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## Relocating the past: The case of the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn

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# Contents

- 9 Presentation  
**Siri Nergaard**
- 11 Introduction  
**Sherry Simon**
- 17 Marseilles' Sanitary Station: morphologies of displacement  
between memory and desire  
**Simona Elena Bonelli**
- 32 Translation and Fragmented Cities: Focus on Itaewon, Seoul  
**Hunam Yun**
- 51 Of Translational Spaces and Multilingual Cities: Reading the Sounds  
of Logos in Sefi Atta's *Swallow* and *Everything Good Will Come*  
**Elena Rodriguez Murphy**
- 70 Translation and Asymmetrical Spaces, the Strait of Gibraltar  
as a Case in Point  
**África Vidal and Juan Jesús Zaro**
- 90 Lviv Refashioned: the Canvas of Translation/Mistranslation  
in a Contemporary City  
**Anastasiya Lyubas**
- 114 The 1960s, "hors-Montréal," and translating mobility  
**Ceri Morgan**
- 131 Relocating the Past: The Case of the Bronze Soldier of Tallin  
**Federico Bellentani**
- 150 Firenze, Quattrocento: The Translational Channels and Intercrossing  
of the *Chaldaica*, *Hermetica*, and *Kabbalistica* as the Matrix  
of Future Scientific Revolutions  
**Laurent Lamy**



# Relocating the Past: The Case of the Bronze Soldier of Tallinn

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**<Abstract>** Memorials are built forms with commemorative as well as political functions. They can articulate selective historical narratives, focusing attention on convenient events and individuals, while obliterating what is discomfiting for an elite. While articulating historical narratives, memorials can set cultural agendas and legitimate political power. Elites thus use memorials to convey the kinds of ideals they want citizens to strive towards. Design strategies are available to entice users along a specific interpretation of memorials. Nevertheless, individuals can differently interpret and use memorials in ways designers might have never envisioned. There is a significant geographical and semiotic literature on the multiple interpretations of memorials. This literature is grounded in two main distinctions: between material, symbolic, and political dimensions; and between designers and users. This paper aims to overcome these distinctions by connecting the cultural, geographical, and semiotic perspectives on the interpretations of memorials. This connection provides a broader theoretical and methodological framework for the study of the multiple interpretations of memorials in regime change. To develop this framework, this paper presents a case study: the relocation of a Soviet war memorial in Tallinn, the capital of Estonia. After regaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Estonian national elites used memorials as tools to culturally reinvent the built environment. Cultural reinvention is the process of filling the built environment with specific cultural meanings through practices of redesign, reconstruction, restoration, relocation, and removal. As the relocation of the Bronze Soldier shows, these practices have sparked broad debates and have resulted in civil disorder in Estonia. Controversies have arisen because each individual and each group interprets memorials differently and, on this basis, develops specific patterns of behavior within the space characterized by memorials.

### INTRODUCTION

After the Second World War, the Soviet Union annexed Estonia, the northernmost of the Baltic countries in northeastern Europe.<sup>1</sup> In 1947, Soviet authorities unveiled a memorial to celebrate the third anniversary of the entrance of the Soviet Army in Tallinn, capital of Estonia. According to Soviet-Russian historical narratives, the victory of the Soviet Army on the Eastern Front

<sup>1</sup> Several cultures and nationalities have been considered as "Baltic." After the First World War, the terms "Baltic states/countries" have more commonly referred to Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania (Haas 2006, 4).



during the Second World War paved the way for the liberation of Tallinn and Estonia from Nazism. For this reason, the memorial was officially named *Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn* (Smith 2008, 422). Estonians nicknamed this memorial the “Bronze Soldier” (*Pronksõdur* in Estonian) because it featured a two-meter bronze statue of a soldier in Soviet Army uniform (fig. 1). Throughout this paper, “Bronze Soldier” will be used to refer to this memorial, following the practice of the scientific literature available in English on this topic. The Bronze Soldier was originally located in the city center of Tallinn, the capital of Estonia (fig. 2). This park was a focal point for the practices of war commemoration in Soviet Estonia because some Soviet Army soldiers who served during the Second World War were buried here.

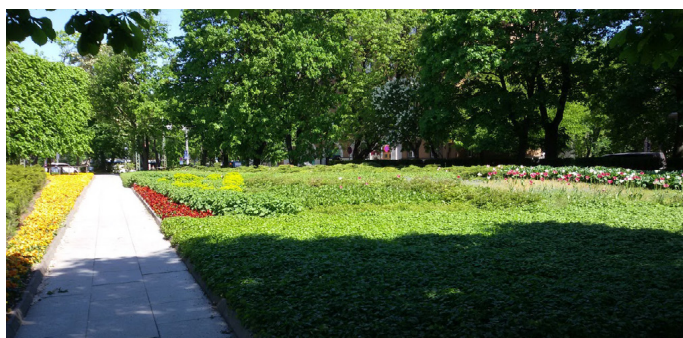
Estonian independence was restored on August 20, 1991. Although referring to Soviet aesthetics, the Bronze Soldier survived the tearing down of Soviet monuments and memorials after the restoration of independence. In independent Estonia, the Bronze Soldier continued to be an important memorial for many and especially for the Russophone community living in Estonia. In this study, the term “Russophones” refers to Estonian citizens who speak Russian as their first language and who do not define their ethnic identity as “Estonian.” According to the *Population and Housing Census 2011* (Statistics Estonia 2011), Russophones are 24.82% (321,198) and Estonians 68.75% (889,770) of the overall Estonian population, which is 1,294,236 (Statistics Estonia 2011).

However, many other Estonian citizens linked the Bronze Soldier to the experience of the Soviet regime, the loss of national sovereignty, and deportation. By promising to remove the memorial, national-conservative parties gained exceptional popularity and won the parliamentary elections in 2007 (Tamm 2013, 666). Once in power, they honored their promise, and removal began on April 26, 2007. As a result of this, two nights of rioting broke out in Tallinn, during which a twenty-year-old Russian was killed. The Bronze Soldier was finally relocated in a military cemetery in the outskirts of Tallinn.

The Bronze Soldier has attracted much attention from different research communities. Scholars in different disciplines have agreed in seeing the relocation of the Bronze Soldier as a “benchmark” moment in the contemporary history of Estonia (LICHR 2007, 7). They have tended to focus on the Bronze Soldier as a site of conflicting memories and identities (see, for example, Wertsch 2008). This paper outlines a new approach, considering the relocation of the Bronze Soldier as a practice of cultural reinvention implemented by the Estonian government to convey dominant cultural meanings and thus legitimate the primacy of its political power. In this paper, “cultural reinvention” refers to the process of filling the built environment with specific cultural mean-

1.  
The statue of the  
Bronze Soldier in its  
current location in  
the Tallinn Military  
Cemetery (picture  
taken by the author on  
October 29, 2015.)

2.  
The original location  
of the Bronze Soldier  
(picture taken by the  
author on June 5,  
2015.)





ings through practices of redesign, reconstruction, restoration, relocation, and removal. In transitional societies, cultural reinvention can be seen as a process of translation, the aim of which is to transfer the meanings of nonlinguistic texts such as monuments and memorials to new cultural contexts. By analyzing the relocation of the Bronze Soldier, this paper aims to develop a theoretical and methodological framework in order to provide a broader understanding of the multiple interpretations of memorials in regime change.

This paper is divided into two parts. Part One outlines the theoretical and methodological basis for the study of the multiple interpretations of memorials. Section 1.1 begins by reviewing the geographical and semiotic literature looking at the cultural and signifying aspects of memorials, highlighting limitations and future recommendations. Cultural geography has assessed the role of memorials in perpetuating cultural norms, social order, and power relations; semiotics has analyzed memorials as communicative devices able to promote a specific understanding of the past. Section 1.2 develops a theoretical framework based on the connection of cultural geography and semiotics to understand how different individuals and groups interpret memorials differently. Section 1.3 applies this framework within the context of transitional and changing societies, with a focus on Estonia.

The theoretical and methodological framework outlined in Part One is then applied to the analysis of the Bronze Soldier's relocation in Part Two. Section 2.1 introduces the process that led to the relocation of the Bronze Soldier. Section 2.2 completes a review of previous research on the Bronze Soldier and the troubled events following its relocation. Finally, section 2.3 proposes an analysis of the marginalization, relocation, and removal of the Bronze Soldier as a practice of cultural reinvention implemented by Estonian elites to articulate specific cultural and political positions.

The final section summarizes the conclusions and highlights the potential for analytic generalization of the theoretical and methodological framework presented in Part One. It then indicates directions for future research.

## 1. THE CULTURAL GEOGRAPHICAL AND SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE MULTIPLE INTERPRETATIONS OF MEMORIALS

### *1.1 Two limitations of the geographical and the semiotic perspectives on memorials*

Monuments and memorials celebrate and commemorate significant events or individuals. Young (1993) defined “memorial” as a general term for commemorative texts, as distinguished from “monuments,” that is particular types of memorials fixed in material forms and normally associated with public art. Throughout the



paper, the terms “memorials” and “monuments” are used interchangeably to refer to built forms erected to commemorate individuals who died due to war, ethnic cleansing, mass violence, or other disasters (Kattago 2015).

Several publications have appeared in human and cultural geography and in semiotics looking at the interpretations of monuments and memorials. Cultural geography has assessed the role of memorials in perpetuating cultural norms, social order, and power relations. Semiotics has analyzed memorials as communicative devices able to promote specific discourses on the past. This section presents an overview of the geographical and semiotic literature on memorials, highlighting two key limitations: first, that the connection between the material, symbolic, and political dimensions of memorials has been often overlooked; and second, that the relationship between designers and users has remained mostly undertheorized.

Since David Harvey (1979) analyzed the political controversy over the Sacré-Coeur Basilica in Paris, several publications in human and cultural geography have appeared documenting the cultural and political significance of memorials (Wagner-Pacifci and Schwartz 1991; Hershkovitz 1993; Johnson 1995; Peet 1996; Withers 1996; Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998; Osborne 1998; Dwyer 2000; Whelan 2002; Hay, Hughes, and Tutton 2004; Benton-Short 2006). Despite variety in empirical analysis, this geographical research has been based on two common assumptions: first, memorials play an important role in the definition of a uniform national memory and identity; and second, memorials are tools to legitimize and reinforce political power. These two assumptions can be seen as interdependent—in practice, the national politics of memory and identity embodied in memorials can legitimize and reinforce political power.

Geographers have demonstrated that political messages are wittingly or unwittingly attached to the commemorative function of memorials (Wagner-Pacifci and Schwartz 1991; Peet 1996; Withers 1996; Osborne 1998; Dwyer 2000; Hay, Hughes, and Tutton 2004; Benton-Short 2006). Following this view, memorials can fix in space a particular understanding of the past, focusing attention on convenient events and individuals while obliterating what is uncomfortable for an elite (Hay, Hughes, and Tutton 2004, 204). Hence, elites can design memorials to educate citizens about what to remember and what to forget of the past (Tamm 2013, 651). Scholars in the humanities have recently conceptualized memory as the basis for identity building (Tamm 2013, 652; Withers 1996, 328). Articulating dominant historical narratives, memorials can create and spread principles of national belonging. Drawing on this assumption, geographers have sought to reveal the ways though which memorials shaped and reinforced sentiments of national distinctiveness (Johnson 1995; Withers 1996; Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998; Whelan 2002).





Many geographers has recognized that national elites have more power and resources to erect memorials and thus to convey their political and cultural meanings in space (Till 2003, 297). Hence, national elites use memorials as tools to legitimate the primacy of their political power and to set their political agendas.

Monuments are the most conspicuous concrete manifestations of political power and of the command of resources and people by political and social elites. As such, they possess a powerful and usually self-conscious symbolic vocabulary or iconography that is understood by those who share a common culture and history. (Hershkovitz 1993, 397)

While assessing the role of memorials in perpetuating power relations, geographers have rarely discussed how the materiality of memorials can effectively convey political messages and thus legitimate political power. Despite the efforts of elites to convey dominant meanings, the interpretations of memorials are never enclosed once and for all. In recent years, an increasing number of geographers has recognized that the interpretations of memorials are “mutable and fluid” (Hay, Hughes, and Tutton 2004, 204). According to this view, users interpret memorials in ways that can be different or even contrary to the intentions of those who have them erected: “It is apparent that any intention to express a fixed and discrete set of collective meanings in the material landscape is inevitably altered, rendered mobile and open to alternative and even contrary readings” (Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998, 30).

However, geographical research on memorials has tended to focus on the elite intentions, while underestimating how memorials are interpreted at nonelite levels. By inviting questions on “readership,” semiotics has sought to overcome the restricted focus on the designers’ intentions that has characterized the geographical approach. Inspired by the debate around the conflation between memory, history, and place (see, for example, Nora 1989), semiotics has begun to analyze memorials as communicative devices to promote selective “discourses on the past” (Violi 2014, 11; translation mine). Discourses on the past always present a “partial vision” focusing attention on selective histories while concealing others (Eco 1976, 289–290). As a consequence, discourses on the past can affect present and future identity as well as the ways in which individuals represent themselves and relate to each other (Violi 2014, 18).

Semiotics has recognized that the production of political meanings through memorials is “often but not necessarily” led by elite (Montanari 2012, 2). In practice, individuals and groups can interpret differently the same discourse of the past. Despite the efforts to focus attention on “readerships,” the key limitations identified in the geographical perspective persist. In fact, semiotic analysis of memorials has largely considered nonelite interpretations





as spontaneous reactions to more prominent elite meanings. Moreover, semiotics has scarcely discussed how the materiality of memorials actually conveys political meanings.

### *1.2 The geographical and semiotic perspective on the interpretations of memorials*

The limitations of the geographical and semiotic perspectives on monuments and memorials identified in section 1.1 can be overcome through a holistic perspective conceiving the interplays between the material, symbolic, and political dimensions of memorials on the one hand, and between designers and users on the other. As for the former, the material, symbolic, and political dimensions are useful analytical concepts for the study of memorials, but at the empirical level they equally contribute to a better understanding of how the meanings of memorials are constructed and negotiated. There is thus the need for a theory that conceives the material, symbolic, and political dimensions as interacting in the interpretation of memorials. As for the interplay between designers and users, a set of strategies is available to designers to entice users along specific interpretations of memorials. Nevertheless, not all users conform to the designers' intentions. As for the interpretation of texts, the interpretation of memorials lies in an intermediate position between the designers' intended meanings and the users' interpretations (Eco 1990; Eco 1992). Hence, there is the need for a theory that conceives the interplay between designers and users.

This paper argues that connecting cultural geography and semiotics provides a broader theoretical and methodological framework for the study of the multiple interpretations of memorials in regime change. Cultural geography is a multifaceted discipline using different theoretical perspectives and methods to analyze concepts such as space, place, landscape, built environment, and power. Since the 1980s, a "new cultural geography" has conceptualized landscape as a construction to perpetuate social order and power relations (Cosgrove 1984; Jackson 1989; Duncan 1990). Despite using different approaches, most "new" cultural geographers converge on two assumptions: landscape has power and it can be seen as a text that communicates meanings (Boogart 2001, 39). These assumptions have been extended specifically to urban landscape (Duncan 1990).

Semiotics has been generally understood as "the study of signs and sign systems as modes of communication" (Waterton and Watson 2014, 15). Semiotics analyses have explored the concepts of space, place, and landscape using different paradigms ranging from the semiological tradition associating spatial forms with texts (e.g. Marrone 2009) to more ecological understanding of landscape (e.g. Lindström, Kull, and Palang 2014). Contemporary semiotic



research has progressively moved to the concept of “textuality” to reconceptualize the traditional notion of text as a closed product with fixed borders and defined by internal coherence (Stano 2014, 61). Textuality has been considered a methodological concept that allows the researcher to periodically redefine the borders of the texts so as to include the “signifying practices” considered as relevant for the analysis (Eco 1984, 35). Looking at the textuality of memorials has thus given appropriate methodological basis for analyzing the relevant material, symbolic and political practices that continuously redefine their multiple interpretations (Eco 1984, 35).

Umberto Eco (1984) showed that research on textual interpretation had polarized those stating that text can be interpreted only according to the intentions of the authors and those affirming that text can support every possible interpretations of the readers. Later, Eco (1990, 50) suggested that textual interpretation lies at some point between the authors’ intentions and the total arbitrariness of the readers’ interpretations. This proposal has overcome the idea that “appropriate” interpretations occur only when readers follow the intentions of authors and thus semiotic analysis has begun to include interpretations deviating from the intentions of the authors. However, Eco explained that texts necessarily impose certain constraints on interpretation and make certain reading more desirable than others (Eco 1990, 143).

According to Eco, textual strategies are available to authors to entice readers along a specific interpretation. Eco grouped these textual strategies under the term “Model Reader” (Eco 1979, 7–11). Empirical authors thus foresee and simultaneously construct their readership, emphasizing certain interpretations while concealing others (Eco 1979, 7–11; Lotman 1990, 63). However, texts do not function as mere “communicative apparatuses” to directly imprint meanings to readers (Eco 1984, 25). As such, texts become the place where authors and readers continuously negotiate their interpretations: while authors empirically seek to control readers’ interpretations, readers interpret texts in line with their knowledge, experience, and needs. Hence, a complex interaction between authors, readers and texts themselves underpin textual interpretation. As Yanow explained, “meaning resides not in any one of these—not exclusively in the author’s intent, in the text itself, or in the reader alone—but is, rather, created actively in interactions among all three, in the writing and in the reading” (Yanow 2000, 17).

The model describing the complex interaction between authors, readers, and texts can be applied to the interpretations of memorials. As textual interpretations, the interpretations of memorials are to be found in an intermediate position between the designers’ and the users’ interpretations. Elites design memorials striving to entice users along interpretations that con-



form to their political intentions. Paraphrasing Eco's Model Reader, Marrone (2009 and 2013) calls Model Users those individuals who conform to the designers' intentions and develop patterns of behavior that are consistent with the envisioned function of memorials. Nevertheless, not all users conform to the designers' intentions. There is thus the need for a theory that conceives the meanings of memorials as emerging from the interplay between designers' and users' interpretations.

### *1.3 Cultural reinvention as a translation strategy: memorials in regime change*

Memorials embody the agency of generations and assume different functions in different time periods. Memorials legitimizing elite power can turn into sites of resistant political practice (Hershkovitz 1993; Whelan 2002; Benton-Short 2006). In other cases, memorials sacred for an elite become the object of scorn and ridicule (Atkinson and Cosgrove 1998). In less spectacular way, memorials of a bygone era can turn into neutral urban landmarks.

This is particularly evident in transitional societies associated with regime change (Grava 1993, 9–10). In transitional societies, memorials are often used as tools to shape specific attitudes toward the past and thus to create specific future expectations (Whelan 2002; Tamm 2013). For example, in Estonia, monuments and memorials have been used as tools to educate citizens on the current historical narratives and to set cultural and political agendas (Tamm 2013). They have thus represented a tool for the cultural reinvention of the post-Soviet built environment.

In transitional and changing societies, cultural reinvention can be seen as a process of translation. Peeter Torop considered translation as inseparable from the concept of culture (Torop 2002, 593). It is the “translational capacity” of culture that continuously includes new meanings and thus promotes cultural innovation (Torop 2002, 593). As a mechanism of translation, culture is characterized by the constant interaction between its abstract, global level and its concrete, local manifestations (Torop 2002, 593). Lotman described this interaction through the notion of semiosphere and the center–periphery hierarchy. The semiosphere was the condition for the existence and the functioning of languages and cultures (Lotman 2005). The center–periphery hierarchy was one of the mechanisms for the internal organization of the semiosphere (Lotman 1990). At the center of the semiosphere, central cultures continuously attempted to prescribe conventional norms to the whole culture. The majority of members of culture embodied these norms and perceived them as their own “reality”. However, peripheral culture could always arise and variously refashion the central norms.

In this paper, “translation” is understood as a cultural mechanism



transferring the meanings of nonlinguistic texts such as monuments and memorials to new cultural contexts. As such, the concept of translation can be useful to explore the role of memorials in constructing and disseminating cultural and political meanings in space (Dovey 1999, 1). In regime change, memorials and their meanings are variously transformed so as to be in tune with the current cultural context. The relocation of the Bronze Soldier can be thus seen as a “translation strategy” (Osimo in Torop 2010, xxvi and 230) to transfer the meanings of the memorial into the contemporary Estonian society and culture. Drawing on the proposed theoretical and methodological perspectives, Part Two proposes an analysis of the relocation of the Bronze Soldier as a cultural reinvention implemented by Estonian elites to articulate specific cultural and political positions.

## 2. THE RELOCATION OF THE BRONZE SOLDIER OF TALLINN

### 2.1 *Setting the scene: the context of the relocation of the Bronze Soldier*

A vast number of economical, legislative, political, social, and cultural changes have characterized Estonia after the regaining of independence in 1991. In academic discourse, the term “transition” has been used to describe this turmoil of change. The regaining of independence has also determined a status reversal of ethnic communities: the Russophone community—dominant in Soviet Estonia—has suffered a decline in status, while Estonians have found new economic opportunities and political power (Riga and Kennedy 2009, 461). Russophones were assigned immigrant status since their presence was ascribed to a forced colonization and thus they were expelled from state politics and from the public sphere in general (Ehala 2009, 147–148). This situation resulted in economic and social inequality between Estonians and Russophones (Ehala 2009, 152).

Obtaining European Union and NATO memberships in 2004 provided an adequate “sense of security” in such a manner as to the redesign of the built environment and monuments and memorials specifically (Ehala 2009, 152). The cultural reinvention of the post-Soviet built environment in Estonia has evolved through two distinct yet concurrent practices: the redesign of the inherited built environment created by the Soviets and the simultaneous establishment of a new built environment reflecting the needs of post-Soviet culture and society. The general plan behind this cultural reinvention was twofold: to emphasize the differences from the Soviet built environment and to emphasize the link of the Estonian built environment with that of western and northern countries (Lehiti, Jutila, and Jokisipilä 2008).

In this context, the Estonian Government have largely used monu-



ments and memorials to educate citizens toward the current historical narratives and to set their cultural and political agendas (Tamm 2013). In 2002, a memorial representing an Estonian soldier in a Second World War uniform was erected in Pärnu, a city in central Estonia. During the Second World War, Estonian soldiers fought alongside the German army, so the portrayed soldier displayed Nazi military paraphernalia. The memorial was therefore removed even before its official inauguration. In 2004, the local authorities of Lihula, a town in West Estonia, decided to reerect this memorial to commemorate the “Estonian men who fought in 1940–1945 against Bolshevism and for the restoration of Estonian independence” (Smith 2008, 424). According to current Estonian historical narratives, the soldiers who willingly or unwillingly joined the German army are seen as “freedom fighters” against the advance of the Soviet Army in Estonia (Pääbo 2008, 13). As was to be expected, the erection of a memorial associated with Nazi symbolism elicited criticism from the European Union, the Russian Federation, and several Jewish organizations (Lehti, Jutila, and Jokisipilä 2008, 399). Following international condemnation, Estonian authorities removed the memorial two weeks after its inauguration, without any notice to the public (Ehala 2009, 142). This sudden removal sparked a debate on how to commemorate the Estonian soldiers who fought alongside the German army without displaying Nazi symbolism.

The controversy around Nazi symbolism elevated the tension toward the public display of other totalitarian material remains such as the Bronze Soldier. An increasing number of Estonians began to think that the same logic behind the removal of the Lihula memorial should have been applied to the Bronze Soldier. Promising the removal of this memorial, national-conservative parties gained exceptional popularity and won the elections in 2007 (Tamm 2013, 666). Once in power, they honored their promise and began relocation work on April 26, 2007. Some Tallinn citizens—especially belonging to the Russophone minority—perceived this as a provocation. For them, the memorial represented an important site of commemoration disconnected from the crimes of the Soviet regime. According to Soviet-Russian historical narratives, the victory of the Soviet Army on the Eastern Front during the Second World War—the event the Bronze Soldier was originally designed to celebrate—liberated Tallinn and Estonia from the Nazi regime. In Soviet Estonia, the anniversary of this victory was celebrated on May 9, still one of the most important national holidays in today’s Russia, known as Victory Day. Russophone communities living in postsocialist countries spontaneously celebrate Victory Day, even if it has been suppressed as a national holiday in their country of residence. The area around the Bronze Soldier has been the main setting for the unofficial celebrations of Victory Day in Estonia. For





this reason, Russophones wanted the Bronze Soldier to remain in its original location. Nevertheless, the Estonian Government removed the Bronze Soldier and relocated it in a military cemetery in the outskirts of Tallinn.

### *2.2 The conflict over the relocation of the Bronze Soldier: An 'ethnic clash'?*

The case of the Bronze Soldier has attracted much attention from different research communities, especially within Estonian academia. The Legal Information Centre for Human Rights dealt with the legal aspects related to the relocation and the following riots in April 2007 (LICHR 2007). Political scientists addressed the political context of the relocation, highlighting its risk of damaging the relations between Estonia and the Russian Federation (Bruggemann and Kasekamp 2008; Smith 2008; Lehti, Jutila, and Jokisipilä 2008; Pääbo 2008; Selg 2013). Social scientists investigated how the political dispute surrounding the relocation revealed social problems and ethnic divergences (Torsti 2008; Vihalemm and Masso 2007). Anthropologists described the Bronze Soldier as a site of conflicting memories and identities (Wertsch 2008). Several scholars considered the relocation of the Bronze Soldier as a typical example of those national politics aiming at dismantling the material remains of the Soviet regime (Smith 2008; Kattago 2009; Mälksoo 2009; Vihalemm and Kalmus 2009; Melchior and Visser 2011; Raun 2009; Tamm 2013).

All this diverse research agreed in seeing the relocation of the Bronze Soldier as a “benchmark” moment in the contemporary history of Estonia (LICHR 2007, 7). This relocation created a disruption in the everyday interactions between Estonian and Russophone communities in Estonia, a country where transition had evolved peacefully up to the riots following the relocation (Pääbo 2008, 5). Several scholars used war metaphors to describe the potentially conflicting interpretations of Estonians and Russophones in relation to monuments and memorials and the Bronze Soldier specifically. For example, Wertsch (2008, 46) defined Estonians and Russophones as contrasting mnemonic communities. Terms and expressions such as “memory front” (Mälksoo 2009, 65), “struggle over interpretations of history” (Lehti, Jutila, and Jokisipilä 2008, 393), “identity threat,” and “identity battle” (Ehala 2009, 139 and 142, respectively) were used to highlight the antagonism between the cultural memory and identity of Estonians and Russophones. Several scholars used the terms “War of Monuments” to refer to a series of small-scale conflicts over the interpretations of monuments and memorials starting from the early 2000s (see, for example, Pääbo 2008; Smith 2008; Bruggemann and Kasekamp 2008).

This paper argues that the narrative of two conflicting ethnic groups with opposing understanding of the past disguises the broader context in which each individual and group interpreted the relocation of the Bronze Soldier based on



their cultural traits, political views, socioeconomic interests, as well as contingent needs. In practice, the Bronze Soldier incorporated multifaceted understandings of the past as well as multiple social, cultural, and political meanings. “Estonians” and “Russophones” were rather heterogeneous groups cut across by a number of criteria: not only ethnic origins, but also age, gender, education, and profession could shape the attitude toward the relocation of the Bronze Soldier. For example, by the turn of the century, the Bronze Soldier was visited by a decreasing number of elderly people (Ehala 2009, 139), demonstrating the declining relevance it had for the new generations of Russophones living in Tallinn.

Estonians presented many different attitudes toward this memorial before its relocation. Statistics show that the majority of Estonia’s population was against the relocation of the Bronze Soldier before the debate on its relocation started. At this point, the attitude to the process of integration of Estonians and Russophones was gradually improving: 40% of the Estonian population was ready to integrate Russophone communities into Estonian society (Ehala 2007 cited in Pääbo 2008, 17). In this context, the majority of Estonians conceived the gathering around the Bronze Soldier as a normal phenomenon and less than 25% considered its presence to be unacceptable (Pääbo 2008, 13–14). This situation changed when the debate on the relocation of the Bronze Soldier sparked off at a political level. In May 2006, 53% of ethnic Estonians supported the removal of the Bronze Soldier and 73% of Russophones wanted the memorial to remain in its original location (Pääbo 2008, 14). Yet, the different attitudes toward the relocation of the Bronze Soldier were not entirely based on ethnic divisions or on divergences in the understanding of the past. Rather, there were different “interpretative communities” (Yanow 2000), each with its particular way of framing the relocation of the Bronze Soldier based on cultural traits, political views, socioeconomic interests, as well as contingent needs. This supported Smith’s thesis that

To point to divergent collective memories is not to essentialize nationality or to posit the existence of two internally homogenous groups with no points of contact between them. Ultimately, memory is a matter for individuals rather than communities. Estonia’s Russian-speaking population—not to speak of the Soviet immigrant population—is far too diverse a group to speak as one, displaying tremendous heterogeneity in terms of ethnicity, descent, degree of integration with Estonian culture and political outlook. (Smith 2008: 420–421)

### 2.3 *The marginalization, removal, and relocation of the Bronze Soldier*

Since 1990s, the Estonian Government has taken several measures to reduce the visibility and “soften” the symbolism of the Bronze Soldier. A competition was announced in 1995 to redesign the statue of the Bronze Soldier (Ehala 2009, 141). Most of the plans presented suggested balancing the symbolic meanings of the memorial with Estonian national symbols. However, these plans were never brought



to fruition. Only few interventions were implemented in the spatial surroundings of the memorial: diagonal footpaths replaced direct access to the memorial, new trees were planted, and the eternal flame was removed (Ehala 2009, 141). Furthermore, the writings on the commemorative plaque were amended to convey a more general sentiments of mourning: “For the fallen in the Second World War” replaced the former dedication “Eternal glory for the heroes who have fallen for the liberation and sovereignty of our country” (Smith 2008, fig. 4–5).

These interventions elevated tensions towards the permanence of the Bronze Soldier in its original location. Russophones considered the attempt to reduce the visibility of the memorial as an outrage toward an important site for their commemorations. Conversely, the Bronze Soldier started to disturb a growing number of Estonians who linked the memorial to the traumatic experience of the Soviet regime. Tensions arose so much that the memorial was the target of a number of acts of vandalism by Estonian nationalist activists—the memorial was splattered with paint several times and an attempt was made in May 2006 to blow up the memorial (LICHR 2007, 12 and 17).

Further exacerbating these tensions, national-conservative parties started to call for its removal and thus gained exceptional popularity among those who strongly wanted this memorial to be removed. After winning the 2007 parliamentary election, they honored their promise. Work on removing the statue started on the evening of April 26, 2007. On April 30, 2007, the Bronze Soldier was relocated to a military cemetery on the outskirts of Tallinn, approximately two kilometers from its original location. As a result of the relocation, two nights of disorders broke out in the center of Tallinn. Demonstrators were mainly Russophones rioting against the removal of this memorial and the exhumation of the buried bodies of the soldiers. Exhumation represented a particularly sensitive issue for the Russophones affiliated with the Orthodox faith, which does not allow exhumation. Moreover, the relocation had political consequences, potentially damaging relations between Estonia and the Federation of Russia as well as the everyday interactions between Estonians and Russophones.

Relegating the Bronze Soldier to a peripheral location had spatial as well as ideological consequences. It was not only the excision of a material object from Tallinn’s city center, but also an attempt to define this memorial and its meanings as alien to what is today’s “central” culture of Estonia (Lotman 1990). However, the Bronze Soldier was not completely excised, but relocated to Tallinn’s Defence Force Cemetery, an official burial site for those who died in military campaigns. Placed in a military cemetery, the meanings of the memorial have today shifted to a more “open and universal sentiment of mourning” (Kattago 2012, 78). Members of the Russophone community



**3–4.**  
The commemorative writings near the statue of the Bronze Soldier: “For the fallen in the Second World War” in Estonian (left) and in Russian (right). Two ribbons of Saint George were fastened to the Russian memorial plaque (pictures taken by the author on November 11, 2012.)

**5.**  
Flowers and a ribbon of Saint George in the Bronze Soldier’s helmet (picture taken by the author on November 11, 2012.)



still visit the relocated Bronze Soldier and use it for their commemorations. In the pictures below, one can see only Russian commemorative objects on the memorial, such as the ribbons of Saint George (fig. 4–6). For Russophones in Estonia, the ribbons of Saint George are symbols of military value linked to the commemoration of the Second World War.

### 3. EPILOGUE: THE RELOCATION OF THE BRONZE SOLDIER AS A PRACTICE OF CULTURAL REINVENTION

Memorials have commemorative as well as political functions. They can convey dominant cultural meanings and thus legitimate and reinforce political power. In transitional societies associated with regime change, recently formed elites spend significant resources in shaping a society’s collective meanings and establishing concepts of nation in accordance with current cultural and political conditions. Here, memorials are often used as tools to shape specific attitudes toward the past and thus create specific future expectations. Howev-

er, unexpected interpretations and practices could challenge the meanings of monuments and memorials as intended by elite.

The relocation of the Bronze Soldier was analyzed as a cultural reinvention, the process of filling the built environment with specific cultural meanings through practices of redesign, reconstruction, restoration, relocation, and removal. Relocating the Bronze Soldier was a strategy implemented by Estonian national elites to translate the celebratory meanings of the Soviet war memorial into more general sentiments of mourning (Kattago 2012, 78). This relocation created a disruption in the everyday interactions between Estonian and Russophone communities in Estonia. This paper revisited the controversy over the relocation of the Bronze Soldier as not reducible to an ethnic division alone. Rather, each interpretative community had its particular way to frame the relocation of the Bronze Soldier based on its cultural traits, political views, socio-economic interests as well as contingent needs.

The analysis of this case helped to develop a theoretical and methodological framework based on the connection of cultural geography and semiotics for the study of the interpretations of memorials in regime change. This framework is based on a holistic perspective conceiving the interplays between the material, symbolic, and political dimensions of memorials on the one hand, and between designers and users on the other. The material, symbolic, and political dimensions equally contribute to a better understanding of how the meanings of memorials are constructed and negotiated. As for the interplay between designers and users, a set of strategies are available to designers to entice users along specific interpretations of memorials. Nevertheless, not all users conform to the designers' intentions. There is thus the need for a theory that conceives the meanings of memorials as emerging from the interplay between designers' and users' interpretations.

The theoretical and methodological framework can be generalized beyond the case of the Bronze Soldier's relocation. Comparisons with other case studies can be made to advance the understanding of the practices of cultural reinvention in postsocialist countries as well as in other transitional and changing societies. Future research on the cultural reinvention of the built environment in Estonia is desirable. Further analyses need to be undertaken on the cultural reinvention of the original location of the Bronze Soldier. In 2009, the Estonian Government inaugurated a war memorial less than two hundreds meters from the original location of the Bronze Soldier: the War of Independence Victory Column, a large column-shaped memorial commemorating those who laid the foundations for the Estonia's first period of independence (1918–1940). Some scholars have argued that the erection of this memorial was a direct response of the troubled events following the relocation of the Bronze Soldier (Kaljundi

2009, 44). I am currently planning to undertake further research on this case in order to investigate national politics embodied in the Victory Column and how these national politics are interpreted at the nonelite level.

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