

The episode of the statue of the Russian soldier has brought to light the weaknesses of the young democracy of Estonia. The most acute phase of the crisis has passed, but the nationalistic rhetoric that broke the country

From Tallinn you can see Yugoslavia

THE CASE

by Marco Montanari

in two has not. The presence in the government of a political entity led by a pro-Nazi is one problem. The attitude of Estonian public opinion is even more worrying, seeming to indicate a Yugoslavia-like scenario

If seismographers able to measure political crisis existed, they would have identified the epicentre of the quake that shook Estonian society between the end of April and the beginning of May as the park of Tõnismäe Square, on the hill of St. Anthony, located in the centre of the Estonian capital. This place has had a difficult history since the end of the Second World War, when Soviet authorities chose it to honour the sacrifice of those who had fought to free Tallinn from the Nazi occupation. But the concepts of occupation and liberation in Estonia are still a source of irreconcilable divisions: those who view the Nazis as invaders and the Soviets as liberators are opposed by those who think exactly the contrary and are also opposed by those, probably representing the majority, who consider both the soldiers of Hitler and of Stalin to be invaders. It would be useless to try to heal this fracture with the tools of historiography, sociology or any other social science. The feelings at the basis of these counterpoised views originate in dramatic personal and family events that only the flow of time could, perhaps, erase; also because the historical memory is reinforced by the cultural division of Estonian society, a

division that is deep and hard to heal. In the Estonian language the term “nation” has a strongly anti-“Rousseau” meaning. The word *rahvus* carries the thought of blood ties and language interconnections, of belonging to a community that cannot expand itself by contamination and widening of its borders, but only through demography or assimilation. These limitations, typical of many “threatened” peoples, have resulted in the fact that the Estonians today are smaller in number than they were in the '30s. These limitations define 30% of the population of the state, the Russians, as a foreign element, under draconian laws of citizenship that have made Estonia a unique case in the world, with almost 10% of residents constituted by stateless people stripped of any rights. Many are those who in this situation exercise a sort of “existential self-censorship” in fear of the revocation of their residence permit and of expulsion to Russia. Already in the Soviet era, in the middle of the rhetorical idea of the “Indivisible Union of Free Republics”, the two communities were living “separately but together”. The most meaningful example of this situation was repeated every New Year’s Eve, when the

Russians would celebrate New Year at 11pm – midnight in Moscow – whereas the Estonians would open *Sampanskoe* bottles one hour later. The guerrilla war against the Soviet authorities, after all, was being waged in the Estonian forests until 1956.

The Hill of St. Anthony

The two communities have fought, and not only symbolically, on the hill of St. Anthony since May 8th 1946, when two little Estonian girls blew up the small wooden pyramid that marked the burial of 13 soldiers of the Soviet Army. The “sacrilege”, which took place on the eve of the first anniversary of the victory in the great patriotic war, moved the Soviet authorities to react vigorously: the place was renamed Liberators’ Square and was chosen as the site for a great monumental complex to honour those who freed Tallinn wearing the Soviet uniform.

On September 22nd 1947, on the third anniversary of the liberation of the Estonian capital, the memorial was officially inaugurated. It was made of a dolomite wall, in the middle of which stood a two-metre high bronze statue, portraying a Soviet soldier. On either side of the statue, on the wall, there were two marble plates: they listed, in Russian and Estonian, the fallen soldiers who gave their lives for the liberation of Tallinn, to whom the title of heroes had been given, under the sentence “Eternal glory for the heroes fallen in the fight for the liberation and the independence of our Homeland”. At the foot of the monument, 13 bronze tombstones marked the burial of the fighters of the Soviet Army. A fence surrounded the whole complex. On September 26th 1964, the 20th anniversary of the liberation of Estonia, an eternal flame was added, to symbolise the transformation of the monument from being a tribute to the liberators of Tallinn into a memorial for the more than 50,000 Soviet soldiers fallen in Estonia.

The monument was a work of architect Arnold Alas, and the statue a work of sculptor Enn Roos, both Estonians. The Bronze Soldier was modelled after the features of Kristjan Palusalu, gold medallist in wrestling in the Berlin Olympic Games. Palusalu was and is still today a national glory, with a tragic history similar to that of



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many Estonians of his generation: arrested after Soviet troops entered in 1940 and condemned to forced labour, he enlisted and was sent to the Finnish frontline in exchange for his freedom. He deserted and was sent back to his home country, at that moment under German occupation. Newly arrested by the Soviets in 1944, he was finally pardoned. The decision of Roos to use Palusalu as a model, then, represented a real act of civil courage, which the sculptor tried to disguise by claiming inspiration from factory worker Albert Johannes Adamson.

The '90s

After the independence of Estonia in 1990 an iconoclastic fury swept across the country targeting all the symbols of Sovietisation, from statues of Lenin to bilingual road signs. The Bronze Soldier was barely saved, thanks only to the protection afforded it by the presence of thousands of Russian soldiers until 1994, who would have never stood by and allowed the demolition of the most important military memorial in Estonia. Changes, however, took place. The old name of the square had already been restored in 1990, while the following year the eternal flame was turned off and the original plaques substituted with two bronze ones which, in Russian and Estonian, were dedicated "to the fallen of the Second World War". Finally in 1994, the departure of the Russian Army was accompanied by a "re-structuring" of the monument which involved the removal of the 13 bronze tombstones and of the protective fence. Estonia, however, was on the brink of an economic boom that has continued to the present day, and public opinion saw the Bronze Soldier as a wreck beached by the waves of history on the hill of St. Anthony, while everybody was busy getting richer, creating an economy based on services, making the small Baltic republic one of the most computerised countries of the world, totally directed towards the future. Or at least so it seemed.

The crisis

It is a recurring fate of many monuments to see, in the flow of the years, a change in the interpretation made of them by those who pass by everyday. Statues that aroused the spirit can be



reduced to simple topographic elements or curiosities in travel guides. This was not the case for the Bronze Soldier. This simulacrum, like others created during the rule of Stalin, has progressively lost its Soviet skin to reveal a Russian one.

Therefore it has assumed a role as symbol of the national identity of Estonian Russians, provoking the furious reaction of neo-Nazis and Estonian nationalists, whose world view cannot conceive of any public manifestation that would expose the diversity, the cross-breed character of Estonian society in the 21st century. The fight was inevitable and had its prelude on May 9th 2006, during the usual homage of Russians to the Bronze Soldier, with outbreaks of fighting and police charging the rioters.

The prime minister Andrus Ansip, a liberal technocrat, was guilty of letting himself be attracted by this controversy and by the temptation to gain political advantage for himself for the forthcoming elections of March 2007. A grieved phone call by the poet and former dissident Hando Runnel, and the opportunity to take away votes



Ethnic Russian Estonians carry flowers to the “monument to the liberators of Tallinn”, better known as the Bronze Soldier. Its removal also sparked violent clashes between Russian protesters and police forces in other Estonian towns

from the nationalistic coalition Pro Patria/Res Publica Union of Mart Laar, led him to ride nationalistic indignation, affirming his will to proceed in removing the monument “as soon as possible”. The head of the government, furthermore, needed an embarrassing page of his past to be forgotten. Ansip, today champion of liberalism and anti-communism, had in fact been an officer of the Estonian Communist Party since 1986, as chief of the organising department of the regional committee of Tartu. Ansip justified his decision to enter the party with his desire to “have a career”, stating that, anyway, he had never believed in communist ideology. On January 15th 1988 the present-day Prime Minister called for a meeting of his department, to “fight against the nationalistic movements”. The following February 2nd some nationalists demonstrated in Tartu; among the

organisers of the event was future Premier Mart Laar. The militia broke up the demonstrators using extreme violence, including the use of dogs. Ansip was present during the operation, later claiming to have been there “out of curiosity”. Others, however, affirmed that it was indeed the future premier who pushed for the use of the dogs and the heavy-handedness.

Mart Laar, between Milton Friedman and the Waffen SS

Mart Laar, the other sworn enemy of the Bronze Soldier, was Prime Minister from 1992-1994 and from 1999-2002, distinguishing himself as promoter of the introduction of radical reforms inspired by the liberal principles of the School of Chicago, and as the leading character in various scandals. After the currency reform of 1992 – which introduced the Estonian crown instead of the ruble – he should have sent the billions of rubles in cash withdrawn from circulation to the Bank of Russia, but he preferred to give them to the authorities of the Republic of I?keria, that is, to Chechnyan separatists. He was then involved in a debated case of acquisition of Israeli weapons. This episode is in contrast with the praise he gave to the Estonian Waffen SS as a patriotic force. To date, there are three books written by Laar on sale in Estonian bookshops in which an open pro-Nazi revisionism is expressed. Curiously the Cato Institute of Washington awarded Laar, in 2006, “The Milton Friedman Prize for advancing liberty”.

The Failure of the Moderates

The electoral result, with a clear victory for the party of Ansip and an equally clear defeat for Laar, made everybody believe that the crisis could be overcome. The opinion polls, in fact, were indicating without exception public opposition to the removal of the Bronze Soldier. However, the creation of a coalition with the nationalists of Laar and the appointment of the Defence Ministry, which is legally competent on war cemeteries, to the Pro Patria/Res Publica Union, caused tension to flare again. In the middle of the impending crisis, Estonian civil society reacted with an

unprecedented episode. In fact the NGO “Movement of the 8th of May” was born, an apolitical organisation of Estonians founded by young teachers and students of the University of Tallinn, aiming to fill the ditch between the two communities and to fight in the media and with public demonstrations against the removal of the monument. Despite the fact that it was just a small group, and continuously harassed by the defence Police – the internal security system – the NGO seemed to be gaining growing consent, up to the point it supported a sensational open letter to the prime minister by 10 professors of the University of Tallinn, in which they offered their help to find a “balanced solution” to the crisis. In spite of the fact that the head of state, Toomas Ilves, had initially declared himself to be against any “childish” feelings of retaliation, the moderate voices were growing weaker and weaker in front of a hammering nationalist campaign, which found use of Internet blogs to be one of its strongest tools.

The Crisis Precipitates

The government decision to proceed in demolishing the monument, pre-announced on April 25th by premier Ansip with the beginning of the exhumation of the remains of the Russian soldiers, must then be framed within this climate. At 4am the following morning 400 policemen surrounded Tõnismäe Square, blocking the entrance to everyone, whilst teams of workers erected a huge tent that completely hid the monumental complex. During the 26th a greater number of Russians began to gather near the area cordoned off by the police, while uncontrolled rumours of the demolition of the monumental area and even of the destruction of the statue spread among the crowd. With the fall of darkness began the first night of outbreaks of violence.

The crowd, composed now by some thousands of totally chaotic people, began to swarm in the maze of streets and alleys of the old town centre, abandoning themselves to acts of vandalism without reason or political meaning. More than 400 shops and public places paid the price; 99 of them were looted. Among the few “political” targets attacked was the “Woodstock” bar,



considered a hideout for Estonian neo-Nazis. During this attack, evidently the most violent, there were physical fights and the throwing of Molotov cocktails, resulting in the death of 20-year old Dmitri Ganin, a Russian citizen with an Estonian permanent residence permit. In the night between the 27th and the 28th the fights intensified and spread to other towns in Estonia, with police using CS gas, rubber bullets and water cannons. While 3 helicopters flew over the centre of Tallinn illuminating the crowd tens of police vehicles and thousands of policemen proceeded to arrest over 1,500 people. Unbelievably, during the day of the 28th the police opened enrolment calls vaguely defining the positions as “police assistants”, successfully enrolling over 700 people. In the following days the riot reverted to non-violence, preventing this sort of town militia being put into operation, an act which could easily be foreseen to bring the crisis to a point of no-return.

The Dismantling of the Monument Officially, the decision to dismantle the monument was taken in the early hours of April 27th, during an emergency meeting of



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_A World War II veteran poses in front of the statue of the Bronze Soldier in the cemetery of the Estonian armed forces, where the monument was placed on 30 April, sparking protests and clashes

the government held “for security reasons”. The statue, ripped from its base the same day, re-appeared in the afternoon of the 30th in the graveyard of the Estonian defence forces, in the suburbs of Tallinn, on the site where the unknown soldier of the Soviet Army is remembered. A sort of official inauguration of the new “monument” took place on May 8th, featuring the presence of the premier and the conspicuous absence of the Russian ambassador, who went to the cemetery the following day.

Russian Reactions

The day after the riots the Estonian embassy in Moscow was besieged by demonstrators who threw stones, covered the walls with writings, sang slogans and Soviet military marches, and attacked the car of the ambassador Marina Kaljurand.

The Russian authorities, under the pressure of the unanimous votes of the Duma and of the Soviet of the Federation, adopted some restrictive measures towards Estonia, cancelling the train link Tallinn - St. Peterburg and limiting the export of oil and charcoal products destined for Estonian ports. The mayor of Moscow invited shop owners and customers to boycott Estonian products in the shops of the capital. The Estonian economic sectors more exposed to Russian retaliations are those of energy, timber, dairy and the transport of goods and passengers. The construction of a car assembly line, valued at 80 million euros, established by a Russian company, was abandoned. The Tallinn government then accused the Russian authorities of having organised a computer attack aimed at Estonian web-sites, even while conceding they couldn't produce evidence to support the claim.

International Reactions

In the days following the riots many declarations were given by international organisations, re-stating the present-day geo-political divisions, with the unconditional support of USA, EU and NATO towards the government of Tallinn, and strong criticism from Russia and other countries of the CIS. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe preferred to remain silent. Totally opposite were the reactions in Israel: if the deputy premier Shimon Peres congratulated the Estonian authorities for their “great wisdom” and the “positive conclusion” of the episode, the director of the Wiesenthal Centre Efraim Zuroff defined the removal of the monument as “an insult to the victims of Nazism”. Estonia, furthermore, is included by the Wiesenthal Centre in category F-2, countries which do not make any effort to prosecute Nazi war criminals, together with Australia, Austria, Canada, Croatia, Germany, Great Britain, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine.

Epilogue

The crisis has uncovered, dramatically, the weakness of the young Estonian democracy, still marked by the heavy inheritance of fifty years of a single-party

regime, and by the decade of authoritarian and pro-fascist governments which preceded it. The population, as if animated by a conditioned response, divided along national lines and sided, with a few exceptions worthy of praise, with the Estonian authorities or with the position of Moscow. The media have a very heavy responsibility: until the afternoon of April 27th there was still a plurality of positions, and even requests for the resignation of the Ansip government, because of his failure to manage public order during the first night of the riots. After that the rhetorical idea of the country under siege, of the net alternative between loyalty and treason, pushed the media to describe events in a non-critical and uniform way. Some articles and satirical cartoons published between the end of April and the beginning of May, showing strong anti-Russian racism, will remain a shameful mark for Estonian journalism. The authorities, on their part, acted heavily-handedly against Estonians who opposed the government line of conduct, and were pointed at by the public as shameful

and molested by the security service. Demonstrations by the opposition were prevented by intimidation and by the use of some clearly illiberal laws, like the one requiring that the organisers of a public event pay to the authorities the missed daily revenue of all parking existing in the area where the demonstration is to take place. The most acute phase of the crisis has passed, but the nationalistic rhetoric that broke the country in two has not done so. The popularity of Prime Minister Ansip is at its peak, whereas the moderation of the mayor of Tallinn cost him an online petition for his removal, supported by over 90 thousand people. The party of Laar, which also controls the Ministry of Education, is ready to start resume hostilities with a project that plans to introduce with force the Estonian language in Russian High schools. pro-Nazi, who is also a member of the European People's Party, constitutes a danger. But even more worrying is the attitude of Estonian public opinion. The road towards Yugoslavia-like scenarios has been laid.

THE STORY OF THE BRONZE SOLDIER

The “monument to the liberators of Tallinn” – better known as the Bronze Soldier – was inaugurated on September 22nd 1947 in the former Tõnismäe Square in the Estonian capital, renamed Liberators' Square. In 1990, at the time of independence, the square was given back its old name, while in 1991 and 1994 the monument underwent modifications and changes.

In January 2007 the Estonian parliament approved a law regarding war cemeteries, an act that allowed the government of Andrus Ansip to proceed with the removal of the Bronze Soldier. The work began on April 26th with the exhumation of the remains of 13 soldiers of the Soviet Army who had been buried at the feet of the monument, and concluded in the early hours of the 27th with the removal of the bronze statue and the demolition of the other structures of the memorial. Violent fights between Russian demonstrators and the police occurred from the 26th to the 28th in Tallinn and in other Estonian towns. On April 30th the bronze statue was positioned in the graveyard of the Estonian defence forces, located in the suburbs of the capital, where the whole complex would be reconstructed before June. The area formerly occupied by the Bronze Soldier in Tõnismäe Square has been covered with flower-beds by the Defence Ministry.

