Reconstructing Life in Violent Eras: A Comparison of Émigré and Native Narratives

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Note: The figures mentioned in the text could not be reproduced here, but will be shown at the workshop.

In this article, I am going to compare two sets of memories used to explain anti-Soviet resistance in Lithuania during the 1940's. Interviews with Lithuanian émigrés in the United States during 1990-91, primarily in Chicago, the center of Lithuanian-American cultural and social organization, form one set. Interviews conducted in Lithuania in the summer of 1992 form the second. In creating both sets, I would begin the interviews by encouraging respondents to draw their village and map out pre-1940 social networks. Then they were asked to describe the nature of the transformation of these networks during Soviet and German occupation. The interviews lasted from a couple of hours to two days; the number of interviews totaled forty, about equally split between émigrés and non-émigrés. In both sets of interviews, I primarily sought the "objective facts" of the respondent's pre-war and war-time community life: who participated in community-level economic arrangements, who belonged to social-patriotic organizations, who were members of political parties, who joined the local resistance organization (if one had developed at all).

This fieldwork was an important part of a broader project that sought to identify individual-level causal mechanisms that promote and sustain political violence.[1] More specifically, this research pursued the relationship between observable types of community (classified by size, centralization, density of ties, etc.) and the development of

rebellion and resistance (as related in the narratives of interviewees). In attempting to isolate the mechanisms of rebellion and resistance I sought to find the source of variation in the development of resistance organization among villages in the same region. Why would one village develop an extensive guerrilla organization or cell while the neighboring village (under the same geography and regime policies) remain passive?

This short article is limited in ambition; I will simply describe similarities and differences between the émigré and non-émigré interviews and then try to relate these observations to larger issues of memory and narrative. There are some obvious reasons to predict that the two sets of interviews might unfold in very different manners and produce divergent types of information and interpretation. Many in the Lithuanian émigré community in the United States fled their homeland during the multiple occupations of the 1940's. They formed new émigré associations or joined existing ones; they often lobbied the United States Government on foreign policy issues. Two issues are most crucial here. First, the émigrés stories were often well-rehearsed in the sense that they had been openly discussed. In contrast, their native counterparts, who had lived under Communist rule for over four decades, could not openly discuss the 1940's, especially the nature of anti-Soviet resistance. In fact, many of the native interviewees in my sample (gathered in 1992) had never discussed their experiences even with their own families. Secondly, émigrés had, in general, been exposed for several decades to a meta-narrative stressing Soviet inhumanity and Western betrayal and hypocrisy. The West had sacrificed Lithuania to the brutal Soviet regime. However, political efforts, such as the continuance of the US policy of non-recognition of the Soviet incorporation of Lithuania, could and should be made to correct historical injustices.

These differences in rehearsal and knowledge of meta-narrative created differences in the flow and content of the interview. The native interviews seemed more likely to turn toward the personal; grief formed the emotional undertone of the exchange. Émigré interviews often brought in the meta-narrative; anger often affected the course of the exchange. These emotional undertones are important to note and understand because they changed the course of the proceeding narrative in important ways. Yet, despite these differences, some of the similarities between the two sets of interviews were more striking than the differences.

An Overriding Similarity

Both émigrés and natives could remember their neighbors and the associational life of their community in remarkable detail. For rural communities, elderly Lithuanians were asked to draw maps of their villages, list local pre-war membership in political and social associations, and describe the nature of anti-Soviet resistance. Many interviewees, both émigrés and natives, can draw an intricate map of their village as it stood on the eve of the Second World War. The respondent's map below represents a village described by an émigré. As can be seen, the respondent could draw each farmstead and designate the number of hectares as they stood before the first Soviet Occupation (1940-June 1941). He could also list memberships in political parties and social organizations. Finally, he gave a rendition of how resistance was organized in this community.

SEE FIGURE 1

The corresponding narrative describing the local formation of a resistance unit was detailed and vivid. For social scientists and historians attempting to reconstruct social life in the 1940's Baltic area, interviews with elderly survivors are often the only available source of information, especially in terms of rural communities. Yet it is not only their necessity but their very richness that makes these oral histories so valuable.

The maps found below were derived from interviews with long-term residents (natives) of southern Lithuania. When the Soviets returned to this region in the tail months of the Second World War, locally-based rebellion organizations began forming. Indeed, Lithuanians controlled much of the countryside (at least at night) until the late 1940's. In late December 1944, the Soviets returned to southern Lithuania and the area around the town of Merkine. On Christmas Eve, they massacred much of the population of a small village named Klepocai. As the news of Klepocai's destruction spread, hundreds of people from neighboring villages, most of them youth fearing conscription into the Red Army, fled into the woods to buy time to consider their options. Within a short period of time, many of these refugees had reincorporated themselves into their communities. Significant numbers of these communities developed into support networks for the refugee-rebels. In fact, some villages created elaborate systems of underground bunkers supplied with food and information by the majority of the community.

In one chapter of *Resistance and Rebellion* (2001, Cambridge University Press), I describe the experience of five individuals from the area around Merkine, a small town in southern Lithuania, during the post-war years. One interviewee became a member of a locally-based Soviet collaboration force whose mission was to pacify the countryside.

Another tried to stay out of the conflict altogether. A third joined a band of mobile partisan fighters (and was quickly captured and deported to Siberia). Two others were involved in community-based resistance, although the development of resistance in their respective communities differed. As in other interviews, these two respondents produced community maps, lists, and histories. These two closely located villages are diagrammed below. The first figure is the map from the interview. The second schematic (Figure 3) is derived from the interviewee's detailed map that was, unfortunately, drawn in too much detail and in print so small that it could not be reproduced here.

SEE FIGURES 2 AND 3

Again, the interviewees could recall remarkable detail. The respondent (Figure 3) related how the twelve farmsteads of the community were aligned along the Merkys River; he listed the number of hectares and total number of family members. He recalled lists of members of various social/political groups. The interviewee listed other details on his map. For example, the Tomas Barysas farmstead was comprised of forty hectares and sixteen family members. Jonas Barysas was killed as a partisan; Vladas Barysas had formerly been in a Lithuanian military unit and changed his name to conceal that background from the Soviets; Cezaris Barysas became a Soviet informant. This village developed widespread and organized support for the post-war partisans. In these years, Lithuanian rebels hid in underground bunkers in several locations indicated on the map by small squares. In the nearby village, represented in Figure2, no such widespread

participation developed; however, a few members of the community, including the respondent, served as liaisons for non-local partisan groups.

This brief discussion of the multiple cases from the Merkine region illustrates how this type of thorough study can create a field of variation crucial to understanding resistance and rebellion against powerful regimes. First, there is obvious variation among individuals. The five individuals described above played distinctly different roles in the post-war drama: collaborator, neutral, liaison, locally-based rebel, and mobile partisan. Further, clear variation occurred at the community level. Some of the communities in the region, like the one above, developed elaborate bunker systems to hide home-grown rebels. These communities maintained their crucial support of partisans until collectivization or significant deportation decimated the village. Other communities, like the one represented in Figure 2 above, were ready to support partisans that passed through and might have a liaison or two but were never organized in even an informal fashion. Yet other communities in the same region remained neutral.

Rural villages were not the only communities examined in this research. Seven respondents were associated with one fraternity at the University of Kaunas, a community heavily involved in conspiratorial anti-Soviet resistance during the first Soviet occupation (1940-41).[2] Both émigré and non-émigré members of Grandis, the Catholic engineering fraternity, can tell a remarkably similar story of how rebellion evolved within their ranks. Most had been active in Catholic youth organization (Ateitis) in their home villages. After the Soviets installed their regime in Lithuania, organization developed along "groups of five," five person self-contained cells designed to prevent easy Soviet penetration throughout the organization. Recruitment was conducted almost

exclusively within Catholic circles. When the actual revolt occurred, timed to coincide with the German invasion, each group of five was assigned a specified task. One respondent's group guarded a tunnel; another was assigned to reconnaissance at the airport, and so on.

Former members of the fraternity who had immigrated to the United States have written about these experiences and shared them at meetings of former political prisoners. Those remaining in Lithuania also had not forgotten their participation in ant-Soviet resistance. For example, in 1992, within a year after the reestablishment of independence, one of the Lithuanian non-émigré respondents produced a sheet (see Figure 4) during the interview listing the former members of the fraternity and their fates. Respondent G2 could name almost every member and whether they had been deported, had been killed, were still living, and so on. In short, a coherent collective narrative of the Grandis fraternity existed that could be accessed by the seven former members (from Chicago, Cleveland, Vilnius, and Kaunas).

Figure 4: List of Grandis Fraternity Names here

In my limited set of interview, I saw little difference among émigrés and natives in terms of the ability to produce community-level information and narratives. Émigrés and natives remembered their neighbors and the number of hectares they had owned in the pre-Soviet days about equally well. Both groups could draw maps, or fail to draw maps in roughly equal numbers. Both groups produced roughly similar narratives about the establishment of Soviet power in 1940 and the German invasion of June 1941. In

short, the ability to provide names, numbers, and a list of events appeared much the same to me. Perhaps this should not be surprising. For both émigrés and natives, no one had ever sat down and asked them these particular details before. There could be no rehearsal of this previously unasked story.

Differences

While my research primarily sought community-level information, the interviews were fairly open-ended and often diverged to either personal or national levels. To summarize my impressions, the interviews of native respondents were more likely than émigrés to transform into personal and grief-laden narratives. Émigrés were more likely to digress to political meta-narratives with an angry emotional undertone. I mention anger and grief because I believe these emotions, once unleashed, changed the flow of the interview in significant ways. In order to understand the effect of these emotions on narrative, a few comments on emotion, and grief and anger in particular, are in order.

Following the work of Nico Frijda (1986) and others, emotion can be treated as an action tendency—an impulse or a state of readiness to act, or in this case, to remember, in a specific way.[3] For example, the emotion of shame activates an urge to disappear from social life; fear initiates action tendencies toward fight or flight. In reconstructing life from violent eras, the most powerful emotions are often those related to loss and absence. Respondents must recall (or vividly imagine) the death of relatives or the act of fleeing one's country. In my project, interviews commonly and unsurprisingly activated grief and anger, both powerful emotional responses that are

triggered from memories of loss. Frijda makes the following observation regarding these emotions:

> For absence to truly constitute grief, it must possess the property of finality: the notion that absence will be forever. Without finality there is misery or distress or anger. Anger upon loss indeed appears to function as a means to ward off realization of finality: "I wish there was something I could blame (p. 200)."

Frijda expands on this point:

> Grief is the emotion of finality, of definitive, irreparable loss. Finality has its specific painfulness in the helplessness that it implies. It also has its advantages: No efforts make sense, nothing has to be endeavored, no effort has to be spent.
>
> Similar considerations apply to anger. Its situational meaning structure involves an obstacle that in principle might not have been there. The antagonist could have acted otherwise; something or someone else is to blame. This implies that behind the obstacle the blocked goal still exists, still is available; and the nature of the obstacle is such that, in principle it can be controlled and modified. Anger implies hope. Further, anger implies that fighting is meaningful; one is not reduced to mere passivity (p. 429).

While both grief and anger relate to loss, their respective action tendencies create different impulses. Anger precipitates efforts to correct the brutal past. Thus, the angry interviewee might be expected to take a more proactive role in shaping his or her responses to questions as well as to produce different types of narratives. Anger might tend to lead to questions of blame, possibly to revenge. Anger implies that a battle over the history of past is still being waged in the respondent's mind, that the events are not final, that the very interpretation of events that might proceed from the interview will somehow modify that event. Anger may drive the interview into the political realm.

Grief admits finality. The action tendency of grief may be toward confession or catharsis. The interview itself cannot be seen as changing finalized events.[4] With the grief-stricken respondent, the interviewer is less likely to become involved with some form of interpretive game concerning the events of the past. Unless counteracted, grief is likely to drive the interview into the more personal realm.[5]

Examples and Generalizations

For obvious reasons, in the early 1990's émigrés were more likely to have discussed the events in Lithuania during the 1940's far more often than their native counterparts. As discussed above, grief is one response to the experience of loss; anger is another. A key difference between the two emotions is summed up in the Frijda quote above: "Anger implies hope. Further, anger implies that fighting is meaningful; one is not reduced to mere passivity." Anger's action tendency is to address the source of loss, to avoid finality, to try to attack those responsible for loss in order to put things straight somehow.

Well-rehearsed émigré narratives tend to bring in the political rather than the personal. Ethnic or political groups are often targeted for blame. Reference to documents or treaties sometimes replaces vivid personal memory. The émigré respondent seems to take on a responsibility to provide a broad history for the interviewer. A set of Western terms (genocide, for example) creeps into the narrative. The interchange below typifies this phenomenon. At this point in the interview, I was encouraging the respondent to discuss, in terms of sticks and carrots, Soviet methods in

deterring resistance. Visibly annoyed with the questions, respondent M kept slipping back into the angry collective narrative:

> RP: The Soviets obviously want to stop people from going in this direction (toward active resistance). Now there are two ways the Soviets could do this: they could make the penalty so high that nobody would want to go and that would deter them. The other is that they might give benefits to people who go in the other direction (toward collaboration).
>
> M: In Communism there was no human face. Suslov at that time was governing and he simply announced that there will be Lithuania without Lithuanians. And the government took that particular direction.
>
> RP: So everything was a stick and there was no carrot?
>
> M: There was no regard for human life at all. Destruction. No human faith. People were robbed and destroyed.
>
> RP: Couldn't they say that I will give you a government position or land if you do this (collaborate)?
>
> M: The people did not believe what they gave and that was actually deceit. Volunteers (collaborators) were the people to whom power was assigned one hundred per cent. They could shoot anybody, kill anybody, rob anybody, and they had complete freedom to behave in that country anyway they wanted.
>
> RP: Were there any istrebiteli (Soviet armed collaboration force) from your village?
>
> M: One was. He was just born in that village, but he did not live there. He was living in the township.
>
> RP: Was he a Communist student or anything?
>
> M: The people who volunteered…the incentive to volunteer was first, it was promised that they would not be inducted into the Red Army to fight against the Germans, they would remain in that particular location and serve the purpose, and more so for those who volunteered actually they were hooligans. The one who was from this village

> raped a girl and was taken out during the Smetona period (pre-war period) to the penitentiary. He volunteered to avenge those who disturbed his peace.[6]

As with many émigré interviews, general terms of blame dominate the discussion. Slogans ("In Communism there was no human face", "Lithuania without Lithuanians") replace detail.

As with almost all of the respondents in my project, members of the émigré community suffered tremendous losses, including the loss of connection to their homeland and even the loss of the ability to communicate with relatives. However, the organized Lithuanian émigré community, particularly in Chicago and other large cities, saw a possibility to act—an opportunity to publicize their history, to affect US government policy, to identify those responsible for their suffering. These possibilities cannot undo the losses that have occurred, but they do prevent grief. As the emotion of finality, grief is eliminated, or suppressed, by anger and the possibilities for justice and/or vengeance. Anger leads to a search for new targets of blame. In the above example, Communism, the Soviet official Suslov, and a local collaborator are targeted in turn. Often, specific questions, answered through a prism of anger, are refracted into generalized responses: "There was no regard for human life at all. Destruction. No human faith. People were robbed and destroyed."

Natives, having lived under Soviet domination for decades, had no well-rehearsed meta-narrative available, at least not in 1992. They had never believed the Soviet version of events and were generally not concerned with historical nuances during the economic and political upheavals of the Perestoika era.

Consider the following example. One evening, I decided to interview the woman from whom I was renting a room (Respondent S). I went through the usual interview process, starting with her earliest recollections of the village where she grew up and proceeding through the changes of the 1940's. S had left her rural community in the mid-1940's to attend the university in Vilnius. Respondent S had never been involved in politics. She was a fairly typical sixty-five year old Lithuanian.

Like many of the respondents in my project, S painted a positive, almost idyllic, picture of pre-war life in her community: "There were very good times. Very beautiful relations between neighbors." S recalled beekeeping operations and relations among god-families with visible joy. Whether community relations were actually this friendly and tranquil is not clear; the point is that S, like many other respondents, began her narrative with a series of observations about pleasant events and relationships. The main focus of the interview began when I interceded to ask factual questions about the structure of the village or community. How many hectares did this neighbor have? Who owned a threshing machine? And so on.

Eventually, the narrative led to tragic and violent events. Like many other Balts who had lived through this period, Respondent S had witnessed considerable tragedy and atrocity during the Soviet occupations: a brother had been shot in the crossfire between Soviets and partisans, her father was tied to horses and dragged to death, and her cousin had been imprisoned and tortured during the first Soviet occupation. S had personally witnessed the Soviets display dead partisans in the town square, a common deterrent tactic; she had twice seen scores of individuals and families destined for Siberia herded onto trucks. While horrific, on the whole her experiences were similar to those of most

of the other interviewees. Also, like many other interviewees, S broke down and wept during the session. The morning after the interview, S was pale and somewhat withdrawn. She mentioned that she had not slept because of nightmares of the events of the 1940's, events she had not recalled for years and had never openly discussed.

During the latter stage of the interview, S's narrative became more vivid. She recalled not only a looting of her family's house, but how the trespassers took the guitar from the wall and how they found her father's prized gold watch in one of his coat pockets. S tended to concentrate on her family's history. She had little comment on political matters; she had little desire to assign blame or seek revenge; she did not tend to speak in terms of ethnic or political groups or in general terms at all. At the end of the interview, when asked if she had anything to add, she replied "You can't make any decisions on that time because you must understand both sides and you can understand them only if you have a knowledge of the smallest detail." Politicians today, she added, must not seek revenge but rather concentrate on the good of the Lithuanian nation and "humans in general."

Some émigré interviews resemble that of S. Respondent L immigrated to the United States in the late 1940's and worked as a meat packer in a small midwestern city for most of his life.[7] After dispassionately describing his community, Respondent L broke into grief-dominated discourse. First, when asked to list individuals deported from his village, L described his brother's arrest in June of 1941. Weeping, L related the last words his mother spoke to his brother. After the introduction of grief, the interview became intensely personal. Regardless of the nature of my questions, L began to tell long and vivid personal stories—he told of being stopped by a Soviet soldier while riding his

bicycle during the German invasion of 1941 and lying to the soldier about going to get his shoes fixed; he recounts the smell of the Soviet soldiers' food ("it stinks like hell that food"); at length he tells the story of his last meeting with his girlfriend before leaving for Germany in 1944. At this point, there was no reason to continue the interview. L was simply too upset to return to a systematic account of events. Like S, respondent L's narrative became personal. Since coming to the United States, he had lived in an isolated town in the middle of the United States and had less chance to participate in organizations with a politicized meta-narrative of 1940's Lithuania. In the two examples above, the respondents did not belong to organizations or local communities with a rehearsed meta-narrative. Both interviews tended toward the personal and came to be dominated by grief.

Finally, let me come back to the seven fraternity members. They all told a similar narrative concerning the community of their engineering fraternity. While being told, this narrative created an emotional affect—pride. Emotion theorists define pride as a positive emotion triggered by a belief about one's own action. The seven members of the Grandis network all positively assessed their personal participation in the 1940-41 conspiracy. They took pleasure in going over the group's history. Most emotion theorists consider pride as an emotion without an action tendency; it is experienced on its own without consistently direction the individual toward any specific type of action. The crucial point here, though, is that the existence of this type of collective narrative diverts the individual from strictly personal narratives dominated by grief. The seven former members of Grandis certainly experienced tragedy and hardship. Two of them, continuing resistance activity into the German occupation, were arrested by the Nazis and

sent to concentration camps. Two others were arrested and sent to Soviet labor camps in Siberia for anti-Soviet activity in the 1944-46 period. Yet, on the whole, this particular set of respondents was among the least embittered in the entire pool. Their narratives generally proceeded in a straightforward manner, avoided political generalizations, and did not exercise excessive judgment and blaming.

Conclusions

During the 1940's, the region stretching from the Baltic to the Balkan witnessed some of the most brutal events of modern history. For social scientists and historians attempting to reconstruct these events, interviews with elderly survivors are often the only source of information available. This is especially true when these survivors were able to recreate past events at the level of community in vivid and remarkable detail. For my limited sample, this phenomenon appears equally true for émigrés as well as those who never left their country.

When the interview diverged from the community level, however, differences among émigrés and natives appeared. The narratives of émigrés tended to include an angry and rehearsed meta-narrative. Anger can lead to attempts to correct the past through blame and generalization. Those without access to a meta-narrative, including many natives among my particular set of interviews, appear more likely to move to the personal. Grief leads to a search for finality, perhaps through some sort of confession. Blame and generalization tend not to enter into the narrative. These comments are largely impressionistic. I am certain, however, that social scientists relying on interviews

need to be more aware of how memory, emotion, and narrative interact in producing the material so vital to their work.

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[1] I have completed two books on violence: *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), and *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2002). A statement regarding the mechanism approach underlying these works can be found in John Bowen and Roger Petersen, eds., *Critical Comparisons in Politics and Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[2] I extensively cover the organization and history of this fraternity in Chapter Four in *Resistance and Rebellion* (2001).

[3] As Frijda writes: "Action tendency can actualize in mental actions having similar intent to overt ones: turning toward an object in thought, or away from it; disengaging emotionally from it; turning toward or away from the thoughts themselves (1986, p. 76)."

[4] This view of the action tendencies of grief and anger has along history. For example, for Aristotle, anger was partly defined by the impulse to revenge and could not be separated from it—'no one grows angry with a person on whom there is no prospect of taking vengeance.' (Rhetoric) Anger is a mixture of pain and pleasure, the pain of being insulted combined with the pleasure of revenge, or at least imagining revenge. Aristotle points out the re-equilibriating effects of mourning which involves a view of grief: '(T)here is an element of pleasure even in mourning and lamentation. There is grief, indeed, at his loss, but pleasure in remembering him.'

[5] For further insights on action tendency and the operation of specific emotions, including anger and grief, see Elster (1999), especially 281-283.

[6] M was a long-term émigré who fled Lithuania before the Soviets returned in 1944. In this interview, M was supposed to be serving as a translator for a recent émigré who had served in a partisan unit, but he generally could not hold back from interceding. The interchange reflects M's views rather than the more recent émigré (P1).

[7] Referred to as #21 in Petersen (2001).