Vyborg Local Identity: A Case Study of Self-Narrative

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Abstract: The identity of Vyborg citizens, born after World War II, is determined by both the appropriation and negation of the space they inhabit. This paper analyses identity in terms of a double "estrangement", a concept coined by the Russian Formalists in the 1920s and 1930s. Estrangement forms a framework in which local exceptionality is expressed and maintained. Assimilation in Vyborg, the former Finnish city Viipuri occupied by the Soviet Army in March, 1940, and now part of Russia's Saint Peterburg District, is interpreted here as an interactive process. According to several case studies presented in this paper, people attempt to assimilate the new space while negating and reinterpreting their past. At the same time, the space (landscape, architecture, topography, and cultural landmarks) assimilates the people, providing a fundamental context for the construction of their self-identity. A close reading of two self-narratives with burial practice as their central theme illustrates this hypothesis. The identity narrative becomes coherent and reveals the complexity of Vyborg's collective memory only when the subjects overcome their denial of the past in favour of reflexivity and the retrieval of subjectivity.

Keywords: local identity, self-narrative, collective memory, historical memory, estrangement, reflexivity, Vyborg

维堡的地方身份：自我叙述案例研究

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　　摘　要：二战后，维堡市民的身份由他们对其居住空间的挪用与否定来

决定。本文采用俄国形式主义者在 20 世纪 20 至 30 年代创造的术语——双重"陌生化"来分析身份问题。陌生化构成一个表达和保留地方独特性的框架。维堡曾是芬兰的维伊普里，在 1940 年 3 月被苏联军队占领，现在成了俄国圣彼得堡的一个部分，本文认为它的同化是一个相互作用的过程。对相关案例的研究表明，人们在试图同化一个新地区的同时又否定和重释他们的过去。这个地区（包括景观、建筑、地形、文化标志）在同化居民的同时，为他们提供了建构自我身份的基本语境。本文通过细读两个以下葬为核心主题的自我叙述来说明这一假设。只有当主体以自反性克服他们对过去的否认，恢复主体性，身份叙述才能够清晰连贯地反映维堡集体记忆的复杂性。

To Kari K. Laurla (1943 – 2006)
who taught me to love Vyborg,
the city to which we both belong

Ⅰ. Introduction

As I was born in Vyborg myself, this article may be regarded as a case of self-fashioning and self-narration. It was started in 2007 as a historical study on the reuse of old graves in Vyborg. My objective was to evaluate this practice, which at the time I found bizarre and psychologically traumatic. Later, I treated the essay resulting from my research as a self-narrative, using narratological tools to analyse my own text. At that point I developed the hypothesis that my local identity had dominated my specific and traumatised outlook as the author of the essay.

Those who settled in Vyborg after World War Ⅱ developed a clear understanding of their geographic, ethno-political, and cultural separation from other people. Being dislocated and cut off from the Soviet "mainland", they no longer belonged to their places of origin all around the USSR, which they had left to settle in Vyborg. Moreover, because of the compulsory, politically determined nature of their dislocation, they could not associate themselves with the city's former

citizens, the Finns, who had been forced to leave their homes, schools, and theatres for the new settlers to use. The new locals quickly discovered that the other settlers were also strangers to them, many having come from places they had never heard of. Consequently, members of this haphazard post-war community in Vyborg did not have in common the customary assumptions and stereotypes of their own local cultural background. (Granitsa, 2005) Only their children and grandchildren born in Vyborg felt free of the need to manage the effect of displacement and loss.

Several sets of theoretical tools have been particularly useful in the present study. Considering the conflicted nature of Vyborg's local identity, several sets of theoretical tools are needed to analyse it in a consistent, convincing manner. The first set is grouped around a simplified ("dispirited" according to Heartfield) version of Hegel's theory of self and other, stating that "the juxtaposition towards the other constitutes the self" (Heartfield, 2005). This Hegelian notion is widely known nowadays as the concept of "othering", and is used in gender and postcolonial studies to help researchers write on the subject of immigration, integration, and other experiences leading to identity crises. The concept of "othering" is essential in this study, because it allows the portrayal of Vyborg citizens as a community that defines itself in contrast to both the former inhabitants of the city and the newcomers who relocated from various places across Soviet Russia.

Certain aspects of imagology have also proven relevant to the present study. The concept, as stated in Beller and Leersen, helps reveal "the dynamics between those images which characterise the other (hetero-images) and those which characterise one's own domestic identity (self-images or auto-images)" (2007, p. xiv). In this paper, I often interpret the national aspect of Vyborg's self-identity as a misunderstanding and an artificial construct that obscures the city dwellers' resolution of their identity crises.

Yet another set of theoretical concepts used in this research derives from theories of historical memory. The idea that national identities are psychological/linguistic constructs gained critical acclaim at the end of the twentieth century. (Giesen & Berding, 1996) It is closely linked to the concept of historical awareness, which most scholars also present as a construct. (Hobsbawn & Ranger, 1983; Nora, 1992) One could consider both ideas as belonging to the same scientific paradigm, which is predicated on the nature of their contractedness. When a similar approach is

applied to the study of Vyborg, however, it generates conflicting results, revealing, for example, that local identity can in no way be seen as a miniscule component of Russian national identity. In other words, what works well in terms of *Les Lieux de memoire* all over Russia fails in Vyborg.

Having tried several theoretical approaches to allow me to frame my study of Vyborg's self-identity, I decided on semiotics and narratology as the fields could provide the most fundamental theoretical insight in the present study. Both are interdisciplinary, with Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity to be credited in the first instance (Ricoeur, 1992). Therefore, "narrative" is used in my article as a general term to describe the "medium that displays the goals and intentions of human actors; makes individuals, cultures, societies, and historical epochs comprehensible as wholes; humanises time; allows us to contemplate the effects of our actions and to alter the directions of our lives" (Richardson, 1990, p. 20).

Ⅱ. Narration (Case #1)

Vyborg, the biggest city on the Karelian Isthmus, compels researchers to describe it as a palimpsest. This colourful metaphor works well in this case, because over the course of its long history starting in 1293, it has been part of Sweden, the Russian Empire, Finland, and the USSR, and presently the Russian Federation. From the moment of its foundation, the city has been an active agent of the ongoing cultural process. Palimpsest implies that old texts cannot be completely obliterated— something always remains and shines through the fabric of the new narrative. This is also true for Vyborg. The cultural texts of the city have never been completely obliterated, and whenever a new layer was added, it became merely a transparent coating that often dramatically changed the intended effect.

The Red Army first occupied Vyborg in March, 1940, in the course of the 1939－1940 Winter War. In August 1941, the occupied territories were recovered by the Finns, and the Soviets abandoned the city, leaving behind their buried dead.

Dozens of cemeteries are spread around Vyborg and its suburbs, providing scholars with one of the brightest insights into the city's palimpsestic nature. In the 1940s, most of the graveyards were divided into Finnish, Swedish, German, and Russian Orthodox sections; some also had Jewish and Muslim areas. When the Finns returned to the city in 1941, they noticed no cemetery vandalism, especially

regarding tombstones or statues. For the "dead of the past", the Soviets had needed relatively little space to dispose of bodies, as most of their graves were military-style mass burial places, the so-called *bratskiye mogily* (братские могилы), in which hundreds, sometimes thousands, of bodies were deposited under a single tombstone large enough to list all of the identified victims' names. The Soviets had used mainly the Russian Orthodox cemetery in Sorvali, placing their graves next to the graveyard's central gate or near the main road. Having spared the existing graves, they inflicted only unintentional damage resulting from burial works in the vicinity and from the large vehicles used for transporting bodies. Several cases of reusing old Finnish graves were reported, but this was not a common practice. (Tolstikove & Lankinen, 2007)

After 1944, when Vyborg was reoccupied (or "liberated" as the Soviets preferred to put it), the situation with Vyborg's cemeteries began to change, as they also began to serve as sites of "forced relocation". In 1944 there were three Orthodox cemeteries in the city. Two of these were located in the Ristimaki and Sorvali districts, occupying a compact space next to the Orthodox Churches. Two of the Russian cemeteries bordered Swedish, German, Finnish, and Jewish cemetery areas, while the third was a separate Russian Orthodox graveyard near Ilinskaya Church. Although at least two of the three Orthodox cemeteries had enough space to accommodate the "newcoming" dead for twenty or thirty upcoming years, the Soviets, ignoring common sense, adopted a policy preoccupied with full erasure of Vyborg's past or its palimpsestic replacement with the Soviet present.

Having taken over the city, the new inhabitants set about demolishing all of the Russian Orthodox cemeteries, starting with the Orthodox churches. In the process, they also eliminated a collective Soviet military grave in the Orthodox sector of Sorvali—a blatantly meaningless act, given that the land was reused only in the 1960s and 1970s when a new road, petrol station, and car park were constructed over the former graveyards.

Other parts of Vyborg's cemeteries (Finnish, Swedish, German, and Jewish) were neglected but left intact. The only eloquent exception was the old Finnish sector of the Ristimaki cemetery, which by then had been isolated from the rest of the graveyard by a road and a stone wall. The Soviets began reusing this cemetery in 1945, replacing the mass grave of the Sorvali Russian Orthodox cemetery that had

been created in 1940. Until the mid-1960s, the Finnish part of Ristimaki remained the city's main active cemetery. This cemetery can now be read as a two-layered text, with the new Soviet narrative "written over" the Finnish original. The most striking feature of this graveyard text is its tombstones. The Soviet city-dwellers did not remove the Finnish monuments, but instead reused them, applying several obliteration and replacement techniques. The simplest method was to write a new name above the original inscription with water-resistant paint, such as oil. Another method involved scratching off the old name and carving a new one between the badly distorted lines of the old text. Finally, the newcomers used only the grave without altering the tombstone, paying no attention to the name on it. In this case, the new dead remained unnamed and could be identified only by those relatives who had claimed the grave.

The strategies applied by the citizens of Vyborg when reusing the city's cemeteries allow me to treat these deeds of cultural violence as a series of symbolic acts, which in addition to fulfilling a utilitarian purpose, also have a detectable message related to Vyborg's local identity. The story of the Ristimaki cemetery immediately reveals at least one implication, associated with a rhymed Russian saying, *Bylo vashe—stalo nashe* (Once yours—now ours). This message is closely linked to the political, social, and economic agenda of the Soviet state, which was pronounced not only at the time of the occupation, but also during subsequent decades. Often cited in cartoons and popular fiction and widely used in common speech, the rhyme was not only familiar to adults, but also used by every Russian child. The popularity of this saying and its semantic proximity to the propaganda texts of the 1940s relate to the Soviet takeover of Finland. In other words, while interpreting the narrative of the Vyborg cemetery, I attempt to treat it linguistically, detecting a layer of meaning that is not only verbal in form, but also derived from the vernacular. This approach emphasises such aspects of the Soviet treatment of Vyborg's cemeteries—and more broadly, its cultural memory—as translation.

In light of this interpretation, three types of Soviet treatment of cemeteries become apparent. The first can be termed "acceptance", presupposing the new city dweller's passivity in relation to the past. They leave the cemeteries as they were, as if to say that their city had undergone no ownership change. The "once yours, now ours" rule does not apply in this case, as no one claims the abandoned property. As

a consequence, there is no verbal rendering of the original historic narrative, and thus, no translation.

The second type can be termed "destruction", the demolition of Russian cemeteries established on Finnish territory in the past. Although the Soviets needed cemeteries, they refused to use Russian cemeteries to bury their dead, as reuse could be interpreted as a meaningless act of translation from Russian into Russian. By demolishing the Russian cemeteries in Vyborg, the Soviets erased the palimpsest of memory, replacing it—decades later—with a utilitarian layer of urban structures. This choice easily compares to an incompetent translation practice, summarised by the rule of thumb: "If you don't know how to translate something, omit it."

The third type of Soviet memory narrative elucidated by the treatment of cemeteries in Vyborg can be termed "repression". Its goal is to turn a Finnish cemetery into a Russian one, translating the Finnish graveyard into the language of the occupants. One of the tools of such translation involved introducing the typically Russian iron fences separating each grave from the others. Another tool, already mentioned, was re-marking the graves with new names.

According to Paul Connerton (2011), cultural memory studies recognise seven types of forgetting. The reuse of Finnish graves seems to belong to the *repressive erasure* type that was first widely used in ancient Rome (*danatio memoriae*), and later gained popularity among totalitarian regimes. This type of forgetting "has the effect not of *destroying* memory but of *dishonouring* it" (Connerton, 2011, p. 41). Erasing or writing over the names of the dead on old Finnish graveyards allowed the Soviet inhabitants of Vyborg to deny the earlier Vyborg history. Among the functions of this historical practice, there was purpose in masking the fact that a lot of Russians had been living in "bourgeois" Finland. Naturally, Communist propaganda would have been at loss to answer simple questions about the past, such as: "If there were thousands of Russians buried in Vyborg, where are their relatives, colleagues, and friends? Are they all dead, too? And if not, where are they relocated?" Any hint that might have evoked the idea of thousands of Russians previously living in Finland who might have chosen not to be Soviet citizens was to be banished. The fear of failing to reconcile Vyborg's past with its present was so great that the Soviet government chose to destroy cemeteries, excavate and get rid of remains, and turn graveyards into construction sites rather than face such unwelcome

questions.

Two decades later, Vyborg faced the need for a new cemetery. The "new" graveyard occupied the site of the old Finnish cemetery. It preserved its Finnish name Kangas, thus giving life to a new local euphemism. In Vyborg, *to go to Kangas* means *to die*. Thus, Vyborg's *genius loci* is still at work.

In the 1980s, yet another cemetery was established, occupying a new place. This time it had no Finnish name, yet also bore no resemblance to a traditional Russian cemetery, due to its open, park-like layout and broad paths without grates or fences. In terms of narratology, this new version of a Vyborg cemetery has finally turned the people who believed they were the authors of their urban text into what they actually were: narrators, storytellers who existed within the story while simultaneously spinning the tale. Definitely unreliable, these narrators sought to usurp the authorial voice of their city, the site of memory which is to remain omnipotent and omniscient.

Ⅲ. Narration (Case #2)

I have lived in St. Petersburg since 1975. A number of my relatives were buried in the graveyards of this city which we usually visit at least twice a year. The real history of the cemetery in St. Petersburg where my in-laws are buried is similar to that of all old cemeteries in the city, and to the history of most old graveyards in big cities all over Russia. The cemetery started functioning in the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1915 it was full and no more burials were sanctioned. In the mid-1920s, it started functioning again. Then it was closed once more, later opened, and then closed again. Nowadays it is in full operation with a new church built there ten years ago. Approximately 10 − 15 per cent of the original site was added to the old cemetery as a new space, but failed to resolve the shortage of burial space. There is only one way to solve it—to reuse old graves, a practice that has been followed for dozens of years. I do not wish to discuss the moral issues of such reuse, an issue which seems common worldwide. It also seems to have longevity; thus, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio."

The thing that surprised me most is that people visiting the cemetery tend to filter or block out any signs of the old practice of grave reuse. They may read the names on gravestones dating from the 1860s to the 1880s (as I have done for the

past twenty years) without questioning why such gravestones are so rare and their numbers constantly decreasing. There are a lot of obvious questions that adults consciously—or unconsciously, some may argue—avoid asking.

The problem as I see it is why I, like many other people born in Vyborg, consider the practice of reusing old Finnish graves in Case #1 to be a meaningful performative act, whereas similar burial practices elsewhere reside in the blind spot of my brain where they ring no bell and eventually signify nothing.

The attitudes in Case #2, where we refuse to see—and thus to interpret—the obvious, are maintained by constantly and selectively refraining from engaging our decoding abilities. This can be explained in a number of ways, depending on the approach one prefers, e. g., in terms of psychology.

By contrast, Case #1 provides us with an example in which the decoding is switched on to ensure that we regard certain practices as performative acts.

In accordance with my hypothesis, the reason a person suspends interpretative judgment in one case yet treats the same subject, the same burial practice, as a traumatizing text in another, is the use of different points of view involving different sets of attitudes. A self-identity profile is always complex, and each emerging situation or context may change one's priorities. Sometimes gender is at the top; at other times it is ethnic background or social status.

For me, as for a lot of people of my age who were born in Vyborg, it is this place that activates our local identity; it is in Vyborg that this identity is primary. There is no need to feel oneself a *Viipurin poika* (Finnish for *a boy from Vyborg*) when you are in St. Petersburg, Moscow, or elsewhere.

It seems as simple as that. Local people tend to see local things differently.

The classical social theories of Marx, Weber, or Durkheim do not easily apply here, as Vyborg's "new settlers" were not engaged in immigration or integration. They were not a separate social, ethnic, or cultural group integrating into a society, as do the ethnic minorities of contemporary Europe, where something like "acculturation" takes place. The Vyborg settlers emerged into a partly foreign material culture. They obtained a functioning urban infrastructure: libraries, theatre, archives, and buildings, including homes as households with kitchenware, pottery, china, etc. ready for use. There was tap water and hot water in every flat, and the cottages looked similar to the typical village dwellings the new settlers had

left. Similar, but far better equipped and differently organized. This is where the first gaps occurred between official propaganda and personal experience. Those who "were exploited by the local bourgeoisie" and "needed liberating" first fought fiercely against the liberators. And then the liberators discovered that the "exploited" Finnish workers and farmers lived in much better conditions than did the Soviet people.

As a result, the main features of the Vyborg local identity area refusal to belong and a distinct tendency to differ.

Ⅳ. Conclusions

The settlers' children who were born in Vyborg after World War II belong to a unified, culturally constructed community characterised by self-seclusion, self-identification, and othering, and the expression and maintenance of a local identity. The formation of the Vyborg local identity is tightly bound to time and space, and is the central hypothesis of this article. The lived experience is built around the representation of a "newly learned" past for those who were eager to learn more about local history. Thus local identity is shaped by the irreconcilable difference between the lived experience, a variety of memories, and the official historiographies (both Soviet and Finnish). Nevertheless, locals share a clear understanding that they are disconnected and cut off from others in this country, even from St. Petersburg, to whose region Vyborg belongs as one of its administrative centres. At the same time, the citizens of Vyborg can freely identify with both Russians and Finns. In this paper, I have proposed a specific hypothesis that Vyborg's local identity is determined by a double estrangement, or defamiliarisation, to use Victor Shklovsky's literary term. This device works through its double power to form the framework within which local identity is expressed and maintained. Assimilation here might be considered an interactive process: people trying to assimilate a new space while the space (landscape, architecture, etc.) is assimilating the people, forming an important part of the framework in which local identity is being constructed. The advanced hypothesis can be supported by Berzonsky's self-identity model (Berzonsky, 2011), according to which 'the perception and understanding of information from reality (i. e., social, cultural, and physical contexts) is filtered through people's theoretical constructs and identity

structure, which in turn influence what information they attend to and encode and how this information is interpreted.

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