

Colonial Regimes in the Baltic States

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On June 16, 2013, ten Baltic scholars addressed issues of colonialism in the territories of contemporary Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, in a roundtable organized for the Baltic Studies conference at Tallinn University. This roundtable, moderated by Epp Annus, developed out of the process of putting together a special issue on Soviet colonialism in the Baltics for the *Journal of Baltic Studies*.¹ Most of the invited participants were contributors to the special issue. But where the JBS special issue seeks to explore in depth the possible colonial aspects of the Soviet period, there was also a general wish, for this conference, to broaden the time frame to include prior centuries of foreign rule in the Baltics. Thus, specialists of earlier periods in Baltic history were invited to join the discussion.

The discussion in the roundtable proceeded in several directions. Some scholars addressed specific aspects of Baltic history and offered postcolonial readings of these situations. Several texts treating postcolonial theory were identified as inspiring fruitful insights into Baltic histories and cultures. Also, very general methodological questions were addressed.

Liina Lukas and Ulrike Plath pursued the topic of pre-Soviet colonial layers in the Baltic region. For Estonians and Latvians, this is a question of the Baltic German heritage in its relationship to the tsarist Russian Empire. From the perspective of the colonizers, Liina Lukas outlined how the early colonization of Livonia provided a structural model for subsequent waves of European overseas colonialism. Ulrike Plath stressed the merging of different colonial discourses in novels and historiography and other texts, where the Baltic German colonial experience became a model for interpreting the later Soviet colonial experience.

Ulrike Plath also underscored scholarly difficulties that vex interpretive movement between, on the one hand, objective structures of colonial power politics and economy, and, on the other hand, subjective colonial forces and

¹ This special issue is at the moment still under preparation.

experiences, including colonial desires, colonial fantasies, and colonial trauma. “In colonial history and postcolonial theory, it is not easy and indeed nearly impossible to decide what comes first, the objective structure or the subjective layers,” argued Ulrike Plath. “We can perceive ourselves as victims of violence and colonial practice without being part of ‘real’ colonial structures – and, under certain circumstances, colonial desires and fantasies can exist prior to colonial political structures.”

Ulrike Plath also stressed the importance of close-reading of pertinent texts and documents before any theoretical models. We should “let the texts speak for themselves,” she claimed. “Let them define what the authors thought about colonialism in different centuries, under different rules and in different social realities: what kind of explicit colonial comparisons, desires, traumata and fantasies, and what implicit colonial layers we can find in them? Texts, and this seem central to me, do not only react on different forms of political colonialism, they do also push political acting and influence it with their fantasies and emotions – so we have to take them seriously.”

Of postcolonial texts, the name of Gayatri Spivak was foregrounded by several presenters. Tiina Kirss, inspired by Spivak’s seminal essay “Can the subaltern speak”, posed the question of the subaltern in Estonian history. Kirss, like Spivak, stressed the doubly complex silencing of subaltern women and pointed to Eduard Vilde’s character Miina, in the historical novel *Mahtra sõda* (*The Mahtra War*, 1902), to propose that “silences need to be measured”.

Jüri Kivimäe, inspired here by Spivak’s reading of Foucault, focused on the notion of ‘epistemic violence’. To Spivak’s suggestion that “one clearly available example of ideological epistemic violence is the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as other” (Spivak 2006: 31), Kivimäe found epistemic violence in the postwar Sovietization of Estonia, and suggested that an analysis of the epistemic effects of colonialism might be a fruitful way to interpret the Soviet era in the Baltics.

Violeta Davoliute, also addressing the post-war period, relied on two critical notions by the Latin-American postcolonial critic Angel Rama: ‘narrative transculturation’ (Rama and Frye 2006) and ‘the lettered city’ (Rama and Chasteen 1996). The term ‘narrative transculturation’ was coined by the Cuban ethnographer Fernando Ortiz as an alternative to ‘acculturation’, which had signified the dominance of a colonial culture over the colonized one. Transculturation is understood not as a relationship of dominance and subordination, but rather a heterogeneous relationship of two cultures, where the colonized culture retains its vibrancy and its role in the colonized society. Rama’s notion of the lettered city, according to Davoliute, “emphasizes the importance of cities to the Spanish colonial model in propagating the culture

of the metropolis throughout the colonial periphery, and the key role played by the lettered elites, the *letrados*, in constructing the ideal city in discourse and creating new frameworks for the evolution of collective identity” (Davoliute 2014). Davoliute argued for the critical potential of Rama’s approach in post-war Lithuania, where, by 1946, the urban population was between 10 and 15 per cent. Here, Sovietization, urbanisation and modernisation went hand in hand, the lettered elites and their discursive reconstruction of the city discourse helped to coin the new Soviet way of life, and later, in the 1980s, to lead the way towards desovietization. Davoliute proposed to bypass the critically limiting resistance–collaboration schema and to instead focus on Soviet Lithuanian lettered elites as actively engaging in creative transculturation processes.

Liisa Kaljula (Tallinn University) looked at the Thaw period in Soviet Estonia, investigating the complex interweaving of Soviet modernity, Western influences and Soviet coloniality. Kaljula, working between Soviet studies and postcolonial studies, pointed to similarities between Elena Zubkova’s approach to Sovietization and Spivak’s rendering of colonial situation: Zubkova defines Sovietization as “a process aimed at ‘subsuming’ the mentioned territory into the Soviet system and shaping its political, social and economic structures compatibly within the Soviet model” (Zubkova 2009: 10). Spivak argues that terms like “colonizer” and the “colonized” can be used “when an alien nation-state establishes itself as ruler, impressing its own laws and systems of education and rearranging the mode of production for its own economic benefit” (Spivak 2003: 3). Kaljula also reminded the audience of David Moore’s seminal essay “Is the post in postcolonial the post in post-Soviet? Towards global postcolonial critique”, and Moore’s coinage of “reverse-cultural colonization”, where the colonized feels itself culturally superior to its colonizers (Moore 2001). Kaljula pointed to the cunning of Estonian artists, who rendered Soviet modernity as Western modernity in Soviet disguise, and suggested that Homi Bhabha’s notions of ‘sly civility’ and mimicry might serve well to analyse the Estonian art scene of the Thaw era.

Rasa Balockaite argued in a somewhat different direction, proposing the notion of a Soviet internal colonialism, where difference operated not on the ethnic or racial basis, but on the basis of class. Piret Peiker stressed the importance of the postcolonial angle in studies of nationalism and emphasized that the central task was not about claiming one’s victimhood. Rather, she argued, postcolonial approaches explore the lack or loss of collective agency under colonial rule.

The last presenter, Deniss Hanovs raised the issue of postcolonial heritage in contemporary Latvian society. Hanovs addressed ethnic tensions in Latvia through an analogy to Shakespeare’s *Tempest*; he interpreted the postcolonial

figure of the distorted slave Caliban as an allegory for the situation in Latvia, where, according to Hanovs, “some of the tools and practices of the vanished Soviet colonial regime are being reused in the politics of integration”. Hanovs referred to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s warnings of a returning past in a society which seems in other respects to have been liberated of the colonial past (Chakrabarty 2000). “How to combine traumatic collective memories of an ethnic majority (Latvians, approx. 60% of the population) with general participation and social cohesion?” asked Hanovs. “How to include the Other with their memories, identities and views on the history and present situation in Latvia?” Hanovs thus attached to Baltic postcolonial thought the political urgency of many postcolonial thinkers, who have considered postcolonial critique as both a scholarly as well as political enterprise.

These are impressions and thoughts from the roundtable “Colonial Regimes in the Baltic States”, held on June 16, 2013 as part of the Baltic Studies Conference at Tallinn University.

Epp Annus:

Imagine a beautiful September day. It is the beginning of the 1950s in Estonia. A young couple, not yet married, but very much in love, wanders happily together in a forest in Northern Estonia. They pick mushrooms, but mostly they just enjoy each other’s company on an early autumn day.

All of a sudden, two armed soldiers emerge. Questions are asked, all in Russian: why are you here? Present your documents! And imagine – they haven’t taken their passports with them to gather mushrooms!

The couple is taken to the military ‘cordon’, a surveillance point. Over the course of several hours, more people are led in, not one of them with proper documents, all of them apprehended in the forest, suspiciously picking mushrooms. When somebody finds a ball, the young people start playing ball. Eventually everybody is released, and people can take their mushroom baskets and return home.

In this story,² we see many faces of life in 1950s Soviet Estonia.

First of all, we see young people falling in love and enjoying their lives – as in any other time.

Second, we see a totalitarian regime intruding into the everydayness of ordinary people.

² This is a fragment of my parents’ romantic youth, a story often told in family gatherings.

Third, we see a foreign power at work – the despised regime speaks a different language, clearly not ours.

Fourth, we see ways of survival and accommodation, reversive strategies of re-establishing one's sense of self and one's sense of community (through a ball game) in the face of an intruding power system. We see a manifestation of power exposed to ridicule.

This is, of course, only one story, only one fragment in a heterogeneous network of narratives, a network that we should try to unpack in its complexity. Here, we have stories of arrests and deportations, including that oft-recurring motif of a packed suitcase ready for departure, still waiting, years after the major deportations, just in case.³ We have stories of discursive clashes and confusions, but also stories of mixed identities, of rewritten histories, of getting used to the new society, of making a career, of queuing for butter, of exploring the richness in the diverse Soviet conglomerate of nations.

One way to make sense of this network of Soviet history would be through the postcolonial angle. Here, we could and perhaps should address the question: Was the Soviet Union an empire? Was it a colonial empire? Can the postcolonial perspective open new perspectives to this era? This is an ongoing conversation in Soviet studies,⁴ where the voice of Baltic scholars should be made more audible.⁵

Liina Lukas:

Before speaking about the Soviet or post-Soviet condition I would like to put under discussion several historical layers of Baltic colonialism – in particular, the interaction of the Baltic German and Estonian cultures. For my own research, a joint examination of Baltic German and Estonian and Latvian literature seems to be productive in the light of postcolonial theories (Lukas 2013). Intra-European colonialism is a topic that would need a more systematic examination. European post-colonial studies do not realize that the history of the Baltic countries is a significant part of European colonial history: that, for instance, German colonial history began with the conquest of Livonia at the beginning of the thirteenth century. Recent medieval studies in Estonia took up the claims of James Brundage, who compared the conquest of Livonia with

³ This motif is found for example in a novel by Mari Saat *Võlu ja vaim* (1990).

⁴ See von Hagen 2004, Ronald Suny, Martin 2001, Northrop 2004, Hirsch 2005, Burbank et al. 2007.

⁵ For Baltic perspectives, see Kelertas 2006, Annus 2012.

the Spanish colonization of the Americas, because of ideas and techniques that were first worked out in thirteenth-century Livonia. Colonisation of Livonia gave the structural model for European overseas colonialism more generally. This is an important argument for a postcolonial approach to Baltic history.

The next reason to speak about Baltic colonialism is the self-consciously colonialist outlook of this culture. Baltic-German culture recognised itself rather explicitly as the first colonial culture in Europe, seeing Old Livonia (Alt-Livland) as “die einzige, wenn auch nicht transoceanische, doch rein transmarine Colonie, die Deutschland gehabt hat” (Kohl 20); “die einzige wirkliche Kolonie des alten römischen Reiches deutscher Nation” (Behrsing 1928, Schieman 5, see also Plath 2011). Colonisation of Old Livonia was the cornerstone of the Baltic German identity.

The very long period of this colonial situation changed its form over time, due to the changing political background in this region and, in the end, this colonialism, in a political sense, proved to be more fantasy or a wishful dream than reality. But in a cultural and psychological sense, colonial experience formed the national and cultural identities in this region. And this experience is articulated in literary texts both in the German and Estonian/Latvian languages. On the other hand, these texts not only react, they act, they form the reality.

Indeed, there is no clear-cut opposition of coloniser and colonised, but, rather, there exists interdependency – they are two inseparable poles of one and the same sign of colonialism. There is a large space between, there is a space of interaction, interesting to examine in the light of post-colonial theories: power relations between written and oral culture, the forms of insubordination, the places of articulation of the “hidden transcript” (in terms of Scott 1990), the strategies of resistance and domination, the rhetoric and language of the subordinated and dominant culture.

There are some dangers, too, resulting from any theory that organizes the world into two poles: here, coloniser and colonised. The responsible scholar must consider how to avoid simplifications, how to avoid the mere replacement of Marxist class struggle with another similarly simplifying confrontation, and how, finally, to resist the temptation to write out of one’s own spirit of resentment.

Piret Peiker:

Next to the question, whether or not the ideas and tools of Postcolonial Studies are suitable for the analysis of the Baltic States in terms of their being a good

fit (are the situations usefully comparable?), I think it is also very important to ask the “why” question. Why does one want to analyse a particular Baltic issue from the perspective of the Postcolonial Studies? This, in my view, entails a question about politics: what are the political implications of approaching a particular Baltic concern as postcolonial? Postcolonial Studies is not only a field of academic enquiry, it inherently implies political agendas. There is no single answer to the “why?”, of course, this is a question for every scholar and for every new project to address.

As for me, I am interested in postcolonial nationalism (in the sense of national mobilisation) in general and Estonian nationalism in particular. The crux of the matter is that if we accept that what Postcolonial Studies centrally deal with is collectives’ responses to their experience of the loss or lack of collective agency under colonialism, then nationalism comes into the picture as a very efficient way to condense power and to rekindle the sense of agency (with its own pitfalls and dangers, of course). I find that, viewing matters of Estonian nationalism as anti-colonial or postcolonial ones, I gain a profitable intellectual space to approach them. It gives me the opportunity to consider them as being part of the global framework of different kinds of colonialism, unequal power relations and nationalisms. This offers new insights by throwing into relief historical connections and situational analogies, rather than leaving one with Estonia only viewed as a unique case, a regional case, or a deficient version of Western normality.

The questions that can thus be fruitfully studied include not only historical issues, but also contemporary controversies over national and ethnic problems, e.g. the categorical style debate between more liberal and more conservative national outlooks in Estonia. To discuss issues like this in terms of the struggles of postcolonial collective formations where different actors seek to deal with the colonial residues and the globalized world in a variety of ways can offer one new perspectives both academically and politically.

Frequently when “nontraditional” postcolonials (the Eastern Europeans, the Irish, etc.) turn to postcolonial interpretations, this is seen as a move to add to the competing victimhood claims in the world. That wish may well be the political motivation for some, yet, as proposed, postcolonial approaches can also be used better to appraise and thus address the considerable political and sociocultural challenges that people face, in the Baltics in the present instance.

Secondly, what have I learnt from the Postcolonial Studies methodologically?

Studies of nationalism are not a dominant strand in the central canon of the Postcolonial Studies. Postcolonial Studies to a large extent developed in the climate of the so-called culturalist turn in critical theory. Perhaps because of that, scholars of postcolonialism often reduce nationalism entirely to a kind

of cultural affectation or a manipulative elite ideology, rather than analyse it as a modern form of political organisation based on the assumption of popular sovereignty. Most influential thinkers in Postcolonial Studies do not take much interest in decolonising nationalist movements or postcolonial nation formation. Rather they focus on the Western metropolitan nationhood in the need to be deconstructed by the – quite abstractly presented – migrants at its margins, or on the critique of top-down nationalism (predominantly based on the case of India). Despite that I find their work highly valuable in terms of deconstructing simplistic views on the workings of nationalism (presumption of internal harmony without internal struggles or marginalizations) and of colonialism (presumption of clear-cut and total binary oppositions between colonizer/colonized and the resistance/submission of the colonized).

Moreover, a little bit to one side of the most dominant approach to nationalism there do exist postcolonial scholars, such as Clare Carroll (2003), Pheng Cheah (2003), Laura Chrisman (2004) or Neil Lazarus (1999) who deal with the aspects of nationalism relating to decolonisation and postcolonial collective formation. What unites these diverse scholars is their interest in a broad range of case studies, and a postcolonial perspective on issues like the relationship between nationalism and modern democracy or nationalism and capitalism. It is also not unimportant that, in the twenty-first century, there has been a small paradigm deflection in the general studies of nationalism. In the 1980s and early 1990s left and liberal Western scholars predicted the immediate (and salutary) obsolescence of nationalism in the globalised world. Nowadays some (e.g. Craig Calhoun in *Nations Matter*, 2007) make an argument for nations – and international cooperation – as potentially a beneficial resource to counter or at least buffer the global forces of neoliberal capitalism and neocolonialism. This approach seems to take nationalism closer to its nineteenth-century role when popular nationalism was seen (positively or negatively) as an anti-feudal, anti-imperial emancipatory force.

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