

## **CREATING CULTURAL CONTINUITY IN THE DOMESTIC REALM: THE CASE OF SOVIET ESTONIA\***

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The article discusses some possibilities for studying everyday culture under socialism, emphasizing the specific role of non-verbal culture-building in the domestic milieu. The analysis focuses on the creation and restoration of privacy as a strategy for coping with cultural trauma. Ethnographically documented creative activity of people demonstrates how, in a context where cultural traditions and political-economic changes collided, the Soviet reality was formed. The result was equally different from the socialist, as well as from the nationalist utopias.

In post-socialist historical and everyday discourse the Soviet time in Estonia is often described as a culture of disruption. Subjective visions of history, for example memoirs and written biographies also tend to reproduce such an approach. An understanding of the general ideologized nature of socialist culture and thereby, its division into two levels: on the one hand a public – dominating, hegemonic level, and on the other hand, a private – adapting or oppositional level – has become a stereotype. This is probably due to a vision of both Western sovietologists and Soviet ideologies who unanimously proclaimed centralized unity of the Soviet empire for many decades. At the same time, for ideological and political reasons, everyday life was seldom studied in an academically reliable manner by social scientists in East and Central Europe.

However, due to studies conducted in the past decade, it has become evident that ethnology of everyday life enables one to correct the stereotypical understanding of such a unitary world regulated by official standards, and suggest a more nuanced picture of the life-worlds of those decades. Already in the 1980s and early 1990s some Western anthropologists experienced socialist everyday life as

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particularistic and pluralistic to the point of complete disorganization, suggesting that it was more often individualistic and creative than deadened by totalitarian conformity.<sup>1</sup> Still, until today, the discourse on socialism and post-socialist transition is dominated by political, economic and historical aspects of the system, while relatively little has been written about daily experience in the system.

A common feature of many recent studies focusing on private life-worlds is the biographical perspective. Estonian ethnologist Ene Kõresaar suggests that the “biographical boom” that followed the collapse of the totalitarian system reflects the previous experience of a sharp separation between the private and the public in the socialist society.<sup>2</sup> Personal memories also played an important role in the process of reconstructing identity, especially national identity in the first years of re-establishing independence.<sup>3</sup>

In Estonian cultural studies, the analyses by E. Kõresaar, T. Anepaio and A. Aarelaid, examining the interpretation of history through memory, provide valuable insights into what it actually felt like living as an Estonian in the Soviet Union in the postwar decades.<sup>4</sup>

The present article discusses some possibilities of broadening the focus of studies on socialist everyday culture, emphasizing the specific source value and active role that material culture and milieu play in shaping the cultural space. Thereby, some alternative approaches to a narrative-centered study of Soviet-time cultural history are considered. It is presumed that the meaning, rhythm and intensity of the progress of everyday life in the Soviet period was not necessarily synchronic with the official and public scheme of history. Also, cultural continuity did not break up, but was reconstructed in a new manner. The article primarily focuses on privacy as a central value for Estonians, which was aimed for and expressed in the domestic sphere, and the various ways of creating and restoring privacy, used as a strategy for coping with the cultural trauma.

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. **Nielsen, F. S.** The Eye of the Whirlwind. Russian Identity and Soviet Nation-Building – Quests for Meaning in a Soviet Metropolis. – [http://www.anthrobase.com/Txt/N/Nielsen\\_F\\_S\\_03.htm](http://www.anthrobase.com/Txt/N/Nielsen_F_S_03.htm); **Verdery, K.** National Ideology under Socialism. Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu’s Romania. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991; **Verdery, K.** What Was Socialism and What Comes Next. Princeton; New York, Princeton University Press, 1996; **Wedel, J.** The Private Poland. New York, Facts on File, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> **Kõresaar, E.** Editorial. (Pro Ethnologia, 16.) Studies on Socialist and Post-Socialist Everyday Life. Tartu, 2003, 6.

<sup>3</sup> **Bela-Krumina, B.** Relationships between Personal and Social: Strategies of Everyday Life in the Process of Radical Social Change. (Pro Ethnologia, 16.) Studies on Socialist and Post-Socialist Everyday Life. Tartu, 2003, 11.

<sup>4</sup> **Kõresaar, E.** Memory and history in Estonian post-soviet life stories: private and public, individual and collective from the perspective of biographical syncretism. *Dissertationes ethnologicae Universitatis Tartuensis*. Tartu, Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2004; **Anepaio, T.** Boundaries in the Soviet society: the case of the repressed. – *Studia Fennica Ethnologica*, 2003, 7, 67–78; **Anepaio, T.** Reception of the topic of repressions in the Estonian Society. – *Whose culture?* (Pro ethnologia, 14.) Tartu, 2002, 47–65; **Aarelaid, A.** Ikka kultuurile mõeldes. Tallinn, Virgela, 1998.

## DIALOGUE BETWEEN THE PUBLIC AND THE PRIVATE

In the studies on Soviet Estonian culture published in recent years signs of adaptation and forms of resistance appear as central analytical categories. Attention has been focused mainly on art and literature, analysing how the ambiguous character of professional intellectuals became a means for preserving the national system of values.<sup>5</sup> According to A. Aarelaid an abundant use of artistic codes is indeed a special feature of the Estonian counter-cultural movement, while its basis lies in the traditions of folk culture.<sup>6</sup>

It is in such a kind of cultural practices that the mechanisms for the preservation of national identity are seen. Literary scientist Rein Veidemann uses the term “enclaves of public life”, referring to certain mental meeting points of the people (Estonian literature from the 1960s to 1980s, song festivals, plays by Estonian authors being staged, funerals of cultural figures) where not only “the development of value attitudes and taste, self-education, but also training of social and political discourse” took place.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, A. Aarelaid and A. Kannike regard the so-called singing nationalism (based on folklorism) as a central value constellation of the Soviet-era national identity.<sup>8</sup>

Some recent studies have also reached the conclusion that during the Soviet period oppositional cultures were in a dialogical relationship or even interdependent. For example, the architectural historian Andres Kurg writes that in the art of those days alternative thinking and creation found a meaning and a possibility of existence only by adapting into official structures.<sup>9</sup> Analogously, K. Kuutma sees the Estonian post-war song festival culture as a unique phenomenon synthesizing the official and the oppositional.<sup>10</sup> The Estonian Singing Nationalism as a counter-cultural system of values that served to protect national identity could become

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<sup>5</sup> **Annuk, E.** Totalitarismi ja/või kolonialismi pained: miks ja kuidas uurida nõukogude aega? – In: *Võim ja kultuur*. Comp. A. Krikmann, S. Olesk. Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum. Eesti kultuuriloo ja folkloristika keskus. Tartu, 2003, 22; **Veidemann, R.** Kirjandus sotsiaalse sidususe tegurina. Eesti juhtum. – In: *Võim ja kultuur*. Comp. A. Krikmann, S. Olesk. Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum. Eesti kultuuriloo ja folkloristika keskus. Tartu, 2003, 155–169; **Helme, S.** Mitteametlik kunst. (Kunstiteaduslikke uurimusi, 10.) Eesti Kunstiteadlaste Ühing. Tallinn, 2000, 253–269; **Kurg, A.** Almanahh Kunst ja Kodu 1973–1980. (Kunstiteaduslikke uurimusi, 2 (13).) Eesti Kunstiteadlaste Ühing. Tallinn, 2004, 110–142.

<sup>6</sup> **Aarelaid-Tart, A., Kannike, A.** The end of singing nationalism as cultural trauma. – *Acta Historica Tallinnensia*, 2004, 8, 77.

<sup>7</sup> **Veidemann, R.** Op. cit., 163.

<sup>8</sup> **Aarelaid, A., Kannike, A.** Op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> **Kurg, A.** Op. cit., 112.

<sup>10</sup> **Kuutma, K.** Laulupidu kui kodanikualgatuse erivorm. – In: *Kodanikualgatus ja seltsid Eesti muutuval kultuurimaastikul*. Ed. A. Aarelaid. Tallinn, Jaan Tõnissoni Instituudi Kirjastus, 1996, 39–48.

real only by accepting the severe and inflexible dominant culture that aimed to mix our national self-being into the “melting pot” of a “unified Soviet nation”. Thus, it was a “carnavalesque” dialogue between two opposite value-systems that had a common contextual background binding them together like Siamese twins. The dialogue between the “central stage” and the “backstage” allowed the opponents to live together.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the research focus is shifting from emphasizing the conflict between the official and the oppositional, the public and the private, to the dialogue conducted on the border of the two spheres and to the coping mechanisms used in the so-called half-public sphere.

As a result of the pressure exerted by the state some new forms of sociality, circles of friends and networks of solidarity developed. Even shadow economy, being also based on close social connections was in that sense a private network. At the same time public wealth and public property was largely used for one’s personal interests.<sup>12</sup> In the context of Estonian postwar history, Kirsti Jõesalu has described the privatization of working life, arguing that in biographies working life is not reflected as a controlled ideological space, but rather using one’s personal everyday categories.<sup>13</sup>

The dichotomic conception of the public and the private has also started to crumble in Western cultural studies due to analyses of postmodernist lifestyle, especially media and consumption studies that examine the shifting of the border between the public and the private and the travel of objects and meanings over this border. By now it is generally accepted that the personal is quite as political as the public.<sup>14</sup> The former dichotomy has become a mobile, permeable border, a gray area of transitions and interdependence. Thus, the “great dichotomy” has come to be considered not so much a feature of factuality as, rather, a point of view adopted by the analyst because of its heuristic potential able to encourage new aspects of research.<sup>15</sup>

Besides works of art and literature increasing attention has been paid to everyday processes that were also an arena for competition between the state/system and the memory and identity of the people as well as to mutual adaptation in attributing meanings to objects and spaces.

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<sup>11</sup> **Aarelaid, A., Kannike, A.** Op. cit., 83.

<sup>12</sup> **Crowley, D., Reid, S.** Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc. – In: Socialist Spaces. Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc. Eds D. Crowley, S. E. Reid. Oxford; New York, Berg, 2002, 15.

<sup>13</sup> **Jõesalu, K.** Tööelu privatiseerimine sotsiaalsete suhete kaudu. Postsotsialistlik vaade sotsialistlikule tööelule. – Estonian Social Science Online, 3. Tartu, 2005, [http://www.sotsioloogia.ee/esso3/16/kirsti\\_joesalu.htm](http://www.sotsioloogia.ee/esso3/16/kirsti_joesalu.htm).

<sup>14</sup> **Attfield, J.** Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life. Oxford, Berg, 2000, 192.

<sup>15</sup> **Vaudagna, M.** Introduction. – In: State, Family, Subjectivity in the Twentieth Century. Eds R. Baritono et al. Torino, Otto Comunicazione, 2003, 6.

## PRIVACY AS A KEY CONCEPT FOR MAINTAINING CONTINUITY

In recent studies on socialist and post-socialist everyday culture growing emphasis has been laid on differences in cultural development within the socialist bloc.<sup>16</sup> Although international discourse tends to treat the Soviet culture as something quite homogeneous due to the pressure exerted by the totalitarian state, the self-consciousness of the Estonians contains a strongly articulated understanding of their special position and cultural uniqueness. Therefore, it would be necessary to examine in more detail, in what sense (besides the Western-like façade) the Estonian version of Soviet everyday life was unique. It seems that, primarily due to the pre-war cultural tradition, it was not only niches of a higher symbolic value, or certain practices on the boundary of the public and the private, but also private life as an integral practice aimed at the creation of privacy that acquired a special counter-cultural meaning.

Whereas in Western civilization privacy is intimately connected with the notion of home, the concept of privacy has never been a feature of Russian or Soviet culture. Even the term is hard to translate into Russian.<sup>17</sup> Only since the late 1980s the developments in Russia have come to show many signs of a return to domesticity and an orientation to some Western-type notions of private life, with the term *privatnost* gaining currency. Many petit-bourgeois values once reviled are now seen as positive and socially progressive.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore some scholars have argued that the use of the private/public dichotomy in any analysis of Soviet society is misleading.<sup>19</sup> M. Garcelon also argues that the assumption that the meanings of “public”, “private” and “civil society” remained broadly similar in Communist and Western societies, is highly misleading. Concepts derived from the Western experience require careful interrogation and refinement in the light of the historically distinctive features of Soviet-type societies. Instead, he suggests that the basic institutional configuration of a Soviet-type society can

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<sup>16</sup> See e.g. **Bren, P.** Weekend Getaways: The *Chata*, the *Tramp* and the Politics of Private Life in Post-1968 Czechoslovakia. – In: *Socialist Spaces. Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*. Eds D. Crowley, S. E. Reid. Oxford; New York, Berg, 2002, 123–140; **Crowley, D.** Warsaw Interiors: The Public Life of Private Spaces, 1949–65. – In: *Socialist Spaces. Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*. Eds D. Crowley, S. E. Reid. Oxford; New York, Berg, 2002, 181–206; **Kannike, A.** Negotiating privacy: individual strategies and cultural change in Soviet Estonia. – In: *Constructed Happiness. Domestic Environment in the Cold War Era*. (Estonian Academy of Arts Proceedings, 16.) Eds M. Kalm, I. Ruudi. Tallinn, 2005, 76–83.

<sup>17</sup> **Gerasimova, K.** Public Privacy in the Soviet Communal Apartment. – In: *Socialist Spaces. Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*. Eds D. Crowley, S. E. Reid. Oxford; New York, Berg, 2002, 207.

<sup>18</sup> **Gerasimova, K.** Op. cit., 207–209; **Buchli, V.** Khrushchev, Modernism and the Fight against *Petit-bourgeois* Consciousness in the Soviet Home. – *Journal of Design History*, 1997, 10, 324.

<sup>19</sup> See e.g. **Kharkhordin, O.** Private Life in Soviet Russia. – *Public and Private in Thought and Practice. Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy*. Chicago; London, University of Chicago Press, 1997, 343–344, 359.

be captured by distinguishing between the realm of *officialdom*; the “social” realm of work, routine administration, as well as the officially sanctioned and supervised associational life versus the *domestic* realm of family and friendship.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Russian scholars Voronkov and Chikadze define such an ambivalent sphere as private public.<sup>21</sup> O. Kharkhordin has analyzed the semantics of the Russian word *lichnaya zhizn’*, usually translated as private life, and concluded that in Soviet ideology its underlying meaning was the need for the “public” to keep “private” life under constant surveillance.<sup>22</sup>

The following discussion deals with the construction of privacy in the domestic sphere, standing apart from the official and social realms. In the case of Estonia both Western and Soviet conceptions and patterns are combined in everyday practice. It was regarded as a sphere of personal life in the Western sense, but it also served as a “subterranean “reservoir” of unorthodox and dissident practices and opinions” in the Soviet system.<sup>23</sup>

In the Western cultural tradition there exists a strong connection between domestic privacy and respectability.<sup>24</sup> Also for Lutherans privacy has been sacred as this was the realm where communion with God took place.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it is not surprising that privacy is one of the most important characteristics that Estonians have considered to be desirable in their homes. It is closely connected with such notions as a sense of the whole, balance/harmony and closeness to nature. These notions do not only direct aesthetic and consumer decisions in everyday life, but they are first of all emotional and moral categories. It is significant that privacy is often associated with mental independence and free development of personality.<sup>26</sup>

The central position of privacy is, without doubt, a heritage of middle-class values that took root in the Estonian society alongside with large-scale modernization in the early 20th century. During the 1920s and 1930s the nation-state also associated the aesthetics and behaviour patterns of everyday life with ideals of civil society and modern life. Then the private was no longer a business of the individual or the family, but also of the national culture and its future. In the Soviet

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<sup>20</sup> **Garcelon, M.** Public and Private in Communist and Post-Communist Society. – In: Public and Private in Thought and Practice. Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy. Eds J. Weintraub, K. Kumar. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1997, 304, 317.

<sup>21</sup> **Voronkov, V., Chikadze, E.** Leningrad Jews: Ethnicity and Context. – In: Biographical Perspectives on Post-Socialist Societies. Eds V. Voronkov, E. Zdravomyslova. CISR. Working paper, 5. Spb: CISR, 1997, 187–191.

<sup>22</sup> **Kharkhordin, O.** Op. cit., 343.

<sup>23</sup> **Garcelon, M.** Op. cit., 317.

<sup>24</sup> **Allan, G., Crow, G.,** eds. Introduction – Home and Family. Creating the Domestic Sphere. London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1989, 149.

<sup>25</sup> **Kharkhordin, O.** Reveal and Dissimulate: A Genealogy of Private Life in Soviet Russia. – In: Public and Private in Thought and Practice. Perspectives on a Grand Dichotomy. Eds J. Weintraub, K. Kumar. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1997, 337.

<sup>26</sup> **Kannike, A.** Kodukujundus kui kultuuriloomine. Etnoloogiline Tartu-uurimus. (Eesti Rahva Muuseumi Sari, 4.) Tartu, 2002, 151–155, 197–199.

period the previous meanings of private life and privacy had to be revised and everyday practices that had been self-evident acquired new layers of meaning and new functions.

### EVERYDAY LIFE AS A REFUGE FOR THE SACRED

In post-war Estonia the public word and free cultural production was suppressed. In an extreme form the mental offensive of the new regime lasted until the mid-1950s. The public space was subjected to a “spring cleaning” to make room for increasingly widening areas carrying the mentality of the dominating regime. Censorship also hit homes, especially domestic libraries, but also objects carrying a directly ideological message. The privacy of personal texts (correspondence, diaries) was also actually conditional, because the official power could use them against the writer.<sup>27</sup>

Privacy was also highly constricted because of crowded living conditions. The official regime did not respect individual rights for privacy and the reliable securing of “private space” was by and large confined to the nomenclature. Therefore, according to M. Garcelon, a more traditional, *familial* privatism, characterized by mutual dependency on family members and friends for aid and comfort, a web of customary obligations, and the close proximity and surveillance of “neighbours for life” developed as opposed to the *individualizing* privatism of liberal Western modernity.<sup>28</sup> The private, however, also existed in the form of *chastnaya zhizn'* – the invisible sphere of the most intimate compartment, carefully hidden by individual dissimulation. It was hidden not only from the leaders, but primarily from the pervasive surveillance of the surrounding comrades. Such dissimulation became, according to O. Kharkhordin, the most profound practice of the Soviet society.<sup>29</sup>

Still, in Estonia the home continued to carry a counter-cultural message with its static nature and orientation to the past until the 1960s. In the domestic arena the disruption was not absolute, and often cultural continuity was carried on in a silent manner.

Metaphorically one could even speak of the development of a cult of home in the Soviet time. On one level it can be explained as an aesthetic counter-reaction:

The desperate decoration of domestic interiors turned inwards and heaping up things into them seemed to be in proportional to with the homogenization of the public space and its filling with industrially produced houses.<sup>30</sup>

But behind this contrast there lied complicated strategies of coping with the new realities and finding new ways for maintaining cultural continuity.

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<sup>27</sup> Annuk, E. Op. cit., 22.

<sup>28</sup> Garcelon, M. Op. cit., 324.

<sup>29</sup> Kharkhordin, O. Op. cit., 360.

<sup>30</sup> Kurg, A. Op. cit., 123.

The work invested into the building of one's home acquired elements of ritual behaviour, all the more that it often turned out to be a real "road to Calvary" keeping one going for years and even decades. Attaching special attention to *making things with one's own hands* as the main way of constructing privacy, individuality and security is characteristic to home decoration as culture-building in Soviet Estonia.<sup>31</sup> This is even revealed in the main characteristics of home as suggested by the informants:

Home is all the work and care that has been shared.

Home – it's what has been built and made so much with one's own hands. If a person achieves something with great trouble, he somehow grows together with it.

Just the things that I have created myself for my own give me a feeling of security and a feeling of home. Namely made by myself, got on my own and achieved on my own.<sup>32</sup>

The expression "with one's own sweat and blood" is often repeated in descriptions of home-making. It is also remarkable that in interviews, as well as in memoirs and autobiographies concerning the socialist period, the home and family sphere are described using religious terminology: *paradise, place of peace, redemption, glory, haven, true life*. This is quite remarkable in the context of the drastic deepening of religious indifference of Estonians during the postwar decades as described by theologian T. Paul.<sup>33</sup> The vocabulary used in the discourse on private sphere issues emphasizes its culturally distinctive meaning as a space where different cultural codes were applied.

Speaking officially about atheism, the Soviet power actually replaced Lutheranism with an official state cult with its respective rituals. Although the Lutheran church as an institution has never been too close to Estonians' hearts, in the pre-war culture Lutheran values and moral were generally acknowledged. But now everything that symbolized important moral values was banished from public life and the logic and practice of the Soviet system ridiculed the Lutheran work ethics. Nevertheless, this failed to turn everyday culture fully profane. Religion was marginalized, but "the sacred" did not disappear, being primarily relocated into domestic life.

At the same time, home-building required a professional command of purely socialist strategies:

I cannot deny that by mutual co-operation of myself, my wife, the repair shop, the overseer and the builders I got many materials for building the house at a bargain price and sometimes even for a song. And thieving was already then quite a widespread hobby as well, which I also used at the appropriate moment (Endel, 75, retired).<sup>34</sup>

One could not escape the public sphere, it was always present at the back of one's head. Obviously, constructing a home was unthinkable for a dissident. One had to be loyal at least in a passive manner, because a deal with the authorities

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<sup>31</sup> **Kannike, A.** Op. cit., 218.

<sup>32</sup> Interviews on "Home as a cultural space" conducted in 1997–1999, at the author's disposal.

<sup>33</sup> **Paul, T.** Kirik ja usk. – 20. sajandi eesti kultuur. Tallinn (forthcoming), Underi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus.

<sup>34</sup> Archives of the Estonian National Museum, KV 835, 132.

was the precondition for acquiring a private space – the state made “presents” to people in the form of flats and presumed citizens’ loyalty or adaptation in return.

Earlier experience of “modern”, that is, civilized life, spread in the 1920s and 1930s by the modernizing nation-state, played a great role in the preservation of cultural identity in Soviet Estonia. Now, under new circumstances, that experience became an anchor of identity. The customs and taste characteristic of a middle-class Western civil society acquired the function of a cultural weapon. This was especially true for the generation which reached adulthood and was educated in the Republic of Estonia. Whatever had been acquired through (partly silent) socialization, what had been considered normal, then got a special and distinctive value in socialist everyday life.

For example, a recollection of an Estonian doctoral student in Moscow from the late 1950s depicts the conflict between the new and old eating habits:

At that time it was conventional practice in the self-service canteens of the type that matched my income level, to use metal plates that were washed in special automatic machines. But those automats would leave a thin layer of grease on all washed dishes, producing an unwashed impression. Secondly, there was usually an atmosphere in those canteens that differed greatly from what I had been used to consider good eating and canteen habits. Once, having arrived in Tallinn over a long time... I decided to make coffee for myself in the kitchen and make a couple of sandwiches. Tired of the milieu I had to bear around me in Moscow, I laid a proper coffee-table for myself. I took a runner from the kitchen cupboard, placed the coffee cup and the bread plate on it, put the sandwiches I had made on the other plate and the knife and the fork on their places in order to use them for eating the sandwich... Earlier, when I had appetite, I had usually fed myself standing in the kitchen, grabbing from the fridge whatever happened to be there. Until then I had probably never laid such a proper coffee-table for myself only... But earlier I had not been able to enjoy sitting at a properly laid table, that was so self-evident.<sup>35</sup>

Another way to emphasize the distinction from official life, to escape the dull and ordinary, was *aesthetization* of the domestic space, for example by adding an individual touch to a mass-produced and extremely standardized flat:

Each room in my home has a different colour scheme. In the vestibule the violet colour dominates. On the dark violet wall painted shoots of light violet clematis in full blossom are wriggling. Between them there are 6 tender violet doors in white frames. The cupboards in the vestibule for clothes and footwear are also white, with tender violet doors, the ceiling and the floor are of a light colour. Onto the seventh door that leads out of the flat, I painted a symmetrical picture depicting a colour flowing into a niche. For that, I used the deep violet colour of the walls, gradually adding white. I made it line by line, starting from the darkest in the middle and finishing with white. With that picture I mean to say that the person who leaves our home will be carried on by the flow of life, through that opening or door that is painted with the colour of hope and is warm like a summer night... As for the bathroom I designed it with a light blue ceiling and checked pink-light-blue tiling on the floor. On the door of the toilet I painted Mickey Mouse (Küllli, 48, housewife).<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Mereste, U. Toimunust ja kaasaelatust, 1. Tallinn, SE & JS, 2003, 748–749.

<sup>36</sup> Archives of the Estonian National Museum, KV 835, 36.

In Estonian homes of the Soviet period, *dialogue with time and history*, especially family history plays a great role, being often considered more important than arguments concerning style or composition. Among the things that are considered important in one's home, objects connected with memories and family ties were most frequently mentioned.<sup>37</sup>

Pictures painted by my father have a special meaning; grandfather's clock from the turn of the century, pictures of grandmother and grandfather in oval frames... Sometimes I feel that my grandmother is still protecting me when I succeed in something. (Ireen 40, teacher).<sup>38</sup>

The postwar developments in the Estonian architecture and design also reflect how quotation of history aimed to restore the threatened sense of security.<sup>39</sup>

The field of everyday life was certainly not homogeneous – it had its own hierarchies, centres and peripheries. Often *reversed hierarchies* are also signs of coping with the official ideology. So, for example, among the rooms of a home, it was the marginal rooms – kitchens, cellars or ateliers – that acquired a special aura of an alternative, anti-Soviet spirituality. They were used not only for the purposes foreseen by their planners and by the norms of socialist everyday life. For example, a “Housewife's manual” published in the Khrushchev era, states that “A kitchen is a room meant for cooking and eating only. It should not be a place that people walk through, or used for activities not connected with cooking”.<sup>40</sup> But in practice the kitchen was often a multifunctional “heart of the home”:

The kitchen is the most important place. Besides cooking one also works there, doing sewing or scientific research. One reads books. Guests are also usually received in the kitchen. It's like the heart of our home, we just love sitting round the table (Ludmilla, 50, engineer).

The kitchen is the place where I feel most at home. That's the heart of the home. When the children come home from school, most life goes on in the kitchen (Sirje 51, secretary).<sup>41</sup>

Likewise, for many Estonian urban intellectuals the country home was (and continues to be) important not only because of the potato-plot providing additional income, but also as a symbol of mental freedom, roots and continuity.

In the countryside my own degree of freedom is much greater, here in town it is very much restricted by neighbours (woman, 32, doctor).

Here (in town) I cannot do anything by myself, my enthusiasm dies out. But there, it's different (Andre, 30, doctor).

The flat is nothing special, just a place to live in. But the country home, that's the real home. It was built up with our own hands and I do everything there with pleasure (Jüri, 50, associate professor).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> **Kannike, A.** Op. cit., 75, 120.

<sup>38</sup> Interviews at the author's disposal.

<sup>39</sup> For detail, see **Kannike, A.** Op. cit., 60–63.

<sup>40</sup> **Lints, L. et al.** *Perenaise käsiraamat*. Tallinn, Eesti Riiklik Kirjastus, 1960, 200.

<sup>41</sup> Interviews at the author's disposal.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Thus, in Soviet Estonian everyday life a lot of cultural opposition took place on the level of social space, that is, it was the significant context, a general mentality not necessarily even verbalized (or fully verbalized) that created the contrast. It should be remembered, of course, that such kind of opposition is not characteristic of totalitarian systems only; practices oppositional to bureaucracy, alienation and anonymity also exist in democratic cultures. But it seems that in Estonian socialist everyday life it did not shape only marginal identities but the cultural mainstream.

## EVERYDAY LIFE AND CULTURAL TRAUMA

### Development of cultural trauma

The theory of cultural trauma provides an appropriate framework for the everyday culture of Soviet Estonia, where it definitely had to do with a clash of new ways of life with an old culture. Looking at it from the perspective of the actors we may speak of cultural disorientation. This is characterized by a duality, split, ambivalence within a culture, merging suddenly, rapidly and unexpectedly, and embracing the core areas of cultural components, such as basic values, central beliefs and common norms.<sup>43</sup>

In the Socialist system everyday life was in the focus of ideological intervention. In his Moscow diary of 1928 Walter Benjamin wrote that the bolsheviks had liquidated private life and the state's interests dominated everywhere – in culture, at home, in the spending of free time. Communal flats represented a surreal illustration of the inversion of the inner and the outer, the public and the private.<sup>44</sup>

According to the ideological imperatives of socialism the phenomena that otherwise might have been oppositional – utopian versus the ordinary, art versus routine, ideals versus experience – had to be synthesized. The project of socialism was to turn utopia into reality. Under those circumstances everyday life and space acquired some specific characteristics. It had to contain something extraordinary and so everyday events were interpreted either through official heroic past or through glorious future (Lenin and communism). In the Soviet discourse ordinary places could become “big places” through a connection with the “grand spatial narratives” of socialism. For example, a housing co-operative represented a microcosm of the socialist order, the palace of pioneers was seen as a “paradigm” of a communist city of the future. At the same time “social justice” demanded democratization of space. Even the “grandest places”, such as, e.g. palaces of culture or the Hermitage, were “everyday”, that is, everybody had to own and use them.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Sztompka, P. Op. cit., 453, 455.

<sup>44</sup> Benjamin, W. Moscow Diary. Ed. G. Smith. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1986.

<sup>45</sup> Crowley, D., Reid, S. Op. cit., 7–8.

Thus, the socialist understanding of equality and justice meant a conscious restructuration of space with the aim of homogenization and rewriting history. Therefore, in Soviet Estonia the postwar “reconstruction” often actually meant demolition, rebuilding in a new manner and making a clear distinction with the past. Likewise, the later modernization of the living environment was also a simultaneous clearing of accounts with history and certain earlier meanings and associations embodied in the milieu and everyday environment. The renaming of places and institutions as attempts to unify the space in the semiotic sense, was also part of the project.

Throughout most part of the twentieth century both fascism and communism levelled radical criticism against the mystified nature of the capitalist private realm and fostered the vision of an all-encompassing public.<sup>46</sup> The Soviet authorities regarded space primarily as a means for implementing power, while an official belief in environmental determinism, i.e. the ability of material environment to change mentality dominated.

As a result of the politization of milieu and everyday life there developed competing versions of places where official and popular history, state and popular utopias collided. Therefore the so-called material history became an important means for anchoring alternative meanings and memories. The specific character and ambivalent nature of material objects was used to overcome various cultural dilemmas and preserve cultural continuity despite the traumatic social changes. Thus everyday practice aimed at liberating itself of the ideological rhetorics of the socialist state and produced its own norms and hierarchies.<sup>47</sup>

### Coping with the trauma

Cultural trauma is characterized by the development of a social discourse whereby people collectively look for ways or strategies of coping with the severe conflict between “us” and “them” and reinforce their threatened identity.<sup>48</sup> Ron Eyerman stresses that trauma is neither an institution nor experience, but is primarily associated with collective memory. “As a cultural process, trauma is mediated through various forms of representation and linked to the reformation of collective identity and the reworking of collective memory”.<sup>49</sup> More important, he emphasizes that resolving cultural trauma can involve articulations of collective

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<sup>46</sup> **Vaudagna, M.** Op. cit., 5.

<sup>47</sup> **Niedermüller, P.** Arbeit, Identität, Klasse. Der Sozialismus als Lebensentwurf. – Arbeit im Sozialismus – Arbeit im Postsozialismus. Hrsg. K. Roth. Freiburger Sozialanthropologische Studien, 1. Münster, LIT Verlag, 2004, 28.

<sup>48</sup> **Sztompka, P.** Op. cit.

<sup>49</sup> **Eyerman, R.** Cultural Trauma. Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, 1.

identity and collective memory as filtered through cultural artifacts and other materializations which represent the past in the present.<sup>50</sup>

A. Aarelaid and A. Kannike, in a study focusing on how cultural trauma is expressed in the discourse and behaviour of particular groups engaged in folk culture, have demonstrated that various manifestations of the trauma are closely connected with alternative and conflicting concepts of the past and visions of the future. At the same time the ways of coping with the cultural trauma also depend on the range of possible communication partners and on the actual openness to dialogue of different segments of the society. By combining the coping strategies described by P. Sztompka and A. O. Hirschmann, a typology of such groups has been delineated.<sup>51</sup>

When speaking about the dysfunctional behaviour of systems or organizations, A. O. Hirschman describes two alternative but mutually connected strategies: the exit option – leaving the system, and the voice option – expressing dissatisfaction to authorities, general protest. Thereby, exit is predominantly a passive attitude while voice is an active one.<sup>52</sup> Hirschmann's basic scheme can also be applied to characterize the basic strategies for overcoming the trauma in Estonian everyday life during the Soviet period.

V. Buchli writes that Soviet society was based on a profound reconfiguration of domestic relations, the individual, the home and daily life as part of a larger, highly contested and demiurgic process of social reform. For Soviet social reformers, the sphere of daily life (*byt* in Russian) and in particular, the home, was the arena in which this fundamental restructuring of the society was thought through and materialized, from the obviation of class antagonisms to the liberation of women. Therefore, the home can be seen as a key analytical context for understanding social change.<sup>53</sup>

Under the exit-form a pronounced conservatism in behaviour, lifestyle and home decoration, a preference for traditionalist aesthetics, retreat into a closed circle of family and history could be classified. In the behaviour connected with the home the exit-form is expressed in a “ritualistic turn towards established traditions and routines, cultivating them as safe hideouts where to deflect cultural trauma”.<sup>54</sup> Compensatory practices of pronouncedly apolitical character: hobby sports, collecting, crafts or other hobbies are also examples of a similar strategy. In the ethnology of socialism one speaks about the so-called socialist alienation that mostly means locking oneself into the family or into some limited social niches. Such practice of social escapism, using construction of parallel worlds and

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>51</sup> Aarelaid, A., Kannike, A. Op. cit., 89–97.

<sup>52</sup> Hirschman, A. O. Exit, Voice and Loyalty. Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations and States. Cambridge; Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1970, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Buchli, V. Architecture and the domestic sphere. – In: The Material Culture Reader. Ed. V. Buchli. Oxford; New York, Berg Publishers, 2001, 210–211.

<sup>54</sup> Sztompka, P. Op. cit., 461.

networks is characteristic of the private sphere or the borderlands of the public and the private.<sup>55</sup>

According to a study conducted by Estonian sociologists in 1979–1984, about 25% of Estonians had retreated into the circle of their home and family, tried to ensure its well-being, not interfering into the business of society, while about 20% looked for and found active opportunities of self-fulfilment in an alternative way or in a way ignoring the system, for example in one's closed society, in sportive, technical or other hobbies, professional associations and other niches, 15% of the people could be characterized as asocials and 35–40% were relatively well adapted to life in the Estonian SSR.<sup>56</sup>

It is clear that over the years the coping strategies changed and, at the same time, were intertwined. The predomination of the exit-form in the domestic sphere did not exclude collaborationism either, for example in the case of a representative of the nomenclature who, by his loyalty to the power obtained the right to live a “second life” in the private sphere.

The voice-strategy in the everyday life of the Soviet period was actually, to a great extent, a non-verbal expression of creativity, often by turning the official hierarchies upside down. For example, building one's own home or summer house with one's own hands (and making use of what actually belonged to the “system” with the help of a trustworthy network) was an especially strong statement of self-fulfilment and a sign of a “true Estonian man”.

In many cases innovative forms of creation are symbols of strong resistance and as such, illustrations of Lefebvre's idea of the private sphere as oppositional space where an individual can take an oppressing and alienating room that is unpleasant to him, make it his own, domesticate it and thus, applying active creativity, protest against the way of life forced upon him.<sup>57</sup>

## VARIETY AND DYNAMICS OF STRATEGIES

The behaviour of the authorities towards private life differed across different stages of the Soviet power. Thereby the relationship between the public and the private as expressed in the material world changed as well. During the first Soviet years the main slogan was opening up the private sphere to the state and the collective. Everything that was closed to or distinctive from the state or the collective was regarded as counter-revolutionary. In the 1930s a change of the course, the so-called Great Retreat, took place. In the social hierarchy a new middle-class elite developed who owned forms of cultural capital unavailable for

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<sup>55</sup> In Estonia, for example, K. Jõesalu has studied such niche activities as important means for self-realization that used the public space and facilities of the workplace. See **Jõesalu, K.** Op. cit.

<sup>56</sup> **Hion, E., Lauristin, M., Vihalemm, P.** *Meie muutuv elulaad*. Tallinn, Eesti Raamat, 1988.

<sup>57</sup> **Lefebvre, H.** *The Production of Space*. Oxford, Blackwell, 1991, 361.

the majority of the population. These strata actually became bourgeois and wanted to live a “cultured”, civilized life, regarding comfort and consumption as important values. In Stalin’s time one began, for example, civilized distinguishing between personal life (*lichnaya zhizn*) and private life (*chastnaya zhizn*). Whereas the life of an individual and family was no longer banned, the kind of private life that hindered the state from controlling its citizens, was repulsed.<sup>58</sup> The Stalinist era marked a start of intensive attention to one’s everyday manners. The campaign of *kulturnost*’ was launched, which meant constant discussion and control over hygiene and a uniform system of behaviour norms. Personal life was righteous only if it was *kulturny* and well organized.<sup>59</sup>

The 1960s, parallely with the political “thaw” brought an attempt to give the regime a modern, humanistic and youthful image oriented to social progress. But as for the official attitude to the domestic sphere, we cannot speak about liberalization as, paradoxically, the state expressed even a more aggressive wish to transform the private life. The alien attitude to pre-revolutionary domesticity that had stopped at Stalin’s time, re-emerged. Petit-bourgeois consciousness was seen as a threat to the realization of communism. As everyday issues became problematic, strict norms of good and bad taste were established in an attempt to rationalize the domestic sphere. This period has even been called the second cultural revolution.<sup>60</sup> In domestic interior design, for example, open plans and multi-functional zone-planning was introduced. Rejected were the previous rooms that used to be inwardly focused, mono-functional and spatially discrete. Another significant innovation was transformable furniture, introduced to de-artifactualize the domestic sphere. Also, taste was marshalled to discourage the importation of old material culture into new flats. The aim was to eliminate as many items of material culture associated with the petit-bourgeois realm as possible. Everything but the most essential was to be eliminated. Uniform and light surfaces were promoted. Thus, far from being a period of liberalization, the “thaw” brought about the revival of a whole range of disciplining modernist norms in the domestic realm.

In Estonia, another source of cultural stress was a massive inflow of Russian-speaking workforce:

I argue that in the sixties a total Russification of Estonia took place. “Khrushchevkas” were built on a mass scale, because all those coming from the vast expanses of the “great homeland” immediately wanted a living-space... For an Estonian, however, his own country became ever more narrow... When an Estonian tried to improve his social conditions he got stuck in the jungle of Russian-language bureaucracy. So the Estonian tried to make it another way. On an empty stomach and half-legally one built up one’s own dwelling... The gap between the two ethnic groups grew bigger and bigger. Besides the language we were also divided by the way of life, culture, and customs. This was pronounced especially clearly in youth culture. I remember how strange we found the eating of sunflower seeds, the “conjunctions” *matj* and *bljatj* in the speech

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<sup>58</sup> Gerasimova, K. Op. cit., 209–210.

<sup>59</sup> Kharkhordin, O. Op. cit., 352–356.

<sup>60</sup> Buchli, V. Op. cit., 215–216.

of young Russians, their generally aggressive behaviour, their ratty coats, fur caps of shaggy rabbit skin with a forehead flapper torn to the front and “antennas” pulled to the back, muddy trousers dangling out of black rubber or felt boots, the habit of talking on the street squatting. Mutual fights were just everyday business.<sup>61</sup>

In Brezhnev’s era another backdrop occurred and, as a result an object-centered understanding of socialist welfare rose to dominate. The period from the 1960s to 1980s is often characterized as a society of adjustment and retreat where most energy and attention was directed to the achievement of personal welfare.

Conceptualizing the private life in postwar Estonia, one can see a retreat or exit-strategy dominating until the mid-1950s, to be followed by a more active, but less oppositional and more adapting attitude, combining elements of *exit* and *voice*. As a new generation, born after the period of independence, reached adulthood a development towards innovative lifestyles and models of everyday environment developed. Transition to consumer society as well as total alienation from church also signify important changes in mentalities.<sup>62</sup> Active dissatisfaction was to a great extent expressed just through Western-like lifestyle, alternative art, and student culture. During this period contrast between the everyday cultures practised in the Baltic countries and in the rest of the Soviet Union became remarkable. In the period of stagnation (the beginning of which in Estonia can be dated back to 1968, the year of breaking many political illusions after the Czech events), everyday life is characterized by a new shift towards retreat. The behaviour of many intellectuals showed signs of mental emigration. Creating a strong emotional connection with one’s country-home, evaluating the local natural and cultural heritage illustrate a search for a kind of spiritual refuge. Such a turn to the past can be regarded as a reaction to the problem of alienation arisen as a result of the symbiosis of mass culture and a totalitarian ideology. In a wider everyday discourse “common” and “common life” usually acquired a negative meaning, while one retreated into mass culture, one’s separate “well-organized everyday life”.<sup>63</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In the Soviet period, creating privacy was primarily realized by the personalization of one’s immediate milieu and the domestic space. In the sociopolitical context of those decades it acquired the meaning of a ritual transmission of national cultural identity and values of a civil society. In the private sphere, strategies of overcoming the cultural trauma were aimed at the restoration of control and balance. Actualization of certain pre-war norms and taste, aesthetization of the domestic space, actualization of memory through historical objects and milieu as well as reassessment of certain officially marginal places and spaces – it all

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<sup>61</sup> Tammer, E., comp. Nõukogude aeg ja inimene. Meie mälestused. Tänapäev, Postimees, 2004, 73.

<sup>62</sup> Vahtre, L. Elu-olu viimasel vene ajal. Tallinn, Kirjastuskeskus, 2002.

<sup>63</sup> Raud, R. Alternatiivne tegelikkus. – Eesti Ekspress, 2001, 21. juuni, Areen B8.

served to emphasize the borders of the domestic space and to achieve privacy. At different times different strategies were used, but personal work that acquired a somewhat ritualized character was maintained as a continuous private practice in Estonia all through the Soviet decades.

The public and the private can be studied on the economic (state-regulated versus market economy), political (state versus civil society) and social levels (anonymous state, market, bureaucracy versus islands of intimacy and emotionality in private life). Investigating all such expressions of the public and the private, it is often in the grey, overlapping areas that the potential for numerous discoveries is hidden.<sup>64</sup>

Therefore it is also important, while studying private life, to deal with the multiple meanings attached to the terms “public” and “private”, as well as the specific character shaped by the national cultural heritage. Since privacy is an extremely dynamic and ambivalent concept, anthropological analysis of everyday practice has a great value at describing the coping mechanisms used in Soviet society. Ethnographically documented creative activity of the people demonstrates how, in a context where cultural traditions and political-economic changes collided, the Soviet reality was actually formed. The result was equally different from socialist, as well as from nationalist utopias.

Over the recent years a shift from structure to practice, from patterns to processes has taken place in anthropology. One has realized that about major topics and important aspects of culture nobody, even the “locals” possess the kind of information that could be collected easily and expressed by discursive statements. Such aspects are only revealed through practice. A great part of relevant information is nonverbal and can only be experienced.<sup>65</sup> According to Paul Willis, meaning is created in a metaphoric, indirect and atmospheric manner to a much greater extent than in a descriptive or rational way.<sup>66</sup> Thus, the role of living experience, immediate practice and symbolic material is emphasized.

The fact that in the Soviet time identical blocks of flats were erected everywhere and one could only buy a couple of models of living room furniture does not automatically mean that common and unified conceptions of private life would have dominated. Discussing the influence of ideology on everyday life, the diversity of private practice cannot be reduced to norms, adaptation or resistance only. Everyday life is by no means profane, but of principal importance from the viewpoint of understanding socialist culture.

The domestic space preserved a reservoir of unofficial values, traditions and styles of resistance that were used for maintaining continuity. Such a symbolic capital also became important in the new transition culture aiming towards a civil society.

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<sup>64</sup> Vaudagna, M. Op. cit., 7.

<sup>65</sup> Hastrup, K., Hervik, P., eds. *Social Experience and Anthropological Knowledge*. London; New York, Routledge, 1994, 3.

<sup>66</sup> Willis, P. *The Ethnographic Imagination*. Cambridge, Polity Press, 2000, 9.

## **KULTUURILISE JÄRJEPIDEVUSE HOIDMINE KODUSFÄÄRIS. NÕUKOGUDE EESTI NÄIDE**

Anu KANNIKE

On käsitletud nõukogude argikultuuri uurimise võimalusi, rõhutades mitte-verbaalse kultuuriloomise eripärast rolli privaatsfääris. Analüüs keskendub privaatsuse loomisele ja taastamisele kui ühele kultuuritraumaga toimetuleku strateegiale. On väidetud, et nõukogude perioodil loodi Eestis privaatsust peamiselt oma lähimiljöö ja koduse ruumi personaliseerimise kaudu. Nende kümnendite sotsioliitilises kontekstis omandas see rahvusliku kultuuriidentiteedi ja tsiviilühiskonna väärtuste rituaalse edasikandmise tähenduse. Sõjajärgsetest käitumisnormidest ning maitsest kinnipidamine, endisaegsete asjade ning ruumisuhete säilitamine ja ametliku ruumihierarhia ignoreerimine eraelus – see kõik lõi kodu-ruumi sümbolised piirid ja aitas saavutada privaatsust. Kodu kujutas endast mitte-ametlike väärtuste, traditsioonide ja vastupanustiilide reservuaari, sümbolset kapitali, mis sai uuesti aktuaalseks postsotsialistliku üleminekuaja kultuuris.