

SOVIETISATION AND THE ESTONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM DURING THE 1940s–1950s

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ABSTRACT

The article deals with the impacts of the policy of the 1940s-1950s Soviet authority on the Estonian National Museum. The first, introductory part observes the general frameworks of the (ethnographical) museums in the Soviet Union, thus providing an overview of the goal of Sovietisation policy – what was the system's perception of the institution that the ENM was supposed to become. The main part of the article focuses on Sovietisation practice in the ENM: what kind of reorganisation took place within the work of the museum in connection with political changes, whether and how the new norms were adapted to and to what extent they were adopted. The source material used for the treatment of the subject matter comprises, in addition to the ENM's archive materials, the memories of three ethnologists who worked in the ENM during the observed period.

KEYWORDS: Soviet museology • ethnography • ideology • adaptation • autobiographical interpretation

Sovietisation is understood as *a number of structural, institutional, and cultural processes of transfer and adoption of the Soviet model with the goal of the adjustment of non-Soviet societies to the social and political circumstances prevailing in the USSR.* (Mertelsmann 2003: 10, quot. Lemke). In Estonian society, the relevant process commenced almost immediately after the annexation of Estonia by the Soviet Union in June 1940, lasting (however, disrupted during 1941–1944 due to German occupation) until the second half of the 1950s (see Mertelsmann 2003). One of the significant parts of Sovietisation policy was adaptation of local cultural and research institutions into the new system and the harnessing of these in the forefront of Soviet ideology. This also concerned the Estonian National Museum (ENM)¹ – the so far central institution for the collection and research of national culture had to re-orientate itself in order to operate as a Soviet ethnographical museum.

MUSEUMS AND ETHNOGRAPHY IN THE SOVIET SYSTEM

In Soviet museology, museums were defined as “scientific and cultural-educational institutions” the task of which was the collection, study and preservation of natural objects or artefacts of scientific or cultural value and the utilisation of the relevant work results for educating the people by way of expositions, publications, etc. (*Osnovy*... 1955:

11; Luts 1979: 10, 14). Thus, notionally, the “Soviet museum” did not significantly differ from what we consider under museums² today, however, in practice, the difference is clearly visible.

The “Soviet” bases, for the operation of museums in the USSR, were set forth as early as during the reforms of the 1920s–1930s when the entire research and cultural life was implemented to serve the ideology. In science, this denoted a compulsory transfer to Marxist principles. The Marxist nature and goals of ethnography were formulated in 1932, during the all-Russian discussion meetings on archaeology and ethnography where ethnography was referred to as science ancillary to history, aiming at supporting the science of history in the research of “alteration processes of socio-economic formations” and Soviet society (Shangina 1992: 135–136). As Marxist science, ethnography also had to have a so-called practical value. Ethnographic materials were seen as a favourable source for dealing with the contemporary political and economic problems in the Soviet Union, particularly in the cases concerning the “assisting” of the so-called “lagged behind” societies (by skipping the capitalist level of development) to the socialist level of development or the build-up of “cultures with ethnic-national format and socialist essence” (ibid.: 136).

The rooting of the Marxist method in Soviet science brought along extensive repressions, which also acutely concerned the ethnographers (see, e.g., Tumarkin 2002). At the same time, there was no content-wide implementation of Marxist theory in science – until the end of the Soviet period, the majority of ethnographers mainly focused on the collection and description of empirical data. Application of Marxist principles in the Soviet Union was primarily a sign of loyalty, which mainly constituted the ability of properly quoting the classics and did not pre-necessitate a more thorough awareness of original sources. Thus, the “subordination of Soviet science to Marxist theory”, which commenced during the 1930s, had simply remained a mere illusion even during the 1980s (Shnirelman 1992: 8–9).

Museums were encompassed in the socialist build-up work as the institutions which had to deliver the Marxist worldview to the masses, thus they had to become the so-called exemplary textbooks of historical materialism and the history of societal development (see Luts 1979: 17). Museum expositions were seen as easily accessible facilities for delivering the message namely to the common people (who, at that time, were largely illiterate) (Shangina 1992: 137). Strict exposition-related principles were imposed on museums with a historical profile, which also comprised ethnographical museums. These principles primarily regarded the opposition of the past and the present – by way of exhibiting the peculiarities of different socio-economic formations, the museums had to, in a simple and understandable manner, demonstrate the advantages of socialist society in comparison with all other ones (ibid.).

The situation, where the focus of museum work was concentrated on propagandist activities, inevitably brought about the subordination of research and collection work under the interests of expositions and other cultural-educational work. The scientific function of museums as “research and cultural-educational institutions” – defined as such in Soviet museology – decreased to being nearly non-existent. The aim of such a function primarily meant to “provide scientific reasoning” to the policy propagated in cultural-educational activities. Or, as Arved Luts wrote in his study material on museology, published in 1979: the museum operated as the “plant of political clarification work” which, however, was based on scientific research (9).

The norms imposed on the Soviet history science and history museums in the 1930s remained valid practically until the end of the Soviet era (Viires 2003: 47; Shangina 1992: 139). The formulations (e.g. agitation-propagandistic, political-educational, pedagogical-educational, cultural-educational work) used for denoting the ideological function of museums in the course of time, were altered, whereas in essence, everything remained the same. Within the Soviet system, museums were in the first place ideological institutions and their activity, particularly with regard to expositions, was strictly subjected to the monitoring of directive organs, even during the 1980s (Gazalova 1999: 13).

SOVIETISATION OF THE ESTONIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM

The Sovietisation of the Estonian National Museum actually commenced twice, before and after World War II. The objective of reorganisations undertaken in 1940 was explicitly the liquidation of the Estonian National Museum as a national (ethnic) museum. The ENM was split into several parts – the Ethnographical Museum was created on the bases of the ethnographic collections; the Literary Museum was established on the bases of the archive library and manuscript collections. Content-wide reorganisations, such as retraining of the staff or remaking of the exposition, which were also actively launched during 1940–41, were not completed due to the start of the German occupation and the military action that had quickly reached the Estonian territory. Soviet power was restored in 1944 however, by that time the situation of the Estonian National Museum had undergone significant changes in comparison with the pre-war period: the Museum building in Raadi had perished and a large share of the research personnel had emigrated. The Museum's collections had been evacuated from the war zone to different regions of Estonia and, due to this operation, had been preserved, however, were in need to be returned and arranged. Indeed, to replace Raadi, the Museum was allocated new premises relatively quickly, in a former court house in Veski Street, however, the rooms were too small for the Museum from the very beginning and did not meet its actual needs. It was necessary to start working practically from scratch. Being conditioned, on one hand, by the situation of the Estonian National Museum and also due to the weakened ideological pressure as the consequence of the war, Sovietisation in 1945 did not commence as intensively as during the first time. Rather, the system even allowed certain concessions: e.g. the Estonian National Museum was allowed to continue operation under its old name.³ In 1946, the Estonian National Museum was merged with the newly established Academy of Sciences of the Estonian SSR, thus ensuring its status namely as a scientific institution. To a certain extent, this fact differentiated the ENM from the so-called ordinary Soviet museums which, regarding scientific research, were treated by the system as secondary institutions⁴.

Recognition of the Estonian National Museum, as a research institution, did naturally not mean that the so-called “cultural-educational” work of the Museum would have lost its significance. Indeed, more extensive activity in this particular field was somewhat limited in the Estonian National Museum as, following the destruction of the Raadi building, the Museum was in constant shortage of rooms. Nevertheless, restoration of expositions – the main method of communication for the museum – was a relatively urgent problem for the ENM. The first small exhibition, “Handicraft of the

Estonian People", was opened as early as in 1945, by the anniversary of the Great October Revolution, pursuant to the recommendation given by the ESSR Council of People's Commissars. At the same time, preparations started for the new permanent exhibition, titled "Everyday Life of Estonian Peasants in the 19th Century", the actual opening of which, however, took place in 1947.⁵

The most essential part of museum work was the retraining of the staff. The personnel, young at the time, had commenced their education in non-Soviet circumstances, prevailing under the guidance of Prof. Gustav Ränk (1902–1998) who represented ethnic-national treatment of ethnography and, in his research, proceeded from the historical-geographical method established by Ilmari Manninen (1894–1935). In the reminiscences of the young employees of the time, (Ants Viires (b. 1918), Tiina Võti (1919–2007)), it was an extremely important indicator to have been Gustav Ränk's student, being repeatedly underlined. This subject was pointed out with particular acuteness when talking about retraining, thus expressing the compulsory nature of the latter. The folk science of the 1920s–1930s, represented by Gustav Ränk, was distinctly in accordance with the young researchers' understanding of ethnography of this period; the new Marxist trend was unfamiliar and enforced and adverse to everything that they had studied and considered to be right.

Well, we did have to relearn, that's true. As I had also been a student of Professor Gustav Ränk I also had to undergo retraining. Naturally, I couldn't avoid this. This way, I have been the downhearted generation as they call this, wasn't I? Whether I liked it or not, I was forced – I couldn't otherwise work in the museum if I hadn't undergone retraining. As my university studies were not completed, I went back to the university and had to again pass the university examinations according to those programmes. At school, I had learnt German, English and now I had to also start to learn the Russian language, even the history of Estonia was totally different from what it had been earlier. I had to restudy everything (Tiina Võti 2004).

The study of Marxist ethnography and museum work principles commenced under the supervision of Harri Moora (1900–1968), Professor of Archaeology in the Tartu State University. According to Moora's conception, ethnography was a science of history, which studied the folk culture of the feudal period. He criticised the ethnography of the independent Estonia, for idealising the peasant culture and focusing too excessively on folk art; instead, he promoted the treatment of folk culture as a complex integrity, this being intrinsic (according to his words) of the Soviet ethnography. Hereby, it is relevant to note that in people's memories, Moora's treatment of ethnography is not opposed to that of Ränk in such a black-and-white manner as the Soviet concept to that of the national one. The reason being that Moora's understanding of ethnography is not seen as an equivalent to Soviet Marxist ethnography. Rather, the former was seen as a further development of the national ethnography, which, due to diplomatic deliberations, was presented in Marxist frames (see also Viires, Tedre 1998: 28). As an example, I would bring a passage from the interview with A. Viires in which he analyses H. Moora's concept of ethnography, referring to the latter's article published in the Yearbook I (XV) of the Estonian National Museum.

When carefully reading Moora's theoretical introduction in this Yearbook – well, he says that co-operation with neighbouring sciences is indeed very Soviet and that

this has to be developed, and under his guidance, such a development was started. Well, for example this “Eesti rahva etnilisest ajaloost” (“Ethnic History of the Estonian People”) [Tallinn, 1956] is a prime example of such collaboration. The only thing is that once his respected figure disappeared later, this co-operation quickly fell apart. Well, let’s say the Marxist transition line in Moora’s article was the one stating that we should not only study the old peasant people but rather its layering and things like that (Viires 2004).

Moora’s activities, in directing the work of the Estonian National Museum in the 1940s, are relatively highly appreciated by his contemporaries. Ants Viires, in particular, has emphasised the diplomatic role of Moora, an acknowledged researcher in the USSR, in achieving certain independence for Estonian ethnography. According to the employees of the time, there was no content-wide introduction of Marxist principles in research work, and this is considered to be Moora’s achievement – in the background of Moora’s diplomatic activity, it was possible to deal with folk study-related research in the spirit of G. Ränk’s conception.

Scientific research of the time is similarly reflected in the 1947 Yearbook of the Estonian National Museum, publishing, besides a couple of leading ideological articles (that could be treated as “diplomatic gestures” towards Moscow) a number of articles following the earlier principles, some of them even written during the German occupation and under the supervision of Gustav Ränk (Viires 2004).

The same becomes evident in the materials collected during the 2nd half of the 1940s, kept in the ENM’s ethnographical archive (EA). At that time, the focal scientific work for the ENM was the compilation of “An Overview of Estonian Ethnography”, enabling collective concentration on the collection and research of older folk culture of Estonia. The only change in comparison with pre-war ethnographic descriptions was the highlighting of sub-clauses referring to social stratification of the village. In 1946, Aliise Moora and Ida Kaldmaa indeed went on fieldwork in the vicinity of Lake Peipsi to collect Russian ethnography (TAp: 341; EA 43: 15–233), but this was practically the only collection trip before the study of kolkhozes that commenced in 1949 and could be associated with the trends of Marxist ethnography.

The change took place in 1950. Ideological pressure started to increase at the end of the 1940s and reached its peak in 1950, after the VIII plenum of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party of Estonia launching the struggle against “bourgeois nationalists”. Using such an accusation, a number of employees of the Estonian National Museum were sacked. And once again, the name of the Estonian National Museum was altered – as of 1952, the institution again operated under the name of the Ethnographical Museum.

The work carried out by the museum was severely criticised by the ESSR Presidium of the Academy of Sciences – namely, the manuscripts of “An Overview of Estonian Ethnography” were declared to be *unusable* (ERM A 1-1-60, p. 10). Likewise, the ENM permanent exhibition was taken down, the reason being that it was *apolitical and disoriented the visitors* (ERM A 1-1-49, p. 14). A temporary exposition, “The Friendship of Estonian and Russian Peoples on the Basis of Ethnographic and Historical Materials”, was quickly organised to replace the current permanent exhibition. Due to the shortage of rooms, it was not possible to compile a new full-size permanent exhibition, however, smaller temporary exhibitions, on the other hand, were organised more actively, similar to photographic and mobile exhibitions. Utilising the example of museums in Moscow

and Leningrad, public lectures were launched both in the Museum as well as outside its walls, radio broadcasts introducing the activity of the Museum were aired, articles were published, etc. (ERM A 1-1-75, p. 7). Thus, the cultural-educational or popularisation work of the museum, (referred to as such in the reports of the ENM), became significantly more active during the 1950s. The most popular topic, in exhibitions as well as lectures, was the folk art of Estonian and other Soviet peoples; likewise, the Estonian-Russian friendship relationships were also represented as one of the permeating topics.

Scientific research continued in co-operation with Moscow. In 1950, Moscow determined new directions for ethnography – research of ethno-genesis and the socialist reorganisation of workers' and kolkhoz peasants' culture and everyday life. Both of these subject matters were in many ways propagandistically inclined, bearing an objective to prove, respectively, the positive role of the Soviet system or that of the "great Russian nation" in the development of other nations of the Soviet Union. At the same time, such co-operation served as a good tool for fixing the trends and methods of Soviet ethnography in the science of Estonia (Ränk 1978: 325). These two directions indeed underpinned the scientific research of the Estonian National Museum, until the end of the 1950s.

Influenced by the events at the beginning of the decade, ideological pressure was, quite explicitly, the keyword for the 1950s, in the memories of the ethnographers of the time. The staff of the ENM had practically been replaced and the entire work done in the 1940s had been demolished and replaced by new enforced topics the study of which emanated from political orders. The most problematic field, in this regard, was indeed the study of kolkhozes. Relevant questionnaires⁶, compiled in Moscow for this purpose, proceeded from the supposition that the system of collective farms had already stabilised. For instance, they required the comparison of economic indicators of recent years, an overview regarding the development of cultural life in kolkhozes, etc. It was quite difficult to find answers to these questions from the newly established kolkhozes in Estonia, as they had been recently devastated by the wave of deportations and had been repeatedly restructured during these years. In addition, the questionnaires were extremely broad-based, comprising all the domains of kolkhoz life; this way, the relevant descriptions in the ENM's ethnographic archives begin with the stories on the creation of kolkhoz villages and end with the presentation of the current economic indicators. A paragraph from Linda Treiman's article in the 1952 *Rahva Hääl* newspaper (4.II 1952) should provide a picture of the extensiveness of such an undertaking:

The writing down of the history of a kolkhoz starts with the history of the former individual farms which are now part of the kolkhoz, according to the narratives and personal memories of older members of collective farms. These notes encompass the creation of capitalism, filled with the exploitation by and arbitrariness of the Baltic barons, the purchase of farms and the formation of kulaks and the abuse of power by the bourgeoisie, until the establishment of Soviet order and the current impetuous development of kolkhozes.

The life, work and customs of the peasant farmers are described in the part dedicated on everyday life. For example, the data is written down about families, celebration of holidays, about buildings, clothing, ways of working and tools, the crops, agricultural

technology, machinery, food management, cultural life, etc. etc., concerning the past and today. The collected material gives a picture of the development of the Estonian village, so to say, from the bear harrow to combines and from sorcerers and parish clerks to rural hospitals with up-to-date furnishing and the new village intelligentsia – kolkhoz chairman, zoo-technician and farm manager, and from chimneyless huts to the construction of large kolkhoz centres (ERM A 1-1-75, pp. 3–4).

At the same time, the top executives of kolkhozes, during the 1950s, were not competent to provide answers to a number of questions; the flourishing kolkhoz life, that had to be studied, simply did not exist and thus, a large share of the material, concerning contemporary times, was instead collected from newspapers. For ethnographers, the study of collective farms was methodologically unfamiliar and also a relatively uninteresting field as it was obligatory to document everything and it was not possible to delve into more interesting individual issues.

The Baltic expedition⁷, dealing with the subject matter of ethno-genesis, was appreciated to be more interesting than the study of kolkhozes, largely due to the fact that it enabled the focusing on a concrete topic that was of interest for the researcher. Likewise, this topic made it possible to continuously deal with the study of folk culture and to implement comparative-historical methods, customary for Estonian researchers. And finally, the work of the complex expedition, targeted towards the past, was somewhat less politicised than the study of kolkhozes. Thus, in several articles, the study of collective farms has been directly thematised as the enforcement of Soviet trends, whereas in the case of the complex expedition, such a problem remains more in the background. With regard to the subject matter and the utilised methods, it seemed to be more “ethnographic” than the researching of kolkhozes and was therefore understandably a more pleasant direction for Estonian ethnographers. In comparison with the study of kolkhozes, the subject matter of ethno-genesis was remarkably more successful in Estonian ethnography of the 1950s. For this reason, the complex expedition has also been treated as the hinderer of the nadir in Estonian post-war ethnography as despite its initially propagandistic goal, it helped to consolidate the research forces in Estonia (Viires 1993: 17).

By the end of the 1950s, the political situation had normalised and Estonian ethnography had overcome the ebb tide of the beginning of the decade. The difficulties concurrent to the adjustment with the new system had been overcome by this time in the Estonian National Museum. The year 1957, denoting the beginning of the new phase for the ENM, has been dealt with in a more concrete manner – as a result of the all-republican discussion meeting of ethnographers, relatively significant changes took place in the priorities of the museum work. Namely, collection work was once again set in the forefront of museum activities, having been carried out in a relatively limited amount as of the beginning of the 1950s, due to focusing on the topics dictated by Moscow (ERM A 1-1-80, pp. 28–30).

Likewise, the themes for museum research also expanded. By the end of the 1950s, certain stability was achieved in the ENM activities and, to a large extent, the work proceeded pursuant the plans devised by the museum itself. On one hand, this was conditioned by the change in political circumstances (a thaw period had replaced the Stalinist peak time at the beginning of the decade); on the other hand, people had become somewhat adjusted to the Soviet principles of museum work by that time so that a number of enforced norms had become self-evident.

Still, how to evaluate the impact of the 1940s–1950s policy on the Estonian National Museum? Was the Estonian National Museum sovietised? If we perceive Sovietisation as a situation where the scientific function of museums is of secondary nature and the museum evolves into an institution the aim of which is to justify and propagate the political decisions of the Soviet power, we can probably say that the ENM was not sovietised. The ENM had maintained its status as a research institution, its scientific and cultural activities had been put into Soviet frames, however, the reception of these principles was formal to a large extent. The so-called recommended topics by Moscow, as, e.g. the study of kolkhozes and workers’ settlements, remained in the work plans of the museum also in the future, however, the relevant research proceeded on the basis of the questionnaire plans compiled by the ethnographers themselves and their own interests – therefore, the field trips were not comparable with the expeditions of the 1950s. In the future, the focus was prevailingly once again on the collection and study of old peasant culture and the main implemented method was, as earlier, the comparative-historical approach. Nevertheless, the propagandistic tendency of cultural-educational activities, aimed at “educating the people” and the popularisation of museum work was ineluctable. Self-evidently, Soviet museums had to also organise political exhibitions and lectures, in addition to specialised ones. This had become an ordinary part of museum life and in interviews regarding the periods after the 1950s, such a topic is not raised without a relevant question.

ANNEX

Table 1. Dynamics of the Estonian National Museum’s name 1909–2007.

14.04.1909 – 11.02.1931	Estonian National Museum
11.02.1931 – 7.09.1940	Foundation Estonian National Museum
10.09.1940 – 1.11.1940	Nationalised Estonian National Museum
1.11.1940 – 1.08.1941	State Ethnographical Museum
1.08.1941 – 19.08.1944	Estonian National Museum
19.08.1944 – 1.07.1946	Estonian National Museum
1.07.1946 – 13.09.1952	Estonian National Museum of the Estonian SSR Academy of Sciences
13.09.1952 – 13.08.1963	Ethnographical Museum of the Estonian SSR Academy of Sciences
13.08.1963 – 1988	State Ethnographical Museum of the Estonian SSR
1988 –	Estonian National Museum

SOURCES

ERM A – Estonian National Museum's Archive
ERM EA – Estonian National Museum's Ethnographical Archive
ERM TAp – Estonian National Museum's Topographical Archive
Ants Viires (14.02.2004)
Tiina Vöti (26.01.2004)
Endla Lööke-Jaagosild (22.09.2004)

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NOTES

1 The name of the Estonian National Museum was repeatedly altered during the observed period (see the dynamics of the ENM name 1909–2007, Annex p. 36). Aiming at simplicity and clarity, the name ENM is being used throughout the article.

2 A Museum is defined in Article 3 of the *Statutes* of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) as ‘a non profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for the purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man and his environment’ (ICOM... 1994: 21).

3 During German occupation, the State Ethnographical Museum had been reinstated with the designation ‘Estonian National Museum’ which was now also confirmed by the Soviet authorities.

4 It is probable that in this instance, the then Museum of Ethnography and Anthropology of the USSR was used as an example – differently from other Soviet museums the particular museum also belonged within the Academy of Sciences.

5 More lengthy writing on this issue: Luts 2001.

6 The so-called Kushner programme was implemented in the ENM at the beginning of the 1950s: Kushner 1950: 130–135.

7 In the years 1952–1960, a number of interdisciplinary expeditions were organized by the Ethnography Institute of the Soviet Academy of Sciences (initially under the name of “Baltic ethnographic-anthropological expedition”, from 1955 the “united comprehensive Baltic expedition”). The goal was to study the origin and ethnic history of Estonians, Latvians and Lithuanians and their relations with neighbouring people (especially Russians and Belorussians). From another aspect, the task of the ethnographers was to identify special regional characteristics of the folk cultures. Tied in with this area of research is the theory of economic-cultural types and historical-ethnographic fields presented by Maksim Levin and Nikolai Tsherbokсарov in 1955, which held that the Baltic States formed a separate historical-ethnographic field and according to which it was possible to view them as regions separate from the rest of the USSR (Kõresaar 2002: 774; Viires, Tedre 1998: 29).