

The Conditions of Soviet Colonialism

This essay focuses on questions of colonialism through the historical reality of the Soviet Union in its relationship to the Baltic states¹. I am interested in the question whether the vocabulary of postcolonialism can help us to investigate the mechanisms of oppression in the Soviet Union.

First some historical reminders about the Baltics: in the year 1940 Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia were each independent states, they were all economically flourishing, they each had a high national consciousness and a clearly formed national culture. In the summer of 1940, Russia invaded these countries; one year later, in 1941, the Germans took the Baltic States; three years later, in 1944, Russia re-occupied the countries and did not leave for almost fifty years. Finally, in 1991, the economic chaos and political instability of the Soviet Union was such that it could not defend itself from falling apart and the Baltic states broke away.

With few exceptions, the field of postcolonial studies has not seen Russian colonialism as part of its research agenda. Similarly, colonialism is not a common parlance in the Baltic states. Why not, one should ask. Maybe it is relevant to quote Ella Schohat's critique of the term postcolonial here: "The critical differences between Europe's genocidal oppression of Aborigines in Australia, indigenous peoples of the Americas, and Afro-diasporic communities, *and* Europe's domination of European elites in the colonies are leveled with an easy stroke of the "post"." (Schohat 1992: 237) Add Soviet postcolonialism to the picture and you get an even diffuser set of different histories with relatively few common features. This is why

¹ For a good collection of writings on a similar topic, see Kelertas 2006. About the state of research in the field of Soviet colonialism see Annus 2011a.

in my own project about nationalism in Estonia I actually attempted to show how postcolonialism is not a suitable framework for describing post-communist, post-totalitarian states in Eastern Europe. Incidentally, my project turned against itself.

My first question is thus: can we speak about the invasions of the Baltic states in 1941 and 1944 as colonisation? It is a historical fact recognized everywhere, save in Russia itself, that Russia invaded the Baltic states. Our question regards the precise nature of this invasion. Is one to describe it in terms of “occupation” or else rather as “colonization”– the two terms are not quite synonymous, are they? They seem to describe somewhat different projects, which may coincide, but which do not necessarily coincide. So then, what kinds of distinctions can we make between occupation and colonization?

Firstly we should note that in many articles about postcolonialism these words are used interchangeably. Authors who take the Baltic colonial situation for granted often use colonisation in one sentence and occupation in the next. But it strikes me that in many classic cases of colonization the word “occupation” does not seem to fit very well– even when the verb “to occupy”, interestingly enough, does not disturb us in English. For example, we do not generally speak about British “occupation” of India or Portuguese occupation of the territory of Brazil. Why not? Firstly, we think of occupation primarily as a violent, rude, bloody annexation of a territory belonging to somebody else, yet the story of Indian colonization, for example, is the story of the gradual imposing of a foreign rule, a process started by merchants that created small settlements which gained a political importance only later. Second, as the Latin root *colere* – to cultivate – suggests, important aspect of colonization is peaceful settling down in order to cultivate land. Robert Young reminds us: “Colonisation, as Europeans originally used the term, signified not the rule over indigenous peoples, or the extraction of their wealth, but primarily the transfer of communities who sought to maintain their allegiance to their own original culture, while seeking a better life in economic, religious or political terms – very similar to the situation of migrants today. Colonialism in this sense comprised people whose primary aim was to settle elsewhere rather than to rule others.” (Young 20)

Early colonization was possible because of the lack of clearly defined and well developed political entities in the destination areas. Using our example of India, there were different smaller political units in conflict with one another – a typical premodern condition.

A big difference between the situation in the Baltic states in the 1940s and in early colonial invasions stems from the fact that the Baltic countries were already modern states, that is, modern legal entities with established national identities. These were nations and they identified themselves as such, they were proud of their national culture, and, what is more, they felt themselves to be culturally, economically, and technologically superior to their invaders. This created a very different dynamics of oppression and the invaders had to face a much stronger resistance on the ideological level. Can one colonize a nation-state? I do not think so. One can only ever *occupy* a nation-state. One can only colonize a prenational, premodern community. In the core of colonization we have a clash between a modern and a premodern society, or at least a very significant technological superiority of the colonizers. The modernity of colonists mesmerises the premoderns, and this happens first of all through technology. Recall, for example, the widespread myth of how natives considered the newcomers to be their returned gods. Remember how colonisation was supported by the work of missionaries. Yet the missionaries of Soviet Russia, the communist party ideologues, did not convert a noticeable number of people in the Baltic states.

Thus I claim that the Russians did not colonize the Baltic states. Instead, they occupied them, and this is not to be equated with colonisation. Yet the Baltic case seems to defy the archetypal story of occupation—that of the French *résistance*, a story based on binary thinking with occupation opposed by resistance. Thus, the oppressors are hated, their voice is not accepted in the occupied country as a voice of truth, and, under a thin veil of collaboration, the natives respond with proud denial. A wonderful story to tell. I would love to describe the almost 50 years of Russian dictatorship in the Baltics in these terms – only that it just is not possible. Between 1940 and 1945, more than a million people in the Baltics had died or been killed, had escaped, or been sent to Siberia. During the years 1940–

52 more than 203, 000 people were deported from Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia (Vahtre 2005: 274). The Baltic states had lost approximately one fifth of their population. Those who tried to offer resistance were ruthlessly silenced.²

Thus the new situation emerged. The simple opposition between oppressors and oppressed started to dissolve and become complicated – because it became clear that the resistance would not harm the enemy at all. The occupation-resistance scheme can work only when there is hope that the occupation can end soon – when there is no hope at all, resistance in its absolute denial of collaboration is left for very few selfless and dedicated nationalists. It can be a dominant model during a war (even though oppressors always find collaborators), it can be an important model for some years after the war. There were people hiding in the woods and fighting the regime until about ten years after the end of war (in Lithuania, from 1944 to 1952 approximately 100,000 Lithuanians participated in partisan fights against the Soviet system and the Red Army), but, one after another, they were caught or killed or simply gave up. What was left was a situation where the majority of the people took the new regime for granted.

By the 1980s, thirty or forty years into the occupation, basically the whole population in the Baltic states had started to collaborate with a new regime. For example, almost all children were organized into communist youth organizations. It was possible to refuse to become a member, but it is rather remarkable that parents almost unanimously agreed with the teachers' demands. Why? Maybe partly because of the memory of Stalinist terror, they did not want their children to differ from others. But most of all it was just a silent concession that the Soviet regime had the brute power to mould the life of their children – that one must follow the rule of the game. Simple binary oppositions started to fall apart. Instead of a categorical "I will do anything I can to resist the regime," people started thinking: "How can I live in the best possible way, given the fact that the Russians won't leave this country? And how can my children live

² See Saueauk 2009 for mass repressions in Estonia.

in the best possible way inside the communist empire?" The oppressed started leading their lives within the framework of rules established by the oppressors. And so a situation emerged that has some significant affinities with typical colonial oppression: new forms of hybridity started to appear, the culture of the oppressed territories and the identity of oppressed people became infected by the new regime – and this influence had already some significant similarities with Western models of colonialism.

Thus I would propose that, even though Communist Russia did not colonize the Baltic states and instead “occupied” the Baltic states, nevertheless the period of occupation turned into a period of colonialism, as the modes of resistance turned into hybrid co-existence with the new power. Occupation has a short life-span; if an occupation does not end by expelling the occupiers from the country, then it acquires features of colonialism: the occupants settle in the occupied territory, their ideology starts to change the ways how the occupied relate to the world. The oppressed country can, of course, still be called an occupied country, yet the economical, social and cultural models at work are those of a colonial enterprise. Note here that I am making a distinction between colonization and colonialism. Generally these terms are used quite loosely, yet I reserve the term “colonization” only for the political and economical act of establishing settler colonies. Colonialism I use as a wider term, both temporally and ideologically: Colonialism is colonization plus what follows *after* the establishment of a colonial power. Thus colonialism is a set of political, economical, social and cultural issues. I claim that it is possible to separate colonization from colonialism and to have colonialism without a prior act of colonization.

Now we should ask more serious questions about colonialism, in order to prove our hypothesis about Soviet colonialism. What are the typical features of colonialism?

Firstly, foreign supremacy is established over a certain territory;

Secondly, the supremacy is guaranteed by the technological mastery lacking in the culture of the colonized;

Third, the economy of the territory is (re)constructed in order to serve the interests of the colonizers: whereas the know-how and

intelligentsia come from colonisers, the hard labour is, whenever possible, provided by locals;

Fourth, even though the establishing of power might have been bloody, after the system has been established, it generally works without constant and oppressive military supervision;

Fifth, the foreign power presents itself and is accepted by the majority of natives as an enlightenment project; (Said: “Both [imperialism and colonialism] are supported and perhaps even impelled by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination”, CI 9);

Sixth, the identity of the local population becomes based on the presence of others, who are perceived as superior, or more precisely, whose presence makes the natives feel themselves as secondary and unworthy. The experience of being oppressed becomes an important aspect of the local culture.

You see that my typology here is incomplete, I have left out, for example, the impact of the colonial situation over the colonizer which is not my interest here.

The first and third condition, foreign rule and economical exploitation describe well the situation in the Baltic states. As for economy, the Baltic economy was completely remodeled according to the needs of Moscow. The Baltic economy ceased to be oriented towards serving the needs of the local people, instead, it started to provide products for Russia. Economic power in the Soviet Union was, of course, concentrated in Moscow. The cornerstone of the economy of occupied Estonia, for example, became oil-shale industry and production of electricity, of which about 80 % was exported to Russia (Mettam and Williams 1989: 371). Even though Baltic farmers produced more meat than the local market could consume, still in the Baltics there was a shortage of meat, because most of the meat travelled to the Russian metropolis. However, communist Russia’s employment policies were not typically colonial. The communist model relied on local intelligentsia, and imported *manual labour* to the oppressed countries. The Baltic states had a large, well-educated middle class. There was no need to import engineers, teachers or accountants. For its part, the impor-

tation of uneducated Russian labourers was a feature of population politics in the Soviet Union: to assimilate smaller nations, they would overwhelm them by flooding their territories with the larger Russian population. In the year 1934 there were roughly 93,000 Russians living in Estonia; by 1989 that number had grown five-fold to nearly half a million (475,000). If you keep in mind that the Estonian-speaking population has remained slightly under a million, you can see the vastness of that change in a population. This indicates a much more serious assimilation politics than the one used by Western colonialism, generally speaking.

As for the second point, the Russina supremacy was not guaranteed by the technological mastery, but instead by the military forces far outnumbering the military of the attacked countries. This sounds more like occupation than colonization.

Point four, the question of controlling the dominant power is, again, different in the Soviet occupation, as compared to Western colonizations. According to Edward Said, in colonised India were in 1930s 4000 British officials, 60,000 soldiers and 300 million Indians. Estonia had one million inhabitants, thus, keeping the same balance it would have meant about 15 Russian bureaucrats and about 200 soldiers. The fact was that for most Indians the power of the colonisers was not visible as an oppressive power supported by bare military force. The Baltic countries, however, were overcrowded with the Russian military personnel who did not speak the local languages, and who guarded the borders and major settlements with the utmost care, day and night. Typical of that situation was the tragedy of ethnic Livonians, a small Finno-Ugric ethnic community living in the territory of Latvia, whose main occupation had been fishing for centuries and who were now prohibited from coming closer to the sea than 50 metres.

Without the very visible fact that the oppressing regime was overwhelmingly stronger and more populous than the oppressed, the Russian regime would have not been possible.

The fifth point. Western colonialism was presented as an enlightenment project and it was generally taken as such. The Russian occupation, however, was understood in the Baltics as a barbarian invasion. As we already mentioned, the Baltic states were nation-

states with an established national culture. Whereas the Russian invaders mythologized their invasion as an enlightenment project educating allegedly illiterate natives, in Estonia, to the contrary, one of the myths of the Russian invasion is, that the wives of the Russian officers, who had not seen fully equipped stores for twenty years, bought Estonian nightgowns and wore these as party dresses. This story, still often told, summarizes the position of the occupied countries: people felt the presence of barbarians, who were culturally ridiculous, but who unfortunately had a very large and ruthless army. The story of enlightenment, though told by Russians to Russians, was never accepted in the Baltic states.

Thus we have an interesting, multivoiced situation: the official story for the Russian state was to help the workers around the world and to liberate the Baltic states from their bourgeois governments. Behind this story we can easily discover the two-fold discourse of colonialism: the story of bringing enlightenment to the wilderness and behind it the typical imperialist desire to gain new territories and new commodities. Sure enough, Russian oppressors made sure that in the public sphere only their discourse was present – yet their discourse was taken as a manifestation of power, not as a truth to be believed in.

We see already that the colonial regime established by communist Russia did have some very specific features. Apart from the above-mentioned lack of 'modern state versus premodern state' situation, two additional factors determined the situation; firstly, the communist ideology, secondly, the totalitarian regime. The totalitarian regime created the basic lack of freedom, closed the borders so that nobody could escape, and kept a very strict physical control over the oppressed. The communist ideology created a specific language, which was not openly colonial—and indeed described itself as anti-colonial. In all the Soviet empire, the official ideology was that of equality. In communism, all nations and all people were supposed to be equal. Thus, the communist ideology, together with totalitarian and colonial ideologies, created a complex fusion, where communist, colonial and totalitarian features merge into one another. Colonialism meant forced communism. It created a situation where communist vocabulary became the official language, yet very few speakers of

that language believed in the words they uttered. The totalitarian regime made sure that only acceptable language was spoken.

Maybe the most interesting feature of communist totalitarian colonialism in the Baltics was the failure of Russian oppressors to make natives feel unworthy and secondary in the cultural terms (look at point 6). Since the occupied people did not approve of the new culture, the oppressors did not become their objects of aspiration. Instead, the colonizer generated a movement away from itself and created another object of desire: the free world outside the oppressed regime. So, instead of a binary opposition between the colonizer and the colonized, the result was the deconstruction of that opposition by a third term, the free world outside the coerced union of the colonizer and the colonized. Everything Western, from hats and jeans and vinyl records to colourful plastic bags and chewing gum, became the object of desire in the youth culture of the oppressed country - the occupation led to a powerless resentment against the Soviet metropolis and an idealization of the west beyond the Soviet sphere.

In conclusion: Soviet colonialism shares many important features with classic Western colonialism: political and economical hegemony, attempts to shape the worldview of oppressed people. Yet in ideological terms Soviet colonialism functioned as colonialism in reverse: a colonialism that actually created an imaginary opposite for itself, a fantastic ideal of the Western world, full of happiness and free from Russian influence. Because of their forceful yet non-credible claims for enlightenment superiority, Soviet colonialism managed to make even language function in the reverse, so that “bad” (e.g. Western) started to stand for “good” and “happy” (e.g. Soviet) for “unhappy” – and that is quite an achievement, even though quite the opposite from the one intended by the Soviet colonial regime.

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