



The Baltic Way human chain in 1989.

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How and why did Estonia succeed? Exploring the long-lasting grip of the Soviet period

Bakom och bortom järnriddån. De sovjetiska åren och frigörelsen i Baltikum och Ukraina

[Behind the Iron Curtain and Beyond. The Soviet Years and the Emancipation in the Baltics and Ukraine].
Li Bennich Björkman.
Stockholm: Appell förlag.
465 pages.

Li Bennich Björkman, Professor Skytteana of Eloquence and Government at Uppsala University, is the appropriate scholar to write the contemporary history of the three Baltic States. Bennich Björkman's chair was founded by the Swedish state counsellor Johan Skytte in Uppsala four hundred years ago. At the time Estonia had already become, and Livonia was in the process of becoming, a Swedish province. In 1632 Johan Skytte became the first chancellor of Tartu University in Estonia, which was founded on his initiative. The students came from Estonia and Livonia. Estonia and Livonia belong in the foundation process of early modern Sweden, the age of state chancellor Axel Oxenstierna.¹

Johan Skytte is the symbol of the kinship of Sweden, Estonia and Livonia. In 2007 a monument to him was erected in Tartu. Besides being the current scholarly heir of Johan Skytte, Professor Bennich-Björkman has a personal link to Estonia. Her mother was born in prewar Estonia. *Behind the Iron Curtain and Beyond. The Soviet Years and the Emancipation in the Baltics and Ukraine* is a comparative analysis of the transition of the three Baltic States and Ukraine from dictatorship to democracy. It is also a hermeneutical investigation of the states of mind of the different people who accomplished the transition. Simply put, the book is a comprehensive history of the contemporary political

history of the Baltic States and Ukraine. It is a blend of strict political science and good story telling. The analytical tools are neatly interwoven in the narration.

This lengthy introduction to a review may seem excessive. However, after having closely followed Bennich Björkman's presentation of the contemporary histories of the four states, I cannot help concluding that Estonia stands out as the third contemporary edition of the Swedish state that was formed in the seventeenth century, the second edition obviously being Finland. The siblings are different in many respects, but their shared ancestry is living history with agency.

According to Bennich-Björkman's criteria for the establishment of a democratic multiparty system and of a non-corrupt market economy, Latvia has been less successful than Estonia. The jury is still out concerning Lithuania. It is not evident whether it will join Estonia as a future-oriented society or remain hampered by the Soviet heritage of mess. In the first post-

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Soviet decades Ukraine showed similarities with Latvia. It was perhaps entering a more promising “Lithuanian” way before the Russian war of conquest. The author goes beyond these coarse generalizations. They are not value judgments but simply statements of the fact that the magnitude of the Soviet assault on civil society was great. Bennich-Björkman delivers a multifaceted picture of political struggles and the development of market economy in all the four states.

The crucial research question is expressed explicitly at the beginning of the book: how and why could Estonia succeed? The answer is reached through a systematic comparison between Estonia and the three less successful examples. They have not managed to follow the same track:

[...] Estonia swiftly developed that specific mixture of cooperation and conflict which is the trade mark of democratic policies at their best. Competition and struggle for power in conjunction with respect for rivals and cooperation according to the legal rules of the game. No noticeable political corruption, economic managers not attempting to capture the state, or to become the state. (pp. 10 f., my translation).

In order to explain why and how Estonia’ transition has been successful, Bennich-Björkman starts her comparative analysis with an overview of the Soviet period. It is an outright condemnation of the Soviet experience. It is characterized as “Out of many, one: seventy years of Soviet headache.” The author makes clear that the Soviet Union was a very peculiar entity. It was a territory with fixed external boundaries but it was neither a polity nor an economy. It was a society without politics, a dictatorship based upon forced labor and arbitrary distribution of goods to the population. Basically it was a continuation of pre-Petrine Russia, a society which most Russians accepted as natural. However, and this is what Bennich-Björkman’s history is all about, this society was experienced as alien by the non-Russian inhabitants of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, western Ukraine and Kyiv.



Night singing parties at Lauluväljaku 1988, Estonia.

PHOTO: JAAN KÜNNAP/WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

An obvious premise for Bennich-Björkman is that the native population of the three Baltic States and western Ukraine experienced the Soviet period as a Russian occupation of the homeland. It was self-evident that there must be resistance. The author makes clear that the resistance wasn’t primarily anti-Russian, but anti-Soviet, against the real-life consequences of the communist ambition to create Homo Sovieticus, the reduction of human beings to mere productive forces. The successful resistance was epitomized by the activities of the Estonian intelligentsia. In art, music, literature, poetry, drama, history, religion and through self-studies, all Soviet dimensions were externalized from ordinary life.

Natural scientists and engineers as well as economists helped create an ambience that was oriented not towards the past but the future. Estonians were prepared to meet the challenge of Gorbachev’s perestroika. In Estonia, the representatives of the ruling party were pragmatic. They mastered the art of double think. They might seem to have been opportunistic, even hypocritical, but they were realists. They functioned as a shield against the oppressors, i.e., the Russians and the true Soviet believers among their own kin. Much like their 13th century Japanese predecessors, the Estonians trod on the tiger’s tail and managed to avoid detection.² In due time they became recognized. In the perestroika period, Alexander Yakovlev as well as three Soviet philosophers pointed to the Estonians as the (only) people that were capable of implementing glasnost and perestroika: They should “pull the other territories out of their backwardness and stagnation”. The reason was that they were Protestants.³

Thanks to Bennich-Björkman’s approach of designing her study as an investigation of state building, it becomes obvious

that the Soviet Union's main characteristic was that it was a pre-modern state. Her book is a splendid and highly readable anthropological study of state building in primitive societies. She has met and discussed history, politics and economy with some fifty people, representatives of the party state, and intellectuals, i.e., agents of the status quo and agents of change. Above all in Estonia but to a certain degree also in Lithuania the boundaries were blurred between the two categories.

The first part of the analysis has the title "Behind the Iron curtain". People in the three Baltic Soviet republics proved capable of preserving informal institutions from the period when their countries had been real existing states in 1920–40. Western Ukraine also had an experience of having belonged to regular states in the same period (Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania). Estonia is characterized by the author as "a pragmatic survivor", Latvia as mutilated by "decades of frost" and Lithuania as "with the Vatican as lodestar". Ukraine is defined as "at the margin of Europe". This is a conscious pun, because the literal meaning of the word is "on the border" or "the end". Bennich-Björkman's manner of defining Ukraine implies that Russia is outside Europe, not in a banal way, geographically, but as a civilization.⁴

Bennich-Björkman's book is the result of twenty years research and extensive field work in the three Baltic States and Ukraine. She gives detailed descriptions of the environments of the meetings with her informants, of the local architecture in the capitals with their distinctive European medieval, Renaissance, Baroque and Art Nouveau buildings. In classical cafés she could meet with her interlocutors over coffee (and not over vodka, the usual Russian drink).

The book is an intellectual traveler's guide to the Baltic States and Ukraine. As has been hinted at above, Li Bennich-Björkman calls attention to the role of tradition when she notes the prominent role of certain cities as strongholds of existential resistance to the Soviet steamroller. The university town Tartu in Estonia, Kaunas with its Catholic seminar in Lithuania, and the university town Lviv in Ukraine were intellectual counterweights to the political capitals. This does not mean that intellectuals in Tallinn, Vilnius and Kyiv were idle, but the provincial cities went under the radar. Latvia was different. Riga was not only the capital; it was also the site of the university. Latvia stands out as least resistant against the Soviet repressive conformity. There was no important counterforce in the country.

Before 1939 Lviv had been a vibrant intellectual center of Austrian-German, Polish and Jewish culture. After 1945, the Austrian Germans had left, the Jews had been exterminated and the Poles had been deported (many to turn up in Wrocław, from where the Germans had been deported). The new inhabitants were Ukrainian workers and peasants. However, the new inhabitants managed to re-animate the spirit of this arch central European city. It became a dynamo in Ukraine's striving to emerge as a European

country. The history of the place and not of the people became decisive.

The necessary condition for the epochal change in Estonia was the changes brought about by Michail Gorbachev and Alexander Yakovlev in Moscow, i.e., glasnost, perestroika and *novoye myshlenie* [new thinking]. However, as Li Bennich-Björkman can demonstrate through her comparative analysis, only Estonia possessed a domestic political culture of pragmatic cunning that made the country capable of rising from Soviet apathy. This is the whole gist of her analysis. Estonia's existential resistance was a continuous process. Once the Soviet Union began to falter, the Estonians were prepared to resume that history which had been brought to an abrupt end in 1940.

The sad and horrible fact is that the Russian president Vladimir Putin is against everything Western. Li Bennich Björkman rightly concludes that if all Russian speaking inhabitants had become citizens of Estonia and Latvia when these states resumed their sovereignty in 1991, "NATO membership would not have been accomplished when the Russian bear woke up again". ❌

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references

- 1 Gunnar Wetterberg, Axel Oxenstierna: makten och klokskapen [*Axel Oxenstierna: Power and Wisdom*] (Atlantis, 2010).
- 2 Cf. the movie by Akira Kurosawa from 1945.
- 3 Kristian Gerner, Stefan Hedlund, *The Baltic States and the End of the Soviet Empire* (Routledge 1993, 1997), 101.
- 4 The present review is written under the impact of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine. For the present reviewer it is odd to be forced to realize that Russia isn't a part of European civilization in a positive sense. In 2011 I published a book called *Ryssland. En europeiskt civilisationshistoria*. In 2022, the revised version was called simply *Rysslands historia*. It has an epilogue: "Rysslands avsked till den europeiska civilisationen" [Russia's goodbye to European civilization].