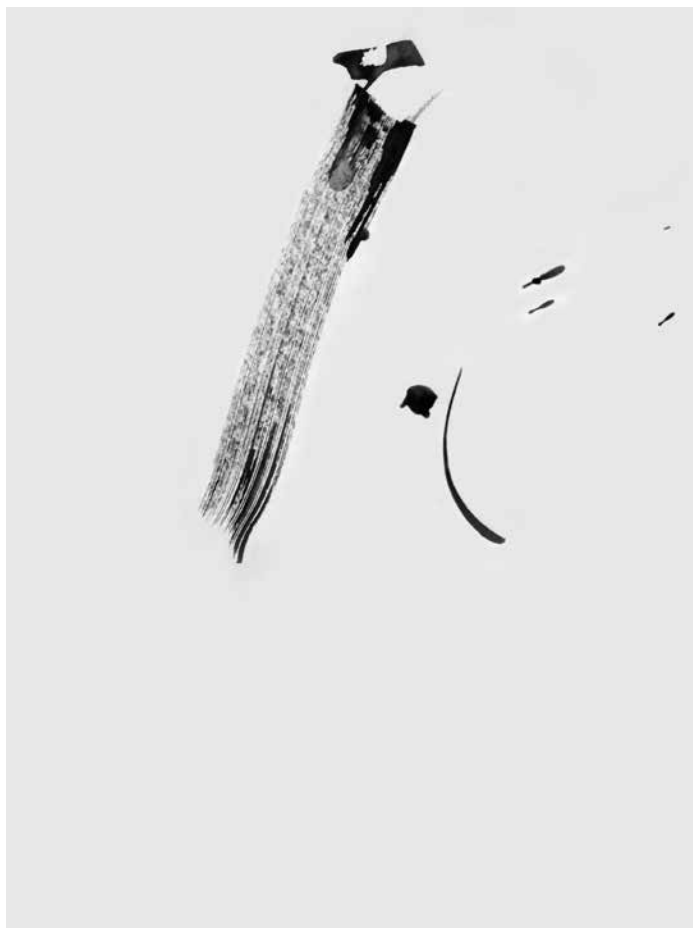


# KULTŪRINĖ ATMINTIS IR TAPATUMAS



I. Laužonytė. Zenga kaligrafija „Okashi“, 2019, popierius, tušas, 30 × 42 cm

# State of the Art in Studies of Late Socialism in the Baltic States

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The concept of 'late socialism' is widely used to describe the period of Soviet history from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. The concept was introduced in the 1990s to draw attention to the dynamic social processes that lay under the surface stagnation of political life. The introduction of the term involved a paradigm shift in Soviet studies similar to the 'revisionist turn' of the 1960s, to include heightened attention to social and cultural history of the period, ego-documentaries, life-stories and memory research. The article reviews the trends of the latest research of the late Soviet era in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, comparing them with the spread of the research of the "late socialism" of the USSR and its transformations in the Western academic context.

**Keywords:** Soviet studies, Baltic studies, late socialism, oral history, historiography

## Introduction

Scholarly interest in the period of 'late socialism' has become so pregnant of late that one might easily forget how the period was regarded not so long ago as a time of political and cultural stagnation, when nothing of interest could possibly have occurred. At the 2019 convention of the Association for East European and Eurasian Studies (ASEEES) in San Francisco, for example, there were two roundtables, three panels and a dozen papers devoted to the characterization of 'late socialism' from a wide variety of disciplines.<sup>1</sup>

The rapid growth of interest among scholars working within the traditions of

Baltic studies and Soviet studies into the late sixties to the mid-80s reflects a shift of academic methodologies and thematic focus that is worthy of targeted study. The aim of this paper is to trace the emergence of late socialism as a focus of mainstream historical study, and as an example of the creative dialogue between regional (Baltic) and international scholarship leading to a paradigm shift in scholarly approaches to the Soviet occupation in the Baltic States. This is not an exhaustive analysis of the developments in the area over the past thirty years, but an attempt to catalyse wider regional reflections based on the themes and topics introduced in the recent academic forums like ASEEES.

The entry of late socialism into mainstream scholarship in the twenty first cen-

<sup>1</sup> ASEEES, 51<sup>st</sup> Annual Convention. November 23-26, 2019, San Francisco, CA [https://www.aseees.org/convention/past-aseees-conventions].

tury is analogous to the rise of 'revisionist' approaches to Soviet studies in the 1970s, which engaged in a creative tension with the 'totalitarian' school that formed during the early years of the Cold War.<sup>2</sup> According to Sheila Fitzpatrick, these changes of terminology reflect a deeper 'paradigm shift' in the methodology and approach to the subject at hand; specifically, the rise of social history over political science as the primary lens through which the Soviet experience was perceived.

Three Baltic republics – Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania – are often seen as a single unit in terms of academic approaches to Soviet studies, employing mainly the 'totalitarian' paradigm without much distinction between Stalinism and late socialism, and developing narratives of Soviet oppression and national resistance<sup>3</sup>. However, as demonstrated below, this generalized perspective is inaccurate insofar as it overlooks a broad range of studies emerging from the region. Estonian scholars working in related fields of oral history, life story and memory studies have played a leading, though far from exclusive, role in driving methodological innovation in the study of late socialism in the Baltics. In Latvia and Lithuania, narratives of contemporary history to a greater degree continued to follow a more conservative thematic approach to the period, focused more on the traumatic experience of Stalinism, the atrocities of the immediate post-war period, and – to a lesser degree – the function and role of the nomenklatura. Nevertheless, in each academic community the emergence

of new and more diverse approaches to the contemporary history of the Soviet period is developing.

The following analysis is based on a survey of select academic publications and conferences focused on the period of late socialism over the past two decades, paying particular attention to the profile given to the topic within the framework of the ASEES as the leading American forum for the study of the USSR. This approach leads to the conclusion that the migration of 'late socialism' as a label for the period was instrumental to the bridging of local and international work on contemporary history in the region, contributing to the emergence of sophisticated approaches to questions of social and cultural continuity and disruption over the political breaking point of 1991.

### The Invention of 'Late Socialism'

Alexei Yurchak, professor of anthropology at Berkeley University, may or may not have been the first to coin the term 'late socialism,' but he has undoubtedly done more than other scholars to advance the use of the term as a framework for understanding the historical period of the USSR after Stalin and before Gorbachev. In 1997, Yurchak published a paper that was first presented at the 1994 convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (since re-named the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies) entitled 'The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretence and the *Anekdot*,' in which he provides an novel interpretation of how state power and ideology functioned

2 Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Revisionism in Soviet History.'

3 Budryte, *Taming Nationalism*.

and how the 'late socialist subject' experienced the official socialist representation of reality as 'largely false and at the same time immutable and omnipresent'.<sup>4</sup>

Yurchak explained his use of the term by analogy with notion of 'late capitalism,' to 'stress that the Soviet social order at the time differed in certain important respects from the socialism in previous historical periods'.<sup>5</sup> He introduced a novel understanding of state-subject relations that undermined the totalitarian model of Soviet power as dominated by oppression and/or ideological belief, and the characterization of the pre-Gorbachev era as one of unchanging stagnation.

Instead, Yurchak's model of late socialism opened the door to more subtle investigations of the inner workings of late Soviet society, that had the potential to reveal the origins of the sudden changes that led to the collapse of the USSR. Yurchak's theorization of late socialism through the themes of continuity and disruption culminated in his pathbreaking work *Everything was Forever Until It Was No More*.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps more than any other scholar before then, Yurchak drew attention to the powerful and largely unknown social and cultural processes that prevailed in the time of the so-called stagnation.

In a subsequent study of the period, Juliane Fürst notes that while she uses the term 'mature' socialism as a way of conveying the evolution and 'aging' of the

Soviet regime, especially in light of her generational approach to twentieth century history, it was being displaced by the more 'neutral' term of 'late socialism' as formulated by Yurchak.<sup>7</sup> She notes how it was only recently that scholars have tried 'to make sense of what happened in the later years of the Soviet Union' (highlighting works by Stephen Solnik, Stephen Kotkin and Donald Raleigh, including 'the question of what caused the Soviet Union's sudden demise and why it came so unexpectedly – for both outside observers and those living within the system'.<sup>8</sup>

For those seeking to explain the sudden collapse of the USSR, Fürst continues, the dramatic political events of 1991 (or 1989 in Eastern Europe) matter less than the slower-moving social and cultural processes that originated in the years and decades preceding the revolutionary turning point: 'Much of the rot in Soviet society took place much earlier and many aspects survived much longer. Soviet decay cannot be traced to one single point in time, nor can it be considered complete' (Fürst 2010, 25).

The concept and periodization of late socialism has since become mainstream in Western studies of the USSR. In the influential reference work *The Cambridge History of Communism* published in 2018, Fürst described late socialism as the period when the state 'struggled to reform its structures without endangering its raison

4 Yurchak, Alexei. 'The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism,' 161-2.

5 Ibid., ft. 1, p. 162.

6 Yurchak, Alexei. *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*.

7 Fürst, Juliane. *Stalin's Last Generation. Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism*.

8 Solnik, Stephen. *Stealing the State: Control and Collapse in Soviet Institutions*. Donald Raleigh, *Russia's Sputnik Generation*.

d'être: the creation of communism, marked by an evolving relationship between the Soviet Union and the West, which appeared to the former as 'both as a fascinating provider of all things desirable and as a constantly goading competitor'.<sup>9</sup>

In this period of geopolitical détente, she continues, the state's main concern was not so much the external enemy as its own subjects, 'whose participation and mobilization were supposed to form the backbone of the Soviet project.' The 'late Soviet subject,' in Fürst's reading, was a complex construct, who responded to the realities of the surroundings, adapting to necessity as well as ideology and who defied easy classification into categories of support or resistance<sup>10</sup>.

In summary, the concept of late socialism emerged over the last two decades in Western scholarship as central to the understanding not only of the latter years of the USSR, but of post-Soviet transition in each of the successor states and regions, based on a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of Soviet society and the relationship between the Soviet state and subjects, and between the USSR and the West.

The emergence of late socialism as an approach to the study of the Soviet Union can be compared to the emergence of 'revisionist' approaches in the 1970s that challenged the 'totalitarian' paradigm of Sovietologists of the day. As described by Sheila Fitzpatrick, herself a leading 'revisionist' historian, the new generation of scholars, mostly social historians, sought to

understand Soviet reality from the 'bottom up.' They were sceptical of the totalitarianism thesis, which held that society was completely controlled by the state and incapable of any agency. They suspected that at least some parts of society must be benefiting from the system and looked for one or another form of implied social contract, some kind of social support for the regime.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, the rise of 'late socialism' as a term to describe a distinct period of Soviet history is connected with the 'post-revisionist' shift away from political and social history towards what Fitzpatrick calls the 'theory informed cultural and intellectual history' associated with the *Kritika* journal starting from the late 1990s. Unprecedented access to personal diaries and other archival documents combined with novel, Foucauldian approaches to the question of power as discourse enabled the 'post-revisionists' to transcend the 'top-down' vs. 'bottom-up' opposition of Soviet studies of the 1970s and 1980s to a more comprehensive understanding of power relations as necessarily multiple and decentred.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Migration of Late Socialism to Baltic Studies of the Soviet Period**

The 'invention' of late socialism by scholars in the West tracked closely with the evolution of scholarly approaches to the post-Stalin period in the Baltic States using methodologies of oral history and life

9 Silvio Pons, ed. *The Cambridge History of Communism*, 282.

10 *Ibid.*, 282–285.

11 Fitzpatrick, Sheila. "Revisionism in Soviet History," 81.

12 *Ibid.*, 83.

stories focused on discovering the nature of everyday life under Soviet rule. The turn towards testimonial sources to inform the narration of contemporary history was intimately related to the 'return of memory' in the late 1980s, a side-effect of Gorbachev's policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*' that accompanied and catalysed the collapse of Soviet power throughout the region.<sup>13</sup>

While the initial movement to publish repressed memoirs and collect the life histories of individuals traumatized by the historical crimes of the Soviet regime was political in nature and organized in the framework of the popular movements against Soviet rule, more academic approaches to the subject would soon follow. In particular, the gathering and analysis of life stories would gain methodological rigour with the publication in 1998 of *The Testimony of Lives: Narrative and Memory in post-Soviet Latvia* by Vieda Skultans, a professor of social anthropology at the University of Bristol.<sup>14</sup> This work was instrumental in promoting theoretical interest in the experience of Soviet deportation and the methodologies of oral history and life stories as media of collective memory.

The work of Skultans on the memory of deportees was paralleled in Estonia by Tiina Kirss on Jaan Kross' autobiographical fictions (2000) as well as questions of memory and gender in the Baltic States (2003).<sup>15</sup>

In Estonia, a key role in the introduction of advanced social science methodologies and the propagation of life-stories approach to contemporary history was also played by Aili Aareleid-Tart (1947–2014), who was a member of the European Sociological Association (ESA) from 1995 onwards and a member of the board of the Research Network of Biographical Perspectives on European Societies from 1999.<sup>16</sup> In 2008 Aareleid-Tart helped to establish the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory (CECT), 'a transdisciplinary network of Estonian humanities scholars involved in the development of general theoretical models in Estonian culture by juxtaposing and comparing data, theories and analytical methods'<sup>17</sup>. In Lithuania, the rise of interest in life stories of the Soviet period was pursued by sociologists Irena Šutinienė, Sigita Kraniauskienė and Laimutė Žilinskienė in a volume entitled: *Born in socialism: The first generation of the Soviet period*,<sup>18</sup> and historian Dalia Leinartė-Marcinkevičienė, in a volume entitled *Soviet memory in life stories*.<sup>19</sup>

According to Kirsti Jõesalu, who along with Ene Kõresaar, has contributed extensively to the development of life stories and memory studies of the late and post-Soviet period in the Baltics,<sup>20</sup> this process

13 Davoliūtė, Violeta. *The Making and Breaking of Modern Lithuania*; Kirsti Joesalu, *Dynamics and tensions of remembrance in post-Soviet Estonia: Late socialism in the making*.

14 Vieda Skultans, Vieda. *The Testimony of Lives*.

15 Kirss, Tiina. 'Playing the Fool in the Territory of Memory: Jaan Kross' Autobiographical Fictions of the Twentieth Century.' Tiina Kirss, ed. Special Issue: Perspectives on Women in the Baltics, 34.

16 Aili Aareleid-Tart. 'Double Mental Standards in the Baltics During the Two Afterwar Decades'; *Cultural Trauma and Life Stories*.

17 Kirsti Jõesalu et al, "Aili Aareleid-Tart: Key Milestones in Her Life and Research."

18 Laimutė Žilinskienė et al, *Gimę, socializme: pirmoji sovietmečio karta*.

19 Leinartė, Dalia. *Sovietmečio atmintis gyvenimo istorijose*.

20 Ene Kõresaar, ed. *Baltic socialism remembered: memory and life story since 1989*. London, Routledge, 2018.

was driven by a number of projects to collect life stories from Estonians, like the campaign *The Life of Me and My Family in the ESSR and Republic of Estonia*.<sup>21</sup> In these life stories the dialogue with the discourse of ‘rupture’ that dominated in the 1990s emerged and everyday experience of late socialism became a central issue. A short time later, the Estonian National Museum (ENM) circulated different questionnaires which dealt with everyday life in Soviet Estonia in the project *Strategies and Practices of Everyday Life in Soviet Estonia*, including *Elu nõukogude ajal* (Life during the Soviet Era I) 2000, *Töö ja tööelu Nõukogude Eestis* (Work and Work Life in Soviet Estonia) 2001, *Noortekultuurid nõukogude ajal* (Youth Cultures during the Soviet era) 2003, *Toidukultuur nõukogude ajal* (Food Culture during the Soviet Era) 2002, *Turism nõukogude ajal* (Tourism during the Soviet Era) 2007, and *Noorte rõivastus nõukogude ajal* (Youth Clothing during the Soviet Era) 2008. Museums also played a role in focusing attention on the period of late socialism through exhibitions like *Things in My Life* curated by Kai Lobjakas and Karin Paulus in 2000–2001 at the Estonian National Museum and Estonian Museum of Applied Art and Design.<sup>22</sup> Over the next decade similar initiatives sprang up in the other Baltic states; for example, the MO museum of Vilnius where several Lithuanian scholars not only participated in the formation of this exhibition but gave

public lectures on aspects of everyday life in the 80s and 90s.<sup>23</sup>

Multiple international workshops, seminars, conferences led to gradual expansion of the methodological approaches to the period, especially in Estonia. During the past decade, especially, many important high level, interdisciplinary and international conferences took place, some of which have become annual events. For example, Heiko Pääbo, a political scientist at the University of Tartu Johann Skytte Institute of Political Studies has been regularly organizing international Memory Studies workshops at this university. The workshops bring scholars from the Baltic region and beyond who work on memory issues in diverse fields, ranging from social and transgenerational memories, intermarriages between Estonians and Russians in Soviet Estonia, issues of politics and memorialization were the issues on the table, to name just a few. Close interaction with Western experts on the period like Catriona Kelly, Poly Jones, the above-mentioned Aleksei Yurchak and Juliane Fürst, to name just a few, is also evident in the annual summer school on late socialism that has been held at Tallinn University since 2005. As is evident in the program for the recent school held in the spring of 2019, which seeks to develop a dialogue with “various strands of critical theory, including (but not limited to) affect studies, postcolonial studies, new materialism, gender and queer studies,” the Tallinn

21 Joesalu, Kirsti. *Dynamics and tensions of remembrance in post-Soviet Estonia: Late socialism in the making*.

22 *Ibid.*, 12.

23 MO Museum, *The Origin of Species: 1990s DNA* (5 October 2019) <https://mo.lt/en/news/mo-museum-invites-to-remember-your-own-stories-and-discover-new-exhibition-the-origin-of-species-1990s-dna/>

Summer School is indeed focused on developing new approaches to the period.<sup>24</sup> This expansion is also visible in the wide scope of research projects, as, for example, in the ambitious newly launched project of literary scholar and critical theorist Eneken Laanes ‘Translating Memories: The Eastern European Past in the Global Arena’, ERC funded project that has been started this year.<sup>25</sup> The research of transnational memory and transcultural memorial forms in post-Soviet memory cultures of Eastern Europe points to Estonia as a leading player in this field.

In Lithuania, historical scholarship has by and large followed a more conservative path, in terms of method, and most prominent studies of the years following Stalin’s death were written in a more traditional mode of political history focused on the repressive role of the state vis-à-vis society. Arvydas Anušauskas, a politician of renown as well as a historian, who began his career as a researcher of Stalin’s crimes for the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre (founded in 1992), would continue to focus on political repressions and the resistance of dissidents in his writings on the later Soviet period.<sup>26</sup> Nerija Putinaite, a philosopher by training and a former deputy minister of education, challenged the heroic status of the official *intelligentsia* of the late Soviet period like the poet and writer Justinas Marcinkevičius<sup>27</sup> focusing on the practices of sovietisation and anti-

religious indoctrination via cultural practices. Although such cultural elites were prominent leaders of the popular movement against Soviet rule in the late 1980s, she points to their role as subtle ideologues of the regime, inuring the population to the chains of political control through the invention of false national traditions. In a similar fashion, Arūnas Streikus focused on the role of the state in the repression of the Catholic church and the mechanism of Soviet censorship.<sup>28</sup>

Lithuanian and Latvian historians, although to a lesser degree, also explored the role of the *nomenklatura* and the biographies of prominent national communist leaders to make sense of the period. Vytautas Tininis pioneered this approach with the publication in 1995 of an in-depth biography of Antanas Sniečkus, the long-reigning first secretary of the Lithuanian Communist Party (1940-1974).<sup>29</sup> To this day it is the only biographical study of this historical personality, though a young political historian Marius Ėmužis has conducted research on underground communist party members in interwar Lithuania and their activities after WW2.<sup>30</sup> In the field of Soviet *nomenklatura* studies, Saulius Grybkauskas has done pioneering research on the role of the members of so called “technical intelligentsia” and second secretaries within the communist party.<sup>31</sup> Together with Mindaugas

28 Streikus, Arūnas. *The Church in Soviet Lithuania; Minties kolektyvizacija*.

29 Tininis, Vytautas. Sniečkus: 33 metai valdžioje: Antano Sniečkaus biografinė apybraiža.

30 Ėmužis, Marius. ‘Nesutarimai ir kovos dėl lyderystės tarp Lietuvos komunistų 1935–1937 m.; Antano Sniečkaus sovietinio partinio elito klanas 1944–1974 metais’.

31 Grybkauskas, Saulius. ‘The Role of the Second Party

24 Tallinn Summer School. *The Soviet Otherwise*.

25 TAU19181 ‘Translating Memories: The Eastern European Past in the Global Arena’.

26 Anušauskas, Arvydas. *Kelias į Nepriklausomybę: Lietuvos Sąjūdis 1988–1991*.

27 Putinaite, Nerija. *Nenutrūkusi styga; Skambantis molis*.



Tamošaitis he completed a first biography of Algirdas Brazauskas, the first president of Independent Lithuania and the last first secretary of the LCP.<sup>32</sup> In Latvia, similar research has been conducted by Daina Bleiere, and Martins Kaprans has studied the role of the ‘nationalizing’ communist elites,<sup>33</sup> while Valdemaras Klumbys and Vilius Ivanauskas extended the *nomenklatura* approach to the study of the cultural elites in Soviet Lithuania.<sup>34</sup> In terms of the attempt to get a grasp of the reception of political ideology in wider society ‘from below’, Vilnius University historian Tomas Vaiseta tried to apply the ‘oral testimony’ approach to the history of the late Soviet period in Lithuania in his dissertation-based book *The Society of Boredom*, based mostly on interviews.<sup>35</sup>

Paradoxically, it would be political scientists who made the most consistent use of oral history to develop new methodological approaches to the period of late

socialism in Lithuania. Ainė Ramonaitė and other scholars from the Institute of International Relations and Political Science drew heavily on interviews to map out the social networks that developed in the late Soviet period to form what she refers to as a ‘parallel society’ that catalyzed the popular movement of the late 1980s.<sup>36</sup> To make a stronger platform for the ‘oral turn’ in the research of late Soviet period last year Ramonaitė and others established the (Post)Soviet Memory Studies Center, which showcases many recent works, methodological and substantive, of oral history of the late socialist period in Lithuania.<sup>37</sup> The majority of these works, although partaking in the ‘oral turn’ and focusing on the late soviet period, do not depart very far from the traditional field of political history, with only occasional digressions into the fields social or cultural history, such as, for example, the pioneering work of Lina Kaminskaitė-Jančorienė on the cinematification of Lithuania after WWII.<sup>38</sup>

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Secretary in the “election” of the First; ‘Imperializing the Soviet Federation.’

32 Saulius Grybkauskas, Mindaugas Tamošaitis, *Epochų virsmo sūkuriuose: Algirdo Brazausko politinė biografija*.

33 Kaprans, Martin. “Remembering communism in Latvia: a nationalizing state and the multi-directionality of the past.” Daina Bleiere, ‘Latvijas PSR nomenklaturās veidošanās 1940.–1941. gadā.’

34 Klumbys, Valdemaras. *Behavioural Models of Soviet Lithuanian’s Cultural Elite*. Vilius Ivanauskas, “Engineers of the Human Spirit’ During Late Socialism: the Lithuanian Union of Writers between Soviet Duties and Local Interests.’

35 Vaiseta, Tomas. *Nuobodulio visuomenė: kasdienybė ir ideologija vėlyvuosiu sovietmečiu (1964–1984)*. Vaiseta’s book, in turn, was inspired by the study of art historian Agnė Narušytė called *The Aesthetics of Boredom* (2010) on the paradoxical situation in late socialism where artists sought to capture aesthetic experience in the representation of boredom and banality.

### State of the Art in Studies of Late Socialism

As recently demonstrated at panel discussions at the 2019 Convention of the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies in San Francisco on 23–26 Novem-

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36 Rūta Žiliukaitė, Ainė Ramonaitė, Laima Nevinskaitė, Vida Beresnevičiūtėeresneviči Vinogradnaitė. *Undiscovered Power: Map of the Civil Society in Lithuania*.

37 <http://www.memory.tspmi.vu.lt/>; Inga Vinogradnaite et al., Sakytinė istorija kaip sovietmečio tyrimo metodas.

38 Lina Kaminskaitė-Jančorienė, *The Cinema in Soviet Lithuania: the development of the system and the shift in functions (1944–1970)*.

ber 2019, studies of late socialism have not only become mainstream, but have taken on a new level of sophistication and balance between the necessary focus on national particularities and regional patterns.

As noted by Norman Naimark, the Cold War context gave such a large academic exchange forum as ASEES and others a strong focus on Russian studies, leaving the other nationalities of the USSR and Eastern Europe in the shadow. The Baltics, in particular, remained on the margins of mainstream Soviet Studies, due in part to the problems of language, with the few exceptions proving the rule, as for example with the address made by Donald Treadgold at the Second Conference on Baltic Studies at San Jose State College in 1970. Treadgold was the editor of *Slavic Review*, and he began his address by ‘confessing’ his complete ignorance of the languages, history and cultures of the three Baltic states, that he knew less of this area than any other part of the USSR.<sup>39</sup> It was restricted to much smaller forums, such as conferences organized by the American Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies to fill in the gap of interested in the specificities of the Baltic region.

In any case, it was not until 1971 before the AAASS devoted a special session of its National Convention for the discussion of national identity in the Baltics. This reflected the growth of ‘nationalities studies’ in the 70s and 80s, as witnessed by the establishment of the journal *Nationalities Papers* in 1972. However, it would not be until the collapse of the USSR that the non-

Russian parts of the region of the subject came to be studied in their own right.<sup>40</sup>

Since then, the ASEES has evolved to become, along with the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies (AABS) into a significant forum for the exchange of ideas and research in Baltic Studies. At the above-mentioned Annual Convention held in San Francisco in November 2019, for example, there were at least 5 panels and at least 50 papers focused on topics relating to the Baltic States, based on a qualitative analysis of the papers and panels as described in the program. A word-search of the electronic version of the program will find 22 papers with ‘Estonia’ in the title or delivered by a scholar from Estonia, 19 with ‘Lithuania’ and 12 with ‘Latvia.’<sup>41</sup>

There were two roundtables devoted to the subject of late socialism, including ‘Inequality and Privilege under Late Socialism’ chaired by Guillaume Sauvé, University of Montréal, and ‘Engaging Late Socialism,’ chaired by Thomas Roberts of Smith College. And in addition to three stand-alone papers with ‘late socialism’ in the title, there were three full panels on the topic, including ‘Architecture and Society in Late Socialism,’ chaired by Marie-Alice L’Heureux, University of Kansas, ‘Tearing up the Plan: Urban Developments during the USSR’s Late Socialism,’ chaired by Anna Ivanova of Harvard University, and ‘Homes, Heritage, Sex, and Moscow: New Approaches to Late Socialism in the Baltic SSRs,’ chaired by the author of this paper.

39 Treadgold, Donald W. ‘Baltic studies as viewed by an outsider.’

40 Naimark, Norman. ‘Soviet and east European studies and Baltic studies: a historical exploration.’

41 ASEES, *51<sup>st</sup> Annual Convention. November 23-26, 2019, San Francisco, CA.*

The four papers of this last panel, delivered by Estonian scholars Uku Lember, Linda Kaljundi and Karsten Brüggemann, all from Tallinn University, and Epp Annus from Ohio State University represent the most 'cutting edge' approaches to the study of late socialism in the region and deserve to be closely surveyed here. The approaches demonstrated by this group of scholars integrate the study of history both 'from below' and 'from above' from more central and more peripheral locations in Late Soviet society. They also combine various methodologies and post-structuralist disciplinary approaches in their focus on oral history, life stories and topographical investigations. The papers either contrast or deal with transfers between different social discourses or spheres of life; for example, oral histories with Estonian gay men are juxtaposed with documents of the Soviet court files for sodomy; cultural texts about homes and domestic spaces that were in wide circulation are discussed together with intimate life writings and interviews; elite debates over heritage culture are seen in the context of the developing mass tourism and tourist kitsch.

Epp Annus from Ohio State University, the author of an important monograph and a collection of articles on the topic of post-colonialism as it applies to the study of Estonia and the Baltic States,<sup>42</sup> focuses on national intimacies and cultural imaginaries in late-Soviet Baltics. Annus proposes a very creative usage of a term of Jacques

Rancière, *dissensus*, pointing to a form of 'dissent' quite different from the classical, public, political activities of 'dissidents'. She examines the 'everyday dissensus' that took place in the private space of the home, and in the action of summer homing that is, leaving the city and creating a new 'world' within the separate confines of the summer home. In Annus' interpretation, the practice of summerhoming in one's privately owned space, in imagined separation from the state and its demands, was not the only source of 'dissensual energies' in the late Soviet era. Indeed, she is careful to state that one should not underestimate the role of the 'other spaces' and dissensual energies in national mobilizations for the anti-Soviet cause. Nevertheless, these dissensual energies kept the potential for change latent in people's sensorial regimes, cultural imaginaries provided alternate value systems, different visions of modernity and competing narrative models for achieving personal happiness.

Reflecting a significant concern among historians of the period of late socialism, Annus seeks to trace historical continuities between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, such as the 'cultural preconditions' for the popular movement of the late 1980s. These include the 'dissensual energies' embedded in various cultural practices and themes, activities that were not overtly political, and yet which could feed into the political at the right time and place. The questions raised by this research include how 'total' was Soviet rule, to what degree did ideology penetrate the private space of intimacy, what were the strategies for protecting a degree of freedom and autonomy? The con-

42 Epp Annus, *Soviet Postcolonial Studies: A View from the Western Borderlands*; ed., *Coloniality, Nationality, Modernity: A Postcolonial View on Baltic Cultures under Soviet Rule*.

cept of 'dissensus' is useful for revealing a 'genre' of the everyday that can be discerned in oral histories of the period.

Uku Lember, a lecturer in history at Tallinn University and an expert in the late Soviet period, queer studies and oral history, is one of the pioneering researchers on the memories of the period of late Socialism among gay men in Estonia. This research explores the history of sexuality and every day in the soviet Baltic states during the late Soviet period. Lember's research builds on his earlier work on oral history of private lives during late socialism, which looked at inter-marriages to reveal the cultural division between the Estonian and Russian-speaking communities in the Estonian SSR. Based on interviews of everyday practices of socialization, identity, bonding, in the everyday life in Soviet Estonia, Lember examines Soviet individualisation processes and personal life trajectories by looking at sexuality next to other large social categories – such as state, ethnicity, and profession. Interestingly, this research is catalysed by recent art projects of Jaanus Samma,<sup>43</sup> based on the court proceedings of a Soviet Estonian chairman of a minor collective farm in the 1950s who was convicted for homosexual practice in 1964, fruitfully blending investigation into every day private live, dissent, legal practices and topographies of personal socialization (saunas, public baths, etc.). Lember and Samma both conducted interviews with gay men on their life in the late Soviet Estonia – in the 1970s and 1980s. These interviewees, representing different

social strata, were all born in the 1950s and early 1960s and today live either in Tartu or Tallinn; the interviews were taken in 2011-12 and 2018.

The main themes emerging from this specimen of oral history are as follows. First, the temporal break of the collapse of USSR is reflected in how the interviewees understand the break and changes in their lives 'before' and 'after' 1991, at a time when they were in their late 20s and early 30s. The second theme concerns identity and labels: how did they identify themselves? When and how did 'being different' matter in the context life-stories? Thirdly, the interviews revealed how the spatial position of Estonia on the borderlands of the USSR played a role in bringing out ethnolinguistic difference and the distinct cultural space of the Soviet Western borderlands. To date, research on such issues is only beginning to emerge at the graduate studies level in neighbouring Lithuania and Latvia.

Linda Kaljundi, Associate Professor of History and Research Fellow at Tallinn University and currently also a visiting curator at the Kumu Art Museum with her paper on 'Late Soviet Heritage Boom: Transfers Between Arts, Science, and Heritage Practices' represents a strong example of multidisciplinary approaches to late socialism blending social history and art. Kaljundi's work on cultural memory studies develops the idea of the 'past-oriented culture' of late socialism, looking at space and time in how an orientation towards the past is evident in the built environment and in urban restoration projects.

These new trends are summarized by Karsten Brüggemann, Professor of Estonian and General History at the School of

43 <https://www.jaanussamma.eu/>

Humanities of Tallinn University, in his call 'Towards a Transnational Perspective on Late Socialism in the Baltic SSRS', which outlines a research agenda aimed at coming to an understanding of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union through the study of its peripheries. Noting the big gap between studies on late socialist Soviet society focused predominantly on Russia and Ukraine, with an occasional turn to central Asia, and the research in the Baltic republics which usually deals in some depth with just one republic, he argues for the necessity of developing an approach to the transnational Soviet context as such. Moreover, Brüggemann suggests that this approach needs to be supplemented by a comparative approach to the Soviet experience within a broader European framework. He describes this challenge as the historicisation of the problem that should begin by enlarging the research context of regional history: 'to put it a bit provocatively, to re-Sovietize and denationalise the analytical frame of Baltic history in the second half of the 20th century'. In Brüggemann's view, a transnational perspective that looks for inner-Soviet entanglements and pays attention to the links and flows between the socialist nations might shed some new light on how Soviet society managed diversity while aiming at uniformity. Although this task is difficult, due to the language barriers and strongly differing scholarly traditions as well as methodological approaches involved in the study of many nationalities within the USSR, it is necessary to overcome the limitations of single-country studies.

In conclusion, such methodological samples for the study of late socialism not

only demonstrate the state of the art of current studies in the Baltics but reinforce the value of comparative and transnational approaches that have become increasingly evident in studies of the period. From the 'invention' of late socialism among Western scholars of the USSR to the mainstreaming of interest in this period throughout the academic communities of the Baltic states, the spread of this post-revisionist term has revolutionized the study of the USSR in the post-Stalin period and generated a great deal of interest in a period and region that were previously seen as stagnant. The new generation of studies of late socialism, which is gradually becoming mainstream across the Baltics, albeit with different intensity in each of the three academic communities, seeks to characterize the interaction between the individual and the state in the late Soviet period, investigating the more subtle mechanisms of social control and resistance. This trend involves a breaking down of binary oppositions and a shift away from narratives of national martyrology, which runs against the grain of some more recent political trends across the region. As characteristic of the post-revisionist approach to the Soviet period, they seek to address the question of how and to what degree the Soviet state penetrated the private sphere, and what were the modalities of autonomous action within that sphere. Based on a transnational theoretical framework that enables comparative approaches on a pan-European level, they demonstrate the value of seeking similarities and differences among the individual Baltic states against global developments that nonetheless scrutinize the historical distinction of the Soviet experience.

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