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From the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES)  
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The economic  
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# BALTIC WORLDS

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The return of  
the Nordic model

Urban spaces:  
comparing Riga,  
Belgrade, Prague  
& Tirana

Modern archeology  
in the Baltic states

Childhood in  
a country that  
no longer exists

History is  
present  
in Romania

The role  
of culture  
in the Russian drama

also in this issue

YURI LOTMAN'S SEMIOTICS / GRASS'S FLOUNDER / TOURISM IN ALBANIA / POVERTY IN POLAND / IKEA IN GERMANY / SOVIET DESIGN

Illustration: Ragni Svensson

## Welcome aboard, Joakim Ekman!

**JOAKIM EKMAN**, Professor of political science at CBEES, has now taken on the position known in Swedish as *ansvarig utgivare*, which is usually translated with the somewhat inelegant, though correct term “legally responsible publisher”. The position is unique to Sweden and a few other countries.

### What will you do in your capacity as Baltic Worlds' legally responsible publisher?

“Basically, I will make sure that the contents of each issue of *Baltic Worlds* do not contravene the Freedom of the Press Act. In Sweden, the law requires that for all major periodicals a physical person fulfill the function of a legally responsible publisher. It is thus a formal position, not an editorial one. That said,



Joakim Ekman.

I am certainly no stranger to editorial work, having served for a number of years now as the Swedish editor for the Scandinavian journal *Nordisk Østforum* (NUPI, Oslo). I am constantly involved in conventional editorial tasks such as proofreading and assigning peer reviewers. Since 2012, I have also been part of the editorial board of the Swedish journal *Utbildning & Demokrati* [Education and democracy] (Örebro University), which focuses on education science, civic education, and democracy; and as of April this year, I am a member of

the board of Södertörn University's Publications Committee.”

Joakim Ekman's research interests include democratization, public opinion, and political participation. He has recently put the finishing touches on a book that analyzes the development of political party systems in nineteen countries in Central and Eastern Europe, and in particular highlights party-voter alignments and political cleavages. The third edition of his *Handbook of Political Change in Eastern Europe* was published in 2013 (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar). “The book continues to expand as we have more countries, more elections, and a longer history to monitor.”

In 2013, Joakim Ekman received funding from the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies for the project “European Values under Attack? Democracy, Disaffection and Minority Rights in the Baltic States”. x

## Changes on the editorial board



**SINCE JANUARY 2013** Anders Björnsson is no longer the journal's editor-in-chief. Björnsson will now devote himself full-time to writing books. However, he returns to *Baltic Worlds* as a contributor, starting with this issue.

Anders Björnsson has an honorary doctorate from the faculty of humanities at Gothenburg University, and is the author of several books. In 2012 he published *Organisationen som skapade en profession: nedslag i FSA:s och de svenska arbetsterapeuternas historia* [The organization that created a profession – the impact of organization on the history of the FSA and of Swedish occupational therapists]. The year before, in 2011, he edited a reader of Swedish economic history, *Jord-påron* [Spuds].

Recently he released a Swedish version of Joseph Roth's short stories, *Kejsarbysten och andra noveller* [The Bust of the Emperor and other short stories]. x



## Agreement with EBSCO

**BALTIC WORLDS** and one of the largest scholarly databases, EBSCO, entered in January 2013, into an agreement under which all peer-reviewed articles will be searchable in EBSCO's databases and thus available in 90 percent of the world's research libraries. *Baltic Worlds'* editorial board is pleased to be able to enhance the opportunities for the work of the journal's authors to be cited. x

## “On Identity – No Identity”

**SINCE THE END OF** the East-West conflict, a regional “Baltic Sea Identity” has been claimed by a variety of people. At first glance, the case for a (common) regional identity is not obvious, since the history of the Baltic Sea region (BSR) is one of cooperation and conflict, notes Bernd Henningsen (see also page 44 in this issue) in a detailed paper “On Identity – No Identity: An Essay on the Constructions, Possibilities and Necessities for Understanding a European Macro Region, The Baltic Sea”.

He asks: “How can a region like the Baltic Sea region have an ‘identity’ or be regarded as homogeneous, when nine different languages (at least!) are spoken within it, it contains more than nine ethnicities, uses eight different currencies, practices three different forms of Christianity – and where Judaism was once a powerful force – and, last but not least, it fosters different political cultures?”

Could it be that a BSR identity is rooted in contradictory experiences? Bernd Henningsen asks.

“What commonalities exist in this diversity? Are there shared values? The starting point for these reflections must be the concept of identity itself – an invention of German idealistic philosophy from the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Is it possible to apply this concept to a nation or a region?”

“Two developments have had a decisive impact on European collective identities in the past two decades: the end of the Cold War and the accelerated process of globalization. In the wake of the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc, renewed nationalism swept over Central and Eastern Europe. That dissolution also triggered the search for new and overarching identities that would distance these parts of Europe from their recent Soviet-dominated past. Simultaneously, the process of globalization reduced the ability of nation-states to govern and thus increased the likelihood that they would identify benefits from larger-scale multilateral and transnational units – for example, the Baltic Sea region.”

**HENNINGSEN ALSO ARGUES** that the Baltic Sea region identity is almost identical to the concept of Hansa, a league that had the city of Lübeck as its center (Lübeck was founded in the High Middle Ages). “The influence of the Hanseatic League was so enormous, and the memory of its successes so overwhelming, that the French historian of mental history, Fernand Braudel, in his voluminous investigation of the Mediterranean world, favorably compared the Baltic Sea region with southern Europe, describing it as: ‘the Mediterranean of the North’. But he did not point out the fundamental difference: The Mediterranean Sea is the cradle of Western civilization and gave birth to the Roman Empire. Compared to these achievements, our region is a poor one.” x

Note: Read the full paper on the website of the Baltic Development Forum: [http://www.bdforum.org/cmsystem/wp-content/uploads/BDF\\_SoRR\\_Identity\\_2011\\_08.pdf](http://www.bdforum.org/cmsystem/wp-content/uploads/BDF_SoRR_Identity_2011_08.pdf)



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## The past leaves many traces, with many possible interpretations

This issue is permeated by nostalgia – for an age that does not exist, the artifacts and art that are no longer produced. In one article we search for the past quite concretely: Balts often buried possessions in the earth when they were banished into exile by the Soviets. Now treasures are being dug up – often relatively simple objects.

History is both a private matter and a collective creation, says Romanian curator Lila Passima.

History is contemporary politics, says Vladimir Tismaneanu who, until May 2012, chaired the Scientific Council of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (IICMER).

IN THIS ISSUE WE INCLUDE a special cluster of articles about cultural life in the nascent Soviet state. Russian futurists were hired to decorate the streets and squares for the introduction of the First of May celebrations. The Bolsheviks wanted to find a new form for communicating with the people. It didn't exactly turn out as intended.

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Russian writers and poets sought to depict the melancholy they felt in the face of human suffering. Here, Khlebnikov and Vasily Grossman dwell on the encounter with famine and barbarism.

Professor Magnus Ljunggren generously shares his observations on writers, philosophers, and poets during the turbulent time in Russia and the Soviet Union.

His notes get me digging through my own boxes. And I find the memoirs my grandmother jotted down for us grandchildren in the 1980s. On the prima ballerina Lubov Egorova, my grandmother, born Moussia Poleshko in 1905 in Petrograd, writes:

*“Egorova, Princess Troubetskaya by marriage, we met quite unexpectedly in Uusikirkko. The couple had left Petrograd and, like us, ended up in Finland. As soon as my mother came across the border in 1918 and cured her TB, she, who was very active, began to organize the Russian colony. Several intellectuals got the idea of making a film as propaganda against Bolshevism. Everyone was interested. An author wrote the script, an artist gave advice, Sofya Nikolaevna Poleshko would keep all the pieces together. Lubov Egorova was asked to play the lead role, the choreographer Georgy Krol to direct. For a while all film stock disappeared from the market, and this caused a hopeless delay for us, but the problem was solved by paying a higher price.*

*The film was completed, it was shown for a short time in Vyborg and Helsinki, but then disappeared without a trace. I have a few amateur photographs left and a photo of Egorova with a dedication.”*

I wish that film could be dug up! Magnus Ljunggren says that “Under de Yoke of Bolshevism” was the first Anti-Soviet film. ✕

NINNA MÖRNER

# MEMORY CACHES

by **Påhl Ruin** illustration **Ragni Svensson**

**W**hen the Russians occupied Estonia in 1944, Estonians saved their possessions by hiding them in the ground. We've known for some time that this occurred, and thanks to new archeological research, we now know it was common.

The person behind this groundbreaking study is the archeologist Mats Burström of Stockholm University. He had heard tales of buried objects in Estonia and wanted to investigate further. Estonian archeologists had never concerned themselves with the question and other Estonian academics told him the reports were essentially “modern legends”.

“Unfortunately, it's a good story, but hardly true,” wrote one scholar by e-mail. “I've interviewed people who fled in their own boats and helped others flee [...] and none of them ever told me anything of the kind.”

This made Burström even more determined to keep digging. He reached out to organizations concerned with the Estonian diaspora in Sweden, the US, Canada, and Australia – and came into contact with people who had heard from a friend who told them about a relative who had a neighbor . . . and so on. A few years later he was able to confirm about 30 cases of buried objects in his book *Treasured Memories: Tales of Buried Belongings in Wartime Estonia*, which was published last spring.

“And I've only scratched the surface. I am convinced that many hundreds, probably several thousands, of the 70,000 Estonians who fled the country buried belongings before they fled. It is interesting that an event that happened so recently has not been documented in writing – even though we have such an abundance of texts about that time! What we needed here instead was archeological studies and oral histories for the burying of possessions to become known to the world.”

**AFTER THE BOOK** was published and Burström had written a long article in the Swedish newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet*, even more Estonians got in touch and told him about their own families' buried belongings. It was as if Burström had released a pent-up need among people to share their deeply personal stories. So why didn't the extent of these burials come to light earlier?

“There are probably many reasons. People didn't want to talk about it for privacy reasons – these were personal things they had buried, after all, which were

nobody else's business. In some cases, people had buried weapons or things that belonged to a club or an organization. They did not want to spread that information. Even after the liberation, a lot of Estonians have been generally reluctant to talk about the dark Soviet era that contains so much pain and suffering.”

**MOST OF THE BURIALS** took place in 1944 during the second Soviet occupation of Estonia. People feared that they would be forced to leave their homes in a hurry and did not want the Russians to steal or destroy all of their belongings. And so they buried diaries, photographs, and other belongings of personal significance. Things that would be dangerous if found by the occupying power – such as banned books – were also hidden in the ground. It was even common to bury ordinary household utensils and china, partly because it would be a violation if things associated with the safety and security of one's own home were stolen, partly because they were actually convinced that they would soon be able to return – and that it might be hard to get hold of kitchen items quickly when they did.

It was the message of the United States and Britain in the Atlantic Charter of August 1941 that convinced Estonians – and other Balts – that they would be free once the war was over. In the Charter, the Allied powers declared that they “respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live” and they “desire to see no territorial changes that do not accord with the freely expressed wishes of the peoples concerned”. For many years after the Soviet occupation in 1944, long after the war ended, the Balts hoped that the British and the Americans would come to their rescue. It was this hope that kept the Baltic guerrilla movements – especially in Lithuania – working long into the 1950s. People also continued burying objects long after the war. Then it was fear of being deported to Siberia that made many people want to hide their belongings.

In fact, it took more than a few years to regain liberty – it took until 1991. Estonia has now been free for more than 20 years. What has happened to the buried objects? Some of the people Burström spoke to have never made any attempt to dig them up. Either the importance of recovering the belongings has dissipated with time, or people were sure they would be unable to find them. In some cases it would be downright impossible, since a road or a house has been built on the site. Others have embarked on a treasure hunt but

failed to find their belongings. Burström participated in such a treasure hunt with one Ahto Kant, who grew up on a farm 50 kilometers south of Tallinn. His father, a fighter pilot, had buried a small collection of silver objects wrapped in oilcloth.

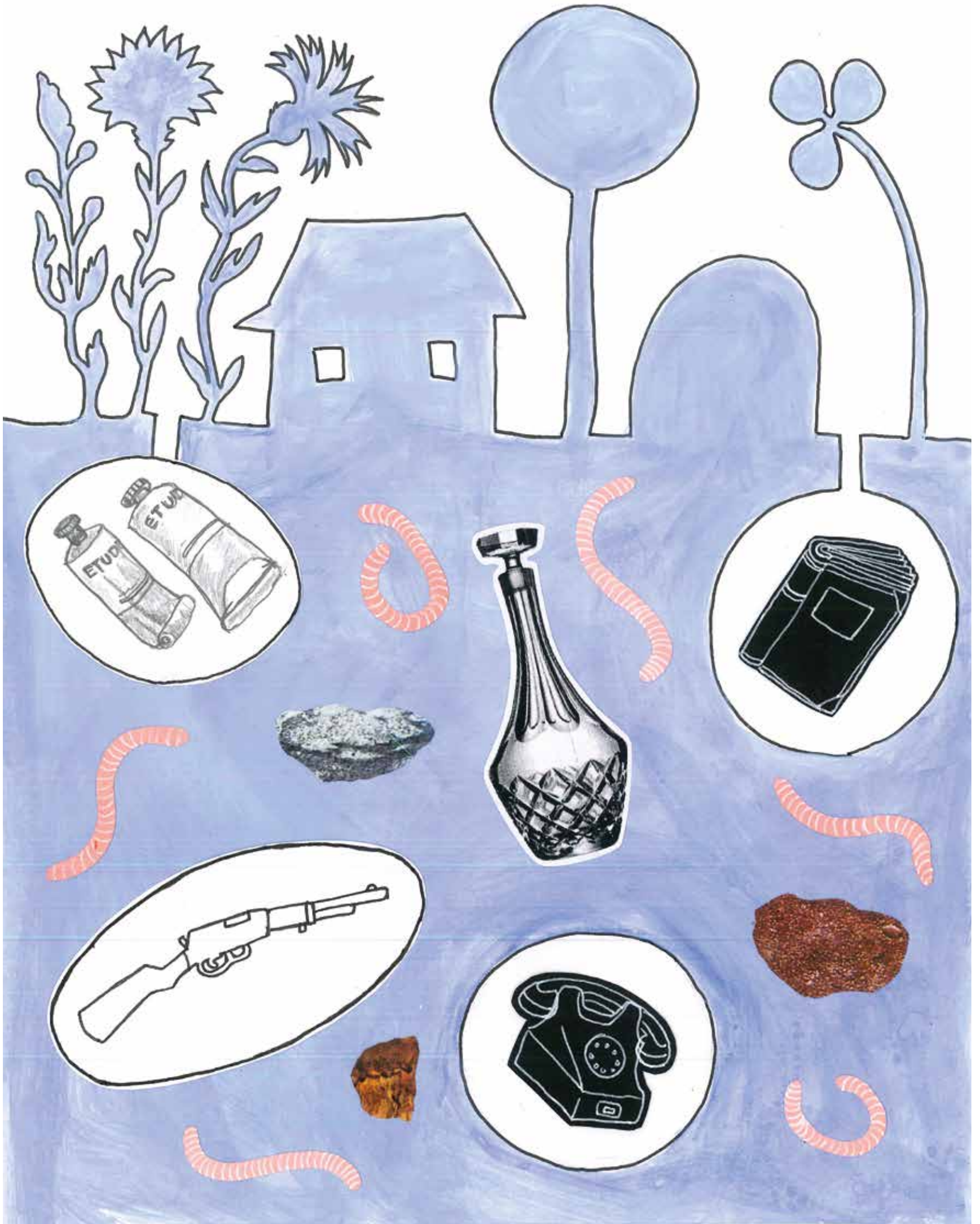
“Even though we were assisted by an expert metal detectorist, we were unable to find the objects,” Burström relates. “It was disappointing, of course. But the search wasn't worthless. Ahto reached a kind of closure. And while we were looking, we found other metal objects that brought back memories of his childhood, including a rusty door handle from the farm where he had lived and an Estonian twopence from 1934.”

**BUT THERE ARE FAMILIES** who have succeeded in finding and digging up their belongings. The Rammus family might be the most spectacular example. During the war, they had lived on a farm about 20 kilometers west of Tallinn. The father had buried an oak barrel filled with family possessions just before they set off for Sweden, in September 1944, in their little fishing boat. Only the son, Ulo, had been told where the barrel was buried. In 1998, he and his sister Letti returned to the plot of land. The buildings had been burned down by the Soviet military, who considered them a security risk. But Ulo managed to find the farmhouse foundation, paced off the distance to the burial site, thrust his spade into the light soil and began to dig – and shortly thereafter struck the oak barrel. Up into the light, after 54 years in the ground, came a pair of old Ericsson telephones, a cut-glass decanter, drinking glasses, a silver watch, silver coins from the Tsarist period, jewelry, and a good deal more. One box contained tubes of oil paint that had belonged to the father, who was interested in art. His daughter Letti, who herself is an artist, now uses them in her own paintings on rare occasions.

“It is interesting to see how the importance of these objects changes over time,” says Burström. “Before they were buried, they had a practical, mundane importance. Once the objects were in the ground and the years passed, they became memory caches of sorts, memory banks where the memories were kept alive. As long as the memories lived, the hope of return also lived. When the objects later resurface, they may once again take on practical importance – and also become reminders of times past and the people one loved.”

**To hide something in the soil of the fatherland – an act of defiance against the enemy?**





The one who knows **why** it is buried is the only one who finds treasure in what is discovered.

Some families hid their belongings in cavities between house walls or under layers of sawdust insulation in the attic. But it seems that people most often chose to bury their belongings – partly because houses can burn down or be demolished, partly because the ground has a particular symbolic power. In the ground they had buried their families, the ground had given them food for the table – and now it was to the ground that they committed their most precious possessions.

In addition to both the people digging up buried objects since the liberation, and those who willingly or unwillingly let them stay in the ground, there is a third case: those who did the forbidden and dug up the objects while Estonia was still part of the Soviet Union.

**ALEKSANDER RAUKAS** WAS a chief forester, living temporarily in Pärnu when the second Soviet occupation came knocking at the door in the summer of 1944. Based on his experiences of the first occupation in 1940–1941, when thousands of his countrymen were deported, Raukas feared the worst for himself and his family. He had not yet made the decision to flee – that would come a few weeks later – but he wanted to hide his dearest belongings. And so he got hold of two empty oil barrels, cleaned the insides and coated them with tar on the outside. In these barrels, he placed photographic archives and other mementos, an Estonian reference book, needlework, a hunting rifle, linen, and clothing. He took the barrels into the woods and buried them in two different places in dry, sandy soil.

His daughter Helga was nine years old when her father took her to the hiding places in the woods and charged her with a very important task: remember these places.

“I understood the seriousness of the task,” Helga Nõu relates when we meet in the apartment in Tallinn returned to the family after the liberation. “I was not allowed to write anything down about the hiding place. For weeks afterwards, I fought to remember exactly how many steps away from a certain pine tree the barrels lay. To this day, I would absolutely be able to find them, at least one of them.”

But she never had to look. Her uncle Heino dug up both barrels 14 years after they were put in the ground. The year was 1958, Stalin had been dead for five years, conditions in the occupied homeland had improved somewhat, and it had become possible to correspond with relatives abroad. For Aleksander Raukas’s family, the dramatic flight to Sweden was already far in the

past, but the story could easily have ended with the family being killed. They had left late one night after saying goodbye to Helga’s paternal grandmother, who did not want to go with them.

“We told her we would be back in a month or two. But that was the last time we saw her.”

They traded a crate of vodka and a brass barometer for a place on a barge hidden in a bay. A German bridge guard had been bribed to look the other way when the boat headed out, but engine problems had delayed the departure and the guard had been relieved before the boat could get started. The new guard shouted “halt” three times before he opened fire.

“The bullets hit the water all around us,” Helga remembers. “The distance was very short, so I suspect he deliberately fired away from the boat. Even in the midst of the flames of war, there were people with kind hearts.”

Helga had already moved away from home when her father Aleksander got the slightly daft and defiant idea of sending a treasure map to his brother-in-law Heino in the occupied homeland. He sketched maps from memory and wrote detailed directions. He ended up with four double-sided pages that he hid in a wooden sugar box between one side of the box and the cardboard liner. By means of clever wording in the letter he sent along with the box, Heino was given to understand that there was something hidden inside beyond the visible, innocent contents. A tiny speck of paint showed where the treasure map was hidden in the side of the box.

Uncle Heino, an adventurous sort, took his motorcycle and drove the 150 kilometers to the hiding places in the woods. This was no easy task. The woods and surrounding area had changed, trees had been felled, and new roads had been laid. He had to go back several times and talk to people who knew what the area looked like in the past. He finally found both barrels and enlisted the help of a colleague to drive them home.

“Uncle Heino would have been given a considerable prison sentence if he had been caught, of course. But he obviously got a kick out of defying the Russians.”

**IN THE HIDDEN LETTER** containing the instructions, Aleksander wrote that he had “no need” of the buried things. “I just want to know whether anything is left and whether any of the photographs can be saved, but even that isn’t very important. Life has taken other paths, and all that once was seems now as if a dream, far removed from reality.”

The possessions proved to be well preserved after 14 years in the ground. Heino sent photographic negatives to Sweden a few at a time, in separate letters, to avoid the censor. Helga and her husband, Enn Nõu, had prints made from them in the 1960s. We flip through the photo albums and look at pictures from Pärnu of Helga standing next to her two younger brothers and her parents, just weeks before the flight, pictures that would never have been preserved for posterity if it had not been for her father Aleksander’s inventiveness and Uncle Heino’s courage.

“It was an amazing feeling to suddenly see pictures from my childhood, pictures that had lain hidden in the ground for so many years. I was able to see my lost childhood in Estonia once again.”

Aleksander Raukas died in 1988 and thus never lived to see the liberation. During the last years of his life, it became possible to visit Estonia, but he did not want to go.

“He was embittered and said that the Soviet powers had destroyed and ravaged the country. He did not want to see the misery; he wanted to remember the country as it once was.”

The hidden and later unburied objects – what significance have they had? Helga ponders for a moment:

“When we fled the country, they meant nothing. Survival was the only thing that mattered. But with time, the objects became symbols, of sorts, of what we had lost. Digging them up and taking care of them became a way of overcoming the evil power that wanted to take them and our entire country away from us.”

**MATS BURSTRÖM** SAYS that Helga’s family history – like several similar stories brought to light in his book – should give archeologists food for thought. Archeologists on digs often discard modern finds in the belief that they have nothing to tell us. They are regarded as nothing more than coincidental finds of trash and junk.

“There is every reason to rethink the chronological cleansing that is often done as a matter of routine at archeological digs,” writes Burström in his book, which is already available in English and may soon be translated to Estonian as well.

He is, however, far from first in the line of archeologists with an interest in objects of the present day. Studying modern consumption patterns, for instance, has been an international trend in archeology for several decades. Perhaps the most well-known study came out of the US, where archeologists examined people’s household rubbish and were able to determine that what they really ate and drank differed from what they reported in interviews. And the explanation was not that they deliberately lied about having a healthier lifestyle: they truly believed that they drank less alcohol and ate less junk food than they actually did.

Still, Burström is probably the first archeologist in the world to focus on the study of objects buried by people fleeing their homelands in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – even though such burials have in all likelihood occurred over large parts of the world.

“If there had been any other study, I think I would have heard about it by now,” he says.

Examples of people burying objects exist in many countries victimized by war and occupation: Finns in Karelia, the French under German occupation, Japanese detained in Canadian internment camps, people driven from their homes in Yugoslavia. But nowhere have the burials been studied in detail. Burström has received many positive reactions from archeologist colleagues in other countries – which might result in an international European project in the field.

“I must say I have become especially curious about France. The word is that the French also buried bottles of wine.” ✕

Pähl Ruin is a freelance journalist living in Vilnius.



Helga Nõu shows the pictures that have been unearthed.



# Tourism is endangering Albania's cultural heritage

Unique medieval castles are being turned into resorts with tennis courts to attract more tourists to Albania. With poverty widespread in the country, most Albanians have bigger problems to think about, and the political leadership seems unwilling to act.

"We are the last secret in Europe," says Albanian Minister of Tourism and Culture Aldo Bumçi, when he meets with me in his office in central Tirana.

He reports that 2.7 million foreign nationals visit Albania every year – about as many as the number who live in the country. There is no doubt that tourism is important to Albania, one of the poorest countries in Europe. Agriculture is still the most important sector in the economy and employs more than half the population, but tourism now accounts for 4.6 percent of GDP, and 140,000 people work in the industry.

Bumçi talks happily and passionately about the country's potential, about the majestic mountains in the north and the olive groves in the south. When I bring up the sustainability aspect of the tourism industry and the risk that Albania's cultural heritage will be neglected, the mood changes. His answers and tone become more abrupt.

"There is always risk of exploitation. But I assure you, this issue is our highest priority," he says.

## Missed chances

In another part of the city, I meet Artan Lame, director of the Albanian Heritage Center. From his office, he and his small staff are trying to make people aware of what is happening to the country's cultural heritage.

Artan Lame says that after the fall of communism, there were opportunities to coordinate and plan the development of tourism while instituting strong protection of the cultural heritage.

"The politicians missed those chances. Every government since, left-wing and right-wing alike, has been incapable of controlling development."

With his own political background – Artan Lame has served as director of cultural heritage at the Ministry of Culture and as deputy minister of territory and tourism with previous governments and is an active member of the Socialist Party – he has first-hand knowledge of the state's inability to deal with the country's deteriorating cultural treasures.

Albania's cultural heritage consists of relics of the Illyrians, Greeks, Romans, and the later periods of

the Byzantine and Ottoman empires. Over the centuries, the country has been a cultural melting pot, a confluence of east and west.

This cultural heritage is now crumbling away, either through natural deterioration or due to construction of various kinds. As an outside observer, one should be wary of judging the Albanians. Considering the poverty, it makes perfect sense that people in places like Gjirokastër would rather put new and cheap metal roofs on their houses than restore the slate roofs using traditional and costly artisan methods. This is their country and not a museum.

## A political issue

But above all, there is a lack of political will to preserve the cultural heritage. Artan Lame leaves the office and comes back with a banner.

"Look at this. This is what they want to do with the castle," he says with anger in his voice.

The banner depicts Lezhë Castle in northwestern Albania. Built by the Illyrians, this was the place where General Skanderbeg gathered all the warring Albanian tribes to an assembly in 1444 and managed to unite them in joint opposition to the Ottomans. Skanderbeg is now a national hero and the 1444 assembly in Lezhë is commonly described as the occasion when the first seeds of a movement towards Albanian nationhood were sown.

In addition to the castle ruins, the banner shows the construction plans for a resort hotel that a southern Italian investment company wants to build. Inside the walls of the castle, they have drawn up a hotel with a large tennis court. The project has been given a green light by the government, but was recently put on hold after the public criticism following a campaign mounted by Artan Lame and his colleagues.

"The castle in Lezhë is very meaningful to us Albanians. The government claims the hotel would double tourism in the region, but we don't think that is reason enough to destroy the castle."

Artan Lame is happy that he managed to stop the project, at least temporarily, but it was a small victory in the overall scheme of things. He brings out pictures of castles in Shkodra, Preza, Durrës, Kruja, Elbasan, and Bashtova – castles that have already been de-

stroyed or are endangered.

"The government speaks a lot of pretty words about how we must protect our cultural heritage, but at the end of the day, they are the ones who grant permits for construction projects like the one at Lezhë Castle."

## Bleak future

It has been almost three years since Artan Lame founded the Albanian Heritage Center. Much of its work since has been devoted to informing the public. "We need politicians who act responsibly. But if the voters don't care about their cultural heritage, the politicians won't either."

The lack of public interest in these issues is evident in the Heritage Center's budget – virtually all donations come from abroad. The organization has a total staff of about ten people.

"We are not big, but we can make a lot of noise," says Lame, and asks whether I am familiar with the Albanian film *Tokë e përgjakur*.

I am not, but I decide to check it out after the interview. The film was made in 1979 and is called *Bloody Land* in English. It tells the story of a lone partisan hiding in a building besieged by Italian troops. The partisan moves from window to window to fool the Italians into believing he is not alone. Artan Lame says his organization has learned a lot from this partisan.

If you ask Artan Lame, the future is bleak. In the film, the Albanian partisan is exposed in the end and meets his death. Things hardly need go quite so badly for Lame, but he is fighting an uphill battle and reforms are slow in coming. He gives me a pamphlet published by his organization. It lists fifty cultural heritage monuments – everything from bridges to houses and castles – destroyed in just the last few years. ❌

**axel kronholm**

freelance journalist living in Stockholm

Note: The article was previously published in the Finnish weekly *Ny Tid* [New times].



Top: Some of the bunkers that remain scattered around the country from Enver Hoxha's regime. Bottom: The ruins of Buthrotum, a UNESCO site. Right: Gjirokastër.

Photos: Axel Kronholm

# THE WORLD SEEN THROUGH BINOCULARS

Interview with Lila Passima, curator of the exhibition  
*Childhood: Remains and Heritage*

by **Anna Kharkina**

**THE OLDER ONE GETS**, the more tenuous the connection to one's own childhood becomes – especially when the country and even the society where one was born no longer exists, and even the place where one grew up is not called by the same name anymore. Feeling I was losing my connection with my childhood dreams, I found that the exhibition *Childhood: Remains and Heritage* was able to open a door to childhood – others' as well as my own. Although the objects in the exhibition did not look exactly the same as those I remember from my early years – for example, I did not find the East German toy train set whose happy owner I had been, even if I never actually played with it – I immediately felt something familiar, a sudden knock into the slightly dusty, partially erased memory of my own childhood.

Never before this exhibition had I thought that childhood is more than just a certain stage in one's own life, but is rather a very special cultural field – one that is, in a way, as the curator of the exhibition Lila Passima claims, universal. There is nothing that can prevent children from different countries, if they happen to meet, from coming up with games that they can play together, and sharing their toy collections. Looking at childhood from this perspective, one might think that childraising consists in taking children out of this universality and placing them in the adult world of locality.

To describe her approach to childhood, Passima uses the term “subjective archaeology”. It is an attempt to recreate the imaginary world of childhood, and to reconnect visitors with their own childhood dreams.

**MY FIRST QUESTION** to Passima is about the kind of experience she wants visitors to have in the exhibition.

“The idea of a Virtual Museum of Childhood came to Ioana Popescu, head of research of the Romanian Peasant Museum. She wanted to attract attention to a minor part of our heritage, of no monumental scale,



Lila Passima.

whose value is determined by local, individual, or family memory. The subject of childhood is composed of remnants, specific memories, disparate objects that become a pretext for revisiting a history experienced in its own time, a time of wonderment, fears, grief and joys, that has taken concrete form in the preservation of a favorite toy over time.”

**What does the title of the exhibition mean?**

“‘Remains and Heritage’ means that we understand that we cannot bring back the past in its entirety, but with the help of fragments we can rediscover it.”

**You have assembled objects both from the past and the present. What principle did you follow in bringing them together?**

“In the exhibition we connect tradition with contemporary life. To old rituals that mark childhood in different ages, we add new mythologies and the signs of a living culture. In Romania, when we celebrated the holiday called *the shearing of the forelock* or *the breaking of the gingerbread* – a baby's first birthday – we used to put symbolic things on a plate: a coin to bring the child wealth; rice, for prosperity; a mirror or jewelry for beauty; thread and scissors for skill; a pencil or paintbrush for cleverness and talent; sugar for sweet and pleasing looks. Nowadays, people also put miniature office computers, car keys, and euro banknotes on the plate – all kinds of objects from contemporary life. Another example: in the past you could guess the sex of the child by dangling a wedding ring on a thread next to the mother's belly, and now we have ultrasound.

“We have created a dialog between the peasant world and contemporary urban life. In the begin-

ning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the peasant world became a popular theme in urban society. People made studio photographs with the whole scenography of a village to reinvent a national atmosphere. The question is how the town borrowed from the countryside, and how the countryside is being reshaped today by urban culture.”

**WE ALSO TALK ABOUT** childhood in a certain period, during communism, when children became an element of propaganda. The image of a pioneer child, as opposed to the image of a peasant child, celebrating the victory and new achievements of the Communist Party and its beloved leader, preparing to become the “new man”, multilaterally developed in a glorious society conceived by its proletarian heroes. In that time, politicians used coercive methods to increase birth rates by prohibiting abortion (the famous decree of 1966). An individual could not preserve his or her identity, but became a number in an army, unable to choose what is good or bad for his or her own life and future.

**Did the national theme, which arose in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, disappear in the Soviet period?**

“Romania is a very interesting geographical territory, situated at the intersection of various cultures: Byzantium, the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Balkans, and Western Europe. These Byzantine, Oriental, Western, and Slavic influences are visible in folk art and architecture and create a unique diversity of styles. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Romanian peasant art achieved the status of a national art, worthy of inclusion in museum collections. The Romanian aristocracy adopted peasant art both for décor and costumes.”

“All this was replaced with a kind of nationalist ideology that was in fact Soviet propaganda, which had no relation with our historical values. It was only

**Childhood is the country to which there is no return.**





propaganda with the cult of personality. The new cultural instructors and inspectors who supervised craft production and traditional art took elements from national history and from old values, and transformed them into kitsch. For the new class of workers they created new folklore, art, and music – a new type of communist folklore.”

#### Can you describe one memory from your childhood?

“That is a difficult question. There are a lot of interesting and powerful memories. It is strange that, although we lived through the hard period – I was a child in the 1970s – we were happy. There was a huge shortage of those ingredients that can make happiness for a child: there was a lack of toys, good food, and good clothes. I was like many other children at that time in the middle of all this, but I was happy. We created our games, with sticks and elastic thread to jump over; over and over we played hop-scotch and the snail game drawn with a piece of chalk on the sidewalk. We lived through lots of repression and harmful historical events, but we never felt it so traumatically, because a child has a very strong imagination of his or her own world. Simple games, word games, and although all we had was a Chinese bubble-gum that was like a stick of metal, or the famous *Eugenia*, the poorest and cheapest of cocoa-cream biscuits, we were also happy when we could get bananas. We had really hard times, but we had other things that brought us closer together. We had a real sense of friendship.”

#### When do you think childhood ends?

“Childhood has no end. You can say goodbye to your childhood when you become an adult, but from that point on you have lost the most important, essential thing in your life, and in the lives of other people. Childhood makes things possible; it helps us to go on, and reminds us how to enjoy life with the heart of a child. It is really the most important thing! If you stop

being a child, you close the door to happiness. You have an advantage as a grown-up if you keep childhood near you. You have a fresh attitude, a fresh expression in making things, and the ability to ask questions, including questioning yourself. And of course you have the benefit of that miracle of wonder. You keep wondering.”

**I read an article about the political pressure that cultural institutions are under in Romania today, especially the Romanian Cultural Institute. The institute was accused by the country's leadership of damaging the sense of community among Romanians living abroad. What do you think about it?**

“We feel that politicians want to replace the structure I just spoke of: about being open to other cultures in other societies, and to universal culture. You can find contemporary art in China, Russia, and Europe, in Romania as well as the Netherlands: it does not need to be in a certain place. I don't know why the Romanian government thinks that Romanian culture is not so well represented; I don't think you can put the concept in those terms in our time. You are not more national than universal. You can be national even if you work in completely different parts of the world; you can be national and universal at the same time. I feel it as an anachronistic return to a sort of communism, to a rigidly restraining understanding of life and values.”

**Do you think that the government wants to separate people, to make them think, not about real problems, such as the economy, but something else?**

“After the revolution we were together, in my opinion, because we had only one known enemy: the dictators and their abusive and aberrant politics. After the 1990s, political authority created a kind of conflict between different categories of people, creating a false paradigm: the conflict between national and universal

views of society. I do not know why they put the accent on this theme, but I suppose they can create – to call it a new ideology is perhaps going too far – but a new orientation, in which I see a lack of creativity. They are not inspired by innovation. Ultraconservative men use force and fear because they do not have creativity, inspiration, and an understanding of other cultures and diversity. You cannot be complex if you are locked into your small territory, using only a self-referential system. You cannot put emphasis only on your past, which, if it is wrongly understood, can be empty. I like my past, I always work with my past, but I do not want anybody to tell me how to work with this past and how to integrate it into the internal territory of contemporaneity.”

**Do you think that a conservative comeback is a general tendency in post-Soviet countries?**

“I ask myself the same question. We felt the opening of society as a positive movement. We all felt freedom in our work. We could dream, travel, form our own perceptions, and create our own criteria to evaluate the world. I do not understand this phenomenon. It is strange. You would expect that after twenty years of progress, when you have started to create a new basis on every level of society – culture, agriculture, administration, health – the new system would have acquired its structure, its vision. But in my local territory I miss all that. That is why we should ask some questions: what are we doing with our present, and what do we want to do with our future?” ❌

Note: The traveling exhibition *Childhood: Remains and Heritage* is financed by the European Commission. The project is a collaboration among cultural institutions in Romania, Poland, and France. The exhibition appeared in 2012 in London, Paris, Madrid, and Rome; in 2013, it appears in Stockholm, Warsaw, and Ljubljana.

**The memory of a bygone childhood is like the shadow of a lick of flame in a fire.**

# “Historiography has been a minefield”

A conversation with Vladimir Tismaneanu

**R**omanian cultural policy is a landscape that changes constantly according to political decisions. The fortune or misfortune of scholarly research on sensitive topics such as the history of national communism is primarily due to the possible outcomes that politicians foresee – and the consequences affect the whole cultural field, including cultural projects, institutions and the lives of those who work in them. There is a clear tension between the freedom of scholarly research and the allocation of resources by political power. This tension became evident in Romania during the past decade, and was often highlighted by mainstream media, which contributed to making contemporary history, and the history of Romanian communism in particular, a hotly debated topic in the national public discourse.

Until May 2012, Vladimir Tismaneanu, professor of comparative politics at the University of Maryland, chaired the Scientific Council of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (IICCMER), a public agency of the Government of Romania coordinated by the prime minister's office.<sup>1</sup> It was the newly elected Romanian prime minister Victor Ponta (center-left coalition) who relieved him of that position.

The Romanian government's diktat brought about Tismaneanu's resignation from the Scientific Council, a decision immediately followed by other members.<sup>2</sup> Vehement letters of protest were sent by members of other cultural institutions in Romania and abroad. One letter denounced the Ponta government's attempts to discredit the Institute's work and to “politicize the activity of IICCMER”.<sup>3</sup> Another letter, signed by seven IICCMER researchers, denounced the overt death threats addressed to them by an unnamed department head at IICCMER, and pointed to the defamation campaign and gross mystification carried out to discredit the IICCMER's activities from 2010 to 2012,<sup>4</sup> during Tismaneanu's leadership of the Institute.

**VLADIMIR TISMANEANU** WAS appointed chair of the Scientific Council of IICCMER by the Romanian prime minister Emil Boc (center-right coalition) in 2010. Tismaneanu was chosen to lead the Institute because of his solid reputation and his leading role in coordinating the Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania in 2006. That commission's Final Report was published in 2007 by Humanitas Publishing House; the electronic version was posted on the Romanian Presidency's official site on December 18, 2006. The activities of the Commission were condoned by the Romanian president at the time, Traian Băsescu. Its members included well-known domestic and international experts on several aspects of

Romanian history, and it was intended to offer a new and revised historic view of Romanian communism.

While from a scholarly point of view this commission's resources and visibility represented a great opportunity, from the political point of view, the desired effect, and the actual result, was a partial discrediting of political adversaries – most of all Ion Iliescu. The Commission revealed the links that leftist and extreme rightist politicians had with the communist nomenklatura, enhancing the image of President Băsescu in public opinion as a man who endorses transparency and is unafraid of examining the past, being “new” in politics – a characteristic that his adversaries could not claim.

**REFLECTING ON THE RECENT** conflict over IICCMER and on Tismaneanu's trajectory in Romanian cultural life, two things come to mind. The first is that Gramsci's statement, “History is always contemporary, that is, political”, is still true, and is also true of historical writing. Historiography, once it spreads outside the less visible circles of academia, tends to become political argument, and historians – or political scientists, in this case – become political allies to some, and political enemies

to others. Second, the conflict regarding IICCMER confirms that the dependency of historical scholarship on political power is very much present in contemporary Europe. And that dependency is one of the constants of European historiography during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>5</sup> In the process of establishing history as a profession, the allocation of resources has played a pivotal role. Political power has been able to offer both resources and prestige

to those historians and institutions that were willing to create narratives that suited the project of political power. This made the fortunes of some schools of thought and some topics of research, while causing misfortune for others.

Even if political interference with historical research is an everyday matter in contemporary democratic Europe, the battle for national history is probably fought in no other European country with as much passion, determination, and vehemence as in Romania.

Certainly the speed with which research positions change according to the political winds is impressive. This feature of the relationship between politics and scholarship has several consequences for intellectual debate: the high rate of verbal violence and the acerbity of mutual accusations among intellectuals and politicians in Romania are surely unrivalled in Europe.

“History is always contemporary, that is, political.”





Photo: Alexandru Petria

The American political scientist Charles King, in a critical review of the Final Report of 2006, claimed, “Few professors have biographical entries on Wikipedia. Fewer still have theirs blocked from further anonymous editing after becoming boards for hate speech.”<sup>6</sup> Tismaneanu’s Wikipedia entry was vandalized several times by anonymous individuals, and hate speech directed towards his person (in all forms, from satire to defamation) is posted on the Internet by intellectuals, journalists, and politicians.

These insults and defamations are clear attempts to intimidate Tismaneanu and to question the work he and his colleagues (including many researchers from IICCMER) are conducting on Romanian communism. Their work has entailed considerable problems for those responsible for the Romanian Communist Party’s societal control and repression, and for those contemporary parties whose links with the previous regime are evident.

IN 2008, TISMANEANU denounced the “campaign against intellectuals” undertaken by influential voices in national mainstream media. Tismaneanu made his appeal to public opinion together with Gabriel Liiceanu, the founder and director of Humanitas Publishing House, who has had a leading role in shaping Romanian cultural discourse since the 1990s, and with Horia-Roman Patapievici, then the head of the Romanian Cultural Institute (he resigned last summer in protest against the Ponta government’s decision to downsize the Institute). On that occasion, Tismaneanu lambasted the “pathological intensity” with which the media disseminated “a toxic language” against intellectuals. Tismaneanu pointedly asked the conference audience, “How can you, expert in one domain, establish a dialogue with one who’s saying that you are an idiot and that you don’t know anything about these matters?”<sup>7</sup> This “toxic language” was particularly intense in reference to Liiceanu and Andrei Pleșu, the philosopher and former minister of culture and of foreign affairs.<sup>8</sup> Here, according to Tismaneanu, “the most perfidious insinuation” was used “to delegitimize them ethically and intellectually.”<sup>9</sup> During the same conference, Gabriel Liiceanu offered a striking image of this campaign, telling a joke about politicians who warn historians: “We won’t meddle in history – but don’t you meddle in politics!”<sup>10</sup> According to some Romanian politicians, historians are too much

## About Vladimir Tismaneanu

Vladimir Tismaneanu is a professor of comparative politics at the University of Maryland, where he is also the director of the Center for the Study of Post-Communist Societies. Between 1998 and 2004, Tismaneanu served as editor of *East European Politics and Societies*.

Born in Romania, Vladimir Tismaneanu grew up in a communist family. Both his parents fought in the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War. In the 1950s, his father was a party ideologue, his mother, a physician, taught at the Medical School in Bucharest. They fell into disgrace in the 1960s, but were nonetheless dedicated communists. Their son Vladimir, however, became a critical intellectual opposed to any form of totalitarianism. He left Romania in the 1980s and settled in the US. He is a consistent anti-communist, associated with Tony Judt, and has written extensively on



the crimes of his parents’ generation. His most recent books are *Lumea secretă a nomenclaturii* [The secret world of the nomenclatura] (Bucharest 2012: Humanitas) and *The Devil in History: Communism, Fascism, and Some Lessons of the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley 2012: University of California Press).

**HIS INVESTIGATIONS ARE** biographical, ideological, and institutional, as demonstrated by his award-winning book *Stalinism for All Seasons: A Political History of Romanian Communism* (Berkeley, 2003: University of California Press). Maybe this was the main reason why he was appointed by President Băsescu to lead the Presidential Commission for the Analysis of Communist Dictatorship in Romania, which presented its report in less than one year, a few weeks before Romania’s accession into the EU. The activity of the Commission led to an unprecedented opening of the Romanian archives and to virulent attacks from the far left and the far right. In March 2010, Tismaneanu was appointed head of the Scientific Council of the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (IICCMER) – this was also a political appointment – by Premier Emil Boc.

**ALTHOUGH TISMANEANU IS** not a politician, he is very close to President Traian Băsescu, especially on issues related to decommunization and the consolidation of the rule of law. And he has been very outspoken against politicians who were once members of the Communist Party (such as Ion Iliescu, Romania’s leader in the 1990s) or extreme nationalists. Vladimir Tismaneanu was relieved of his position in May 2012 by the new prime minister Victor Ponta of the Social Democratic Party (which has many former communists among its members). Ponta has rapidly fired a number of high-profile academics associated with the Democratic Liberal Party, among them several of Tismaneanu’s closest colleagues.

Because of Tismaneanu’s Jewish background, much of the vulgar hate speech against him in Romania has anti-Semitic content. ❌

**david gaunt**

Professor emeritus, History  
Södertörn University

interested in politics, but actually, most historians are simply doing their research as they should, and are not to blame if the names of contemporary politicians appear in the Communist Party archives as Party activists or supporters. Those who study the past become political enemies to those who would prefer to consider the past over and done with.

**President Băsescu appointed you head of the Presidential Commission for the Study of the Communist Dictatorship in Romania. What does it mean to work for a Presidential Commission?**

“The topic and the Report have proved not only highly relevant, but also highly divisive. In more than one respect, Romania is a polarized country. Many people talk about the need for reconciliation, but how can reconciliation take place if nobody atones?”

“The offensive against the Report has been very much the result of the opposition mounted by post-communist nostalgics, including former apparatchiks, former Securitate operators, and ultra-nationalists, united in a common front against a genuine reckoning of the past in Romania. President Traian Băsescu was suspended in the spring of 2007 and, for a whole month, until a national referendum brought him back to the president’s office, the Final Report was deleted from the presidency site.

“To me, working for such a commission meant promoting values I deeply cherish: truth, dignity, tolerance, and compassion for the victims. I believe in the unity of thought and action. Our philosophy, the Commission’s moral viewpoint, was not vindictive: the issue was to capture the truth, not to indict people. We embraced an antitotalitarian ethos, both antifascist and anticommunist.

“I want to emphasize that while there are opponents of the Report, there are also numerous supporters. The most important newspapers in Romania, significant civil society associations, including the Group for Social Dialogue, and thousands and thousands of citizens expressed solidarity with the Commission.”

**Are there historians who still approve of the political views of those political parties that more or less overtly oppose not only the activity of IICCMER, but also other institutions for the study of history, such as the National Council for the Study of Securitate Archives?**

“Romanian political parties in general have no special interest in historical matters. To most of them, quite erroneously, the past is another country. Obviously, the parties least interested in addressing the traumatic past are those directly linked to the communist era, first and foremost the Social Democrats, whose honorary chairman is the former communist ideologue and two-time post-communist president Ion Iliescu. It was not pressure from political parties that convinced Traian Băsescu to appoint the Presidential Commission in April 2006, but rather the mobilization of civil society. IICCMER, as it functions now, is actually the result of a merger in the fall of 2009 between two institutes: one dealing with the communist crimes and one dealing with the Romanian exile. I became chair of the Scientific Council in March 2010. In May 2012, Prime Minister Victor Ponta ‘released’ me from this non-remunerated duty and fired the executive president, professor Ioan Stanomir. This was the first decision in a series made by the Social-Liberal Union coalition government that came to power in April 2012, culminating in the failed coup attempt in July 2012. I should mention the dismissal of the young historian Dorin Dobrinicu as director of the National Archives and the forced resignation of the leadership of the Romanian Cultural Institute (ICR), headed by the philosopher Horia-Roman Patapievici. Neither I nor my colleagues have endorsed a particular political party. Our only concern was the quality of scholarship, the expansion of publications, and the development of the institute as a major research center.”

“The issue was to capture the truth, not to indict people.”

**Do you think that optimism regarding Europe and the Western world has ceased among intellectuals and public opinion because of the economic crisis? Is it possible that allogenic**

**factors, namely the neo-liberal politics of the center-right and the world crisis, favor “Stalinism for all seasons”, reinforcing the endogenous factors of corruption and patronage?**

“The austerity measures adopted in 2010 were inevitable, yet the Social Democrats and the Liberals, supported by Dan Voiculescu’s Intact media trust and its TV stations, especially Antena 3, presented them as a ferocious exploitation of the Romanian people by soulless Western neoliberal institutions and their Romanian agents. There was a lot of genuine discontent in Romania that led to the riots of January 2012. Non-violent protest is legitimate in any democratic society. The problem is when populist demagogues exploit and manipulate such popular discontent. In the summer of 2012, when the EU and the US State Department, through the US Embassy in Bucharest, put pressure on the Ponta government to stop its assault on the rule of law, Crin Antonescu, the National Liberal Party leader and interim president during Traian Băsescu’s second suspension, engaged in and escalated a virulent anti-American and anti-EU rhetoric. Even some of Antonescu’s colleagues voiced disapproval of his irresponsible political fireworks.”

**A recent study conducted by Florian Banu" shows that the majority of researchers who examine the Securitate Archive materials are concerned with studying the conditions for intellectuals under the Communist regime. Why is intellectual history so strong in Romania?**

“The communist regime was an ideocratic system; ideology was the regime’s underpinning. The dictatorship was based on the supremacy of its own interpretation of Marxism, codified in Nicolae Ceaușescu’s speeches. The regime used different methods to control, coerce, and co-opt the intelligentsia. Walking in Stalin’s and Mao’s footsteps, Ceaușescu fancied himself a great theorist. Some intellectuals dared to defy him, but the overwhelming majority chose collaboration or silence. This led to a need to compensate for past complicities. Since 1989, democratic intellectuals have played a decisive role in formulating goals and programs for a nascent civil society. I think this fascination with the intellectuals’ files in the secret police archives is not specific to Romania. Think of the great Hungarian writer Peter Esterhazy’s discovery of his own father’s activities as an informer. Add to this the psychological effects of spectacular revelations about long-admired figures who turned out to have been less admirable than previously thought. At the same time, one must emphasize that many intellectuals, such as N. Steinhardt and I. D. Sirbu, turned down opportunities to become accomplices of the regime and remained targets of permanent surveillance.”

**During the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Romanian cultural debate revolved around the definition of the Romanian nation and of Romania as a Western or an autochthonous country, and the communist period was no different in this respect. Do you think that the battle over historical interpretation in contemporary Romania can be still regarded in the light of Romania’s geopolitical position and the search for a new definition of Romanian national identity?**

“Romania is now member of NATO and the EU. As the political scientist Ken Jowitt once said, membership in the EU is the best thing that has happened to Romania, and to Eastern Europe in general, in 500 years. Post-communist Romania has been a battlefield between liberal and illiberal visions of identity, traditions, belonging, loyalties etc. The late National Peasant leader, Corneliu Coposu, supported a civic-liberal interpretation of national identity, opposed to any form of exclusive tribalism. The same can be said about other political figures such as Traian Băsescu, Emil Boc, Valeriu Stoica, and Mihai-Răzvan Ungureanu (himself a historian). There are, of course, at the other end of the intellectual spectrum, voices that promote xenophobia and exclusiveness, such as Corneliu Vadim Tudor and his Greater Romania Party. There are many blank spots that need to be studied, especially in Romania’s recent history. Self-serving narratives of perpetual victimization need to be demystified. I think that the rise of a new generation of social scientists – I include historians in this category – has already resulted in a different perspective on the na-

From a conference arranged by the Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of the Romanian Exile (IICCMER), June 2011.





tion than the one embraced by the more traditionalist predecessors. These younger historians, political scientists, philosophers and anthropologists contributed to the writing of the Final Report as a modern, rigorously scholarly document. Let me mention here two names, two historians with whom I co-edited the Humanitas version of the Final Report, Dorin Dobrinu and Cristian Vasile.”

**The year 1989 represented a radical change for Romania, and also for the writing of national history. What is your perception of Romanian post-communist historiography?**

“Historiography, more than any other epistemic field, has been a minefield. The majority of the older historians had collaborated with the Communist regime. (David Prodan, Lucian Boia, Șerban Rădulescu-Zoner, Alexandru Zub, and Șerban Papacostea were rather the exception.) Some did so enthusiastically, others reluctantly. Some became Securitate informers. Altogether, it is a pretty depressing record. Initially, immediately after the regime’s collapse, there was an effort to exorcize the demons of the past and to repent for the abdication imposed by the regime. However, with support from Ion Iliescu, the nationalist school resurrected quite swiftly and took over the main institutions, including the archives. One influential person was Professor Ioan Scurtu, Iliescu’s history advisor and one of the most adamant supporters of the national Stalinist paradigm. These people perceived the Final Report as a personal offence and responded accordingly: with slander, innuendo, and threats.”

**Some of the nationalist ideas present in Romania in the '90s were simply resurrected from the interwar period, or reimported by the émigré communities. However, several discursive features of nationalism were pioneered and developed by Ceaușescu’s national-communist cultural policy, a political project that was Stalinist in form and national in content. Are these ideas still present in the Romanian cultural discourse?**

“Of course they are present and inform much of the public discourse, especially through the pro-USL television stations. Think of the obscene bombast accompanying the national funerals for Ceaușescu’s court poet Adrian Păunescu, whom I described as the minstrel of dynastic communism. Or, more recently, in 2013, the glorification of the movie director Sergiu Nicolaescu, another official artist of the Communist regime, a mythmaker directly associated with the creation of the nationalist saga. The illiberal nationalist project still has strong supporters not only in the USL, but in other parties as well. Let’s not forget the collectivistic impulses within the Orthodox Church.”

**The official historiography of Ceaușescu’s Romania is often represented as monolithic body of loyal activists, bureaucrats, and party activists. Is it possible to disrupt this monolithic image by looking at the biographies of the regime’s protagonists and at their different trajectories after 1989?**

“In all fairness, the monolith was just a façade, as misleading as any other. Underneath the monochrome surface, there were real conflicts, especially in the 1960s. Some of those historians truly believed in the nationalist vulgate, bought into the party-sponsored mythologies. In some cases, this was linked to deep anti-Western resentment. The late Florin Constantiniu is such a case, otherwise an interesting historian with a reportedly checkered past. Obviously, the bona fide historians – Florin Constantiniu, Dinu C. Giurescu, Șerban Papacostea, Apostol Stan – looked askance at the ideological apparatchiks from the Party History Institute and Ilie Ceaușescu’s Center for Military Theory and History. After 1989, these people could finally spell out their views and opinions. This explains Constantiniu’s bitter attack on the party historians Mircea Mușat and Ion Ardeleanu. Still, Constantiniu himself was not a supporter of Western-style democracy, and expressed deep skepticism regarding lustration and other measures linked to decommunization. When I invited him to become a member of the Presidential Commission, he politely declined, telling me that he did not want to join an ‘anti-communist chorus’.”

**Do you think that the seed you helped to plant will continue growing in the years to come in the same direction?**

“I think the official condemnation of the communist dictatorship as illegitimate and criminal cannot be reverted. With or without me, there is a critical mass of Romanian intellectuals who would oppose such a disastrous return to the past. IIC-CMER has excellent researchers who will continue their work, regardless of who is the president, director, etc. Think of the remarkable journal *History of Communism in Europe*, edited by Marius Stan and Corina Dobos (the latest issue has Bogdan C.

Iacob as guest editor). It is not up to me to pass judgment on my tenure as chair of the Scientific Council. What we did, we did together, as a scientific team. The seeds are there and cannot be destroyed, even if some people may want that to happen. IICCMER is now integrated in the European network of major research institutes dealing with totalitarianism. It is a modern, vibrant community, mostly of scholars. Obviously, the fact that the Scientific Council resigned to protest abusive attacks against me and professor Stanomir does not help the researchers. I hope that this crisis will pass and IICCMER will be what it needs to be: the moral and scholarly flagship of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* in Romania.”

**THE EVENTS TO WHICH** Tismaneanu refers concern the political and cultural elite of Romania. But it is not just an elite-related problem that is at issue here. As he says, popular mobilization, which contributed to the revolution of 1989 and to the first democratic political change in 1996, encouraged and supported the process of dealing with Romania’s past. This resulted in various laws on lustration, in the “democratization” of archives, and in the development of studies on the past regimes. Many of the Romanians who suffered under one of the most repressive, grotesque and absurd dictatorships of the twentieth century now want to highlight the country’s open wounds, to speak of them openly, and to shed new light on the present state of the country.

But history is highly divisive, since it draws lines between the perpetrators of atrocities, repression, and control, and their victims. The victims may have been part of the apparatus of repression, neutral observers, or opponents of the regime. History offers understanding, revealing all the complexity of society during communism, since victims and collaborators were usually close relatives, friends, or colleagues. Last but not least, history is divisive because the promises of 1989 have been dismissed, leaving some people with no other option but to cling to their long-standing patron-client relationships.

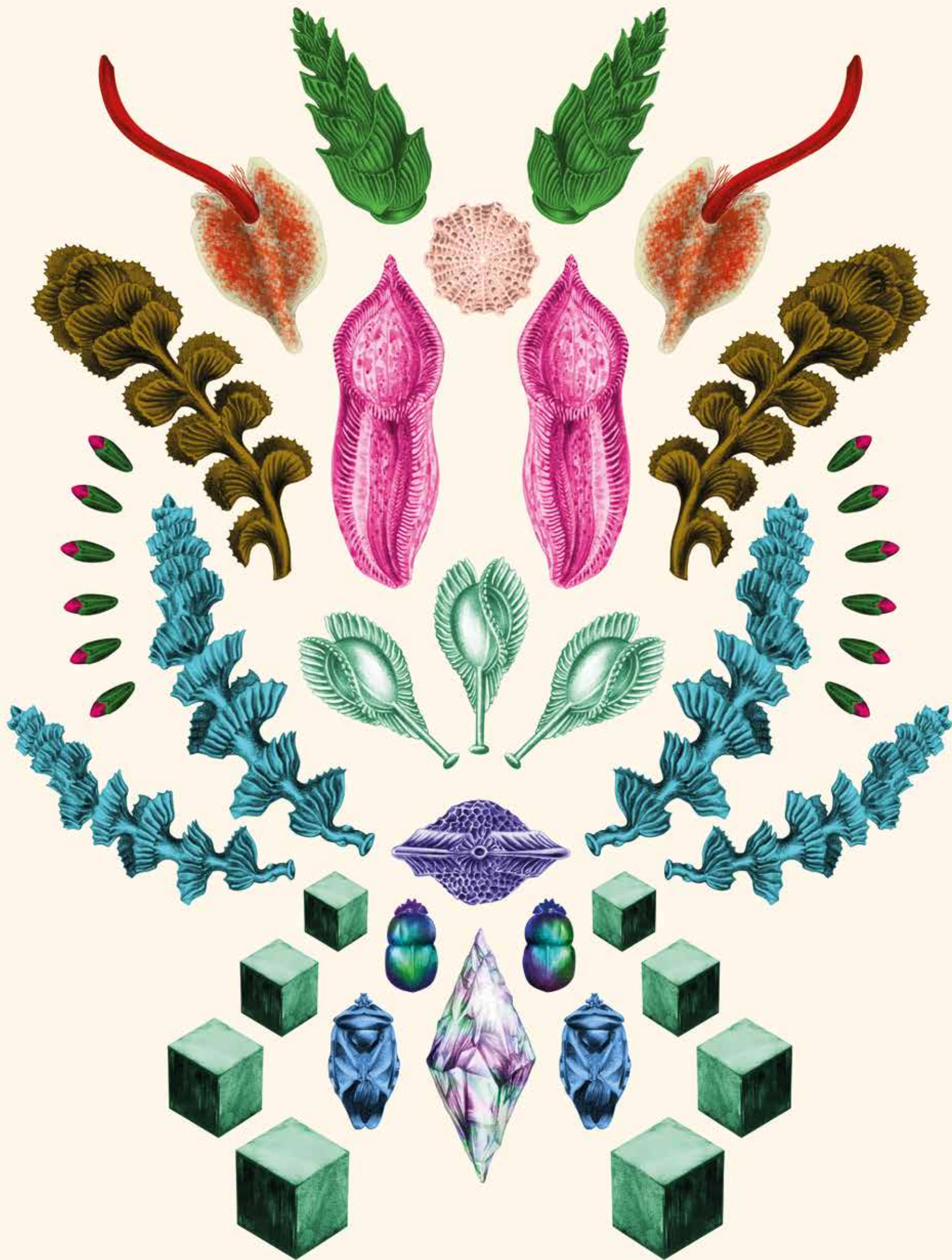
This divisive character of history conflicts with the need for reconciliation in Romanian society. But this character of history is also a reflection of Romanian society, which is divided by the past, by the conflictive memories, and by the ties in the present. ✕

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**When a totalitarian regime collapses there are no protective shells. Everything is exposed and wounds are split open.**







# THE APOSTLES OF LINNÆUS AND THE ECONOMY OF NATURE

by **Arne Jarrick**  
illustration  
**Karin Sunvisson**

The world of Linnaeus and Darwin was one of vast and abundant riches – for Darwin, a time of a burgeoning wealth of varieties and species. For both men, the world they so penetratingly studied was also hypersexualized – in Linnaeus’s case, clearly and merrily modeled on the relationship between men and women, almost to the point of parody. The cryptogams were so named, for example, because their “marriage” was secret, unlike the phanerogams with their obvious “sex organs” (stamens and pistils).

But the world that emerges from the studies of Linnaeus and Darwin is also informed by several disciplining circumstances, compelled by a struggle for scant resources in the midst of this cornucopia of varieties and species. Nature not only offers beauty and diversity, it also forces most species to engage in a never-ending struggle for survival under ever-changing circumstances. In this struggle, various forms of conserving physical and mental energy evolve: the colors of a plant or animal, or the willingness and capacity to engage in battle. As everyone knows, some die in the effort, and again, especially in Darwin’s observation, not only individuals but entire species die just as new ones arise.

All of this forms a point of departure for the discussion to be conducted here on the general development of the thinking of Linnaeus (and his apostles) and Darwin on the subject of economy. The questions are where this economic thought has taken us, where we are headed now, and where we should be going.

But what do the ideas of Linnaeus and Darwin have to do with the ideas of economy and economics? For that matter, what is economy in the first place?

## What is economic thought?

Economic thought revolves around our external living conditions and the choices people make to improve them. It is based on a few simple assumptions: all people want to improve their living conditions; everyone wants to attain the best living conditions possible and maximize their wealth with the least possible effort or, to put it another way, with minimal consumption of energy.

The third assumption is associated with the familiar economic arguments about “opportunity cost”. Those who are successful in a particular endeavor to improve their living

conditions with minimal sacrifice of opportunity to accomplish another particular endeavor have also minimized the opportunity cost – or the consumption of energy, if you will.

Therein lie economic phenomena! It becomes clear that both Linnaeus’s and Darwin’s scientific orientations are germane.

One could provide an even broader definition of the objects of economic study, something like what Eli Heckscher once offered: economic activity is everything that has to do with the adjustment of goals to resources. This takes place either through minimization of resource consumption to attain a specific goal or through maximization of the goal in relation to a finite quantity of resources. When we employ such a broad definition, it is possible to discern an economic aspect in almost all types of natural processes and social activities. Animals do not fight for the sake of fighting, and especially not if they feel inferior and believe the battle is hopeless – and a concession also spares the superior animal the consumption of energy that the fight would entail. Some sociologists believe the same applies to people: according to such a theory, only relatively equal parties would engage in conflict with each other. This may not be entirely true, but in

## INTRODUCTION

Carl Linnaeus, von Linné after his ennoblement, lived in a globalized time. He was a great traveler: he took his degree as a doctor of medicine in the Netherlands; he explored his native country of Sweden province by province; he sent his apostles far and wide across the world. A couple of them (Solander and Sparrman) sailed with Captain Cook, another (Thunberg) founded Japanese botany, one (Forsskål) succumbed in present-day Yemen. A few (including Forsskål and Kalm) first traveled across the Baltic from Finland, then a part of the Swedish realm.

And they all did their research and wrote, following the master’s precept of writing down everything he saw. They sent their finds home. They named plants according to the *Systema Naturae* that Linnaeus himself had created

in the spirit of the Heavenly Father. They were all men of the Enlightenment, several of them politically radical. One might say that their contributions as wandering scholars formed a school: an Alexander von Humboldt, a Charles Darwin sailed in their figurative wake, as did, in his own way, an even later traveler from the far north, Erik Adolf Nordenskiöld, a Finn by birth who conquered the Northeast Passage and was raised to the baronial rank by the King of Sweden, Sven Hedin, the last Swede to be ennobled, in 1901, and the Norwegian Fritof Nansen, the recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for his humanitarian efforts after the First World War.

The published and unpublished writings of his apostles have often been overshadowed by Linnaeus’ own scholarly output. That oversight has now been redressed:

through a London-based international enterprise carried out over many years and involving numerous scientists and scholars, these writings have been published in eight magnificent volumes and three index books. The publication as a whole was celebrated in November 2012 at a seminar held at the Swedish Riksdag (of which Linnaeus was of course a member in his capacity as a nobleman). Arne Jarrick, professor of history, was one of the speakers on that occasion. Here we have the pleasure of publishing a revised version of his address. ✕

**anders björnsson**

the ordinary course of things we apply a kind of psychological economy when we say that we “pick our battles”. Lowering our expectations now and then to avoid being disappointed if those expectations do not pan out is also wise stewardship of mental energy. And perhaps there is a sort of natural economy involved when the leaves on the trees close their stomata, or in the equipping of certain animal species with camouflage. And so on.

Indeed, the existence of economic activity in nature and society is apparent. Equally apparent are the connections to the plant and animal worlds of Linnaeus and Darwin and their insight that the abundant riches of nature conceal a brutal economy. What brings these natural scientists into the social sciences is thus the simple definition of economy as the doctrine of wise stewardship of scarce resources.

## The economic projects of Linnaeus and those of mercantilism

Linnaeus clearly saw the economy of nature, but also engaged in arguments on the nature of economy in the conventional sense of the term.

In Linnaeus’s understanding, the economy of nature involved not only a fierce battle for survival, but also a divinely determined and eternally fixed set of species. The world might seem filled with a boundless multiplicity of animals and plants, but in Linnaeus’s time, it was truly thought to be limited to a fixed number – as one pondered the question and classified what one saw. And so Linnaeus did, for all he was worth. In this counting, there was a rigorous thrift, a sort of scientific economy, a simple, disciplinary system of classification. The entire classification project was facilitated by the belief in a natural order, an order that according to the doctrine of “physical theology” of the time (which bears a striking resemblance to the current idea of intelligent design) was proof of the existence of God. And order is more economical than disorder. Order is economy. Everyone who spends a disproportionate amount of time looking for keys, eyeglasses, mobile phones, bus cards and the like knows that. In Linnaeus’s worldview – shared by most of his contemporaries – one had no choice but to submit to the natural order. Conversely, Linnaeus promoted the idea that nature should be exploited, indeed made subordinate to human interests, subordinate to people’s desires to improve their living conditions with the least possible leakage. As Linnaeus saw it, it was actually only through elegantly classified knowledge about nature that social conditions could be improved. In 1746 he wrote: “He who wishes to improve his Private Economy should do so through the understanding of Natural History.”<sup>1</sup> How did he arrive at that conclusion? Does it make sense?

**HOW LINNAEUS USED** his apostles in his endeavors to increase global understanding of nature and to improve the general welfare of Sweden is generally known. They were dispatched as much to study business and trade in remote lands as to identify and bring home foreign plants and animals from every corner of the world. Both tasks were aimed at the improvement of the Swedish economy. The overly optimistic belief that all of these species would be amenable, without much ado, to transplantation to the north was based on the bible-based belief in Noah’s Ark, the vessel by which all originally fruitful species everywhere had first been saved and then widely dispersed. If it was possible in pre-archaic times, it should certainly be possible now. The idea behind this dubious transfer of all manner of vegetation was to begin

processing products on Swedish soil in order to reduce the exports of raw products. This was a fundamental element of the mercantilist doctrine of the age: in the international zero-sum game, the goal was to maximize exports and minimize imports of processed products, and vice versa for raw products. Linnaeus subscribed to the doctrine and considered the acts of his apostles a way to contribute to the improvement of the country.

The apostles did what they could on their far-flung travels. They recorded everything between heaven and earth, whether they were aware or unaware of the grand plan of which they were part. Nothing was beyond their purview. For example, in his notes from his travels through Russia, Johan Peter Falck reports in text and copious tables on all manner of things: all trades and industries, religious affiliations and diverse other details. From Perm in the western Urals, he relates that the majority are Russians, that beekeeping is popular, that hunting is a winter occupation for many, that mining is the main industry, and so on. And he compiles a tabular lexicon of the languages: Swedish, German, Kyrgyz, Kalmuck. And so it goes, not only with Falck, but everywhere in the travel diaries of the apostles. They all have to do with economy (among other things) and they are ambitious, and yet, in their wealth of detail, they are also uneconomic and overly ambitious – if, at any rate, the aim was to change the world based on an explanation of it, and not on a description on a 1:1 scale.

Under the surface of this drive to improve, however, one can discern a relatively static understanding of the world. This is a reflection of dominant elements of the thinking of the times, both in the idea of the great chain of being and in central elements of mercantilist thought.

**WITH ROOTS IN** Late Antiquity, the idea of the great chain of being and the divinely determined world order was still a potent concept in the 1700s. It was based on the notion that all species, all types of beings, were equally necessary; that no link could be removed without the chain falling apart. This applied equally to the soulless animals, the bodiless angels, and the body-and-soul package of humans (who therefore, unlike the other beings, were torn between the competing claims of body and soul). It was also premised on the belief that everything had a place in an eternally sovereign hierarchy that cut across from the lower orders to the higher, within and between the species (or however one should classify angels and demons). Herein lay the static: no species could either be added or taken away, and the hierarchy would remain forever unchanged. Linnaeus accepted this tenet and built upon its postulates in his work to classify and name this purportedly immutable world.

The mercantilist doctrine was also highly static and supported by Linnaeus, who was politically aligned with the “Hats”.<sup>2</sup> Certainly there was a dynamic idea here about achieving macroeconomic growth in the home country by importing raw materials and exporting processed goods from a strongly subsidized domestic and manufacturing industry, manifest in, among other things, a large gold reserve (which according to Keynes could function as a monetary multiplier), as well as by stimulating population growth. But the price of development in one place was its absence elsewhere.

In this zero-sum game, it was believed that a country with large industrial exports of processed products would fare better than a land with less of the same, and that a populous country would fare better (in war) against a less populous country – an idea propounded repeatedly in other times, as in the Nativism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Naturally, one can find elements of more genuinely dynamic ideas about growth in this age of mainly static ideas – as one can in most eras. As an example, of his journey to Spitsbergen and the North Pole, Anton Rolandsson Martin writes that “a country that can live from the sea’s inexhaustible riches, by which I mean fishing, is among the luckiest in the world.” He could have had no presentiments of the radical depletion of ocean fauna in our age, despite our persistent and dangerous delusions about its inexhaustibility.

**NEVERTHELESS, LINNAEUS** eventually adopted a somewhat more dynamic view of nature and the economy of nature. His reorientation was spurred by the discovery of a modified variant of the common toadflax, incontrovertible evidence of the occurrence of species change and of the genesis of new species, in direct contradiction of the theory of the great and immutable chain of being. At the same time, he believed that a new species could arise only at the expense of an old species – that the number of species remained constant. Such was the divine economy of nature and so firmly rooted was Linnaeus, despite all, in the persistent worldview of the zero-sum game.

Linnaeus’s ideas and the acts of his apostles coincide with a general definition of economy as the doctrine of wise stewardship of scarce resources, which could be applied to both nature and human society. But beyond this, the philosophical, economic, and scientific thinking of Linnaeus and his contemporaries was historically distinguished by the belief that resources, as for example the number of species, could normally increase in one place simply by shrinking in another. This static view of the potentialities of being was also part of what was then the oh-so-modern philosophy of the Enlightenment, for which the secularizing idea of good national management for worldly prosperity was, nonetheless, central.

This was the widely held creed of the day, but not yet a doctrine of profligacy. It was still something other than the widely embraced faith in growth from whose modern vantage point this static notion would seem helplessly naïve and outmoded. But was it?

## The economic projects of Darwin and those of the classical economists

Darwin has quite a bit in common with Linnaeus: like Linnaeus, Darwin devoted tremendous and successful effort to systematically describing and classifying what he observed in nature.

And yet Darwin differed fundamentally from Linnaeus by virtue of his ingeniously simple, almost tautological idea, which he used to explain the dynamics of nature that Linnaeus had suspected and begun to conceive, but had not recognized. Darwin was not the first to see the evolutionary dynamics of nature – others, including his grandfather Erasmus Darwin, had done so before him. But he was the first (along with Wallace) to identify the simple mechanism, natural selection, that could explain it and which, once identified, seemed so glaringly obvious.

And with that, the great, static chain of being was replaced by the evolutionary tree and the species’ divinely and eternally determined number and characteristics were replaced by the constantly ongoing and godless, indeed blind, evolution of species, usually but not always characterized by accelerating differentiation. Linnaeus’s stopgap explanation, that the



change he nevertheless observed was a zero-sum game, was no longer necessary.

The theory of natural selection was something truly new in relation to all the variations on theories of heredity that had been in circulation for so long. At the same time, the theory of inheritance of acquired characteristics still enjoyed such high status that Darwin himself continued to believe in it, despite his own discovery of another mechanism. This is apparent when one reads Darwin's treatise *The Descent of Man*. Here he repeatedly avers that natural selection was probably greatly aided "by the inherited effects of the increased or diminished use of the different parts of the body".<sup>3</sup> One example is the use of the organs used for speech, another how the skills of the carpenter are passed on to his children. But the central example is his belief that man could become benevolent by virtue of inherited sympathy, the basis of his theory of group selection.

Mind you, Darwin's belief in a natural world in a state of constant change did not mean that he also believed in an economy in a state of constant growth. On the contrary, he embedded the somber prediction of the classical economists, that by no means everyone would grow to adulthood and successfully reproduce, into his theoretical conception of the brutal economy of nature. Echoes of Malthus are clearly heard in *The Descent of Man*, even though Darwin talked about species where Malthus talked about individuals. Still, Malthus's predictions about individuals were part of his macroeconomic arguments about the prerequisites of improvement, one of the pressing questions of the day. "It has been said", he wrote, "that the great question is now at issue, whether man shall henceforth start forwards with accelerated velocity towards illimitable, and hitherto unconceived improvement, or be condemned to a perpetual oscillation between happiness and misery".<sup>4</sup>

**AND THIS IS STILL** one of the great questions.

Malthus did not have the answer, but he was not optimistic. He was however soon succeeded by growth-optimistic economists who believed that the Malthusian barriers could be overcome with the aid of technology. It is likely that the introduction of fossil fuels played a critical role for growth as such and for the subsequent belief in perpetual growth. In 1800, two thirds of the global energy regime was still "somatic", that is, the extraction of energy was based essentially on the muscle energy of people and animals. With the advent of non-renewable energy sources, most things were instead based on mechanical energy, on an "extra-somatic energy regime". The stewardship doctrine of absolute scarcity fell back, and the doctrine of profligacy emerged.

A rusted and broken chain of being, replaced by a flourishing tree of evolution. Historic stagnation exchanged for constant movement – in society and in nature. Could it be more dynamic?

Yes.

There is in the interpretation of Darwin – perhaps to some extent in Darwin himself – a static or mechanistic element also found in the infinite faith of economists, of Darwin's time and our own, in what could be extracted from nature. In simplified presentations of the theory of evolution, the environment and the species are often differentiated as fixed units: here the one and there the other. Here is an environment responsible for the selection pressure to which the species must adapt – if they can. In a similar way (although reversed), economists have long regarded nature as the relatively permanent base material, the production factor, from which endless growth would be generated.

And what is wrong with that? The error is that nothing is purely environment or purely species. The species are in constant interplay with one another in such a way that they are subjected and subject one another to mutual selection pressure. As the animals and plants constitute an environment for and occasionally represent selection pressure on us humans, we humans likewise constitute an environment for and selection pressure on them. And so the circle goes round and round. The species are dependent upon the environment abundant in carbon dioxide to which they have contributed with their expiration. The Neolithic revolution, for example, can be regarded partly as the human adaptation to changed circumstances. Partly. But it was also the adaptation of grains to a new selection pressure from humans, which through increasing permanent settlement came to favor a particular grass, emmer wheat, for reasons including the fact that the grains of this particular grass were not released spontaneously from the spikes but had to be harvested.

This is how the dynamic economy of nature works. And it is how the social economy works. Natural resources are not merely a passive production factor to be exploited to further our desires to improve our living conditions, indeed to maximize our prosperity; they can instead be regarded as agents of a kind that affect us and which we affect in a perpetual interplay. This fundamental condition sets such limits for us that the doctrine of profligacy which still dominates our thinking is going to be pulverized by the true scarcity to which it contributes.

## Why and where?

The evolution of philosophical, scientific, and economic thought was accompanied by the dissolution of the old static and fundamentally religious idea of the great chain of being. This evolution entailed an unequivocal step forward in humankind's understanding of the world, to which was now ascribed an alternately blind, alternately intentional and human-staged mutability. As species could be replaced by new species, it was now also acknowledged that social positions are liquid. The shoemaker need not, as the Swedish axiom adjoins, stick to his last.

But in the midst of the dynamics of the new thinking was found – and is still found – a static view of the relationship between the species and between humankind and nature. It is based on radically increased opportunities to extract wealth from nature combined with never-ending human desires for improved living conditions and our short-sighted, naïve belief that this shall always be, that the golden years will never end – until they actually do.

Why does this self-deception survive, despite millennia of bitter experiences of over-exploitation, the depletion of fish stocks, the destruction of forests, the hunting of large land animals until the last one is killed, and other things humans have done to undermine the basis of their own livelihoods?

One important reason is precisely that we are humans; that we therefore, given our genome, have by cultural means and against all odds, brilliantly withstood the pressure against our existence. Indeed, we have been uniquely successful in increasing our numbers and thus our proportions among the living species on Earth. This is why the doctrine of profligacy, this deep-seated belief in growth, still holds such strong sway over our senses.

But this cannot go on. The extraction of resources is still rising and even though the global rate of population growth is declining, there are still plenty of us who are taking too much from the finite supply, the rich world far more than

the impoverished, the wealthiest more than the poorest. In this sense we are still too numerous – if we fail to change in accordance with our insights. It should be possible. As the cultural beings we are, we have the capacity not only to withstand the selection pressure against us, but also to reduce our own selection pressure against the world around us and thus against ourselves, in the dynamic interplay of which we are a part.

According to economic thought, we all want:

- to improve our living conditions;
- to have the best possible living conditions;
- to maximize our prosperity with the least possible effort or, to put it another way, with minimal consumption of energy.

**AND WHAT IS THIS**, actually? It is to make our lives as pleasurable as possible, for ourselves and for others. To succeed, we must subject the natural prerequisites to the least possible strain. And so economic growth cannot, must not, be the yardstick by which all else is measured.

To move in that direction, we must learn to understand and control our own psychology that drives us to devastate the economy while believing we are maintaining it. And for this, we need a dynamic doctrine of wise stewardship instead of the doctrine of profligacy we have clung to for far too long. In the effort to design such a doctrine, we have a great deal to learn from Linnaeus, Darwin, and others who have determinedly followed in their footsteps in the striving for truth and the good life. ✕

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# IN THE WAKE OF EUROPE'S CRISIS: GROWING POVERTY **IN POLAND**

**M**arcin and Michał – both thirteen – suddenly appear in the courtyard of a couple of the buildings in one of the rundown housing areas of Upper Silesia. This is in Bytom, one of many in the conglomerate of Polish coal and steel towns in and around the larger city of Katowice.

They have a big white plastic sack with them and are hunting for scrap metal. The courtyard is covered with concrete rubble and brick gravel from the rows of outhouses torn down last year. There are bits of metal, some large, some small, here and there among the shards of brick. Other scrap is cast into the pieces of concrete and it takes some bashing by the two boys before the pure scrap can be thrown into the sack.

“We get 78 groszy for a kilo,” they say. Their goal is to gather about 15 kg. “That’ll give us enough money to buy two old used mobile phones from an old lady.”

They have taken the day off, or have maybe cut classes, from their nearby school, which is also in a poor neighborhood in Bytom. They work intently in the courtyard. One or two residents watch from their windows and an older man walking his bicycle with some difficulty across the bumpy courtyard nods in assent, looks empathetically at Marcin and Michał’s hunt.

He obviously understands.

Effortless milk and honey do not flow into the mouths of these two boys. They are among the poor of modern Poland, but unlike many others in this group, they have not given up. They are determined to ascend the social hierarchy.

“We both want to train as bakers,” they say. “That will give us jobs in the future. People always need bread.”

**It is hard** not to feel sympathy for Marcin and Michał. The courtyard they have chosen for their search is in an enclave of buildings in various states of decay, lining a Bytom street.

A few kilometers away, there is a still-operating coal mine and a defunct steel mill. After a decade in which jobless locals had also collected iron scrap, just like Marcin and Michał but on a bigger scale and at risk to life and limb, the ruins were still here about a year ago. The scrap has been removed over the course of the last couple of years. Here, we encounter hundreds of buildings and thousands of residents in a city district in utter ruin.



Few places in the country were affected by such drastic economic changes after the fall of communism and the rapid entry of demanding capitalism as the coal mining and steel manufacturing districts of Upper Silesia. One company after another was shut down in rapid succession. In a city like Bytom, unemployment shot up to more than 35 percent of the working population in the 1990s. And thus was created in the new and modern Poland an underclass in which poverty, twenty years later, has already been passed down from one generation to the next. Representatives of the underclass can be found all over the country, but its landmarks are nowhere as apparent as in Upper Silesia.

It is hard to get close to the residents of these city



districts. They are reluctant to talk about their lives. They will sometimes say laconically that “things are fine here”, that they “feel at home here”.

“I was born here, my parents were born here, and I married a man who was also born here,” says Magdalena as she watches her two children play on the swings the city set up last year.

**When asked** whether she would like to move, she shrugs. Maybe it was a stupid question. Maybe the step out from this world alone seems insurmountable to her.

Others like Marek and Elżbieta, who are sitting on the stoop of one of the “family buildings” and watch-





ing their two grandchildren, are blunter: “Who the hell do you think would want to stay here? Falling-down buildings, a little one-bedroom apartment for eight people – us and three adult children, a son-in-law and two grandkids – and casual labor that brings in maybe a thousand zloty or a bit more every month.”

Today, the entire city district is in utter decay. Once upon a time it was beautiful here, an example of fine urban planning. There is space between the buildings. There is a rundown avenue between two of the rows of buildings, lined with linden trees and broken-down benches. Across the street, between two other rows of buildings, there is a large “green area” that used to be a park. It is late summer now and family life in the “park” is busy and vibrant, with children playing on a

soccer playing field they have marked out themselves, with two poles for the goalposts.

“Sure,” says almost everyone I ask, “we all know each other here.”

It could not be otherwise. As in so many other poor areas in the cities of the world, people live much of their lives outside their buildings and apartments: on the street, on the stoop, or on a dilapidated bench in a rundown park. Yes, they know each other and perhaps they also feel for each other. It is not everywhere in Europe that that can be said. ✕

text **peter johnsson**

photos **rafal klimkiewicz**

**A**fter 1989, there can be no doubt that Polish social change and the Polish economy have been a success story. At no other time in the last five hundred years has Poland managed to narrow the gap between itself and Western Europe as successfully as in the last quarter century.

However, this transition has come at a cost: an increasing wage gap and a growing number of poor and socially vulnerable people. Since the mid-1990s, contemporary Poland and, for that matter, other post-Socialist countries in Central Europe have had an underclass in the sense intended by Gunnar Myrdal. In his writing from the early 1960s about economic inequality in the US, the underclass is a “class of unemployed, unemployables, and underemployed who are more and more hopelessly set apart from the nation at large and do not share in its life, its ambitions and its achievements”.<sup>1</sup>

Polish sociologists now estimate that about ten percent of the population belongs to vulnerable social groups.<sup>2</sup>

Poland’s entry into the European Union in 2004 meant that economic growth received a boost and, in the subsequent four years, there was a reduction in the proportion of citizens living below subsistence level. This trend stagnated between 2008 and 2010, and there were hopes for recovery and a decrease in poverty.

However, in the latest surveys to be made public, including one conducted by the Polish Central Statistical Office, GUS, it is apparent that the situation is again worsening. The proportion of people living below subsistence level increased by one percentage point from 2010 to 2011.

In European terms, an increasing proportion of people in poverty is not unique to Poland; the same is happening today in other countries, even in richer areas of the continent. The step from relative wealth to relative poverty and vulnerability is, however, shorter in relatively poor countries such as Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria. Not unexpectedly, the hardest hit are families and children. Among Polish families with four children, between a quarter and a half live in extreme poverty.<sup>3</sup> In its latest survey, GUS estimates that around 31 percent of the country’s under-18s are threatened by extreme poverty. UNICEF’s latest survey also highlights Poland as one of the European countries with very large numbers of children living in extreme poverty. According to UNICEF’s investigations, one million children in Poland are living in poverty and another several hundred thousand are at risk of falling into poverty. ✕

**peter johnsson**

1 Gunnar Myrdal, *Challenge to Affluence*, New York 1963, p. 10.

2 Maria Jarosz (ed), *Ubóstwo w Polsce 2011* [Poverty in Poland 2011], Główny Urząd Statystyczny (GUS).

3 According to UNESCO the international standard for extreme poverty is the possession of less than \$1 a day. [http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc10\\_eng.pdf](http://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/rc10_eng.pdf).

# WINDS OF CHANGE

## AND THE SPATIAL TRANSFORMATION OF POST-SOCIALIST CITIES

by **Sasha Tsenkova**

**P**ost-socialist cities and societies have experienced dramatic economic, social, and political changes. Inequality and poverty have increased, with significant implications for cities, where two thirds of the people live and work.<sup>1</sup> Despite the importance of cities, there has been limited comparative research on urban spatial restructuring in the context of post-socialist transition, and even less scholarly work on the influence of planning in this process.<sup>2</sup>

The present research draws on empirical evidence in four countries and their capital cities to highlight the links between the threefold transition to democracy, markets, and decentralized government on the spatial transformation of post-socialist cities. The diverse mosaic of urban experiences in Prague, Riga, Belgrade, and Tirana is related to major drivers of change in the economic, social, and institutional environment. These are related to patterns of spatial transformation in three principal domains: (1) spaces of production and consumption, reflecting the economic transition; (2) differentiation in residential spaces, associated with the social transition; and (3) new approaches to planning and service delivery, resulting from the transition in government.

**CENTRAL TO THE ARGUMENTS** in the present article is that transition of this magnitude has created a complex urban world in which the patterns of divergence will become more explicit in the future, producing spatial and temporal differentiation among post-socialist cities. The methodology builds on a number of qualitative and quantitative methods. The research uses a case study approach, content analysis of regulatory plans, policy documents, and secondary sources pertinent to the transformation of urban economies and societies in the cities under review. These methods are complemented by personal interviews with twenty-four planners



Contrasts between old and new in Belgrade.

and policymakers involved in strategic planning and management processes over a period of five years, as well as personal observations of major urban developments in the four capital cities. The field work for this research was begun in 2004 and completed in 2008, incorporating a series of observations and field visits that were instrumental for the understanding of dynamic process of economic, social, and spatial transformation. The case studies are conceptually appropriate as they illustrate diversity in both the exogenous factors (including the most and the least advanced reformers) and the endogenous factors (including different transformation trajectories of planning institutions). The focus on capital cities is deliberate, since they are where the post-socialist transformation is expected to be manifested most explicitly due to their widely recognized role as the administrative, financial, cultural, and

economic drivers of national economies. The research does not explore the impact of the global financial crisis on these cities due to a variety of limitations, the most important of which is the lack of systematic data to analyze relatively new phenomena observed since 2009. Nevertheless, some reference to these phenomena is made, where possible, to highlight patterns of diversity.

Similarly, the researchers acknowledge that the focus on the capital cities of the four countries concerned excludes lower-tier urban centers. The set of constraints and opportunities that face the dominant national center is quite different from that experienced by most other urban centers in the national urban system, regardless of size, location, and hierarchical position. However, second-tier cities may well experience similar trajectories of urban and social change, so the analytical framework advanced in the paper may be widely applicable. By the same token, the emphasis on planning institutions and their ability to effectively manage the spatial transformation justifies the focus on capital cities, where a new generation of strategic and regulatory instruments has been approved in response to development pressure. In the secondary cities, the process has been delayed and/or taken a back seat to competing issues such as unemployment, fiscal deficits, and social stress.

### Framework for the analysis of urban change in post-socialist cities

It is important to situate the post-socialist urban experience in the context of overall institutional transformation on the one hand, and of rapidly changing economic and political systems on the other. This undeniable complexity creates unique challenges for planning and urban policy. The analyti-



cal framework of the research draws on approaches in the urban literature that use the country's urban system as an analytical construct to interpret major trends. It is argued that the urban system serves as the primary channel linking the national economy to the global system of cities.<sup>3</sup> Viewing development through the urban lens, the approach explicitly links the changes in the external (national and global) environment, which are much more dramatic and revolutionary, to changes in the internal environment (the urban system and the city itself), by emphasizing the nature and diversity of the ongoing transformation. The transformations are associated with three aspects of the transition process that are particularly important for post-socialist cities: the transition to markets (systemic economic change), to democracy (systemic political change), and to decentralized systems of local democratic government.<sup>4</sup> The analytical framework advances the notion that the triple transition is a major driver of urban change. Further, local responses to global pressures (competition for markets, trade) and to policy reforms at the national level (privatization of industry, deregulation of property markets, and social policy reforms) set the framework for spatial changes in three major domains: spaces of production and consumption, residential spaces, and spaces for the provision of essential urban services. Finally, the spatial transformation of post-socialist cities is guided by plans for future development as well as by the ability of planning institutions to lead implementation.<sup>5</sup>

**IN MAPPING AN** analytical terrain for this comparative study, the “socialist city” is taken as the primary point of departure. One set of influences represents the outcomes associated with the transition to markets, democracy, and decentralized government. These influences are viewed as important drivers of urban change, leading to converging trends in the transformation of urban economies and societies. Notwithstanding these patterns of convergence, the framework recognizes the diversity in the initial conditions – different levels of economic and social development – due to past socialist policies, as well as differences in the spatial legacy of cities, some of which have developed over 800 years in which the socialist period can be viewed as a brief discontinuity. Such important sources of difference are often ignored in the literature, as if the “socialist city” were a carbon copy of the Soviet ideal, and planning under socialism were identical across all countries.

The application of this framework maps critical differences in the urban transformation of post-socialist countries during the past twenty years. Some have become well-functioning competitive democracies, while others have struggled to establish political and economic stability.<sup>6</sup> Although national differences are powerful determinants of transformation paths, the cities themselves also shape their own trajectories. The framework recognizes the critical links between national policies and the types of responses at the local level, thus capturing the multi-layered nature of spatial transformations. The starting point could be the ideal model of a “socialist” city. That ideal is an important legacy which affects a city's economy, its social and spatial structure, and the quality of its urban services. To what degree actual cities were “socialist” under state socialism is an important question for debate. Notwithstanding country-specific differences, the salient characteristics of the “socialist” city are distinguishable, and have been extensively discussed in the literature.<sup>7</sup>

Table 1 links these characteristics to trajectories of change, in which similar trends in economic, social, and institutional transformation increasingly map to a diverse set of outcomes in post-socialist cities.



Socialist-era apartment complex in a Prague suburb.



Modern office building in central Prague.

# TABLE 1. THE TRAJECTORY OF CHANGE IN POST-SOCIALIST CITIES

**Major drivers: Transition to markets (systemic economic change), democracy (systemic political change), and decentralized systems of local government**

Domain	The “socialist” city	The “post-socialist” city
<b>National urban system</b>	Centrally planned population growth, investment, economic development, and job creation Stable increases in the level of urbanization, sustained concentration in large metropolitan areas Economies of scale in production	Market-based restructuring of the urban system, integration in the global economic hierarchy of cities Service-led growth, core vs. periphery Selective growth of cities, population decline in many urban centers
<b>Economic transition</b>	Macroeconomic control through central planning, regulation, collective bargaining, and control of markets through income and price policies	Deregulation of markets, laissez-faire approaches to economic development, growing international competition, service sector growth, informal economic activities, unemployment
<b>Spaces of production and consumption</b>	Dominated by manufacturing and responsive to the needs of large-scale state producers, located in urban areas according to planning norms	Growing percentage of obsolete manufacturing facilities, new spaces for private small and medium-sized production, suburbanization of offices and retail
<b>Social transition</b>	Stronger welfare state, universal subsidies, moderate (controlled) urban growth, relatively homogeneous social structure, egalitarian income distribution	Retrenchment of the welfare state, socially polarized societies, poverty, marginalization, declining and aging population, high economic dependency
<b>Residential spaces</b>	Relatively uniform, social housing provision allocated by state institutions, universally affordable, built according to planning norms, mix of tenure types	Increasingly polarized social areas and housing markets, high homeownership, gentrified housing enclaves vs. problematic housing estates, informal housing
<b>Transition in government</b>	Dominated by central government decision-making, appointed officials; little autonomy	Democratically elected, decentralized, fragmented structure, fiscally dependent on central transfers, entrepreneurial approaches to planning and city marketing
<b>Provision of urban services</b>	Relative uniformity, provided by the state, largely funded by central governments, universal access to education and health care, investment in water and sewer networks, strong emphasis on public transport	Privatization and marketization in the provision of urban services, unfunded social mandates, growing inequalities in provision of water, sewers, and public transport
<b>The role of urban planning</b>	Embedded in the economic and political system of top-down central planning, state control over investment, property development	Shift to more pluralistic and entrepreneurial approaches to planning, attempts at public consultation, strategy developments, compromises
<b>Management of spatial change</b>	Rigid planning norms, coordinated planning for housing, public facilities, and transport, nationalized urban land, controlled access to housing.	Difficulties in addressing triple conflicts related to changing property rights, shrinking resources, and development priorities



War damage in central Belgrade.



New commercial developments in the city center of Prague.



Gentrified housing in the historic city of Riga.

This application of the analytical framework reviews major patterns of change related to the transition to markets, democracy, and decentralized government and their impact on Prague, Riga, Belgrade, and Tirana. The analysis highlights salient features of the transformation stemming from the economic, social, and political transition in the three domains: spaces of production and consumption, residential differentiation, and the provision of services. The evidence from the case studies is summarized in Table 2, with an emphasis on factors of similarity and dissimilarity.

## The economic transition and new spaces of production and consumption

The transition from a centrally planned, industrialized system of mass production to a system of flexible accumulation has been accompanied by a restructuring of the welfare state and a transition to pluralistic, democratic government. National economies in the post-socialist world have become increasingly integrated in a global system of production, distribution, and exchange. The liberalization of trade, the international flow of capital, and the growing influence of transnational corporations have led to fundamental economic restructuring, which is particularly visible in Prague and Riga.<sup>8</sup> The internationalization of capital cities has been accompanied by deindustrialization, growth of command and control functions, and changing power relations between the public and the private sector.<sup>9</sup> The structural changes in the economies of Prague and Riga were introduced in the early 1990s (through voucher privatization), and economic growth resumed in the mid-1990s. In fact, despite the loss of Soviet markets, Riga has had very strong GDP growth, while Prague has maintained its economic competitiveness in the Czech Republic, contributing 25% of the country's GDP. In both cities, private sector output tripled, and reached over 60% of GDP by 1995. This dynamic adjustment has been accompanied by rapid growth of the service sector, which accounts for 60% of the GDP in Prague and 70% in Riga.<sup>10</sup> Both cities have attracted the lion's share of foreign investment in economic restructuring and property development due to their more liberal and stable environments.

In Serbia, by contrast, the economic transition was delayed by a decade. In Belgrade the Milošević regime propped up public enterprises, resisted deregulation, and brought a severe economic crisis and civil wars. During the time of international sanctions in 2000, the city became home to 100,000 refugees from other parts of Yugoslavia and a flourishing grey economy<sup>11</sup>. In Albania, a much more underdeveloped economic system dependent on a few resource-based indus-

tries and agriculture collapsed in the early 1990s, leading to massive migration to cities. Thousands of migrants in search of economic opportunities doubled Tirana's population within two years.<sup>12</sup> Privatization and the opening of previously sheltered sectors to growing competition in the global marketplace have required the urgent adjustment of industries, services, and other economic activities.<sup>13</sup> The private sector expanded from 5% of GDP in 1990 to 75% in 2002. The transition to service-oriented economies in Belgrade and Tirana has increased the importance of private small enterprises (with less than 10 employees) in retail, construction, and business services.<sup>14</sup> Overall, the economies of the capital cities have managed to sustain a more stable labor market sheltered from high unemployment, with rates half to one third of the national average, with the exception of Tirana, where unemployment has remained high (19% in 2005). The informal economy in Belgrade and Tirana has become well entrenched, accounting for 30% to 50% of the GDP.<sup>15</sup>

The transition to market-oriented forms of economic development is reflected in a number of changes in the urban fabric. In Prague, some existing industrial zones have experienced intensification to accommodate the growing number of new private firms, warehouses, and offices.<sup>16</sup> In Riga and Belgrade, industrial zones associated with manufacturing have declined, leaving behind brownfield sites. The large state enterprises, a legacy of the socialist past, have gone bankrupt, and the industrial landscape has become dominated by abandoned complexes of industrial and administrative buildings, particularly in Tirana and Belgrade. New production activities, driven by foreign investment, have generated demand for suburban industrial warehouses, often beyond the urban edge, and/or ribbon development close to airports and transit hubs.<sup>17</sup> The continued growth of private service industries has made areas with good exposure and transportation access more attractive to private investors. Such processes, although rather moderate in Tirana and Belgrade, have created demand for new industrial spaces (warehouses, logistics, and small-scale flexible production).

The post-socialist economies of the capital cities have solidified their position as financial and business centers, attracting a large share of investment in banking, retail, and office developments. The most dramatic spatial transformations are manifested in the commercial property markets in Prague and Riga, which have attracted the largest share of institutional foreign investment. New office functions in banking and finance have resulted in dynamic property development in new suburban office parks and business centers in Prague and Riga, and more recently in Tirana and Belgrade.<sup>18</sup> By 2010, the supply of office space in Prague (class A and B) reached 1,700,000 m<sup>2</sup>, and in Riga 518,000 m<sup>2</sup>. Nearly half of

the supply was built after 2004 to accommodate international companies and multinational corporations.<sup>19</sup>

The retail sector experienced dynamic growth as well.<sup>20</sup> In Tirana and Belgrade, a high level of small-scale retail activity, often located in ground level apartments, garages, and newly-built street retail premises, characterizes the sector. In Prague and Riga, the consolidation of retail investment, often with foreign partners, has been channeled into the construction of new high-end retail spaces in the city center and suburban locations.<sup>21</sup> The increased interest in the development of shopping malls in Riga and Prague has created new landscapes of retail, entertainment, restaurants, and hotels, associated with a new urban culture of consumerism and rising purchasing power.<sup>22</sup> The shopping malls, often in suburban locations, have provided a new, more sophisticated retail experience compared to the old bazaars, retail strips, and open markets.<sup>23</sup> By 2005, Prague and Riga had acquired 600 m<sup>2</sup> of shopping center space per 1,000 residents, and Tirana 140 m<sup>2</sup>.<sup>24</sup>

## The social transition and growing inequality in residential environments

The legacy of centrally directed urbanization driven by industrial growth during socialism has had powerful consequences for post-socialist cities. Although capital cities weathered the economic transition much better than industrialized company towns, Tirana and Riga were hit badly by the closures of unproductive state enterprises in the early 1990s. Prague, despite a much more moderate economic recession, also experienced growing unemployment and poverty. The socialist system had a more egalitarian income distribution than the new market-based system. It also tolerated lower economic growth to avoid income inequality. Not surprisingly, a new attribute of the economic transition is income polarization, which, measured by the Gini coefficient, has increased rapidly, with important implications for social safety nets and access to housing and urban services.<sup>25</sup> Although data indicate that capital cities have incomes 30% to 40% higher than the national average, the proportion of the population living in poverty in 2005 was 8% in Tirana and 15% in Belgrade.<sup>26</sup>

**THE SOCIAL COST** of the transition from planning to markets has been high, particularly in Belgrade and Tirana, where increasing costs of living have been combined with limited support from a less generous welfare state to groups at risk: the long-term unemployed, large or one-parent families, people with little education, and increasing numbers of ethnic minorities. A two-speed urban economy with poorly paid service jobs and a privileged



**TABLE 2.**  
**THE TRIPLE TRANSITION**  
**AND PATTERNS OF SPATIAL**  
**TRANSFORMATION**

- 1 and 2. Suburbs of Prague.  
3. Shopping center in Riga.  
4. Abandoned industrial building in Riga.  
5. Flea market in Belgrade.  
6. Poor suburb in Belgrade.  
7. Marketplace in Tirana.  
8. Informal housing in Tirana.

**Domain**

**Prague**

**Riga**

**Belgrade**

**Tirana**

**Economic transition**

Stable economic environment; reforms completed in early 1990s, maintaining economic competitiveness, growth in foreign investment and services (60% of GDP).

Quick economic reforms, growth resumes in mid-1990s, privatization to strategic investors, rapid growth in service jobs, control functions, finance, and foreign investment in the new capital.

Delayed economic restructuring; starting in 2000, growth in small enterprises, service industries, often part of the gray economy (over 30% of GDP); delayed privatization, war-related problems (economic blockade, refugees); high unemployment.

Rapid economic adjustment and abandonment of welfare state, massive migration to the city, doubling the population in the early 1990s; political and economic instability, delayed privatization of strategic assets, high unemployment, grey economy over 50% of GDP.

**Spaces of production and consumption**

Selective intensification of industrial zones with foreign partners, rapid investment in office and retail spaces by large property development companies, suburbanization.

Increased large-scale office and retail construction, often by multinational companies; brownfield industrial sites left behind; suburban business parks and center city shopping malls.

Abandoned industrial sites, flea markets, bazaars, informal housing development; city-promoted business zones in new Belgrade.

Abandoned industrial enterprises, flea markets, street retail, high level of informal construction (housing, retail, office).

**Social transition**

Limited income inequality, sustained social support systems absorbing social costs, delayed privatization of housing, controlled rents.

Rising income inequality, means-tested social support devolved to local governments, delayed privatization of housing, migration and shrinking population, low unemployment, growing poverty.

Rising income inequality, poverty and refugee crisis, rapid housing privatization in 1990s, high unemployment.

Substantial concentration of poor migrants with no social support in informal areas, high unemployment, rapid housing privatization in 1991.

**Residential spaces**

New housing in compact developments and suburban enclaves, eroding affordability, some gated communities.

Rapidly increasing property prices, building for the elite market, gentrification of inner city areas, suburbanization of new housing.

Investment in property as a hedge against inflation, speculation, informal property use, large informal neighborhoods with limited services.

Informal housing and retail development, self-help, over 30% of residents in self-built housing, no access to finance or infrastructure.

**Transition in government**  
**Provision of urban services**

Smooth transition to a system of democratically elected self-government with fiscal autonomy; more predictable stream of financial resources for essential urban services, central government programs for upgrading infrastructure, public facilities, and housing.

Quick institutional reforms, delayed framework for fiscal decentralization; introduction of regional entities; privatization of selected urban services; central government programs to address a backlog in infrastructure (transport and utility networks).

Institutional reforms delayed until 2000, fiscal decentralization introduced in mid-2000; lack of resources to maintain essential services, particularly in informal areas, widening inequalities.

Institutional reforms to democratically elected self-government introduced early with elections contested along political lines; fiscal decentralization introduced in 2000; lack of resources to develop infrastructure, public transport, and water provision; no infrastructure in informal areas.

sector of highly paid professionals, coupled with cutbacks in social welfare and reduced spending on social programs, have contributed to the growing social inequalities. In the capital cities, the two-speed economy has underpinned the formation of a two-speed housing market.<sup>27</sup> The results are bifurcated, with concentrations of the urban poor in peripheral housing estates and/or informal housing on the one hand, and the spatial segregation of newly formed elites in gated communities on the other.<sup>28</sup> Privatization policies increased homeownership dramatically, leading to 98% owner occupation in Tirana and Belgrade in the early 1990s, while Riga and Prague reached levels of 85% fifteen years later. All of these cities have a high proportion of multifamily housing built during socialism: about half of all housing in Riga and Tirana, 30% in Belgrade, and 20% in Prague.<sup>29</sup> This highly subsidized housing provision was the flagship of socialist housing policies, and is difficult to manage without state subsidies to address growing needs for renovation and energy efficiency improvements. Prague, and to a limited extent Riga, have launched some programs to reverse the spiral of urban decline, but progress has been limited.

While these trends define major changes in the residential environment, the overall transformation of housing areas in the capital cities, both inner city and suburban, is less uniform. Typically, new housing construction has gentrified attractive inner city neighborhoods or has transformed the urban fringe with single-family developments.<sup>30</sup> Just like new office and retail development, new housing has added rings to the existing compact urban structure. A number of studies document increasing housebuilding in Prague and Riga since 1998 and a pattern of extensive growth driven by higher mobility and preferences for single-family living.<sup>31</sup> Newfound prosperity in these cities and a more consolidated property development industry responsive to housing demand has delivered a number of planned communities for the elite market, ranging from medium to high-density developments.

**BY CONTRAST, MOST OF** the new housebuilding in Belgrade and Tirana has resulted in organic, unplanned growth in periurban areas, where investment is made without any planning, permits, cadastre registration, or mortgage financing. This phenomenon has reshaped the urban landscape of the two cities in a profound way, creating complex challenges for the delivery of infrastructure and government in these communities. Some estimates indicate that about a third of the residents in Tirana and nearly 20% of the residents in Belgrade live in informal housing.<sup>32</sup> Informal developments have become a socially acceptable response to an urban crisis in the provision of affordable housing, where illegal connections to existing infrastructure ensure much-needed electricity and water. Some of these are squatter settlements on public land or illegal subdivisions outside municipal boundaries.<sup>33</sup> In Belgrade, research documents a more nuanced pattern of landownership and investment by high and low-income groups alike. In Tirana and Belgrade, remittances are vital for the upgrading of such settlements. The quality of housing is generally better in Belgrade, and residents are relatively effective in resisting attempts to relocate them. Often they have managed to secure connections to city services and have organized their own community-run transportation and waste management. Kaluđerica, on the outskirts of Belgrade, is a self-made city of 50,000 residents recently incorporated in the new master plan. Legalization, however, has been delayed by the lack of adequate legal framework and operational implementation procedures.



Kaluđerica: a self-made city in Belgrade.



Lack of basic services in informal Tirana.

## The transition in government and the provision of services

The hallmark of the political transition has been the move to democracy and multiparty elections. Post-socialist capitals have created a variety of political structures (elected local councils) and multi-tier municipal administrations with various degrees of autonomy. In the absence of national urban policies, and under frequently changing political regimes, local governments have operated in an environment that is less predictable and fiscally much more conservative than in socialist times. As part of the process of decentralization and institutional change, local governments have become important agents in economic development, urban planning, and city management.<sup>34</sup> They have retained statutory responsibility for providing and maintaining technical infrastructure and urban social services. In the four capital cities under review, municipalities have acquired ownership of water and sewerage companies, district heating systems, and public housing. At the same time, running public transit, schools, hospitals, social care homes, and essential infrastructure with fewer central subsidies has raised the expenditures of local governments.

Legislation on fiscal decentralization and revenue sharing in Albania and Serbia was introduced in the mid-2000s, allowing municipalities to borrow on capital markets, and improving the local tax base somewhat through business and property taxes. Fiscally constrained local governments in Tirana and Belgrade have been able to invest less than 20% of their budgets, and have had a higher dependency on inter-governmental transfers.<sup>35</sup> As a result, many services have deteriorated, with long-term implications for urban residents. In Prague and Riga, a more stable fiscal policy and a sustainable local tax base has ensured investment of over 40% of municipal budgets in city improvements, although the need for resources has been higher.<sup>36</sup> Since 2004, both of these cities have benefited from regional programs and EU funds for major infrastructure projects in transport, water, communications, and environmental protection. In the past few years, Belgrade and Tirana, attempting to address the accumulated backlog, have made much-needed investments and upgrades in urban infrastructure and transport. Riga and Tirana have launched international competitions for the redesign of the city center, and Belgrade has channeled strategic investors in the rebuilding of New Belgrade.

**UNDER DECENTRALIZED** government, urban planning has become a critical regulatory instrument guiding the spatial

transformation of post-socialist cities. In the aftermath of the economic and political crisis of socialism, followed by the erosion of the welfare state, planning institutions have struggled to redefine their mandate and to establish their legitimacy. Studies have found that the new, market-oriented local governments have adopted “entrepreneurial” attitudes and a laissez-faire approach to planning. Local responses to rapid changes in demand for new offices, retail space, and housing have defined a new repertoire of planning instruments. Planning legislation, norms, and institutions have had to adjust to new power relations in the institutional mosaic of actors reshaping post-socialist cities.<sup>37</sup> With the new market orientation, urban development has ridden a wave of investment in those land uses that offer the highest returns, and selective redevelopment by the private sector.<sup>38</sup>

In their search for new planning paradigms and more flexible approaches, Prague and Riga have embraced strategic planning as a way to involve residents, the business community, and various stakeholders in defining a vision for the future. In Tirana and Belgrade, the process has been delayed and planning has become irrelevant in the rapidly expanding “wild cities” of periurban areas. Planners have experimented in the past few years with incremental changes, in a spirit of “muddling through” and an effort to incorporate informal development.<sup>39</sup> The institutional and regulatory vacuum in the last fifteen years has allowed numerous ad hoc changes to detailed urban plans from socialist times to accommodate developer interests and politically driven compromises. Finally, a fairly large part of market development has taken place with no planning intervention, but with the expectation of being legalized at a later stage.<sup>40</sup>

## Winds of change: differences and similarities

The complex interplay of different forces associated with the triple transition to markets, democracy, and decentralized government in post-socialist societies has been illustrated in four national trajectories: Latvian, Czech, Serbian, and Albanian. The countries had significant differences at the start of the transition process, but they have also implemented different economic, political, and governmental reforms. The focus on Prague, Riga, Belgrade, and Tirana provides a more nuanced interpretation of the post-socialist transition, avoiding the focus on Central Europe that dominates the scholarly literature, and examining cities whose socialist legacy was more aligned with the Soviet norms alongside others shaped by more liberal socialist systems.



The winds of change in the economic, social, and institutional domains have affected the spatial transformation of the capital cities and the adjustment of their economies, societies, and spatial structures in a manner that implies some convergence. The empirical evidence from Riga, Prague, Belgrade, and Tirana points to common trends, but also to substantial differences that will continue to shape divergent spatial trajectories in the future. At the level of planning and implementation, convergence seems less of a reality. Central to the arguments in the article is that transition of this magnitude has created a complex urban world in which the patterns of divergence will become more explicit in the future, producing spatial and temporal differentiation among post-socialist cities.

The literature has noted that socialist era experiences, tenure forms, demographics, and social composition affect the outcomes of general or nationally unique policy decisions. The countries covered here have experienced population decline (as a result of emigration), growth, and/or stability, all in the context of rapid transition to markets and democracy. Clearly, that kind of experience is different from the contextual factors that are relevant to a more stable transformation in Western Europe. Patterns of diversity and change also matter at the local level and manifest themselves in selective redevelopment and decline at the neighborhood level. It is not only the urban economy that is two-speed, but also the fates of individual cities relative to others, and change within housing estates and neighborhoods. Thus, the occurrence of gated communities, or new suburban divisions, differs quite markedly across the four cities studied, as does the occurrence of informal housing developments. The effects of retrenched welfare programs also differ substantially, Tirana possibly being the extreme case where many of the socialist privileges were abruptly eliminated, while in Serbia war-related conflicts and displacement became the major source of social stress.

Notwithstanding these differences, given the importance of cities, countries in the region need a strategic focus on urban policies to promote more efficient and effective change management. National governments need to recognize that the urban agenda is central for the economic competitiveness of post-socialist economies and the governance of these highly urbanized societies. The framework advanced in this article allows a more integrated approach to urban governance that brings together perspectives on the economy, society, institutions, and space in an interdisciplinary way. The approach allows different policy choices that *integrate the urban perspectives in a dialogue on national and local development policies*. This provides an opportunity to have an impact on pressing urban issues with high stakes for national poverty reduction, equitable growth, and environmental improvement, ensuring the complementarity of sectoral reforms. ✕

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Note: This essay completed with extra material, such as figures and diagrams, can be found on [www.balticworlds.com](http://www.balticworlds.com).

Note: All essays are scholarly articles and have been peer-reviewed by specialists under supervision of Baltic Worlds' editorial advisory board.

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- 24 For comparison, London has 210 m<sup>2</sup> of shopping center space per 1,000 inhabitants; Paris has 350 m<sup>2</sup>. (J. L. LaSalle 2005)
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- 26 Tsenkova, "Comeback", pp. 291–310, Economic difficulties and social stress have resulted in negative population growth: Riga has declined by 15 %, and Belgrade and Prague by 3 % each (Economic Commission 2007).
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- 40 ALUIZNI is the national Agency for the Legalization and Urbanization of Illegal Constructions and Settlements in Albania. First legalization permits were granted in February 2007 upon payment of duties equal to US \$1 per square meter. In all there are 681 informal development zones and over 350,000 applications for legalization, of which some 80,000 are for multi-apartment dwellings and shops (Tsenkova 2010).

## GÜNTER GRASS AND THE PIRATES:

## The stuff of myth and

Should my reference to pirates suggest a swashbuckling comparison of our German author with the *Pirates of the Caribbean* (Günter with a patch over one eye, brandishing a saber, and wearing three-league boots), I will immediately disappoint. Rather than scanning an emerald Caribbean seascape for literal pirates, Grass invites us to wonder at a Baltic setting where the question of who we can call a pirate depends on the stories we use to set and hold our own borders.<sup>1</sup> Pirates, pirating, piracy – these are words that may also be applied to the ways in which the stories we use to demarcate space and fix history themselves result from using the stories of others. From such a vantage point, *The Flounder* challenges the pretense and shows the inadequacy of any single controlling idea of history.<sup>2</sup> Although often ignored today, the novel invites conjectures on the trajectory of Grass's work in regard to the retelling of history, or even on history itself.<sup>3</sup> While such questions were important when the book was published, they are even more relevant at a time when we continue to adjust to shifting borders. Since a trial is the major structuring event of the novel, it also provides a starting point for an examination of how literature inevitably becomes part of revealing or concealing crimes, which come to be understood as either against society or against the heart. Efforts to examine Günter Grass's own prolonged silence regarding his association with the Waffen-SS as a teenager make the question of writing as a vehicle of history and confession still more pressing. In a novel that can be read as the transcript of a trial, we may ask precisely who is on trial, just as we are continually tempted to ask our fellow spectators in the courtroom, what is the crime?

## Fabulae

Published in 1977, as Grass's gift to himself on his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, *The Flounder* has been found difficult to read, and even a misadventure. The title comes from the fairy tale "*The Fisherman and His Wife*" (Von dem Fischer un syner Fru) collected by the brothers Grimm.<sup>4</sup> The tale recounts the story of a man who catches a fish that asks to be returned to the sea. If he is returned to the sea, the fish promises, he will grant any wish. When the man tells his wife what has happened, she scolds him in disbelief for losing a good fish. To her astonishment, the woman discovers that the fish indeed is magic ("ik bün 'n verwünschten Prins") and grants wishes. She asks for more and more (cottage, castle, papacy, and kingdom) but finally when she asks for the sun and moon, she loses everything she has gained and is returned to her hovel in a place named Pisspot. In Grass's version, the Flounder is caught by three



"Butt Im Griff", statue by Günter Grass in the Danish city Sønderborg. Photo: arne.list/Flickr

young women who represent the women's liberation movement.<sup>5</sup> Instead of returning the fish to the sea, they place the fish on trial for subverting a matriarchal order of culture and civilization.

**There was once a Flounder. He was just like the one in the fairy tale. When one day some women who had caught him hauled him before a tribunal, he resolved not to say a word, but only to lie flat, mute, much-wrinkled, and old as the hills in his zinc tub. But after a while his thunderous silence bored him, and he began to play with his pectoral fins. And when Sieglinde Huntscha, the prosecutor, came straight to the point and asked him whether he had deliberately circulated the Low German fairy tale "The Fisherman and His Wife" as a means of minimizing the importance of the advisory activity that he had demonstrably been carrying on since the Neolithic era, by maliciously and tendentiously distorting the truth at the expense of the fisherman's wife Ilsebill, his crooked mouth couldn't help opening and pouring out speech.**

The novel evolves as an extensive report of testimony given at the trial, which is held in a movie theater. It is a show-trial, or a grand jury hearing in which the reader is invited to judge whether there is sufficient evidence for an indictment. Since the Flounder is on trial for transforming history itself, historic persons are called to the movie theater courtroom to testify.

With great irony, the reader becomes a witness to a trial that at once probes fable, historical evidence, and the ephemeral nature of all narrative.

## Examining Baltic Sea histories

The witnesses gathered at the movie theater trial turn the Baltic into a *Schauplatz* to re-imagine history itself. Herder reminds us that the Baltic shoreline is an intellectual network that permitted work on the relation between languages and history. His allusion to the Baltic as a *Zwischenlandschaft* describes the space that he himself inhabited and that Grass also occupies.<sup>6</sup> As testimonies are received, we move through layers of northern history. The prehistoric period allows Grass to describe the herding of reindeer and hunting and gathering. It also permits him to describe the matriarchal structure that shaped religious practice through the integration of food and sexual reproduction; the subsequent contact between peoples brought about the comparison and development of

weaponry. The novel recounts further the incursion of the Teutonic Knights, the Hanseatic League, the Polish wars, the Reformation, the appearances of the Swedes, the continuous disruption of the Thirty Years' War, the Napoleonic Wars, and the Franco-Prussian Wars. Swedes appear again and again, as if Danzig were the muddy backyard of Sweden. The history, preparation, and consumption of food, and the consequences of its consumption, are recounted in detail. The most attended sessions of the trial are the ones in which the Flounder includes recipes in his testimony. A consideration of the genres of German literature is brought together with recipes for cooking flounder.

As the trial proceeds, the Flounder describes the *Weltgeist* that emerges from the continuous interplay of story-telling that ultimately makes up history. But the stories are not those of lost manuscripts or histories in academic form. They are everyday narratives that have never seen the light of day. Grass follows narratives as they hatch and lead to a proliferation of other narratives. These *fabulae* continue to reproduce and are like mushrooms that must be found, identified, and cooked. Rather than fixing attention on stories that might be associated with grand myths or master narratives, Grass asks what we might do with the small myths that we live with daily. We are left with the multiplication of stories used to prevaricate, reveal, and conceal. The *Weltgeist* of the Flounder is not attired in the guise of Hegel's *Weltgeist*, but in that of a joker or trickster who always has another recipe up his sleeve. This is a phenomenology, not of the spirit, but of the kitchen.



# the Baltic Sea

by **Kenneth J. Knoespel**

## Self-interrogation in suspense

Grass's own personal stories interrupt the veneer of historical narrative in such kitchen phenomenology. Overwhelmed by the exhausting trial, the Flounder hides in the mud at the bottom of the large glass tank that has replaced the zinc bathtub and refuses to speak. The narrator too, obligated by a scheduled promotional trip to India, interrupts the trial to give a graphic documentary account of his own reactions to starvation in the subcontinent. India offers an ironic respite in the middle of the trial and constructs a space from which we may look back at the Baltic. But the trip to India is so debilitating that Grass must cut it short because of diarrhea and outright fatigue. (Grass deliberately documents his own confession of being utterly overwhelmed by India.) The episode allows Grass to bring into the open his own impotence as world-renowned writer in the face of starvation in the world. It also shows how poverty and starvation in India may be used to escape the stench under our own noses. Here, in a reversal of a missionary morality, the Baltic becomes India. But as readers searching for incriminating evidence in the Flounder's trial, the disruption of the India narrative also makes us ask whether something else might be at stake as well. Although the trial portrayed in Danzig is interrupted, we as members of the grand jury may wonder whether the trip also hints at another confession.

Returning to the Danzig trial, we inevitably ask whether there is more to the shadow play of interpretation that both reveals and conceals. In 1977, the crime investigation leads to suspicion regarding the meta-histories used to order and silence the patchwork of stories that make up history. But in the end, incriminating evidence is not found in a single meta-narrative: rather, history itself appears as a testimony of crimes constituted by the ways in which histories are written and rewritten. As fable, history, documentary, personal biography, poetry, and recipes are set before us, we wonder along with the narrator what crime we are really being asked to investigate and how we ourselves may be complicit in the evidence brought forth. In interrogating the Flounder, we interrogate ourselves and the authorities invoked to give credence to one story over another. In an interview in 2006, after the revelation of his affiliation with the Waffen-SS, Grass links self-interrogation and indirect forms of confession with the process of literary writing:

Es ist ja eine Binsenwahrheit, daß unsere Erinnerungen, unsere Selbstbilder trügerisch sein können und es oft auch sind. Wir beschönigen, dramatisieren, lassen Erlebnisse zur Anekdote zusammenschnurren. Und all das, also auch das Fragwürdige, das alle literarischen Erinnerungen aufweisen, wollte ich schon in der Form durchscheinen und anklingen lassen. Deshalb die Zwiebel. *Beim Enthäuten*

*der Zwiebel*, also beim Schreiben, wird Haut für Haut, Satz um Satz etwas deutlich und ablesbar, da wird Verschollenes wieder lebendig.<sup>7</sup>

Reading *The Flounder* with *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel* in mind, one might argue that Grass, by lending his voice to the Flounder, reveals himself repeatedly, only to hide in the mud and wait to be uncovered again. In this way his novels become a hermeneutics of confession in suspense.<sup>8</sup> But the forensic hermeneutics set in play by Grass do not end with Grass, but nag the reader to ask again and again what crime has been committed and whether something more has been concealed. Through the repeated interrogation of established histories, indirectly including Grass's own, the novel works as a continuous appeal to confession in which solving the "crimes" of history results only in further stories and their interpretations. The alibis used in a detective novel or in a military trial may seem to disappear when a common plot line comes to light, but such a closure may also unravel. For Grass, the knitting and unraveling of stories shape the long wake of his narrative journey through the Baltic with *the Flounder*. Rather than the epic grandeur of an Odysseus, Grass builds a piratical anti-epic that incites us to listen to fish tales from the Baltic.

## The Baltic space

Grass's *Flounder* contributes to our work of locating, dislocating, and relocating literature in the Baltic Sea region by challenging us to give attention to the lost or hidden stories that are ignored or played off against each other in the official versions of history that would fix our position in space. While Grass counters the seduction of the big story – universal history – he also reveals himself by getting caught in the contradiction of his own storytelling. Well beyond its own narrative terrain and Grass's confessional mode, the novel works as a tool kit for unraveling Baltic Sea landscapes. Just as Grass himself intrudes in the story of the Flounder through his documentary confession of a trip to India, he invites us to play through our own histories. His efforts to give speech to the organic – to mushrooms, trees, blood, the smell of soup and the stink of sewage – often appear as an antidote to our susceptibility to be duped by abstraction or allegory. For the study of literature from the Baltic Sea region, the challenge of small, local stories is enormous. It is also important. For this truly is a "Zwischenlandschaft", covered by the tracks of armies and the ways by which ordinary people have sought to save themselves, reveal themselves, and hide themselves by telling stories. ✖

Note: All essays are scholarly articles and have been peer-reviewed by specialists under supervision of Baltic Worlds' editorial advisory board.

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- 4 Brüder Grimm, *Kinder und Hausmärchen*, vol. 1, Stuttgart 2010: Reclam (1980), Tale 19, pp. 119-127.
- 5 The novel's satire of the feminist movement in the 1970s has given rise to several analyses from the vantage point of gender studies. It should also be seen in the much broader political climate of the 1970s. Grass repeatedly portrays political action being thwarted or blocked by a proliferation of personal agendas.
- 6 See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*, Stuttgart 1990: Reclam [1774], pp. 40-78.
- 7 His memoir is titled *Beim Häuten der Zwiebel*. "Mein Schweigen über all die Jahre zählt zu den Gründen, warum ich dieses Buch geschrieben habe. Das mußte raus, endlich." Günter Grass in conversation with Frank Schirrmacher and Hubert Spiegel, 2006-08-11.
- 8 The Niobe episode in *Die Blechtrommel* may be compared to the revelatory acts of story-telling in *The Flounder*. Niobe is the wooden bowsprit from a Florentine galleon captured by the Danzig pirates Paul Beneke and Martin Badewiek in 1473. Over the centuries, the much prized Niobe is stolen, hidden, and eventually located in a museum. Each phase of Niobe's "Baltic translation" provokes miracles and disasters that originate from an act of piracy. Günter Grass, *The Tin Drum*, New York 1964: Crest [1962], pp. 173-187; *Die Blechtrommel*, Frankfurt am Main 1962: Fischer [1960], pp. 148-159.



Photos: Margareta Tillberg

# Soviet Design 1950-1980 EXHIBITION IN MOSCOW

The Soviet era was one of shortages, endless queues, far from sexy display windows, and store shelves lined with monotonous merchandise. But at Soviet Design 1950–1980, we can discover another side of Soviet consumer goods. The exhibition displays a cavalcade of lovable objects, such as the small radios with clever names like “Surprise” and “Atmosphere”, and the “Saturn” and “Seagull” vacuum cleaners, which, unlike their American Hoover prototypes, had both suction and a blower, and thus could also be used to paint ceilings.

The exhibition is organized into categories – home electronics, furniture, toys, clothing and posters, clocks, photographic technology, household goods – along with one section devoted to design and science. Design historians often emphasize cars as proud national achievements, and Soviet Design 1950–1980 boasts a bright-red Lada made on license from Fiat for conversion to right-hand drive and export to Great Britain, and an equally vivid green Moskvitch prototype from 1975 (both from the Moscow Retro Auto Museum).

One might ask whether Soviet design actually had

its own aesthetic or whether it mainly involved plagiarism and copying from the West. And although a lot of things seemed to last forever, many products were short-lived. In a 1961 letter to the editor of the popular weekly magazine *Ogonyok* the question is posed: “It took us two years to save up for a TV and we stood in line for a long time. But it only worked for two hours. Is that why it is called ‘Record’?”

**Even if Soviet design** was often – but far from always – based on originals borrowed from the West, the individual objects exude a personal charm, variation, and quirkiness that makes them well worth preserving, exhibiting, and discussing. Certainly, one might think the Vyatka is merely an unnecessary repetition of the original Vespa, only heavier, of poorer quality, and, because it was not mass-produced, much more expensive. But I still believe the Russian-made scooter deserves more notice than it has been given thus far. It says something about a time and a system that

may seem alien, but which had tremendous impact on what our world looks like today.

Soviet Design 1950–1980 is an important event. The organizers hope the exhibition will be made into a permanent design museum – a museum that so far exists only virtually, as a website and on Wikipedia. Even though the physical objects of Soviet-made everyday life have virtually disappeared, the organizers are sure to amass a collection worth seeing, with help from exhibition-goers.

There are countless themes that can be further developed here: toy manufacturing, graphic design, stewardship of traditions from the Russian avant-garde, and contextualization of the profuse production of prototypes. The biggest problem is thus not a shortage of material.

The main challenge is instead how to construct the narratives of the objects. The organizers have taken on a huge and important task in this respect. For example, during the Soviet era, consumer goods from the involuntarily occupied Baltic states were coveted for their high quality and advanced production, compared







The 1980 Olympic Games in Moscow are exemplified with the red and white uniforms of the Soviet contingent, Adidas-inspired shoes, and the iconography of the prolific Valery Akopov, which, although reminiscent of Otl Aicher's designs for the 1972 Olympic Games in Munich, has many unique touches.



The toy section features a radio-controlled toy car and an elegant sports car for kids, both remarkably skillfully made.



The simple milk bottles are one of the highlights of the exhibition, and they, unlike most of the objects on display, were actually used. Everyone who ever lived in the Soviet Union probably held one in their hands. Or perhaps not: dairy products were also scarce.



to the Russian-Soviet variety. I am slightly taken aback though, when I hear the exhibition guide, one of the organizers, say "The Baltic countries are our close foreign neighbors, which unfortunately are no longer ours."

Many of the visitors are far too young to have personal memories of the Soviet dictatorship, as consumers at any rate. "If you made a little effort, you could buy this radio," we are informed with a sweeping gesture at the display case holding home electronics. But then she concedes, "It might have been a little harder outside Moscow." I lived in Moscow during the Soviet era and I recall things differently. I cannot help but think the Soviet era is being romanticized.

**Soviet Design 1950–1980** was shown for two busy winter months and enjoyed great public success. The organizers are a group of young (under 40), smart, well-educated Muscovites. They have managed to mount their first exhibition at the Central Exhibition Hall in the middle of the symbolic heart of Russia at the Kremlin Wall and Red Square.

Soviet Design 1950–1980 displays examples of

*homo ludens* that should be taken very seriously. The many lovingly invented and manufactured objects may instill a sense of forgiveness in the process of mythologization that is now accelerating along with the nascent media hype. This just might be the start of something good.

For surely design involves a fundamentally humanist attitude wherein relationships among people and our place in the world are given shape based on human measures, needs, and desires? A design museum can fulfill an important mission here as a platform for discussion and meetings across generational lines. With the help of the many charming artifacts, Soviet design could also foster a more lighthearted international dialog in an area of Russian policy that has hitherto been far too toxic.

**Design history** encompasses cultural heritage and national pride, as well as issues concerning copyright and the capacity to produce an appealing lifestyle. The Soviet Union no longer exists and its material culture has literally been thrown into the dump. The initiative

to found a design museum in Russia is praiseworthy and it will be interesting to follow its progress.

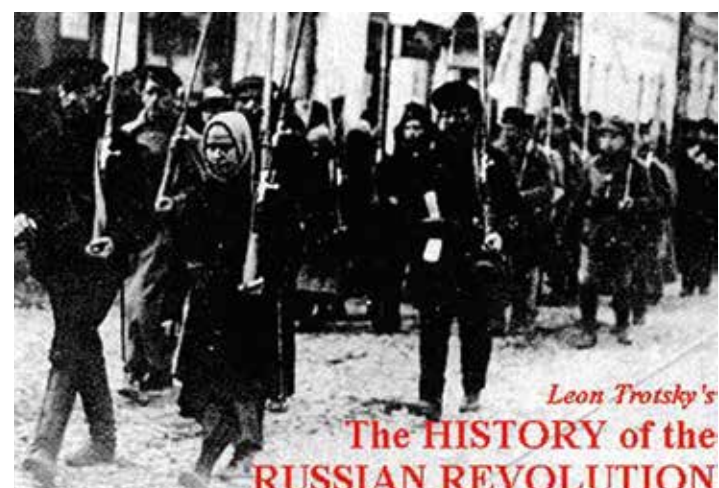
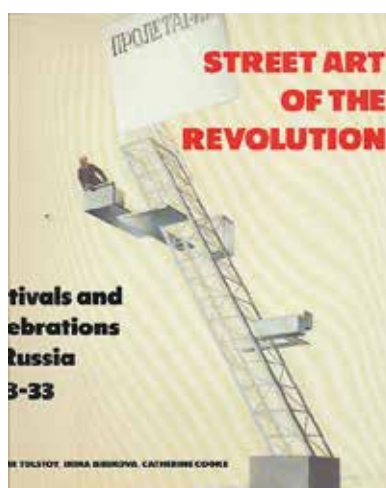
When the Russian Union of Industrial Designers was formed in 1987, its founder Yuri Soloviev was given a seat in the Supreme Soviet, where he sat in alphabetical order next to the human rights activist Andrei Sakharov. At the time, there were extensive plans to create a large design center in Arbat, which would have included an interactive museum with test workshops for interaction between consumers and designers, but the plans were never implemented.

Soviet Design 1950–1980 is a new chance for Russia to show itself to the world and talk about new opportunities. Despite everything, it was the Soviet Union that accomplished the monumental task of sending the first man into space. And what did Gagarin say? That Russia is part of the common land mass like every other country on the face of the Earth.

When push comes to shove, design is about how we want to give shape to our lives today and in the future with the material resources we all share. ✖

**margareta tillberg**

**Romanticization of the Soviet period? This can of course occur.**



# FEAST IN A TIME OF THE MAY DAY CELEBRATIONS

by **Natalia Murray**

**T**he 1917 Bolshevik Revolution aimed to destroy the old bourgeois society and to build the new homogenous socialist state, which was unprecedented and needed a new founding myth. When the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917, their party numbered no more than 350,000 people in a country of 140 million. Turned into the ruling party overnight, the Bolsheviks sought to use the power of mass propaganda to establish their founding mythology and to disseminate their ideas to an overwhelmingly rural and illiterate population.

The leader of the new Bolshevik state, Vladimir Lenin, proclaimed that culture should serve political needs, which meant in effect that all culture was now viewed as propaganda. In his memoirs, the first Minister of Education in Bolshevik Russia, Anatoly Lunacharsky, wrote that Lenin had told him in 1918, "It is necessary to advance art as the means of agitation."

With the establishment of the concept of a dictatorship of the proletariat, the need for new proletarian art and culture became essential, and street festivals and performances became cornerstones of the new mythology of the new Russia. The new myths and images were aimed at redefining life, reinventing social relations, and rejuvenating cults and traditions.

**THE PEOPLE'S COMMISSARIAT** for Enlightenment (Narkompros) invited artists to leave their studios and to participate in decorating streets, squares, and public buildings for the two annual celebrations that served as landmarks in the construction of a Soviet identity: the anniversary of the October Revolution, and May Day.

These festivals were first celebrated at a time when the

whole country, especially Petrograd, was threatened by internal counterrevolution and external intervention. In March 1918, the threat of an occupation of Petrograd by the German forces compelled the Bolshevik government to transfer the party headquarters, and the Russian capital, to Moscow.

In the middle of this difficult political situation, which was complicated even further by famine, the Soviet government announced a May Day celebration throughout the country.

In Russia, the first May Day demonstration took place in 1897. The demonstrations of 1901 to 1903 united thousands of workers, calling for political struggle. Under the tsars, festivals were a prerogative of the church and the government. Demonstrations were illegal, and May Day processions were often dispersed and outlawed. The only legal processions were funerals, which consequently served as pretexts for political manifestation.

May Day was legalized and made an official festival by the Provisional Government after the February Revolution of 1917. Unlike Lenin and the Bolsheviks, Kerensky and the Provisional Government did not pay much attention to art policy or mass spectacles. The Arts Commission (*Komissiya po delam iskusstva*) was established on March 4, 1917. It included the renowned author Maxim Gorki and famous *World of Art* artists Alexandre Benois, Nikolai Roerich, and Mstislav Dobuzhinsky. They focused on the pressing need to save palaces and works of art from the threats of war and revolution.

At the same time, other artists in Petrograd – representing 182 artistic movements, from futurists to traditional realists – formed the All-Arts Union (*Soiuz deiatelei vsekhn iskusstv*). The Provisional Government called on the union to help create a special mass festival on May Day.

In Petrograd, Lev Rudnev,<sup>1</sup> the architect of the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, was in charge of the city decorations. On May 18, 1917, Rudnev also won the first prize in the competition for the *Monument to the Victims of the Revolution* at the Field of Mars. His monument, called *Ready-made Stones*, looked like a stepped pyramid, and was made of granite stones left over from the rebuilding of the Neva embankment.

**THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE** turned out for the 1917 May Day parade. They carried allegorical banners and posters, which became the main elements of the decorations in Petrograd. These banners marked the birth of a popular image, repeated many times in posters and city decorations: the figure of a strong worker in front of an anvil with a plowing peasant and the rising sun in the background. Later, an image of a worker in a Russian shirt, leather apron, and boots became one of the most popular symbols used by the Bolsheviks. He was usually depicted with a moustache (since a beard was an attribute of the Orthodox peasants), holding a hammer poised to strike an anvil. These banners introduced a new allegorical language.

In his book *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917-1920*, James von Geldern writes,

Festivals test a symbol more rigorously than other environments do. An emblem sewn on a shirt or decorating a pamphlet lies in a congenial context that supports and complements its message. Symbols displayed in a public festival must compete for attention, and they must drive home their message through a stew of competing symbols and

**The futurists were not able to portray the future of the people.**





# PLAGUE OF 1917–1918

hostile interpretations. The cultural heritage was particularly formidable during festivals, when it was embodied by the city itself. The language and medium of a festival is the city, its people, streets, and buildings.<sup>2</sup>

Initially, the major source of inspiration for allegorical figures was the neoclassical tradition transmitted by the French Revolution. While the Bolsheviks still struggled with the ideas of the French Revolution and the Paris Commune due to their bourgeois nature, Kerensky's government adopted them wholeheartedly. They used the *Marseillaise* as their anthem, and in August 1917 they even proposed a "grandiose carnival-spectacle honoring the epoch of the French Revolution to be organized in the Summer Garden to aid Russian prisoners of war. . . . A prop city will be built depicting the Paris of that time. Actors will portray the artistic and theatrical bohemia of the late eighteenth century."<sup>3</sup> The Provisional Government proposed that Evreinov direct it and Yury Annenkov make all the stage designs. Although this rather mad idea never materialized, Evreinov and Annenkov worked together on the most imposing mass spectacles of the 1920s.<sup>4</sup>

On May Day 1917, the procession in Petrograd included reenactments of the February Revolution, the 1905 uprising, the tsar's family, and a woman portraying Freedom. She stood on Nevsky Prospekt in front of the State Duma building, dressed in a Classical tunic and holding a broken chain in her hands. A banner was created by professional artists for the workers of the famous Putilov Factory, and featured a woman in a white tunic standing on a globe holding a palm branch – a Christian symbol of triumph, victory, and sacrifice – in one

## Russian sketches

**Professor Magnus Ljunggren prefers to cultivate a miniature format in his Russian sketches. He speaks of unusual lives from the modern cultural history of Russia. He writes about authors, creators of art, scientists. He seeks, with small slices and sharply etched images, to reveal something greater, to offer shards of the Russian drama.**

### Lidia Chukovskaya

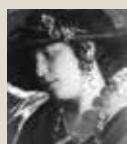
Lidia Chukovskaya's novel *The Deserted House* was published in Swedish translation in 1969. With quiet intensity, it tells the semi-autobiographical story of a woman who loses first her husband and then her son during Stalin's Terror.

Chukovskaya had written down her text secretly in 1939 in a copybook she left with a friend. But the friend starved to death soon after during the Leningrad blockade. She then believed the novel was lost. It turned out, however, that just before she died, her friend had given the copybook to a sister, who had survived. It remained in her possession.

The sister died in 1957, during the thaw. Chukovskaya traveled in from Moscow and dug through her papers. The sister's relatives did not hold out much hope.

And then suddenly she found the copybook, at the bottom of a wastepaper basket. Books have their destinies.

### Ida Nappelbaum and Nina Berberova



Ida Nappelbaum (left) was born in 1900 and Nina Berberova in 1901. I happened to know them both, and think of them

often. Their shared history begins in Petrograd in the spring of 1921. Artistic freedom had not yet been wholly throttled in the Soviet state. They were nurtured as poets by Nikolai Gumilyov. They heard – in his studio – that the word must be chiseled out in a labor of great patience. The craft was almost everything.

Gumilyov was suddenly arrested in August 1921, accused of conspiring against the Bolshevik government. Nappelbaum and Berberova soon stood hand in hand on Nevsky Prospekt and read the announcement of his execution. They felt that an epoch had come to an end. After a time of reflection, Berberova chose to emigrate.

Nappelbaum remained and her voice was stilled. Thirty years later, she was arrested in connection with Stalin's "anti-cosmopolitan" actions and was

thrown into a camp. While Nappelbaum was chopping down trees in Taishet, Siberia, Berberova was beginning a new career in the United States as a Slavist on the strength of her successful career as an émigré writer. She ended up a professor at Princeton.

Her memoirs, called *The Italics Are Mine* in English, were published in 1972. Nappelbaum read them in secret: they circulated in the intellectual underground of Leningrad and astonished everyone with their remarkably vivid Russian.

Glasnost came, and perestroika. Nappelbaum was able to publish her harrowing memories of imprisonment. At the same moment, Berberova decided she must set off for Russia. She arrived in 1989, almost 90 years old – but still fully active, now with her memoirs published in various countries. After 67 years of separation, the two were reunited. Leningrad TV recorded the meeting for posterity.

Two unique women's experiences in a divided world. They stood there and held hands once again. There was something palpably indestructible in their friendship. Two years later, the Soviet Union collapsed. Three years later, Nappelbaum died. Another year passed, and Berberova was gone.

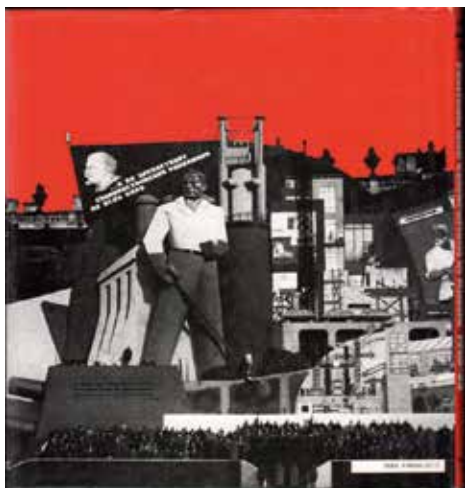
A tale of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### Aleksandr Tarkovsky

Much is said about Andrei Tarkovsky's father in his sister Marina's memoir, *Shards of a Mirror*. Arseny Tarkovsky was one of the great 20<sup>th</sup>-century Russian poets. In various incarnations, he is always present in his son's films.

But there is an argument to be made that Tarkovsky's artistic output is ultimately traceable to his grandfather, Arseny's father – whom Marina unfortunately does not linger on for any appreciable length of time. This Aleksandr Tarkovsky was a penitent nobleman who in the 19<sup>th</sup> century dedicated his life to the Revolution, based on his reading of radical literature. The socialist utopia of Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?* became his life's project.

Like other young people, Aleksandr was prepared to make great sacrifices. He spent many long years in exile in Siberia in the 1880s and 1890s. He belonged to "The People's Liberation", a group that engaged in terrorism, although he personally refrained. He was never able to have a government career and had to settle for obscure clerical duties. Secretly, he cultivated his rebellious ideas and he wrote and wrote – without managing to publish



hand, and a torch in the other. The slogan proclaimed, “Long live the International!”

**RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS WERE** widely used, including angels and St. George. As Victoria Bonnell observed, “the most central image, which provided a ‘cultural frame’ for organizing political narratives under the old regime, was that of St. George.”<sup>5</sup>

The tsarist government had repeatedly employed the image of St. George for political propaganda during the First World War. For May Day, 1917, workers from the Petrograd tannery produced a banner with the image of St. George killing the dragon. The dragon was also depicted on a banner painted by an amateur artist, carried by the piping workshop of the Izhorskii factory. Here a young woman with broken chains reached toward the sun, while the dead dragon was painted with a crown and scepter, symbolizing the tsar’s defeated autocracy. The slogan on the banner proclaimed, “Long live the democratic revolution and the 8-hour workday!”

Although Russian workers and peasants could relate to religious images, they were less likely to be able to “read” neo-classical images. The important literary critic and historian Viacheslav Polonski wrote in the 1920s that the prevalence of allegories and symbols was a consequence of the “bourgeois consciousness of those artists who came from the bourgeois class, bringing with them, together with technical skills, an alien approach to the interpretation of agitational lithography.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1917–1919, most festival decorations and banners were still painted by professional artists. Thus a famous soviet artist, Alexander Samokhvalov, who in 1917 was a student at the Academy of Arts in Petrograd, wrote about May Day,

**The Revolution demanded slogans, symbols and posters. They were necessary for those who felt that the Socialist Revolution was inevitable. Workers from factories would bring texts for the slogans and red fabric to us at the Academy. We would write their slogans, trying to illustrate them with industrial symbols: anvils, hammers, sickles and so on.**<sup>7</sup>

But could professional artists or academic students create a new proletarian art that was comprehensible to the masses? In his article “Art and the Street”, the leader of the *World of Art* movement, Alexander Benois, remarked, “When high art

stayed away from the street, the street still had a vibrant artistic life. But now high art has come out onto the street – and everything has become rather confusing.”<sup>8</sup>

Apart from the contradiction between the visual language of workers and that of the intelligentsia, the desire of festival planners to celebrate the Revolution in a harmonious style was often frustrated by the cities themselves, particularly by Petrograd, the former imperial capital. Petrograd’s ceremonial center was dominated by the classicism of the tsar’s palaces. For the celebrations of the First of May, 1917, all the buildings on the Palace Square, including the Winter Palace, were decorated for the first time with white drapes with red edgings and revolutionary slogans. As one of the journalists present, Mikhail Levitov, remarked in his article “On the Day of the Red Festival”, “These decorations were the only bright spots on the dull yellow background.”<sup>9</sup>

The idea of decorating the Classical facades of the old palaces was developed even further after the October Revolution of 1917. Under the Bolsheviks, avant-garde artists assumed the right to develop art for the newly formed communist state, and the commission to decorate Petrograd for May Day 1918, was awarded to futurists.<sup>10</sup> It was the first big state commission after the October Revolution, and it was entrusted to the “leftist artists” who gathered around the Visual Arts Department of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (IZO Narkompros): Natan Altman, Ivan Puni, Vladimir Baranoff-Rossiné, Konstantin Boguslavskii, Vladimir Lebedev, and others.

As a statement of their new art, the futurists covered the facades of most of the historic buildings in the center of Petrograd with bright cubist posters featuring futurist slogans. These unique city decorations and their reception by the hungry, impoverished townspeople, recorded in the press of 1918, became the true expression of the first steps towards new art in Bolshevik Russia.

One of the leading artists of the *World of Art* movement, Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, wrote,

**Well, you must admit we have witnessed the birth of a new era: on the First of May we artists finally took our revolutionary banners out onto the streets, and just look how delightfully the creations of new art adorned the city. At last, we have declared war on the despotism of architectural lines, which have imprisoned the artist’s free eye long enough!**<sup>11</sup>

However, most reactions to these ultra-modern city decorations were not so positive. The newspaper *Vechernie Ognii* [Evening lights] presented a rather sarcastic description of the May Day decorations of Petrograd:

**On the façade of the hotel Astoria is a poster depicting a knight on a green horse, striking someone’s light brown leg with a spear. The slogan says, “Let Us Defend Petrograd” [Zashchitim Petrograd]. / On the Mariinsky Palace there are three posters: (1) a man and a woman are loading guns; between them are two lonely buds; the inscription reads “Build the Red Army” [Stroite Krasnuiu Armiiu]. (2) Cubes, triangles and scrolls of all the colors of the rainbow alternately scattered around. The letters “Fial...” and “ki” are mixed among the cubes [fialki is Russian for violets]. Underneath is written, for those who did not understand, “flowers”. (3) The same cubes, triangles and scrolls with the words “First of May” [Pervoe Maia]. / The General Staff Building was adorned with several mysterious pictures. . . . Participants in the demonstrations especially enjoyed seeing on one of the posters a blacksmith with one right hand and four left hands; his right eye was flying somewhere in the clouds. / By the Alexander Column, facing Konnogvardeiskii Boulevard, was a large painted panel showing dancing peasants – a woman and two men – one in a red and other in a green shirt; it is inscribed “First of May” [Pervoe Maia]. / On the façade of the Winter Palace is a canvas with two figures shaking hands in the middle of a green field; between them is a tree without any leaves but with two red cones; a sign says, “Power to the Soviets” [Vlast’ Sovetam].<sup>12</sup>**

The Soviet Festivals were seen by the Bolsheviks as the most effective tool in agitation and in the education of the proletariat. Essential funds and manpower were diverted to them in the midst of famine and economic disaster. Often on the day of the festival restaurants and cafes offered cheap meals to the starving population. The new state had to explain its newly invented founding myth to the populace: during the challenging time of economic disaster and civil war, they allocated special funds to the festivals, but struggled to develop a visual language understandable to the proletariat.





The leading art critic of twentieth-century Russia, Nikolay Punin, proclaimed in the futurist newspaper *Iskusstvo Kommuny* [Art of the Commune],

To blow up the old artistic forms, demolish them, wipe them off the face of the earth: that's the dream of the new artist, the proletarian artist, the new man. . . . If you can't destroy, build stage props, pretend to demolish – but do not decorate. Do not decorate, since nobody needs these decorations. Not just me, but everyone who has eyes and some common sense was sorry to see such a huge amount of fabric spoiled by often very low quality posters; in our time when we all lack trousers or skirts, it is the same as hanging bread on the streets just for fun. . . . We did not need these painted cloths, wet, faded and torn; life was not merry in those days.<sup>13</sup>

For the first time in Russia, new futurist art claimed to be the artistic vanguard, but proved unable to communicate with the proletariat – now the most important class, after the Bolshevik revolution – and soon had to surrender to more self-explanatory realism. As early as 1919, the May Day decorations were fairly self-explanatory: “Everything was clear and easy to understand, there were no mysterious paintings on pieces of fabric on the streets, no caricatures.”<sup>14</sup>

But futurist or not, the people's impressions of the festive decorations and spectacles were often so strong that the recollections of even those who witnessed the historical events were overridden by the dramatized performances. Memory can be very selective, and tends to remember joyful and cheerful occasions. The Bolsheviks banked on this, and probably won. ✕

## references

- 1 Rudnev became one of the most popular architects under Stalin, and designed the Moscow State University building in 1949, followed by the Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw in 1952–1955.
- 2 James von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917–1920*, Berkeley 1993, p. 73.
- 3 Ibid., p. 23.
- 4 Their most famous mass spectacle, *Storming of the Winter Palace*, was performed on November 7, 1920 in Petrograd.
- 5 Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin*, Berkeley 1999, p. 70.
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- 8 Alexandre Benois, “Iskusstvo i ulitsa” [Art and the street], in *Teatral'naiia gazeta* [Theater Newspaper] 1917, no. 24 (1917-06-11), p. 8.
- 9 Mikhail Levidov, *V den' Krasnogo Prazdnika* [On the day of Red Festival], in *Novaia Zhizn'* [New Life], no. 2 (1917-04-20).
- 10 They were not all futurists, but from the time when futurism first emerged in Russia, the term had quite a broad meaning, and incorporated aesthetics of “leftist” art rather than specific artistic principles.
- 11 Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, “Bomba ili khlopushka: Razgovor mezhdum dvumia khudozhnikami” [A bomb or a firecracker: a conversation between two artists], in *Novaia Zhizn'* no. 83 (1918-05-04).
- 12 “Torzhestva 1 maia: Plakaty” [Festivals of the 1 May: Posters], in *Vechernie Ogn'i* [Evening lights] no. 35 (1918-05-02), p. 3.
- 13 Nikolay Punin, “K itogam oktyabr'skikh torzhestv” [To the outcomes of the celebrations of the Anniversary of October Revolution], in *Iskusstvo Kommuny* [Art of the Commune] no. 1 (1918-12-07), p. 2.
- 14 “Pervoe maia v Petrograde” [First of May in Petrograd], in *Petrogradskaia Pravda* [Petrograd truth] no. 96 (1919-05-03), p. 2.

much. He sent a gushing letter to Victor Hugo, yet another of his idols. We do not know whether the missive was ever received.

In 1918, Aleksandr Tarkovsky compiled a family history for his offspring in which he likened himself to a tree that was almost barren but now wanted to produce its last fruit. One cannot help but think of the final scene in Tarkovsky's last film, *The Sacrifice*, filmed in Sweden shortly before his death: the heavily symbolic image of the tree that the little son is taught to water and sustain.

The materialist and the metaphysicist united in their overwhelming faith in art. A typical Russian paradox.

### Aleksandr Pushkin



Bob Dylan and Aleksandr Pushkin have something important in common. Young revolutionary poets who interpret the experience of a generation and then test new waters – and are accused by old friends of having betrayed their radical ideals. It sometimes seems as if the two poets have a thousand identities, their art refusing to permit them to become fixed in one. In his memoirs, Dylan tells of reading Pushkin in English translation when he was young – works written when Pushkin was about the same age he was then. Perhaps he also thought about his own Jewish roots in the Odessa that the young Pushkin felt so deeply during his time in exile.

### Chekhov and Meyerhold

Vsevolod Meyerhold was arrested in 1939. Soon afterward, his wife was stabbed to death and in short order he was executed. The NKVD confiscated the family apartment and his wife's two children from a previous marriage to Sergei Yesenin were thrown out on the street. In that distressing situation, his stepdaughter Tatiana Yesenina had the presence of mind to rescue important parts of Meyerhold's archives. The papers she took to the family's dacha in her father's old valise included Meyerhold's correspondence with Anton Chekhov. The war came. The area where the dacha lay was pounded by German fire. In the greatest secrecy, Meyerhold's former pupil Sergei Eisenstein carried the valise back to Moscow. Today, its contents are preserved at the Russian Archives of Literature and Art.

Risking his own life, the great film director saves the great theatrical luminary's correspondence with the great playwright in the great poet's

# VELIMIR KHEBNIKOV

by **Robert Chandler**

## AND THE VOLGA FAMINE

**A**longside Mayakovsky, Khlebnikov is the most important of the Russian futurists. In much of his work, he experiments with language, inventing neologisms and finding significance in the shapes and sounds of individual letters. He treats a wide range of themes: the experience of war, revolution, and famine; the changing seasons; Slavic mythology; a utopian future in which all human knowledge can be disseminated by radio and in which people live in mobile glass cubicles that can attach themselves to skyscraper-like frameworks. He was passionately interested in mathematics and he believed that a mathematical understanding of the laws of history could allow humanity to predict the future – and so gain the power to shape it. In his long poem *War in a Mousetrap* Khlebnikov expresses the hope that we will eventually be able to “trap” war it as if it is no more than a mouse. And in his unfinished treatise *The Boards of Fate* he writes, “Once I was sitting deep in thought, pen in hand. My pen was hanging idly in the air. Suddenly war flew in and, like a merry fly, landed in the inkwell. Dying, it began to crawl across the book and these are the tracks left by its feet as it crawled in a coagulated lump, all covered in ink. Such is the fate of war. War will drown in the writer’s inkwell.”<sup>1</sup>

Velimir Khlebnikov was born in Astrakhan, on the Volga delta, where his father was the official administrator of the Kalmyks, a nomadic Buddhist people who speak a Turkic language. A keen ornithologist, he passed on to his son both an interest in birds – and the language of birds – and an interest in non-European cultures. In 1905, Khlebnikov and one of his elder brothers spent five months on an ornithological expedition in the northern Urals.

**Velimir’s mother was** close to some of the most important members of the *People’s Will*, a populist terrorist organization. Velimir himself studied a variety of subjects – biology, mathematics, natural sciences, Sanskrit and Slavic languages and literature – at both Kazan and Petersburg universities but never completed a degree. After a brief apprenticeship with some of the leading Symbolist poets, he became a central figure in the Russian avant-garde. He contributed to *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*, the notorious futurist manifesto which called for Pushkin, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy “to be thrown overboard from the steamship of modernity”; and he collabor-

ated with David Burliuk, Kazimir Malevich, Pavel Filonov, Natalya Goncharova, Vladimir Mayakovsky and others on a variety of projects including the opera *Victory over the Sun* (1913). Nevertheless, Khlebnikov seems a somewhat unlikely futurist. While his comrades enjoyed shocking the public, painting their faces and dressing like clowns, he himself was a poor and low-key public performer. A lover of myth and folklore, he wrote poems about mermaids, forest spirits and shamans, often in archaic language. And he wrote movingly about the place of animals in our lives: “Man has taken the surface of the terrestrial globe away from the wise community of beasts and plants and become lonely; he has no one with whom to play tag and blindman’s buff; in an empty room with the darkness of non-existence all around, there is no play and no comrades. Whom is he to have fun with? All around is an empty ‘nothing’. Driven out of their carcasses, the souls of the beasts have thrown themselves into him and inhabited his steppes with their law. They have built beastly cities inside his heart.”<sup>2</sup>

**Khlebnikov welcomed** both the February and October revolutions. Back in Astrakhan he worked for the local military-political newspaper, *Red Soldier*, and also helped his father to organize a nature reserve in the Volga delta. He spent the last four years of his life wandering. He left Moscow for Kharkov in early 1919, but the city was captured by the Whites, and Khlebnikov only narrowly, by feigning madness, managed to avoid being conscripted into the White Army. In 1920 he took part in the “First Congress of Eastern Peoples” in Baku, on the Caspian Sea. In a letter to his sister Vera, he wrote that in evening classes for the workers, “I announced to the Marxists that I represented Marx squared, and to those who preferred Mohammed I announced that I was the continuation of the teachings of Mohammed, who was henceforth silenced since the Number had now replaced the Word.”<sup>3</sup>

From Baku Khlebnikov travelled in April 1921 to Persia, as a “lector” in the “Persian Red Army” which had been sent to northern Persia to support a short-lived “Persian Soviet Republic”. There, delighted to be in the East, he wore Persian robes and became known as “the Russian Dervish”. He returned to Russia in August, where he witnessed the terrible Volga famine. At some point he was attacked and robbed, and he lost most of his manuscripts. He died in June 1922, after years

of malnutrition and several bouts of both typhus and malaria.

Khlebnikov has much in common with Guillaume Apollinaire. Both poets lived short lives – Apollinaire from 1880 to 1918, Khlebnikov from 1885 to 1922. Both had a gift for drawing, and both were provincials, feted as geniuses when they moved to their country’s capital. Both were close to the greatest visual artists of their time: Apollinaire to Picasso, and Khlebnikov to both Pavel Filonov and Vladimir Tatlin. Both poets remain best known for their more outrageous experiments, but both also wrote many relatively classical poems that embody deep and unexpected perceptions; their early technical experimentation is linked to an openness to experience, to a willingness to follow thoughts and feelings of all kinds wherever they may lead. Like Apollinaire’s, Khlebnikov’s best work is informed by a bold simplicity and deep compassion. Other examples of avant-garde rhetoric – for example, the manifestos of Marinetti – now seem dated. Khlebnikov’s “Appeal to the Governors of the Terrestrial Globe”, however, retains its power – largely because it is so clearly inspired not only by hatred for the ordinary and everyday, but also by a justified horror at the monstrosity of modern industrial warfare. Khlebnikov was admired even by poets with little sympathy for futurism. The classically inclined Mikhail Kuzmin referred to him as “a genius and a man of great vision”. The no-nonsense Nikolay Gumilyov wrote admiringly about his first publications and Osip Mandelstam later wrote, “Every line of his is the beginning of a new long poem. [...] What Khlebnikov wrote was not even verses, not even long poems, but a vast all-Russian prayer book or icon case.”

**The First World War** put an end to the idea of inevitable human progress in every area of life, but the idea of progress in art has proved surprisingly resilient. Literary and art historians tend to focus on artists’ most innovative work even when it is not their best. Just as Malevich’s Black Square has always attracted more attention than his figurative paintings of the 1930s, so Khlebnikov’s most experimental poems have taken up a disproportionate amount of critics’ attention. The following brief selection represents an attempt to redress this imbalance.

*Hunger* shows us Khlebnikov at his most compassionate; it may well be the only adequate literary response to the Volga famine of 1921. Another of the many versions of this poem





Illustration: Moa Thelander

contains the lines: “And their faces are more transparent than windows / so that hunger, like a bearded, self-satisfied landlord, / can look out through a child’s face. / The children are melting.” The only other responses by writers to this famine were non-literary: Maksim Gorky published an appeal to the outside world which led to the creation of the International Committee for Russian Relief, which eventually managed to feed about ten million people. And the twenty-two-year-old Andrei Platonov, who would go on to become the greatest Russian writer of the twentieth century, temporarily abandoned literature for work in land reclamation. “Being someone technically qualified,” he wrote, “I was unable to continue to engage in contemplative work such as literature.”

We are also including a few of Khlebnikov’s finest lyrical poems and a prescient poem about Moscow. The inspiration for this was probably an article by Gorky in the *Communist International* (December 1920) which includes the sentence, “For Lenin, Russia is only the material for an experiment that has been begun on a world-wide, planetary scale.” My translation of the poem was first published in an appendix to my co-translation of Andrei Platonov’s novel, *Happy Moscow*.

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- 2 Quoted in Yevgeny Kovtun, *Avant-garde Art in Russia*, New York, 1996, p. 132; original in Khlebnikov, *Poemy, dramy, proza*, Moscow, 1986, pp. 324–25.
- 3 Velimir Khlebnikov, *Collected Works*, Vol. I, Cambridge, MA 1987, p. 28.

The Volga Famine

Hunger

(A complete translation of Khlebnikov’s shortened version)

Why are elk and hares leaping through the forest,  
 making themselves scarce?  
 People have eaten the bark of poplars,  
 the green shoots of firs . . .  
 Women and children wander the forest,  
 gathering birch leaves  
 for soup, for broth, for borsch,  
 the tips of fir trees and silver moss —  
 food of the forest.  
 Children, forest scouts,  
 wander through thickets.

They roast white worms in a bonfire,  
 wild cabbage and fat caterpillars,  
 or big spiders — they’re sweeter than nuts.  
 They catch moles, grey lizards,  
 shoot arrows at hissing reptiles  
 and bake goose-foot pastries.  
 Hunger drives them after butterflies —  
 they’ve collected a whole sack of them.  
 Today Mama  
 will be making butterfly borsch.  
 Enraptured, as if in a dream,  
 not believing the truth,  
 the children watch  
 with big eyes made holy by hunger  
 as a hare leaps tenderly through the trees.

black leather suitcase. This is perhaps something that could have happened only in the era of Stalin.

Anastasia and Marina Tsvetayeva



Marina Tsve-  
 tayeva,  
 perhaps  
 the great-

est Russian poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, hanged herself in Yelabuga in 1941. The fact is her sister and fellow writer met her long, long afterwards.

Back in the 1980s, I occasionally visited Anastasia Tsvetayeva, Marina’s sister, at her little one-room apartment on Malaya Bronnaya in Moscow. She told me how Marina regularly gave her signs and signals from the other side. She sometimes glimpsed Marina’s shadow on a street corner, once even at a reading at the House of Writers. It sounded all the more remarkable because Anastasia was so utterly sober and unsentimental. She published her memoirs in 1983, 750 densely printed pages, and everything she remembered was grounded in a reality.

In the memoirs, Anastasia writes of her and Marina’s early symbiosis, of their poetic debuts during the late Symbolist period, of the hard years as young mothers during the world war and civil war, of how they were separated through Marina’s exile and how their fates were re-entwined through Marina’s return and the Terror (which led Anastasia to eighteen years in Gulag).

Anastasia Tsvetayeva could not talk about herself without talking about Marina. It was as if Marina still lived inside her; the symbiosis had never ended. Perhaps Marina did not truly die until she passed away with Anastasia in 1993 – in Anastasia’s ninety-ninth year.

Anatoly Surov

Yury Tynyanov’s novella *Lieutenant Kijé* was published in 1928, the first year of the Five Year Plan. It seems almost prophetic in its caustically satirical depiction of a non-existent person’s brilliant career in the Russia of Paul I. “Lieutenant Kijé” is born of a clerical error, lives on in the official rolls, and is finally, after a spotless career, promoted to general. When the tsar asks to meet his able subordinate, Kijé suddenly “dies” and is given a state funeral with full military honors, just to be on the safe side.

In Stalin’s Soviet Union, people sometimes vanished without a trace. But they could in fact also appear out of thin air. There was a Lieutenant Kijé in late Stalinist literature by the name

It might be a vision from the world of light —  
but the vision is agile and soon gone —  
nothing left but the black tip of an ear.  
An arrow sped after it,  
but too late — the ample dinner had fled.  
The children stand as if under a spell...  
'Look — a butterfly! Quick! After it!  
Over there now! Pale blue!  
The woods are dark, a wolf from far away  
comes to the spot  
where a year before  
he had eaten a lamb.  
He circled round and round like a top, sniffed everywhere,  
but nothing remained —  
the ants had worked hard — save one dry hoof.  
Embittered, the wolf tightened his lumpy ribs  
and made off beyond the trees.  
There with his heavy paw he'll crush  
crimson-browed grouse and grey capercaillie  
that have gone to sleep beneath the snow —  
and he too will get sprinkled with snow.  
A vixen, a fiery ball of fluff,  
clambered onto a tree stump,  
and contemplated her future:  
should she become a dog?  
Should she become a servant to humans?  
Many traps had been laid —  
she could take her pick.  
No, it wouldn't be safe;  
they'd eat a red fox  
quick as they eat dogs!  
And the fox began to wash herself with her downy paws,  
spinning her fiery tail into the air  
like a sail.  
A squirrel grumbled:  
"Where are my nuts and acorns?  
The people have eaten them!"  
Quietly, transparently, evening came.  
With a quiet murmur, a pine kissed a poplar.  
Tomorrow they may  
be chopped down  
and broken up for breakfast.

7 October, 1921

Hunger  
(The third section of Khlebnikov's long version of this poem)

Fire-eye,  
without its lashes  
of downpours and rain,  
has been burning our earth, our fields  
and whole nations of stalks of grain.  
Rippling like dry straw,  
fields smoked and ears of grain yellowed,  
faded and withered into a dry death.  
Scattered, the grain fed mice.  
Is the sky ill? Is the sky a sick person?  
It has no moist eyelashes,  
no mighty downpours, none  
of the weather that makes for fine harvests.  
Burning the grass, the fields and our gardens,  
the eye of the heat remained cruelly yellow,  
always golden, with no brows of clouds.  
People sat down submissively to wait  
for a miracle — but there are no such things — or death.  
This was a pale-blue doom.  
This was drought. Among beloved years —

a stepson.  
Everything — grain and rain —  
had betrayed the farmer's labour.  
Had not the ploughman's hands,  
sweating as always, scattered  
good grains that very spring?  
Had not the farmer's eyes  
looked in hope at the sky  
all summer long,  
in expectation of rain?  
The naked eye of the heat,  
this eye of golden fire,  
was burning with golden rays  
the cornfields of the Volga.

Through the ravine in the forest,  
raising clouds of dust,  
the crowd hurried to the green hills and the three pines.  
All in a rush and agitated,  
holding sticks in their hands,  
long beards like wedges,  
they hurried along.  
All of them, children and adults, were running.  
This was hunger.  
It was to find the holy clay,  
that can be eaten like bread,  
that you don't die from,  
that people were in such a rush.  
Clay — you alone remained  
when everything let us down!  
Clay! Earth!  
Hunger was herding humanity.  
Men, women and children,  
filling the ravine,  
were hurrying to find the holy clay  
that is as good as bread.  
Clay — the mute saviour  
beneath the roots of hundred-year-old pines.

And that was when the mind of scientists,  
aspiring towards other worlds,  
wanted to construct a dream of life  
out of lands subordinated to thought.

October, 1921

Love Flight

Will you turn  
your twisted plait  
to a bow-string for me?  
Hold  
me to the burnished bow  
of your brow —  
and I,  
with finer feathers,  
will outfly  
the swiftest storm!

25 January, 1921

The air is split

The air is split into black branches,  
like old glass.  
Pray to Our Lady of Autumn!  
The windows of autumn's chapel,  
smashed by a hurtling bullet,  
are wrinkling.

A tree was burning,  
a bright spill in the golden air.  
It bends; it bows down.  
Autumn's flint and steel angrily  
struck the sparks of golden days.  
A forest at prayer. All at once  
golden smells fell to the ground.  
Trees stretch out — rakes  
gathering armfuls of the sun's hay.  
Autumn's tree resonantly evokes  
a sketch of Russia's railroads.  
The golden autumn wind  
has scattered me everywhere.

7 November, 1921

Moscow, who are you?

Moscow, who are you?  
Enchantress or enchanted?  
Forger of freedom  
or fettered lady?  
What thought furrows your brow  
as you plot your world-wide plot?  
Are you a shining window  
into another age?  
O Moscow, are you femme fatale  
or fetter-fated,  
fated or fêted?  
Does scholarship decree  
your crucifixion  
beneath the razorblades of clever scholars  
frozen over an old book  
as pupils stand around their desk?  
O daughter of other centuries,  
powder-keg,  
explosion of your fetters.

15 December, 1921

I, a butterfly

I, a butterfly that has flown  
into the room of human life,  
must leave the handwriting of my dust  
like a prisoner's signature  
over the stern windows,  
across fate's strict panes.  
The wallpaper of human life  
is grey and sad.  
And there is the windows'  
transparent 'No'.  
I have worn away my deep-blue morning glow,  
my patterns of dots,  
my wing's light-blue storm, first freshness.  
The powder's gone, the wings have faded  
and turned transparent and hard.  
Jaded, I beat  
against the window of mankind.  
From the other side knock eternal numbers,  
summoning me to the motherland,  
calling a number to return to all numbers.

1921



# “ANY SUCCESSFUL TRANSLATION OF POETRY IS A SMALL MIRACLE”

With a career spanning more than 20 years, Robert Chandler is one of the best known and most prolific translators of Russian into English. He has translated classic authors such as Pushkin and Leskov, as well as more contemporary writers like Grossman, and his translations of Platonov have won prizes. He recently completed a translation of Velimir Khlebnikov's poem about the Volga famine. Baltic Worlds had the opportunity to ask him a few questions about translation in general and Khlebnikov in particular.



Robert Chandler.

largely as a result of malnutrition and a general lack of medical care.”

**What made you translate Khlebnikov? Does he have particular relevance to you personally?**

“I am at present compiling a large anthology of Russian poetry in translation. It will be titled *Russian Poetry from Pushkin to Brodsky*, and it will include about sixty poets in versions by almost

as many different translators. I was not very happy with any of the existing translations of Khlebnikov, so I decided to try my hand at him. I soon realized that – despite his rather intimidating reputation – he is a very approachable poet. Like his contemporary Guillaume Apollinaire, whom I have also translated, he is a natural lyricist.”

**Could you explain a little more why you are not happy with existing translations of Khlebnikov?**

“I'd rather not. Any successful translation of poetry is a small miracle. I'd rather write about the few good ones than about the many inevitable failures.”

**Which would you say are the particular challenges of translating poetry?**

“It goes without saying that there is always tension between reproducing the exact meaning and reproducing the music. All the time, one has to struggle to do both. Sometimes this seems impossible and one has to decide which matters most at this particular point in the poem. There are no general answers to these questions.”

**Do you think Khlebnikov generally deserves more attention from readers and literary scholars?**

“There is a long Russian biography by Sofia Starkina, published in Petersburg in 2005. It looks extremely thorough, but I have not yet had time to read more than a few pages. I'd love to see a shorter book available in English – one that might be of interest to anyone who loves poetry, not just to Russianists. It would not be difficult to create a very appealing book. Khlebnikov was an accomplished artist himself and many of the finest artists of the time drew portraits of him, so there could be lots of illustrations. And there has been too much emphasis on Khlebnikov's difficulty. Much of his work is very accessible indeed.” ❌

henriette cederlöf

PhD student of Russian literature at BEEGS (Baltic and Eastern European Graduate School). Her thesis is about the 1970s fiction of the Strugatsky brothers.

of Anatoly Surov. His plays were wildly successful and he was awarded the Stalin Prize twice. And yet he had never written a word. He had done nothing more than add a bit of spit and polish to texts he stole from colleagues – preferably Jews whom he brutally maneuvered off the Soviet stages during these years of “anti-cosmopolitan” actions – with the collusion of his powerful patrons.

One colleague whose work he had stolen was told, “I can see to it that you rot in Kolyma.” It was 1949 and Surov was at the top of his game.

The fraud was ultimately exposed after Stalin's death. At a writers' meeting in September 1954, the pretend writer's criminal activities came to light. Afterwards, he lived out his days, with no literary pretensions, until 1987. He died at the peak of perestroika, in a state of advanced alcoholism.

**Vitaly Ginzburg**

The Russian 2003 Nobel laureate in physics, Vitaly Ginzburg cautioned strongly against religion as a power factor and fashion in today's Russia.

Ginzburg always had a deep interest in literature. He and his entire department were evacuated to Kazan during the bitter wartime winter of 1942. While he was there, he and a friend stepped in to bury the symbolist poet Sergei Solovyov – who had just died in a mental hospital, with no family in the city. He picked up the body at the morgue, arranged a coffin, hired an unwilling driver, and thus with great hardship conveyed the dead poet by sledge to a cemetery outside Kazan. Over the final stretch, the driver drove so fast that the coffin began to slide into the snowdrifts. The young physicist had to lie down and grasp the coffin in his arms so that it would not be lost.

When Ginzburg came to Stockholm to receive his prize, I could not resist asking whether he, with his unshakable faith in science, had nonetheless not been driven by a religious impulse that day when he lay there and held onto the coffin, desperate to lay the dead poet to rest in consecrated ground. His answer was a firm no. He had done only what decency demanded – the ethical imperative exists within us, he explained, independently of the imprints of religion.

**Yury Trifonov and Georgy Trifonov**

Two of the leading Russian prose writers of the late Brezhnev era were cousins and had, essentially, the same name: Yury Trifonov and Georgy Trifonov. They were the sons of two prominent Bolshevik brothers, one of whom was

**Why did you start learning Russian?**

“No very good reason. I was fifteen, and at a good school. I was extremely good at Latin and Greek, but had made up my mind that I did not want to go on studying what I then saw as ‘dead’ languages. One of my teachers flattered me into taking up Russian: ‘Robert, I really think you should do a difficult language. Why not do Russian?’ But since the Russian teacher, whose name was Count Sollohub, was someone unusually kind, gifted and imaginative, I soon became very interested indeed.”

**How did you become a translator?**

“Gradually. Soon after graduating from university, I translated one of Andrey Platonov's versions of a Russian folk tale – simply because I loved the tale and wanted to share it with other people. This was the first piece of work I completed on my own initiative. Then I translated two more of Platonov's tales, sent them to Faber and was commissioned to translate the remaining three. All six were then published as a children's book titled *The Magic Ring*. But during the following twenty years I did many other jobs. It is really only during the past twenty years that I have devoted most of my time to translating.”

**How would you describe the particular challenges of translating Russian?**

“One challenge is that the freedom of Russian word order enables a writer to make it very clear exactly which words he wants emphasized in any sentence. This makes it easy to reproduce the intonations of living speech on the printed page. It is harder to achieve this in English.”

**And now you have translated Khlebnikov. It is a very powerful poem. Could you tell me a little more about it, for example the circumstances under which it was written?**

“I have written a little about this poem in my introductory article. I really don't have a lot more to say. Only that it was written a year or so before his own death – and that Khlebnikov himself seems to have died

# VASILY GROSSMAN AND HRACHYA KOCHAR

**T**here is a great deal that we do not yet know about Vasily Grossman's life. The widely held belief that Grossman lived out his last years in poverty and isolation is probably mistaken.

In 1986, a Russian-language publishing house in the United States brought out the first edition of Semyon Lipkin's memoir, *Vasily Grossman's Stalingrad*. Lipkin wrote that in 1961 – after the “arrest” of *Life and Fate* – a translator from Armenia asked him to find her someone who could edit her own word-for-word translation of *The Children of the Large House*, a war novel by Hrachya Kochar. And Lipkin naturally recommended his close friend, Vasily Grossman.

Kochar's daughter, however, tells this story differently. According to her, “Vasily Grossman arrived in Yerevan in autumn 1959. This was a difficult time for the writer, after the arrest of *Life and Fate*. [...] He was both depressed and in financial difficulties. My father had been longing to have *The Children of the Large House* translated into Russian – and he wanted this to be done by Grossman, whom he worshipped. Vardkes Tevekelyan, the chairman of the Literary Fund, had introduced my father to Grossman.”

The contradictions between these two accounts are glaring. Lipkin makes out that it was thanks to his mediation that Grossman was able to travel to Armenia and earn money there; according to Lipkin, it was only when Grossman was already in Armenia that he first met Kochar. Mary Kochar, however, states that the two writers were brought together by the chairman of the Armenian section of the Literary Fund, a powerful organization that decided almost all the financial matters of the Armenian section of the Soviet Writers' Union. A commission from the Literary Fund would have been very important; there would certainly have been no need for Lipkin's mediation.

Mary Kochar does, of course, get the date wrong. It was in February 1961 that *Life and Fate* was arrested, and in autumn of 1961, not 1959, that Grossman travelled to Armenia. Mistakes of this nature, however, are common enough in memoirs, and this particular mistake in no way invalidates the rest of her account.

**It goes without** saying that Lipkin's and Kochar's accounts cannot both be accurate. It is, however, possible that both are inaccurate, that the truth is somewhat different from either of these versions.

Since the mid-1950s Grossman had been an acknowledged master. His articles about the war were being republished again and again, and the first of his two Stalingrad novels, *For a Just Cause*, was seen as a classic. Few people knew about the “arrest” of *Life and Fate*, and Grossman's public reputation remained intact. He could, in principle, have begun again. He could have written another novel like *For a Just Cause*. He could have produced a fully revised and self-censored version of *Life and Fate*. This, admittedly, would no longer have been

*Life and Fate* – but no one was preventing him from following this course.

It is natural to assume that Grossman took on this “translation” because he needed the money. Lipkin writes, “I thought it would be good for Grossman to go to Armenia, and he needed the money badly.” Anna Berzer (the editor from *Novy Mir* who, in 1990, published another memoir of Grossman, titled *Goodbye*) says much the same: “He travelled to Armenia [...] because of need and unhappiness.” And Grossman himself wrote to his wife in December 1961, “I am glad that I have managed to extricate myself from material need without getting into debt, without borrowing money from my well-wishers.”

All these statements, however, are puzzling. It is hard to conceive how, in 1961, Grossman can have been in need of money. In 1960 he had received from the journal *Znamya* an advance against the publication of *Life and Fate*. We know, from a letter sent to Grossman by the chief secretary of *Znamya*, that this advance totaled 16,587 rubles and that it was irrevocable. In 1960, this was a large sum.

In 1960 Grossman also published several extracts from *Life and Fate* in other Soviet periodicals. Given Grossman's fame as a war novelist, these publications must have been well paid.

And Grossman must have earned other large sums. His articles written as a war correspondent had been republished in 1958, and *For a Just Cause* had been republished in 1959. And his pre-war novel, *Stepan Kolchugin*, had been republished twice, in 1959 and in 1960. During the 1940s and 1950s authors received an average payment of 3000 rubles for each *avtorsky list* (a print unit of 40,000 letters, spaces and punctuation marks – still the standard Russian system for calculating payments to authors). In view of his eminence, Grossman would almost certainly have been paid more than this average rate. Authors were, admittedly, paid less for work that had been published already, but Grossman would still have received a minimum of 1500–1800 rubles for each print unit. His war journalism constituted thirty of these units, *For a Just Cause* forty-six, and *Stepan Kolchugin* over forty-four. Grossman would, therefore, appear to have earned well over 180,000 rubles during the years 1958–60. This was at a time when an average salary was 650 rubles a month and a woman's coat with a fur collar cost 700 rubles.

Writers' income during these years was often extraordinarily high; there were dramatists earning more than a million rubles a year. The need for a progressive income tax on writers was, in fact, a frequent topic of discussion in the Communist Party Central Committee. There was, however, no disagreement about the fact that a writer was a representative of the elite – and so was entitled to earn large sums. It is hard to imagine that Grossman, a member of the Writer's Union since 1937, was living in poverty. All this, however, only raises more questions; it does not help us to understand why Grossman should have taken on a task that, for a writer of his standing, would have been seen as something of a humiliation. It is pos-

sible that a clue lies in Anna Berzer's words about Grossman accepting this commission because of “need and unhappiness”. Berzer's memoir is written with restraint and she does not discuss Grossman's personal life, but she would certainly have known that his marriage was close to a complete breakdown. He may simply have been glad of a chance to get away from Moscow.

**There are further** complications to the story of Grossman's work as a “translator”. *The Children of the Large House* was written in two stages. The first edition was published in Armenian in 1952. This was followed by the publication in 1954, in Armenia, of a Russian translation by Arus' Tadeosyan; this translation was republished in 1955. Tadeosyan's translation was not perfect, but it was good enough for its purpose. Some passages of the original were omitted and, by the standards of the time, the print run was small (5000 copies); it seems likely that the literary authorities simply considered it important that the book be published in Russian – the language of the entire Soviet Union – and not only in the language of one of the constituent republics. How many people read the book was of lesser concern.

In 1955 an expanded and re-edited version of Tadeosyan's translation was published by a major Moscow publishing house, Sovetsky Pisatel'; this time the print run was 15,000 copies. And in 1956 this new version was republished by the no less important military publishing house, Voenizdat. We do not know the print run, because of a gap in the records, but it is sure to have been at least 15,000 copies. Kochar, however, decided at some point to continue to work on his book. In 1959 he published what we now look on as the second part of his novel. This, of course, needed to be translated – and the obvious choice for this task was Tadeosyan. She was qualified and experienced; she specialized in long epics and two of the most prestigious Moscow publishing houses evidently considered her work acceptable. To commission a translation from anyone else would have been a blow both to her reputation and to her income. And as far as the Armenian section of the Writers' Union was concerned, commissioning a translation from so important a figure as Grossman would have entailed considerable costs. They would have had to pay him a high fee; they would have had to pay his travel and living expenses; and they would have had to arrange for him to visit Armenia's main sites of cultural interest. He would have been an expensive guest.

It is also surprising that it was thought necessary to ask Grossman to translate not only the second half of the novel but also the first half, which had already been translated. It would have been cheaper, and less insulting to Tadeosyan, to commission Grossman to translate only the second half. And translations by more than one person were, at this time, common enough.

The “arrest” of the manuscript of *Life and Fate* was a unique

**Were his motives political? Economic? Or was it an act of friendship?**





Illustration: Katrin Stenmark

event. Usually, the authorities either just censored work they considered dangerous or else arrested the writer himself. The authorities' treatment of Grossman, however, was entirely logical. Their main concern was to make it absolutely impossible for the novel to be published abroad. In 1956, after all, Pasternak had sent *Doctor Zhivago* to two Soviet literary journals. After they had refused it, Pasternak had sent the novel abroad. In 1957, it had been published in Milan – and in 1958 Pasternak had been awarded the Nobel Prize. Grossman's novel had also been refused by a Soviet literary journal. The authorities had good reason to fear that this might lead to equally catastrophic consequences.

And so the authorities not only told Grossman that his novel was ideologically harmful and therefore unpublishable; they also reminded him that it was his duty to prevent it from being published abroad. This was why they confiscated his manuscripts, and their failure to find every copy is of only secondary importance. What mattered is that Grossman signed a declaration, after his apartment had been searched, to the effect that he possessed no more copies. This meant that any publication of any extract from *Life and Fate* in an émigré journal would have been a criminal offence – proof that Grossman had misled the KGB. The Soviet authorities had not only locked the book up; they had also turned it into a weapon they could use against its author. No part of it could be published without endangering Grossman and his family.

This was the stick – or, as we Russians say, the whip. What of the carrot – or the gingerbread, its Russian equivalent? This was, after all the Khrushchev era. Recent political liberalization meant that it seemed appropriate to provide Grossman with some kind of compensation for his loss, at least at a material level. And so it was decided to send Gross-

man to Armenia. He would meet new people and have the chance to visit a new country. He would earn good money. Apart from *Life and Fate* being under lock and key, everything would be all right for him . . . It seems then that Mary Kochar's version of the story is more accurate than Semyon Lipkin's: if Grossman's commission was organized by the Central Committee, then the person who introduced Grossman to Kochar would have been not Lipkin but Tevekelyan, the chairman of the Armenian Literary Fund.

Grossman's involvement would also have brought benefits both to Kochar and to the Armenian section of the Writers' Union. A "translation" by a writer of Grossman's stature would have greatly enhanced the novel's status. It would, above all, have given the novel a real chance of winning the most important Soviet literary prize of the time – the Lenin Prize, which had recently been resurrected in place of the now defunct Stalin Prize.

**On returning from** his successful and well-paid trip to Armenia, Grossman wrote to Nikita Khrushchev, asking for *Life and Fate* to be returned to him. The Kremlin's response was to summon Grossman to a meeting with Mikhail Suslov, the member of the Central Committee responsible for matters of ideology. Suslov addressed Grossman as "comrade" and treated him with respect, but he refused to return his novel. It was, he said, a provocative novel, and its publication would bring terrible consequences, for which Grossman would not be forgiven.

The Russian version of *The Children of the Large House*, credited to Vasily Grossman and Asmik Taronyan (the translator of the literal version from which Grossman worked), was published in Yerevan in 1962. It was republished in Moscow in 1966 and 1971. It then appears to have been forgotten until 1989, when it was republished in a print run of 200,000 copies. And in 1989 – in contrast to earlier years – a large print run truly was an indication of public interest. This, of course, was a consequence of the first Soviet publication, in 1988, of *Life and Fate*. Grossman's involvement did indeed – at least in the short term – win Kochar's novel a huge number of readers. ✕

**yury bit-yunan**

translation: Robert Chandler

executed as an enemy of the people. The other died of a heart attack during the final phase of the Terror.

Yury Trifonov became the chronicler of the Era of Stagnation, a mournful observer of relationships at a standstill, of dead revolutionary slogans and bitter fights for apartment space. His most famous novel, *Another Life*, quotes Chekhov in the very title.

After a carefully planned defection in 1968, Georgy Trifonov evolved, under the pseudonym Mikhail Dyomin, into the chronicler of the brutal and colorful reality of the criminal underworld in the Gulag Archipelago. He knew whereof he spoke: all of his stories came from personal experience.

Obviously, Georgy's defection did not strengthen Yury's position. Nevertheless, Yury was able to publish exactly what he wished. He had found a way to get around the censors.

The connection between the cousins remained broken for a long time. On a trip to Paris in 1980, Yury ventured to contact Georgy. He wanted a taste of his cousin's freedom. And what did he hear? That Georgy – caught up in his success, with his Gulag account translated into several languages – had had enough of his new life and wanted to go back.

#### Vladimir Antonov-Ovseyenko



Vladimir Antonov-Ovseyenko turned Russia upside down in October 1917. He was the very first to enter

the Winter Palace in Petrograd on that night of the coup; it was he who arrested the ministers of the Provisional Government and he who actually made sure everything – at first – proceeded without bloodshed. The famed Swedish journalist Jan Olof Olsson ("Jolo") makes a great fuss out of this – the little bespectacled man in a floppy hat, boots, and a coat too big for him who carries out the October Revolution.

Twenty years later, Antonov-Ovseyenko was shot to death. Today, his son Anton, who has passed his ninetieth year, is the director of the state Gulag Museum in Moscow. As a relative of an enemy of the people, Anton was held for 13 years in Stalin's camps and now fights determinedly against Soviet nostalgia in the land of Putin.

One family: one nation. A hundred years of Russian history distilled. ✕

## The relativity of suffering. One of the last century's greatest realists at work

**Vasily Grossman**  
**Everything Flows**

Editor and translator:  
Robert Chandler  
New York  
New York Review of Books  
2009  
253 pages

**Vasily Grossman**  
**The Road: Stories,  
Journalism, and Essays**

Editor and translator:  
Robert Chandler  
New York  
New York Review of Books  
2010  
373 pages



**Anders Björnsson**

Editor-in-chief of  
Baltic Worlds 2008–2012.

**W**hen I reviewed Wendy Z. Goldman's *Inventing the Enemy: Denunciation and Terror in Stalin's Russia* (BW, vol. V:1) about Stalinist mass terror at the local level, in factories and party committees, I returned to Vasily Grossman's unparalleled polemic in the form of fiction *Everything Flows*, the natural and necessary sequel to *Life and Fate*, his novel about World War II and the confrontation between two major twentieth-century ideological systems, Nazism and communism.

Grossman (1905–1964) had of course been one of the devoted, politically correct journalists in the Soviet Union in the 1930s and 1940s. As a war correspondent, he covered the Red Army's battles and slow progress westward after the appalling setback that dealt such a vicious blow to the Jewish population of the old Russian Empire, his own people. He wrote an early exposé, an on-the-spot report, from a German death camp; his short stories of the years of ruin, when all of Eastern Europe seemed on the brink of destruction, are gripping literature and profound works of art.

*The Road*, a volume of collected works, presents Grossman writ small. Laconic, suggestive, with large, meaningful points between the lines. Grossman's prose is light, like a butterfly. The subjects of the first suite are the birth of the young Soviet state and its struggle to survive. Especially striking is the prominent place of women in the social life depicted – including women in leading positions. The story about the young political commissar who, quartered in a Jewish home as the Russian-Polish war raged (1919–1921), gives birth after the infant's father had fallen in battle and leaves her newborn behind when the Red Guards go on the counter-offensive, is unforgettable – as a document of the times, and as art.

**THE SECOND SECTION** is framed by the Second World War and the Jewish plight under Nazi occupation. A provincial teacher who meets his cruel fate never having lost his illusions seems to me the embodiment of the lot of an entire people. Although some of the later short stories allude to Nazism and the hatred of Jews, the most powerful among them are a couple that provide glimpses into the Soviet human soul. "Mama" for instance, based on the authentic and proven story of the adoption of an orphan by the NKVD boss Nikolai Yezhov and his wife, and the girl's unglamorous adventures after the execution of her father and the suicide (in reality) of her mother. The terror of the epoch resides in glances and gestures, not physical torture and bloodletting. Grossman's rage becomes most palpable when he holds back; he has no need to display it.

In an appendix to the book, "the girl" was allowed, in 2010, the year of publication, to give her version of the brief time she spent in the Yezhov family. To her, this prince of the Terror, who ultimately became its victim, was a loving and caring adult who made sure the child was given everything she needed. She went so far as to try, without success, to have her adoptive father rehabilitated as a prisoner of the system. She also suffered for his sake, although actually only in that she was sent back to an orphanage and could not choose a profession in the music world, as she would have preferred.

Suffering is relative.

Grossman lost his own mother to the ravages of German SS troops in his home city and he felt guilty to the end of his days for not having done more to get his mother out in time. Two letters to his mother, written long after her murder, are ele-



Illustration: Katrin Stenmark

giac in a manner otherwise unlike this writer. When he is close to death, he can unleash, as in a few lovely graveyard meditations written shortly before his own passing, his sense of humor and his quiet irony; in this story there is an almost ribald passage about bearded "private priests" with long, red noses who will, in exchange for a glass of vodka or, even better, several, agree to hold a funeral oration for the chief mourners – drunkards of a kind who would otherwise be consigned to parasitism, as the society would later condemn one Joseph Brodsky.

One long text in *The Road* differs from all the others. The war correspondent Vasily Grossman was one of the first to write about a concentration camp after having been on site and making personal observations. His article about Treblinka is an indictment. The bombast (otherwise absent from Grossman's

prose) is there to soothe indescribable anguish. Sharply, piercingly, the writer reconstructs the industrial killing; he characterizes a few of the murderers and when he imagines the innocent victims he becomes painfully physical.

"HELL IN TREBLINKA" was written in the heat of the moment and there was of course a rush to get out the information after the Soviet Army's liberation of this piece of Polish ground. The camp had by then already been destroyed by the German murderers. Unfortunately, Grossman's estimations of the number of dead are wildly exaggerated. He reports three million murdered in this camp alone; the actual figure is well under eight hundred thousand – a horrific figure in its own right. But the error reminds us that war reportage (like biased testimony) is a shaky



foundation for establishing historical truth. Propaganda is a mighty force that does not always have any relationship to the facts. However, the editor and translator Robert Chandler has appended exemplary notes to the Treblinka article, as well as to the rest of the selections, which are based on the most recent literature in the field.

*Everything Flows* was written after the post-Stalinist authorities had obstructed the publication of *Life and Fate*. Grossman continued working as a writer for the Soviet press, but none of his literary works could be published until a couple of decades after his death, when the generation of leaders who were molded politically and professionally during the Stalin era were leaving the stage. Robert Chandler may be right in his suspicion that Grossman might have fallen victim to the repression in connection with the hysterical campaign against cosmopolitanism and the so-called Doctors' Plot (a way of eliminating the still-vigorous Jewish element in Soviet society) if not for the sudden death in March 1953 of the holder of ultimate power, Joseph Stalin.

The posthumously published book is structured in scenes. In one of the first, the foreground is taken by the problem of the anti-Jewish purges within the Soviet intelligentsia. Sympathizers won honor and admiration that would not otherwise have been theirs. The protagonist of *Everything Flows*, Ivan Grigoryevich, has just been released from the gulag after twenty years. He arrives in Moscow and visits his cousin, who has achieved career success and a place in the scientific academy through profiting by the persecution of Jewish colleagues. Grigoryevich had himself been a promising scientist who made criminal statements during his student years and was shipped away to serve hard labor. All the characters are prematurely gray. Who lives in the greatest distress, the free or the imprisoned, remains an unanswered question. Who is without guilt? The prisoners who squeal under painful interrogation? And is he who voluntarily informs not also a victim of the torture afflicted upon the entire society by the state and its institutions?

**FEW WORKS OF** 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction can measure up to *Everything Flows* when it comes to questions of morality. It is not an indictment; it is a coming to terms – with, among other things, the writer's own experience, the writer's own possible complicity. Like a good reporter, Grossman has gathered material from camp life in outer Siberia, the mass famine in Ukraine in the early years of the 1930s, the torture in the interrogation cells, the many layers of *Glanz und Elend* in the life of society.

The present is the time just before Khrushchev's thaw, the many amnesties and returns after Stalin's death (quite a few, as we know, preferred to stay in their places of exile, as they had nowhere to return to). But the past is always present, in monologs, in dialogs, in fictional legal settlements. Who, then, has any right to pass judgment in such a society? Are not the judge, the prosecutor, public opinion also tainted, and in some sense guilty? Ivan Grigoryevich's first love betrayed him when he was taken away, and married someone else; his second and last love – the woman who allows him to board with her while he performs his lowly job as a metal worker – feels that she too has betrayed others when, as a young party activist, she stood helpless before the outrages and cruel mismanagement during the forced collectivizations. Her long, night-time confessions, sitting on the edge of the bed, have a realism that surpasses the descriptions of Shalamov and Solzhenitsyn, which is no small praise. And naturally, for this otherwise would not have been a great and tragic Russian book, this woman is also taken from him, by lung cancer.

The discussion in the final chapter of Lenin's ominous role in Russian modernization, his encapsulation in the thousand-year Russian history of serfdom and subjection is – I was about to say, as sharp as a knife. Because if there is something that has characterized our time, according to Grossman, it is that particular instrument, the surgeon's knife, that is "the 20<sup>th</sup> century's true theoretician, its greatest philosophical leader". Through his ascetic nature, Lenin could persist in a modernization project that precluded all thoughts of individual freedom. He never argued to persuade, but always to bully. He had sacrificed himself for the revolution (exhausted and paralyzed, he died at 54), and thus the sacrifices of others were not more worthy than his. In this way, Bolshevism became a kind of philosophy of decline: "This was not nourishment for the healthy. It was a narcotic for failures, for the sick and the weak, for the backward and beaten." Is this simply a lack of civility? "In Russia, there is virtually no such thing as manners," wrote Nikolai Leskov long before (in *A Decayed Family*).

"Lenin's synthesis of non-freedom and socialism", Grossman writes in a wholly unexpected turn, "stupefied the world more than the discovery of nuclear energy."

*Everything Flows* is a voyage of discovery to a barbarism that Grossman refuses to attribute to the realm of necessity. People must become accustomed to choosing, in the midst of their despair: choosing their inclinations, their time, their work, their friends. That is the way out of slavery. And it will demand sacrifice. But that is not the business of this book. ✖

anders björnsson

## Culture as both a text and a system: Reconstructing the connection

**T**he author of *The Texture of Culture* is ideally prepared for his task to present Yuri Lotman's semiotic theory to a larger public. Aleksei

Semenenko is an expert in semiotics who shares Lotman's high esteem for human language, the literary work of art, and their role in culture. So the book subtitled *An Introduction to Yuri Lotman's Semiotic Theory* is at the same time a defense of literature and literary studies, now threatened by attacks from various sides, including attacks from "cultural studies", which manifests only marginal interest in the methods and theories developed for the analysis of literature during the past century. Yuri Lotman, founding member of the famous TMSS (Tartu-Moscow Semiotic School), became one of the world's most influential thinkers in semiotics during the seventies and eighties.

Semenenko's monograph is the third in a series edited by Marcel Danesi, professor of semiotics and anthropology at the University of Toronto. Danesi's explanation of the series title, *Semiotics and Popular Culture*, deserves attention: "It engages with theory and technical trends to expose the subject matter clearly, openly, and meaningfully." Could it be that the three adverbs hint at contrasting efforts to expose the subject matter obscurely, surreptitiously, and nonsensically? Danesi's series preface confirms such an interpretation: "Although written by scholars and intellectuals, each book will look beyond the many abstruse theories that have been put forward to explain popular culture". Professor Danesi and his authors are evidently fighting for enlightenment about popular culture. That engagement implies a clear concept of low and high culture.

Semiotics, originally associated with Saussure's linguistics and philosophers like Charles S. Peirce and Edmund Husserl, has since penetrated our common knowledge and everyday language. Along the way, semiotic terms have lost their precise definitions. Accordingly, some scholars spread opinions that obscure Yuri Lotman's studies. Aleksei Semenenko mentions two publications in particular. In 2003, Krista Ebert reduced the importance of Lotman's work at TMSS to a phenomenon relevant only to the study of Soviet culture. In Ebert's view, Lotman appears as the propagator of an "anticulture that undermines the monopoly of the ideological culture" (quoted in Semenenko, p. 19). Andreas Schönle and Jeremy Shine follow a similar line in their introduction to *Lotman and Cultural Studies: Encounters and Extensions*, published in 2006. Semenenko pronounces a harsh verdict: "It is noteworthy that the authors conceive of culture quite dif-

**Aleksei Semenenko**  
**The Texture of Culture:**  
**An Introduction to Yuri**  
**Lotman's Semiotic Theory**

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## Continued. Culture as both a text and a system

ferently from Lotman, listing various facets of life that make up culture as a whole – ‘political, economic, social, erotic, and ideological’ – but this list does not include ‘artistic’ or any other terms that are central in Lotman’s works.” In this light one understands better why Semenenko found it necessary to write his own introduction.

**ANOTHER OPINION** rebuked by Semenenko sounds particularly strange to scholars of Slavic literatures in Germany and other European countries. When Lotman’s books on structural poetics and semiotics were published in the seventies and eighties, they were attentively studied in the light of Russian formalism, Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory, and linguistic and semiotic achievements since Saussure. Lotman’s approaches to literature not only delivered new analytical tools, but also widened our cultural horizon. Yet his reception by English scholars, apart from Ann Shukman, is marked by indifference, as Semenenko notes: “[T]he marginality of Lotman’s theory in English books on semiotics of culture is rather noticeable”. Igor’ A. Chernov, in his “Opit vvedeniia v sistemu Iu. M. Lotmana” [Attempt at an introduction to Y. M. Lotman’s system], first published in 1982 and republished in 2012, describes why Soviet scholars were initially hostile to semiotics. They regarded semiotics as an ideological weapon of the Western capitalist class against the working people. Later, when the government needed linguists and specialists in computer science for military and industrial production, the ideologically motivated hostility gave way to financial and institutional support, and attacks against semiotics were thenceforth more or less suppressed. Lotman and many other researchers at TMSS profited over a long period from this ideological shift. Reading Semenenko’s book, one gets the impression that the blindness that once characterized Soviet-Russian ideologists has now befallen scholars in the capitalist West.

Such blindness occurs not only in English-speaking contexts. During the 1990s and the first decade of the new century, academic discussions about semiotics disappeared in Europe too. Cultural studies at universities now draws inspiration from other sources. Governments favor comparative studies in cultural stereotypes, seemingly philosophical or psychological studies under headings such as “I and the Other” or “The Familiar and the Foreign” and, more recently, so-called regional studies. All this keeps our students busy and leads them away from true semiotics of culture.

**SEMEENENKO’S BOOK** reconstructs Yuri Lotman’s intellectual development from traditional historian and philologist to innovative structuralist and semiotician. The book’s main thesis fights against the idea shared by many Lotman specialists that a rift exists between Lotman’s structural and semiotic phases. Where others see a break, Semenenko observes a continuous and systematic widening of Lotman’s initial thought. The four main chapters of the book – “Culture as System”, “Culture as Text”, “Semiosphere”, and “Universal Mind” – try to demonstrate Semenenko’s thesis. These chapters, numbered 2 to 5, are preceded by an introduction and a first chapter called “Contexts”.

Also valuable are the notes, where the reader finds additional information about the history of semiotic terms. In note 4 on chapter 3, “Culture as Text”, for example, Semenenko explains the exact meaning of “sign” and “model” in Lotman’s conception: whereas the sign is an icon of the

referential object, the model is a transformation of the object on a more abstract level. Most important is also Note 1 on chapter 5, “Universal Mind”, which quotes C. S. Peirce: “Thought is not necessarily connected with a brain. It appears in the work of bees, of crystal, and throughout the physical world”. This attribution of thought to the world outside the human intellect has influenced the conception of signs and communication in modern computer science. Lotman differentiates, with reference to the biologist Jakob von Uexküll, between communicational connections in non-human and human semiotic spheres.

What one misses in the chapters as well as in the notes is a mention of dialectics. In his pamphlet-like article “Literaturovedenie dolzhno byt’ naukoj” (Literary studies must be a science), written in 1967, Lotman declares: “The methodological ground of structuralism is dialectics.”<sup>1</sup> He refers to Paul Lafargue, who praised Karl Marx for his insight into the connection between dialectics and mathematics. This was of course a helpful argument against ideological opponents in the Soviet Union. But aside from that topical discussion, one should not ignore that dialectics and mathematics also characterize Russian formalism and Prague structuralism, two schools that are part of Lotman’s intellectual heritage. Members of these schools dissected the work of art into sets of elements and described their functions inside and outside the work. Dialectical thinking in the tradition of G. W. F. Hegel, Marx’s intellectual forebear, became particularly prominent in Prague aesthetics. Perhaps Semenenko wanted to forestall English-speaking readers’ distrust in Lotman’s structuralism and semiotics, and therefore chose not to mention this nonetheless important gnoseological tradition (to use Lotman’s expression).

**LET ME TURN NOW** to a few crucial topics.

In chapter 2, “Culture as System”, Lotman’s links with Russian formalism and Mikhail Bakhtin become most obvious. The formalists observed a two-layered structure in the literary work, which they called the sign of a sign or the second-degree sign. The ethnologist Petr Bogatyrev introduced the term to the Prague linguistic circle. The first-degree sign comes from communicative language. In literature, this sign functions as the material basis of the second-degree sign, whose construction follows purely artistic devices that deform the basis. As a result, literature cannot function like the practical communicative system of natural language. It serves its own specific function, called the aesthetic function.

Semenenko describes how Lotman changes this formalist concept into his “secondary modeling system”. The new name indicates that the underlying sign of conventional language is not merely deformed, but transformed into a totally different sign type, the icon. The work as a whole delivers a “world-model”, that is, a new vision of man in his world and in the universe. The iconic sign not only belongs to works of art, but can also be found in myths, rituals, and magic. The question whether such signs are indeed secondary to language, or whether they must be regarded as primary signs, is discussed in depth by Semenenko. From the European perspective, one is tempted to mention André Jolles’s distinction between oral “einfache Formen” (simple forms) and their literary transformations. Jolles’s ideas come close to Bakhtin’s “recheviie zhanry” (speech genres; cf. Semenenko pp. 50, 88 ff.). Neither Jolles nor Bakhtin classifies these genres as icons. Problems connected with the difference between the icon in literary art and the icon in myths, rituals, and magic are discussed in the third chapter.

**IT WAS MOSTLY** Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism (*dialogichnost’*, sometimes translated as “dialogicity”) that inspired Lotman to define interaction between different semiotic systems as a kind of dialogue. Let us recall that neither Bakhtin’s nor Lotman’s concept of dialogism conforms to what a linguist means by dialogue. Where the linguist compares the semantic accumulation in dialogic utterances with the quite different accumulation in monologue, the theorist of culture is interested in the mutual openness or closure of systems and subsystems. Bakhtin and Lotman prefer openness to closure. Such a preference does not make sense to a linguist, for whom each of the two types of utterances has its justification with respect to its function in a communicative situation. As Semenenko repeatedly points out, Lotman often uses terms borrowed from other disciplines in a vague, metaphorical way. In the case of dialogism, better insight into the metaphorical transposition of dialogue to the level of systems would have reduced the confusion that has surrounded that term since Bakhtin’s time, and better enabled the reader to understand the section “Explosions in Culture”. As an example of such an “explosion”, Semenenko takes the political revolt of the Decabrists in the early nineteenth century. Lotman analyzed the Decabrist movement as the result of the confrontation between the hierarchical political system of tsarist Russia and the more egalitarian system favored by young intellectuals. Instead of opening their





Illustration: Moa Thelander

minds toward these new political ideas from Western Europe, the governing forces closed themselves up. The chance for a gradual evolution by mutual approximation was lost, and Russia sank back into an age of social and intellectual darkness. The example shows that closed systems tend towards inner, doubtless unhealthy explosions. Yet systems as such cannot discuss with one another: human speakers are needed who lay bare their ideas point by point, looking for convergences and divergences in order to find a viable bridge between the two sides. This is where true dialogue comes into play. Openness of systems is only a prerequisite to human dialogue.

The title of the third chapter, "Culture as Text", announces a new phase in Lotman's thinking. The underlying idea is that a cultural type can be regarded as one text. Each individual text belonging to the given cultural type is a variation on the invariants, the whole set of invariants constituting what is called the text of that culture. The methodological inspiration is derived from text linguistics, but, as in the case of dialogism, the linguistic terms are applied on a level that is alien to linguistics, called the level of ideas or worldview. The kind of research connected with the conception and the analytical method of "culture as text" can be fruitfully applied in literary analysis, as Lotman demonstrated in his works on Russian lit-

erature. In his 1981 article "Semiotics of Culture and the Concept of Text", he criticizes the tendency of semiotic studies to "focus on models and models of models", i. e. the tendency towards increasing abstraction. He preferred the opposite current, focusing "on the semiotic functioning of actual texts". Lotman tried to overcome the limited view of literature propagated by the adherents of realism by showing that realism is an invariant to which many periods of cultural history contributed their variants.

**I SEE A WEAKNESS** in the way Semenenko tries to explain the concept of "culture as text" as a single sign. The point I have in mind is connected with Semenenko's thesis that there is a continuity in Lotman's semiotic thinking. One would expect the form and function of the crucial concept of the secondary modeling system, exposed in "Culture as System", to be discussed further in "Culture as Text". Yet even in "Culture as System", Se-

menenko states, "the term secondary modeling system is problematic and produces more questions than answers". Does this mean Lotman drops the term when a culture is envisaged as a single text? Or does Lotman not rather consider a third level of sign-construction, which rests on the first and second levels constituted by the secondary modeling system? That third level allows him to characterize the specific, sometimes revolutionary function fulfilled by the literary work vis-à-vis the dominant cultural type, as in the case of the Decabrists, inspired by Romantic European and Russian literature.

Lotman's idea about the literary text as a single sign figures in Jan Mukařovský's articles "Dénomination poétique et la fonction esthétique de la langue" (1938) and "K sémantice básnického obrazu" [On the semantics of the poetic image] (1947). In his 1973 article "O soderzhanii i structure poniatia 'chudozhestvennaia literatura'" [On the content and structure of the concept "artistic literature"], Lotman names Mukařovský, together with Yuri Tynianov and Mikhail Bakhtin, as the predecessors who evaluated the literary work of art as a dynamic factor in culture. The Prague aesthetician analyzed the dynamic cultural function of literature in the 1934 article "L'art comme fait sémiologique". The two later articles describe the specific technique by which the poetic work transforms the manifold verbal signs of the text into one global denomination and one sign. Following this line, Lotman's concept of the secondary modeling system in combination with culture as text delivers a parallel to and a continuation of the research done in Prague. Semenenko mentions the Prague school in connection with Saussure, but he seems to ignore the fact that Jan Mukařovský's aesthetics paved the way for modern studies in the semiotics of the arts, including literature, architecture, theater, painting, and film.

The last two chapters present the ideas which will forever be connected with the name of Yuri M. Lotman. In chapter 4, Semenenko discusses the term "semiosphere", from Lotman's famous title, in connection with the semiotic space. While "semiosphere" is linked with theories about genetic semiosis in general, "semiotic space" deals with the specifics of the semiotic processes accessible to biological classes of beings. According to Jakob von Uexküll, beings (organisms) are bound to the limited Umwelt of their class. The borders of the Umwelt can not be transcended: "Consequently, an organism will not be able to perceive any signs or texts that are not part of his Umwelt" (quoted in Semenenko, p. 116). Von Uexküll's term Umwelt hints at the blindness of every

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## Continued. Culture as both a text and a system

being to the worlds of classes other than his own. The human being is no exception, and, even worse, the same blindness separates different human cultures, even though the genetic dispositions of all humans are identical. Yet the human being is able to imagine Umwelten outside his own. That imagination, the field of literature and the other arts, can lead to an intuitive understanding of other cultural worlds, or experimental contacts between man and nature. Semenenko rightly observes that Lotman's vision of cultures in contact, "which together constitute the semiosphere as a whole", is rooted in the Enlightenment era. One would have wished for a more detailed presentation of that early philosophical and semiotic tradition. Perhaps the limited space of Semenenko's book and his focus on modern semiotics only permitted a few hints.

Chapter 5, "Universal Mind", presents two divergent lines of research at TMSS: that of cybernetics, also called artificial intelligence (AI), associated with the name of Norbert Wiener; and that of neurological studies connected with Lev S. Vygotski and his pupil Viacheslav V. Ivanov, the latter a professor and colleague of Lotman in TMSS. Lotman and his team of philologists were charged with the elaboration of a metalanguage that would unite these lines. Yet it turned out that Lotman's project "was just a cover that allowed Tartu scholars to conduct their own research which had only a remote relation to the problem of AI or the moon exploration. It was not entirely unexpected when in 1976 the officials terminated all side contracts with literary scholars in Tartu and Leningrad". So this fifth and last chapter is about a fascinating phase in the history of TMSS and Yuri Lotman.

**THE REASON FOR** the rupture between Lotman and the officials was their different positioning of human and artificial signs. Whereas researchers engaged with AI attributed the central position to artificial signs suitable for communication between machines, and conceded only a marginal position to human language signs, Lotman was inclined to invert the relation. Lotman's argumentation is interesting in a philosophical respect: He referred to the contrasting roles of error in human cognition and in artificial intelligence. Error fulfils a positive function in cognition inasmuch as it reminds man of his blindness within his Umwelt and warns him against excessive self-confidence, which could result in stupidity. Error in the thinking machine, on the other hand, destroys its value. Lotman argues that natural language renders the human being superior to the machine. Sem-

eneko concludes: "Among all other forms of semiotic expression, natural language takes the central position as the most powerful system".

**TO CONCLUDE**, I should like to mention a parallel in the United States to Lotman's precarious situation at the TMSS. Joseph Weizenbaum, a mathematician who worked for a long period in Pentagon projects and at MIT, described in many critical publications how specialists in computer science were trained in the technique of ignoring the social and political environment of their work. The constructive deficit of the computer – its lack of contact with the real Umwelt – was thus transferred to the human mind. Professor Weizenbaum lists a number of scientific terms that now flood our common-sense language, where they produce a new kind of brainwashing: "artificial intelligence" is, according to Weizenbaum, no intelligence at all; "virtual space" reinforces a dangerous abstraction from real life; "computer art" is a product of mere chance, devoid of any creativity. As an example of a concept which fatally lost its original signification, he mentions Einstein's theory of "relativity", abused to propagate relativistic ethics and epistemology. A more recent example of such abuse is chaos theory and the "butterfly effect". "Cloud theory", currently propounded by postmodernists in the humanities, could be added to the list of abused terms. However, one difference between Lotman's and Weizenbaum's positions must not be forgotten: Weizenbaum's critiques (paralleled at MIT by the linguist Noam Chomsky's investigations of American imperialist policy) were published immediately, while Lotman's critical studies remained hidden in the archives for some twenty years.

Weizenbaum's books could well figure in Danesi's series on "Popular Culture". One obstacle is of course the fact that "semiotics" in the traditional sense of the term is not Weizenbaum's specialty. Yet the reader of Aleksei Semenenko's *Introduction to Yuri Lotman's Semiotic Theory* finds many similar arguments in Lotman's and Weizenbaum's pleading for human language, literature, and arts, and the expurgation of mystifications from our culture. ❌

herta schmid

## IKEA in German. Working with clichés

**Jennie Mazur**  
**Die "schwedische" Lösung:**  
**Eine kultursemiotisch**  
**orientierte Untersuchung**  
**der audiovisuellen**  
**Werbespots von IKEA in**  
**Deutschland**

Würzburg, 2013  
293 pages

**J**ennie Mazur has entered a fascinating, alluring, but at the same time seductive field of research: a field, indeed, in which one can easily get into trouble. In saying this, I refer to those traps we can fall into when we compare national cultures. A Swede writes about a "Swedish" theme in the German language, a theme that is ubiquitous – the Opel commercial in Germany that is still running at present sounds like one from IKEA: "We live cars"; everyone will understand the allusion. These days people are amused by the new 2013 IKEA catalogue, in which a lamp, which in fact is more like a chandelier, is extolled for its various features. The company gave it the name "Söder" – in Germany, of course, hardly anyone knows that's the Swedish word for South; Germans would more likely recognize it as the name of the current Bavarian finance minister, who feels himself called to the highest of high offices, contrary to the wishes of the public.

The project belongs in the closed loop of the Ego-, Alter-, and Aliusculture – both this investigation and IKEA's marketing strategies themselves: they both deal with what we have absorbed, through social and cultural images, from constructions of the Self and the Other. We believe in defined identities. We accept inherited conventions as genetic, as biological truths.

**WE COMMEND** the author for having risked entering this field; it speaks to her courage, maybe her boldness – I do not want to say that daring plays a role here, for her analysis of IKEA's advertising strategy in Germany is all too convincing and also too scholarly for that. In other words, you do not get bored while reading her work and creativity plays its part: these are good, and essential, prerequisites for successful scholarship. But you have to know in advance that this work does not belong to the mainstream of Swedish German studies: the thesis cannot be attributed to a Swedish tradition in the humanities, either in its methodology or in its content, not even in relation to its theme.

When I look at the list of Swedish German studies dissertations during the last few years, I rarely, in fact never, find a dissertation that could compete with Jennie Mazur's work, whether in its method, its theory, or even its content.

The article is written in German, but it is not really a German academic treatise. The author uses a relaxed style, a writing style that is not precisely academic in the traditional, let alone Teutonic sense. I see that as an advantage, with the crucial prerequisite that the language is appropriate for the subject and that it has differentiated depths. One can say this about her prose: it is simple, it is occasionally flat when she is talking about the simple and flat plots of the little IKEA films; however, it becomes differentiated and abstract when she evaluates and analyzes what she has seen. This is the case in her chapters on culture and semiotics: when she reviews the research literature, her language, though still relaxed and flowing, becomes differentiated and abstract.

**IN A FAIRLY LONG** preface, the readers are acquainted with the subject of the investigation; the author recounts, in an offhand, ironic way, an IKEA commercial that is all too well known in Germany. It shows a few German stereotypes, with the critical aim of exploiting them by building them, in accordance with advertising psychology, into a contrasting Swedish sales strategy. I would like to delve a little deeper here,



because quite clearly IKEA is working with German clichés. The author analyzes this; German seriousness and Swedish irony are set in opposition to each other.

In the Germany of IKEA, strange names are in circulation (for people and products): “Ewald” and “Rosalinda”, for example. These names are so unusual and so rarely used that they seem to me to be a witty way of showing distance rather than irony. That is not a rebuttal of the arguments laid out here, but rather suggests how over-the-top the IKEA strategy is.

And the supposedly classic “German” living room with its heavy oak furniture seems to me to miss the German reality of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries so completely that, at first glance, I would have my doubts about the benefits of sales psychology. In the living rooms of the German lower and lower-middle classes – and hence of potential IKEA customers – there is no such furniture. This view comes 100 years too late.

The IKEA clientele is distinguished above all by – apart from its low budget – a certain youthfulness, with the attitude to life that goes along with it. The Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and (somewhat later) ABBA, Sjöwall/Wahlöö – but above all, the protest against the entrenched, to a considerable extent political and habitual rituals of the “older generation” were part of this attitude towards life when IKEA came to Germany at the beginning of the 1970s; to this extent, IKEA in Germany should also be interpreted as part of the rebellion against parents. We hear again and again that it is because of the protest by Helmut Schmidt that the cult shelving unit “Billy,” which was produced from 1974 until 1991, appeared on the market again two years later (“Without Billy you won’t get rid of your pine junk!”). Since then, “Billyfizierung” (“Billyfying”) has become a familiar term.

**THE FIRST PART** of the monograph is of solid scholarly quality: the research question is introduced, we are led to the theoretical starting point, and, perhaps most importantly, an overview of the previous research on IKEA, and the cultural-semiotic interpretation of images of ourselves and of others are provided. A longish first chapter is devoted to discussion and the thematic rationale for studying IKEA commercials. In these brief thirty pages, Jennie Mazur takes a good look at the mechanisms of advertising; she rightly emphasizes that advertising has become a distinct and recognized form of culture and art: advertising has become part of our everyday communication. The actual purpose of

advertising, to attract people to buy something, has long been complemented, at times transcended, even completely supplanted by its function as entertainment and culture vehicle. The tension created by these multiple functions of advertising is what attracts scholarly examination, but it brings with it great risks when companies transfer national cultural conventions, even those specific to their own country, to other settings. When a Swedish company advertises its products in Germany, or an American company advertises its goods in France, then the limits of understanding and especially of acceptance are soon reached. One example of this is the names of products – a product’s name does not always have to attract buyers by using words outside their own language. (One example of this is “Söder”; another is that Danish people feel insulted because doormats and carpets have, without exception, been given Danish names.

**NONETHELESS, AS WE** learn from this work, advertising is not static, even in the case of a worldwide company that over many years has become accustomed to success. While the “German” IKEA advertising campaign began in 1974 with the national branding slogan “The impossible furniture store

from Sweden” (*Das unmögliche Möbelhaus aus Schweden*), since the 1980s a new tagline has been created almost every two years. The most successful has been an aphorism in Germany for funny situations since 2002 which, completely separate from IKEA, has its own existence in colloquial language: “Wohnst du noch oder lebst du schon?” – which plays on the two different meanings of “live”: “Are you still just living somewhere?” or “Are you alive (do you feel alive yet)?”

Another chapter, one that I would consider to be actually the theoretical one, is about the concept of culture: culture cannot be defined, and equally, we cannot live without it. It is like “time” or “identity” – we are clearly dealing with everyday concepts that come up in our everyday reality without further definition, but we cannot truly grasp their meaning. Jennie Mazur avoids the problem adroitly by pointing to relevant authorities, beginning with the classics of semiotics and linguistics

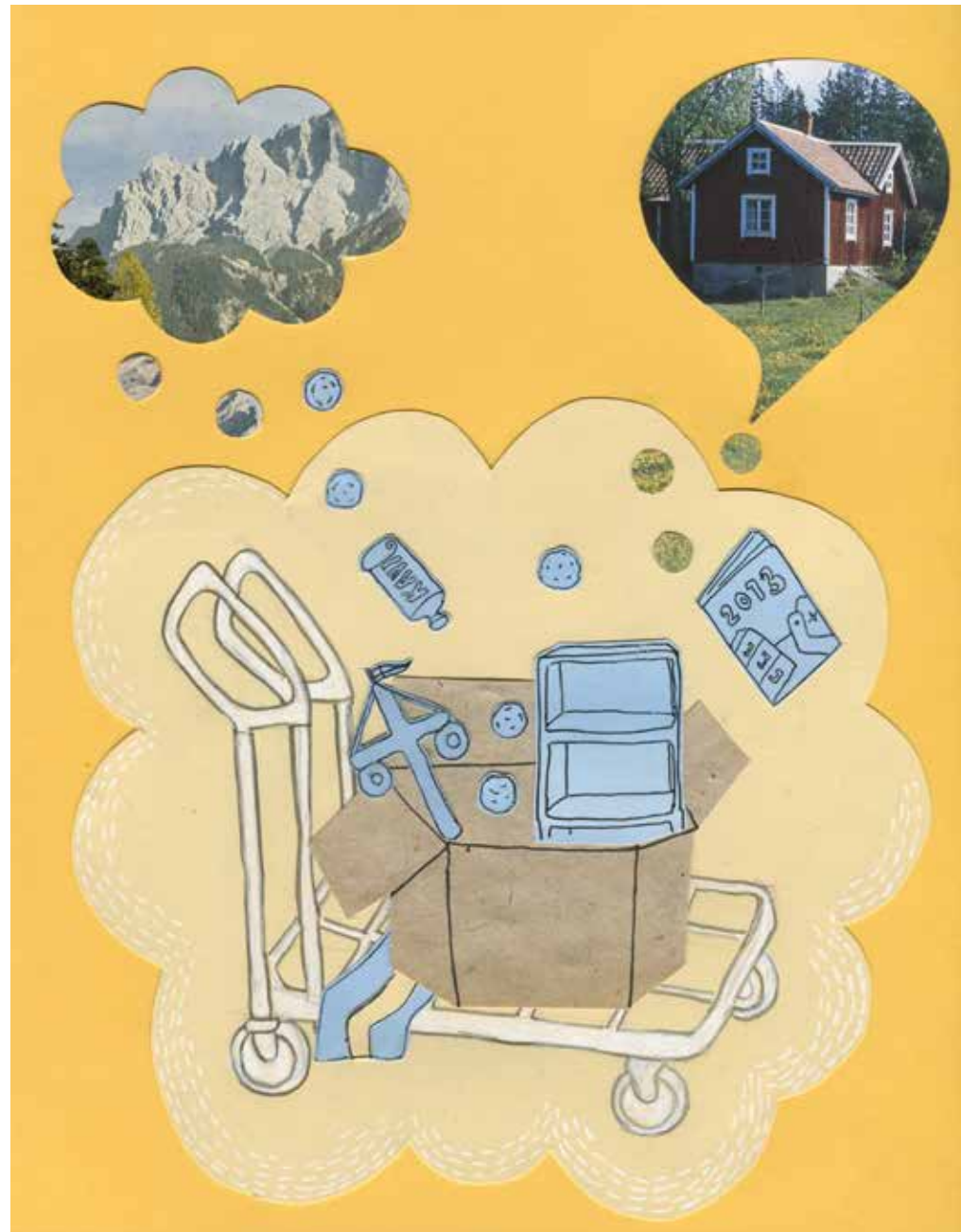


Illustration: Ragni Svensson



**Bernd Henningsen**

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## Continued. IKEA in German

definition of signs: “Signs define the world we live in”; a sign is the correlation between expression and content, and this brings us to the heart of culture, for expression and content can be modified within a given culture. Then the author differentiates between everyday culture and culture in research; she has expressed her understanding of culture with the quote from Malinowski that she has set as the slogan for her study: culture “as the widest context of human behavior” – where the emphasis on behavior is at best annoying, for culture is also the expression of a way of thinking and of political self-image; political culture is more than political behavior. How can it be otherwise – and the author does not attempt to solve this puzzle – that in German there is a *Kulturbeutel* (a *culture bundle*), in English simply a *toilet bag*, in French a *trousse de toilette*, in Spanish *el neceser*? In the language of semiotics, culture is (and I quote) “collective knowledge, system of signs, order, structure”. Thus, in reality, culture extends far beyond “behavior”. This is in reality the essential prerequisite for being able to investigate the IKEA commercials in terms of an analysis of semiotic culture.

**THE GENESIS AND CONSTRUCTIONS** of the respective national cultures are of central importance for an examination of this sort: we have already recently learned that Scandinavians’ image of Scandinavia has been significantly influenced by the German image of the North: the Germans had constructed their ideal picture of an idyllic North and had taken it to Scandinavia, where it became established as their own image. If I translate that correctly into semiotic language, over decades the German Alter-culture of Scandinavia became the Swedish Ego-culture. To that extent, Sweden sells Germans their own original image of Sweden, the German Alter-culture as Swedish Ego-culture: this is the company’s “Swedish solution” – which can function so successfully only in Germany. The two-way paths of image and identity construction are thus not only of the immaterial world but are also entirely tangible, economic ones.

*Der Spiegel* puts together this list of stereotypes from 1969:

“Drugs and pornography, prisons without doors and girls without morals, boredom and short skirts, hot love and cool people – that is the average German’s image of Sweden.”

Stereotypes like this always have a funny, lighthearted side; they make it possible for us to see that they can change: the “Swedish film”, which came into fashion in the 1950s as an umbrella term for films considered pornographic, had a quite different connotation

in the 1930s – it meant the filmic depiction of nature! “Swedish film” stood for “nature film”, or, as the case may be, scenes that took place in free, primordial nature.

The “Swedish solution” – the description, deciphering, and evaluation of five IKEA commercials – is the climax of the dissertation; the author gives them each their own title: “Frankenstein”, “Knut”, “Froschkönig der Mittsommerzeit”, “Eine gewaltige Gardenparty”, and “Neuheiten bei Oma”. She examines the commercials minutely, describing the techniques and the content. Her summary, “The Swedish Solution”, is an “IKEA solution”; it has as much to do with Sweden as the Germans permit – and that is a lot! IKEA has cult status for its southern neighbors with a construction of Swedishness that no doubt is entrenched in a good part of Germany.

But what is happening with IKEA in France, in Russia, in England? As far as furniture is concerned, IKEA has at least managed to modernize the German living room – if it were to manage that in Russia, too, that would also be a cultural revolution. At the same time, however, we must remember that the sorcerer’s apprentices from time to time have the upper hand and can no longer be put back behind bars, or, as Helmut Schmidt put it: If “Billy” does not return, you will be stuck with all your pine junk. The wit and irony that has fascinated the Germans for nearly 40 years is not a Swedish specialty; Swedes are just as serious and humorless as the Germans – nevertheless, we would really like to believe that they are not.

**JENNIE MAZUR’S** *Die “schwedische” Lösung* provides a good example of a scholarly critical investigation of Self- and Other-images in terms of culture. In connection with the use of concepts such as highlight or headline, we should return to the term “icons”, in this case “iconic films”. Aby Warburg’s treatment of popular-culture techniques and nomenclature could also be of use in this connection and would complete the semiotic analyses. On the basis of a large amount of evidence, the dissertation illuminates just how ubiquitous the heterostereotypical and autostereotypical constructions of the National – or of what is considered the National – have become. It has long been known in the context of national product branding that making money is not the only thing that can be done with these constructions; this study demonstrates that a lot of money can be made. ✖

bernd henningsen

## Union, federation, or “merely” Norden as a product of 1814

**Jóhann Páll Árnason and  
Björn Wittrock (eds.)  
Nordic Paths to Modernity**

New York: Berghahn Books 2012

**Björn Magnus Berge and  
Anders Björnsson (eds.)  
Skandinaviska vägval  
[Scandinavian crossroads]**

Stockholm: Atlantis 2008

**Max Engman and Nils Erik  
Vilstrand (eds.)  
Maktens mosaik:  
Enhet, särart och självbild i  
det svenska riket  
[The mosaic of power: Unity,  
peculiarity, and identity in  
the Swedish realm]**

Stockholm & Helsinki: Atlantis  
and the Swedish Literary  
Society in Finland 2008

**Rasmus Glenthøj  
Skilsmissem:  
Dansk og norsk identitet  
før og efter 1814  
[The divorce: Danish  
and Norwegian identity  
before and after 1814]**

Odense: University Press  
of Southern Denmark 2012

**Henrik Meinander  
Finlands historia  
[The history of Finland]**

Stockholm: Atlantis 2006

**Niels Kayser Nielsen  
Bonde, stat og hjem:  
Nordisk demokrati og  
nationalisme – fra  
pietismen til 2. Verdenskrig  
[Farmer, state and home:  
Nordic democracy and  
nationalism, from pietism  
to the Second World War]**

Århus: Aarhus University Press  
2009

**Gunnar Wetterberg  
The United Nordic  
Federation**

Copenhagen: Nordic Council of  
Ministers 2010

**T**he year 1814 was a watershed in Nordic history. In the glare of hindsight, we can see that it was on the whole fortunate that Denmark and Norway separated in an almost bloodless manner without sparking conflict between the two peoples. Norway did not become wholly independent with the Treaty of Kiel on January 14, 1814, which Frederick VI reluctantly signed at Hindgavl. It did eventually become independent after the signing of the Constitution of Norway at Eidsvoll on May 17 of the same year, and after almost ninety years of imposed union with Sweden. The circumstance that the Norwegian struggle for political emancipation was directed at Sweden, while cultural emancipation from Denmark proceeded quietly throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was a blessing for everyone. If both of these emancipations, together with economic independence, had taken place within the confines of the multinational state and under continued Danish rule, it is easy to imagine the legacy of bitterness the struggles would have left to present-day Scandinavia.

The outcome would probably have been the same, but with a stain of hatred between the peoples. There would have been a genuine basis for Norwegian anti-colonialist repudiation of all things Danish, otherwise propounded only by the anti-Danish Henrik Wergeland and the protagonist of Henrik Ibsen’s dramatic poem *Peer Gynt* of 1867, in which the characterization of the history of the union as “four hundred years of darkness” was first minted. The line “Twice two hundred years of darkness brooded o’er the race of monkeys” (where the monkeys are the Norwegians) is uttered while *Peer Gynt* is in a madhouse in Cairo. Ibsen did not, as is popularly believed, subscribe to this interpretation of the shared history of the countries. On the contrary, this was a confrontation with his countrymen and their mentality and probably a reckoning with himself and his earlier, more national-romanticist works on subjects borrowed from the age of the sagas. *Peer Gynt* was a confrontation with a mentality Ibsen believed was typically Norwegian and the poem should be read as a satirical fantasy about a boastful egotist, the feckless and irresponsible Peer, a character of Norwegian folklore.<sup>1</sup>

**AS THINGS WERE** after the loss of Norway, everyone in the Nordic countries<sup>2</sup> managed to get used to living in small independent nation states, especially after Norway and Sweden peacefully dissolved their union in 1905, Finland achieved independence in 1917, and Iceland became largely independent in 1918. It was by no means a given that things would turn out this way, but when they did, the foundation was laid for today’s good relations among the countries and especially the peoples. So, in the long view, it was probably best that things went as they did in 1814. But this was not easy to imagine at the time.

From the Danish point of view, the break was so enormous that it was psychologically repressed. A half-century later, 1814 paled in the light of the total defeat in 1864 – but the critical step on Denmark’s journey to becoming a small nation was the loss of Norway in 1814. This is probably why the year has been forgotten or at any rate ignored in Denmark. The surrender was simply too painful. This began with Frederick VI himself, who considered the defeat and the loss of Norway so ignominious that he later forbade any mention of it. And the Danes by and large followed his lead to such a degree that Norway was essentially written out of Danish history. In 1954,



## European cooperation.

Georg Nørregård examined the Treaty of Kiel in January 1814 from a traditional foreign policy angle, a subject upon which he gave a lecture to a group of supremely uninterested history students in Århus – including the present author.

**APART FROM TRADITIONAL** diplomatic history, the separation between Denmark and Norway has largely been passed over in silence, even in the massive work on the history of Danish foreign policy, *Dansk Udenrigspolitikshistorie*.<sup>3</sup> The meager focus on the consequences of the separation was due to the structure of the work, where 1814 was the cut-off year between Volume II and Volume III. This structure, not inherently unreasonable, causes Norway to vanish from the Danish horizon as a result of the impossible position of the multinational state in the European conflict after 1807–1814, given that there is no further analysis of the long-term consequences. Nor was this shortcoming definitively corrected in Ole Feldbæk's final volume of the shared history of Denmark and Norway from 1380 to 1814.<sup>4</sup> Brilliant works of cultural history like John Erichsen's *Drømmen om Norge* and an anthology entitled *Norgesbilleder* published in connection with an exhibition on the common history of the two countries at the Danish Museum of National History in Hillerød in North Zealand in 2004,<sup>5</sup> call attention to important elements of the shared culture, but these, too, fail to definitively rectify the mutual ignorance of the two countries' shared history. Only in recent years has a young Danish historian, Rasmus Glenthøj, provided a comprehensive analysis of the background and consequences of the separation from both the Norwegian and Danish perspectives in a series of exciting and thoroughly documented works. His contribution has culminated in *Skilsmisken: Dansk og norsk identitet før og efter 1814*.

**THE DESCENT OF** the Danish state, or more accurately the Oldenburgian state, from a mid-sized European power to a helpless small nation happened in 1814, although the fate of the nation was not finally sealed until the total defeat of 1864. The political amateurism that continued until 1864 can be explained as a consequence of 1814. That year entailed not only the loss of one third of the nation's population and an even larger proportion of its territory, but also a change in the demographic composition from about one third Danish, one third Norwegian, and one third Holsteiners (and Schleswigers) to a situation in which the German-speaking 40 percent ruled the Danish-speaking 60

percent, when they formerly had made up only about 25 percent of the population of the entire realm. This led almost inevitably to national conflict and a civil war in 1848–1851, which culminated in the Danish defeat by Prussia and Austria in 1864. It is difficult to determine today whether things necessarily had to go this way, but the conflict was lying in wait, especially since the Holstein elite had retreated to their estates in Holstein after the attempt to centralize the state following the incorporation of Schleswig-Holstein in the wake of the disintegration of the Holy Roman Empire in 1806. The economic hardships of the war culminated in a national bankruptcy in 1813; the loss of agricultural exports to Norway and tax revenues from that country, so rich in natural resources, transformed the Danish Monarchy into a small, poor country, albeit still a multinational one by virtue of Schleswig-Holstein and the islands in the Atlantic. The fateful year of 1814 dealt a nearly insurmountable blow to the Danish state that, after total defeat in 1864, took a new, nationally and socially homogeneous shape. That new Denmark is embraced with great satisfaction today, just as the foundation was laid for good relations among the modern Nordic states. But this occurred at the expense of a larger and more multinational state formation, which we now remember only vaguely and which was until recently either ignored or disparaged.

Denmark – or rather the Oldenburg Monarchy – suffered critical defeats between 1645 and 1660 at the hand of its hereditary enemy, Sweden, which had been ruled by kings of the House of Vasa since 1523, after Gustav Vasa severed the country's ties with the Danish-dominated Kalmar Union. But the state survived as a composite of four realms and a number of dependencies in the Atlantic, augmented by an overseas colonial empire that made it possible to engage in the profitable triangular trade of slaves and sugar cane, albeit at a far more modest level than Britain or France. In addition to the Kingdom of Denmark, made up of Northern Jutland, the Islands, and Norway, the state comprised the Duchies of Schleswig and Holstein, which were gradually incorporated

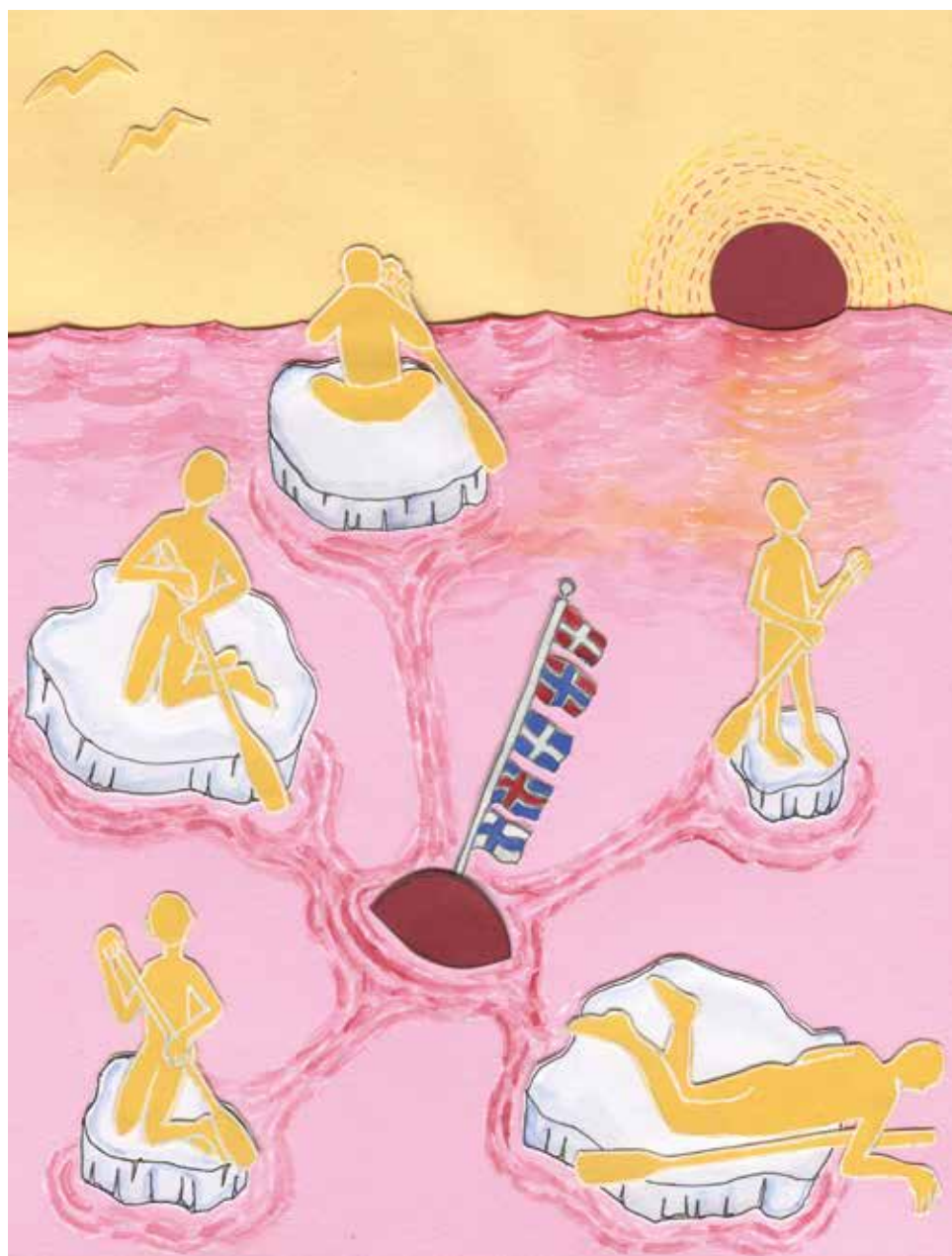


Illustration: Ragni Svensson

into the state after 1721. Ever since the dissolution of the medieval Kalmar Union, which most closely resembled the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the same period (*Rzeczpospolita* in Polish, from *res publica*), Denmark and Sweden had been embroiled in savage competition for dominion over the Baltic – *Dominium Maris Baltici* – which ended in victory for Russia. But the two Nordic states remained multinational states – called composite states by historians – until 1809, when Sweden was compelled to cede the Finnish part of the realm to the Russian tsar. The Swedish-Finnish state was recently analyzed in a fascinating anthology from Åbo Akademi University, edited by Max Engman and Nils Erik Vilstrand, *Maktens mosaik*. After

## Continued. Union, federation, or “merely” European cooperation



**Uffe Østergård**

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this painful loss, a nearly united Sweden sought compensation in the form of Norway, successfully after the election of Jean-Baptiste Bernadotte as heir to the throne and the Danish monarch's defeat alongside Napoleon in 1813, which resulted in the Treaty of Kiel in January 1814. At one stroke, an entirely new geopolitical situation was created in the Nordic region: one which by way of 1905, 1917, 1918, and 1920 led to the modern-day balance between virtually equal nation states that are in the main mutually sympathetic.

**THE EXISTENCE OF FIVE** national homogeneous states in the Nordic region became possible because the interests of the great powers of northern Europe had held each other in check; apart from isolated threats against Denmark and Finland, the countries were never in immediate jeopardy. Especially in the Cold War era of 1948 to 1989, peace reigned in the Nordic region by virtue of the firmly established Iron Curtain that cut through the Baltic. At the time, we did not know how safe we were, but it became clear to many after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The actually peaceful and predictable nature of international politics explains why public enthusiasm for the Nordic alternative was at its peak between 1945 and 1989. During this period, Sweden could play the neutrality card, while Denmark, Norway, and Iceland could be on the winning NATO side without having to foot the bill. Finland is the Nordic exception: the country demonstrated its will to survive in 1939–1944 and thus escaped the cruel fate of Estonia – annexation by the Soviet Union. That is why the country wholeheartedly joined the European Community in 1995 and has embraced the euro, in contrast to the more hesitant Sweden and Denmark.<sup>6</sup>

Seen in the longer historical perspective, the Nordic countries are not as different from other European countries as the ideology of Scandinavism and the Scandinavian model would lead us to believe – but they are Lutheran.<sup>7</sup> It wasn't the Reformation of 1536 that was fundamental, but rather the pious revivalist movements of the 1700s that took hold of the populations of all the Nordic countries, a development that continued with the political and economic movements and the 20<sup>th</sup>

century's leftwing/environmental alliances in the democracy of farmers and the working class. This process is brilliantly described in the late Niels Kayser Nielsen's major synthesis on

Nordic democracy, *Bonde, stat og hjem*. Nielsen describes the rationale for the Nordic welfare state as stemming less from a distinctly Nordic social structure than from the homogeneous Lutheranism of the countries. Other Lutheran communities are part of larger state formations (Germany and the United States) or have been conquered by other realms (Estonia and Latvia), but in the Nordic countries, the Lutherans dominate entire states. The link has not yet been systematically studied, but from the perspective of the history of mentalities, it seems plausible. If the hypothesis proves correct, the consequence would be that Nordic social democracy, regardless of what is said in party platforms and by generations of party members, is the result of secularized Lutheranism rather than democratized socialism. This explanation of the distinct character of the Nordic region is one of the explanations discussed in a recently published anthology in English edited by Jóhann Páll Árnason and Björn Wittrock, *Nordic Paths to Modernity*. The book consists of five pairs of chapters covering various explanations of the development of the Nordic countries written by Nordic historians and sociologists, which are supported by a general essay on Nordic modernity.

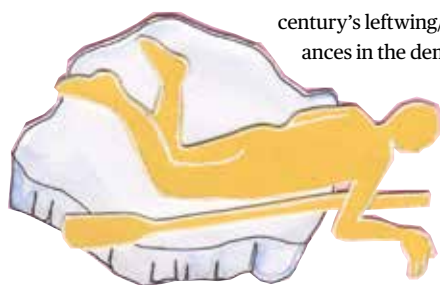
**THE RELATIVELY SMOOTH** course of democratization in the Nordic countries was paved by peace, since the countries were spared involvement in international conflicts. They were in the right place at the right time. To the extent that they no longer are, it becomes difficult to live high on the Nordic myths and braggadocio of yesteryear. There is much to indicate that the Baltic Region is on the verge of reclaiming its former place as an economic and civilizational axis in northern Europe, as I described in 1998 in a book on European identity.<sup>8</sup> In that position, however, the region is attracting international attention, with no guarantee that the superpowers will constrain each other as they did during the Cold War. To the extent that this occurs, it will be difficult to bridge the antagonism between the Atlantic part of the Nordic sphere facing the oceans in one direction and the land-based Nordic region facing the Baltic Sea in the other. Not to mention the Arctic, where Denmark-Greenland – or the “Kingdom”, as it is called when the Commonwealth of the Realm engages in international politics – in alliance with Iceland and the United States is pursuing a different policy from that of Norway, Russia, and Canada with regard to national control over the shipping routes that are opening in pace with global warming.<sup>9</sup> Herein lies the potential basis for future conflicts of interest that will make the historical battles between Denmark and Norway over the right to East Greenland seem like small potatoes.

The lesson history teaches us is that there is no objective law that binds the Nordic peoples to a common fate. But the historical and cultural raw materials for building such an identity do exist – if, mind you, the nations wish it. While there are no economic and geopolitical regularities at stake, the political and cultural opportunities are so much the greater. In a cooperating Europe, it is important to hold on to the strengths in the arena of civil society that Nordic cooperation does in fact have – this in order to assign value to these strengths, but also to ensure they are not lost in a misguided attempt to turn the Nordic countries into a state proper or a federation. Economic and political cooperation has always failed at the broader level, but succeeded at the narrower level, that of the civil society.

The root of both the strengths and the weaknesses of this cooperation is that the countries were organized early on as relatively small and homogeneous nation states.<sup>10</sup> And that is a product of 1814. The history of this process is, however, considerably less familiar to the Nordic peoples than it should be. On the other hand, there is a widespread but vague sense that we have a great deal in common, although we simply do not know each other well outside of a narrow elite of politicians, civil servants, and prominent figures in the arts. Nevertheless, judging by opinion polls, Nordic cooperation is viewed favorably by the people of the Nordic countries. But this positive interest in their neighboring countries is losing ground fast, especially among the young and the youngish. This is particularly evident in the language, where Swedish and Danish are often considered, even by university students, mutually unintelligible. Norwegian might perhaps be understood but is considered, at least by Danish students, as a peculiar form of Danish, littered with spelling errors and amusing neologisms – or as utterly mysterious, should they happen to stumble upon a text written in New Norwegian. To top it off, most people do not consider Finnish, Icelandic, Faroese, Greenlandic, or Sami to be Nordic languages at all.

As a result, conferences outside particularly committed Nordic circles are increasingly being held in English. This is why, when a group of Nordic historians published a cross-Nordic presentation of important themes in the countries' histories, we chose to do so in English.<sup>11</sup> Differences in VAT rules have unfortunately made the book almost prohibitively expensive in Denmark, but in the rest of the Nordic countries – and especially outside them – it has gradually gained an audience due to its novel cross-national analysis of these themes. The usual procedure in inter-Nordic publications is to assemble a team of authors and have each write about their own country. The good books are coordinated and involve Finland and Iceland; the poorly edited books – sadly, most of them – omit both.

There are several reasons for this unfortunate state of affairs, including the countries' various approaches to European cooperation. Before diving into the lamentations, so common among dyed-in-the-wool Nordists, who decry the EU as an enemy of the Nordic countries, it is important to acknowledge that this situation is a logical consequence of the arrangement of Nordic cooperation, which is grounded in the sovereignty of the national states. Successful Nordic cooperation was not a result of the romantic Scandinavism







rife in Denmark and Sweden in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. In reality, these currents had to do with an attempt by Sweden to muster assistance against Russia, which had conquered the eastern part of Sweden in 1809 and established the Grand Duchy of Finland, while Denmark was seeking assistance against the expanding Germany, which was on the verge of unity – considerably helped along by the foolhardy policies of the Danish National Liberals in 1863–1864, without which it is by no means certain that Bismarck would have succeeded in uniting Germany in 1871.<sup>12</sup> Norway and Iceland were primarily interested in their own independence, while Finland successfully became Finnish under relatively benevolent Russian suzerainty. These considerations were obviously irreconcilable and it all came to nothing. Cultural Scandinavism on the other hand, especially in literature, remained a vigorous force throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although it rarely included Finland and Iceland.<sup>13</sup>

**THE NORDIC REGION** as a model of regional partnership is mainly the outcome of practical and pragmatic cooperation in a long list of professional areas that developed in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – but the necessary prerequisite was that the countries were independent. Thus the Nordic Association could not be established until 1919 after the dissolution of the union between Sweden and Norway in 1905 and Iceland's de facto independence from Denmark in 1918 (completed in 1944). Finland likewise became independent in 1917, but was at first and for many years preoccupied mainly with its own internal conflicts and relations with Russia, as one of the successor states of the Russian Empire. In reality, Finland did not embark upon the Nordic path until the end of the 1930s and not definitively until after its defeat by the Soviet Union in the Winter War of 1939–1940 and the Continuation War of 1940–1944, so brilliantly described by Henrik Meinander in *Finlands historia*.

Nordic cooperation as formalized in the Nordic Council in 1952 (expanded with the accession of Finland in 1955) is unusual in being at once far-reaching in numerous areas of the civil society yet weak on the governmental level. For a long time, Nordic cooperation was run primarily by the parliaments, not the governments. Lack of interference with national sovereignty was the prerequisite for this success. The Nordic approach to international coordination of legislation has worked extremely well, except in the critical areas of economic policy, foreign policy, and defense. The Nordic countries have failed at every attempt in these areas, from the Scandinavian

Defense Union in the late 1940s to Nordek in 1970.<sup>15</sup> This is not surprising in light of the geopolitical placement of the Nordic countries. But for precisely that reason, it is also no wonder that the peoples have drifted apart linguistically and thus, over time, psychologically as well.

**WELL INTO THE 1950S** and 1960s, the idea of the universal Nordic welfare state flourished in opposition to the patriarchal systems of the European Continent and the Anglo-American systems of minimal government. As historical studies have shown, there was a great deal of mythology involved in the cultivation of these differences. Welfare researchers speak bluntly of a model made up of five exceptions.<sup>16</sup> One gets the same impression from a comparative analysis of the distinctive characteristics of Nordic capitalism.<sup>17</sup> The universal aspect of the welfare state, that citizenship alone conferred rights to uniform benefits, regardless of any connection to the labor market, has long been an important difference between the Nordic countries and the rest of Europe, hence the widespread notion of the socially minded and democratic Nordic region in contrast to Catholic and Conservative Europe. Today, this hallmark has been modified by the introduction of employment-related pensions, and it is thus likely that the distinctively Nordic, democratic nationalism will also decline in importance.

Each in its own way, Sweden and Norway also kept their distance from the European community, while Denmark acceded in 1973. And therewith began a political divide that deepened when Sweden and Finland joined the EU in 1995 and Norway once again chose to remain on the outside – albeit in such a way that the country, like Iceland, adopts EU legislation on the inner market through the EEC. These divergent choices go some way towards explaining the lack of interest in Nordic cooperation among the governments of Denmark, Sweden, and Finland, but not the more deep-seated cultural and political differences that have become increasingly clear in recent years, even though Iceland has flirted with the idea of joining the EU since the financial crisis of 2008. Though it will probably come to nothing, this, combined with the economic collapse, has given the Faeroe Islands reason to think again about whether they should continue down the road towards full independence or settle for home rule like that granted to Greenland in 2009.

**DENMARK AND SWEDEN** in particular have grown apart from each other politically. Sweden has officially declared itself a multicultural land of immigrants with the abolition of the close connection between the Lutheran church and the state. In Denmark, the debate on the relationship between church and state has finally begun, at least in circles with a particular interest, but most politicians who express an opinion on the subject adhere firmly to the utterly vague balance of power we call the “people’s church”. Among younger politicians, there seems to be enthusiasm for total separation, but the people’s church, more than 150 years old, seems as popular as ever with the Danish people. Indeed, along with the so-called “grammatical comma” (which is actually German and diverges from both Norwegian and Swedish), the majority of the population seem to perceive the national church as the most important guarantee of “Danishness”. Along with the religious holidays like the Public Day of Prayer and Ascension

Day, it has proven more difficult to abolish than the Danish government envisaged. Norway has recently disestablished the state church

in favor of an arrangement designated the “people’s church”, whereby the Evangelical Lutheran Church is accorded the status of one among many religious communities. It is too soon to tell whether this will eventually entail a separation of church and state as in Sweden or a vague situation like that in Denmark.

On the other hand, Denmark is leading the way in Europe along with Austria, Italy, and perhaps the Netherlands, towards curbing immigration. The discourse in Norway – thus far – is different from the discourse in Denmark. On the surface, the words are politically correct as in Sweden, but the actual deeds are closer to Denmark’s. Iceland and Finland have not yet been challenged to the point where it has been necessary to take an open stance on immigration. It is too early to say whether all of this combined with foreign policy differences will drive the Nordic countries even further apart. These issues were discussed at a series of meetings at the Norwegian embassy in Stockholm, the proceedings of which have been published in an anthology, *Skandinaviska vägval*, edited by Bjørn Magnus Berge and Anders Björnsson.

Under the surface in Sweden there lies a latent threat of violent revolt against the multicultural policy and political correctness, which Danish media love to talk about. But there is a strong tradition in Sweden of putting a lid on that kind of behavior, while in Denmark there has been, since the breakthrough of “popular” movements in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a strong tradition of anti-elite populism that has been simply called “*folkelighed*”, which is perceived as benign and good. The present course has also been followed for some time, as evident in the Danish Power and Democracy Study, for instance, which was more reassuring about democracy than the almost contemporaneous Norwegian power study under the direction of Øyvind Østerud.<sup>18</sup> By 1973, Denmark had already taken a different route from that of the other Nordic countries with the breakthrough of Glistrup’s Progress Party. The differences did not become actual system differences, however, until the alliance established between the Danish People’s Party, the Liberal Party, and the Conservative People’s Party of 2001–2011. The center-right government in power in Sweden since 2006 has not brought about any significant rapprochement. On the contrary, a united political Sweden has successfully isolated the Sweden Democrats,

## Continued. Union, federation, or “merely” European cooperation

even though the party gained seats in the Riksdag on the strength of a platform and strategy lifted from the Danish People's Party. The situation is however still relatively open, as is also the case in Norway, where the present government is likely to be exchanged for a coalition of the conservatives and the Progress Party.

**IN THAT SITUATION**, the future seems dim for the Swedish historian and former government official Gunnar Wetterberg's proposal for a Nordic federation, put forward in the winter of 2009 in *Dagens Nyheter* and later expanded upon in a pamphlet, *The United Nordic Federation*. He argues well, objectively, and persuasively for the advantages to the Nordic countries of a formalized partnership, contending that the countries could gain international influence commensurate with their aggregate size. In a united federation, the countries could be represented in the G20 and other international forums, although he does not clarify what policies would be pursued in these contexts. The Nordic countries already have a greater international presence than their modest size would dictate. The combined population of the Nordic countries, 26 million, is not much larger than that of a single German federal state as North Rhine-Westphalia, but they play a much greater role internationally. Wetterberg also wisely saves his thoughts about the historical barriers to a formalized federation for the end of the book, not to mention the issue of where the capital city would be. It does not take a great deal of imagination to foresee the fight between Stockholm, which has successfully marketed itself as the “Capital of Scandinavia”, and Copenhagen, which cannot achieve consensus among the suburban municipalities of Zealand – let alone its own administration – on any subject whatsoever. The obvious choice of a third city is not much more likely. And the geographical center of the geographical Nordic region from Greenland in the west to Karelia (and Estonia) in the east, Tórshavn on the Faeroe Islands, has slim chance, unless such a choice was able to remove the emotional significance of the idea of a capital city. And that would be no easy thing in countries so intensely nationalist as the Nordic nations.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1960s, the Nordic states demonstrated their incapacity and lack of interest in supporting Nordic culture and language. Today, the need is greater than it's ever been since the two Nordic multinational states of Denmark and Sweden were separated into national states in 1809 and 1814. This separation process, at least in relation to Denmark, will not come to an end until the Faeroe Islands

and Greenland have determined their political futures. The Nordic region is fascinating, multifaceted, and a worthy task for wise Europeans in the area we should perhaps call “Northern Europe” rather than the ideologically charged “Norden”. But there is little reason to conceive of the Nordic countries, or *Norden*, as constituting an exceptional region or a permanent alliance in the EU. We are European countries, for good or ill. And as the other EU member states become relatively smaller and more closely aligned while maintaining or accentuating their distinctive national characteristics, the special relationship between the Nordic countries will probably become less significant, provided that the European project does not disintegrate due to the financial crisis and the problems associated with the euro. Regardless of what lies ahead, the Nordic countries started down their separate paths in 1814, when the Oldenburgian state became the biggest European loser in the Napoleonic wars only a few years after 1809, when Sweden had for a short period been reduced to a small state in danger of being carved up by its neighbors. ✕

uffe østergård

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Illustration: Karin Sunvisson

## BLESSED SCANDINAVIA IN 1930S EUROPE

Scandinavia seems to have existed as two essentially separate literary places. Some visitors, like Karel Čapek, saw the democratic Utopia. Others, like Nazi writer Hanns Johst, saw a group of Aryan peoples who could potentially be worthy friends to the Third Reich.

**THE CZECHOSLOVAKIAN** writer Karel Čapek (1890–1938) and his wife Olga Scheinpflugová took a trip to Scandinavia in the summer of 1936, traveling through Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. Their travelogue, *Cesta na sever* [Journey to the North] was published later that year. For Čapek, one of the most important European anti-fascist intellectuals of the day, the journey to the north was obviously a mental timeout from the misery of the Continent. To him, these countries represented a region where the peoples were “happier and more spiritually adult”. In the Scandinavian democracies he could relax and, according to Olga, he was transported by what he saw: “The landscape and the people’s living standard corresponded to his idea of the promised land.” Čapek was among the intellectuals who could not accept the

Soviet Union and communism as a bulwark against fascism. In something of a contradiction, he was posthumously rehabilitated by the regime in Cold War Czechoslovakia. Today, he is mainly known for coining the neologism “robot” and for his anti-fascist, civilization-critical, and satirical science fiction novel *War with the Newts* (*Válka s mloky* in the original).

In a Europe where one country after another instituted totalitarian regimes in the 1930s, Scandinavia became a region upon which people could project a variety of political hopes and aspirations. Scandinavia offered an example that anti-fascists who were also critical of the Stalinist Soviet Union and radical socialism were quick to exploit in order to spread their message more effectively. But the image of Scandinavia in 1930s Europe was Janus-faced. Scandinavia was generally considered the womb of the Aryan race – or the Nordic race as it was also called – where, according to prominent Western anthropologists, the most ethnically pure Aryans of the modern age were to be found. Scandinavia seems to have existed as two essentially separate literary places in the

1930s. Some visitors, like Čapek, saw the democratic Utopia, while others, like the Nazi writer Hanns Johst, saw a region and a tribe of peoples who could potentially be close and worthy neighbors and friends to the Third Reich.

### The promised land

The drawing of a mental boundary between a free, happy, and paradisiacal Scandinavia on one side and on the other an increasingly hopeless Continental Europe where state after state had fallen under the yoke of totalitarianism is clear in Karel Čapek’s case. As he was leaving Scandinavia, he was reawakened to reality. He claimed not to have read any newspapers during those summer weeks in the north, but found out as he was preparing to depart that civil war had broken out in Spain. He left the Nordic dream to return to the European nightmare: “I went to see the northern part of Europe, and thank the good Lord; she is not in such bad shape yet.” For Čapek, who saw himself as a European patriot, there was something pure, unspoiled, and admirable in Scandinavia. Here, he saw a noble people, or as he wrote: “a formidable and courageous race who love peace and freedom, demonstrate their integrity, and have not the slightest need to allow themselves to be led by anyone else”. One is struck by how the concept of race is used on all sides of the ideological front, and the notion of Scandinavians as particularly noble and upright is reproduced in near unison. The metaphors were rife: Denmark, for instance, might be likened to a rosy-cheeked, happy, and well-fed (but also intelligent) farm boy, synonymous with the good fortune of an entire nation.

**THE SPANISH CATALAN** author Josep Pla also wrote from Denmark when he traveled north in 1928. In *Cartes de lluny*, a collection of travel impressions, city views, and “imaginings”, he describes a meeting with a local parish pastor in rural Jutland. For Pla, this was an encounter with a literary and philosophical Scandinavia he had known for decades and the horizon of his expectations was already drawn. The Danish pastor embodied the myth of Nordic freedom, the simple life in harmony with nature, and higher moral ideals. All of this gave “these Protestant pastors of the wilderness a reformist and anarchist

aura". The Catalan Pla had grown up in an intellectual climate where Friedrich Nietzsche and Henrik Ibsen, the northern European names writ large on the Mount Helicon of Europe, were fundamental to the Catalan intellectual orientation away from the gravitational pull of Iberian traditionalism. Ibsen had been read and performed on stage in Catalonia as a major anarchist ideologue. In intellectual circles, casting one's sights north of Latin Europe was a sign of nobility. Familiarity with the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard was obligatory. The meeting with the pastor in Jutland was simply an experiential corroboration of Pla's northerly mental geography, proof that this world also existed in reality, and not only in German, French, Catalan, and Spanish translations.

**THIS, OF COURSE**, was an element of creating the image of a region where everything was better, and everything was happier. Once this kind of image was established, writers could begin describing the place in greater detail as copious evidence of the hallmarks of good societies. Josep Pla was rather poetic and contemplative in his textual representations, but he also described a highly egalitarian society. The Nordic societies were described more fully in other more purely journalistic reports, where the recurring themes were equality, welfare, education, and healthcare. In his dissertation, *Roots of the Scandinavian Model: Images and Progress in the Era of Modernization* (2002), the Polish scholar and Scandinavia expert Kazimierz Musiał has clearly evinced the unanimity and solidity of this progressive image as the modern mass society emerged.

## French perspectives on the People's Home

One of the more interesting depictions of Scandinavia from this period is the French journalist and man of letters Émile Schreiber's nonfiction work *Heureux scandinaves!* [The happy Scandinavians]. The sub-heading of the book, published in 1936, was "A survey of realized socialist reforms in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland". The book's systematic review of all advances in social and labor market legislation is perhaps the most comprehensive of all Continental European descriptions of

Scandinavia of the time. Here, Denmark is seen as the pioneer in Scandinavia, and the Danes most of all as a people who "have nothing in common with the Germans". Schreiber, himself the son of German Jewish immigrants, puts great effort into explaining to his French countrymen the essential difference between Continental and Nordic socialism. An interview with Per Albin Hansson, prime minister of Sweden and "father of the People's Home", makes plain that the northern approach is to solve practical problems, and in consensus. Sweden is described as a country both aristocratic and socialist. Socialism here is different from what it is in France. Nordic workers protest very little and if a few marches are arranged, they are almost naïve compared to what Schreiber is used to in France. Like their leaders, the people are fundamentally peaceful and level-headed. The conservative prime minister of Finland, Toivo Kivimäki, is also quoted: "We have little wealth in our country, but also little destitution."

"**SOCIALISM HERE IS** not Marxist socialism, it is reformist socialism," Schreiber instructed his French readers. Instead of having a people's front, the liberal/conservative side was also incorporated in a politics of consensus aimed at creating harmony and equality, as shown by the Kivimäki example. Why had the Scandinavians managed to create democratic socialism, social democracy, when the Austrians and Germans had failed? Schreiber wondered. Diplomats surely sent home reports of protests and conflicts in the Nordic countries, but those elements were not included in the textual strategies of the pro-Nordic liberal left, where the emphasis was on harmony. Arthur Engberg, the Swedish minister of finance, assured the French journalist that even the monarchy was a relative non-issue.

The "pragmatic socialism" of Scandinavia was thought to ensure a true leveling of society. Schreiber was amazed that even workers could own a sailboat in Sweden. He saw only clean and healthy workers decently clothed marching in the May Day parades. He believed the content of the working class was such that Nordic socialism could actually be termed "middle-class socialism".

He was seconded on this point by Serge de Chessin, a Russian émigré who

had fled the Revolution for Sweden in the 1920s and later settled in France. He published short biographical sketches of both Hjalmar Branting and King Gustav V. The former he described as a robust and confident superman who had personally made sure that "the Swedish working class is better protected against the Bolshevik disease than workers in many other countries". He also proclaimed that Swedish workers were far too wise to be seduced by false prophets. Chessin, who had been an official with the Russian foreign ministry before the Revolution, was fascinated that the conflict between the monarchy and the workers' movement was not especially virulent by international comparison. He probably exaggerated to some degree, but he usually let Social Democratic politicians attest to the good relationship between the workers' movement and the monarchy. In his most important report on Sweden, *Les Clefs de la Suède* (1935), which was translated to English the very next year (*The Keys to Sweden*), he had Carl "Zeth" Höglund, the editor-in-chief for *Social-Demokraten*, explain how he had abandoned the communist convictions of his youth for the realism of experience. From the Russian perspective, this was truly Utopian, but the popularity of the monarchy among workers must certainly have seemed peculiar to Chessin's French readers.

## In the exalted Scandinavia

The picture of Scandinavia and the Scandinavians had strong traditions to fall back on. The region had been described as a European semi-periphery, for good or ill. Many Germans and Anglo-Saxons considered Scandinavia the ancestral home of the most outstanding race on earth. As the historian Andrew Newby has found, many people in Great Britain believed that the "Viking blood" that the Norman invasion had infused into the nation was a prime reason the British were able to establish a global empire. Among the Scots, for instance, there was a strong belief that it was specifically the Viking blood that explained why they were involved in running the empire. The less distinguished Celtic ethnic element would not have been capable of any such thing, or so the argument went. And as most people know, Old Norse mythology was a building

block in German national romanticism. The operas of Richard Wagner took this mythology straight into the heart of the middle class. In the 1930s, it was clear that Scandinavia as a region could not be monopolized by the liberal left, which (over-)emphasized social welfare modernity.

**OF THOSE WHO** held fast to other images of Scandinavia at the time, one of the more interesting was the German author Hanns Johst. He toured Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland in the summer of 1935 and published his travelogue *Maske und Gesicht* the same year, with the somewhat self-assertive sub-heading "A German Nazi's journey from Germany to Germany". Johst was the Nazi regime's trusted culture worker and had been appointed to the leadership of the German writers' union, which had been purged of dissenters against Nazism. He is best known for his play *Schlageter* (1933), which he wrote as a paean to Adolf Hitler. The line proclaimed by the protagonist, the martyr soldier Schlageter, "When I hear the word culture, I cock my Browning," is a classic, and one certain people are still fond of quoting.

Johst's itineraries in Scandinavia took him to museums and theaters. He provided vivid descriptions of Nordiska Museet, the Viking ships at Bygdøy in Oslo, and the National Museum in Helsinki. Johst propounds that all nations should be pure and unadulterated, and Sweden is his model Aryan country par excellence. He is also enchanted with Finland and the serious, industrious Finns. He encourages them to create a monolingual Finnish nation as the only way to resist Bolshevik imperialism. The high point of his trip is at the Finnish National Opera, where he sees Wagner's *Lohengrin* performed entirely with Finnish talent. In his view, this people of "zauna und sisu" were headed for a brilliant future. He was ambivalent about other places in Scandinavia, and was obviously constantly on the lookout for attacks on his person in local "socialist" newspapers. He systematically assigns merits and demerits to everything he sees. In Oslo, he likes the sculptures by Vigeland in Frogner Park, but concedes that to him, Oslo has always been the Nordic Weimar, due to Ibsen.

Johst's representations of Scandinavia are a kind of status report on Germany's neighbors to the north. In



his Scandinavia, modernity and the present do not reign supreme: history is always there. The same applies to the Austrian writer Walther Eidlitz, who also visited Scandinavia in 1935. His travelogue, *Reise nach den vier Winden*, was translated to Swedish as *Vindrosen runt* ("Around the wind rose"). Eidlitz was preoccupied with the struggle between cultural spheres and he spent a great deal of time on the Vikings, the ancient Goths, and especially Charles XII of Sweden, in favor of describing modern Nordic society. He talks about the Ukrainian or "Gothic" steppes and the darkness that had prevailed there since the days of Peter the Great. Because the Scandinavians had once been a master race in history, they would, according to Eidlitz, once again liberate the peoples in the east and carry out the grandiose plans of Charles XII.

### The geography of fear and hope

There was an obvious need to draw boundaries in Europe in the 1930s. For some, it was a matter of cultural, linguistic, and ethnic dividing lines, but for others, this was an attempt to find positive alternatives to development towards increasing numbers of totalitarian states on the Continent. For the latter group, in which we can include Karel Čapek, Josep Pla, Serge de Chessin, and Émile Schreiber, it was important to emphasize the pure and unadulterated democracy in Scandinavia. This was done at the expense of a more balanced picture of reality. Their descriptions were, of course, grounded on actual developments in the Nordic countries, but the reality might not have been as rosy as they led people to believe. There were labor conflicts in Norway and Sweden which in the latter case led to lethal violence. Unemployment was 15–20 percent in the Nordic countries during these years. The class society was far from eradicated. The Swedish Eugenics Institute, founded in 1923, and the documented anti-Semitism within the workers' movement in the 1920s do not fit the picture – and so they are omitted.

**THIS WAS PERCEIVED** as insignificant by comparison in 1930s Europe. As the situation in Europe became increasingly ominous, Scandinavia still seemed like a paradise. There was hope here, hope for a better society and a better

life for people. To Čapek, the geography of fear and hope was a concrete reality. When the Germans invaded Czechoslovakia, his name was among the first on the Gestapo's list of public enemies to be liquidated. Čapek died in 1938 from complications of an illness, a few months after Sudetenland had become German. His brother, the artist and writer Josef Čapek, died in Bergen-Belsen during the final stages of the war. Serge de Chessin had fled the Russian Revolution and devoted most of his life to demonizing Bolshevik Russia. A civilized and peaceful Scandinavia was an effective contrast in that endeavor. In an anti-German spirit, Chessin was careful to hold up the Scandinavians as the true Aryans because they had created an authentically equal society. Scandinavia and Nordic social democracy became a model for Émile Schreiber, who attached the more French-sounding Servan to his surname during the war. The Servan-Schreiber family became significant actors in media and politics in postwar France. One of his sons, Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber, enjoyed an outstanding political career; a center-left liberal, his positions on many issues were very closely aligned with the social democracy of Olof Palme.

For the social actors of the time, 1930s Europe was a political powder keg, a place where people were engaged in a life-and-death struggle. The histories are full of narratives that sketch the outlines of this geography of fear. History is also acquainted with a great deal of testimony about visits to Scandinavia in which the region is put forth as the domicile of hope. For many, Scandinavia was the place where fascism never took hold. ❌

**peter stadius**

Note: This is an abridged version of an article published in *Ny Tid*.



Illustration: Moa Thelander

## THE RETURN OF GEOPOLITICS IN THE "NEW NORTH"

Geopolitics is back in the North.<sup>1</sup> Not that it ever was gone. But after more than two decades of soft power, low politics, and cross-border cooperation in the Baltic and Barents regions, regional security discourses have relaxed significantly on this former front of the Cold War.

Recently, however, a more openly geopolitical language has reemerged in the discussions on the future of the Nordic, Baltic, and Arctic regions.

In late January 2013, for example, the Arctic Frontiers conference was convened in Tromsø, Norway, on the topic of "Geopolitics and Marine Production in a Changing Arctic". At the conference, the Norwegian foreign minister Espen Barth Eide said the rising global interest in the North would make the Arctic a more important area for global politics. The Swedish foreign minister Carl Bildt spoke of the need to solve the

remaining "geopolitical uncertainties" in the Arctic.<sup>2</sup>

What are these uncertainties, then? Most observers agree that the increasingly geopolitical framing of Arctic issues reflects another geopolitical shift currently underway, namely the tipping of the global economy away from the Atlantic Rim to the Asian Pacific Rim.

**AS LONG AS THE** demand for fossil fuel continues to rise in China and India while climate change takes place at present rates, Arctic hydrocarbons will become more profitable. While sea transport is less expensive today than it has been in a long time, insurance costs are rising due to Middle Eastern instability and Indian Ocean piracy. This, too, makes the Northern Sea Route (NSR) along the Northern coast of Russia more attractive.

In a longer view, it has been sug-

gested that the Arctic may emerge as a future power hub – a “Northern Rim” made up of the eight states that constitute the present Arctic Council – perhaps even outpacing the development of the Pacific Rim by 2050.<sup>3</sup>

Some Arctic Council members have projected ambitious visions, although usually not quite as grand, onto the Arctic. Canada expects continuous population growth in the coming decades and sees its future in “our North”.<sup>4</sup> Russia has begun developing the Arctic as its next “resource base”.<sup>5</sup> Both Denmark and Norway have adopted more active national strategies for the Arctic. Sweden and the US mainly channel their Arctic interests through the Arctic Council itself, where Sweden holds the chairmanship until May 2013, when Canada takes over.

This growing interest in the Arctic has led observers to consider the consequences for the regions bordering on the Arctic. How are the three distinct but interlocking security agendas – Nordic, Baltic, and Arctic – coming together in the “New North”? These regions all have their own security concerns, which may or may not benefit from being intentionally connected with the scramble for the Arctic.

The Baltic Sea, for example, has a strategic value in its own right, serving as a transport corridor for 15 percent of global trade, including oil exports from Primorsk.<sup>6</sup> While the Nord Stream gas pipeline that runs along the bottom of the Baltic Sea will improve the Russian gas industry’s ability to supply its EU customers, it may also make Poland and the three Baltic states more vulnerable to Russian political pressure.

**IT IS CRUCIAL** to note that the high North as well as the Baltic Sea – where Russia has limited legal or military capability of exercising effective territorial control – are growing in importance to Russia’s overall economic development and hence to Vladimir Putin’s political plan.<sup>7</sup> At the moment, Russia’s neighboring Nordic countries, with the exception of Finland, appear less capable of guaranteeing the security of their own territories or fully controlling the Baltic Sea, which is a concern not only to the Nordic security community, but to Russian observers as well.<sup>8</sup>

In response, the Nordic countries have stepped up intra-Nordic and Baltic-Nordic defense cooperation. There are already proposals to pool military resources under the auspices of NORDEF-CO in order to cut costs.<sup>9</sup> But more than

simply economic considerations lie behind these moves. In January 2010, for example, Sweden adopted a “solidarity declaration” addressing both the Baltic and the Nordic countries.<sup>10</sup>

The Baltics for their part are concerned about their own as well as the EU’s dependence upon Russian fossil fuel, a growing share of which is, incidentally, produced above the Arctic Circle, further increasing the importance of the North. Another issue is the overextension of US global policy commitments. Some Nordics also worry about being marginalized as US interest shifts to the Pacific.

**IN A LONGER** perspective, policy analysts have predicted the emergence of a global energy-security axis, which would run from North to South, eventually connecting the new gas fields of the Arctic with the oil fields of the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf. Such a link could conceivably guarantee continued American security commitments in the Baltic Sea region, a perspective welcomed by Poland for example, by linking the Baltic to US strategic interests in the Middle East and in the Arctic.<sup>11</sup>

Yet most Nordic commentators note with some relief that both Russian and US security planning documents tend to regard the Baltic and Nordic regions as “stable” areas, which do not require much attention, in contrast to the Middle East, North Africa, the Far East, and the Arctic.<sup>12</sup>

To some, then, decoupling the Arctic, Baltic, and Nordic security agendas is a way of ensuring continuous stability. To others, connecting them is a means of guaranteeing security.

Noting that the interests of great powers have prevented earlier attempts at closer Nordic cooperation, the Swedish historian and debater Gunnar Wetterberg has argued that the current absence of great power interest in the region would permit the existence of a “Nordic Federation”. While small on a global scale, the five Nordic countries do represent significant economic and demographic power, with 25 million inhabitants and an aggregate GDP of \$1,500 billion.<sup>13</sup>

While Wetterberg’s proposal may appear utopian to some, it also expresses a new sense of reassurance in the “soft power” of the Nordic realm as the “next supermodel” to combine economic stability and competitiveness with social security and sustainability, recently noted by *The Economist*.<sup>14</sup>

The Swedish historian Jonas Har-

vard has suggested that *Norden* can be viewed as either “hard” or “soft”.<sup>15</sup> Traditional Nordic cooperation has indeed been soft. “Thinking big” in the sense of Wetterberg’s proposal may be a way of aligning the hard and soft aspects. But a new and more far-ranging kind of Nordic cooperation would also have consequences for the traditional role of the Nordic countries in solidifying and stabilizing the region, precisely because of the countries’ small size. A more firm Nordic cooperation would also have to consider the geopolitical consequences of its own weight on the surrounding Baltic and Arctic regions. The recent return of geopolitics in the region puts this perspective in a new, perhaps harsher, light.

**IT MAY BE** paradoxical that geopolitics – whether positive or negative, reactive or proactive – is making a comeback at a time when traditional geopolitics is widely seen as superseded by soft power. At the same time, more and more “soft” issues such as democracy, regional cooperation, and environmental sustainability are becoming just as important as the “hard” issues of old. As the ice is melting and new forms of international cooperation and conflict take shape in the New North, the Cold War logic of securitization and desecuritization will likely be transformed as well. But small and soft may continue to be smart even in the future. ❌

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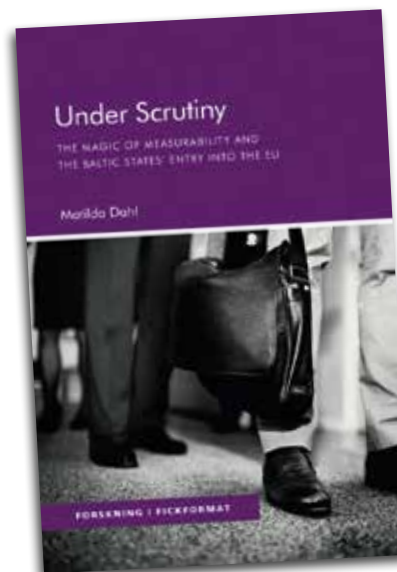
## nadezda petrusenko



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## on the web

Baltic Worlds has a special **Election Coverage** section on the web. Since the autumn of 2010, elections from twenty different countries have been covered.

## Pussy Riot: Reflections on receptions

**E**ven though Pussy Riot succeeded in hitting many sensitive spots, the greatest crisis of social consensus that the women produced, and the deepest collective anxiety that surfaced in the discussion, was the fear of the active and politically conscious woman: a woman who does not hesitate to use symbolic violence in claiming her subjectivity from the authority of the church, the family, the establishment, or the state. This fear can be read throughout society's various strata, groups, or classes, and is expressed in a great variety of ways. Public opinion was polarized in a particularly dramatic way over one principal theme: Pussy Riot's feminist agenda. Very broadly formulated, that agenda included the issues of the church, religion, and faith; patriarchal family values; and feminist critique in political art.

Officially, the Pussy Riot case is closed. But the story is far from over, especially because, in spite of almost a year of passionate discussion, condemnation or praise, expressions of solidarity or disgust, reason or mudslinging, campaigns of support or counteractions of blame, public opinion still has not agreed upon, and is still looking for, a meaningful answer to one simple question: "What was it?" And more specifically: "What was it for us?"

**WE OFFER SOME FRAGMENTS** of a reflection on the impact of Pussy Riot's actions on Russian public opinion. Our article is written in the form of a dialogue among us three authors, in which we comment on one another's thoughts. The article, with all our linked comments, is published in full on the Baltic Worlds website.

Instead of seeking a suitable rubric under which to classify the Pussy Riot episode as an event – political protest, artistic action, carnivalesque gesture, act of hooliganism, blasphemy, or anything else – we decided to look for its "eventness" not in the intervention itself, but in how the intervention was received by Russian public opinion. Making a gesture is the responsibility of the actor, while making sense of it – hence producing the "eventness" of the event, that is, constituting an event as event – is the responsibility of the addressee. Assuming that the addressee of the Pussy Riot intervention was Russian public opinion in general (and putting aside the fact that the intervention was ostensibly a prayer of supplication addressed to the Blessed Virgin), we have therefore, in a necessarily fragmentary manner, concentrated on the receptions of their intervention in Russian society and the deep ideological conflicts and anxiety it aroused, especially in connection with women's activism.

Pussy Riot achieved an unprecedented measure of revelation by disclosing, in a single gesture, the questionability of Russia's most fundamental social, political, and cultural institutions – of the public space in general. All of a sudden, pillars of society such as the media, the parliament, political authority, the church, the family, ethical and aesthetic values, and even the law itself revealed themselves as mere conventions.

**RUSSIAN PUBLIC OPINION** responded by asking questions as to the legitimacy of such conventions. The political establishment predictably responded by tightening screws to stop the questioning, while the parliament fell prey to massive attacks of male hysteria exploding in spectacular fireworks of spiteful "anti-American" legislative acts – as if to confirm its own illegitimacy as a legislature. All this became especially visible against the dark and impenetrable background of the society's profound fear of women's initiative. The situation is still far from being resolved, theoretically or politically. How and

even whether it will be resolved depends on how Russian society will ultimately make sense of it. We are therefore offering here our necessarily disparate and fragmented reflections on receptions of Pussy Riot so that we ourselves can make sense of Pussy Riot, and of all the other issues that arose and became visible as issues thanks to their act of "summoning forth". In particular, we look at civil society's and experts' responses to Pussy Riot's intervention, at the pro-Putin media's attempt to present this radical intervention through the lens of "woman's obligation of motherhood" and at meanings of the intervention for feminist strategies of confronting patriarchy.

The punk prayer in the Cathedral called attention to its multi-layered historical context. For almost 150 years, women have been resorting to radicalism in the cause of freedom and justice for all. They have been severely punished by law and rejected by a society that sought to protect itself against women's violent lawlessness in destroying conventions. Pussy Riot also returned us to the very recent, but surprisingly almost forgotten history of the 1990s, especially that of radical artistic activism. The public discussion of Pussy Riot, confused and conflicted as it was, drew attention to the margins of Russian history, which suddenly became important and recognizable in a powerful way as memories gained new currency.

**FINALLY, THE DISCUSSION** drew the public's attention to the languages that society uses to speak about God and freedom, women and revolution, justice and law, "then" and "now". It also demonstrated how these languages – narratives, metaphors, and attitudes – are exploited by the media, and how the media, in their discourses, construct their audiences as classes in conflict with each other, maintaining and solidifying divisions between classes, ostracizing "wrong" genders and sexualities. Pussy Riot broke through all the linguistic defenses and urged Russian society to become aware of the existence of such defenses, of the all-pervading collective fear, on all social levels and in all contexts: the fear of the active, politically conscious woman, the woman who breaks through and calls forth. ✖

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Note: Read the full article on the Baltic Worlds' website.



There are many images and visual acts of resistance concerning Pussy Riot. In connection with the online version of this article, a selection of such image are presented. Above: Victoria Lomasko 2012; below, a cartoon by "Smart Mary" (Umnaia Masha) 2012.