

ILLUSTRATION: RAGNI SVENSSON

CRACKS IN THE “IRON CURTAIN”

The evolution of political contacts between Soviet Estonia and the Estonian emigration in Sweden before perestroika

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abstract

Almost throughout the Cold War, opportunities for interacting with the occupied home countries were severely limited for tens of thousands Baltic war refugees and their offspring in the West. However, the evolution of political contacts between exile activists in Sweden and the occupied homeland sheds light on the largely underresearched phenomenon of anticommunist cooperation between capitalist and communist societies and challenges the narrative of the impermeability of the “Iron Curtain” between the Soviet Union and the West.

KEY WORDS: Cold War, exile–homeland relations, Soviet Union, Estonian SSR, Sweden.

A quarter of a century after the fall of the communist regimes from East Berlin to Moscow, the political map of “Yalta Europe” remains etched into the collective memories of Europeans, whether their home country once was located in the communist or capitalist half of the continent. The era of Europe’s political and military division lives on in iconic images of heavily armed soldiers patrolling barbed-wired checkpoints, which corroborate the narrative of a virtually impermeable border between two rival blocs. Thus, the topos of the “Iron Curtain” is a self-evident element of the language used in discussing Europe’s Cold War past, even among scholars specializing in the field. As a rhetorical remnant of a

propaganda war that contributed to cementing the bipolar order of postwar Europe, however, the term is misleading. Under the impact of de-Stalinization, most communist governments in Central and Eastern Europe had abandoned dogmatic isolationism as a cornerstone of foreign policy. Over time, crossing state borders between East and West turned into an everyday affair. At least after the onset of détente, which paved the way for even greater East-West mobility, the number of tourists, businessmen, artists, scientists, and exchange students traveling between the blocs skyrocketed.

IN RECENT YEARS, historians have devoted considerable research efforts towards gaining a deeper understanding of the ambiguity of border regimes in Cold War Europe. Shifting the focus from the grand narrative of Cold War diplomacy to non-state actors, informal networks, and personal encounters across the Iron Curtain has enriched the field with innovative, transnationally framed approaches.¹ Numerous studies on tourism and trade between communist and capitalist societies, smuggling and black market activities, and technological cooperation and cultural exchange have provided a more nuanced picture of the history of the divided Europe, revealing a vast undergrowth of contacts below the governmental level. So far, scholarly research has been focused primarily on the satellite states, which indeed promoted an at times astonishing degree of openness towards the West, although the scope of cross-border contacts remained highly dependent on the overall international political climate. However, even the comparatively rigid border regime of the Soviet Union was affected by the dynamics of European détente, although the degree of individual mobility and the intensity of contacts with non-communist societies was decidedly lower.

Due to its cordon sanitaire of more or less servile satellites, the Soviet Union shared few land borders with capitalist states. Hence, the Black and Baltic Sea basins formed the most important contact zones between the Soviet and the non-Soviet world. While the Soviet Union faced the NATO member Turkey in the Black Sea Region, Sweden's and Finland's postwar neutrality considerably lowered the level of ideological and military tensions around the Baltic rim. The dynamics of East-West interaction triggered by this geopolitical constellation had a decisive impact on the Estonian SSR in particular, the postwar history of which differs in some crucial aspects from that of other Soviet republics.

THE THREE BALTIC republics were among the newly acquired lands of the Soviet Empire. Populated by mostly non-Russian inhabitants with never-entirely-suppressed national sentiments and prewar traditions of close cultural ties to Western Europe, they generated a constant level of suspicion in the Kremlin. Moreover, due to their geographical proximity to capitalist coun-



Declaration of independence in Pärnu on February 23, 1918. One of the first images of the Republic.

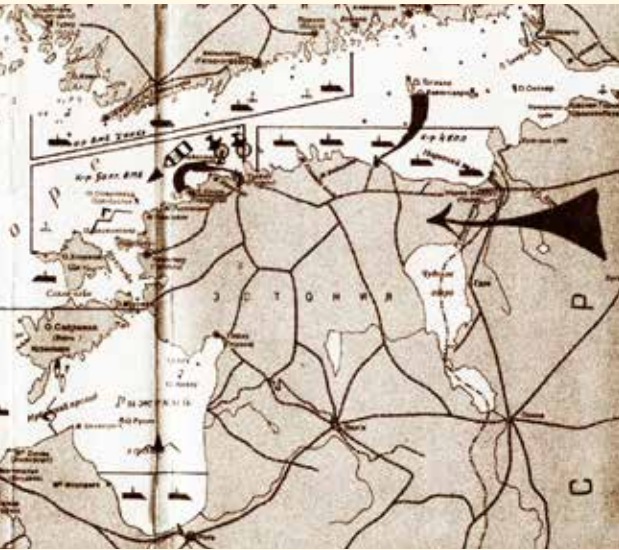
tries, the Baltic territories were seen as possible gateways for hostile military forces and intelligence operations, but also as a bridgehead to the West for oppositional circles inside the Soviet Union. Thus, up to the late 1980s, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians were generally denied access to their coastlines, where raked beaches and a chain of watchtowers reflected the status of the Baltic shores as military exclusion zones. Yet, despite Moscow's restrictive policies vis-à-vis the Balts, the republican elites gradually succeeded in negotiating certain concessions with the Soviet

leadership. By the late 1950s, the Baltic republics had managed to acquire a reputation as the main Soviet testing ground for economic and cultural reforms, with the Estonians leading the way as a kind of Soviet avant-garde in many respects.

The liberal currents of the post-Stalinist era had a considerable impact on the Soviet Estonian border regime. During the better part of the two decades that followed

the first Soviet occupation in 1940, Estonians had been almost completely insulated from foreign influences. The few sporadic visitors from non-communist countries who had been permitted to enter the Estonian SSR after Stalin's death were carefully selected delegates of fraternal communist parties, trade unions, or sports clubs. The vast majority came from neighboring Finland, in exceptional cases even from neutral Sweden or non-European countries.² In 1960, the Estonian capital of Tallinn, an architectural gem among the Hanseatic port cities that dot the Baltic coasts, opened up to Western tourists.³ With the establishment of a direct ferry connection to Helsinki in the summer of 1965, which was facilitated by the Finnish president Urho Kekkonen's

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Map illustrating the Soviet military blockade and invasion of Estonia and Latvia in 1940.



The ferry *Georg Ots* (in service from 1980 onwards, 1993–2000 chartered to Tallink) played a key role in the courier network between Soviet Estonia and Sweden.

excellent contacts in the Kremlin, foreign visitors were able to avoid the time-consuming travel via Leningrad's Inturist office. Due to the convenient connection across the Gulf of Finland, Western tourism to Estonia developed into a mass phenomenon and the provincial city of Tallinn into Moscow's preferred site for advertising the motherland of communism as a prosperous and modern state with a pronouncedly European cultural identity.⁴

The Estonian SSR indeed possessed the highest standard of living among the Soviet republics, which triggered a massive and steadily growing influx of Russian-speaking industrial workers from other, less wealthy parts of the vast country. Nevertheless, Estonia had a rather peripheral status within the Soviet Union: it was to a large degree simply the place from which the inhabitants of nearby Leningrad and Moscow were supplied with agricultural goods, dairy and meat. But taking into account the considerable masses of incoming foreigners and the subsequent spreading of Western fashion and taste in Tallinn, the Estonian capital could still compete with the grand metropolises of the Russian heartland as a major hub of Soviet interaction with the capitalist world. It is this extraordinary exposure to Western influences that makes the tiny Soviet republic an interesting case study for historical research on nongovernmental contacts between Soviet citizens and the non-communist sphere.

IT WAS FIRST and foremost the reformation fervor of Party bureaucrats in Moscow and Tallinn that paved the way for Estonia's gradual opening up to the West. The dynamic unleashed by the decision to liberalize the border regime, however, was triggered mainly by external factors and rooted in specific geographical and cultural conditions. There is already a quite substantial literature on the significance of neutral Finland for Estonia during the decades of Soviet occupation. Due to the linguistic and cultural kinship between Finns and Estonians and the 'Finnish-

Soviet friendship', the inhabitants of the Estonian SSR were able to absorb a remarkable array of Western influences. As early as 1957, Finnish television could, according to Finnish reports, be received in the coastal areas of northern Estonia. The Kremlin's decision to jam only broadcasts produced in one of the Soviet Union's official languages made it possible for several generations of Estonians to get acquainted with life and consumption patterns in the West.⁵ The impact of this breach in the informational Iron Curtain cannot be underestimated, not at least as it fostered a widespread familiarity with the Finnish language among the population of Tallinn. These skills considerably facilitated face-to-face communication with Finnish tourists, by far the largest group of Western visitors, which opened up numerous opportunities of de facto uncontrollable interaction between Soviet and non-Soviet citizens.

A MUCH LESS investigated factor that had an enormous impact on how Soviet Estonia's encounters with the outside world evolved was the sizeable Estonian exile community in neighboring Sweden. The neutral country was the main political and cultural center of the Estonian diaspora in Europe, hosting about 22,000 war refugees, who had escaped the westward advances of the Red Army that foreboded the second Soviet occupation of Estonia in autumn 1944, and their offspring.⁶ Sweden's Estonian population adhered to an uncompromising anti-Soviet stance, categorically refusing to acknowledge the incorporation of Estonia into the Soviet Union, which led to regular clashes with the Swedish authorities' rather compliant attitude towards Moscow as far as the Baltic question was concerned. Nonetheless, the isolation of the Baltic territories from the outside world, which had been implemented immediately after their reoccupation and lasted until the post-Stalinist Thaw, had opened up a physical and mental abyss between exile and homeland that mirrored the



PHOTO: SIGURD ROOVE

Estonian refugees on the *Triina*, 1944.

general alienation between East and West in postwar Europe. While homeland Estonians for a long time lacked the possibility of contacting relatives and friends in the West, the exile community maintained a dogmatic reluctance to communicate with the occupied home country via Soviet authorities. Fear of infiltration and a strong aversion to collaborators had given way to a strictly isolationist stance that unconsciously imitated the traditional “Soviet phobia”⁷ against all kinds of external influences. When the Estonian SSR opened up the gates to a growing number of Western visitors in the mid-1960s, the issue of homeland tourism thus became one of the most heatedly debated controversies among the exile community. For a vast majority of Estonians both in Western Europe and overseas, applying for a visa at a Soviet embassy or consulate severely undermined their political struggle, which was based on the non-recognition of the geopolitical status quo. Everyone who still decided to visit the old home country risked open condemnation and social exclusion within the exile community well into the 1980s.⁸

A PROFOUND TURN in East-West relations and a generational shift among the Estonian communities in the West eventually contributed to the bridging of the abyss between exile and homeland. The onset of détente altered the tone of international Cold War diplomacy. “Cold warfare” was to be replaced with a peaceful dialogue between capitalist and communist societies. This inspired a younger generation of Estonian exiles to engage in a fundamental critique of the voluntary isolationism of the old guard.⁹

The categorical refusal to communicate with the homeland, they argued, merely reinforced Soviet Estonia’s isolation and weakened any genuine domestic opposition to Soviet rule. While, in general, the large exile communities in North America remained rather skeptical towards the idea of visiting the homeland as a potentially effective counterweight to the ongoing Russification and Sovietization of Estonia, this more pragmatic approach was avidly discussed among Estonians in Sweden. Both the geographical proximity and the Swedish government’s active commitment to promoting multilevel cooperation with communist Europe gradually fostered networking processes between exile and homeland that would considerably influence the course of Estonian history.

The willingness of a growing number of exile Estonians to make use of the facilitated opportunities to visit the home country was welcomed by the Soviet leadership, which, since the onset of de-Stalinization, had been striving to establish a dialogue with the Baltic communities in the West. Moscow’s underlying goal was to neutralize the anti-Soviet lobbying campaigns and to weaken the non-recognition dogma by encouraging, in particular, a younger generation of Baltic exiles to open up to contacts with representatives of the new political order. According to the calculations of the Kremlin, the recovery of Soviet Estonian society from the gloomy years of Stalinist terror and repression had rendered it increasingly immune to anti-Soviet agitation. Indeed, the 1960s marked the peak of an era of political conformism and societal optimism in Estonia, which was partly the result of two

decades of mass education in the spirit of Marxism-Leninism, the “major vehicle for indoctrination and conformist mentality”.¹⁰

DUE TO THE absence of any significant political opposition in the Estonian SSR up to the late 1960s, the decision to loosen the rigid travel and border restrictions thus turned out to have only minor side effects. Initially, the challenges the Soviet Estonian authorities had to cope with were limited to a greater availability of banned political and religious writings and an increase of black-market activities in the capital.¹¹ However, as Michael Cox points out, the perceived political stability of the early Brezhnev era eventually turned out to be a chimera.¹² The limited national autonomy that Moscow had granted the Balts was not sufficient to compensate for the failures of the planned economy and the migration policy, which, due to the unhampered mass influx of workers from other Soviet republics, triggered fears of Russification among the autochthonous population. A clear sign of rising discontent among Estonian society and of the initial breaches in the KGB’s surveillance system was the formation of a nationalist dissident movement, whose protagonists quickly learned how to use the rapprochement between the Soviet Union and the neutral Nordic states for their own subversive purposes.

In 1972, after having operated underground for some years, a small circle of dissidents decided to draft an open appeal, which would be directed to a broader Western public. The memorandum was addressed to the General Assembly of the United Nations, to whose predecessor organization Estonia once had belonged, and demanded a referendum on national sovereignty under the auspices of the UN, a return to democracy and the liquidation of the Soviet “colonial administrative apparatus”.¹³ The dissidents, who were well informed about the vigorous anti-Soviet campaigns driven by exile activists in the West, sent the memorandum to Stockholm, the European headquarters of Estonian exile organizations. Although solid evidence is lacking on how the document crossed the border, the most plausible explanation is that it was smuggled via Helsinki by a group of Finnish Baptists involved in a network that illegally imported religious literature into the Soviet Union.¹⁴

THE DISSIDENTS’ AMBITION to involve compatriots abroad in their oppositional activities opened up a new chapter of exile–homeland relations. For the first time since the end of World War II, communication between Estonians on both sides of the Iron Curtain contained a political element that reached far beyond

the dimension of face-to-face conversations during private visits. The memorandum, which after initial hesitation was forwarded to the United Nations and disseminated to a wider public in Europe and overseas by Estonian exile activists, confirmed the vague rumors about the existence of organized nationalist dissent in the Estonian SSR. Moreover, its message revealed a striking similarity between the radical visions of the dissidents and the political agenda of the Estonian community in the West. A shared language of oppositional thought had the potential of uniting homeland and exile in a common political struggle, which considerably changed the angle from which leading exile activists in Stockholm viewed the opening up of Soviet Estonia to the non-communist world. Consequently, the main focus of their political activities, which traditionally had been information campaigns and the cooperation with anticommunist

forces in the West, began to shift eastwards.¹⁵ This marked the beginning of a transnational alliance that established a new anti-Soviet frontline of the “Second Cold War”, which, under the impact of the increasing Western attention to human rights violations in communist Europe as well as the 1979 invasion in Afghanistan by Soviet troops, put an end to the era of East-West détente.

The network of Estonian exile organizations with its main hubs in Sweden and North America had been designed for the systematic collection and dissemination of uncensored information from behind the Iron Curtain, not for active interference in Soviet domestic politics. In view of the efficiency of the KGB and the risk of infiltration, which had led to a disaster in the 1950s, when Western intelligence services tried to smuggle Baltic spies across the Soviet border via Sweden,¹⁶ Estonian exiles consciously avoided engaging in clandestine operations taking place in Soviet Estonia itself. This attitude remained unaltered even in the late 1970s, when Estonian dissidents started to act openly, counting on the protection offered by Western public opinion and the Helsinki Watch Groups. The arrest of the leadership of Estonia’s dissident underground and the subsequent show trial in autumn 1975, a direct result of the publication of the memorandum to the UN in the West,¹⁷ had taught the political leaders of the Estonian exile community an important lesson. Any ill-considered action contained the risk of seriously endangering the dissidents’ personal safety.¹⁸

This rather passive stance was challenged by the appearance of a new figure on the stage of exile politics. The unexpected political comeback of the retired businessman Ants Kippar, who had resigned from his activities in Stockholm’s Estonian organizations decades earlier after an alleged electoral fraud, led to a major twist in exile–homeland relations. In 1977, Kippar had gathered a small group of second-generation exile Estonians in order to form an aid organization for imprisoned Estonian dissidents. One year later, the Relief Center for Estonian Prisoners

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of Conscience was officially established. The organization aimed at delivering humanitarian aid to convicted dissidents serving their sentences in central Russian labor camps, as well as to their families back in Estonia. Moreover, it aspired to become an information center on ongoing human rights violations in the Soviet Union.¹⁹ Soon, however, the Relief Center became directly involved in clandestine operations inside the Soviet Union itself as the first exile organization that sought and found contact with the core of the Soviet Estonian dissident movement.

In the aftermath of the 1975 trial against the first generation of Soviet Estonian dissidents, a new network of activists had tried to mobilize the republican intelligentsia as well as representatives of Estonia's religious and ethnic minorities in order to establish a popular front against Soviet rule. Yet it turned out that the fears of repression were still strong enough to prevent an overwhelming majority of the Soviet Estonian elites from engaging in oppositional politics.²⁰ From the late 1970s onwards, the resurrected Estonian dissident movement thus gathered around a small circle of released political prisoners, who would form the backbone of nationalist opposition for years to come. Together with a number of younger men and women, a new generation of oppositional activists, the former prisoners of conscience focused on informing an international public on systematic human rights violations in Estonia and other parts of the Soviet Union. Ants Kippar's Relief Center quickly developed into an important hub for the dissemination of up-to-date information. Via Finnish couriers, who maintained close links to Kippar in Stockholm, the Relief Center had managed to establish functioning communication channels with Estonian dissidents in Tallinn.²¹ Thus, the organization could soon claim the status of the major Western partner of the anti-Soviet opposition in the Estonian SSR, a statement reinforced by the fact that one of the Relief Center's members was a recently emigrated Estonian dissident himself.²²

The close cooperation between the dissidents and the Relief Center marked a first crucial step towards a convergence of homeland and exile forces into coordinated opposition to the Soviet occupation and hence against the geopolitical status quo of postwar Europe. Although the clandestine network involved merely a small number of activists on each side of the Iron Curtain, it proved to be highly effective. By the turn of the decade, Kippar and his assistants had established a well-functioning courier system that facilitated a reasonably rapid flow of uncensored information between Stockholm and Tallinn. Helsinki was the crucial hub of this communication network, given that the intermediary activities were mainly carried out by Finnish tourists.²³ The ferry across the Gulf of Finland was ideal for smuggling shorter messages, usually typed on interlining cloth and sewn into the couriers' clothes,²⁴ across the Soviet border. Longer

documents and underground publications, by contrast, posed a greater logistical challenge. Microfilms turned out to be a convenient and easily concealable medium for smuggling appeals addressed to Western governments or international organizations and samizdat writings, such as the underground chronicle *Some additions to the free flow of thoughts and news in Estonia*, to Stockholm. The main channel for smuggling microfilms was provided by the commitment of a number of Swedish and American correspondents in Moscow, who agreed to organize the transfer to the Relief Center, from which the information reached the Western media.²⁵ Due to the freedom of movement inside the Soviet Union, the dissidents could frequently travel to Moscow to meet up with the journalists, hand over the microfilms, and share the latest news about developments in Estonia.²⁶

Ants Kippar's devotion to the cause of the Soviet Estonian dissidents significantly facilitated the establishment of a secret, but reliable communication system between Soviet Estonia and the West. Its existence was a crucial advantage for the protagonists of anti-Soviet opposition, who operated in difficult conditions. Printing equipment was lacking and it was, as everywhere else in the Soviet Union, hard to access unregistered and, thus, untraceable typewriters, which made any large-scale reproduction of samizdat

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writings practically impossible. Yet, due to Kippar's excellent contacts among the staff of Western broadcasting stations such as Radio Free Europe or the Voice of America, the dissemination of uncensored information even within Estonia itself was considerably accelerated via its transmission back to the Soviet Union.²⁷ The Relief Center thus played a crucial role for channeling news and uncensored information across the Iron Curtain, which turned Kippar himself into a well-informed, much-cited source for media reports on the current situation in the Baltics. It is largely due to this symbiosis of people and groups operating in exile and the homeland that Estonian experiences were noticed in the West and integrated into the post-Helsinki discourses on human rights in the early 1980s.²⁸

THE OVERALL REACTIONS among the Estonian exile community to Kippar's activities were, nevertheless, mixed. While the dissidents highly appreciated his pragmatic and effective support,²⁹ direct interference in Soviet affairs remained a controversial issue, especially in view of the obvious risk of jeopardizing the well-being of the dissidents involved. Indeed, the KGB turned out to be utterly well informed about the secret communication channels, due both to successful infiltration and to the blackmailing of couriers.³⁰ In addition, the systematic interception of phone calls between Kippar and his contacts in Estonia had delivered useful information.³¹ General concerns about the strategy of the Relief Center proved to be justified when the KGB



Baltic Institute's first two conferences, at Hässelby Castle, 1971, and in Stockholm in 1973.

launched a second wave of arrests in Estonia. During the political trials of 1981 and 1983, which essentially ended the era of Soviet Estonian dissent, communication with Kippar figured among the primary charges brought against the accused activists.³²

The critics of Kippar's political commitment touched upon a whole array of issues. One of them was the narrow focus on a marginal group of radical dissidents, which, according to Arvo Horm, a prominent exile politician from Sweden, was highly problematic. "The national resistance of the Estonian nation in the homeland," he argued, "is much broader, deeper, more open, and considerably more diverse than Kippar currently is presenting it to the Estonians abroad."³³ The Relief Center was accused of having monopolized and unnecessarily limited the political dialogue between the exile community and Soviet Estonian society. It was, in Horm's opinion, the obvious risk of communicating with Kippar and his Relief Center that had induced the Soviet Estonian intelligentsia, which was generally unwilling to cooperate with dissidents, to refrain from establishing durable contacts with the Estonian communities in the West.³⁴

By the beginning of the 1980s, however, a group of less radical exile activists from Sweden was already about to establish a parallel channel of communication with the home country. In contrast to Kippar's activities, which relied upon conspiracy and clandestine networks, their vision of a dialogue between exile and homeland was inspired by the spirit of European *détente*. The overarching goal was to bridge the gap to the Soviet Estonian intelligentsia via the official channels of Swedish-Soviet cultural diplomacy. Upon the Kremlin's approval, Swedish and Soviet Baltic authorities had signed bilateral agreements on fostering cultural exchange.³⁵ The major driving force behind their implementation were Baltic scholars and intellectuals in Sweden, who, covered by the academic and cultural institutions they worked for, succeeded in initiating a broad range of Swedish-Baltic projects. By transferring the organizational responsibility for the bilateral cultural cooperation to Swedish authorities and institutions, they managed to evade the propagandistic element which was characteristic of events hosted by the Soviet embassy.³⁶ Academic conferences, guest lectures, and cultural and artistic events offered a platform on which the Soviet Estonian intelligentsia was given the possibil-

ity of engaging in a broader dialogue with their compatriots in neutral Sweden. The numerous informal encounters that resulted from the cultural dialogue across the Baltic Sea were at least as significant for the gradual convergence of oppositional thought on both sides of the Iron Curtain as the transnational networks of the Soviet Estonian dissidents.

THE BALTIC INSTITUTE, an independent institution founded in 1970, and the Center for Baltic Studies, established ten years later by Baltic exiles at Stockholm University, were the main flagships of the official cooperation between representatives of Baltic cultural and academic life both in exile and at home. Established in a joint effort by Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians in Sweden, the Baltic Institute was primarily supposed to foster an "objective" discourse on Baltic issues, based on thorough scholarly research. A politically more dogmatic faction among the Baltic exile communities had initially insisted on transforming the institution into another anti-Soviet battle organization and categorically rejected any cooperation with scholars from the occupied homelands.³⁷ However, the moderate forces eventually succeeded in enforcing their vision of the Baltic Institute as a non-political institution whose primary official task it was to foster the rapprochement between the blocs in the spirit of the Helsinki Final Act. The election of a Swedish scholar as head of the Baltic Institute reaffirmed the new course, which kept a safe distance from the anti-Soviet credo of the Baltic exile community. It could thus officially figure as a Swedish institution, which considerably facilitated cooperation with the authorities in the Soviet Baltic republics.³⁸

A major recurring event that manifested the Soviet leadership's new approach to East-West cooperation, the biannual international conference on Baltic Studies, had originally been a brainchild of the Baltic Institute, but was hosted by the Center for Baltic Studies from 1981 onwards. The sixth conference, held that year at Hässelby Castle outside Stockholm, was the first to welcome scholars from the Soviet Baltic republics among its participants.³⁹ As the organizers consciously avoided sensitive topics such as Baltic statehood in the interwar era, the conferences could develop into a forum where scholars from institu-



August 23, 1989, approximately two million people joined hands, forming a human chain from Tallinn through Riga to Vilnius, spanning 600 kilometers, or 430 miles.



tions such as the Soviet Estonian Academy of Science or Tartu University could establish personal contacts with colleagues and compatriots in the West. The lively exchange of ideas and opinions was facilitated by the possibility of inviting guest researchers from the Baltic republics to Sweden for a period up to several months, which was organized and coordinated by Stockholm University, acting in the name of the Center for Baltic Studies.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, there was still a considerable amount of distrust among Estonian exiles, especially in North America, where the geographical distance amplified the general skepticism against any form of official cooperation with Soviet authorities. Hence, the participation of Soviet Estonian scholars at the Baltic conferences in Stockholm was an issue that provoked heated discussions, although most of the visiting scholars did not even belong to the Estonian Communist Party.⁴¹ Only in the mid-1980s, the atmosphere eventually changed in favor of broader academic contacts, as one of the visiting scholars reported back to the Soviet Estonian authorities.⁴²

THE POINTEDLY NON-POLITICAL nature of the cultural and scholarly exchange notwithstanding, there was a hidden political agenda behind the ambition of Baltic scholars in Sweden to establish long-lasting channels of communication across the Baltic Sea. The strategy resembled the concept of ‘change through rapprochement’, the motor of East-West détente from the late 1960s onwards. “We know that a liberation by American tanks etc. is utopian,” as representatives of the Baltic Institute wrote in 1979. “[T]he future resurrection of national sovereignty has to be achieved via the corruption of the communist regimes (including Moscow) and a liberation from within (...).” A broader range of contacts between the Soviet Baltic republics and the West was supposed to accelerate this process.⁴³ That was the subversive aspect of this new form of exile–homeland communication, which at an early stage caused Soviet propaganda to accuse the Baltic organizers in Sweden of using cultural and scholarly dialogue as a “sophisticated smoke screen” for covering up their anti-Soviet agenda.⁴⁴ By the early 1980s, however, interaction between

exile and homeland had been intense enough to reveal that the ideological war was lost in the Estonian SSR, at least for the Soviet leadership.⁴⁵ There was no need to disseminate anti-Soviet propaganda among the visiting scholars and artists who came to Sweden in the framework of the official cultural and academic exchange, despite their apparent political conformism. The cooperation between Estonian scholars and intellectuals across the Iron Curtain was, as the prominent exile publicist Andres Küng put it, rather supposed to provide an intellectual ‘breathing space’ for the Soviet Estonian intelligentsia. In the eyes of a growing number of Estonian exiles in Sweden, this benefit justified the cooperation with Soviet Estonian authorities as an “inevitable communication channel”.⁴⁶

The credit for having turned Sweden into the country with most official links to Soviet Estonia after Finland in the pre-perestroika era belongs to a large degree to the activists behind the Baltic Institute and the Center for Baltic Studies.⁴⁷ Taking into account the additional significance of the Swedish connection for the underground opposition in Soviet Estonia, it becomes clear that the interaction between Estonian exiles in Sweden and their homeland had a dual political profile. Both the anti-Soviet dissident movement and leading representatives of Estonia’s intellectual elite, who despite their reluctance to participate in oppositional manifestations still functioned as a traditional bearer of Estonian nationalism, were in various ways connected to the anti-Soviet exile community. Only with the emergence of a mass-based nationalist movement in the second half of the 1980s did the two isolated strands of active and passive opposition against Russification and Sovietization eventually join forces. This also led to the convergence of the various channels between Soviet Estonia and the West into a much broader web of exile–homeland cooperation, which had a decisive impact on the mobilization of an internationally well-interconnected secessionist movement.

Mikhail Gorbachev’s perestroika changed the Soviet system beyond recognition, introducing “elements of capitalism, the rapprochement with the West and the re-legitimation of national

identity”.⁴⁸ The Baltic peoples greeted the ongoing reformation and liberalization of the system with particular enthusiasm, which gradually spread to the Party nomenklatura and turned out to be impossible to stifle when a conservative turn in Moscow aimed at saving the unity of the disintegrating Soviet Empire. In view of the unexpected renaissance of an outspokenly nationalist rhetoric that evolved under the impact of glasnost in Soviet Estonia, relations between the homeland society and the Estonian communities in the West fundamentally changed. The rapprochement between exile and homeland in the pre-perestroika years had been a complicated process. The various strategies of bridging the mental gap between Estonians on both sides of the Iron Curtain had never been uncontested among the Estonian exiles, neither the Relief Center’s attempts to support anti-Soviet subversion nor the exile intelligentsia’s vision of establishing a dialogue with Soviet Estonian elites. Yet, with the onset of the Estonian emancipation from the imperial center in Moscow, the remarkable mobilization of the exile community bore witness to the successful “reunification of language”⁴⁹ that the years of rapprochement nevertheless had accomplished.

TRAVELLING TO THE WEST was considerably facilitated for Soviet citizens from the late 1980s onwards and the KGB gradually lost control over the rapidly developing, multi-layered network of contacts between Soviet Estonia and the outside world. Soon, “émigré influences on Soviet internal developments boomed” and fostered lively political, economic, scholarly, and cultural exchange between the Estonian SSR and Estonians in the West.⁵⁰ The decisive turning point was the reactivation of groups with a distinct pro-independence profile, which stemmed from the dissident movement. In 1987, a group of former political prisoners, among them those who in the early 1980s had closely cooperated with the Relief Center in Stockholm, started the so-called Estonian Group on the Publication of the Molotov-Ribbentrop-Pact, on whose secret protocol the Soviet occupation of the Baltic states in 1940 had been based. This was echoed by the establishment of a local offshoot in Stockholm by a circle of Estonian exiles, which functioned as the organization’s official representation in the West.⁵¹ Activists on both sides of the Iron Curtain were now able to coordinate public manifestations, which illustrated the efficiency of exile–homeland communication and echoed the networking activities between Kippar and the dissident movement. The Relief Center was still operating under the leadership of Jaak Jürriado, who had taken over after the death of Ants Kippar in early 1987. In view of the formation of a mass-based nationalist movement in Estonia, the organization redirected its activities towards supplying the most radical faction, which stemmed from the dissident movement, with technical equipment. With the financial support of US organizations, the exile community in North America, and Finnish sponsors,

the Relief Centre coordinated the still officially illegal transport of cameras, tape recorders, neck-microphones, and slide films across the Gulf of Finland in order to enable its allies “to collect and give truthful information to the Estonian people”.⁵² As early as 1988, the first computers reached the leadership of the independence movement together with maintenance parts and software, again via smuggling channels in order to evade an official registration of the equipment by the KGB and the resulting undesired consequences in case of a restorative political turn. The participating Estonian activists in Stockholm even worked out a strategy of sending the technical equipment out to Helsinki for maintenance, after which it was channeled back to Estonia.⁵³

The Soviet Estonian intelligentsia, which early on had been “Gorbachev’s constituency of support” for the implementation of political reforms,⁵⁴ initially supported a less radical stance and opted for close cooperation with the Estonian Communist Party. However, Estonia’s scholarly and cultural elites soon developed an increasingly nationalist agenda, which also affected the Party nomenklatura and increasingly marginalized the faction of loyal communists. Eventually, the majority of Party bureaucrats joined the Estonian Popular Front. Many of the leading protagonists of the Popular Front, which supported quickly expanding visions of national autonomy for Soviet Estonia, belonged to the humanistic intelligentsia, which since the early 1980s had maintained close contacts with the exile community in Sweden. The close communication continued in the late 1980s and extended to the Estonian communities in North America, which is reflected in the frequent trips of Popular Front lead-

ers to Sweden, the US and Canada from 1988 onwards. Up to Estonia’s secession from the Soviet Union in August 1991, the originally moderate faction of the nationalist movement gradually adopted the “symbols and slogans” of the political exiles. This contributed to bridging the gap between opposition leaders with roots in the Communist Party and the masses of the anti-Soviet exile community in the West.⁵⁵

The genesis of the dialogue between the exile communities and

the homeland society, which started from individual visits in the late 1960s and reached a much broader scale during the last decade of Soviet rule in Estonia, illustrates the shifting and, at times, ambiguous nature of the Iron Curtain. Up to the demise of the Soviet Union, the elaborate system of fortifying and guarding the physical borders remained intact – between 1947 and 1989, there were only fifteen registered cases of successful escape from Soviet Estonia across the Baltic Sea.⁵⁶ Yet, with the onset of détente, the much more intricate and multileveled pattern of East-West communication became increasingly difficult to monitor, even for a state in which the secret police had driven the surveillance of the population and foreign visitors to perfection. As many earlier studies on unofficial interaction between the

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blocs have confirmed, uncensored information and ideas travelled across the most fortified state borders, which eventually had a long-lasting impact even on rather closed societies such as Soviet Estonia. In this context, the existence of well-integrated and interconnected Estonian communities in the West cannot be overestimated as a decisive trigger for intensified communication with the non-Soviet orbit. The compatriots abroad served as a source of inspiration and moral support for nonconformist circles in the Estonian SSR, but also as a mouthpiece for the silenced political opposition in the occupied homeland. The dialogue that developed between exile and homeland, de facto uncontrollable in its entirety, replicated the ideological battles of the Cold War era, elevating “cold warfare” and political alliances to a level that still counts among the rather opaque aspects of European Cold War history.

While historiography has come a long way in critically reassessing the topos of the Iron Curtain and juxtaposing it with an astonishing variety of East-West contacts on different levels, Cold War historians still meet fundamental challenges when it comes to scrutinizing the political dimension of informal interaction between East and West, especially as far as reliable sources are concerned. In the case of the Estonian SSR, the loss of most of the KGB’s archives, which disappeared shortly before Estonia claimed independence, certainly hampers progress in the field. Yet, scattered copies of KGB files can be found in the archival collections of other Soviet Estonian state authorities and an impressive compilation has been published by the former dissident Arvo Pesti, shedding an interesting light on the dissident contacts to Stockholm in the early 1980s. A series of semi-structured, in-depth face-to-face interviews conducted with protagonists of the Estonian dissident movement and former exile activists has contributed insights that put this fragmented evidence into perspective. Juxtaposing the information obtained from the interviews with accessible sources and comparing the various stories has made it possible to get a quite clear picture of how politically motivated contacts between exile and homeland developed after the onset of détente. The vast archival documentation of political exile organizations as well as individual activists among the Estonian community in Sweden, which nowadays is stored in the State Archives of Estonia, has in this context turned out to be a veritable treasure chest. Throughout the Cold War, exile activists from behind the Iron Curtain acted as meticulous archivists, storing all accessible information about the ongoing development in their homelands and investing considerable time in analyzing and interpreting the communication across the bloc border. These still largely unexplored archives provide a good empirical basis for studies not only on the exile communities themselves, but also on East-West contacts in a much broader perspective.

AT THE END OF THE DAY, it is of course hard to measure the historical relevance of the informal interaction between Soviet Estonian society and the exile community, and especially its significance for the evolution of oppositional thought and action in the Estonian SSR. However, both the dissident networks and the

rapprochement between the exile and homeland intelligentsia indicate that every accessible channel was used to maintain an increasingly uncontrollable exchange of information and ideas between East and West, which was facilitated by the increasing willingness of the regime to encourage nongovernmental contacts to foreign nationals. In the long run, the opportunities of omitting the boundaries of censorship and rigid state control contributed to perforating the Iron Curtain and undermining the stability of Soviet rule, as did the innumerable encounters with Western tourists and the possibility of receiving Finnish television broadcasts in Estonia. Essentially, all these various networking processes confirm the hypothesis of Jussi Hanhimäki, who stated that “détente was instrumental in setting in motion the many processes that ultimately caused the collapse of the international system that it was supposed to have stabilized”.⁵⁷ ✖

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