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NATIONALISM VS. SOCIALISM IN SOVIET ESTONIAN DRAMA*

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Perhaps nowhere in Eastern Europe or the Soviet Union is the tension between nationalism and socialism in general (and not just in literature) as great, although perforce in a state of latency, as in the Baltic countries — Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The Eastern European Communist countries with the exception of the Soviet Union, albeit subject to the Brezhnev Doctrine (with the important exceptions of Albania and Yugoslavia), are still formally independent nation states, with native Communist leadership. On the other hand, the non-Baltic minority nationalities in the USSR, no matter how old or strongly developed their national and cultural traditions, have not experienced modern nationalism in as strong a form as the Baltic peoples. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were fully independent states from 1918 to 1940, where nationalism was a highly emphasized ideology. Their independence was destroyed through a process of ultimatum and military occupation in June 1940 and they were annexed to the Soviet Union. There followed a period of Stalinist repression until 1953 (interrupted by Nazi occupation from 1941 to 1944) which for sheer intensity was probably not matched anywhere in the Communist world, if one were to except the in corpora deportations of the Crimean Tartars, the Volga Germans, and several other minorities deemed to be entrust-worthy during the Second World War. After the death of Stalin and the end of such tactics as mass deportations, a new threat to the Baltic nations arose beginning with the late 1950's: russification in the form of a mass inflow of Russians, who, by most accounts, are considered intruders (and, what is more, intruders who politically have the upper hand) by the native populations, possibly threatening the very existence of their nations. According to the 1970 census, Estonians form only 68.2% of the population of the Estonian SSR (a drop of 6.4% in 11 years) and Latvians an even smaller 56.8% in the Latvian SSR (down 5.2% in the same period). Lithuanians are in a somewhat better position in their republic.1

Nationalism, no matter how anathematized by the "internationalist" Communist and centralized establishment in Moscow is still a strong factor (although either repressed into latency or explained away in crude class terms) in the Baltic countries generally and in their literatures specifically. That this is so, even after approximately thirty years of Soviet rule, is indicated by such events (to cite only recent occurrences publicized in the Western press) as the harsh speech against nationalism by the First Secretary of the Latvian CP, August E. Voss at the party's congress in March of 1971,2 and an anonymous letter by 17 Latvian Communists addressed to those Communist parties that protested the Russian intervention in Czechoslovakia in 1968.3 The latter communication charges, among other things, that the Soviet leadership is practicing "Great Russian chauvinism" and is seeking to force the Latvians to assimilate with the Russians.*

Before we proceed to the more limited subject matter of this paper, the conflict between socialism and nationalism in Soviet Estonian drama during the post-World War II period, I would like to set down several further observations about this conflict in general in recent Baltic and Estonian history. First, Soviet socialism (and the term "socialism" is used in this paper in more or less the same limited sense as in Soviet publications, i.e., it doesn't of course, denote traditional social democracy nor the democratic socialism of Dubček, for example) was imposed upon and has been maintained in the Baltic countries in a most unpalatable manner, from a nationalistic point of view — military occupation of small, independent states by a much larger and more powerful neighbor, annexation by *diktat,* and an increasing threat of absorption of the small nations and cultures into the larger, politically dominant one through sheer force of numbers. These circumstances quite preclude the possibility of viewing the establishment of socialism in the Baltic countries as part of a process of "national liberation," as has been argued in the cases of, say, Cuba or Vietnam. In the latter instances, socialism has been able to harness some of the energies of nationalism and anti-imperialism. Such a strategy has not been open to the Soviets in Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania. Second, socialism appeared in 1940 in these three nations in its most draconian form, even if we leave aside considerations of nationalism i.e., as undiluted Stalinism, which had defined itself in the recent great purges and which was to mark especially terribly the first thirteen years of Soviet rule in the Baltic states.

During these thirteen years, the foremost Stalinist in Soviet Estonian drama was August Jakobson. It is fitting that in this period of extreme politicization of the arts, both Jakobson and the other significant playwright of the time, Johannes Semper, were also important political functionaries of the Soviet Estonian regime: Jakobson served as the Chairman of the Estonian SSR Supreme Soviet from 1950 to 1958 and Semper was a minister in the first Soviet Estonian government in 1940. Both of them had already been established authors during the independence period, with Jakobson being elected chairman of the Writers' Union in 1939 and Semper occupying a specially influential position as the long-term editor-in-chief of the most important literary periodical, "Looming."

Jakobson's reputation was made as a naturalistic novelist of considerable talent and he concentrated only on drama after the war. He wrote seventeen plays in just about as many years before his death in 1963, ending his career with the six-play cycle *Stormknots:*[4] In spite of Jakobson's literary - political eminence and a chronic lack of new scripts, none of the Soviet Estonian theatres has staged even a part of this unwieldy, propagandist "dramatic chronicle." His best known and most often produced play, however, is *Life in a Citadel,*[5] first staged in 1946 and even filmed the following year. Viewed from a purely theatrical standpoint, this play is not without a certain melodramatic effectiveness. It deals with events in the fall of 1944 in a small Estonian town during and immediately after the reentry of the Red Army after the three-year German occupation. Almost all of the action takes place in the home of a retired classics professor, who has attempted to escape the raging political storms by ignoring them, concentrating on his translation of the *Odyssey* and turning his family's residence into the "citadel" of the title, complete with a ponderously symbolic high wooden fence. The play proceeds to demonstrate that such a neutrality is impossible to maintain —one must make a choice between two sides. It is Jakobson's positing of the alternatives through personifications that gives the game away as a rigged one: on one side a heroic Red Army partisan major — both a tender and chaste lover and a resolute man of action; on the other, two former Nazi death-camp officials — the professor's son from a previous marriage and his nephew. Now that the Nazi cause is lost, they attempt to set up a secret radio station in touch with Western intelligence; in addition, they are also seducers (in one case incestuously so), extortionists, and drunkards. At the time the play was written, there was widespread nationalist guerrilla resistance to sovietization in the Baltic states, especially in Lithuania. Jakobson attempts to trivialize the oppositionists into Nazi monsters, who want to sleep with their half-sisters and stepmothers to boot, Such an approach evades the real political conflict by transposing it into the dimension of melodrama and surely enough, the genre's paraphernalia appear: a purloined letter, a cache of gold, gun-play, etc. But such an evasion has its purpose—the claims of the opposition are refused any legitimacy or dignity. The price in artistic terms in the debasement of drama into melodrama.

Where the action of Jakobson's *Life in a Citadel* takes place among the intelligentsia, Semper's characters in his three postwar plays are almost exclusively from the working class or the peasantry. This is something of a switch for one of the foremost prewar Estonian literati, known for his cosmopolitan refinement and devotion to advanced French literature. Semper's *Summons of the Times* (1946)[6] takes place during the war years of 1939 through 1944 and his *Breakthrough* (1949)[7] during a collectivization drive in 1948. As in Jakobson's play, the oppositionists to the new Soviet regime are presented as mere scoundrels out only for personal gain. It would seem that the over-eager Stalinist writers have unwittingly diminished the glory of the Soviet victory if it had only to overcome a more or less criminal element, there really wasn't that much to the task to begin with. The Communist heroes, in addition to adhering to a correct political line, invariably possess sterling personal qualities, usually given baldly in the stage directions when they first appear. Thus Laiksaar in *Summons of the Times* has a "manly" bearing and facial expression,[8] Nirk in *Breakthrough* appears with "serious eyes and self-confident movements"[9] and Liia Poltsam in the same play is described as a girl " whose whole bearing and behavior have natural simplicity, youthful enthusiasm, and freshness." [10] At one point she rhapsodizes about the ongoing collectivization: "[In a reverie] Kolkhozes all over the land... exemplary machines... science coming to our aid... unprecedented harvests... people quite changed... Isn't it wonderful to think? .. Until now everybody lived by himself, thought by himself, but in a few days... every thing will be changed. Moving like ice on the river in spring.[11] Semper published this play in the same year that an estimated 8% to 10% of the Estonian population were deported, most of them in connection with this same collectivization drive.

A few years after Stalin's death, a new group of playwrights headed by Egon Rannet, Ardi Liives, and Juhan Smuul appeared on the scene. These three names were to dominate Soviet Estonian drama for the next decade and a half. Rannet and Liives are still very active, whereas Smuul died in 1971. It cannot be said that the treatment of the relationship between nationalism and socialism by these writers was to become radically different from that of Jakobson or Semper. A greater flexibility in form and subject matter did come about, however, in that writers were no longer required to politicize everything. Whenever a political theme was treated, orthodoxy still prevailed. But it was now possible to publish and stage plays which more or less bypassed politics. Liives especially availed himself of this opportunity to write, among other works, psychological family dramas (e. g. *New Year's Night,*[12] 1958) or a comedy about the private life of a prominent actor *(Robert the* Great,[13] 1957). With minor adjustments, the action of these two plays could occur as easily in Finland or West Germany.

Egon Rannet has also written works where the political interest is not paramount, but his best known play, *The Prodigal Son* (1958),[14] is primarily political in theme and reminiscent of Semper and Jakobson in its attitudes. It is, however, better written than those of the older writers and often achieves a dramatic tension that is quite effective. As a result, it has received wider circulation than any other Soviet Estonian play, having been staged in more than 150 theatres both in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe.[15] The prodigal son is a 39-year-old man who, after an absence of twelve years, in the mid-1950's returns home to his mother and his by now divorced wife, ostensibly from Siberian forced labor camps. It

soon becomes apparent that he has really spent the intervening years abroad in the West and that he has been smuggled back as an agent by a resistance organization that cooperates with Western intelligence. Guided by his mother and after severe conflicts with his former wife and the old rival for his wife's affections (all three of whom have become loyal subjects of the new regime), the agent begins to doubt in his mission, is persuaded to recant, but dies before he can contact the authorities. He is killed by his superior in the resistance network, who had been a close friend before the advent of the Soviet regime. Rannet is careful to explain the motivation of this latter implacable foe of the Communists in class terms — the superior is resentful and vengeful only because he has lost the considerable property he owned during the independence.[16] The agent had embarked on his dangerous mission to return to his wife, because of money paid by Western espionage agencies, and for love of his nation. The latter emotion is scrupulously phrased by Rannet, speaking through his character, as simple nostalgia and homesickness — thus devoid of any political meaning.[17] When the loving mother learns of his mission, her first reaction is to liken him to a wolf who has come to destroy her life. She doesn't hesitate to advise him to choose a death sentence at the hands of the Soviets, if necessary, if that is the only way to end his "treason." The protagonist, after his decision to recant, declares, "But the bases of life here are healthy, strong, and honest. I didn't find unemployment, worry concerning the next day.... Let me be killed, but I myself found the truth." [18] Again the plane of argumentation is that of economics and class. After the three loyal Soviet subjects have expressed their utter horror at his treason, they agree to help the protagonist to turn himself in. In his last confrontation with the underground leader the repentant agent accuses his mentor of wanting him to betray his nation. Step by step, Rannet has led his protagonist to the point of identifying the Soviet regime with the Estonian nation so that he now turns on the anti-Soviet conspirator in righteous patriotic indignation. Such a reversal of attitude, however, smacks too much of dramaturgical sleight of hand—one gets the sense that Rannet is having a dream of wish fulfillment — the opposition gives up completely and accepts the new regime of its own free will. The give away is the attitude of the mother, who is otherwise portrayed as completely devoted to, not to say doting on, her son — she is much too quick in accepting and even counseling a death before a firing squad as an honorable way out. Also, few in the populace besides the small minority of active Communists would have considered the agent a traitor — foolhardy, perhaps, but treasonable, no. This is, after all, only a few years after the end of a widespread (by the Soviets' own accounts), violent resistance that held out Western intervention as its chief (though unrealistic) hope.

Both Juhan Smuul's *Lea* (I960)[19] and Ardi Liives' *The Blue Flare* (1959)[20] also confine the dramatized political conflicts to the class struggle and steadfastly ignore the question of nationalism. The action of both plays takes place during disastrous periods for the Communist cause: shortly after the Soviet occupation has been supplanted by the Nazi one in 1941 —1942 and in the aftermath of the abortive Communist putsch of 1924 in Estonia, respectively. Both works end with the deaths of their Communist heroes while fighting off capture by their enemies. The pathos of the underdog, elevated to the plane of martyrdom by the authors, proves to be considerably more affecting dramatically than the exposure of black hearted villains or the just punishment of errant sons of the people.

In all the plays discussed so far the conflict between socialism and nationalism in post - World War II Estonia is handled by the startling simple gambit of suppressing one side of the struggle altogether. This is done by explaining the motivation of all opposition to the new regime in strictly class terms, with psycho-pathology occasionally adding more lurid effects for greater color. One important reason for this suppression I would take to be theoretical: Marxist - Leninist ideology (and especially the Stalinist version of it) does not adequately account for the phenomenon of nationalism; certainly not the way this ideology is interpreted in the Soviet Union. Things are complicated further by the conflict between the internationalist rhetoric issuing from Moscow and the "Great Russian chauvinist" practice referred to above by the anonymous Latvian Communists. At the time there were, and still are, tactical considerations against dramatizing the nationalist opposition, even if only to show it being vanquished by triumphant communism: it might be too inflammatory. It is safer to depict the enemies as Nazis, kulaks, profiteers, or plain criminals.

But this willful attempt to see everything in class terms (and often crudely so) results in a distortion of reality so pervasive that realistic drama is no longer possible. Without exception, all the plays on political themes discussed here are undoubtedly efforts at socialist realism, and, without exception, they are basically all melodramas. Every one of them ends with gun-play (with the exception of Jakobson's *Life in a Citadel,* where the hero is content to cow his opponents into submission by merely getting the drop on them). What sometimes begin as interesting characterizations are almost invariably trimmed to ideological specifications. Even such a hoary device as misplaced or intercepted letters gets heavy use. Such products would seem to be embarrassing for a school of writing that, after all, has "realism" as half of its name. But then we realize that at least the Soviet variety of this realism has usually started with a priori stipulations of what is real and what is not. The treatment of nationalism in Soviet Estonian drama is a case in point.

One exception to the progression of melodramas posing as works of political realism is a play that consciously abandons all realistic pretensions. This is *The Labyrinth of Bliss* (1959)[21] by Ralf Parve — a lampoon directed at exiled Estonian politicians, writers, and clergymen. Its characters are barely disguised of easily identifiable real persons (or composites of such individuals). All of these appear as either drunkards, lechers, charlatans, monomaniacs, or various permutations of these possibilities. The satire is unfair, slanderous, even vicious — and rather funny at times. But the suppression of nationalism as a real adversary still stands — this time through the gambit of *reductio ad absurdum.*

In 1966 there occurred a sudden break with the orthodoxy of socialist realism in Soviet Estonian drama. Beginning with the publication of *the Nameless Island*[22] by Artur Alliksaar (just six months prior to his death at the age of 43), within three

years five new playwrights appeared whose works bore little resemblance to the conventional Jakobson - Rannet models of Soviet drama. Alliksaar, Ain Kaalep, Paul - Eerik Rummo, Mati Unt, and Enn Vetemaa were already known as prominent members of a group of younger writers (some of them in their early twenties) who had truly renewed Soviet Estonian lyric poetry and prose in just a few years during the first half of the sixties, after the disastrous stagnation or rather degeneration of the previous two decades. According to a gifted young critic,[23] the common denominator among these playwrights who otherwise differ considerably is that they all have placed the action of their plays in a world that is essentially a creation of their imaginations and not the supposedly "real" everyday one. Jaak Rähesoo, the critic, goes on to note that such a circumstance is not exactly news from the perspective of world literature and that the literary - historical question in this instance is the delay of its arrival in Soviet Estonian (and by implication, all Soviet) letters. That it is news in Soviet drama is, however, a revealing fact.

Of interest from our point of view here is that the great expansion of formal and thematic possibilities has not led the new playwrights to attempt dramatizing political subject matter. This is not to say that the different world views emerging from the work of these five dramatists (they are all primarily interested in a drama of ideas) do not have eventually political implications, especially in the highly politicized Soviet context. But direct treatment of politics has been eschewed. They bypass both nationalism *and* socialism. This again is newsworthy and has, in fact, caused problems with the Soviet traditionalists. One explanation (although unlikely) is simply a lack of interest in this sphere. A better one might be that they are constitutionally incapable of the simplistic and falsified formulas of a Rannet but that a true realism in the depiction of political themes is obviously still not possible (i.e., with any hope of publication within the U.S.S.R. — the example of Solzhenitsyn is a constant reminder of this situation). Hence, they have avoided dealing directly with such concerns and concentrate on broader, perhaps more difficult, but less touchy questions of human existence, which, of course, interest them in any case.

Of the five published plays by the newcomers, Ain Kaalep's *IDAM*[24] (an acronym standing for "International Detailed Ape Model"), staged in 1967, and Paul-Eerik Rummo's *The Cinderella Game*[25] (1969) are probably most susceptible to political resonance. Kaalep's play, which owes a lot to Orwell and Huxley, dramatizes the resurgence of humanistic values in a super technocratic, totalitarian dystopia that prizes impersonality as its highest value, suppressing things that are not calculable: feelings in general, love, family, esthetic experiences, language that is not completely standardized. One of the characters holds the ominous position of "psycho-technical controller." This actually sounds like more tempting matter for a political interpretation than it really is. Kaalep is really more concerned here with technocracy than anything else. And his resolution of the conflict tends towards a somewhat facile optimism.

Of all the plays discussed here, Paul - Eerik Rummo's *The Cinderella Game* is easily the most substantial dramatic achievement and the best Estonian play of the postwar era. (And it doesn't have very many worthy rivals earlier, either.) The play is, in effect, a sequel to the traditional Cinderella legend which calls into question the vision of a just and orderly world that the fairy tale posits. At the end of his fruitless search for the "real" Cinderella, the climactic scene of the play has the Prince beat Cinderella mercilessly, hoping thus to summon the Fairy Godmother whose role it is to restore the principle of justice in the world. But none appears. The action of the play is the education of the Prince, who finds it so desperately hard to reconcile himself to a world of indeterminacy that does not reward good and punish evil, that has no built-in structure of justice.[26] Although the matter is ambiguous, I would submit that Marxism, in a sense, does provide a guarantor of ultimate order, justice, and meaning in human affairs — the inexorable progress of history, correct consciousness of which also can make an individual's existence meaningful. Such is not the world view of Rummo's play.

Whatever political implications one may read out of Kaalep's and Rummo's plays, it is clear that they do not touch directly on the politics of nationalism or socialism. Stimulated perhaps by the opening up of formal possibilities on the part of younger writers, their older colleague Juhan Smuul composed as his last play a satirical allegory that alone of all the works discussed here actually admits to the stage characters who are portrayed (unsympathetically, to be sure) as nationalists. Smuul's *Life of the* Penguins[27] is a dramatized fable which has as its location Antarctica, where rampant factionalism is threatening the survival of the penguin state. One pair of warring groups has on one side the Greater Penguinia chauvinists, who are all large-sized emperor penguins, and on the other, the Adélie-nationalists, who belong to a physically much smaller breed of the species. A different quarrel has broken out on artistic lines, which doesn't pay attention to breed differences: here, the traditionalist Icebergs are opposed by the younger Renaissance Boys, whose leader declares, among other things: "We do not bother with politics and let politics not bother us! This is our policy"[28] (Quite un-Soviet sentiments, those). The overbearing emperor-chauvinists claim to be responsible for everything good and successful in the state, while the Adélie-nationalists are incessantly squeaking about their pride, nation, and language. Although some of the satire is funny, other parts of the play drag badly. Smuul as the author assumes an attitude of "A plague on all four of your houses" but his studied neutrality is a little too cavalier.

The approach to the conflict between nationalism and socialism by Soviet Estonian dramatists has involved, with a very few exceptions, two different strategies. One has been a simple refusal to deal with it at all, for very understandable reasons. The other has attempted to twist the nature of one of the parties to the conflict into something other than what it really is. Perhaps one way out would be to expand the list of Marx's categories of alienation to include the variety produced by one nation's dominion over another.

* This paper was delivered on Saturday, May 13th, 1972. The next day, a young Lithuanian worker, Romas Kalanta, went to a park in Kaunas, poured gasoline over himself and burned to death in an act of political self-immolation which caused serious rioting by Lithuanian youth a few days later, following his funeral. Hundreds were arrested, scores injured, and at least one policeman killed. The cry of the Lithuanians while facing special internal security troops brought in to quell the unrest was "Freedom for Lithuania!" There followed several other suicides and incidents of nationalist protest, all of which were covered prominently in the Western media (although, characteristically, suppressed into near non-existence by the Soviet press). Reports of instances of anti-Russian protest (though not as dramatic or violent in character as the Lithuanian ones) were also received from Estonia. While writing this essay I wondered whether, in fact, in the isolation of exile, I was not exaggerating the continued importance of national feeling and thinking in the Baltic states. Perhaps the current regime was right in professing to regard such forces as things of the past. The events of May and June 1972 would seem to indicate, however, that it is the Soviet regime which has been premature, to say the least, in their optimism in this sphere.

Revised version of a paper delivered at the Fifth National Convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, Dallas, Texas, March 16, 1972, and at the Third Conference on Baltic Studies, University of Toronto, May 13, 1972.

1 *Rahva Haal,* April 17, 1971.

2 "Latvians chided for nationalism; party chief asserts some seek to ban Russians," *The New York Times,* March 21, 1971, p. 17.

3 "Protest on Soviet laid to Latvians; letter circulated in Europe charges 'russification'," *The New York Times,* Feb. 17, 1972, Section I, p. 11.

4 August Jakobson: *Tormisolmed* (Stormknots), 2 vol. Tallinn, 1962.

5 August Jakobson: "Elu tsitadellis," (Life in a Citadel) in A. Jarv ja A. Nagelmaa, (compilers): *Eeesti naidendid,* Tallinn, 1971, pp. 441 - 549.

6 Johannes Semper: "Aja kask" (Summons of the Times), in his *Naidendid.* Tallinn, 1961, pp. 5 - 63.

7 Johannes Semper: "Murrang" (Breakthrough), in his *Naidendid,* Tallinn, 1961, pp. 67 - 146.

8 *Ibid.,* p. 9.

9 *Ibid.,* p. 71.

10 *Ibid.,* p. 78.

11 *Ibid.,* p. 110.

12 Ardi Liives: "Uusaasta oo" (New Year's Night), in A. Jarv ja A. Nagelmaa, *op. cit.,* pp. 607 - 664.

13 Ardi Liives: *Robert Suur* (Robert the Great), Tallinn, 1957.

14 Egon Rannet: "Kadunud poeg" (The Prodigal Son), in A. Jarv ja A. Nagelmaa, *op. cit.,* pp. 553 - 606.

15 *Ibid.,* p. 552.

16 *Ibid.,* p. 586.

17 *Ibid., p.* 595.

18 *Ibid.,* p. 596.

19 Juhan Smuul: "Lea," in A. Jarv ja A. Nagelmaa, *op. cit.,* pp. 667 - 708.

20 Ardi Liives: *Sinine rakett* (The Blue Flare), Tallinn, 1959. Liives later wrote another version of this play, *Murgi perenaine* (The Mistress of Miiurgi), which was staged in 1967. However, I did not have access to the text of this version.

21 Ralf Parve: *Ondsuse laburint,* (The Labyrinth of Bliss). Tallinn, 1959.

22 Artur Alliksaar: *Nimetu saar* (The Nameless Island). Tallinn, 1966.

23 Kaak Rähesoo: "See maailm ja teised", Looming, No.7, 1969, p.1073.

24. Ain Laalep: "Iidamast ja Aadamast ehk entimantikulaator" (Of Idam and of Adam or Antimanticulator; IDAM for short), *Mana,* No. 36, 1970, pp. 17-39. The latter Estonian literary publication is published in the West; Kaalep's play is still unpublished in Soviet Estonia, although it was staged there.

25 Paul-Eerik Rummo: *Tuhkatriinumang* (The Cinderella Game). Tallinn, 1969.

26 Rähesoo, op. *cit.,* develops the foregoing at much greater length and with more subtlety.

27 Juhan Smuul, *Enne kui saabuvad rebased* (Before the Foxes Come). Tallinn, 1969. The stage version was entitled "Life of the Penguins, or Before the Foxes Come."

28 *Ibid.,* p. 37.