Postcolonialism and the Soviet Union. Epp Annus, *Soviet Postcolonial Studies: A View from the Western Borderlands* (London and New York: Routledge, 2018)

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DOI: 10.7592/methis.v17i21/22.14594

Keywords: postcolonialism; Soviet Union; Baltic States

I have been asked to comment, as a sort of "ordinary historian", upon the research of Epp Annus, which has recently been published in her monograph *Soviet Postcolonial Studies: A view from the Western Borderlands* (Annus 2018a). In actual fact her research has spanned the last couple of decades, of which the aforementioned book is an admirable culmination, a summation (see a selection of Annus' earlier works at the end of the article). Annus won recognition for her postcolonial perspective on Baltic history in 2016, when the special issue with the *Journal of Baltic Studies* she edited (Annus 2016) won the annual Vilis Vītols Prize. Recognizing the importance of that issue as a theoretically rich collection of articles exploring all three Baltic countries, it has now been published by Routledge as a book (Annus 2018b).

The reasons for asking an historian such as myself to write on Annus' research pursuits are probably disclosed, indirectly, by a few remarks by Annus herself about the reluctance of Estonian historians, sociologists and ethnologists to engage seriously with postcolonial critical theory, while scholars in literary analysis, visual arts, film and dance studies have readily acknowledged the usefulness of such perspectives (Annus 2018a, 64).

At this point I gladly take the liberty to describe my own scholarly background, an approach nowadays favoured in some research fields over pretences of strict objectivity. My more or less serious engagements with "Soviet studies" began as far back as in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. As far as I remember, and checking notes from those times, in those days, scholars still debated about the utility of the model of Totalitarianism, as the focus of research had been shifting from the ostensibly all-permeable state terror toward the everyday life of Soviet citizens—the approach suggested by the so-called revisionist school. Instead of the notions of control, brainwashing, and atomization of society (Arendt 1951), historians approached Soviet society not as a mass of people passively reacting to government pressure, but as a society that had retained some complexity, reconstituted social hierarchies, even undergone an "embourgeoisement" (Fitzpatrick 1999) under the Stalinist regime.

There was interest in social mobility and the uprootedness of Stalinist society, which some argued caused control problems for the state and brought with it coercion, labour discipline, passport laws and terror (Getty 1985). *Magnetic Mountain* by Stephen Kotkin was published in 1995, and its importance was great for its depiction of ordinary people not as passive captives of a counterrevolutionary and criminal Stalinist bureaucracy, but flesh-and-blood people who sensed that they were engaged in a great civilizational project. After this, I must admit, I have viewed the development of Soviet studies only from the margins, as my own interest shifted to international history, even though there was a short period when I did some research on Soviet foreign propaganda, and even more recently I have become interested in the "new political thinking" in the Gorbachev era. However, this is political and international, not social history.

As to postcolonial theory, I have approached this superficially from the point of view of a lecturer who has tried to introduce young students to the latest developments in the discipline of history. Like Terry Eagleton, who has complained about not having received a copy of the secret "samizdat handbook" of postcolonialism (Eagleton 1999), I have found the theories a little inaccessible or even obscure for someone who has not been part of the sect from the earliest days. Indeed, the style of many postcolonial thinkers (Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, but not Edward Said) seems to follow the rule: "Be as obscurantist as you can decently get away with" (Eagleton 1999), which is really surprising, considering the postcolonialists' ethos of speaking for the interests and feelings of the postcolonial world, which in their view is pretty much the entire planet.

My perplexity has not been much alleviated by reading about postcolonialism from secondary sources. For example, the mostly quite comprehensible chapter by Rochona Majumdar in the recent companion edited by Marek Tamm and Peter Burke, *Debating New Approaches to History* (Majumdar 2018), suffers from the mistake that seems to be chronic for postcolonialism—the overambition to explain virtually anything. For example, there is the idea that postcolonialism is about the criticism of the nation state on a global scale. Therefore, Majumdar places mass protests of the 1960s in South Africa, Palestine, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, Hungary, and Poland in the same category of the "disappointment of many colonized peoples at the failure of their respective nation states to deliver on the promises of modernization, alleviation of poverty, forms of inequality, and varieties of prejudice" (49). I very much doubt that protests in Poland and the 1956 uprising in Hungary expressed criticism of the nation state (a similar awkward reference to "several eastern European states" is on page 60).

Placing widely different phenomena in the same category is a mistake that children learn to avoid in kindergarten school, where they are asked to cross out objects that do not match with others (sorry for this analogy, I have a child of this age). I do not want to infer that this is a common problem in the work of Epp Annus, but it does raise eyebrows if the "construction of nations, railroads, factories" is mentioned in the same sentence (Annus 2018a, 112). But because this rests on the constructivist ontological premise that "reality is shaped into existence by ways of legitimizing certain modes of talking about it" (33), the thought that factories are built and nations formed in an essentially same way, namely by way of talking, should not surprise us.

I have found the constructivist analyses of Western orientalist thought and discursive practices by Edward Said, or Larry Wolff, highly valuable and though provoking, but I am not equally impressed by postcolonial "theories". I agree with Prasenjit Duara that postcolonialism is not a theory, which presupposes axioms of secular rationality, but a "perspective pointing to another cosmology" (Duara 2018, 65), which apparently has an anti- or post-Enlightenment ethos (or perhaps a claim to "emotional truth", see Annus 2018a, 125). It is a position of critique toward Western-centred modernity, but Duara is correct to point out that "critique is only a critique". It is not scholarship but an effort, a successful one, to bring the anti-colonial struggle into the heart of the former metropolises, and therefore primarily a political, not a scholarly, endeavour.

Having said this about postcolonialism, I must return to Soviet studies. Reading Epp Annus' book on Soviet colonialism in the Baltic states, I am impressed by the high level of research that has been conducted in this field over the recent years, upon which Annus can build her own original analysis and conceptualisations. Most of this research (on the Soviet period in Baltic history) has been conducted in social and cultural history, and literary studies, with studies on Baltic song festivals, folk dance, post-war gossip, architecture and design, postcolonialism in "Soviet travelogues" and the like standing out as particularly interesting and innovative research pursuits.

In contrast, research on political history seems to be lagging in terms of new conceptual horizons, which might explain some lapses in the otherwise admirable "philosophical rigour" of Annus' book. How else should one explain the emphasis on the "manufacturing of consent" by the regime on the one hand (Annus 2018a, 36) and the reference to "totalitarian control" (101) on the other. I had hoped that, as a result of new social history of the USSR, we were past the paradigm of Totalitarianism, but apparently not quite, and it still begs the question, how can one reconcile the two approaches, one speaking against the view that the Soviet Union

exerted nonconsensual control and the other arguing just the opposite? Perhaps this is just an author's oversight and not an inconsistency characterizing postcolonial perspectives.

Yet, let us pause for a moment on the idea of "manufacturing consent". For me, this seems one of the Foucauldian notions with a claim to universality, which is thought provoking and interesting, but somewhat out of place if applied to some real historical cases. Take for example the Soviet deportations in the Baltic states in 1949, which broke the resistance of the peasantry to collectivization. According to my own family's story, after the deportations, from which my grandparents were for unknown but certainly random reasons excluded, my grandfather along with other farmowners was summoned and told that there were two ways, one to Siberia and the other to Communism. There was no one who chose Siberia and so the kolkhoz was formed. Now, was this non-consensual control or manufacturing consent? Did my grandfather consent to rendering his property, his life's work, and his time to the kolkhoz, or did he do it because he essentially had no other option if he wanted his family to survive? In these perhaps extreme but still very real cases, poststructuralist theorizing and fancy language do not appear to bring a new epistemic quality.

In many other, or rather in most cases the postcolonial approach introduced by Annus produces excellent results, perhaps most convincingly in her discussion of whether the Soviet Union in general and Soviet occupation of the Baltic states in particular were exercises in colonialism. Many scholars have been reluctant to regard the Soviet Union as a colonial power, because in contrast to the European empires it had no overseas colonies, but was controlling a contiguous land mass; it was to some extent engaged in "nation-building"; and the Russians represented a majority, but Russian nationalism was not encouraged and even suppressed (Hosking 2001). I think Annus (2018a, 70) shows brilliantly that despite the rhetoric of national self-determination and the equality of all ethnic groups, Russians were always considered the big brother and, in actual fact, to cite George Grabowicz, "a Russian labourer could feel superior to a Ukrainian intellectual" for the Russian culture was deemed to be greater than all other cultures.

Besides, nation building has always been part of colonial practice, as the assumption that other ethnies need enlightenment and guidance towards Modernity is a typical colonial discourse placing people subjected to the nation-building effort in a position of dependency. Moreover, it did not follow from the teleological model of Modernization that the nations that could successfully progress on the ladder of civilization could become equal to the great Russian nation and perhaps acquire a more independent role, because, as Annus wittily puts it, "the Soviet family romance did not include space for adult peers, not even in imagined future" (117).

Annus is also brilliant in showing how in Russian colonialism feelings of superiority toward subject nations mixed with the sense of inferiority and subaltern impulses toward the West. The situation was particularly complex in the Baltic states, which as the Russians acknowledged was more Western than the rest of the USSR, but the dilemma could still be overcome by references to the supposedly far superior Russian culture (a common assumption among the Russian minorities in the Baltic countries even today). I agree that the idea of catching up with and surpassing the capitalist West was one of the goals of the Soviet Union throughout its history, but I am not sure whether feelings of inferiority manifested in all periods in the same degree. Stalin, for example, was not much guided by those inferiority complexes, especially when the defeat of Nazi Germany had plainly vindicated his industrialisation drive. Besides, in contrast to most other Bolsheviks he had little knowledge of the Capitalist world, having been abroad only once—in Vienna before the First World War (where he wrote his most important treatise on Marxism and the National Question) and that experience had not impressed him much (Montefiore 2008, 261–264). Feelings of inferiority would be much more important for later Soviet leaders (Khrushchev's tour of the United States in 1959 being an interesting, amusing and contradictory case).

Another interesting aspect that Annus points out is the mutually constitutive nature of the colonizer-colonized relationship, which she illustrates well with an example drawn from the memoirs of Andrei Hvostov: when a Russian immigrant-student asks her co-student to teach her the Estonian language, the latter refuses, thus knowingly or unknowingly contributing to the persistence of the cultural barrier supporting the colonizer-colonized divide (Annus 2018a, 186).

This is in many respects an admirable book and will be required reading for anyone interested in the Soviet legacy in the Baltic countries. It suffers only from the ambition of postcolonialism to offer a kind of total interpretive paradigm and the author's wish to engage with that cosmology at all costs, thus sometimes leading to sweeping generalisations, such as "To establish a colonial-type political, economic, and cultural order in a developed modern nation-state requires deportations and executions on a massive scale…", which ignores contemporary cases such as the US 2003 invasion of Iraq, or that massive resettlement operations need an "advanced phase of modernization", which disregards premodern examples of mass resettlements common already in the earliest polities in ancient Mesopotamia (101). There is also an awkward attempt to explain the famine of the 1930s, including the holodomor, by referring to an imbalance between ideas and material possibilities (111), whatever that means; examples of over-interpretation include the claim that upon becoming pioneers "girls and boys cease to exist" (124); also there are questionable

assertions like "cultural abundance was available only for manual workers" (121) or that the Soviet project entailed an "equal treatment of men and women" (112; it can be argued that women were not liberated from home but had a double burden of keeping a job and running an household). When Annus writes of the different "sensorium of the summer home" as a factor bringing down the Soviet Union (239), it seems that she speaks form her own experience and from the perspective of a Soviet intellectual, whereas it could be pointed out that a large part of the population lived in pre-war and pre-Soviet housing and thus in another "sensorium" anyway, and that tilling a garden had never been prohibited by the regime, not even under Stalin. One could also think of certain sports, which were either encouraged by the regime, accepted reluctantly or which were forced underground, such as mountaineering, orienteering or bodybuilding, as spaces of escape from the Soviet routine. Anyway, this is an interesting idea, which deserves a more thorough research.

To end with a personal note, it seems that I share with Annus quite a similar experience of the Soviet Union. Quite subjectively, for me it has not been a question that the Soviet Union was a colonial power, but I also understand the passion with which Annus explains this to foreign audiences, for whom the association of Colonialism and Communism has been difficult to fathom and cope with (with the Soviet Union and the Communist movement seemingly in the forefront of the anti-colonial struggle during the Cold War). However, I think this can be done without taking over all of the questionable "cosmology of Postcolonialism".

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Postcolonial cosmology or postcolonial critique? A response to Kaarel Piirimäe

Epp Annus

DOI: 10.7592/methis.v17i21/22.14671

It was with considerable pleasure that I read Kaarel Piirimäe's words of praise for my *Soviet Postcolonial Studies: A View from the Western Borderlands*. I know—as Piirimäe himself confesses in his review—that he is not a very sympathetic reader of this kind of work, generally speaking, so I was all the more gratified that he found himself broadly in sympathy with my reading of the Soviet Union as a colonial power and that, whatever his minor reservations, he found the generosity to call the book "required reading for anyone interested in the Soviet legacy in the Baltic countries."