new opportunity for Estonian Americans to contribute to supporting Estonia in the 1990s, and it facilitated their own reconnection with the country.

Pedak Kari reflected on this very idea quite extensively in a speech she gave at the American Library Association Annual Conference in June 1994 titled “*Estonia – Going Home Again: Returning to the Roots.*” Pedak Kari received a fellowship from the United States

¹⁵⁸ Eric Suuberg, (Council Member of the EANC and President of Vaba Eesti Sõna), in discussion with the author, September 2023.

¹⁵⁹ Eric Suuberg, (Council Member of the EANC and President of Vaba Eesti Sõna), in discussion with the author, September 2023.

¹⁶⁰ Eric Suuberg, (Council Member of the EANC and President of Vaba Eesti Sõna), in discussion with the author, September 2023.

Information Agency to spend four months living in Estonia and assisting the National Library of Estonia (NLE) in updating and modernizing its operations based on American librarianship best practices. She described that, “The NLE (national library of Estonia) looks to the West for automation, information, and institutional modeling...here was particular interest in acquisitions policies, techniques of analytical research, library automation systems, access to worldwide databases, and a general review of US librarianship.”¹⁶¹ When I asked Pedak Kari about what the opportunity to work professionally in Estonia meant for her, she explained, “It was that moment of realizing I brought my American and my Estonian lives together in that fellowship in Estonia. Those months in Estonia, I had to learn my profession in Estonian, which was really weird. I had never done library work in Estonian and worked with colleagues there who came from a very different background.”¹⁶² For Pedak Kari, the chance to bring different parts of her life together in a way she had never been able to before made her feel closer to her Estonian side.

Living in Tallinn and learning professional Estonian vocabulary enabled Pedak Kari to live “with an intensity unparalleled in my life...I was really living and walking and breathing in Estonia!...I was living in Estonia, the country of my parents, the country I had heard about all my life, the country of several thousand years of ancestors.”¹⁶³ However, in her speech, she also highlighted the times when she felt most American when working with her Estonian colleagues. She said, “I found myself cheerleading. Whenever a colleague complained, I pointed out the positives...When they asked me if I was always like this, I said, well mostly – it’s the American in me. And it was and is the American can-do, can solve, can make happen spirit that I

¹⁶¹ Maria Pedak Kari, “Estonia – Going Home Again: Returning to the Roots.” Speech at American Library Association Annual Conference, Miami, 27 June 1994.

¹⁶² Maria Pedak Kari, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, August 2023.

¹⁶³ Pedak Kari, “Estonia – Going Home Again: Returning to the Roots.”

shared.”¹⁶⁴ Pedak Kari also left the experience feeling more American, having realized that she had carried the optimistic, can-do attitude associated with Americans with her to her work in Estonia. The reconnection that occurred during her fellowship in Estonia left Pedak Kari feeling that she returned home to the United States, “more whole, a better person, a better librarian, and a better Estonian American.”¹⁶⁵ In line with her observations about the juxtapositions between her American attitude in the Estonian context, Pedak Kari wrote in the speech that, “It is my firm belief that my greatest value during four months in Estonia was modeling American group process techniques and work attitude and in breaking down the terrible sense of helpless isolation that surrounds Estonian librarians after 50 years of Soviet tyranny.”¹⁶⁶ Therefore, interestingly, she articulated her greatest value in Estonia was what she could model and offer her colleagues as an *American* and her identity as Estonian American put her in a position where that cultural exchange could be made possible. These three stories from Kelam, Pedak Kari, and Suuberg demonstrate how the opportunity to use their professional skills in Estonia facilitated greater reconnection with Estonia on the individual level and enabled them to engage deeper with their dual identities than when their work with Estonia had been exclusively US-based.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

Conclusion

“I guess, what I want to say is that we need to realize all of this has happened voluntarily. People have not been paid for the time that they have put into this. It’s been a matter of what is near and dear to their hearts and, thanks to them, that’s the reason that the EANC still exists today.” Marju Rink-Abel, Former President of the EANC.¹⁶⁷

Founded at the outset of the Cold War by Estonian immigrants in the United States who had opted for exile over repatriation to Soviet-occupied Estonia, the Estonian American National Council was the only organization of its kind to operate at the national level. The council celebrated its 72-year anniversary in 2024, having continued its operation through the Cold War, Estonian independence, and into the 21st century. The formation of such an organization was not inevitable after the wave of migration to the United States after WWII, instead, it was created from the sense of duty and mission held by the first generation to preserve Estonian culture in exile and continue fighting for independence from afar. The context these dual cultural and political missions operated in changed dramatically upon the restoration of Estonian independence in 1991, prompting debates within the EANC’s leadership and the broader diaspora as to whether it was still needed and if so, what priorities it should identify for the decade ahead. This inspired the research questions of what arguments and strategies did the EANC leadership use to redefine their organization’s relevancy beyond the Cold War context it was founded in? How did they define or adapt their new political and cultural missions? What roles and responsibilities did they outline for the diaspora with regards to rebuilding Estonia?

This MA thesis sought to engage with these questions through the insights and memories of Estonian American leaders in the EANC during the 1980s and 1990s. These leaders were members of the second generation, who were involved not only in the EANC but in other local

¹⁶⁷ Marju Rink Abel, (President EANC, 2006-2024), in discussion with the author, September 2023.

and global Estonian interest groups throughout their lives. Within diaspora theory, these individuals represented the diasporan fraction who sought not only to participate in building a diasporic consciousness but to lead this project. Engaging with questions about the EANC's mission and relationships with the host society and the homeland through the perspectives of the leadership provides valuable insights into their motivations for becoming involved, their advocacy strategies (and how these strategies evolved over the years), and how they understood the significance of their work. Hearing their stories as activists and as leaders illustrates that advocacy was not only about what the group could accomplish, but also about how the process of organizing gave people purpose, community, and a sense of being part of something bigger than just themselves.

Political advocacy in a multigenerational, diasporic context is a useful forum for investigating how diaspora leaders become involved in their work – choosing to go from passive observers to active participants in diaspora building – and what arguments and strategies they employ to communicate their cause to their audiences. Many of my interviewees were motivated to get involved in advocacy not just because of their participation in Estonian diaspora activities as children, but also because of a deep commitment to the United States which inspired them to pursue careers with local or federal government. This directly led to a central theme that emerged across interviews was the importance of advocating ‘the American way’, i.e. making use of American civil rights and institutions as well as adapting the content of Estonian American messaging to reflect US Cold War narratives and interests. Being an engaged US citizen, who participated in civil society and democracy, and being active in the diaspora were often one and the same.

My interviews also revealed important gender and generational divides which permeated the leadership of the EANC. Namely, the top leadership was often run by men and my female interviewees remarked that this only began to change in the 1990s, as the men from the first generation retired from leadership positions. The Estonia-born generation, who experienced life in the DP camps and the hardships associated with immigration to the United States, led the organization through the Cold War and had different perspectives on key diaspora issues than the second generation. One key such issue was that of visiting Soviet occupied Estonia, which the first generation vehemently opposed as against the diaspora's mission and values. Members of the second generation, however, viewed the opportunity to see Estonia for themselves as an incredibly valuable learning opportunity, which increased their effectiveness as activists. The second generation were raised within the 'little Estonia' that the first generation created but learned from their American upbringing as well. This placed them in a unique position to serve as cross cultural communicators, giving rise to Estonian advocacy the American way.

Captive Estonia meant that Cold War era advocacy possessed a clarity of mission that post-Cold War advocacy lacked. After their political mission to see Estonia free once more was accomplished, what more was left for the EANC to do? Defining new objectives, defending the EANC's relevance, and determining the diaspora's new relationship with Estonia was the central focus of the 1990s. With regards to Estonia, statements from the EANC leadership and a review of the 1992 Action Plan demonstrate their desire to be involved in the rebuilding process following independence as fellow Estonians. New objectives emerged, such as the need for Estonian admittance to NATO to ensure security and assisting Estonia to return to the West. Ultimately, speech transcripts from President Kõiva (1996-2006) and President Rink Abel (2006-2023) made the argument that even if it may not seem like the organization is needed after

independence, there is no telling when it might be needed in the future. The EANC's 39 years of advocacy and community building that preceded the independence movement meant that when the time came, they had the resources, connections, and motivation to aid the Estonian independence movement from afar. A similar logic emerged in 1991, in which the leadership defined the security challenges Estonia still faced and argued that one day Estonia might need Western support again. An organized diaspora would be a more effective ally, than isolated individuals.

The value of an organized diaspora can be observed in their present-day activities in support of Ukraine. The EANC is engaged in organizing speaking engagements for experts, publicizing interviews with top Baltic foreign policy officials, collaborating with JBANC to host the Baltic Advocacy Days in DC, lobbying for Ukrainian funding, and organizing demonstrations to support Ukrainian advocacy groups. The newly elected president, Mai Liis Bartling, released a statement on Ukraine saying, "Specific actions we can take include vocalizing support for the Baltic Security Initiative (BSI) as part of FY2025 Defense appropriations...As the U.S. elections approach this fall, we should regard this work with a sense of urgency. Let's not underestimate the power we have when we act together."¹⁶⁸ Bartling underlines the importance of collective action and the necessity of acting with urgency. My interviewees echoed this theme and often drew parallels between their work during the Cold War and their current work with regards to Ukraine. This link was made concrete by Kelam who explained how she reused her old slogan that she and her father came up during the Cold War when she was demonstrating for Estonian freedom in Washington. Kelam recalled, "Da, da, svaboda – yes, yes freedom! We do that same cheer now in front of the Russian embassy when

¹⁶⁸ Mai-Liis Bartling, "Perspective on the 2024 NATO Summit," *Estonian American National Council* (31/07/2024), accessed (10/08/2024).

we're picketing for Ukraine...my little cheer from Washington is carried over [to Estonia]."¹⁶⁹

Russia's war in Ukraine is one of those moments Kõiva and Rink Abel spoke about, in which an organized diaspora had the power to be an ally to the homeland with its networks of people, resources, and connections.

¹⁶⁹ Mari Ann Kelam, (Former Board Member, EANC), in discussion with the author, March 2024.

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Appendix

Interview Question Set

The following list is the full set of questions I developed for my interviewees. Not every interviewee was asked every question due to their different histories with the EANC and issue-area backgrounds. Additionally, spontaneous follow up questions prompted by individual responses are not recorded here because they varied widely based on the organic development of the semi-structured interview.

1. Background Questions

1.a Working with EANC / Estonian American Community

- When did you become a member of the EANC? Were you a member of any other Baltic American or Estonian American organizations such as the Estonian World Council, Baltic World Council, BATUN, JBANC, etc.?
- Did you have any previous contact or experience with EANC before joining?
- What inspired you to join the EANC or other Baltic groups?

1.b Background information

- Before 1991 did you ever go to Estonia / the Baltic States?
 - If so, what were your impressions while you were there?
- As a child or young adult, what was your exposure to or experience with Estonian culture/language/history?
 - How big of a part did this play in your life?
- After Estonian re-independence did you travel to Estonia?
 - What were your impressions while you were there?

2. Advocacy with EANC / Estonian American community in the 1990s

2.a Estonian Independence

- What information did you have in the late 1980s about what was going on in Estonia? What lines of communication were open between EANC and people in Estonia advocating for independence?
- What did you know in the late 1980s about what was going on in Estonia? How did you hear about political developments in Estonia?
- At what moment did you begin to see that Estonian independence from the Soviet Union was a real possibility?
 - At the time, what did you see as the biggest barriers to independence?
 - In what ways could the US and Estonian Americans lend support to Estonians in Estonia?
- In the late 1980s/early 1990s, did you think Estonian independence was a real possibility? At what moment did it seem real?
- Can you speak a little about the big campaigns or projects that you organized or participated in?
 - Did you travel to Estonia between 1989-91? If not, did you have any friends or family that did?
 - Did you have connections in Estonia that you worked with?
 - To what extent did you work with Estonians around the world or other like-minded organizations within the US?
- What was the significance of your American connections/experience or the US in your advocacy for Estonian independence?

- How did EANC communicate the significance of what was going on in Estonia to the broader American public who might not know much about the Baltic states? To the US government?
- Finally, can you speak about the significance of this moment for yourself?

2.b. Post-Independence

- After Estonian re-independence, what were, in your opinion, the most important objectives for the EANC?
 - Were there any issues or projects that you were particularly passionate about or worked on especially closely?
- What kind of a role did you envision for the EANC after independence? In your opinion, did the mission change at all after 1991?
- Did the EANC take part in facilitating Estonian Americans reconnecting with Estonia?
- Did any new opportunities for cooperation arise between Estonian Americans and people/organizations in Estonia in the 1990s? Opportunities to work with the Estonian embassy in the US?
 - Did any new challenges emerge?
- What became the central priorities after independence? At the time, what did you identify as the most important ways the US and EANC could help Estonia?
 - From your perspective did the EANC change at all in the 1990s?
 - For example, with regards to the role of EANC amongst Estonian Americans?
 - Did new leaders emerge in EANC in the 1990s or was EANC leadership consistent with the 1980s?
- Are there any ways that you saw the EANC change internally in the 1990s?
 - Were there any changes or increased challenges to mobilizing the Estonian American community after independence?
- Now Estonia is an EU and NATO member, but at the time, neither of these were guarantees. What possible future did you envision for the newly independent Estonia?
 - What did you hope to see the country do? Did you have any fears about other paths Estonia could take?
- What was the significance of the US or US based support from EANC in Estonia's development in the 1990s?
- What were, in your opinion, EANC's biggest successes in the 1990s?
- How would you characterize JBANC's relationship with the US government?
 - What kind of contacts did you have? Did you correspond with members of Congress, executive branch, or state department at all?
 - What lines of communication were open with the US government?
- Did this relationship change with Estonian re-independence?
- Would you say that JBANC played a role in shaping what the broader American public knew about the Baltic States? In what ways?

- Did you personally or JBANC more broadly have contacts in Estonia? In the new Estonian government?
- Can you tell me a little about how (if at all) JBANC built a relationship with the Estonian government or with organizations in Estonia?
 - In what areas or for what issues did you work with the Estonian government?
- What new opportunities for cooperation and collaboration arose between JBANC and Estonia in the 1990s?

2.c NATO Admittance

- What form did your advocacy take? What were some of the big campaigns or projects that you organized or participated in?
 - What sort of contact did you have with the White House or other branches of the US government? (i.e. June 9th, 1998, Meeting at the White House)
- What was the Russian rhetoric at this time against NATO membership? How was this rhetoric perceived in the JBANC or how was it being received in the US government?
- What in your opinion were the big barriers to Baltic entry into NATO?
- Did you collaborate with friends or colleagues in Estonia / in the Estonian government when working on NATO admittance?
- What, in your opinion, was the role or the significance of the US in Baltic admission into NATO?
 - Did the EANC communicate the significance of Baltic entry into NATO to US government officials? If so, how so?

3. Further Questions

- Is there anything you would like to share about your experience working with EANC that was not asked?
- Looking back on your work with EANC in the 1990s, what are you most proud of?

Application Details

Undergraduate Student Research Ethics Application Postgraduate Student Research Ethics Application

Application Number: PGT/SPS/2023/049/CEERES

Applicant's Name: Leah Johnson

Project Title: The Estonian American National Council 1991-1999: What did Freedom in the Homeland mean for the Diaspora?

Application Status: Fully Approved

Date of Review: 02/05/2023

Start Date of Approval 01/08/2023 End Date of Approval 30/09/2024

NB: Only if the applicant has been given approval can they proceed with their data collection with effect from the date of approval.

Recommendations (where changes are required)

Where changes are required by reviewers all applicants must respond in the relevant boxes to the recommendations of the Committee and provide this as the Resubmission Document to explain the changes you have made to the application as well as amending the documents. **Changes to the application form or supporting documents should be highlighted either in block highlight or in red coloured text to assist the reviewers.**

All resubmitted application documents should then be provided.

Approval Subject to Amendments means that the applicant can proceed with data collection with effect from the date of approval, but amendments must be fulfilled.

Amendments Subject to SEF should be submitted to ethics administrator.

If your application is rejected a new application must be submitted to the ethics administrator. Where recommendations are provided, they should be responded to and this document provided as part of the new application. A new reference number will be generated.

REVIEWER MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

APPLICANT RESPONSE

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REVIEWER MINOR RECOMMENDATIONS

APPLICANT RESPONSE

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ADDITIONAL REVIEWER COMMENTS

APPLICANT RESPONSE

<p>Please note that political opinions are part of the special protected data, but they can be discussed and analysed if you have a legitimate scientific interest (such as the proposed research).</p>	
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Please retain this notification for future reference. If you have any enquiries, please email [School ethics email address](#)

University of Glasgow
College of Social Sciences
Glasgow G12 8QQ
The University of Glasgow, charity number SC004401

E-mail: [School ethics email address](#)