Wind of Change

Separating Heads and Bodies in Eastern Europe

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ABSTRACT

What remains of the Soviet identity for those who grew up in an empire that started in the Baltic sea and ended in Kamchatka? What kind of post-Soviet cultural combos have been produced afterwards? Was it bizarre to listen to Led Zeppelin and Nirvana while being targeted with nuclear missiles from the West? In a retrospective way and engaging with the collective memory of his home country, Estonia, the author reflects on different narratives of Europeanisation, shame and peripherality and the way local people embodied them.

KEYWORDS

decoloniality, dividual identity, Eastern Europe, peripherality, political art

The First Blow

I was born in the Soviet Union. I am Estonian. However, I hardly speak any Russian and instead have spoken English since I was eight years old. Was I a Soviet kid or an Estonian kid? Probably both. But I feel disgust speaking in these terms, as it makes the present a collective trauma and ideological manipulation. But these things are part of human life and need to be dealt with! So, let's go!

In the late eighties, to be 'Soviet' meant to be Russian, and to be 'Estonian' meant to be Western – this much I remember from the common sense of people who surrounded me back then. In this case I was an Estonian kid. Indeed, I remember asking one of my Russian friends something like, 'Why don't you want to become Estonian? You could go to America! Don't be Russian! You'll remain Soviet!' It was around 1988. The winds of change had slightly started to blow. Being Estonian was associated with all kinds of things from the West – especially toys, sweets, cars, films and animations from VHS cassettes. Russian language, music and films seemed like things that could never beat the new wind. Sometimes I wore my father's Soviet officer cap and a rubber King Kong mask. I got the mask as a gift from my father, who

had brought it from Moscow. What a post-Soviet combo that was. I wore it at school and in public places. Once an old lady came to me and said I should quickly hide the cap because you can't make jokes with these things without getting into trouble. I also remember talking loudly about 'fucking Russians, who brought my grandfather to Siberia, when he was only sixteen years old'. And another old lady came to me, warning that I shouldn't speak about these things with such a loud voice.

But I also remember the time before the winds of change. Or the time before I started to sense those winds. People can speculate and fantasise a lot about their early childhood memories, but one day I might be the last person on Earth who remembers the Soviet Union. And then I am going to need a more accurate story. Yes, it was a totally different world. A different cosmology! My subconsciousness was formed above a huge terrain that started with the Baltic Sea and ended in Kamchatka. The footprint of my family was pretty huge. My great-grandfather had been imprisoned in Sakhalin island, where he died. My grand-aunt had been imprisoned in Vorkuta. My grandfather had been imprisoned in Kolyma. But not all of my relatives experienced the huge terrain because of Stalin's repressions. My father worked in hospitals of Krasnoyarsk Krai. My aunt went to camping trips in the Kuril Islands. I remember her photos – bearded men eating piles of caviar with huge spoons. It was a huge continent where I lived! When Mikhail Gorbachev visited Tallinn in 1987, my great-grandmother said, 'Our master is here'. I stood by the road and watched his escort pass. I imagined it to be the road that passes all the Soviet nations. This was my identity as 'a Soviet kid'.

Still, there was always differences between *us* and *them*. Not just an ethnic difference but a colonial difference. We were the colonised, and they were the colonisers. There has been a lot of confusion around the notion of us and them in the Soviet Union. This is what made two young Estonian artists, Jaan Toomik and Vano Allsalu, stand on the Charles Bridge in Prague in 1989, holding a banner that said, 'My prick is clean!' They claimed they were not the Soviets, like many Czechs had thought. Were they telling the truth, or were they trying to provoke and get attention?

Five years ago, before the outburst of the crisis between Russia and the West, my exhibition 'Decolonise This' (Y Gallery in Tartu, 2012) made some local people feel uncomfortable, as I exposed photos of the former Soviet military zone, where nuclear warheads were stored. The place is in my hometown of Tartu. My statement was based on my childhood memories in the blockhouse district of Annelinn, where

many children played with gas masks. It was normal, as every family had at least one at home. The reason was the closeness of Raadi military airport, one of the most important military objects in the Western part of the Soviet Union. I started to think about it. Those gas masks were meant for an attack from the West because those nuclear warheads were meant for the West. And the West probably had some nuclear warheads for us as well. We were the threat to the free world and were to be nuked in case of necessity. I don't know if these thoughts are based on logic or my desire to exaggerate and manipulate – probably both. In 2012, when almost nobody spoke about Eastern Europe and geopolitics of the mind, I wanted to create a discussion. So the statement was something like this: I imagined the atomic bomb that was meant to be dropped on my hometown of Tartu and wondered if it would have killed the Soviet colonisers and saved us, the colonised?

I had awakened my own East European consciousness and wanted society to do the same, as if it were my existential mission. I also publicly advocated to name Friendship Street of Tartu (*Улица Дружба; Sõprusel puistee*) after the Chechen leader Dzhokhar Dudayev as well as the Raadi airfield of this town. Dudayev lived on Friendship Street and had a room in what is nowadays the Barclay Hotel, where he frequently met with local researchers, such as professor Linnart Mall, an Orientalist who later became the founder of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organisation (Martínez 2018). Dudayev was the commander of the nuclear bomber aircraft division at the Tartu air base during the perestroika years. He became a popular figure in Estonia after refusing the Kremlin's orders to block the television and parliament buildings and to suppress the local bid for independence. In 1991 Dudayev moved to Grozny and became president of Chechnya, initiating a process of independence that led to several wars against Moscow.

I Cannot Play Balalaika, But I Would Like To

'Let your balalaika sing, what my guitar wants to say!' is written in the famous song 'Wind of Change' by the Scorpions. This song definitely belongs to the soundtrack of the collapse of the Soviet Union. It emerged during the most pivotal events of the East and made the masses whistle along. No need to speak English – all humans can whistle! So the balalaika people were whistling this catchy melody, while guys with guitars were delivering the message that anyone could hardly understand.

The balalaika is known as a Russian musical instrument. The Scorpions are known as a band from West Germany. The place, where those two would meet, is definitely Berlin. There is a quote from Nikita Krushchev: 'Berlin is the testicles of the West. When I want the West to scream, I squeeze on Berlin!'

Berlin is the site where Eastern Europe takes place. A Western European city that was partly occupied by the Soviet Union, here the East is represented by Russia and the West by Germany. Eastern Europe is the story of Berlin that reaches from Szczecin to Vladivostok. It is one of these homogenising forces that produce the universal global subjects and their hierarchy. You have to choose between guitar and balalaika; otherwise, you are dead. Or was balalaika ever an option – something equal to guitar? In the early nineties a balalaika was probably meant as a humiliation, while a guitar was manly, acquiring a secondary phallic object – something like subordinate masculinity standing next to an alpha male. Also, it is known that 'the world' didn't recognise Soviet and post-Soviet rock music. Although, what is 'the world'? Just a sound in our head, an itching desire that made the massive inflow of Western culture possible. It happened in Russia the same way as in all anti-Russian and pro-Western East European countries. Even the narratives of transition were almost similar – related to democracy and civilisation.

In Juris Podnieks' documentary *End of Empire* (1991) there is a young Russian woman saying the following during the Soviet *coup d'état* attempt: 'There are two options, either we go into the next century together with the democratic and civilised world or we empty our stomachs, take an axe and begin a new and final conflict with the civilised world.' The last part, 'or we empty our stomachs, take an axe and begin a new and final conflict with the civilised world', reveals a spirit I never witnessed here in Estonia in the 1990s. There is a potential for geopolitical struggle in this spirit. To make a contrast, I would bring up another narrative of transformation – from Estonia!

I remember Lennart Meri telling a story about his vision of introducing democracy and other European values to Estonia. He told a story about a Baltic German nobleman, August von Kotzebue, who in the eighteenth century introduced potatoes to local peasants, who were sceptical about the new thing. They didn't want to waste food by putting it into the earth. Therefore, the nobleman decided to teach them a lesson – he dressed up with his fanciest clothes and started to plant potatoes one by one with his white gloves. This was the way Lennart Meri preferred to introduce democracy to Estonians. The

narrative that is based on colonial history lets us see the post-Soviet democracy as another form of colonisation. And such narratives have become very popular lately alongside Soviet nostalgia. What if this balalaika is not a Russian thing? What if it is ours?

The Wall

‘Why are we not allowed to be proud that we had a Soviet Empire?’ Alexandr Lukashenko asked in an interview in 2012. I wanted to spray paint that sentence on the East Side Gallery wall, located at Mühlenstrasse in Berlin and famous for old murals that have become classics. There are, for instance, the painting by Dmitry Vruble entitled *My God, Help Me to Survive This Deadly Love*, which depicts Brezhnev and Honecker sharing a kiss, and the famous artwork by Birgit Kinder representing a Trabant bursting through the Wall. The site is a well-known tourist attraction that feeds the nostalgia industry in Berlin. That nostalgia has its limits, of course: the wall in question is an object of memory that has been restored numerous times; it is not a free platform meant for street art as it might seem at first. The Wall is, therefore, ideologically monopolised, and its primary message is the statement of its collapse. As a dead body, it has started to be sold to people, piece by piece. Yet there seemed to be something in Lukashenko’s quote that crossed all the boundaries of the Western nostalgia that we encounter in Berlin and elsewhere. That ‘something’ was a message about a society that is difficult to be considered as ‘the former East’, represented by the story of Berlin, the fall of the Wall and so on.

Anyway, when I got to the Wall with my spray cans, being ready to deliver the message, it was besieged by police guards, and large buses full of riot police officers were standing a bit farther. It turned out that about to begin was a big demonstration against the city and real estate developers who wanted to construct an apartment building by the Spree and, in order to do that, remove a section of the Wall. My plan had failed, but the number of participants in the street protest was impressive. One of them was David Hasselhoff, known for his song ‘Looking for Freedom’ that he once sang by the collapsing wall. Now he was singing again, but for the opposite reason – to keep the wall standing. ‘*Wovoreit, das Denkmal bleibt!*’ shouted the crowd around him.

I, however, felt like an outsider in that crowd. I do not agree that the fall of the Berlin Wall is an event that could designate the fate of the whole of Eastern Europe. Nor that Berlin was or is the epicentre

for all of Eastern Europe. Is my Soviet nostalgia similar to the nostalgia of Germans? Is my nostalgia similar to Russians and Belarussians? In which way do we Estonians share future expectations and processes of identity making with Poles and Hungarians (Martínez 2017)?

Geopolitical Subjectivities

Some years ago I participated in the conference ‘Communist Nostalgia’ at the University of Glasgow, whereby, during public discussion, an American lady remarked, ‘It would be really bizarre if East Europeans would be nostalgic for the late eighties and early nineties, like us, I mean grunge music, Kurt Cobain, etcetera. It would be really, really bizarre!’ That touched me personally, as I grew up behind TV screens showing NTV and FilmNet. Nirvana has been my greatest influence in global culture. So, what did she mean by ‘bizarre’? Am I supposed to miss balalaika songs?

To me the nineties meant being a teenager – the most receptive age of being open to ideology. Music defined my relation with the world outside. Music was like a protective layer that saved me from the brutal reality that I could never identify with. I lived deep inside of my imagination, as teenagers often do. My long hair made me withstand constant harassments that came from everywhere except my family and few friends. I spent a lot of time watching MTV and playing Nirvana songs on guitar. I used to daydream of Seattle; I imagined the Annelinn block houses amongst the Seattle skyline. Of course, Nirvana is a matter of the nineties. It didn’t belong to the ‘ancient times’, when I was a Soviet kid. But when I think of music in my early years I still can’t memorise anything but local musicians and bands like Anne Veski, Karavan and Marju Länik. But when I listen to my father, he speaks of Led Zeppelin and his own band Medium from the seventies. I wonder if it would sound bizarre to any American? Bizarre, because we listened to Led Zeppelin while targeting their cities with nuclear missiles?

In my exhibition project ‘3rd way’ (Tallinn City Gallery, 2016), I characterised East European identity as a *dividual* one (Strathern 1998). Our minds and desires were in the West, while our bodies remained attached to the East. The symptom of this identity is the restless urge – common to so many people in the East – to leave your home and go to the West, where you belong. Exactly like in the song ‘Go West’ by the Pet Shop Boys. If you can’t live, you are missing

something. You are missing the other half – I would say, you are missing your head. By finding your head and putting it back on your shoulders, you will reach harmony and wholeness. But there is still something missing. The neck wound is aching, as if it remembers the guillotine – the instrument of democracy that once made the cut. Nostalgia is a pain, but a sweet one. There is a definition of nostalgia, coined by Michael Kammen (1991), saying that it is history without guilt. Here we should understand that we are talking about a collective head and a collective body. Anyone can make personal contributions to this by politicising their personal issues – like I do. We are in the middle of another wind of change, this time separating minds and bodies again.

In an era when geopolitical borders are reinforced and right-wing populism is spread around, the body seems to be back or, to be more precise, the weight of our bodies increasingly overshadows the lightness of our heads and the hopes of our youth are eclipsed by the reality of the refugee crisis and the pessimism about the European Union (Farias Ferreira 2017). Also, I would say that it is an era when many people are realising their cockroach citizenship. I remember the moment when I realised it: I was watching a live broadcast of Euro-maidan when snipers started to shoot at people. Then many Ukrainian people suffered a Kafkian metamorphosis, like Gregor Samsa. According to an urban legend, cockroaches would survive a nuclear war. This could also be an answer to my question about the atomic bomb that was once meant to be dropped on my hometown.

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