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## Between improvisation and inevitability: former Latvian officials' memoirs of the Soviet era

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### ABSTRACT

This article deals with the autobiographies of former Soviet officials that have been published in Latvia since the 1990s. In particular, it focuses on three interrelated layers of biographical narrative: construction of social identity, strategies for avoiding the stigmatization of collaboration, and comparisons between the Soviet and post-Soviet experience. The article contends that former officials in their memoirs use a pragmatic representation of the Soviet past as the major locus of their positive identity. Through this genuine representation of the past, autobiographers emphasize virtues that might be accepted by a post-Soviet neoliberal society.

**KEYWORDS** Post-Soviet biographical discourse; stigmatization; social representation; utilitarianism; identity

The transitional period of the 1990s was a time of difficulty, a time when postcommunist societies were faced with a great force of memory which, as Augustine (1991, X, 17.26) describes, was an awe-inspiring mystery and a power of profound and infinite multiplicity. In Latvia, though, the social memory of the 1990s was embedded in the negative representation of the Soviet past, situated at the heart of a new political memory, and reinforced by the national politics of historical justice.<sup>1</sup> Along with reconciliatory intentions, this politics, specifically the lustration proposals (e.g. introducing vetting measures toward the former Soviet officials, opening KGB archives), prompted heated debates (see Pettai and Pettai 2014; Zake 2010). The negative representation of the Soviet past, as scholars have noted, emphasized two major themes: suffering from and resistance to the nondemocratic Soviet regime (cf. Onken 2007; Aarelaid-Tart 2003; Budryte 2002). That, however, provided limited options for coping with existential anxiety vis-à-vis the Soviet era. People were usually implicitly encouraged to see themselves either as victims or ardent opponents of a totalitarian regime. To be sure, the hegemony of negative representation in Latvia and elsewhere created a complicated problem of how to assess the entire Soviet era.

The 1990s was a particularly uneasy time for those who had explicitly collaborated with the Soviet regime and had implemented Soviet policy, such as public officials, active party members, and *nomenklatura*. In Latvia, people from former ideological and law enforcement institutions avoided engaging in public memory work. Nevertheless, former Soviet officials, henceforth referred to as 'former officials,' have

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published a number of memoirs since the 2000s, and their voice has become more pronounced in the mass media. Notwithstanding the dominance of a negative representation in political memory, Latvian biographical discourse has supported objectification of a pragmatic representation of the Soviet era since the 1990s. The pragmatic representation highlights the ability to accommodate the Soviet regime and to achieve privately or socially important goals during the Soviet era (Kaprāns 2012b). This article argues that the pragmatic representation that has emerged outside Latvia's memory regime, in the memoirs of former officials, opens new discursive avenues for the Latvian social memory to understand the late Soviet period.

The Latvian social memory of the Soviet era echoes the characteristics of a broader memory region across the Baltic states. The Baltics have been identified as having distinctive cultures of remembrance, with a strong anticommunist consensus concerning recent history (Troebst 2010; cf. Ekman and Linde 2005). However, the latest dynamics of Latvian, Estonian, and Lithuanian social memory challenges such an anticommunist assumption. The transformation of the image of the Soviet period is especially observable within biographical discourse and popular culture where, unlike in the 1990s, people are more willing to reflect on topics that require a balanced view of the Soviet era. Numerous memoirs written by the former members of the Soviet Lithuanian *nomenklatura* have challenged the traditionally negative view of the *nomenklatura* by claiming that they worked for the benefit of the nation (Ivanauskas 2012). Likewise, Estonian scholars have suggested that in the 2000s, memories of daily Soviet life replaced repression and resistance as the major themes of Estonian life stories, and that they expanded the biographical perspective, supplementing the political ethos of rupture with a sense of continuity at the level of everyday life (Jõesalu and Kõresaar 2013; Aarelaid-Tart 2010, 45; Jõesalu 2005, 92; Anepaio 2002). Even Baltic commemorative discourse about Stalinist repressions, which mobilized people during the period of national revival in the late 1980s, switched from historical memory to a more individualized approach (Budryte 2005, 188). In short, the social memory of Baltic societies over the previous decade has experienced a certain emancipation from the hegemony of anti-Soviet representation, encouraging former officials to construct what Mark calls 'a democratic autobiography' (2010, 136).

By analyzing the autobiographies of former Soviet Latvian officials and representatives of various ideological institutions, this research contributes to the understanding of the shifting social memory in the Baltics and perhaps, to what one may call the east European memory (see Wawrzyniak and Pakier 2013). To tackle paradigmatic changes, I focus on three interrelated layers of biographical narrative: construction of social identity, strategies for avoiding the stigmatization of collaboration, and comparisons between the Soviet and post-Soviet experience. Clearly, these layers cannot grasp the whole individual experience, nor can they fully depict the complexity of postcommunist memory work. Nevertheless, these are important structural tenets that reveal the specificity of postcommunist biographical discourse.

### **Social representations of the past**

By telling life stories, people show their 'will to remember' the recent past. Nora (1989, 19) suggests that by ignoring this will, 'we would quickly drift into admitting virtually everything as worthy of remembrance.' This will, of course, is not transparent; it is driven by different and sometimes overlapping motifs, which shape the creation of

cognitive images of the past and define what we might tentatively label as an idiosyncratic construction of personal history. Since the 1990s, Latvian scholars have been exploring post-Soviet life stories largely as individual histories (cf. Bela 2012; Saleniece 2005; Bela-Krūmiņa 2003; Skultans 1998). However, when life stories become part of the public sphere, as memoirs in bookstores, for example, the inner cognitive images of individuals are propelled into the formation of *social* representations of bygone times. Apart from empirical differences, methodologically, the remediation of the past through public memoirs refocuses the analytical strategy from individual cognitive processes to the relational aspects of meaning making.

By *social* representations, I mean a system of shared values, ideas, and practices that people manifest when communicating about the past. Social representations revolve around conceptual *themata* (source ideas, image concepts) that express essential and generic properties of particular historical periods and encapsulate intentions of particular mnemonic communities. Conceptual *themata* reveal themselves through various pragmatic manifestations or methodological themes (on the concept of social representations, see Marková 2005; Wagner and Hayes 2005; Moscovici 2000). Jovchelovitch (2012, 442) insists that 'Historical narratives fix meaning in the central core of social representations, are resistant to change and endure over time but they are neither frozen nor stable: it is their very flexibility and imaginative characteristics that give them resilience.'

In the 2000s, social representation theory (SRT), which underscores this study, has looked forward to connecting with the 'nonparadigmatic, transdisciplinary, centerless enterprise' (Olick and Robbins 1998, 105) of collective memory. Acknowledging that the SRT as well as collective memory perspective is critical of their forerunners, they still can be read as an extension of the Durkheimian tradition that views society through social facts. SRT, postulated by the social psychologist Serge Moscovici (2008) in the early 1960s, has created an interdisciplinary field where the past is seen as a social object and collective memory is a shared representation of this social object (see Wagoner 2015; Marková 2012; Jovchelovitch 2012; Liu 2005; Liu and Hilton 2005). Such representation is constructed, legitimized, and transformed through various discourses about the past, including biographical discourse. Therefore, social representations, first and foremost, are dynamic rather than static, as one may presume from the common understanding of the term *representation*. In this perspective, autobiographers are not just isolated and lonely storytellers but also memory agents who mold the past by adding a subjective dimension as well as furthering the memory discourse. As SRT particularly addresses the agency-structure issue, it becomes a useful explanatory approach, not exclusively for social psychologists, but for a wide range of social scientists interested in the relations between postcommunist autobiographies and larger mnemonic processes, such as political memory or myth making.

Arguably, social representations of the past resemble constructs offered by professional historians. Both laymen representations and professional constructs attempt to explain retrospectively what has happened in the past. Historians create a rather reified universe, however, by using rule-bound archival work and careful interpretations of findings, whereas common people converse about historical periods daily and informally, thereby creating a consensual universe where 'society is seen as a group of individuals who are equal and free, each entitled to speak in the name of the group and under its aegis' (Moscovici 2000, 34). A freely accessible and dynamic public sphere open to dialogue that tolerates differences is a crucial prerequisite for

generating a consensual universe and, hence, competing social representations. Under such conditions, social representations of history, by definition, cannot be a silent enterprise; there is constantly, as Howarth (2006) stresses, a struggle over the meaning of reality among hegemonic and oppositional representations in society. In democratic societies, this struggle often fosters cognitive *polyphasia* within individuals as well as within the mnemonic community.

The concept of cognitive *polyphasia* implies that 'different and incompatible cognitive styles and forms of knowledge can coexist within one social group and can be employed by one and the same individual' (Voelklein and Howarth 2005, 434). Since representations of the past always involve diverse voices, cognitive *polyphasia* illustrates 'the expression of multiple identities, the forging of cognitive solidarities, and importantly, communication between cognitive systems as the motor that adjusts, corrects and transforms knowledge' (Jovchelovitch 2012, 444). I argue that cognitive *polyphasia* is a fundamental concept in Latvian biographical discourse, as it prompts changes in representational practices with regard to the Soviet period.

### Latvian post-Soviet autobiographies

Latvian autobiographical literature, as an essential part of post-Soviet biographical discourse, has experienced fluctuating growth. Yet, the number of autobiographies that reflect upon life during the Soviet period has consistently increased. The authors of these autobiographies mainly represent two age cohorts: those born in the 1920s and those born in the 1930s. These cohorts may be associated either with two successive generations or with two units of the same generation; the former group consciously experienced World War II and Stalinist repressions, while the latter group formed a generational core in the 1960s and more actively experienced the liberalization of the Soviet regime (see Kaprāns 2012a).

Men representing different groups of the former Soviet intelligentsia (writers, composers, actors) have written the majority of post-Soviet autobiographies. Besides the intelligentsia, there are two other groups of publicly active autobiographers: former officials and deportees (those who were exiled to Siberia).<sup>2</sup> Deportees have published their life stories over the last 25 years both as individual autobiographers and as contributors to public collections of memories. Former public officials have become active relatively recently, but they still take certain precautions. The owners of publishing houses, who dominate the field of Latvian autobiographies, confirm that former Soviet officials avoid publishing their memoirs largely because of a disinclination to be publicly exposed as a former official and to protect themselves from being stigmatized; this disinclination is another reminder of the hegemonic effect of negative representation.<sup>3</sup> However, these three major groups of autobiographers should not be perceived as mutually exclusive; some representatives of the Soviet intelligentsia were deported and Soviet institutions later employed some former deportees. So, a single autobiographer may embody different identities; hence, analytically, it is better to define these groups as distinct mnemonic communities rather than closed social categories. The remaining autobiographers who do not fall into any of these groups may be viewed as individuals defined more by their occupation (priests, teachers, sportsmen, etc.) than as part of a self-aware mnemonic community.

Latvian autobiographical narratives vary stylistically, ranging from purely intimate self-reflections to broader recollections of public life and events. Quite often a mixture

of genres appears: fragments of diaries, letters, statistics, short biographies of other people, and fictional texts supplement a retrospective narration. Some autobiographers also imitate the professional style of texts written by historians: they refer to private and public documents, quotations from other autobiographies, bibliographies, appendices, and so on. Moreover, many autobiographies reflect upon particular political time frames, such as life in Siberian exile, the 1960s, or the revival of Latvian self-determination in the late 1980s. Yet, a common thread running through these narratives is the somewhat weak reference to interwar Latvia.

A synthetically constructed category of former officials consists of diverse social groups. On one hand, it includes individuals who worked in Soviet institutions but were not directly responsible for *ideological work* and most likely did not join the Communist Party, such as policemen, foresters, and heads of shops. Another large group is the *nomenklatura*, who took key administrative positions approved by the Communist Party. The classification described by Voslenskii (2005, 148–51) suggests that Latvian autobiographers represent the staff *nomenklatura*, as well as the elected *nomenklatura*. The staff *nomenklatura* had various positions in the party apparatus that were approved by more senior people in the party hierarchy, but included in the latter group were the members of the *nomenklatura* elected to supreme councils and district councils. Unlike other postcommunist countries, the secretaries of the Communist Party of Latvia (CPL) did not publish their memoirs even though members of the top-level staff *nomenklatura* did (Johansons 2006; Liepiņš 2008, 2003; Dzenītis 2002; Āboltiņš 1992). Memoirs of former officials often attract the attention of the Latvian mass media, which use them as sources of information about the Soviet period. Some of these memoirs are received positively, since they speak about unfamiliar experiences and historical details. Conversely, memoirs are criticized for factual imprecision and for the autobiographer's inability or disinclination to discuss particular historical events and people. In this study, I analyzed 10 memoirs written by people who have worked in Soviet institutions, nine of which were published in the 2000s. These memoirs were selected in order to embrace the different levels of the Soviet administrative ideological system. Such diversity provides multifaceted qualitative data that are useful in extrapolating the different dimensions of analytical categories and in establishing relations between these categories.

### Positive or negative identity?

In autobiographical narratives, the use of *we* instead of *I* changes the experience from an individual experience to a shared one. The opposite process turns a shared experience into an individual one; thus, social identity to some extent is always expressed through self-identity, and *vice versa*. However, both levels (*we* and *I*) are normally shaped by the social representation of the past. Namely, when former Soviet officials reflect either on in-group relations or on their relations with those outside the group, it is not just the retrospective anchoring of multilayered identities; it is also the way that social representations of the Soviet era are manifested and modified in the long term.

A useful vantage point from which to understand how former officials interpret their reconstructed Soviet identities is to see how autobiographers retrospectively depict the horizontal and vertical relations that affected their mutual positioning in the Soviet regime. As Jõesalu and Kõresaar (2012) demonstrate in their analysis of the

life story of an Estonian industry manager, the main objective of their narrator was to manage the vertical and horizontal networking of Soviet everyday life. Presumably, horizontal relations might highlight social cohesion whereas vertical relations entail hierarchical roles and 'power motifs' (see McAdams 1988, 69–104).

At the horizontal level, former officials serve as a reference group for solidarity, outstanding professionalism, and altruism. Horizontal relations that are portrayed in Latvian memoirs often help to frame the autobiographer's positive identity. For example, Jūlijs Beļavnieks (2011, 77), the chairman of the famous *kolkhoz* 'Madliena,' recalls how his colleagues at the District Executive Committee supported his resistance to an absurd ideological demand to increase the potato harvest at 'Madliena.' Jānis Dzenītis, Soviet-era Minister of Justice and Attorney General (2002, 133), does not hesitate to express satisfaction with his supportive colleagues and professional achievements in Soviet Latvia: 'I was keen on my job, felt prepared enough for it, and believed that others also appreciated what I did. They appreciated me at all levels, even at that indefinable national level.' Along with individual satisfaction that clearly illuminates professional qualities, working for the benefit of society is also a common theme that displays the everyday duties and social responsibility of various former officials (cf. Kargins 2005, 67; Ulmanis 1995, 144; Āboltiņš 1992, 12–13).

The interplay between former officials' self-identity and social identity observable in these biographical self-presentations shows how people struggle to find *interpretive keys* that can open doors to positive identity which is associated with the Soviet-era professionalism and social responsibility and lock doors to potentially negative identity that may emerge from reflections on ideological work and conformism. Nevertheless, sometimes, Latvian autobiographers feel comfortable enough reflecting on the exclusivity of their potentially stigmatizing social status. Edmunds Johansons, the last chairman of the Latvian Committee for State Security (KGB) (2006, 39), emphasizes that KGB employees belonged to the elite of Soviet society and, incidentally, KGB informers were chiefly motivated by a well-developed sense of patriotism and loyalty to their country rather than by fear of sanctions. Furthermore, the omnipresent and omnipotent image of the KGB might be exaggerated, as Johansons suggests in his memoirs, which were criticized by the Latvian mass media:

When I started to work at the KGB, I was surprised by the prevailing public opinion about Cheka's eyes and ears as if they were everywhere. The society believed in the enormous size of the KGB's staff. That, of course, was complimentary: it's pleased to work in an institution that was assumed to be so mighty by society. In fact, the number of employees wasn't more than a thousand. (2006, 54–55)

Conversely, the description of vertical relations among former officials triggers in-group comparisons. Usually, that results in a critical appraisal of superior institutions and senior officials who, unlike subordinates (autobiographers), are depicted as ideologically inclined hardliners and simply inert persons. As Beļavnieks recalls:

In the first years [of taking on the chairmanship of the *kolkhoz* 'Madliena'], I regularly sent letters and petitions to superior institutions complaining about various unsolved problems.... Although I received well-timed replies along with the regulations of that time, the positive outcome normally was quite insignificant or the solutions of identified problems were delayed. (2011, 127)

Throughout his memoirs, Beļavnieks continually describes his daily struggle with the Soviet institutions responsible for agricultural policy. In fact, the ostensibly



innocent Beļavnieks' remark highlights Soviet hierarchical relations with a pragmatic *kolkhoz* situated at the bottom and useless governmental institutions at the top. Another account of Soviet everyday life comes from Uldis Lasmanis, who worked in the Soviet trade system. Lasmanis (2006, 274) describes his job as the director of a Soviet shop as involving great responsibility. It demanded a knowledgeable, skillful, and physically strong person; therefore, he assumed that members of the party *nomenklatura* did not covet the position. Here again, professionalism is contrasted with an ideologically inclined Significant Other (the party *nomenklatura*). Such juxtaposition obviously separates the autobiographer from ideologized interactions and obligations within the Soviet administrative system. On the other hand, it brings to the fore the autobiographer's ability to do things professionally, regardless of ideological hurdles. Furthermore, the discourse of professionalism often addresses micro-resistance practices (bypassing the Soviet laws, saving cultural heritage, etc.), which convey daily attempts to overcome the ideological absurdities of the Soviet state. Like other groups of autobiographers, the majority of former officials do not normally interpret these daily subversive activities as some kind of heroic ordeal, although sometimes they were nationalistically motivated. Nevertheless, this micro-resistance redefines collaboration as a unidirectional activity and as an official's complicity with the regime. Instead, the dialogical nature of compliance and autobiographer's agency is emphasized, thus downplaying the conformism discourse provided by the negative representation of the Soviet era.

The memories of vertical relations may also lead autobiographers to the victim identity, a subtype of positive identity in many postcommunist societies whose dominant attitude toward the communist period is arguably embedded in victimhood nationalism (see Lim 2010). Although not widespread, victim identity appears when former officials recall how their superiors in the party and the autobiographer's workplace humiliated them for ideological and selfish reasons. For example, several former employees of Soviet law enforcement institutions allude to the early 1980s as a turning point in their careers. During the short reign (1982–1984) of the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Yuri Andropov, former KGB generals, and those who held the most important positions in the KGB in Moscow started a derogatory ideological cleansing in the Soviet republics. 'We were suspected of being nationalists, as well as being linked to criminals and bribery,' recalls Aloīzs Blonskis (2000, 155–56), who worked for many years in the criminal police, 'All sorts of intrigues, passions, accusations, and insults emerged and consequently, working became harder and harder. Ultimately, it was not possible to bear the brunt of all that.'

Vertical relations are at the core of former officials' negative identity as well. They trigger reflections on obedience and collaboration during the Soviet era. However, rarely is penance or the self-criticism of former officials seen as an underlying attitude toward collaboration with the regime. By and large, explicit reflections on a stigmatized experience are episodic and appear when autobiographers reveal their susceptibility to ideological brainwashing or cowardice and fear of supporting individuals who were unjustly accused of anti-Soviet behavior (cf. Beļavnieks 2011, 53, 280; Liepiņš 2003, 85, 86; Āboltiņš 1992, 14, 71). Edvards Berklavs, Vice-Chairman of the Council of Ministers in Soviet Latvia (1956–1959) and the iconic leader of the so-called national communists in the 1950s, has written,



It's very hard to acknowledge that you have spent part of the best years of your life in illusions. Even now, I can't fully understand why I didn't see much earlier how terrible the party (CPSU) was, which had committed such incredible mass killings; (...) Even in hindsight I can't understand why I was so foolish. In 1940, I was already 26 years old. (1998, 12, 57)

Despite the unwillingness or inability to assess their own collaboration, those from the lower ranks of the Soviet administration are used to associating themselves with the critical discourse characteristic of the intelligentsia's memoirs. These former officials reinforce the image of greedy and incompetent party functionaries who intended to demoralize the professional state administration and to distort many good ideas by blindly following the dictate of the Communist Party. When Nagel (2004) interviewed managers of communist enterprises from the German Democratic Republic (GDR) 10 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, managers emphasized their individual accomplishments and downplayed their responsibility for the former regime and its mishaps by blaming the communist elite. Latvian autobiographies, like the GDR managers' life stories, illustrate this universal strategy of former officials in postcommunist societies in coming to terms with their past. That is, by making superiors the scapegoats, or making minor subgroups, like party functionaries, within the reference group, or by extrapolating the scapegoat as an alien out-group, such as the communist elite or Moscow functionaries, former officials establish a positive identity. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), such strategies of social identity demonstrate the social creativity of former officials. Moreover, blaming the elite can even be observed in the memoirs of the elite itself. For example, Dzenītis (2002, 117, 182, 189, 270) regularly criticizes the Soviet elite as being responsible for the collapse of the USSR. Apparently, a never-ending vertical relation of the Soviet political system provide everyone with an opportunity to relocate responsibility symbolically to imagined party, elite, or *nomenklatura* and present one's self as an executor rather than a decision-maker. Moreover, if we follow Jaspers' (2000) argument and differentiate the issue of guilt, then we will notice that former officials in their memoirs focus on political guilt rather than on moral guilt. As moral guilt 'exists for all those who give room to conscience and repentance' (Jaspers 2000, 57) vis-à-vis their explicit conformism in the Soviet era, it is obviously more risky to address moral guilt. Moreover, such reflections might actually undermine the scapegoat strategy applied exclusively toward superiors. Political guilt, in turn, is narrower and more manageable, as it holds liable only those who explicitly took strategic and decisive decisions that had a destructive impact on the broader public.

Vertical relations do not always lead to comparison and confrontation. Along with critical depictions, one can find memories about fruitful cooperation with particular superior officials who are characterized as professionals possessing a strategic vision of how things should be done. Anrijs Kavalieris, the former Vice-Minister of the Internal Affairs of Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (LSSR) (2002, 15), exemplifies this *soft hierarchy* based on his experience in the Prosecutor's Office:

The Prosecutor's Office was run by Mednis, the prosecutor who wasn't just an excellent organizer but also very demanding of his subordinates and himself. His attitude towards novices wasn't as if they were just a cheap labour force or hindrance, as sometimes happens nowadays. He intentionally attempted 'to create an investigator' out of me.

These ideologically loyal but, in the autobiographers' opinion, agreeable characters symbolize moral soundness, and their appearance in biographical narratives, as Andrle

(2000, 225) has suggested, might be viewed as a collective story that challenges the dominant stereotype of ideologically obsessed communists. Nevertheless, superior officials who have such positive images are rarely found. The image shifts from autobiography to autobiography, revealing not merely the controversy around a particular person, but also the presence of different social representations of the Soviet era. For example, in many post-Soviet autobiographies, Eduards Berkļavs is commonly associated with resistance to Soviet Russification and the industrialization policy.<sup>4</sup> Yet, he is critically appraised by other autobiographers, estimating his anti-Russification measures as unreasoned and voluntary, which resulted in assessment of employees based on their nationality rather than on their professional skills (Beļavnieks 2011, 270).

By the same token, the concept of moral soundness is helpful for highlighting the positive aspect of working in Soviet institutions. For example, Jānis Liepiņš (2008, 146), the assistant of Jānis Kalnbērziņš,<sup>5</sup> admits: 'I felt confident about my capability to serve for the first person of the country, because I knew that such duties are assigned to those who are the most gifted.' Beļavnieks (2011, 143), in turn, explains his election to the Latvian Socialist Soviet Republic Supreme Council as a gratuity from top-level officials for successfully running a *kolkhoz*. Hence, it is more appropriate to speak about the *multiple hierarchies* that link the autobiographical narratives of former officials. The concept of multiple hierarchies has a higher explanatory value than that of a single hierarchy because it shows how vertical relations transform in post-Soviet biographical discourse. Furthermore, multiple hierarchies can be also applied to the autobiographies of the Soviet intelligentsia as an analytical category, where assumptions about the rigid binaries of the Soviet regime and intelligentsia are occasionally revised (see Kaprans 2010a).

### Normalizing the stigma of party [*Komsomoļ*] membership

Goffman (1986) defined 'stigmatization' as the process by which the reaction of others spoils normal identity. In light of the anti-Soviet representation of the past, publicly expressed support for the Soviet system or appreciation of Soviet administrative practices may also spoil one's normal identity in contemporary Latvia. Former officials, however, avoid speaking about the collaboration as a stigmatizing experience.<sup>6</sup> In fact, instead of spoiling normal identity, former officials prefer to reinterpret stigmatizing experiences.

The condemnation of the CPL has invariably been part of post-Soviet memory politics in Latvia. Clearly, that has made membership in CPL a stigmatizing experience. However, the autobiographers whose life stories I have analyzed tend to justify their party membership. On one hand, some former officials clearly admit that they do not regret joining the party. For example, Beļavnieks (2011, 299) was a member of the CPL for 32 years, and he does not feel sorry about that because he obtained experience in the party that was useful in solving economic problems in *kolkhozes* and in learning how to work with a variety of people. On the other hand, former officials highlight the inevitability of party membership if one wanted to have or maintain a successful career; many argue that membership was not motivated by ideological beliefs. Thus, living with double standards – being member of CPL without believing in the communist ideals – as a consciously cultivated state of mind is commonly used as a major justification for Soviet-era conformity. Sometimes, acting in accordance with double

standards is even compared to 'the guerrillas' underground activities' (Liepiņš 2008, 100).<sup>7</sup> The same justification strategy applies to joining the *Komsomol*, the youth wing of the party, where future party leaders were developed. Autobiographers contend that *Komsomol* membership should not be stigmatized, because many of today's politicians and entrepreneurs actually obtained leadership skills and had the opportunity to change the Soviet regime from within. The former *Komsomol* leader Āboltiņš has admitted that practical activities in the *Komsomol*

Were certainly more important than an abstract ideological struggle. There was a double meaning behind these activities: we sought to do useful work instead of screaming ideological slogans. It was a school of practice, a good opportunity to advance the skills of organizing and learning how to persuade people about the usefulness of your plans. (1992, 15)

Incidentally, the reviewers of Āboltiņš's memoirs received this pragmatic attitude positively. For example, the poet and Āboltiņš's contemporary, Māris Čaklais (1992), sympathized with Āboltiņš's active but severely restricted position while working in Soviet institutions. Likewise, party or *Komsomol* autobiographers provide prosaic reasons to deconstruct any ideological attachment for joining the party, pointing to the various material and social advantages received from membership in ideological organizations or from undertaking ideological duties. Notable benefits included travel throughout the USSR or internationally, or acquiring their own flat (Lasmanis 2006, 385; Artmane 2004, 180; Āboltiņš 1992, 10).

Apart from these somewhat pragmatic arguments, more apathetic explanations of joining the Soviet ideological organizations are offered. The former president of Latvia, Ulmanis (1995, 143), managed the public utility establishment in Riga during the Soviet period, and he argues that the party and *Komsomol* – both of which he joined – were simply structural units of the Soviet machinery. Similarly, Vija Artmane, the famous actress and vice-chairperson of the Soviet Peace Committee (2004, 301), insists that she did not know about the riskiness of becoming a member; 'just one thing was clear: successful and loyal people, both old and young, were invited to join the party.' These cases illustrate how autobiographical subjects, in order to reduce moral responsibility for their compliance, turn themselves into objects influenced by the *force majeure* of powerful ideological organizations and functionaries. Sebre (2010, 33), who has also analyzed this kind of strategy in Latvian life stories, defines the strategy as the mechanism of psychological self-defense. Notwithstanding psychological self-defense, the explicit passivity (but not necessarily self-victimization) concerning Soviet collaboration should similarly be interpreted as a cultural practice legitimized by Latvian public discourse. That is to say, the autobiographers' emphasis on a missing agency is a discursive practice that is preferable if one wants to normalize one's collaboration experience. Through such a normalization discourse alternative meanings are attached to the negative representation of the Soviet era, challenging the condemnatory understanding of collaboration that dominates Latvia's political memory. Thereby normalization is a biographical strategy that helps to maintain what Giddens (1991, 35–69) has called 'ontological security.'

The separation of formal ideology from meaningful activities, so characteristic of many Latvian memoirs, is evidently presented as an essential part of the survival kit of those who explicitly supported the regime. It agrees with what Yurchak (2006, 93–98) wrote about the last Soviet generation – those born in the 1950s and 1960s. Following the formal guidelines of Soviet ideology, the final generation engaged in the

performative reproduction of authoritarian discourse that was a crucial precondition to be able to do meaningful work. Yurchak, however, did not thoroughly discuss the equally important question of how a post-Soviet context has influenced the motivation to exploit this dichotomy for explaining conformity within the regime. Jõesalu (2005, 93) clarifies this point by linking it to the post-Soviet de-ideologization of the past. That is, the motivation to differentiate professional responsibility and ideology is embedded in the present necessity of managing the past performance. Such a necessity, as Andrie (2001, 829) suggests, might spring from the desire to create a morally adequate self. If the strategy of double standards normalizes the collaboration experience and is seen as socially acceptable behavior, then there is another social phenomenon that lies behind the normalization. In light of Aareleid-Tart's contention (2010, 52), one may argue that this strategy signals the presence of cultural trauma in post-Soviet biographical discourse. A reference to intentional double standards or double consciousness may be used effectively as justifiable rhetoric, but not straightforwardly annul the fact of deliberate conformism that autobiographers avoid addressing. By remediating this cultural trauma, the autobiographers and their readers are confronted with a moral dilemma: whether to accept the imperative of hegemonic negative representation that stigmatizes those who collaborated or tolerate the autobiographer's humane desire not to be permanently labeled as a collaborator or traitor.

Arguably, there is a generational discrepancy in how participation in the *Komsomol* or other forms of collaboration are seen. Older autobiographers who experienced life in interwar Latvia and whose formative period occurred during a time of tremendous social change in the 1940s are more likely to self-criticize or moderately acknowledge their naivety or idealism as an impetus for joining the party and supporting Communist ideology (Liepiņš 2003, 85; Dzenītis 2002, 42–43; Berklavs 1998, 350). However, those born in the 1940s and 1950s are more focused on stressing double standards, opportunism, and cynicism as everyday strategies (Kargins 2005, 74; Ulmanis 1995, 92; Āboltiņš 1992, 10). Older autobiographers, who represent the first generation of 'builders of communism,' are also more likely to claim that external processes forced them to support the system, whereas younger autobiographers emphasize the inner locus of control in relations with Soviet institutions. Such generational differences in terms of where the locus of control is placed reveal another dimension of how the topics of rupture and continuity interact in post-Soviet biographical discourse (see Jõesalu and Kõresaar 2013). Ignoring these differences may lead to a simplified interpretation of the normalization discourse.

Overall, though, the normalization of CPL or *Komsomol* membership and ideological activities put forward utilitarian motives, which in comparison with the motifs behind self-criticism and penance have a higher probability of being converted into post-Soviet normality. In other words, professional and personal advancement, as well as a realistic and self-confident approach to the system one had to live in, are virtues that might be accepted by a post-Soviet neoliberal society as general characteristics of positive identity. Thus, utilitarianism – especially if it was directed at increasing the well-being of society – manifests itself as an alternative to the collaboration perspective propagated by advocates of negative representation. That also explains why genuine, but more universal political convictions like support for antifascist ideas, as observed in the life stories of former East Central European communists (Mark 2010, 152–64), are rarely used by Latvian autobiographers to justify collaboration. Namely, memories about the political engagement with ideas, which cannot be contextualized

in the discourse of a nationalizing state (Brubaker 1996) or professionalism contradict the virtue of utilitarianism and most likely would be interpreted as signs of allegiance to the Soviet order.

## Comparing two eras

Comparisons between Soviet and post-Soviet experiences are a common feature of Latvian autobiographical narratives, as I have noted elsewhere (Kaprāns 2010b). This also applies to the memoirs of former officials. Their comparisons illuminate the organizing themes of the social representation of the past as well as the present status quo. Regarding post-Soviet autobiographies, we may delineate two different dimensions of inter-experiential comparisons: post-Soviet progress and criticism of post-Soviet reality.

Post-Soviet progress is a rather obscure theme in the autobiographies of former officials, as well as that of other mnemonic communities. By progress, I mean situations in which people openly admit that life is better today than it was under the Soviet regime. This ethos sporadically appears in the memoirs of those who worked in Soviet law enforcement institutions. For example, they allude to the superiority of the post-Soviet legal system and to the fact that contemporary law enforcement institutions are compelled to make their regulations more transparent, and to be more democratic and free from obtrusive ideological demands (cf. Kavalieris 2002, 17, 90; Blonskis 2000, 36, 127). Likewise, some other autobiographers believe that today's youngsters have greater opportunities; they are not as restricted and brainwashed as the autobiographers' generation was during the Soviet period (Berkļavs 1998, 57; Ulmanis 1995, 88).

On the other hand, criticism of post-Soviet conditions is more conspicuous. One recurrent theme of this criticism is the argument with present day interpretations of the Soviet period, and the emphasis on the lack of understanding among historians, politicians, and journalists about how complicated life was then. This line largely challenges the false image of Soviet officials created after Latvia regained independence. For instance, Āboltiņš (1992, 10), who was the first former official to publish memoirs in the early 1990s, objected to the idea of the *nomenklatura* as a privileged class, claiming instead that 'We are mistaken now for insisting that back then the middle stratum of the *nomenklatura* could immediately obtain all the material benefits that they desired. There were physical as well as social problems and procedures that interfered with that' (see also Beļavnieks 2011, 282; Kargins 2005, 67).

The appraisal of current democracy is another theme that emerges. Although the representatives of Soviet law enforcement institutions are among those who point to post-Soviet progress, they are quite willing to highlight various shortcomings, which one can see in the work of law enforcement institutions nowadays. They emphasize that the Soviet state paid more attention to maintaining order on the streets and preventing crimes, and the fight against corruption was more successful. In the opinion of these individuals, the Soviet judicial system also was more effective, and instead of merely sensationalizing crimes, the press attempted to influence its readers (Kavalieris 2002, 72; Blonskis 2000, 100–103; Zlakomanovs 2000, 148). Along with this criticism of rather mundane everyday practices, more fundamental doubts are cast on the rapid transformation of the post-Soviet economy, which degraded outstanding collective farms and industry (Beļavnieks 2011, 229). As a result, this skeptical attitude

toward current democracy and its pillars reveals its favor toward the Soviet era. However, it also exposes the disillusionment about how democracy and the market economy have developed. In particular, sharp criticism emanates from the feelings of former officials that antidemocratic processes are still continuing in the post-Soviet period and that nothing has changed since the collapse of the USSR. Such dissatisfaction often manifests as cliché-ridden frustration: people expected life to be better, but that did not happen. Instead people got poorer and only a weak, corrupt state remained after the breakdown of the USSR. Lasmanis expresses this mood:

Now, in the independence era, the power of money predominates, whereas then, to a certain extent, the party and, of course, *the Cheka's rights to call everyone* ruled... We can judge variously, but in comparison with the Soviet-era *telephone rights*, more and more facts prove that there are *the rights of money and capital* in the free world. Practically, it means that the verdict of the courts depends on one's capacity to hire a lawyer. (2006, 427, 467)

The presence of the Soviet legacy is another broad theme discussed by former officials. The Soviet legacy is partly related to the criticism of Latvian democracy, but, beyond discussing political failures, autobiographers illuminate the current post-Soviet everyday practices that emanate from the Soviet legacy. Notably, former officials, unlike the Latvian intelligentsia, do not speak about the corrupted political elite as an inheritance from the Soviet era, nor do they address the issue of communists who have remained to power in post-Soviet Latvia. Instead, they emphasize peculiar Soviet practices, such as laziness, alcoholism, submissiveness, or exaggerated collectivism, that, in some way, continue to corrupt society. Āboltiņš (1992, 75) concludes that, 'We are still condemning the ability and desire of an individual to be more excellent than other individuals. It comes from our socialist past. It is the philosophy of crowd' (see also Liepiņš 2008, 87; Blonskis 2000, 151; Ulmanis 1995, 178). However, none of these former officials project the lingering of the Soviet legacy to themselves, which might express self-criticism and jeopardize their positive image; in other words, the inability to get rid of the Soviet legacy is associated with collective responsibility. Perhaps an emphasis on collective responsibility might also be interpreted as an implicit and unintended indicator of the Soviet legacy.

If the Soviet legacy bears the negative meaning of past experience, then the degradation of post-Soviet social relations demonstrates just the opposite – a sort of moral superiority of Soviet society. This criticism mostly applies to professional relations, which in post-Soviet conditions have deviated from the earlier standard. As former officials argue, the work ethic nowadays is rooted in a sense of impunity, it sometimes discredits individuality and a sense of responsibility or it eradicates modesty and mutual respect. This lamentation of the lost merits can be vividly illustrated by Ulmanis' reflections on relations between teachers and pupils:

Now it seems to me that teachers have got used to everything and have learned to ignore impudence. Now different relations prevail in school. To a large extent, the respectful distance between teacher and pupil is lost; many regulations of inner order and discipline are lost. [We] do not have pupils' uniforms anymore; everyone dresses and adorns oneself as they like, in line with their imagination and opportunities; girls start to use cosmetics too early. I even can imagine that during the break pupils might have a smoke with the teacher. (1995, 86–87)

In contrast to the current socially disoriented reality, Soviet society is depicted as more disciplined and law-abiding; and even if antisocial behavior, like stealing or teenage fighting, did exist then, it, as suggested by some autobiographers, was normally based

on some sort of morality or implicit humane rules of behavior (Blonskis 2000, 32–33; Ulmanis 1995, 81–82). A number of autobiographers are particularly upset by the lifestyle of members of post-Soviet society who have lost serious purpose in their lives, which built the individual's character and triggered, 'the crystallization of the moral core of personality' (Zlakomanovs 2000, 136).

Although there is a certain amount of criticism toward the Soviet social order, sympathies vis-à-vis the Soviet era may raise the question of what role post-Soviet nostalgia plays in the memoirs of former officials. As Boym (2001, 41–56) has stated, nostalgia should not be perceived as just a desire to return to a lost time. Besides 'restorative nostalgia,' there is also 'reflective nostalgia,' which includes both irony toward the past and a critical attitude toward the present. Whereas restorative nostalgia is based on continuity and reproduction of the past, reflective nostalgia upholds the past as a crucial and unrepeatable part of one's identity project. Nadkarni and Shevchenko (2004), however, insist that the reflective and restorative components may be present in any nostalgic practice, and the salience of a particular component, as well the mutual relationship between components, is determined by generational boundaries and distinct memory politics. Considering these two dimensions of post-Soviet nostalgia, it seems that former officials most likely exhibit restorative nostalgia: they do not clearly support the renewal of the Soviet Union, but they express a longing for stability, predictability, and social security, which, they argue, was intrinsic to the Soviet system. Nevertheless, this restorative nostalgia is largely characteristic of the first generation of the builders of communism (born in the 1920s and early 1930s) but rarely appears in the memoirs of those who represent the last Soviet generation (born in the 1950s).

## Conclusion

Superficially, the memoirs of Latvian former officials appear to reveal relationships between negative (anti-Soviet) and positive (pro-Soviet) social representation: how they come together in making meaning of the Soviet period and the autobiographer's identity. Yet, as I have sought to demonstrate in this study, there is always an area that does not belong to either representation. This is the area into which multiple hierarchies and pragmatic depictions of conformism fall and where 'multidirectional memory' (Rothberg 2009) comes into being.

The vast majority of former officials, I have argued, use this alternative mnemonic area as the locus of their positive identity narrative. From there, former officials can show their complicity in the Soviet era as neither principally undermining the conceptual themes of negative representation nor those of positive representation. Namely, if you wanted to realize your professional ambitions or to work for society you had to collaborate with the regime. This kaleidoscopic area, where either cunning or submissive behavior can be morally justified by today's standards, provides Latvian former officials with opportunities to normalize stigmatized experiences. Hence, the main contention of this study is that the organizational themes of normalization discourse are not just the *in situ* emanations of negative or positive representation; they are relevant indications of a new form of social representation that has become more salient in the 2000s. I have already called it a pragmatic representation of the Soviet era, presented at the beginning of the paper, which does not simply combine



the conceptual themes of negative or positive representation but offers a genuinely alternative mindset, emancipating participants in biographical discourse.

Though pragmatic representation is apparent in various groups of Latvian autobiographers, memoirs of former officials are prototypical examples. The Latvian mass media, which facilitate the discursive elaboration of post-Soviet autobiographies, find this type of representation to be uncomfortable because it does not fit into the self-evident field of politicized negative representation or polemical positive representation. Here, in accordance with the social representation theory, we may encounter semantic barriers, such as the threat of stigmatization or undermining one's identity (Gillespie 2008) if one conveys the Soviet past through pragmatic representation too explicitly. The interaction between the officially mythologized structure of the Soviet period and biographical attempts expand their rigid relations suggest that pragmatic representation is still an *anticipatory representation*, which 'plays a crucial role when social actors reconstitute a common understanding of the world they share' (Philogène 2001, 127).

Manifold knowledge is inherent to pragmatic representation for it may concurrently invoke positive, as well as negative, connotations of the Soviet period, not completely degrading it, but maintaining a morally manageable distance from this past. Arguably, the distinctiveness of pragmatic representation is triggered by cognitive *polyphasia*, which is a decisive prerequisite for biographical improvisation. Cognitive *polyphasia* enables individuals to construct an autobiographical narrative in the manner described by Kõresaar (2001, 48) when many different lives and types of biographies (career biography, apartment biography, travel biography, hobby biography) are entangled in a single narrative, which mediates the Soviet past through multiple frames. Both cognitive *polyphasia* and a relatively polyphonic Latvian public discourse about the Soviet period (see Kaprāns 2010c, 2009) have encouraged former officials to merge their conflicting ideas. The autobiographers' need for a morally adequate identity is an evident driving force of these complex processes. It is noteworthy, though, that cognitive *polyphasia* 'emerges primarily when members of groups are coping with new conditions during their life-time' (Wagner and Hayes 2005, 235). In this sense, not only inter-experiential comparisons, but also predominantly the autobiographies of Latvian former officials per se, have been responses to new post-Soviet conditions.

At end of this paper, however, I want to challenge pragmatic representation by drawing attention to a vital question posed by Zygmunt Bauman (2003, 6): where is the boundary drawn between one's doings and the conditions under which one acted (and by definition, could not have acted otherwise) in the course of the narrative? Among other issues, Bauman's question sheds light on the intriguing dialectics between post-Soviet biographical improvisation and the Soviet conditions in the past under which former officials could not have done other than collaborate. Eventually, Bauman takes us back to the agency-structure problem. On the one hand, this concern emphasizes the emancipating qualities of pragmatic representation, which legitimizes agency, especially when compared with negative or positive representation. However, it also draws attention to moral relativism as a cultural practice, which nurtures pragmatic representation and entitles former officials to overcome the structural limitations imposed by post-Soviet political memory.

## Notes

1. For the conceptual differences between social and political memory consult Assmann (2004).
2. Around 60,000 Latvians were exiled to Siberia during the two largest Stalinist deportations, which occurred in 1941 and 1949. Exile as a traumatic episode appears in practically all the autobiographical narratives as a direct or mediated experience.
3. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with five owners of publishing houses in September 2011.
4. Eduards Berklavs (1914–2004) was the leader of the so-called Latvian national communists who in the late 1950s fought against the Soviet nationality policy. Berklavs was dismissed from the post of the vice chairman of the Council of the Ministers of LSSR in 1959 and was administratively exiled to the Soviet Russia. Berklavs became one of the leaders of the dissident movement in Soviet Latvia and played an active role during the period of national revival.
5. The First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Latvia (1940–1959).
6. The Latvian intelligentsia is more open to speaking about this issue in their memoirs (cf. Purs 2006; Vulfsons 1997).
7. Scholars interested in Estonian biographical discourse have pointed to double consciousness as a pivotal strategy for postwar generations of various professional groups (see Wulf and Petri 2010; Aareleid-Tart 2003).

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