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A Portable Fatherland: Afterlives of the St. George's Night Uprising (1343) in Estonian Cultural Memory

1 Introduction

From the perspective of cultural memory studies, the key question of historical research is not about the original significance of past events, but, rather, about how these events emerge in specific instances and are then translated over time, and about their everyday actualization and propagation, about their social, if not spectral, energy (Tamm 2015, 4). Or in Ann Rigney's concise wording, "the term 'cultural memory' highlights the extent to which shared memories of the past are the product of mediation, textualization and acts of communication" (Rigney 2005, 14). The historical study of the workings of cultural memory can be called "mnemohistory," to use a concept coined by Jan Assmann (1997, 9). The notion of mnemohistory allows scholars to move beyond the (although still important) question of "what really happened" to questions of how particular ways of construing the past enable later communities to constitute and sustain themselves. From a mnemohistorical point of view, the past as a distinct object of study is by no means a natural given; the distancing of past and present does not simply result from the passing of time but is something that is actively pursued and performed. Mnemohistory focusses on the multilayered dynamics of distance and closeness, presence and absence, anticipation and retrospection, past and present. It argues, in the footsteps of Walter Benjamin (1999, 460), that "historical 'understanding' is to be grasped, in principle, as an afterlife [*Nachleben*] of that which is understood; and what has been recognized in the analysis of the 'afterlife of works,' in the analysis of 'fame,' is, therefore, to be considered the foundation of history in general."

This chapter centers on one of the greatest puzzles of Estonian history: how a historical event – the uprising of local inhabitants against German rule on St. George's Night in 1343 – with very little documentary support, has achieved monumental status in Estonian historical consciousness. The argument posits that the significance of the St. George's Night Uprising owes much to its mediations and remediations in cultural memory, particularly through literature. Foremost is the literary debut of young author Eduard Bornhöhe (1862–1923), with his historical tale *The Avenger* (*Tasuja*, 1880), the first to narrate the St. George's Night Uprising in Estonian. Released in early December 1880, this 147-page work resonated with

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an extraordinary energy, "something special, grand, and symbolic" (Nirk 1961, 40), as many contemporaneous readers would attest. For example, the schoolteacher Jaan Roos (1888–1965) reflected in early 1930s:

> For me, *The Avenger* evoked a sense of heroism and national sentiment against the people's unjust suppressors [...] Participants in the war against the Baltische Landeswehr [1919] speak of battling with raw fervour and excitement, releasing centuries of pent-up animosity. This deep-seated passion and animus, fomented by historical literature, tipped the scales in favour of defeating the Landeswehr. A compatriot from my home parish, who perished in the battle of Cēsis [June 1919], was found with *The Avenger* in his pocket. (quoted in Palm 1935, 171)

The Avenger has thus become a "portable Fatherland," as Heinrich Heine once characterized language (Rigney 2012a, 20), establishing the groundworks for a foundational narrative revisited and rewritten by successive generations of writers from the national awakening era to the present day.

2 Imitators of *The Avenger*

The profound and varied impact of *The Avenger* remains not fully explored. From 1880 to 1905, over 23,000 copies were distributed, making historical fiction immensely popular in the late nineteenth century. By 1964, *The Avenger* was still the most broadly circulated original Estonian fictional work (Bornhöhe 1964, 339). Its influence soon spread, with Bornhöhe's pioneering success inspiring his followers.

The Struggles of Villu (*Villu võitlused*, 1890), Bornhöhe's follow-up, also tackled the St. George's Night Uprising but did not mirror the debut's impact. The detached narrative stance, with an all-knowing narrator, potentially diluted reader engagement. A few months after *Villu's Struggles* Andres Saal's (1861–1931) historical tale *Hilda* (1890), set against the backdrop of the St. George's Night Uprising, was published. This extensive narrative, spanning almost 300 pages, introduces the uprising's climax in chapter twenty-nine, entitled "The Night of St George's Day." Saal's work is distinct among the imitators of *The Avenger*, with no overt narrative elements borrowed from Bornhöhe. However, the theme of vengeance is palpably manifested, exemplified in Hilda's confrontation with her father's minion Goswin: "Thy bell is full, thou standest before thy avenger, thy terrible guilt condemns thee without mercy" (Saal 1890, 151).

Subsequently, in the latter half of 1892, Jaak Järv's (1852–1920) *Karolus* was released in Tallinn. Järv, once a journalist and exiled in 1888 for disseminating socialist ideologies, on returning to Estonia, rededicated himself to literary pursuits with renewed zeal. *Karolus* echoes *The Avenger* in recounting the tribula-

tions of a valorous Estonian in the prelude to the St. George's Night Uprising. Descended from ancient Estonian nobility, Kahro is estranged from his parents, rechristened Karolus, and groomed as a knight espousing Christian virtues. Yet, the weight of Estonians' subjugation ignites a vengeful yearning within Karolus. He embarks on a quest for Finnish reinforcements for a grand insurrection, only to return to a prematurely commenced uprising. Captured and doomed to torture, Karolus ultimately eludes execution by his own hand.

The Avenger also inspired A. Raha's historical tale *St. George's Night* (*Jüriöö*), published in 1907. In this short 72-page work, the protagonist Tasuja (the Avenger) dominates the narrative from the outset and resurfaces just before the denouement. The principal characters encounter Tasuja in a forest hideout. Here, he spearheads the revolt: "Across Harjumaa, all manors were to be set ablaze in one night, thus the rebellion would simultaneously ignite across the land" (Raha 1907, 17). In Raha's occasionally fantastical tale, Tasuja perishes alongside 3,000 compatriots during Tallinn's siege.

The surge in historical fiction's popularity and its provocative effect did not escape the Russian authorities' scrutiny. In 1892, the Governor of Estonia, Prince Shakhovskoi, articulated concerns to the Russian Ministry of the Interior about historical narratives inciting Estonian resistance against the prevailing power. He recommended a prohibition on all publications recounting Estonians' ancestral resistance to the Germans, which could inflame nationalistic sentiments. His apprehensions were validated in St. Petersburg, placing historical fiction under the censor's stringent scrutiny (Salu 1964, 31–32).

3 The afterlife of St. George's Night in independent Estonia

The resurgence of the St. George's Night narrative during the era of the Estonian Republic (1920–1939) signaled the incorporation of many significant developments into the established tradition. The late 1920s saw a heated debate in the Estonian press about how to commemorate the St. George's Night Uprising. Opinion was split: some regarded the rebellion as a 'day of great defeat,' while others celebrated it as a brave Estonian stand against German domination. The formal recognition of St. George's Night, which began in 1928 with a proposal to make it a national holiday, proved particularly controversial. The events of the past were powerfully linked to the present, elevating the St. George's Night narrative from the literary domain to the arena of public life. For its proponents, the 1343 uprising was a vital precursor to the fight for independence, reaching its zenith in the

War of Independence (Tamm 2008). A 1931 pamphlet by the inter-organizational committee of the St. George's Night celebrations underscored this link: "The shared radiance of St. George's Night's fires symbolizes the true essence of our Great Struggle's Night commemoration – it renews our unity as a nation, ever-ready to persist in our quest for independence" (*Jüriöö. 1343* 1931, 24).

A few years prior to the discussions surrounding the commemoration of St. George's Night, a more focused debate had emerged around Juhan Luiga's (1873–1927) book *The Estonian Freedom Struggle 1343–1345* (1924). Luiga, an amateur historian, sought to recount the events of St. George's Night from an Estonian perspective, positing the uprising as a national fight for liberty. This was thwarted by the Teutonic Order, who provoked the uprising to break out eight days earlier than the leaders of the Estonian freedom movement had intended (Luiga 1924, 45; 75).

The latter half of the 1930s represented the golden era of the historical novel in the Estonian Republic, with no fewer than thirty titles published between 1934 and 1940 (Põldmäe 1973, 342). It was, therefore, a natural progression for the St. George Night Uprising to be reinterpreted within this literary form. Just prior to the conclusion of the era of independence, Enn Kippel's (1901–1942) fourth historical novel, *St. George's Night* (*Jüriöö*, 1939), was published. Kippel's narrative draws inspiration from Luiga's works, portraying Estonians of the period as affluent citizens engaged in international relations and active in urban commerce. As Luiga posited, Kippel permits the meticulously orchestrated uprising to commence prematurely, a full eight days ahead of schedule.

4 The climax of the St Georges Night's Uprising narrative

During the Second World War, coinciding with the 600th anniversary of the St. George's Night Uprising, the established narrative reached its apex. It was promoted with unprecedented vigor, richly reinterpreted across various genres, and extensively depicted in the arts like never before, especially among Estonian soldiers, intellectuals, and artists on the Soviet front and in the rear.

Literary scholar Olev Jõgi recalls, "The figure of Tasuja [the Avenger] energised Estonian soldiers to engage German occupiers, fortifying their combat morale. Tasuja was frequently invoked at political assemblies, and his memory echoed at rallies and in publications" (Jõgi 1962, 290). On 26 September 1942, the Estonian Rifle Division's newspaper was renamed *Tasuja*, proclaiming on 19 April 1945: "The image of Tasuja, our national hero, constantly before us, drives us to eliminate our

nation's foes with unwavering precision and resolve." With the impending fall of Berlin, the paper asserted: "United with the formidable divisions of the mighty Red Army, we shall carry Tasuja's legendary quest to a victorious end" (Jõgi 1962, 293). Historian Hans Kruus, in his 1943 pamphlet *The Historical Commandments of the St. George's Night Uprising for Today*, imbued with Old Testament connotations, articulated five commandments, culminating in what he described as "the supreme commandment": "Engage in battle everywhere, both on the front and in the rearguard, to defeat the historic archenemy of your people, obliterating the Hitlerite state and its armies" (Kruus 1943, 23).

The war period's utilization of verse in the St. George's Night narrative merits attention; the wartime poetry – by Johannes Barbarus, Erni Hiir, Aira Kaal, Johannes Semper, Ilmar Sikemäe, among others – is unparalleled. This era also gave birth to Mart Raud's cantata "The Fires of Jüriöö," Jaan Kärner's eponymous poem, and the opera "Flames of Vengeance" by Paul Rummo and Eugen Kapp.

The first Soviet Estonian historical novel, Aristarch Sinkel's (1912–1988) *Under the Black Cross's Yoke* [*Musta risti ikke all*], dates to 1949. This expansive reworking of the St. George's Night narrative was not published until 1956, yet it swiftly captivated readers, its initial run of 14,000 copies sold out in days, and a second edition followed four years later. Sinkel's novel spans from early spring 1342 to May 1343, offering, in an extensive prologue, the social underpinnings of the uprising via the free peasant Vahur. The rebellion erupts unexpectedly on page 292 of the novel with the seizure of a Cistercian monastery, adhering to the precedent set by Luiga and furthered by Kippel, wherein the insurrection's genesis eluded its masterminds' grasp.

5 The emergence of skepticism

The St George's Night narrative has garnered scant popularity among Estonian exile writers, with its sole representation appearing to be a brief chapter in Arvo Mägi's novel *The Nation of the Cross* (*Risti riik*, 1970), penned in Sweden. Nonetheless, within the context of its antecedents, Mägi's work stands as a significant contribution. He deftly weaves his narrative into the fabric of Bornhöhe's *The Struggles of Villu*, drawing a tangible parallel between his character, the blacksmith Tiit, and Bornhöhe's protagonist, Villu. The author elucidates this link towards the chapter's conclusion, stating, "Tiit was not a friend to the Germans, unlike one of his colleagues from Sakala named Villu, who was initially described by an earlier author. Villu eventually started to rebel (although historians claim that such a rebellion never occurred) and ended his days in the dungeon of Viljandi Castle" (Mägi 1970, 136).

A vein of skepticism in Mägi's rendition of the St. George's Night Uprising can be traced to writer and historian Edgar V. Saks (1910–1984), living in Canada, who published the essay "A New Light on the St. George's Night Uprising" in 1971. Saks posits that "the St. George's Night rebellion was a political stratagem, orchestrated by the vassalage to instigate a popular uprising and marshal a militia, intending to align Estonia with the Swedish crown and thus evade the clutches of the German emperor or the Order" (Saks 1971, 32). He attributes the insurrection's failure to the inherent liberty-seeking spirit of the populace, which transmuted a well-orchestrated uprising into a widespread rebellion.

The imperative for a re-evaluation of the St. George's Night events finds a profound voice in the works of theologian and writer Uku Masing (1909–1985), working in internal exile in Estonia. His posthumously published studies, likely composed in the early 1950s, cast fresh perspectives on the 1343 events (Masing 2002). Masing contends that what transpired was not an uprising per se, but rather an episode within a broader campaign to expel the Teutonic Order from Livonia, orchestrated by Estonian vassals of the Danish king in alliance with ecclesiastical powers. This comprehensive scheme, however, was truncated to the St. George's Night uprising instigated by the Order and swiftly quashed by their retributive expedition.

This re-assessment ethos is further explored in Enn Vetemaa's (1936–2017) two-volume novel *The People of the Cross* [*Risti rahvas*], published in the latter half of the 1990s (Vetemaa 1994; 1998). The first volume situates its narrative immediately preceding the St. George's Night events, culminating in the insurrection only in its final passages. The second volume, set against the backdrop of the siege of Tallinn, portrays a colorful tableau of the local populace's activities.

Vetemaa's novel, influenced by the scholarship of Luiga, Masing, and Saks, presents a revisionist backdrop to the uprising narrative. It suggests the St. George's Night Uprising to be a ruse by the Teutonic Knights aimed at seizing Danish territories. Vetemaa intersperses a satirical or conspiratorial reimagining of the uprising's well-known episodes, suffusing his account with vivid depictions of the order's corrupt knights, naïve common folk, and cunning nobility. His picaresque narrative encapsulates the final developmental phase of the St. George's Night narrative tradition, questioning the veracity and importance of the 1343 uprising.

6 Conclusion

The narrative of St. George's Night Uprising, diligently chronicled over more than a century and having undergone numerous interpretive transformations from earnest zeal to critical skepticism, has succeeded in encapsulating over a hundred

years of Estonian historical experience. It has emerged as one of the foundational narratives of a nascent nation, deriving its historical importance from a plethora of literary and artistic mediations and remediations (Erll and Rigney 2009a). The cultural longevity of "portable monuments" such as Bornhöhe's *The Avenger* illustrates, as Ann Rigney has highlighted, "the importance of a nonlinear approach to the evolution of cultural memory, which would allow for different temporalities and for discontinuities within traditions" (Rigney 2004, 391). By exploring the intricate ways in which the past has an afterlife – is remembered, interpreted, and given significance – mnemohistory challenges the traditional boundaries of historical inquiry. It compels scholars to consider the affective dimensions of history, the emotional investments, and the mnemonic practices that contribute to the making of history.