I.B.TAURIS

ALIIDE NAYLOR

THE SHADOW IN THE EAST

Vladimir Putin and the New Baltic Front

THE SHADOW IN THE EAST

THE SHADOW IN THE EAST

Vladimir Putin and the New Baltic Front

Aliide Naylor

I.B.TAURIS
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

I.B. TAURIS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA

BLOOMSBURY, I.B. TAURIS and the I.B. Tauris logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain 2020

Cover design by Adriana Brioso
Cover image: Winter in Tallinn, Estonia. (© e_rasmus/Getty Images)

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-7883-1252-3
ePDF: 978-1-7867-3644-4
eBook: 978-1-7867-2638-4

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com and sign up for our newsletters.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank Thomas Stottor, who saw the potential in the article that led to this book, had continued confidence in it, and whose constructive advice has made it exponentially better. I would also like to thank Tomasz Hoskins who took over as my editor after Thomas left and brought the book over the finish line. Both of you have been very patient and encouraging, and you are not only great editors, but lovely people too.

I am indebted to Marc Bennetts and David Patrikarakos. I sought professional advice from both of you, and you have given me a great deal of your time and engaged in several hilarious and informative conversations. Marc, you read my early chapters and encouraged me with your positive feedback, while injecting everything with your dry humour. David, you connected me with people looking for regional expertise and have been championing my writing. You're a constant source of motivation and I am very grateful for that. I hope this work lives up to both of your high standards.

My heartfelt thanks go to the numerous people who facilitated my research over the course of writing this book. Primarily, my interviewees who gave me their time and multitude of varied perspectives. As I travelled, several people hosted me for free. It is impossible to name them all. However, I am particularly thankful to Ieva (and family) for allowing me to stay at the Ventspils apartment without being there herself, having never previously met me. Eugenijus too, for basically saving the project by selling me a ten-year-old laptop for €40 in Vilnius after mine unexpectedly broke. I am grateful to Rees and countless others on the ground who gave me vital assistance, and the two anonymous reviewers who provided insightful and extraordinarily helpful feedback on the manuscript. This book could not have existed without any of you.

One of the pitfalls of having lived abroad for so long means losing touch with old friends, and emerging with new friends scattered across the globe. I am thankful for the depths of the connections that have

survived despite long periods of physical distance. I am particularly grateful to Ian Helmke, who has been a seemingly inexhaustible supply of support, love, and patience. You have motivated and sympathized, brought me coffee and sashimi, and keep tolerating me even on days when it must be quite difficult to. Thank you, for everything. Hazel McMichael and Ben Conroy, you are dear, unfailingly reliable friends, and I love you both deeply. Delphine d'Amora, for several insightful, empathetic conversations even if only via Skype. Solange Masher, Noah Woodman, Helen R. Lewis, Doug Wills, the TW Forum crowd. I would be lost without all of you. Zhenya Pavlovna, Simone Peek, William Echols for so much hilarity, creativity and such meaningful relationships while abroad, and the lovely game group (Jen, Angela, Robin, Maria, Elisa, Luca, Shobhan, Tom, He Xiang) upon my return to the UK. I am also thankful for various tutors and academics over the years, who have both inspired and helped me. At undergrad, Emmett Sullivan, for making me believe in myself, and Holocaust historian Dan Stone, who ran an absorbing comparative course on genocide, as well as staff and faculty in the 2011–12 MA cohort at the European University at St Petersburg for imparting their vast knowledge in such a difficult academic climate. I would love to list scores of twentieth-century (and particularly late-imperial/Soviet) historians but I again fear running out of space.

Equally importantly, I would like to extend my thanks to the editors and staff at *The Moscow Times*, who helped me hone my writing skills in the early stages of my career and and who gave me the opportunity to do my first 'serious' reporting. I am similarly grateful to various editors at the list of publications mentioned in my biography, in particular Anoosh Chakelian at *New Statesman* and Jessica Leber during her period with *Vocativ*, both of whom have been as meticulous as they are kind and communicative. My gratitude also goes to Gordana Andric and Siri Sollie, with whom I worked closely as an editor myself.

Last (but not least), to my family. My mother Linda, father Robert, Alari, Elvine, Paige (and Nick!), as well as the various branches in Canada, Scotland, New Zealand and Estonia.

INTRODUCTION

In the centre of the Lithuanian capital Vilnius, close to the ebbs and flows of the Baltic city's main train and bus stations, US President Donald Trump, with his infamous wisp of orange and blonde, is exhaling a jet of vapour through pursed lips into the expectant mouth of a heavy-lidded Vladimir Putin. Trump cradles the Russian president's head in his left hand, a lit cannabis joint resting between his fingers, dense smoke spiralling upwards.

This street art is pasted on the wall of café Keule Ruke. The name loosely translates as 'The Pig Smoked', using a parochial dialect and a play on words to suggest that the pig is either smoking a cigarette, or that the meat sold inside could be of the smoked variety. The image originally depicted Trump and Putin locked in an even tighter embrace when it appeared in the first half of 2016; an homage to Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and German Democratic Republic (GDR) leader Erich Hönecker who were snapped kissing by photographer Régis Bossu in 1979, and immortalized on the Berlin Wall in 1990 by Russian artist Dmitri Vrubel in a painting titled *My God, Help Me to Survive This Deadly Love*.

In present-day Lithuania, sandwiched between Latvia, Belarus, Poland and Russia, the image touches several nerves. Both Trump and Putin are wearing identical black track jackets, suggesting a superficial similarity in political identity, and the closeness of two modern world leaders acting in agreement with little regard for any external background entities. Supremely wealthy, yet both attired in streetwear. The appropriation of an image from the now-defunct Berlin wall evokes a definitive pivot towards Europe, especially when combined with the visibility of suggested drug usage and homosexuality – both of which in Russia would be touted as symbols of 'western decadence'. There, the promotion of 'homosexual behaviour among minors' is against the law. To the left of the picture, English-language text reads 'make everything great again'.

Trump and Putin are both easily recognizable figures in Lithuania, and indeed the other two Baltic states, Latvia and Estonia. However, it seems unlikely that the average American could pick out any presidents of Estonia, Latvia or Lithuania from a line-up. In October 2018, the US president himself reportedly managed to confuse the Baltics and the Balkans, blaming the Baltics for the war in the former Yugoslavia, despite being married to a woman from Slovenia, which was itself part of the war-torn region until independent Slovenia was recognized in late 1991–early 1992.[1]

The Baltic countries are smaller than most US states: Estonia's population is 1.3 million – about the same as New Hampshire or Maine. London has seven times the number. Latvia has just under 2 million, and Lithuania is approximately 2.9 million. They are hardly global heavyweights. Yet somehow, these minuscule nations have managed to collectively resist one of the largest superpowers of the twentieth century, the Soviet Union. The countries were the first outlying Soviet republics to start rebelling, demanding their freedom from Moscow. Nationalist movements in each country were adept at forging alliances with pro-independence movements in every region, and soon after republics such as Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Moldova started seeking independence too. Without the momentum of the Baltic nationalist movement, preceded and facilitated by the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's liberalization policies, the Soviet Union may not have collapsed in 1991.

While Russia's domestic politics have since undergone dramatic periods of transition (which will be covered later in the book), including Putin's first stint as president in the year 2000, the geopolitical arena has changed significantly in the past decade or so, especially in Russia's near-abroad. In 2008, Georgia (the country) started a war with Russia after months of Russian provocations, which ultimately allowed Russia to recognize parts of Georgia's territory in the north, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as independent states (the majority of other countries recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as Georgian territory under Russian occupation).

In 2014, a revolution in the Ukrainian capital, Kyiv (or a coup, as Russia reasonably terms it), ultimately saw Russia annexing the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine in March 2014. Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine attempted to form further self-proclaimed breakaway 'people's republics': the Donetskaya Narodnaya Respublika (DNR) – recognized only by South Ossetia – and Luganskaya Narodnaya Respublika (LNR). There was an almost immediate wave of news stories declaring

that the Baltic states were growing increasingly nervous about their own fates in the wake of Russian aggression in the near-abroad, specifically with regards to former Soviet republics. While the Baltic countries are small nations, Crimea's population is also fewer than 2 million people. The annexation issue still garnered a stupendous amount of coverage on a global scale. Along the Europe-Russia border, the local is the geopolitical, and the affairs of smaller states have repercussions worldwide.

Historically torn between east and west, the Baltic states have in recent years faced the question of whether they are better off under potentially friendly relations between Trump and Putin or mired in the haze of a 'new Cold War'. Trump's ascension to the US presidency at the beginning of 2017 after soaring to a surprise victory in the 2016 elections brought with it a host of questions in both Russia and each of the Baltic states alike, amid rumours of 'collusion' – that Russia had actively intervened in the US elections to secure a Trump-fronted executive. Over the course of Trump's campaign, Putin paid Trump compliments saying Russia would welcome good relations with him at the helm of the nation, and as the pair shared their first official phone call at the end of January 2017, the Baltics warily watched to see what this would mean for their security, that of Europe, and their place in the world order. A perceived shift towards 'great power' politics and right-wing populism signposted a possible step away from cross-border cooperation and the 'rules-based international order', as lauded by its proponents, who in many cases were key in shaping it.[2] The UK's Brexit vote also threw notions of a united Europe into question, inspiring both similar movements and blowback on the continent. I will be exploring this further in Chapter 6.

In 2004, the Baltic states joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) – a US-led military alliance which today consists of twenty-nine states. The following year, in 2005, Putin called the dissolution of the Soviet Union 'the greatest geopolitical disaster of the twenty-first century'. In historian Neil Taylor's book about the history of Estonia, he recounts an anecdote in which Putin listened to the president of a freshly independent Estonia giving a speech in Hamburg in the 1990s. Lennart Meri denounced the Soviet occupation of the Baltics, reportedly prompting Putin to exit the room in outrage.[3] Since he assumed Russia's presidency, various pundits have suggested that Putin, a former KGB officer, seeks to restore the territory of the former Soviet Union.

Location-wise, the Baltic states are the most vulnerable of all NATO states, nestled in north-eastern Europe underneath Finland, each one

sharing some form of border with Russia. The alliance's Article 5 ('an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all') asserts that all NATO members are united in a pact of collective self-defence, and are required to aid one another militarily in the face of any external threats.[4] This means that any armed incursion from Russia into one or more of the Baltics should in theory result in the article's invocation, and subsequently other NATO member countries would dispatch their armed forces. Around 3,200 foreign troops are already stationed in the region: a UK-led battalion of 800 in Estonia, a Canada-led battalion of 1,200 in Latvia, and a Germany-led battalion consisting of 1,200 troops in Lithuania. Poland is home to a further 4,000 US-led troops.[5] These troops may be a paper tiger or a tripwire, unable to resist Russia's military might in the event of a full-scale invasion – but thus far they have served as an effective deterrent, and the Baltics are encouragingly optimistic about the likelihood of continued peace, in one sense at least.

But even if there is no direct military threat from their much larger eastern neighbour, Russia still conducts acts of aggression in the region, and the new global developments that have been taking place in the twenty-first century call into question the specific kinds of attacks that could fall under the remit of Article 5. While it explicitly states that the attack must be armed, new battlegrounds have started to emerge since it was established in 1949. Social media usage has exploded worldwide, the term 'information war' has fallen into the vernacular, and cyberattacks on media or government websites, banks or even electricity grids are part of the new normality. Humanitarian movements, governments and western society in general is starting to take psychological harm into account more seriously, too (at least on a surface level). The world is rapidly changing, as are the natures of international power relationships and struggles within it.

Russia has rolled out a variety of operations globally that fall into these categories. In March 2018, the US released a report outlining a Russian government attempt to target 'government entities and multiple US critical infrastructure sectors, including the energy, nuclear, commercial facilities, water, aviation, and critical manufacturing sectors'.[6] The 'Lisa case' in Germany in 2016 saw a fake story about a Russian-German girl raped by Arab migrants whip up a media storm. The now-infamous Internet Research Agency (IRA), or 'Russian troll farm' as it is colloquially known, has been accused of various low and high-level feats, from

rewriting news stories with a pro-Russia slant for fake websites, to posting on Facebook and Reddit, as well as comments on Russian political sites. In late 2018, Twitter released data that indicated that Russia had mobilized some 3,800 accounts on the day of the UK's Brexit vote, making comments in favour of the country leaving the bloc.[7] The overwhelming impact of Russia's activity is likely vastly overstated (the UK invariably has enough of its own domestic issues to arrive at Brexit independently), and often Russian entities can use western reactions as 'evidence' that the country is playing a pivotal role in foreign affairs. But intent is important, and through trial and error Russia can poke holes in and undermine existing western institutions to significant effect.

The Baltics are uniquely equipped to deal with the challenges posed by modern Russia. Having experienced the Soviet occupation, in Putin's Russia they have also been a 'testing ground' of sorts for methods that are later deployed further afield, albeit testing grounds with their own very specific sets of domestic issues that can be exploited. Their proximity, history and heightened exposure to the language and tactics of their eastern neighbours mean that they have a degree of expertise which the rest of the world could stand to benefit from in the present climate. Yet, they must also have to contend with being consistently defined as 'post-Soviet' – seen solely through the prism of their former occupying force.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania's paths to absolute independence were convoluted, violent and arduous, but also very heartfelt. On 23 August 1989, some 2 million people – pro-independence residents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania – united against Soviet occupation. They stood in a seamless line stretching for more than 400 kilometres. The non-violent protest, an expression of international solidarity, was timed to mark the fiftieth anniversary of a secret agreement between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany which divided Europe into spheres of influence – the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. In the wake of the Second World War, the US, UK and other western countries never recognized the subsequent occupation of the north-eastern European states as legitimate. But nonetheless, they remained under Soviet control for several decades. In December 1989, the People's Deputies Congress of the USSR finally declared the German-Soviet pact and its 'secret protocols' legally null and void. Lithuania was the first to declare independence, on 11 March 1990.[8]

The Soviet government imposed economic sanctions on Lithuania after March 1990, and less than a year later, in January 1991, fourteen

people were killed and more than 500 wounded as Kremlin troops crashed into the capital, Vilnius, to break up crowds of thousands who gathered to protect media outposts from direct Soviet influence, as well as the parliamentary building.[9] A similar situation took place at the Tallinn TV tower in August 1991, just one day after the Supreme Council of the Republic of Estonia declared the country independent: Soviet troops made an attempt to seize the structure but ultimately failed. In Latvia, crowds made barricades across Riga to preserve resources essential for the fast transfer of information, such as the international telephone exchange. Even back then, the 'information war' was at the centre of the confrontation, with each side recognizing the value of holding the tools through which they could impart their narrative to the wider populace, and the world. The call to the barricades was broadcast via radio. 'Communication was everything,' recalls Latvian state media.[10]

Nowadays, Soviet troops are long gone, and Vilnius' Cathedral Square sits serenely in a valley of craft beer pubs, baroque buildings, accordion players and teenagers Instagramming pictures in the sunshine or snow. Tallinn's TV tower is a major tourist site with panoramic views over the medieval city skyline. The vast Riga barricades (not unlike those of Kyiv's Maidan in 2014) that sat in the channels between the city's art nouveau buildings have been reduced to a small pyramid monument outside the centrally located St James's Cathedral, while crowds light fires in Riga's old town every January in commemoration of the collective Latvian effort and the seven participants who died (six resulting from attacks by Soviet special forces, one accidental).[11] Younger generations often look towards other capitals such as London or Berlin for cultural connections and travel, rather than towards one another or Moscow (although in recent years this does appear to be changing). However, this isn't the case with all residents, and the Baltic states are home to some significant social currents, very specific to the region alone. Just under 30 per cent of Estonia's population are ethnic Russians, with a similar percentage in Latvia (although the split in Riga is much more equal – Riga speaks more Russian than Latvian).[12] The proportion is much lower in Lithuania, with only 5.8 per cent of the country being ethnic Russians; there are actually more Poles – 6.6 per cent.[13] Lithuania was the only country of the three Baltic nations to automatically grant full citizenship rights to all local Russians after the Soviet collapse: both Latvia and Lithuania imposed citizenship restrictions on the native Russians, and nowadays there is still a sizeable 'resident alien' population in each country. In Lithuania, the

politics of the domestic Russian-speaking community is a comparatively minor issue, but one that the Russian state is willing to exploit in all three.

In a general sense, this book seeks to outline these modern internal currents in the Baltic states and Russia's presence there, in the context of wider geopolitical issues and the tumultuous history of the twentieth century, in particular looking at how the past informs the present (whether that be a mythologized or a factual understanding of the past) and how that framing of the past has influenced the social and political forces at play in the present day – including attitudes towards the necessity of continuity. In particular, I will be looking at relations with Russia and the future of Europe, but I also seek to present the Baltic states as vastly different entities from one another (despite the collective grouping) in addition to some significant similarities. Each Baltic state has oddly specific stereotypes of the others. Estonians are perceived as slow and reserved, Latvians are said to have six toes and the country is considered 'the worst' for Russians out of the three. Lithuanians are basketball fanatics with more of a 'large nation' mentality than the other two countries; as an old European power it occupied its surrounding regions in the fifteenth century. The village of Purnuskes, Lithuania (according to Lithuanians) is officially the geographic centre of Europe, and it honours the location with Europos Parkas or 'Europe Park'. In 2018, Lithuania even released a new campaign to encourage visitors to Vilnius, terming it the 'G-spot of Europe' to widespread international coverage, accompanied by an image of a woman's hand gripping a sheet bearing the image of a map at the point at which Lithuania is located. Lithuanian and Latvian share some linguistic commonalities – both have Indo-European roots (although they are far from mutually intelligible), and Lithuanian has been repeatedly linked to Sanskrit. However, Estonia's language is Finno-Ugric (related to both Finnish and Hungarian). It is often mocked for having 'no sex and no future' – genderless and devoid of a future tense. The country regards itself as more 'Scandinavian' than its two Baltic siblings.

The region is characterized by acres of dense forests, lakes and swamps, home to wildlife including wolves, wild boar, and the occasional bear, providing a certain sense of rural simplicity and fairytale-like mystery. One Estonian proverb says 'mets on vaese mehe kasukas' – 'the forest is a poor man's coat' and the topography has played a significant role in twentieth-century history too, providing vital cover for the Baltic guerrilla movements against the Soviets; the partisans who waged covert war during the occupation were known in each country as the 'Forest

Brothers' and have attained an almost mythological status. The Baltic states remained pagan until the fourteenth century (making them the last pagan states in Europe) and there is still a present and pervasive sense of this nature-rooted spirituality in each country – even today the woods are scattered with sacred groves, sacrificial stones and magical sites steeped in ancient lore. But the forests also serve to bolster the local economy; for example, the timber industry makes up one-tenth of Estonia's exports and 22 per cent of its industrial GDP, and mass deforestation is becoming a strong political issue among conservationists and proponents of old pagan spirituality alike.[14]

This spirituality can be over-romanticized too, and the countries are often used as a marker of backwardness. 'Even Latvia', 'even Estonia', 'even Lithuania' are frequently used as comparative examples when western Europe falls behind, suggesting a lack of progress in the region. Yet these countries' prior instability has produced the perfect climate for flexibility, practicality and innovation. Freedom House's flagship 2019 report saw the US falling below 'Greece, Latvia and Mauritius', the implication in several subsequent news stories being that the US should be embarrassed about a lack of progress relative to 'eastern Europe'. The countries have made leaps and bounds in terms of technological progress, for example Skype and TransferWise both originated in Estonia, and Starship Technologies' delivery robots have 'even' been deployed in Silicon Valley.

Politically, since the early 1990s, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have all had to deal with the consequences of totalitarianism, as well as mixed governmental, international and physical results from active similar efforts to 'decommunize'. There have been several common features across the Baltic states: the removal or relocation of Soviet-era monuments, the need for concerted nation-building efforts, and various lustration processes. Even the celebrations of anniversaries have some commonalities; in 2018, the Baltics celebrated 100 years since independence – not from the Soviet Union but rather the Tsarist era, from which the Baltics freed themselves in 1918. The Russian Empire absorbed the Estonian and Livonian areas in the eighteenth century after the Great Northern War, which at that point had both been Swedish dominions. At the end of the eighteenth century, the Austrian Empire, the Russian Empire and Prussia ultimately managed to divide the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth during the First, Second and Third Partitions of Poland, with Imperial Russia annexing territory that spanned parts of today's Ukraine, Minsk, Vilnius and the coastal city of Liepaja in today's Latvia. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, the

Bolshevik party ultimately recognized the independence of the Baltic nations – much to the displeasure of the Latvian and Estonian communists attracted to the movement (in northern Latvia, not including Riga, the Bolsheviks attained 72 per cent of the vote in Russian Constituent Assembly elections in November 1917).[15]

The Baltic nations had to rally around points of commonality in order to secure their second independence in 1991. Estonian scholar Vello Pettai identifies five different commonalities present in the struggle for independence from the Soviet Union: environmental mobilization, calendar demonstrations, intellectuals' leadership, organized movements and personnel changes. The marking of anniversaries was of prime importance – regular people would gather to observe a particular political anniversary. 'Given considerable overlaps in the history of the Baltic states during the 20th century, it was not surprising that the three nations would quickly find common or analogous historical dates around which to recognize moments of national suffering or triumph,' Pettai wrote.[16] In Latvia, dissident opposition group Helsinki-86 organized its first public meeting on 14 June 1987 to commemorate the mass deportation of Balts by Stalin in 1941. Estonian dissident, Tiit Madisson, happened to be in attendance and took the idea back to Estonia and began an underground effort to organize a similar demonstration on 23 August, the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. The idea spread to Lithuania, too, and a broad selection of anniversary dates started to be marked. That the Baltic states mark their centenary of independence in 2018 is a direct result of this Soviet-era drive to establish common timestamps.

De-russification has also seen stringent language policies adopted, to ensure that national languages are used instead of Russian. Estonia and Latvia had more direct and stable political paths than Lithuania as parliamentary democracies and have devoted considerable resources to restitution to ensure property is returned to former owners who lost out under Soviet nationalization policies. Lithuania developed as a presidential democracy and was generally more decentralized. Following the Soviet collapse, it was widely acknowledged that former communists could not be allocated the task of undertaking democratic reforms, and Estonia's Communist Party elites 'proved incapable of reconsolidating their power in the new republican legislature'.[17] In Estonia and Latvia the lustration laws implemented in 1995 allowed for the screening and 'prosecuting' of former communist leaders, candidates for office, and selected public employees.[18] The process in Lithuania was slightly different because of

the automatic granting of citizenship to the comparatively low Russian population – 'there was no legislation restricting those who had connections to the KGB from holding state office, which resulted in a chaotic search for the KGB informants among the political leaders of the new country, even incriminating such well-known independence fighters as Prime Minister Kazimiera Prunskiene,' wrote Dr Ieva Zake.[19] Lithuania's Law of Lustration was only passed in the year 2000. In each Baltic state these processes happened in a climate of some uncertainty; the Soviet collapse saw systematic file destruction and loss, so records of KGB activity and complete lists of inactive agents were difficult to piece together, despite a concerted effort to vet public officials and whether or not they may have aided or collaborated with the Soviet apparatus.

Nowadays the words 'socialism' and 'communism' have assumed an ugly shapelessness in the formerly occupied Baltics. The Soviet collapse and the equation of Stalinism and the Soviet era with socialism or communism means that the humanistic and pluralistic ideals buttressing the ideologies buckled, subsumed by the cacophony of occupation. Inequality actually grew in the Baltic region following the Soviet collapse – quite rapidly in its immediate aftermath as the market economy emerged, but it has since lessened; there was no unemployment and gender, age and nationality had little bearing on wage discrepancies in the Soviet Union.[20] Women's wages are lower (approximately 70 per cent of those of men by some accounts) – there have been no major interventions aimed at achieving gender equality. On top of that, older people who do not have a strong grasp of the local languages can have a hard time fitting into the labour force. Youth unemployment remains an issue, especially now there is no centrally governed system aimed at engaging youngsters in labour market activities.[21] Soviet factory closures have also contributed to high unemployment levels, especially in areas which developed around specific industries. Outward migration is the highest in the European Union, and there are concerns of a brain drain as skilled workers such as medics can often find higher pay abroad.

Russia, as well as the Baltics, has also had to cope with the hangover from the Soviet collapse. There is still sweeping nostalgia for the USSR and vastly exaggerated, but widespread, declining, support for Russian President Vladimir Putin inside Russia (and vastly understated support outside). The population has had to compartmentalize the Soviet and Russian Federation periods and register the ideological separation, but must also simultaneously, unconsciously integrate them both, especially

the older generations. To many people, the Soviet Union symbolized morality and justice, and the population was community-spirited – this is strongly felt among those even in the Baltics who remember the Soviet Union. 'I have read many stories, watched many films where the role model was a young pioneer who is helping elderly people, is brave and honest, etc.,' says historian Ieva Gundare, who now helps edit a Latvian literary monthly *Rīgas Laiks*. 'I am absolutely sure that there is an impact of Soviet ideology on my mindset. Of course, it is very mixed with all kinds of other ideas (many of them contradictory, [and] gained when I was in high-school during the perestroika period: nationalistic ideas from our history teacher, general humanist ideas from our Russian literature teacher. In my family we did not talk of values like this,' she adds.[22]

One of Nobel Prize-winner Svetlana Alexievich's Russian interviewees, a former Communist Party secretary, nostalgically observed: 'socialism isn't just labour camps, informants and the Iron Curtain, it's also a bright, just world: Everything is shared, the weak are pitied, and compassion rules. Instead of grabbing everything you can, you feel for others.'[23] However, she added that 'They weren't building themselves yachts with Champagne showers,' suggesting part of this nostalgia is tied to Russia's present situation under Putin – ostensibly a kleptocratic petrostate with a gaping divide between rich and poor.[24]

But Putin is not only popular inside Russia. He is also something of a symbol of rebellion internationally, and even enjoys a degree of popularity inside the Baltic states. Putin's disregard for international protocol, the 'rules-based international order' and partial reliance on informal power networks, which operate both inside Russia and abroad, combined with his strength and dismissiveness of others, have earned him some respect among those unfamiliar with Russia's domestic situation first-hand. Elements of class war are still at play, and a certain veneration of Russia as a haven for the socioeconomically deprived or disenfranchised lingers. In the Baltics, many of those people are native Russians. One major theme I try to explore in this text is the idea of 'Russophobia' in the Baltic states combined with its manifestation – how native nationality relates to present-day socioeconomic position and perceived victimization, how much this is attributable to language policies as opposed to xenophobia (and where that overlap might occur), and to what extent the original occupation is still perceived as 'class warfare' – whether Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania still symbolize the bourgeoisie in the twenty-first-century shadow of Russia's 1917 revolution. Several complicated currents are at play.

My personal interest stems in part from a combination of my own lived experiences and lineage. As a journalist, the obvious narrative to espouse is that the black hole in my family history led me to seek my Baltic roots. But in truth, I do not know to what extent this had an impact. I was born with two somewhat archaic Estonian names – my own maternal grandmother, 'Grandma Meeri', escaped Estonia on the roof of a train during the Soviet occupation, and other relatives by boat to Sweden. But I have never considered myself anything but British. My primary fields of interest were originally contemporary Russian politics, late-imperial literature and twentieth-century art history; I first moved to St Petersburg in 2011 to study these subjects for my MA and ended up leaving Moscow in 2015.

In that time, I worked both inside a Kremlin-backed news organization and in independent media. I witnessed first-hand the slow erosion of civil and personal freedoms in all directions, and the pervasive political apathy, opportunism, incompetence, fear, and sense of disempowerment that this generated, but which itself helped to facilitate this erosion. I observed both the patriotic pageantry of World War Two in public memory and impassioned personal responses rooted in loss, as well as both regret and relief at the Soviet collapse. I also saw the vast differences in living standards between Moscow and almost everywhere else that I travelled to in the country. As the geopolitical situation escalated when Russia-backed troops entered eastern Ukraine (to use the wilfully blind terminology for 'Russia invaded'), and flight MH17 was tragically shot down in 2014, I started wondering more what further escalation in eastern Europe could mean for the Baltic region – aided by speculation on that very topic. But it was a real concern. What would happen to the countries I grew up knowing to be free, as an impassioned supporter of that freedom on account of my own personal history?

I became more sensitive to the stream of propaganda being pumped out by internal Russian news outlets relating to the Baltic states, namely that they are NATO puppets, full of Nazi sympathizers, and subjugate their Russian-speaking populations. Just as I went to Russia to explore its present-day realities first-hand, I was compelled to understand the position of the Baltics between east and west first-hand, armed with this new experience from 'the Russian side'.

In each country (Russia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) I undertook great efforts to explore all layers of society. My work on Russia is largely based on a combination of well-documented cumulative experience, used and

unused 'potential article' material I collected over my years there, and long-distance web-based interviews. However, I conducted formal in-person interviews across the Baltic states specifically for the book, totalling somewhere between 120 and 150. I gathered personal stories from skinheads, religious fundamentalists, 'non-citizen' aliens (those who never took new citizenship after the Soviet collapse) and local Russians, as well as information from high-level politicians, academics, and the creative artists and curators who help shape public memory and culture. Through all of these I hope that I developed a strong understanding of the relationships between domestic politics, geopolitics, socioeconomic problems, past and present, and different generations' responses to family histories that penetrate each culture.

I relied predominantly upon qualitative social research, rather than quantitative, although I have consulted a variety of statistics portals and academic journals across my studies to bolster my sense of perspective. Interviews were conducted in English and Russian; there was a generational divide and I could speak to older people in Russian, and younger people in English. I also leaned on the occasional interpreter. I do not speak Latvian or Lithuanian, and I consider myself a beginner in Estonian. I only know the songs or phrases that I have absorbed through basic study, several trips over the years, and fragments passed down via my mother.

Parts of my own family history are still something of a mystery; it seems common that the generation forced to leave under the Soviets do not want to discuss the events of their departure in great detail, and many people left loved ones behind with little or no knowledge of what might have happened to them, or vice versa. Some may have collaborated with either Soviets or Nazis, and survived with a burden of guilt. I am only alive because my grandmother was one of the 'fortunate' ones who managed to escape. While in the past five years it is academically fashionable to explore emotional histories, individual and collective trauma, mental health, and its interaction with society, relationships and politics, it is only in recent years – in my generation – that the stigma surrounding trauma has started to fade.

Interviewing some older members of society was very difficult at times for both the interviewee and myself. I am particularly grateful to those who were able to speak so candidly about their experiences, some of whom I have not done full justice to, but who still remain imprinted on my memory.

1 THE SHADOW OF THE PAST

'Trust me: if you scratch any Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian of my generation, and you ask them who was worse – the Soviets or the Nazis? – the Soviets were way, way worse,' says Felicia, an eighty-year-old woman via Skype from southern California. She has a halo of thick white hair, eyes nearly as round as her glasses, and is surprisingly glib about an illness which she believes will kill her. When the Soviets occupied Lithuania in the 1940s as part of Joseph Stalin's plan to annexe the Baltic states, she was bundled out of the country as a refugee to spend a chunk of her childhood in displaced person camps in Germany. She was only eight or nine when she left. 'It was kind of an exciting trip,' she says. 'For my sister it was sheer misery. And my parents, the poor things.'

Her bleak history is almost hard to believe; she is merry to the point of being ethereal and now owns the vast collection of dolls she once longed for as a child. Her twinkle is perhaps indicative of her youthful lack of awareness in the 1940s, blind to the full harshness of wartime Europe. But her story, and that of her family, is one of many similar tales that shape the modern consciousness of Baltic residents and refugees alike – however mythologized or imagined they might be.

There were two Soviet occupations of the Baltic states: the first in 1940–1, and the second from June 1944 which lasted until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In 1941, the Nazis broke the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact overnight – the secret nonaggression agreement between Hitler and Stalin (which saw Lithuania initially fall on the German side before a revision in September 1939).[1] 'All of a sudden . . . we hear these artillery shells and shots going on, and it turns out the Germans just had their blitzkrieg,' Felicia recalls, adding that they thought 'thank God' when the stormtroopers arrived. They were 'very polite and they were very nice,

and they were kind, and they were clean. And they were all the things that the Soviets were not.'

Felicia pauses, realizing the gravity of what she is saying. She takes a moment to emphasize that she is only speaking on behalf of the 'ethnic' populations, rather than the Jews. She mentions 'barbaric' thievery and rape.

The memory of the Second World War and beyond is still deeply etched into the fabric of modern society in every single Baltic state – in public space, education and art (to name just a few). The brutality of accounts from the era is horrifying, and undoubtedly helps sculpt present-day Baltic attitudes to contemporary Russia. They provide a dominant narrative of Baltic residents being cornered into self-defence after victimization at the hands of two militarily superior invading forces. It's hardly surprising they take on this tone; conservative estimates suggest that, in total, Soviet mass deportations saw at least 200,000 people forcibly removed from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania and taken to Siberia and Kazakhstan.[2] Higher estimates put the figure closer to 371,000–400,000.[3]

In the Museum of Occupations in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, people of around the same age as Felicia recollect similarly dismal experiences of having been displaced after fleeing the Baltics. Others who stayed in the country during and after the war recount the grim events to which they bore witness. Magnus Kald from the largest Estonian island, Saaremaa, died in 2014, but every twenty-five minutes or so, his voice still echoes through the glass-walled building on loop. 'Soviets tortured people at the castle – the hands of most of the women were tied behind their backs with barbed wire, breasts amputated.' As his voice circles, a steady rotation of tourists take the three seats in front. He says that pins were pushed into their noses and under their nails, and that in another building, orchestras played to drown out the sounds of screaming.

The personal and inherited memories of violence from the era unsurprisingly spill over into the literary canon. In Finnish-Estonian author Sofi Oksanen's 2008 novel *Purge*, both a guarded elderly woman and one of her younger relatives are subjected to sex crimes at the hands of Russians. The book describes the elderly woman's attempts to isolate herself from society while simultaneously managing to silently identify fellow survivors. 'From every trembling hand, she could tell – there's another one. From every flinch at the sound of a Russian soldier's shout and every lurch at the tramp of boots. Her, too?' The semi-autobiographical *A Woman in Amber: Healing the Trauma of War and Exile* by Latvian

author Agate Nesaule also details similar, graphic experiences of acts of sexual violence committed against Latvian women at the hands of the Soviet soldiers during the Second World War, and how she learned as a young child that women easily become prey during conflict.[4] In the book, Nesaule's own mother encouraged her to move to the front of a queue to be shot so she could avoid witnessing others being tortured.

Of course, both texts illustrate problematic boundaries between history and fiction. It is impossible to quantify how widespread gender-based violence was, and the topic is so ephemeral too because of lack of documentation and stigma. One man of Latvian émigré parentage, when I brought up the subject, said it was 'an interesting topic that I have not heard about'. Even documentary accounts are sometimes left implicit or tackled in an evasive manner. In Imbi Paju's 2005 documentary *Memories Denied*, despite focusing on the female experience, she never directly confronts the subject of sexual violence with her interviewees who were incarcerated at Tallinn's Patarei prison.[5]

'I wish my sister were still alive,' Felicia clarifies. 'She was terrified of falling into Soviet hands when they returned in 1944.' She relays unverifiable, but unnervingly specific stories passed though the teenage girl rumour mills, that her sister later passed on to her. 'Rape for the ordinary Russian peasant-soldier was a group game, showing off who could do it longer-shorter-wilder . . . her opinion [of Nazis] was that for them it was more a single person act of anger, expression of power or resentment,' she said. 'Germans prided themselves on being "cultured"'. The absence of written accounts provides very strong grounds for denial, and along with the dearth of proof, such accounts rely on an understanding of individuals or groups as representations of the whole (e.g. in terms of their nationality).

In the event that a case was reported, there could be serious negative consequences for the accuser. Lithuanian Elena Spirgevičienė filed a complaint with the Soviet Union's Central Committee of the Communist Party on 10 June 1959 alleging that a Soviet partisan (there were both Soviet and Lithuanian partisans), Alfonsas Čeponis, was part of a group who raped her, murdered her sister and attempted to rape then killed her daughter. Čeponis, along with two other Soviet partisans with distinctly Lithuanian names, had been posthumously granted the title Hero of the Soviet Union in 1958 as part of a Soviet attempt to suggest Lithuanian origins to the Soviet partisan movement. Spirgevičienė portrayed herself as pro-Soviet and termed Čeponis a bandit, therefore presenting the violence