

A Critical and Theoretical Re-imagining of ‘Victimhood Nationalism’: The Case of National Victimhood of the Baltic Region

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Abstract: *There are many arguments to support the idea that the Baltic nations (and other “victimized” areas) adhere to ‘victimhood nationalism’, a form of nationalism that explains the region’s recognition of its history and the related problems. Since the start of the 21st century, memory and area studies experts have used the concept of ‘victimhood nationalism’. However, the framework of victimhood nationalism is critically flawed. Its original conceptual architecture is weak and its effectiveness as an explanatory variable requires critical examination. This paper presents a theoretical examination of victimhood nationalism from the perspective of political and social historiography. Further, the paper criticizes the concept from the perspective of the empirical area studies of the Baltic region. First, it argues that the killing or damaging of one community by another does not automatically transform into a nationalism of victimhood. Unless it has been established that one community was the ‘victim’ and the other the perpetrator of the crime, these events will not be remembered as the basis of victimhood nationalism. Second, the effectiveness of this concept is criticized from two perspectives: “tangle” as an explanatory variable and its doctrinal history. It is tautological to claim that victimhood nationalism explains political issues, as was already being implied in the early twentieth-century collective memory studies. In conclusion, the assumption of victimhood is a preliminary necessity to a community claiming victimhood nationalism. Victimhood nationalism is not an explanatory, but an explained, variable. Therefore, the concept*

should be renamed otherwise. The alternative framework of collective memory studies framework of "victimhood" is needed. This research argues that Baltic area studies, particularly regarding history recognition, should be phenomenologically reconsidered to reimagine the framework of "victimhood".

Keywords: *historical recognition, historical sociology, memory studies, post-Soviet studies, victimhood nationalism*

1. Introduction: A need for critical thinking

This thesis is about the memory politics and memory sociology on victimhood. It is widely known that Baltic nations are associating their memory politics on the memory of victimhood. In 2016, Lithuanian court held a trial against ex-Soviet military personnel who were considered to be engaged in 1991 Vilnius tragedy, the Bloody Sunday, in which Lithuanian civilians were killed by the Soviet Army (Reuters, 2016). The Lithuanian court tried to condemn the ex-Soviet remnants for the past crime, while Russia considers itself to be no longer responsible. This is a case of historical recognition conflicts that have happened in this area. Baltic nations, including Lithuania, are generally showing a similar attitude towards Russia and the ex-Soviet remnants. They often criticize the Russian government, enterprises and people, who they see as inhumane enemies. This narrative is seen in many spheres: political conflicts, elections, education and cultural activities. The memories of being attacked by the Soviets have been often used to establish the solidarity of the Baltic people (and so have the memories of fighting against Soviet and Russia together). And this discussion also supports a certain concept: the people of the Baltic nations have developed their nationalism and collective memory based on victimhood. In other words, the Baltic nations have been said to hold victimhood nationalism.

Experts often call the Baltic nations the region of victims and state this region has been with victimhood nationalism. The idea of falsifying this concept may sound odd. The narrative of the Baltic nations and victimhood nationalism has spread over various political spheres: from international politics to local actions, from official fields to local fields. Baltic museums, media, books, and institutions support this. According to them, they were illegally invaded and dominated. For example, a famous institution, the KGB museum in Vilnius, keeps exhibiting the Baltic tragic history (see Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights, n.d.). Baltic politicians often criticize Russians based on this memory.

In the realm of memory politics, some scholars have discussed issues on victimhood. An American scholar, Clark, wrote an essay called ‘Nationalism in Post-Soviet Lithuania. New approaches for the nation of ‘innocent sufferers’ (Clark, 2006), in which he implies the relationship between the concept of ‘victimhood nationalism’ and area studies. Clark wrote, “the Lithuanian nation was also depicted as a heroic people who had suffered for centuries from efforts, made by first the Poles and then the Russians, to dominate and forcibly assimilate them” (Clark, 2006, p. 166). The image of the dichotomy (evil/innocent) can be observed here. European Union is also very interested in perspectives about the image of victimhood and the related issues, such as the European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism, European Public Hearing on Crimes Committed by Totalitarian Regimes, Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism (Prague Declaration), and so on. This kind of study is supported by many scholars in global fields, even including perspectives on East Asia and Germany.

Then, why should we look at victimhood nationalism critically? The answer to the question why we must reconsider victimhood nationalism may sound easy: it does not fully explain the Baltic nations’ memory politics, nor does it explain the issues of history recognition problems. The purpose of this paper is to determine the weakness of this nationalism concept and how that limitation is observed related to this area.

The words ‘victims’ and ‘nationalism’ are both so familiar that some may think that there are no problems to mention on this concept. Actually, there have been many arguments and riots related to historical viewpoints¹ on Baltic history, the one seen as a history of victims (Vardys & Sedaitis, 1997), and Russian history, the one seen as a history of “evil victimizer”. A statement that these conflicts are explained with the concept of ‘victimhood nationalism’ seems to be undeniable, although it is not. The concept of ‘victimhood nationalism’ is worth discussing fundamentally as it contains critical issues. The probability that the historical recognition of these countries could be explained otherwise will show the problems more clearly. The author will show this by means of critical analysis on conceptual framework and the case studies below.

¹ Varys and Sedaitis are trying to see the Baltic history, especially the Lithuanian one, as a history of damages and struggle for freedom against Russia.

2. Victimhood nationalism and its structure

2.1 The basis of victimhood nationalism

First, we should start from thinking, 'What is victimhood nationalism?' and how the studies began. Victimhood nationalism is the conceptual framework that is used among scholars of recent memory and history recognition studies². As far as the author knows, the term was introduced by the Korean historian Lim. We can ascribe the beginning of the study on victimhood nationalism to the 2000s (see Lim, 2008). Lim wrote, "it can be argued that as the space of global memory has expanded, its changing topography has contributed to the emergence of a discourse of victimhood" (Lim, 2014, p. 36).

It seems that studies on victimhood nationalism' have gained legitimacy, generality and universality. In the academic field, several studies and forums influenced by this concept are now being done³.

Because of these backgrounds, it seems natural that victimhood nationalism has been introduced into some area studies, such as 'Germany and Jews', 'Japan and Korea' and, more importantly for this paper, 'Russia and the Baltic area' (Lim, 2010; 2014). For example, in the case of the Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism, many experts signed their names on the text that condemn Soviet for maltreating Baltic people. (Prague Declaration on European Conscience and Communism, 2008). Moreover, the concept of 'victimhood nationalism' is now the good reason for many organizations to work on human rights issues on victims. Many scholars and experts are trying to approach those issues from a viewpoint of the concept of victimhood nationalism.

However, the problem is more difficult and complex than it looks. Is it natural for victims to make victimhood nationalism? This difficulty can be observed from several aspects. The first aspect is about its logical structure, or the concept-creation process. Hashimoto, Pettai and Lim argue that the structure of victimhood nationalism is as follows:

² Lim says "Memories of victimhood have become more contested with the emergence of "new transnational memory communities that appeal to regional connections and shared pasts. [...] In recent years, a shift can be observed in the construction of collective memories, from heroic martyrdom to innocent victimhood" (Lim, 2010, p. 138).

³ For example, the Hitotsubashi University, a famous Japanese college of social studies, held a seminar on victimhood nationalism (see Lim, 2017).

1. Victimhood is taken over from the past and it makes a kind of “nationalism” as victims;
2. This nationalism creates (or explains) conflicts on historical views. (Hashimoto, 2014; Lim, 2010; 2014; Pettai, 2011)

This structure can be observed in some books that deal with area studies. For example, Hashimoto reports Estonian matters as a case study in his book by referring to a 2007 riot which took place in Tallinn between Russian residents and Estonians (Hashimoto, 2016, pp. 1–20). In this case, victimhood comes from the Estonians’ recollection of being attacked by Russians. For example, the Soviet government imposed compulsory labor on Estonians. In Siberia, the Soviets made many concentration camps for political prisoners to maltreat Estonians.⁴

However, this statement leaves a question. The scholars are trying to explain victimhood nationalism as something that emerges from some historical cases of killing/damaging. Then, how can victimhood nationalism be asymmetrical or one-sided? For example, in several cases, Estonians have killed Russians (resistance, guerilla, etc.). Despite these cases, only Russia is seen as victimizers and Estonia is seen as victims. Likewise, Lithuanians have killed/damaged Russians in some cases (Vardys & Sedaitis, 1997, pp. 81–84). Some studies show that Lithuanians even engaged in genocide during WWII (MacQueen, 1998). In this case, Lithuanians are the victimizers. A Japanese essayist Mari showed that, in post-Soviet Lithuania, those who had their origins in Russia and lived in Lithuanian cities suffered from ethnic discrimination (Mari, 1997), while Russian residents in Latvia⁵ suffered from the problem of intentional statelessness. However, as Clark’s paper implies, only the Baltic people are seen as “innocent sufferers” (Clark, 2006). Today’s Russia has good reasons to be seen as “evil”, since it has been demonstrating its power by means of Ukraine riots, *Zapad 2017*, and many other military exercises. However, how long Russia must remain responsible for those past actions (maltreating the Baltic people in Soviet-era Siberian camps, the 1991 Bloody Sunday in Vilnius, and so on) is another problem. This one-sided nature of victimhood nationalism should be observed carefully. This concept does not fully match the status of the Baltic nations’ memory politics. As mentioned below, it suggests that victimhood nationalism does not result in hatred and the related conflicts, but the hatred and the related conflicts may result in it.

⁴ For further reading, see Kasekamp 2010 and Suzuki, 2000.

⁵ For further reading on Latvia’s history and memory of ‘victimhood’, see Bilmanis, 1951.

2.2 Victimhood nationalism as a dichotomy

In addition to the above discussions, we need to think of the problems on value judgements, value on the dichotomy of good and evil. The memory of pain itself does not necessarily cause victimhood nationalism. Pain without the dichotomy of evil/innocent should be distinguished and called 'trauma'.⁶

When we think of people and their memories of being damaged by something other than humans, such as a natural disaster or a pandemic, we can say that they are forms of trauma. And if we define victimhood as a result of the mental or physical damaging/killing that happens between victims and victimizers, violence outside the dichotomy of victims/victimizers will be just trauma.

Victimhood and trauma both unite people in a community, but their working processes are different. In the case of trauma, what people need to do is to just overcome it. This kind of trauma can occur when natural disasters, such as severe earthquakes and heavy rains, hit people. In these cases, people often unite, and the community can get stronger.⁷ Trauma does not necessarily need the existence of an enemy.

On the contrary, in the case of victimhood, what victims should do is to claim a right to be given and victimizers are needed. As Reding says, "we must offer the victims of those crimes, and their family members, sympathy, understanding and recognition of their suffering" (EC, 2011), and the one-sided harsh perspectives will be cast toward "crimes", which no doubt means "evil attackers".

In addition, victimized nation is strongly defended in certain ways. This aspect is difficult and complicated as it contains some moral issues, as Mosse and Kantorowicz describe the holy images of victims who died for their nations (Kantorowicz, 1951; Mosse, 1991). By observing this process, we can conclude that the basis of what they name 'victimhood nationalism' is rather the assumed evil/innocent dichotomy than the history of damage itself. This dichotomy is a problem to be solved, the author thinks, as it may keep us from observing the problem fairly. It is also the reason for the scholars why they have stayed away from critical analysis on this sensitive political issue. Victimhood nationalism

⁶ Note that having 'trauma' or 'pain' does not necessarily mean the existence of a 'victimizer' (Miyaji, 2013, p. 3). It is assumed that several scholars may be confusing 'trauma' and 'victimhood', both of which can be generally called 'pain'.

⁷ In Japan, studies on disasters and people's resilience are popular among scholars. For further reading, see Miyoshi & Namae, 2012; Samuels, 2013.

happens as A-against-B architecture (where A and B are vertical), rather than A-and-B architecture (where A and B are parallel).

2.3 From the aspect of its doctrinal history

The questions on victimhood nationalism and its framework can also arise from the viewpoint of the doctrinal history.

There is no doubt that these kinds of memory studies have their origins in the past sociologists and political scientists, the experts of memory reconstruction and collective memory. One of them is the French scholar Maurice Halbwachs, to whom Pettai and other modern scholars refer. Pettai writes, “[r]esearch on collective memory has long sought to sharpen the original application of the term that goes back to Maurice Halbwachs” (Pettai, 2011, p. 2). However, what Halbwachs tells us is the fictional feature of memory reconstruction. Halbwachs underlines that memory of the past is a re-constructed product (Halbwachs, 1992; Kin, 2010). Halbwachs often refers to the term ‘re-construction’ and this means that modern people’s memory of the past is strongly influenced by the modern situation of the society rather than the historical fact. The tangled nature of victimhood nationalism has been already expected, though probably unconsciously.

Then, what is the importance and meaning of the attempts to apply the ‘victimhood nationalism’ concept to the Baltic area’s memory politics issues? Probably, the Baltic “memory” of victimhood is a sociologically re-constructed product. In the process of re-construction, a historical fact may be turned into a fictional memory in the tangled way. As a result, the Baltic memory policies are suffering from many dilemmas.

3. Victimhood nationalism and its effectiveness: From the aspect of “tangle”

The second aspect of victimhood nationalism is its effectiveness as an academic framework and its historical background.

Some scholars argue that conflicts on historical views are tangled. For example, in this region, there have been many conflicts related to historical recognition. A Japanese historian, Hashimoto argues that the Baltic nations’ governments and people share the concept of victimhood nationalism, which has caused some

conflicts (Hashimoto, 2016, p. 117). In her article on Baltic memory politics, the Estonian scholar Pettai refers to “groups of former victims of injustice”, who fight against “not just for political rights or legal status, but also for official apologies and reparations” (Pettai, 2011, p. 6).

The case of the Bloody Sunday of Vilnius has badly affected modern Lithuanian-Russian relationship. In Estonia, the statue of a Soviet soldier was a symbol of suffering for Estonian civilians, while it was a symbol of victory for Russian residents in Tallinn. Latvian government's attitude towards Russian residents, whom the government denied some political rights, was so harsh that it resulted in international criticism. While Hashimoto (2016) says that the “tangle” can be studied and explained within the idea of victimhood nationalism, Starikovičius (2015) refers to the “tangle” as something more fundamental in his paper Wang (2018, pp. 30–37) compares historical memory to a lens which “retracts” viewpoints toward history, and to amplifiers in electric circuits which “amplify” anger and bonds in communities. However, what is called victimhood nationalism should rather be compared to light sources and batteries that generate electricity.

The author thinks that this “tangle” is more complex and fundamental than it seems. The statement that the “tangle” in historical recognition conflicts, which means that the situations are becoming harder and harder to solve in those narratives, is explained by victimhood nationalism may be tautological as the existing concept of victimhood nationalism is a tangle itself. By using the term “tangle”, the author suggests that the cause and effect are here reversed. Those conflicts are thought to be brought with the concept of victimhood nationalism to explain the conflicts, while probably the conflicts (including the perspectives and the hatred towards Russia) have resulted in what is called victimhood nationalism, which deserves a more proper name for the content. In order to describe the nature of this potential problem, which the name ‘victimhood nationalism’ can make invisible, the concept, the author argues, should be called otherwise—the *bias of victimhood nationalism* or the *assumption of victimhood nationalism*.

4. Conclusion

This paper examines the concept of ‘victimhood nationalism’ from the viewpoint of the area studies on the Baltic nations and conceptual thinking.

In the field of Baltic studies, the tangled nature of the related memory studies is described as below. Experts think that people who once suffered from Russian and Soviet maltreatment hold the memory of victimhood and “victimhood nationalism”, which has become the basis of memory conflicts and antagonism. However, this thought is ignoring some points. In order to establish a memory on the basis of victimhood, the community must first see themselves as victims to see others as enemies. This process creates the situation where the Baltic nations perceive the victimizers as invisible. Moreover, the concept of victimhood nationalism fundamentally needs critical analysis and we should notice that the concept, where the memory of victimhood is thought to cause antagonism, does not fully explain the Baltic nations’ attitude towards Russia. It even suggests that antagonism is the true basis of memory conflicts related to the past, according to the sociologists studying the past.

In order to reimage the framework of victimhood, the author has also revealed that the defective dichotomy (evil/innocent), which has been invisible but existed in some spheres of memory politics, underlies this concept. The viewpoint towards the “innocent” victims can prevent the critical analysis which is needed for reimagining and rethinking the nationalism of “victimhood”.

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