

by **Kristina Jõekalda**
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“Almost every nationally-defined state turned autocratic and anti-pluralistic”

Kristina Jõekalda and Linda Kaljundi in a conversation with Joep Leerssen on past and present nationalism in Europe and beyond.

Joep Leerssen is most renowned for his research on comparative nationalism and the role of culture in constructing national identities. His monograph *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History*¹ has become a standard reference work in nationalism studies. Leerssen has been behind several transnational projects. In 2018 the massive “Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe”² was published under his editorship. In addition to the 1,490-page book it is also available in the form of a rich online platform, enabling the drawing of comparative analyses, map mobility, visualization of connections, etc. The encyclopedia builds on a statement that Leerssen has already defended in his previous studies, namely that cultural nationalism was as international and intertwined in essence as the Enlightenment or Romanticism. In other words, the Revival styles, increasing heritage conservation, historical scholarships, history painting, national art/music/literature were all part of this vast process,² the true extent of which is seldom realized.

In February 2019, Joep Leerssen visited Estonia and held a keynote speech at the conference “Symbolist Art and the Baltic Sea Region, 1880–1930”.³ The conference brought together international scholars who specialized in the Baltic region. It was connected with the exhibition “Wild Souls: Symbolism in the Art of the Baltic States”, first displayed in 2018 at the *Musée d’Orsay* in Paris and last winter at the Kumu Art Museum in Tallinn.

The conference brought into focus the periods of national romanticism and symbolism, which has not attracted much attention in the Baltic countries in recent decades. At the conference, the role of culture and visual culture in national and regional identity-building in particular became the key topic, and this also has a lot to say about the new wave of nationalism in the present world. It was in this context that an interview with Leerssen seemed appropriate – both in relation to symbolism and to more general cultural and political developments. It ought to be added here that the interview was conducted before the parliamentary elections in Estonia in March 2019 that brought the nationalist far-right to power, as the Conservative People’s Party of Estonia entered the government.

KRISTINA JÕEKALDA: The “Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe” has created a separate category for Baltic German culture. How would you situate it inside the “diaspora” of German cultures in

Joep Leerssen, Professor of European Studies at the University of Amsterdam, is one of the leading scholars of nationalism, having initiated several innovative projects and produced influential texts in the field.

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Europe? Do you think a phenomenon such as “Baltic German nationalism” exists? Or would you categorize it under what you have termed “failed nationalisms”⁴? Both options appear somewhat problematic, as there was never a Baltic German state formation to which this “archaeology” of the roots of cultural developments could lead up to. Yet, the cultural processes of the Baltic German community are in many ways similar to national awakenings, allowing theoretical help to be drawn from studies on nationalism.

JOEP LEERSSEN: I don’t think a Baltic German nationalism existed as such. Anyway, I didn’t mean to map nationalisms as separate units. What I map is what I call the “cultivation of culture”. So, I am looking at which cultural identities are articulated and transformed into an object of active identification and an inspiration for culture.

It struck me that in the Baltic region the complexity was very significant both in the horizontal interpenetration of spheres of influence or culture (Danish, German, Russian, Polish, Swedish) and in the vertical stratification of classes (the different hierarchical positions in society). As part of this complexity, the Baltic Germans should be factored in. It appears to me that, much as in the case of the Anglo-Irish, they are involved in the early part of a two-phase development. There is an early phase, heavily influenced by German romanticism, which is about the Middle Ages, the chivalric past. There, the Baltic Germans, as the landowners or bourgeois and literate class, were the only show in town, given the lack of literate self-expression of the native Estonian population. In the second phase, Estonians took charge of the nation-building process. But to see the German-dominated first phase as merely a precursor of a form of Estonian nationalism would be very finalistic. I did not want to go into this in the Encyclopedia.

When you introduced the idea to me of separating the articles about Baltic German culture from those about the Estonian or Latvian nationalist tradition, I agreed. At first I intended to subdivide the articles: what was done by what group of people, and what happened in the trickle down of bourgeois culture from the Learned Estonian Society (*Gelehrte Estnische Gesellschaft*) etc. to the forefathers of Estonian national culture and nationalism, Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald and Johann Voldemar Jannsen – because they are separate circles.

Later on, I realized that this also formed part of the many “hyphenated German” identities across Europe,

including Transylvanian and Tyrolean. These are not meaningful in an Estonian context but are meaningful in a German context. Austro-German identity, for example, is an inflected German identity with features of its own: this *kaiserlich* view of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Viennese culture, anti-Prussian attitudes, the concept of *kleinösterreichisch* in the course of the 19th century; they also developed their own form of antisemitism, their own form of German nationalism. And you realize that the German identity is extremely diverse and polycentric. And in this respect the Baltic Germans stand out as an interesting variant of Germanness. Their role, for instance, in transmitting the choral model of communal singing into the Baltic countries is very specific. So I was very happy that I was forced to create not a pigeonhole, but a “tag” for the Baltic Germans. These tags are like Formula 1 racing drivers – the same drivers can have multiple brands on their shirts. One person could be, for example, both a Belgian nationalist and a Flemish regionalist. These things are fluid –

they are never either-or matters, they are always intersectional in one person. With these tags we could map those intersections. I am glad I specified a Baltic German tag for what I think was a meaningful connection of German culture extraterritorially, outside the creation of the Reich and affecting a very small part of the population.

KRISTINA JÕEKALDA: The standard perspective of Estonian historians, art historians etc on their past is that of a culture of disruption,⁵ of an extremely multi-layered history. Perhaps this also partially explains why scholars sometimes see the earlier stages of history as something that is unreachable, bygone, over. There are not that many traditions that would overarch several generations or centuries; this could be one of the reasons why pre-war topics are so out of fashion among Estonian scholars. A high number of scholars are currently researching the Soviet era – critically and at a very high level indeed. But still, this strong preference for one historical – and very recent – epoch seems rather striking. Do you see a more general tendency towards the study of the most recent past in the Netherlands or internationally?

JOEP LEERSSEN: Some countries have experienced an unusual accumulation of different occupations and regimes. Poland has something like this – and so does Belgium. Estonia shares this extraordinary sense of discontinuity. But people usually select which period is more meaningful than another in light of their present situation and their most recent experiences. Memory itself is a product of history! It’s interesting to see what the history of the Estonian historical memory comprises; each regime did its own things with the past. Some Soviet movies were based on historical novels in a feudal-chivalric setting – such as the film *The Last Relic* [*Viimne reliikvia*, 1969], which amuses us nowadays with all the 1970s’ guys with their sideburns. But its depiction of the feudal period relies on the blood

“In the West, this recent-past nostalgia trend is very strongly tied to populist nationalism.”

and guts novel by Eduard Bornhöhe, written in the late 19th century. Behind the disruptions (each period breaking through earlier ones) there are also accumulations (each period adding a layer on top of older ones).

A question that I find very interesting is: are there any periods that people think they are *not* interested in, are *not* inspired by? Which periods do we think are boring? I notice that these days the real historicism of the 19th-century romantics, that “the past is a foreign country” attitude⁶ – lots of period color, chivalric culture, pre-technological life, the exoticism of long ago – is not as strong as it was. Instead, people are looking more at the recent past and despite the sufferings they have a strange nostalgia for it. This phenomenon is remarkably pan-European.

I recently came across a paper on Swedish populism, and how it glorifies the 1950s’ idea and ideology of national unity; it evokes Astrid Lindgren’s archetypal Sweden as re-remembered from our childhood. The nostalgia of our parent’s generation is also very pronounced in Holland. I think Estonia is just following a trend here, activating the recent past.

I’m not sure yet what to think of it. In the West, this recent-past nostalgia trend is very strongly tied to populist nationalism – old-school nationalism used to be historicist and look back further in time, but 20th-century populists basically evoke the circumstances of their childhood, before immigration and globalization. When states were states and you knew what to expect and life was simple; before we had the complexities of modernization and political correctness. It could be that there is a certain nostalgia for a simpler world.

For all its oppressive nature, the Soviet state was black and white, good or bad, resistance or oppression. It did not have the confused multifacetedness of the contemporary world. People are always recalling the stark simplicities of this period, and we also seem to yearn back to simpler technologies.

LINDA KALJUNDI: Paradoxically, the Soviet period also helped preserve the traditional approach to the national past and culture. While in the West the critical history of nationalism became commonplace in the 1970s–1980s, this didn’t happen in Eastern Europe. Being against national sovereignty, the Soviet politics of history and identity still favored many national symbols and “lieux de mémoire”: in Estonia, for example, the song festival or the idea that the core of national history is the centuries-long fight against the German overlords. The post-Soviet period has also witnessed the continuation of earlier national projects: for example, in 2017, the Estonian National Museum was opened in a major new building. How do we cope with the strong persistence of such traditions in the complex contemporary world?

JOEP LEERSSEN: I think this is very interesting. Such museums seem to address a deeply-felt need. I will give you one recent example from Holland first. There was a drive a few years ago to have a national history museum, which was really a 19th-century answer to a 21st-century question. A colleague of mine said, fine, if you want this, what you should exhibit are controversial things like this: in 1939, Hitler, having not yet invaded Belgium and Holland, escaped an assassination attempt, and as the head of state of a friendly neutral country, Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands sent Hitler a telegram, congratulating him on escaping the assassination attempt. The idea is, well, to show some of the ironies of history. Everyone in the Netherlands remembers Wilhelmina as the woman who in 1940 fled from Hitler and who, in London, encouraged the resistance against the Nazis. But one year previously she had been congratulating Hitler on surviving.

However, these museums often don’t do irony; they cater for a comforting, cocooning, simple, recent history that confirms people’s family stories, informal beliefs and pieties. And, at least if we were the oppressed, we know that we were the good guys and they were the bad guys. A simple world. Well, it wasn’t! The contradictions and ironies must be addressed. And specifically, yes, specifically in the new EU member states in Central Eastern Europe. There is the overriding master narrative: first, the Nazis came and when they left, we seamlessly went to Stalin, whereas the West received Marshall aid. And there was this “golden age”, after 1919, when there was a brief period of independence. If museums only cater for this master narrative, they will be a platform for propaganda rather than instruction.

What people should also be shown (like Wilhelmina’s telegram) is that every single one of these states, with the sole exception of Czechoslovakia, turned into an autocratic, strongman state. As much as António de Oliveira Salazar in Portugal, Francisco Franco in Spain, Józef Piłsudski in Poland, Konstantin Päts, Kārlis Ulmanis and Antanas Smetona here in the Baltic. Almost every single state turned anti-democratic. And when the Nazis and the Soviets marched in, they didn’t actually abolish democracy – it had already abolished itself. I admire the Latvian centenary exhibition in Riga, to name but one example, for showing these aspects very well, and very courageously. However, things are more fraught in Poland and Hungary.

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But the self-abolition of democracy in the Europe of the 1920s and early 1930s: that’s what we need to worry about in Europe now. What emerged in the reportedly “golden age” of the nation state and inter-war independence – intolerant, monoculturalistic nationalism. So, I think that the historians have to show the complexity of the past. Not a past that is simple, not as a cocoon, into which we can withdraw.

KRISTINA JÓEKALDA: How much emphasis would you place on the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in the new wave of studies on nationalism? In Estonia, and in much of Eastern Europe, society at large – and even scholarship – tends to be obsessed with the consequences of the Soviet collapse, the post-1990 condition. It is somehow expected that it will provide answers to all the social, cultural, theoretical changes and so on. Yet, in reality, we can see similar processes happening across the Western world and much of it was quite unaffected by the Soviet Union, as we know – not to such an extent, anyway.

JOEP LEERSSEN: Yes and no. Some fundamental stuff on nationalism was published before 1980. For example, Miroslav Hroch who wrote in the 1960s. He recently published his autobiography. It took some time for his writing to reach the West, but it did, thanks to Eric Hobsbawm and others. Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Anthony D. Smith – they all started in the 1970s-1980s.

In the pre-1989 West, we had a teleology that nationalism led to Auschwitz. In fact, people grew impatient with all these stories that “this is the run-up to Auschwitz”. What we got after the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe was an attempt at telling the story of nationalism as being not necessarily a bad thing. The resistance against Soviet hegemony entailed a revival of nationalism in the former Communist states or, let’s say, the resurgence of nationalism as a dominant ideology in the

post-Communist states.

At the same time, we also see a revival of anti-modernism. A number of theoreticians of nationalism, such as Azar Gat and Caspar Hirschi, trace nationalism back to the Middle Ages or even further (against the modernist constructivism that had come to dominate Western theory in the 1980s), and in the same gesture they want to liberate nationalism from the one-track teleology that it leads to Auschwitz. Many nationalism scholars now work on the assumption that a state needs the cultural solidarity of its citizens. This anti-modernist turn in the 1990s and early 2000s: I see that as being partly determined by the fall of Communism.

KRISTINA JÓEKALDA: Can I ask a more personal question in this regard, about your personal background and the effects of living in a foreign country as eye-openers for your scholarly work? To what extent would you say in retrospect that it has influenced your research – the questions you have come to ask?

JOEP LEERSSEN: No, it was rather the other way around. I ended up living abroad and having a bilingual family, because I was interested in comparative studies before that. I am from a small village on the Dutch-Belgian border, in the middle of the triangle between Maastricht-Aachen-Liège, where we speak a dialect that is incomprehensible to most. It lies 200 km from The Hague, but Brussels, Cologne and Luxembourg are only around 100 km away.

I grew up in a situation in which I realized that national identities were much more complex and fluid than described in school books, and that you could be a citizen of a country that you are not actually very involved in, that you could be culturally and socially much closer to the people across the border than the people in your own country. This is why I decided, when I graduated from school, that I didn’t want to study in Holland. I felt that this was a constricting singular identity. I had the privilege of being able to study either in Liège or Aachen and perfect my German or French in the process, as well as be closer to my village than if I had studied in either Leiden or Utrecht. So I went to Aachen, where I studied comparative literature, because I was always interested in these fault lines that run through identities. The experience of not really belonging to any singular, undivided identity was very fundamental to me. It went on from there: the comparatist study programme at Aachen was a bit obsessed with French-German relations and I wanted to explore something outside that binary bubble. Ireland was a bicultural country where, even in Cold War Western Europe, nationalism manifested itself violently. And there I met the woman who is now my wife as well as my colleague, Ann Rigney; the personal and the national are entangled in many ways.

It also meant that I have become a very committed academic. I belong to the *civitas academica*, and feel at home at any university, whether in Aachen or Dublin... That is romantic, of course. You know the beginning of Umberto Eco’s “The Name of the Rose” when the Benedictine monk knocks on the door – he is from a different Benedictine monastery, but from the same order, and he is invited in. You are in this network: whenever I’m in a university library, I feel at home – I know this is where I belong. In a way, this is a much stronger identity than a national one.

LINDA KALJUNDI: In your academic life, you have devoted much time to various collaborative projects

involving scholars from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds. I would suspect that this has also made you think about how to build a better dialogue between the Western and Eastern understanding of nationalism — as the approach is very different, especially on the popular level.

JOEP LEERSSEN: This is a very fraught question. If you grow up and attend school and university in Western Europe, you study nationalism in terms of the sort of thing that led to Auschwitz, the sort of thing that became dictatorial. In the perception of people from Eastern and Central Europe, nationalism is instead seen as something that was repressed by Stalin, or by Hitler. Nationalism as something that was good before dictatorship. Nowadays, we have a third inflection, which is also strong in Ireland: nationalism is what led the colonies to emancipate themselves from their hegemony. Scholars from different backgrounds tend to bring these assumptions with them.

For many reasons, a very fundamental question for the study of nationalism is: Is it a “Good Thing” or a “Bad Thing?” Naive as it may sound, that’s the core of it! The basic asymmetry is that nationalism is a Bad Thing, mainly for people in the Franco-German tradition, and also for people from the great diaspora tradition of scholars – Isaiah Berlin, Hans Kohn or Ernest Gellner, who was a Hungarian, Elie Kedourie who was born in Iraq, people who were transnational in their own lives.

Now we see a resurgence of people who think that nationalism is not necessarily a Bad Thing. We see this also in its political application. It is sometimes argued that anti-nationalism is just a form of elitist, cosmopolitan political correctness and that there is nothing wrong about protecting Europe from Islamic immigrants, etc. The ultimate exponent of this view is Hungary.

I look at this with horror. My parents’ experiences during the Nazi occupation, everything I learned in my homeland, my borderland, my Franco-German scholarly formation, tells me that nationalism is a political pathology, even if you remove Franco, Mussolini, Hitler, Horthy and the other known dictators from the picture. Almost every nationally-defined state turned autocratic and anti-pluralistic.

But this may not make any sense to people in Central and Eastern Europe, when told by a Dutchman. So, I think intellectuals in Central and Eastern Europe face a massive task. All of Europe is post-totalitarian, but the liberation from totalitarianism came in two waves half a century apart. Understandably, the first response to the end of totalitarianism was the celebration of the liberated community with its independence regained. We experienced this in Holland. Holland was never more nationalistic than in 1947, when the entire country was united in its hatred of the foreign Nazis who had occupied it. I was born in 1955 and this is part of my parents’ family stories – and I know the feeling. But in the West, we got it out of our system during the Vietnam War, with the new generation 20 years after 1945. The Germans started asking their parents: “What did you do during the war?” This was the real de-Nazification of Germany, when the baby boomers began questioning their parents about their own role in the war. People started realizing that it was not all evil foreigners and heroic nationalists. They discovered that the world was more complicated than that. And Holland, for instance, did terrible things in Indonesia within three years of being liberated from the Nazis. Examples such as this make you see the complexities of history.

Now, do the math when we apply this to Central or Eastern Europe. The generational delay, between the end of the dictatorship and the coming of age of the second generation, took roughly 25 years after 1945. How long ago was 1990? It’s about time that young people reassess the past regimes! It’s a generational thing. The younger generation should begin to question the narratives of the older generation. It’s something they’ll have to do for themselves. We have to move beyond the black-and-white, melodramatically schematized narratives that a national “we” group was blameless but victimized by evil Others. History is much more complex and contradictory, and the nation is not the only lens for viewing and making sense of the past. But if it’s the European Union, or Jean-Claude Juncker or Joep Leerssen telling you this, it’s not going to work. It’s going to be counterproductive and will only provoke with its complacency. This is something that local scholars ought to be doing! I should add that among young academics this has actually already been achieved. I am full of admiration for the way young academics from post-Communist countries were very quick to catch up – even by the mid-1990s, and often in difficult circumstances. The role of the Central European University was a very positive one during this process.

LINDA KALJUNDI: **What could prospective topics be in the study of nationalism? On the one hand, the amount of academic research produced on nationalism is huge. For a while, nationalism certainly appeared to be an over-studied subject. On the other hand, the current rise of nationalism has made it highly relevant again. Do you think that borderlands such as Estonia could have something to add here? What are the topics that could also be of interest to a global audience?**

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KRISTINA JÕEKALDA: And continuing from here, you have been to Estonia several times in the past decade, either giving talks at conferences or seminars for doctoral students. What is your general impression of the “health” of Baltic or Estonian humanities, and the amount of nationalism in them? Is there anything alarming here?

JOEP LEERSSEN: The last question is the easiest. As long as Estonia maintains its present state of political independence and economic affluence, relatively speaking, I think it is an enviable country. If the climate was a little warmer, it would be the best country in Europe... And I’m not saying that to ingratiate myself, I really feel it. Estonia is by no means “over-studied” yet, there is exciting new ground for historians to break. All the various regimes, all the interactions, all the complexities are only beginning to be mapped. So, there’s plenty of work to do. There’s an incredible combination of really complex, massive corpuses of cultural documentation, in one form or another, and very highly educated and a very healthy mix transgenerationally between established and younger scholars. Together with Slovenia, I think Estonia is one of the healthiest countries in Europe for fresh historical scholarship.

Returning to the question, what to do with nationalism studies in general – certainly in countries in which most of the archives have been thoroughly mapped, we know what is what, and the heroic fresh archival discoveries are rather scarce.

Why write new books about nationalism? There is a problem with the endless repetition between traditionalist and modernist treatments. What I particularly dislike is that this is now also becoming a separation of expertise, where you have certain people studying post-1800 developments and other people focusing on early modern developments, neither of them being familiar with what went on before and after 1800. And early modernists are saying, this is what happened in the early modern period, and that is how the nation came to be, and so this is nationalism. And people researching the 19th century are saying, this is what happened in the 19th century – it is all modernity before everything became different. There is no way they can actually compare their respective insights.

It has only recently become an ideological debate. The debate is driven by the political position of nationalism in public politics. There is a political demand for nation-affirming stories, and the nation-criticizing or nation-debunking stories are now actively discouraged, also by funding agencies. The nationalism scholar, Anne-Marie Thiesse, is very concerned about the future of nationalism studies in France. This is because the funding agencies say either, nationalism is something German – we don’t do that, or, if you’re interested in nationalism, you are a nationalist yourself. A critical study of French nationalism is not on the agenda for some reason. So this is worrying.

What possible future is there? At the moment, what I really like is the transnational approach, and in particular its multi-scalar element. I’m extremely interested in seeing how the history of identities interacts at nesting levels from large scale to small scale: with macro identities such as Baltic, national identities such as Estonian, regional and micro-regional identities such as Latgalian or Samogitian, and urban identities such as Tallinn or Riga, etc.

Cities are also concatenated networks, bound by larger patterns. The multi-scalar view is really opening up new things. At the moment, I’m interested in the urban cultures of the period of Dutch nation formation in the 19th century – Luxembourg, Liège and Maastricht. These cities ended up in three different countries, but the pre-1860 intellectuals all went to the university of Liège. They had mixed feelings about the various national identities that were crystallizing at the time and also pursued a localist tradition. So I would very much like an urban study of nationalism. Nationalists often claim to speak on behalf of the rural peasantry but, essentially, they are city-based and do their own middle-class municipal thing at the same time. At a macroregional scale, a phenomenon such as World Fairs, and the projection of regional and national identities in a mercantilist and consumerist global modernity is intriguing.

There are still exciting prospects. I think that what Ann Rigney is doing with memory studies is also opening very exciting perspectives, looking at how the history of memory and the history of events interact. And there is, of course, the hugely unexplored topic of the transnational connections in “phase-A” nationalism in the extra-European colonies – for example, the Bengal Renaissance.

LINDA KALJUNDI: In your keynote talk “Neo-Romanticism at the Fin de Siècle: Symbolism and National Identity”, you mentioned the revival and appropriation of nationalist romanticist culture by today’s far-right groups. Could you elaborate a bit on this topic?

JOEP LEERSSEN: It worries me greatly. One thing I’m looking at the moment is the alt-right, the alternative right, particularly in the USA. There was a bit of a shock in America when Donald Trump identified himself as a nationalist. This is pretty unusual – Americans tend to identify themselves as patriots. The word “nationalism” is only used to

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refer to white supremacy, and for the people who still believed in the right of the southern states to secede from the US at the outset of the Civil War. It means that you define American identity in terms of your lineage, not in terms of your future. So people were genuinely shocked when Donald Trump normalized this term in the American political discourse.

And I have since noted that groups between the Eurosceptic conservative parties and the alt-right – there is a sliding scale here – are beginning to identify as nationalist, and they identify this term in the sense it was used by proto-Fascist intellectuals like Maurice Barrès. And they buy into what they call the conservative revolution. (This phrase was used in the 1950s to sanitize the tradition of Fascist- or Nazi-collaborating intellectuals.) The New Right in Europe spans a spectrum from illiberal political parties (the various unilateralist xenophobic ones between Le Pen and Orbán) to neo-Fascist and neo-Nazi groups like the French anti-immigration movement "Génération Identitaire" and the Italian "CasaPound". They now no longer self-identify as anti-elite or anti-Islamic, but as "nationalist". The extreme militant right, those groups that are moving to the neo-Nazi alt-right, sometimes call themselves "romantic nationalist", meaning they experience their nationalism emotionally. Neo-Nazi rock bands are now calling themselves "romantic nationalist". This is very worrying...

At the same time, it also shows that when we research symbolist painters and poets in the 1880s, we're not dealing with innocent aesthetic people producing beautiful stuff. There is a sinister element in there. It has been dormant and latent for a number of years; it was an absolute taboo in Western Europe after the Nazi manifestation of racial nationalism, but it is resurging.

LINDA KALJUNDI: Do you think they will also bring historical nationalist romanticist books, images, music, etc. back into circulation?

JOEP LEERSSEN: Yes, they will, but they'll do it in a dumbed-down, name-dropping way. As gestures, soundbites, icons. Romantic nationalists wrote long, boring and terribly outdated texts and no skinhead these days has the patience to read them. But they like to post a photo and a quote from these authors on their website because they know the name and sympathize. For instance, in Italy, there is an organization called "CasaPound", named after the pro-Fascist poet Ezra Pound, who was locked up after the war for his endorsement of Mussolini. I don't think a single member of CasaPound has read any line by this poet, because it is very demanding. Sometimes little video clips are posted, for instance, 20 seconds from D. W. Griffith's 1915 movie *The Birth of a Nation*, but not the whole movie. A lot of recycling of the 19th century is going on, but only in small samples, as a superficial acknowledgement.

There are bad as well as good things about this. Because for every piece of toxic cultural heritage that is being retrieved for ideological purposes, there is also other, more positive stuff that is returning to life. What I really like about the developments of the last 20-30 years is that Europe is overcoming its Iron Curtain divisions and there is a larger shared memory of what happened before 1914. Thus, people realize that in 1910 there was a pan-European cultural continuum; the fin-de-siècle cultural unity, which was then lost with the First World War and the totalitarian dictatorships, but which is now slowly coming back. While we are rediscovering these nationalists, we are also rediscovering the fact that Europe had much more unity and mutual connections at the time.

LINDA KALJUNDI: In Tallinn, you also had the chance to see the exhibition "Wild Souls: Symbolism in the Art of the Baltic States". What are your impressions of this exhibition and what surprised you the most?

JOEP LEERSSEN: To begin with, I must say that I came here with certain misgivings because I was afraid that all of the Baltic states were celebrating 100 years and that this might be some form of collective identity-building for a Baltic block that is concerned about the proximity of Putin and wants to invent its own collective joint past, much like the Benelux. I was pleasantly surprised by the acknowledgement of how the symbolist gestures and repertoires were actually rather different in the three countries, and, at the same time, how enmeshed they were in the sort of symbolism and fin-de-siècle attitudes that I knew from Ireland, Britain, Catalonia and even Prague. It is very much part of Europe – these works belong together with Norway, Iceland and Ireland, as much as they belong together with each other. That struck me.


The second thing that struck me was the polarity between a very advanced bourgeois modernity in the people who produced the art, and the intense rusticism of the topics. A strong bridge between the country and the city.

Thirdly, the exhibition disproves the facile assumption that the periphery of Europe was somehow lagging behind the centers of Europe in terms of developing modernity. As these paintings show, in cultural exchanges, which spread epidemically across the continent, there is no center. Sometimes the "periphery" is ahead of the "center". Art is often edgier in the imperial provinces than in the imperial capitals. If there is any late start, or belatedness, there is also a very accelerated development. From the rustic provincialism of the 1860s-1870s, they were really on

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the front line of cutting-edge art scene by the 1890s-1900s; a very rapid development of aesthetic modernization was taking place.

LINDA KALJUNDI: The visual culture of symbolism and romantic nationalism is very transnational. Did you notice anything specific to the Baltic region in this regard — something that appears to differ from the symbolist art in other regions that you have seen before?

JOEP LEERSSEN: I remember the intense pre-occupation with the forest. The forest in other parts of Europe is usually represented as an uncanny place, outside the human comfort zone; here it also seems a refuge, a place of regeneration. And I was also struck by the extraordinary rejection of draftsmanship. The Belgian painter, Fernand Khnopff, or some of the Western Symbolists were very academic in their anatomical and perspectival correctness of their drawings. Here we can see much more abstract forms, much earlier on. I was deeply struck by Janis Rozentāls as a major artist — a real discovery for me. Something else I noticed was a particular form of seriousness — it might have been a very important and admirable period, but there does not appear to be much space for irony or humor. 

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Note: A shorter version of this interview was previously published in Estonian in *Sirp*⁸. Joep Leerssen's keynote talk "Neo-Romanticism at the Fin de Siècle: Symbolism and National Identity" is also available online at https://youtu.be/F6GCQHp_-a4.

references

- 1 Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam University Press, 2006). The Dutch first edition dates back to 1999.
- 2 *Encyclopedia of Romantic Nationalism in Europe*, 2 vols. Eds. Joep Leerssen, Anne Hilde van Baal, Jan Rock. (Amsterdam University Press, 2018). Online at <https://ernie.uva.nl/>. Accessed May 30, 2019.
- 3 See Joep Leerssen, Nationalism and the Cultivation of Culture, *Nations and Nationalism* (2006), vol. 12, no. 4: 572.
- 4 Organized by Kumu Art Museum and the Estonian Society of Art Historians and Curators, it was also the fourth joint conference of Baltic art historians. See the program: Art Museum of Estonia webpage, <https://kunstimuseum.ekm.ee/en/research/conferences-and-seminars-of-the-ame/symbolist-art-and-the-baltic-sea-region-18801930/>. Accessed 30 May, 2019.
- 5 Leerssen, *Nationalism and the Cultivation of Culture*, 2006: 564.
- 6 First theorized as such by Hasso Krull, *Katkestuse kultuur* [The Culture of Interruption]. (Tallinn: Vagabund, 1996).
- 7 Cf. David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge University Press, 1985).
- 8 Kristina Jõekalda and Linda Kaljundi, "XIX sajandi vastus XXI sajandi küsimusele". Rahvusluse mitmekihiline minevik, keeruline olevik. Intervjuu võrdleva kultuuriteadlase Joep Leersseniga [19th-Century Answer to a 21st-Century Question: The multilayered past and complex present of nationalism: Interview with the comparativist scholar of culture Joep Leerssen], in *Sirp*, June 21, 2019, no. 24 (3746), 5–7. Available at: <https://sirp.ee/si-artiklid/c9-sotsiaalia/xix-sajandi-vastus-xxi-sajandi-kusimusele/>. Accessed July 1, 2019.