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Krista Kodres
(Tallinn)

The Soviet West? Shifting Bounderies of Estonian Culturescape

Once I read the phrase 'border state' in the newspaper. That was what they called the country I come from.
Emil Tode. Border State (1983)

In 1944, Estonia was incorporated into the Soviet Union, where it would remain for nearly half a century. Being a part of the vast empire was not a new experience for Estonians and Latvians. From 1710 to 1918, modern-day Estonia and Latvia were governorates in the tsarist Russian Empire. Their conquest in the Great Northern War was tied to Peter the Great's ambition to establish "a window on Europe" for Russia, gaining ports on the Baltic Sea. Yet until the second half of the nineteenth century, the governorates were subject to special rules that ensured political and cultural autonomy for the local Baltic-German elite, which had settled here since the Northern Crusades in the thirteenth century. Although a separate Baltic identity began to be constructed as early as the late eighteenth century, the process was significantly promoted by the writings of Russian literary figure Yuri Samarin in the middle of the next century, who criticized the special privileges of the Baltics – and by a general wave of Russification throughout the empire. In 1868, Samarin's book "Okrayni Rossii" (Periphery of Russia) was published in Prague. It was translated into German as "Die Grenzmarken Russlands" and in 1869 a pamphlet appeared accusing the Baltic German nobility of economically and culturally oppressing the Estonian peasantry. A response penned by a Baltic German historian, Carl Schirren, "Livländische Antwort" (Leipzig 1869) stated the difference and self-positioning of the local elite as follows: "Ihre Cultur hat Ihr Reich, abendländische Kultur

hat diese Provinz geschaffen"[196] [Schirren 1869: 12]. In Schirren's phrasing, Estonia and Livonia were "*Bollwerk des Abendlandes*" – in other words, a border fortification between the West and the East.

This long historical prologue to my topic, which is in fact concerned with examining the Soviet period, is useful for showing that the sense that Estonian cultural space is in a border state on the periphery has deep roots for both "parties" – the Estonian and the Russian side. The Russification policy of the late nineteenth century awakened not only the Baltic Germans' self-defence mechanisms but also lay a fertile substrate for the construction of the identity of the nascent Estonian cultural elite as well. Despite the short struggle concerning the eventual belonging to either to the Western or Russian cultural sphere, Estonians positioned themselves as part of the Western cultural space. The slogan coined by the Young-Estonia movement of the early twentieth century – "Let us be Estonians but also become Europeans" – was realized quite effectively through the nation-state policies of the 1920s and 1930s. This idea became the imperative for Estonian culture [Parhomenko 1991: 60–64], nurtured covertly during the Soviet era.

In my essay, I will ask in what manner the boundaries between the "Estonian Soviet" and the so-called "Soviet Soviet" culture were drawn. The object of my interest is the self-image of Estonian culture and art historiography narratives as one means to instil cultural affiliation. I am also interested in how the Estonian culture and material past was seen from the perspective of the Soviet Union. I will argue that the two of them reflected off one another, meaning that approaches to the Estonian SSR (and the Baltic republics in general) as the "Soviet West" were mutually reinforced. Did art histories shape "Western-ness" and how? How were cultural boundaries "drawn" in art historiography and did they remain the same throughout the entire Soviet period? Toward the end of my presentation, I will explore the phenomenon of the border culture, rely-

[196] "Your culture was created by your state, but this province was created by Occidental culture."

ing on the ideas of Yuri Lotman [Lotman 1984] s well as Estonian cultural theoretician Epp Annus's post-colonial approach to socialist culture [Annus 2018].

Cultural-Geographical Manipulations

As is well known, the goal of Stalinist cultural policy was to shape the identity of a new Soviet Man: one way of doing this was to manipulate the existing historical belonging of nations. In reality, this involved prioritizing Russian culture, the manifesto for which was Stalin's speech at a reception held in the Kremlin on May 24, 1945 in honor of the Red Army commanders. In the speech, naturally translated and printed in newspapers in all of the Soviet republics, Stalin raised a toast, saying: "I drink first and foremost to the health of the Russian people, as it is the most outstanding of all of the nations within the Soviet Union. <...> I raise a glass to the Russian people's health not only because they are the leading nation but because also they are possessed of a clear intelligence, stable personality and patience" [Annus 2017: 6–7].

For Estonian historians, including writers in art history, this position, which was to soon be realized through the policies that immediately followed – I refer to the politics known as Zdanovshchina – meant a re-narration of the cultural-geographical borders that had existed in the Baltic Sea region. Already in June 1945, the head of the Estonian SSR Administration of Arts Johannes Semper issued a call at the Estonian Communist Party plenum that "former cultural heritage must be seen critically and reappraised..." and director of the Academy of Sciences Institute of History Richard Kleis delivered a presentation on "the problems for research in the field of the history of Estonian-Russian relations" at a scientific session of the Academy in 1947 [Kodres 1997: 243; Kodres 2016: 409].

For the twentieth century modernist art history discourse, the problem of the historical genesis of the national art styles was

a key discursive element. It was also a component in Soviet art history discourse, which the Estonian Communist Party (ECP)'s leaders perceived as central. For this reason, the aim of the ECP's principles was to place importance on the Russian component in Estonian history and to diminish the significance of Baltic German historical past. As early as in 1951, the magazine *Nõukogude Kool* (Soviet School) published an article by the academician Bernadski, "Questions of Russian Cultural History in School Courses on the History of the USSR," stating: "When introducing the development and the finest achievements of Russian culture, teachers shall indicate the global importance of Russian science, art and socio-political thought, emphasize the priority of Russian scholars in very many important fields of science and technology, and speak about the influence of Russian art (literature, music, theatre) on the world's art..." [Annus 2017: 8].

In 1948, a committee on reappraisal of the past heritage of fine arts was established in the Estonian SSR; it was made up of leading Estonian art historians who concluded that "these Neffs, Hippiuses, Hoffmanns and Krügers" – i.e., nineteenth-century Baltic German artists – were not producing a high-calibre art [Soonpää 1948; Kodres 1997: 4]. At the same time, to set the model of the latter, Russian artworks were sent to Estonian museums from Moscow. Also many travelling exhibitions in smaller Estonian towns took place [Kodres 2016], articles were published about "great Russian artists" and architects, and lobbying for accepting 1802 as the "correct" founding date for the University of Tartu (which was originally opened in the seventeenth century, in the Swedish era) was taking place.[197] In 1949, the idea of a new general history of Estonian art was discussed in the ESSR's Ministry of Arts, with a publication date set for 1953 [Nõmmela 2013: 88]; it was implemented only in 1975. In 1952, the *History of the Estonian SSR* was published, with Estonian history seen from a Marxist-Leninist perspective

[197] There are many studies concerned with issues of culture and local elites during the Soviet period, e.g. [Karjahärm, Sirk 2007; Laas 2010].

for the first time. The chapter entitled "Estonian Territories as a Part of the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century", says: "In the field of art, the accession of the Baltics with Russia meant great success. The Estonian areas had previously been isolated from leading artistic centres, but now it was near a fast-developing art metropolis, St. Petersburg. The fertile influence of the latter grew continuously" [Naan 1952: 133]. It goes on to mention architectural and art monuments of the so-called Russian origin: Kadriorg Palace (initiative of Peter the Great), Stone Bridge in Tartu (initiative of Catherine the Great), and the iconostasis created by Ivan Zarudny in the Orthodox Church of the Transfiguration of Our Lord in Tallinn (initiative of Alexander Menshikov, governor of St. Peterburg and a close friend of Peter the Great). It should also be mentioned that Voldemar Vaga, a professor at the University of Tartu, was not allowed to defend his doctorate in the 1940s and 1950s on the topic of Baltic German art. He was also pressed to lecture in the folk-university on the history of Russian art and Socialist Realist contemporary art [Nõmmela 2008: 103].

To sum up, it can be said that in the Stalinist art history narrative, the value of historical art was derived from the geography of selected art objects, or put in another way, cultural geography was subjected to ideology, based on the victory in the "Great Patriotic War" over the Nazi Germany, extending the negative meaning of the vanquished Nazism over all of historical German culture. The other side of the narrative involved constructing a positive image of Russian cultural influences; the embrace of these influences was said to have made the high-level artistic achievements possible in the Baltics. In this way, the borders of Estonian culture were moved into Russian cultural territory, with evidence marshalled to show that this was historically justified. The shift in the cultural borders also created a new internal hierarchy for the local art history canon.

Subsequent developments

From the Estonian and Latvian perspective, the Khrushchev Thaw meant a revision of the cultural boundaries set by Stalin. This was made possible by loosened restrictions in intellectual centres in the USSR, which also spawned revisionism in the field of art and art history [Morozova 2014; Kodres, Jõekalda 2019: 21–25]. A comprehensive work published (and thus declared officially legitimate) in 1960,[198] "Fundamentals of Marxist-Leninist Aesthetics", A. A. Anikst wrote about the spread of art forms and ideas in a significantly more analytical manner than before: "But national peculiarities do not rule out the mutual exchange of artistic achievements of various peoples; rather, it makes the exchange downright essential. <...> The result of the exchange of achievements is the mutual enrichment of artistic cultures." Anikst also stated: "Marxist art theory affirms that every nation has the right to the original national development (in form and content - K.K.) of its art" [Anikst 1961: 303, 304]. Actually, this approach was also consistent with the Soviet Union's foreign policy course during the Thaw, one component in which was "peaceful coexistence" with the West [Kasack 1973; Reid 2016; Kodres, Jõekalda 2019]. It has been emphasized that in the context of the Thaw era in particular, the "cultural universalist" concept of humanism arose in the Soviet Union which meant placing equal value on the entire world's cultures (i.e., not only "progressive" culture as it had been the case to that point – *K. K.*) [Gilburd 2013: 389–390]. Thus, an opportunity arose in the Soviet Baltic republics for shifting the boundaries of art geography b a c k to more or less where they had been before the Second World War.

In the case of the Estonian SSR, it meant that stylistic genesis, i.e. geography of formal influences, shifted in a Western direction: to the Baltic Sea region; particularly northern German and Swedish areas. Of course, the directional shift was also supported by, besides

[198] The book was immediately translated into Estonian, it was published in 1961. Here I am using this Estonian translation.

the material objects themselves, the historical circumstances, including archive records about the migration of artists and architects and contact zones. Russian influences fell into the same time period as their historically justified place – the period in which Estonia was part of the Russian empire.

Realism without borders

Along with the borders of art geographical influence, the other delimiter in Stalinist art discourse was the doctrine of realism. The boundary was drawn light of both class characteristics of art (including the artwork's theme) and the Realist means of depiction. Thus, art historians took on a role of the historical a r t c r i t i c who decided on whether a given work was aesthetically "positive." This was also one basis for ascribing value to the artwork in the internal hierarchy of the art history canon.

During the Thaw, revisionist-minded art historians began revising realism's conceptual field, which also exerted an influence on art historiography [Kodres, Jõekalda 2019]. On the one hand, this meant a shift in the boundaries of "good/high-quality art", due to which a place gradually began to be made in the art history canon for styles such as Mannerism and Impressionism. [Dmitrieva 2015; Dmitrieva 2019] Of course, a role in this trend was played by discussion about a book by a French Marxist Roger Garaudy, "D'un realisme sans rivages", which dealt with the works of Picasso, Saint-John Perse, and Franz Kafka. Garaudy justified his choice by arguing that love for the works of these authors had been "long forbidden due to the overly narrow criteria for realism" [Garaudy 1963: 243–244; Kangilaski 1967: 1708]. For Garaudy, Picasso's work represented art in which, contrary to the ideal of Socialist Realism, "the object is no longer the model, imitation is not the final goal and alibi for main motif" [Kangilaski 1967: 1712]. In the foreword to the book, Louis Aragon, who commanded great authority in the Soviet Union in that time, noted that this was not a revision

but rather a restoration of (real) Marxist approach. At the same time, even though Garaudy argued in the beginning of his Picasso essay that he would attempt to draw boundaries between the bourgeois and Marxist approaches to Realism, the definition he promised ended up being vague [Kangilaski 2003: 11–24]. It is likely that it is precisely the blurriness that unleashed and enabled the discussion that was held quite intensively within the Soviet art history circles in those years.

Some Estonian art historians intervened in the discussion as well. An article by Jaak Kangilaski entitled "Concerning disputes in Marxist aesthetics" was published in the leading Soviet Estonian literary magazine "Looming" in 1965 [Kangilaski 1965]. Characteristically, for the strategy of narrativization seen back then, Kangilaski padded the case in favor of expanding the boundaries of realism, which he himself obviously sympathized with. As he noted, citing Roger Garaudy, the French saw positive in art in a manner opposite to the Marxist-Leninist approach: Garaudy deemed the works of Fauvists and Cubists as progressive and nineteenth century academism (Neoclassicism-supported) as reactionary [Kangilaski 1965: 1717]. The Estonian art historian Boris Bernstein supported the same positions [Bernstein 1966/67]. The aesthetic assessment was thus fundamentally tied not to formal "realism" but rather historical, "real" content that remains always valid.

The theoreticians' positions were picked up by academic art historiography relatively rapidly. Above all, it was expressed in the detailed descriptions of artworks, where negative characterizations of non-classical styles were no longer to be found [Kodres, Jõekalda 2019]. For instance, if one reads the three-volume "History of Estonian Art" published in 1975 to 1977, he no longer encounters negative characterizations of the Baroque style (e.g. "too decorative", "elitist"); and even Estonian avant-gardism from the "bourgeois republic" era – which traces its cultural-geographical birth to Paris – is described in neutral terms [Solomõkova 1975–1977]. Incidentally, this art history narrative reached general Soviet read-

ers as well, as both the academic and popular treatments for central Soviet publishing houses were written by the Estonian SSR's own contributors.[199]

The "Soviet West"?

The material cultural heritage of the Estonian SSR – buildings, cultural landscapes and art – could thus be treated in the late Soviet era without particular concern over the permissibility of determinations of cultural boundaries. At the everyday level, one way or another, Estonians imagined the boundaries of their culture as running along the Lake-Peipus–Narva line, i.e. along the formal border of Estonian SSR. Once again, it should be remembered that the notion of *Pribaltika* as "Western" was, just like Estonians' idea of themselves, not purely a Soviet-era construction, but rather, its roots go back to the nineteenth century. This has been also noted by Madina Tlostanova who writes of the nineteenth-century Russian empire as a "subaltern empire," whose sense of self included a feeling of inferiority in comparison to the (more successful) West, and the same idea later transferred to the Soviet empire. [Tlostanova 2010: 120] It can be said that while Stalin's cultural policy attempted to forcibly transform this notion, the idea from the Thaw pronounced by Khrushchev, "Catching up and overtaking the West" shows that it was loath to disappear.

Thus, the concept of "Sovetski Zapad" [Zubkova 2008: 3] was very widespread in the USSR as a number of recent cultural research demonstrates, e.g. the American William Risch's work "A Soviet West: Nationhood, Regionalism, and Empire in the Annexed Western Borderlands" [Risch 2015]. From personal childhood experience, I can add a scene from the Estonian resort town of Pärnu, where I spent summers with my parents. The city was always filled with

[199] Estonian art historians contributed to the "History of Nations of USSR in 9 Volumes", "A Survey of World Architectural History in 12 Volumes". They also published individual books, mainly on historical architecure; those were obviosly ordered to meet the growing needs of tourism in the USSR.

people from all over the Soviet Union who made the trip there namely craving for the "Western" environment. As another fragment from my own memory, I recall that I was once asked in Alma-Ata whether we had the same rouble currency in Estonia as did the "brotherly republic" Kazakh SSR.

Soviet cultural circles also saw the Baltics as "our own West." Boris Groys told me years ago how he went to Tallinn all the time because there he could see "Western-like" avant-garde art and more relaxed cultural environment. Due to the obvious special treatment of all three Baltic republics in Soviet cultural politics, avant-garde art was practiced and exhibited there more freely than in Moscow. Estonian design was also perceived as Western, and designs of pavillions for Soviet foreign exhibitions were mainly commissioned from Estonians [Kodres, Lobjakas 2013]. The Estonian anthropologist Aimar Ventsel's article "Soviet West: Estonian Estrada in the Soviet Union," describes how Soviet audiences were excited about Estonian "rockers" as a surrogate Western element [Ventsel 2018]. The attitude toward Estonia and Latvia is also attested to by numerous Soviet-era films, especially Tallinn and Riga-made feature films with historical plotlines that took use of local "Western-style" architectural environment [Näripea 2011]. Much more examples could be brought forth.

Conclusion

Cultures undoubtedly have real boundaries: the two neighbouring cultures in question here have linguistic and territorial boundary, although the latter shifted due to the vagaries of history. The fact of being geographical neighbours has inevitably caused confrontations but also mutual interactions of Estonian and Russian cultures throughout history. As the British art historian Irit Rogoff has aptly said, geography has for a long time been both "a body and an order of knowledge, a theory of cognition and a system of classification, a mode of location, a site of collective, national, linguistic and top-

ographical histories" [Rogoff 2000]. The same has been expressed by the famous historian of the French Annales school, Fernand Braudel: "The question of boundaries is the first to be encountered, from it all others flow. To draw a boundary around anything is to define, analyze and reconstruct it..." [Quote: Naymark 2019: 141].

How to approach the drawing of cultural boundaries of neighbors who do this in order to mark the differences between each other, but who, at the same time, s h a r e the b o r d e r? As we know, Yuri Lotman's general cultural theory – the theory of the semiosphere – postulates that cultures exist in fact only through the contacts between them [Lotman 1999: 7–36]. The boundary of cultures – whether real or imaginary – is always in the role of a kind of filter or translational mechanism [Torop 2011: 162], which essentially generates dynamics in b o t h c u l t u r e s. Lotman also states that "in belonging to some cultural unity, culture begins to more markedly cultivate its origin" [Lotman 1999: 33]. Thus, borders are an inevitable element in the functioning of cultures.

In interlinking these ideas with the problems at hand, it can be said that in the nineteenth century, the crucible of modernity, the identity of both the Estonian and Russian cultural space began to be shaped and take shape, despite the fact that the political boundaries were shared. In this process, identity boundaries were drawn for each cultural space using history – including the architecture and art heritage that were believed to represent this history. As an outcome of this long lasting process Estonian cultural elites decided "t o b e c o m e E u r o p e a n s"; in parallel, Russia began to stress the unique character of t h e i r culture. The respective historical and art historical narratives were constructed. These boundaries persisted in collective consciousness, having become stronger and transmuted, in the latter half of the twentieth century, constantly perpetuating oppositions and hierarchies. It was particularly the case of Estonian very small culture that felt to be threatened under the Soviet rule, as the active russification process started in the 1970s [Ruutsoo 2001]. This situation resulted in toughening the imaginary boundaries of one's own Estonian culture.

Still, bearing in mind the "Soviet condition" and also thinking together with the Estonian literary scholar Epp Annus whose book "Soviet Postcolonial Studies. A View from the Western Borderlands" (sic!) was recently published [Annus 2018], we should ask whether the stereotypical *we/they* oppositions that draw unwavering borders and which have been described here in brief are sufficient to describe the Soviet cultural situation as it "really was". Probably not. Reflecting on Annus's ideas, seen from both the Soviet Union's republic along the Western border and the USSR side, the term "Soviet West" is in the domain of imaginary cultural geography, this was an "imaginary West" [Annus 2018: 133; Ventsel 2018: 106]. In actuality, Moscow and Leningrad themselves often functioned as "Western" cultural centres for Estonian elites. Examples include how Estonians went there to see Western art exhibitions or film festivals [Annus 2018]. Examples also include how there was quite intensive interaction between Russian and Estonian avant-garde artists [Lapin, Liivak 1997], and even if the collaboration between art historians was not very intensive and did not include many, the dialogue between Russian and Estonian colleagues still took place [Bernstein 2009]. Also, some Estonians studied art history in Russia [Risthein 2013], and couple of scholars defended their dissertation in front of the committees of Soviet central institutions.[200] From the art history side, also the collections of Western art and art history exhibitions were significant,[201] as were of course central specialized libraries, which were stocked in a different manner to libraries in the constituent republics, where the latest Western works on art history were practically non-existent [Kodres 2020]. I myself was on such a library-journey in the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad in the middle of the 1980s. Thus, to conclude, it is impossible to draw rigid East-West borders regarding the "border" as signifying opposition only.

[200] At the Allunion Institute of Art History in Moscow: Juhan Maiste, Krista Kodres, Karin Hallas; at the Allunion Central Institute of Theory and History of Architecture and Urban Design in Moscow: Ants Hein, Mart Kalm.

[201] An interview with art historian Juta Keevallik (mns in possession of the author).

On the other hand, it is also impossible to ignore "imaginary geographies," as they reflect the yearnings and dreams of the societies and individuals of the day. One probably just has to remember that the motion of the "Soviet West" during the Soviet times had its own political and cultural past that lived on in the collective memory of the communities on both sides of this border. Besides, one shoud bear in mind that unlike physical boundaries, Soviet-era cultural borders were characterized by permeability and the abovementioned filtration or translation capability, which – as history has shown us – turned them into elastic cultural exchange elements, even if the national agenda (as in the case of Estonia) or political regime (like the Soviet Union) did not favor this process.

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Summary

The notion "Soviet West" that is addressed in this chapter had its own political and cultural past during Soviet times that lived on in the collective memory of the Estonian and Russian communities on both sides of the border. In the nineteenth century, the crucible of modernity, the identity of both cultural spaces began to be shaped and take shape, despite the fact that the political boundary was shared; Estonia was part of the Russian Empire. As part of this process, identity boundaries were drawn for each cultural space using history. As an outcome of this long lasting process, Estonian cultural elites decided "to become Europeans"; in parallel Russia began to stress the unique character of their culture. The respective historical and art historical narratives were constructed. These boundaries persisted in collective consciousness, having become stronger and transmuted, in the latter half of twentieth century, constantly perpetuating oppositions and hierarchies. It was particularly the case of Estonian very small culture that felt to be threatened under the Soviet rule, as the active russification process started in the 1970s. However, one should bear in mind that unlike physical boundaries, Soviet-era cultural borders were characterized by permeability and the filtration or translation capability, which – as history has shown us – turned them into elastic cultural exchange elements, even if the national agenda (as in the case of Estonia) or political regime (like the Soviet Union) did not favour this process.

Keywords: Identity construction, heritage construction, art historiography, Soviet studies, Estonian culture, cultural semiotics.

Аннотация

Криста Кодрес
Восток или Запад? Подвижные границы эстонской каультуры

Понятие «советский Запад», о котором идет речь в этой статье, имело в советские времена свое политическое и культурное прошлое, которое сохранилось в коллективной памяти эстонской и русской общин по обе стороны границы. В XIX в., суровом испытании современности, идентичность обоих культурных пространств начала формироваться и обретать форму, несмотря на то, что политические границы были общими: Эстония была частью Российской империи. В этом процессе границы идентичности были проведены для каждого культурного пространства, опираясь на данные истории. В результате этого длительного процесса эстонские культурные элиты решили «стать европейцами»; параллельно Россия стала подчеркивать уникальный характер своей культуры. Были созданы соответствующие исторические и художественно-исторические нарративы. Эти границы сохранились в коллективном сознании, укрепившись и трансмутировавшись во второй половине XX в., постоянно закрепляя оппозиции и иерархии. В частности, это было в случае очень маленькой эстонской культуры, которая чувствовала себя под угрозой при советской власти, поскольку с 1970-х гг. начался активный процесс русификации. Однако следует иметь в виду, что, в отличие от физических границ, культурные границы советской эпохи характеризовались проницаемостью и способностью фильтрации или трансляции, что, как нам показала история, превращало их в эластичные элементы культурного обмена, даже если национальная повестка дня (как в случае с Эстонией) или политический режим (например, советский) не одобрял этот процесс.

Ключевые слова: конструирование идентичности, конструирование наследия, историография искусства, советология, эстонская культура, культурная семиотика.