

# ORAL HISTORY ONLINE: VIEWS ON AGRICULTURE IN THE ESTONIAN SSR

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*Recently, oral history accounts—the memories of ordinary people, life stories, living strategies, daily life, and so on—have been gaining status as historical accounts. Online comment sections of news media can be regarded as a subsection of the literature dedicated to memories; the comments represent opinions expressed at a fixed time on a fixed topic. This article discusses vernacular history and historical knowledge based on comments written to a news item published in the daily newspaper Eesti Päevaleht on February 9th, 2005 announcing that the social science award had gone to Indrek Jääts for his study on early collective farms in the Oisu region.*

*Keywords: Oral history, online comments, stereotypes, context construction, Soviet era, rural life, periodization of agriculture*

*V zadnjem času so si ustna zgodovina, tj. spomini navadnih ljudi, njihove življenjske zgodbe, življenjske strategije, vsakdanje življenje ipd. pridobili status zgodovinskih poročil. V tem okviru je mogoče spletne komentarje pri medijskih novicah obravnavati kot posebno obliko literature posvečene spominu; pripombe predstavljajo izrazito trenutna mnenja na določeno temo.*

*Autorica v članku analizira podobo zgodovine in zgodovinskega znanja, ki ju kažejo komentarji novice, objavljene v časopisu Eesti Päevaleht (9. februar 2005), o nagradi družbenih znanosti, ki jo je prejel Indrek Jääts za raziskave o začetku kolektivnih kmetij v pokrajini Oisu.*

*Ključne besede: ustna zgodovina, spletni komentarji, stereotipi, oblikovanje konteksta, Sovjetska zveza, življenje na podeželju, periodizacije kmetijstva*

The yearbook of the Estonian National Museum published in 2000 included an article by Indrek Jääts called “Maaelu muutumine Oisu piirkonnas Järvamaal (1970.–1990. aastad)” (Changing Rural Life in the Oisu Region in Järva County, 1970s–1990s), in which he tried “to determine how agricultural reform has evolved on one of the farms that belonged to the group of [successful kolkhozes] and what the current situation there was” (Jääts 2000: 109). The article discussed the fate of the Estonia kolkhoz. The author considered the user-centered paradigm to be important and, when drawing conclusions, relied on interviews with thirty-three people documented approximately at the same time. In his conclusion, Jääts stresses that, as an elite kolkhoz, the Estonia kolkhoz was more of an exception than a rule in the agriculture of Soviet Estonia. In independent Estonia, the quality of life of the people living in the area deteriorated because private production carried little weight in the kolkhoz and the transition to private entrepreneurship was economically more complicated there than in the regions that used to be in an economically poorer state (cf. Jääts 2000).

At the beginning of 2004, the article “Sotsialistlik põllumajandus: Varane kolhoosiaeg Oisu piirkonnas Järvamaal” (Socialist Agriculture: The Early Kolkhoz Era in the Oisu Region in Järva County) was published in two issues of the journal *Akadeemia* that studied the period from the establishment of kolkhozes to Brezhnev’s rise to power in 1964. This

study<sup>1</sup> is based on interviews conducted in the borough of Oisu from 1999 to 2001, and also on another thirty-four interviews about everyday life and human relationships. Jääts also used archive documents and materials published in the press. Based on the sources, a picture has been reconstructed of the Estonia kolkhoz's evolution and of its levers of development. It is pointed out that work on the kolkhoz was productive, as well as reasonably organized and well-paid. These prerequisites could only be ensured by a kolkhoz chairman that was able to serve as a buffer between the kolkhoz and the authorities and that could soften the forceful (and at times incompetent) interference from the district committee in agricultural matters. A chairman exhibiting such qualities had authority both among higher officials as well as kolkhoz members. The large-scale agricultural production that was forced upon rural people gradually achieved legitimacy. If the circumstances were favorable, and also if one were smart enough to live at the expense of other collective farms, kolkhozes could be successful; however, as a whole the system could not be realistically implemented (cf. Jääts 2004a, 2004b).

On February 9th, 2005, the newspaper *Eesti Päevaleht* published an announcement that Jääts' study "Sotsialistlik põllumajandus: Varane kolhoosiaeg Oisu piirkonnas Järvamaal" (Socialist Agriculture: The Early Kolkhoz Era in the Oisu Region in Järva County) had won the co-contributor's prize awarded by the journal *Akadeemia* in the social sciences. The author gives an overview of his study in the article "Kolhoosiajast silmaklappideta" (About the Kolkhoz Era: With Eyes Wide Open).<sup>2</sup> The piece evoked strong reactions. In the online version of *Eesti Päevaleht* it is possible to comment on articles, and during the two days following its publication the article was commented on 333 times. Below, an analysis is given of the comments written in 2005 that form part of the folk perspective on history; the generalizations expressed there are compared to the views of historians. As a comparison, the author's fieldwork carried out in the same region in 2005 was used. The article examined the following questions: How is agrarian life periodized and how is it characterized in the comments? What will it look like approximately fifteen years after its end? What is the stereotype of kolkhoz life and that of rural life? What does this stereotype consist of? Is there any difference between the etic and emic approach?

## THE CONTEXT OF *ONLINE* COMMENTS

Online comments are welcome research material; however, their disadvantage is scant information about those participating in the discussion; one does not know their sex or age, and these are necessary data for creating context. In the internet environment it is

<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by the Estonian Agricultural Museum, and the editing was supported by IRG 22-5.

<sup>2</sup> The same article is also presented in full in the collection *Oisu raamat: Fakte ja mälestusi* (Oisu: Facts and Memories) prepared by Mare Kibe, which describes the past and present of the Oisu area.

easier to determine a person's sex because many people use nicknames or use a signature line in their e-mails; these refer to the commentators being either male or female.<sup>3</sup> Patricia Wallace, a professor at the Information Services and Instructional Technologies Center for Talented Youth at John Hopkins University, confirms that people are more open in anonymous environments, including in making political statements, even if they know that the network administrator is able to link the user name to an e-mail address or real name. Under the cover of anonymity, even well-known public figures can take part in forums (cf. Wallace 2002: 304–306). The same tendency has been verified based on Estonian research (cf. Runnel 1999: 21).

Reactions to the information about kolkhoz life are not greatly affected by sex because the subject has an equal bearing on both men and women. References to age are more revealing; there is great difference in whether personal experience or that of others is intermediated. Taking into account the writing style, one may presume that the majority of commentators remember the time described from their own experience: their comments are lengthy, the sentence structure is varied, and the words are fully written out. On the internet this type of writing is characteristic of the over-thirty generation. Extremely scarce are abbreviations, emoticons, smileys, and other internet communication tools used by youth that have grown up with computers and that have been created to convey feelings and thoughts more easily and more quickly.

The greatest risk when interpreting online comments is the lack of first-hand contact with the specific individual; significant non-verbal information is lost. At the same time, people's views are solidly fixed in the comments; more eager commentators specify and clarify their sentiments in subsequent comments. Therefore, part of the missing context can be construed using methods of cognitivism.

The content of online comments and the online names themselves indicate that the commentators mediated their own experiences or that of their family members in forty-six cases, and ten of the commentators were so familiar with the destiny of the Estonia kolkhoz that they could be considered local contemporaries; that is, people connected to the Oisu region. Almost half of the comments (i.e., 141) were probably written by contemporaries of the kolkhoz era (representing the intra-group viewpoint); no concrete conclusions could be made about the rest. One hundred and eighty people wrote their opinion once, and forty-one joined the active discussion by presenting or defending their views twice or more. The most active forum participants were Mart Arold (seventeen comments), Sisuliselt ('Basically', nine), Ahti Mänd (eight), Loogik ('Logician', eight), Seppius (seven), Maamats ('Boor', six), and Maamees ('Country Man', six).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> For the development mechanisms of internet names, including from the gender perspective, see Haya Bechar-Israeli (1996); Estonian issues have been studied by Ell Vahtramäe (2005).

<sup>4</sup> Hereafter only the online names of forum participants are used. Real names were (probably) used by Mart Arold, V. Kalep, Aksel Kuusik, Ahti Mänd, Malle Salupere, Andres Tarand (in the signature line of a comment), and Lauri Vahtre.

## THE ETIC AND EMIC LEVELS OF COMMENTS

The kolkhoz studies conducted by Indrek Jääts were written from the *etic* position; that is, as seen from the outside. The conclusions were made through an analysis and synthesis of information received from various informants.

Studies of the Soviet era and media coverage, information collection campaigns, and so on interest people and, because the recent past is involved, people are able and willing to have their say on the topic. The oppositions that emerge in the forum represent tendencies seen in the traditional interpretation of the past, present, and future, and some of these are described below.

The disputes are proof of the fact that at times the commentators doubt the truthfulness of others' statements. Although the majority of those involved experienced the Soviet era to a lesser or greater extent, some commentators consider the rest to be incompetent.

It is peculiar that comments are made by people that do not have the slightest idea about the topic and have only read about kolkhozes in the writings of Mart Laar and Tunne Kelam.<sup>5</sup> . . . I myself lived in this environment and I know exactly what I am talking about, not like those modern republican pseudo-intellectual greenhorns. (vana mees [an old man], February 9th, 2005, 08:27:56)

The inter-group emic and etic opposition manifests itself here at the generational level because it is thought that youth do not know anything about the recent past and their sources are not trustworthy. Such attacks in the text corpus examined are targeted both against Jääts<sup>6</sup> as well as the "greenhorns" participating in the forum discussion. The Soviet era is considered so exceptional that only people that were inside the system can understand it; also, bystanders are considered incapable of interpreting the deceitful Soviet statistics and official press statements. To some extent, the same viewpoint is also represented in research. The Latvian folklorist and culture researcher Guntis Pakalns asserts when comparing the present and the recent past of his homeland that quite a lot of the former atmosphere and strategies for getting by and the closely related culture has disappeared, and therefore the essence of many things is no longer understood; the context that was self-explanatory to Soviet people is now incomprehensible. The present generation of youth perceives the bygone time as an exotic and semi-real world that was at first glance governed by special and illogical laws (cf. Pakalns 1999: 58–59).

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<sup>5</sup> Mart Laar (born 1960) is an Estonian politician and historian; Tunne Kelam (born 1936) is an Estonian politician and a member of the European Parliament; reference is probably being made to his urban background.

<sup>6</sup> Indrek Jääts was born in 1971; in the photo accompanying the article in *Päevaleht* the reader, who is not aware of the year of birth, does in fact see a man wearing glasses and a beard, but who quite obviously is still a young man. Without this photograph, the age aspect might have been unnoticed.

In addition to the opposition of generations, a social aspect can also be seen:

I wonder what the comments would be like if Elion or some other company would condescend to provide internet connection to farmers [An old [kolkhoz] man, February 9th, 2005, 08:54:40)?

Here rural people compare the views presented and attribute those alien or unacceptable to them to townspeople, who also include city dwellers with rural roots. In this context, the most outstanding representative of a social etic group is Mart Arold,<sup>7</sup> who actively participates in the forum from the beginning to the end and who defends his views firmly, attracting both supporters and opponents by doing so. Despite excellent sources and knowledge of both the atmosphere described and history, the others—those that took part in the kolkhoz era in full—take him to be an outsider and his words are doubted, the main argumentation being: “You do not know much about life as it was at the time.” The arguments given to counter Arold’s claims are rooted in the opponents’ personal experiences (e.g., kolhoosnik [kolkhoz member] February 9th, 2005, 08:36:07; ka kolhoosnik [also kolkhoz member] February 9th, 2005, 09:11:24).

Some of the commentators chose their online name arising from the connection to the theme; for example, the names *Välismaalane* (Foreigner), *Usakas* (USA), *vurle* (townee), and *Pärnakas* (Pärnu resident) refer to social outsiders, whereas *Kolhoosnik* (kolkhoz member), *Endine kolhoosjuht* (former kolkhoz chairman), *traktorist* (tractor operator), *Kohalik* (local), and *Rahva Võit* (people’s victory) introduce those with direct experience. It is noteworthy that, although the online name is used to position oneself either inside or outside the topic, the comment itself is written proceeding from the emic level.

A small share of commentators form the group of the “greatest experts” (as they conceive themselves); the group itself thinks that it is competent both in the theme of the Soviet era as well as the Estonia kolkhoz, and probably comes from the Oisu area. They protect the honor of their home area while remaining as neutral as possible. Their comments offer important additional information about the past and present of the Estonia kolkhoz. They constitute an opposition to the majority, whose opinion of the elite collective farms coincides with that of Mart Arold: “For purely populist considerations, a small number

<sup>7</sup> Mart Arold (1944–2014) was a journalist and researcher of communist crimes. He was familiar with the source materials of the early kolkhoz era. His publications include archive documents such as *Märtsivapustused* (March Shocks; Tartu: Tungal, 1995), the series *Sortside saladused* (Secrets of Sorcerers), translated and published source materials such as the stenographic record of the Seventh Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party of Estonia (*Akadeemia* 1998/12, 1999/1–11), and *Konstantin Sepp – punavõimu ohver ja kaasosaline: vang Konstantin Savva p. Sepa omakäelised ülestunnistused 17.–23. aprillil 1941. a.* (Konstantin Sepp: The Hand-Written Confessions of a Victim and Accomplice of Soviet/Red Authority: Prisoner Konstantin Sepp, Son of Savva, on April 17–23, 1941; Saaremaa Museum, biannual publication 1999–2000, Kuressaare 2001). He also edited collections of political anecdotes.

of collective farms were pampered to provide evidence of the non-existent advantages of the kolkhoz regime” (Mart Arold, February 9th, 2005, 00:13:44). At the same time, the commentators highlight parallels between the Estonia kolkhoz and the Kirov model collective fishery, and they state that especially due to their special character they would deserve individual research.

## THE CONTENT OF THE COMMENTS

Based on content, the text corpus can be divided into two parts: the comments addressed to Jääts or inspired by his research, and those that concentrate on rural problems in general by presenting viewpoints or starting a dialogue with other commentators. The comments that concentrate on rural life predominantly discuss kolkhozes and state farms, the Soviet way of life, and coping, and to a smaller extent the connections with the present and future. I subsequently study which images emerge based on the content of the comments.

Although the discussion was started by the news that Jääts had been awarded the *Akadeemia* prize, this fact only received a few direct reactions: in only forty-one cases, of which eleven comments show approval and twenty-two disapproval, and eight of the comments are neutral and include additional information or methodological comments. Jääts is praised for his matter-of-fact approach to the theme, for noticing life in its varied forms, and for talking about a specific matter based on specific material.

The most diligent of the commentators to oppose Jääts is Mart Arold (six comments); he is probably one of the few that had read the praised piece. He blamed the researcher for being superficial, for doing too little work at the archives, and especially for disregarding the stenographic record of the Seventh Plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist (Bolshevik) Party of Estonia and for restricting his study to oral sources.

The use of oral material in research is approached with caution worldwide. Talking about social statistics, documentary writings, published sources, and oral history interviews, Paul Thompson, a sociologist and oral historian educated at the University of Oxford, states: “All of these express the *social sense* of facts and all of these are affected by the social pressure of the context in which they have been received” (Thompson 1978: 96). In the humanities and social sciences, information gathered from oral sources is increasingly used, including in history. Although it is known that human memory is selective and strong self-censure is applied when an individual passes on personal memories, a researcher can gather important additional material from oral interviews by using a certain methodology. Furthermore, oral communication is relied on not only in the study of recent history, but also to discuss much older events; for example, legends are an important additional source for archaeologists when searching for and finding old settlements, sacred places, and burial mounds.

The commentators do not seem to have much interest in the amount, origin, or list of the sources used in Jääts’s research, but they do, however, raise objections to Arold by

admitting that the protocols might not represent reality because these were drafted only to be submitted to the representative of the authorities; therefore, these only include information about the instructions given and the development of the themes recommended from above, whereas people lived following other rules (cf., e.g., lisa, February 9th, 2005, 10:47:15; Juss, February 9th, 2005, 10:54:33). At the same time, the contemporaries remember that a sensible *partorg* (party organizer) was of use to the collective farm: the party organizer could help “pump out something useful” along the party lines (Miku, February 9th, 2005, 11:26:09) or “achieve favorable decisions for the farm among all of the Soviet nonsense” (väike päike [little sun], February 9th, 2005, 11:56:37).

Soviet agriculture as a whole was mentioned in 171 comments,<sup>8</sup> touching upon a wide variety of topics, starting with memories of the establishment of kolkhozes, the rise of collective farms, and their economic foundations, and concluding with the reasons for the collapse of the entire system. When talking about the kolkhoz era, forum members warn against applying conclusions based on one part to the entire period. This applies both to the works of Jääts as well as other researchers and online comments. At the same time, this advice has not been acted on much; a certain period is discussed or the era is left unmentioned.<sup>9</sup> At times, the writer has been asked to specify the period and this has been done.

The Soviet era and rural life at the time are evaluated differently: there are those that admit to having lived well at the time, but there are also those that deny this; in both cases, people rely on personal memories as well as on an economic analysis. In seventy-eight of the opinions, the moral and economic damage caused by the Soviet regime is considered irreparable. Decision-making is usually founded on the events that took place in the first decade of the kolkhoz era, and people are more emotional than those that notice benefits, as well; however, they are able to see the effect of the system on rural life today. They zealously defend their views and do not allow others to protest; they see opponents in everyone that finds even the slightest of good in the period in question. In 105 of the comments, people remain in a neutral position or even a position that notices the positive side of things, acknowledging that, although the initial years were very miserable, people worked hard, achieved good economic results, and lived well starting in the 1960s. It is stressed that working people were held in high esteem and that the wages in the countryside were often better than in the towns. Although the 1980s are seen in a relatively positive light compared to life today, there are no vehement comments in favor of the kolkhoz regime.

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<sup>8</sup> The theme of progressive kolkhozes is analyzed separately, and these comments have not been included here.

<sup>9</sup> Among the decades, the 1950s were highlighted the most (thirty comments). The number of comments referring to the 1960s was seven, to the 1970s five, and to the 1980s five; the rest did not have specific time references although, knowing the historical and economical background, it is possible to identify the period discussed; here among the first are descriptions of rural life in the 1970s and 1980s.

## RURAL LIFE: PERIODS OF DEVELOPMENT

Communist land reform started on July 23rd, 1940, when the land was declared to be under state ownership by the declaration of the State Council. Similar to the sources of this study, historians also believe that the main outcome of land reform was the destruction of the established agricultural production, and so agricultural production decreased remarkably, the feeling of ownership and being an owner was lost, and conflicts in the countryside became more pronounced. The nationalization of the land provided an economic justification to collectivization: on the one hand there was the land fund without an owner, and on the other hand the small farms that were established were not economically viable (cf. Lillak 2003: 216–218). Johannes Kaubi, a researcher for the Estonian Agricultural Economics Institute, says that the only economic consideration was the possibility of collecting the already scant production more easily into state resources. This made it possible, albeit modestly, to provide food for the proletariat, equip the army, and even collect export resources while the rural population starved (Kaubi 1999: 805).

People discuss the ideological backgrounds of collectivization in the comments; the economic arguments given in the press at the time are not even mentioned. It is highlighted that the practice of joint effort was there in the form of the Soviet republic-era associations, but it was indeed these associations that that the Soviet regime considered its major enemy: these were demolished, and the majority of its members were repressed. It is stated that the main reason for collectivization was the desire of the central authority to break the Estonian peasants' sense of ownership and mold them into progressive and class-conscious workers (jajaa [yes-yes], February 9th, 2005, 15:10:45). The commentators arrive at the conclusion that this objective was, in fact, achieved. According to the forum members, even the edges of fields were ploughed up and life was concentrated in the centers exactly for that aim. The greatest damage caused was considered the ruining of people's lives and breaking the former mentality: the attitude toward work, nature, and life changed, and an era of full-scale stealing, drinking, and moral degradation started (cf. seppius, February 9th, 2005, 10:30:28, *keskealine mees* [middle-aged man], February 9th, 2005, 14:30:45, *Korsaar* [corsair], February 9th, 2005, 09:56:15). The more pessimistic and negative commentators assert that the Soviet era ruined people's mentality to such an extent that no progress can be made in the present until "the kolkhoz member generation is in the netherworld" (jajaa [yes-yes], February 9th, 2005, 14:23:15).

Instead of dwelling on the beginning of kolkhozes, people recommend reading Heino Kiik's *Tondiõomaja* (Ghost's Lodgings), which is considered quite an accurate and generalized piece of writing. Egon Rannet's writings and Enn Säde's films about rural life are mentioned to a lesser extent. The first prize in the recommended list of propaganda literature still goes to Hans Leberecht's novel *Valgus Koordis* (Light in Koordi) from 1949, which received the Stalin Prize.



However, the beginning of the kolkhoz era (the 1950s) is most commonly and most emotionally discussed in comments. Compared to the following decades, the comments made about this period have the greatest amount of negativity in them.

The first kolkhoz year is remembered as being very difficult; life was turned upside-down, accompanied with the fear of repression. Economically, 1949 is not considered too miserable because people worked hard and were honest; this aspect is stressed several times.

At the beginning of the 1950s, the rural population was hit by a famine, which was repeatedly brought up. Although the exact years are not mentioned, these storylines in particular have become the stereotypical images of kolkhoz misery: hay and crops were left unharvested, bread and sugar could only be bought in ration amounts, and kolkhoz cows starved. These discussions of history stress that in 1952 and 1953 the weather was unfavorable for agriculture: the autumn was wet and crops were therefore left unharvested (e.g., Lillak 2003). Online commentaries do not discuss the weather, but oral interviews dwell on this aspect at length. The commentaries most often look back on the stupidity forced on people from above: the most frequently repeated ideas being planting potatoes in a square pattern, enormous fields of corn and sunflowers unsuitable for the Estonian climate, and ploughing up the edges of the fields.

Mart Arold, who mostly concentrates on Stalin-era kolkhoz life and criticized the shortcomings in the source criticism of Jääts, shares a source with the forum: the application of Oskar Kärner, son of Juhan, a member of the Säde kolkhoz in the Mustvee District, to the secretary of the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party, Johannes Käbin, dating from September 15th, 1954.<sup>10</sup> The document describes in detail and with poor orthography the degradation of the kolkhoz in the last year: the wages are lousy, bread has to be brought from afar, and there are problems in maintaining a cow, the only source of income. The honest kolkhoz member says that the cause of all of these troubles is the chairman of the kolkhoz, Voldemar Kärema, and his lavish lifestyle, and he asks the party members to come and inspect the collective farm.

Although this is very interesting material that makes possible diverse interpretations, it receives no response or feedback; only Ints (February 9th, 2005, 11:39:42) states in an impartial manner that kolkhozes in 1954 and 1988 were very different.

One of the commentators was familiar with the background of the letter of complaint and sheds light on it:

Dear Mart Arold! Oskar Kärner was a farmhand on our farm, and you and I went to school together with his children, and you should be familiar with the actual background of this complaint. As regards Kärema, he was an officer at the German concentration camp during the war and was arrested in the mid-1950s (rs, February 9th, 2005, 11:31:21).

<sup>10</sup> Source reference added by Mart Arold: branch of the State Archives (PA), fund 4027, nim 9, s-ü 18, 1.68–70.

This explanation received no response either, as was the case with other descriptions of specific cases, even when these involved people that are very well known in Estonia. In the general context of the forums, this is surprising because newspaper articles about public figures, especially those concerning their shady past, attract very active online responses.

Among the personality stories in the forum, there is one case that has become a part of folklore.

At the beginning of the 1950s there was a festive meeting at the party committee in the Tartu District that discussed drafting a greeting to Comrade Stalin regarding progress made with the kolkhoz regime in Estonia. The speeches were in every way complimentary and then a woman came forward (a kolkhoz chairperson); she was holding a box of matches (older people here know what it looked like) and said: "I will send Comrade Stalin this matchbox full of shit so that he will know what our life is like." And interestingly enough nothing happened to this woman. The first secretary of the party committee at the time was someone called Meijel. (Usakas [USA], February 9th, 2005, 01:41:17)

There are five responses to this comment, none of which doubt the truthfulness in the description of the event. It is known about Rudolf Meijel that "at some point, probably in 1952, he worked as the chairman of the Executive Committee of the Deputy Council (RSN) in the Tartu Oblast, later he was the chairman of the district executive committee, and probably worked for the party as well, and was promoted somewhere in Tallinn" (cf. To usakas [to USA], February 9th, 2005, 11:29:28). He was a "relatively educated, bold, and critical man" (Rudolf Meijel, February 9th, 2005, 09:46:33), which adds credibility to the above as background knowledge and explains why it was not reported to the security authorities. The party member is totally positive in this context. There is no such unanimity where the woman who said the sensational words is concerned; talupoeg (February 9th, 2005, 15:53:21) thinks that she was a provocateur, so that "the agents could read the reactions on the faces of those present." The commentator that initiated the theme rules this possibility out by claiming that Stalinists would not have allowed such a provocation: using the word "shit" together with Stalin's name (Usakas [USA], February 10th, 2005, 00:44:14).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The motif was borrowed from a funny story (AT 1836\*): The pulpit has been smeared with tar, (cow) dung, and butter. Those behind it were either boys going to confirmation or the bell-ringer. The pastor has a habit of banging his hands on the edge of the pulpit. Monologue: first remark: "What is this life on the earth?" (main version) second remark: The purest of - dung - cow dung." According to AT, this story is common mainly in northern Estonia, in Estonia in five texts; actually there are about sixty, cf. Raudsep 1969). One sees a comparison of the Soviet regime with shit, for example, in the joke: "What is piss?" – What it is elsewhere is another matter entirely, but for us it is the only thing that is not shit" (RKM II 427, 224 (X) < Tartu – A. Särg 1989); in the database of jokes there are eleven variants, recorded from 1962 to 1993 (cf. Voolaid 2004).

The large-scale movement of people into towns is associated with the poor standard of life of the rural population: “People fled to towns not only because of their desire to become urbanized, but because of the fact that even in the mid-1950s the poverty in the countryside was devastating” (Lugemine [Reading], February 9th, 2005, 2005, 01:49:06). Rein Lillak, an instructor in agrarian history at the Estonian University of Life Sciences, writes that from 1950 to 1954 more than 57,000 people moved into towns from the country, justifying this action with the difficult economic situation in the countryside just like in the sources of the present study (Lillak 2003: 223). For the first time, the number of people living in towns (579,500) exceeded that of the rural population (550,300) in 1951 (Kibe 2005: 90).

The final years of the 1950s are remembered as an upturn in the rural economy, when economic considerations started to upstage the ideological ones little by little. The abolition of machine and tractor stations, selling technical equipment to the collective farms, and Kossõgin’s economic reforms in the 1960s are considered to have been a boost to rural life (cf. Loogik [Logician], February 9th, 2005, 00:15:59).

The return of the deported to their homeland sheds a brighter light on the 1960s. The mood of these recollections goes from one extreme to the other: there is hatred, bitterness, and contempt for the kolkhoz regime, but on the other hand there is the feeling of true happiness at returning home. There is no mention of additional persecutions, but there are, however, opposing recollections.

My parents returned from Siberia to their homestead. In the beginning, there was a kolkhoz brigade leader living there, but later he left. My parents went to work at the kolkhoz and nobody harassed them. We, their three children, all graduated from college and are well off. (Mina [Me], February 9th, 2005, 11:29:09)

People that remained here (or were left here) associate the economic upsurge with the return of the deported. There are quite a few that find that they were better adjusted for living under the Soviet regime than those who stayed put.

They got their farms back and went to work at the kolkhoz. They were better and more hardened than the locals; they also knew how to steal; I saw as a child how they took sheaves from the kolkhoz fields. (Nuhk [Spy], February 9th, 2005, 03:59:21)

The commentators agree that the period of the upturn of kolkhozes lasted from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, although it was “artificially boosted and at the cost of subsidies” (Ahti Mänd, February 9th, 2005, 10:16:35).

People seem to remember the 1970s and the 1980s as years of economic wellbeing. Life in the countryside now is particularly backward compared to that period, and the state of the economy is also considered backward:

Our future generations may very well get to some kind of a welfare state, but ordinary people will never live as well as they did during the second half of Brezhnev's regime. The very end got out of hand, and Gorba [Gorbachev]—there's no point in talking about him. (siim, February 9th, 2005, 07:07:35)

The wages earned by the people in the countryside during Soviet times were considered worthy of the work done, and the names of known kolkhoz members are mentioned that had everything they needed for a good life: a house, a car, proper furniture, and so on. Compared to townspeople, people living in the countryside were wealthier:

I remember when going to a large school in a small town that, despite the fact that the kolkhoz members' children were similar to people living in the countryside and dressed a little sloppily, they always had more pocket money and they could always buy what they desired with the help of their parents much more easily than town children. (Mäletan [I remember], February 9th, 2005, 11:47:24)

Malle Salupere asserts that “in the 1970s kolkhoz misery had become an anachronism and the purchasing power of kolkhoz members exceeded the average of the republic” (Malle Salupere, February 9th, 2005, 11:36:14).

When talking about the 1980s, the comments are limited to general lists of benefits; neither the structure of collective farms nor the level reached are analyzed. Major production is, in fact, mentioned but the system of ATKs (agricultural production associations) established in the mid-1970s is not mentioned. One of the comments mentions the ancillary production of kolkhozes as “a good example of the HEY-campaign started yesterday; what the heck did they do to keep alive—starting with industrial technology and ending with space electronics, in between some basic wire leading” (Ints, February 9th, 2005, 11:35:04). No reference has been given to a specific collective farm or period of time, and so the meaning of the comment remains slightly vague.

This was a time when the world was becoming wider, and trips abroad become more frequent—albeit mainly to socialist countries. Inside the Soviet Union tickets were cheap and most tourist travel was paid for by the collective farms; trade unions handed out travel vouchers for next to nothing to holiday homes and sanatoriums. When comparing the travel possibilities at the time to those today, travel is now considered beyond reach, taking into account the current high prices and the low income level of people living in the countryside.

Although many of the goods were unattainable, their quality, looking back, is considered high, especially in the case of food products. People that had become accustomed to eating relatively pure food (i.e., without preservatives and flavorings) do in fact miss it in the context of more varied foods containing a variety of additives:

I have never eaten such good sausage, cheese, or butter as during the time of the kolkhozes. Now I do not eat sausage at all and I try to get meat from my relatives in the countryside, as well as from the marketplace. The case with cheeses is that, if possible, you have try them. There is no more good white flour that costs forty-one kopeks. Now it is grey. And how disgusting all of those buns are! When there is more fat, the more these stick to one's palate, as if made from car- rion fat. (ajud [the brains], February 9th, 2005, 17:44:02)

Life was considered easier, more stress-free, and safer than now: the spread of drugs was very limited and private persons could not own firearms. People had no worries about work and often did not worry about housing.

Everyone had their stomachs full. There was not any left over, but there were none of those digging in rubbish bins. Schools were all free of charge and youth were also ensured a job for the first five years, not to mention a place to live. Wages were sufficient, and medical help was free of charge. Those that complain today cannot imagine such a carefree life. (Tuleb veel aeg... [There will come a time...], February 9th, 2005, 08:20:36)

As a counterbalance to the overall economic satisfaction of the rural population, people criticize the amount of work done to achieve it. In addition to long working hours at the collective farm, people had cows at home too and had kitchen gardens. Afd0000 theorizes that it was, indeed, this kind of endless slaving—resulting in the food produced oftentimes ending up on the dinner tables of townspeople—that has fostered the emergence of an attitude that “rural people are stupid and numb animals that understand nothing” (February 9th, 2005, 13:16:01).

## THE SUCCESSFUL ONES: THE ESTONIA AND KIROV KOLKHOZES

The following themes are discussed in connection with the Estonia kolkhoz: deportation, chairman Marrandi's judiciousness and exceptionality, land improvement, and reasons for the economic success. I now examine the discussions of these themes in greater detail.

Mart Arold, who mostly concentrates his comments on the topic of repressions, asks outright: “Elsewhere the owners of large farms were deported. How could they stay put there? Naturally there is more than one possible answer . . .” (Mart Arold, February 9th, 2005, 16:28:53). Arold himself offers no answer, but actual reasons probably do not meet his expectations. The commentators from the Oisu area state as if with one voice that the reason for the low rate of deportation was “farmer's sense.”

By the way, the Estonia kolkhoz's granary keeper was Paul from [the] Otsa [farm], the accountant Mart from [the] Pae [farm], chairman Heino (Marrandi) from [the] Rehe [farm], and the animal breeder Tõnise Oskar—these were all big farms of seventy hectares, complete, with a pedigree herd, two-story houses, and so on. People worked and used their farmer's sense. They did not want to have a kolkhoz. But they were smart enough to know that you cannot let your home be destroyed, let strangers come here and organize. And Marrandi was no communist; he couldn't even speak Russian. (Kohalik [Local], February 9th, 2005, 15:56:03)

Local people think that the relatively smaller deportation rate was due to Heino Marrandi's protection (cf. Jaak, February 9th, 2005, 17:28:46). I recorded similar stories when I was doing fieldwork in March 2005.

All of the chairmen were invited to the district committee. It was the time of the spring sowing in 1951. Tell us, kulaks, why isn't the kulaks' sowing going well? Nobody says a word. Heino Marrandi stood up—the only bold man—and said: "If you talk like that, then I am the first one, because I earn the highest wages in the kolkhoz." And then there was silence. (Kibe 2005: 240)

In an interview conducted during fieldwork in 2005, the local researcher Leo Rehela thought that few people were deported because the farms in the area were small. He may be right because in 1939 out of a total of 1,949 farms in Säreve Parish only one hundred were over fifty hectares in size (Kibe 2005: 166). The larger and wealthier farms were in Retla, where the number of deported people was higher. Kibe provides statistics for the victims of Stalin's regime in 1941 in Säreve Parish; twenty-six were deported, thirty-two were murdered, three went missing, and no records about imprisonment exist; in the whole of Järva County the total number of repressed was 642, of whom 368 were deported, 133 were murdered, fifty-five were imprisoned and eighty-six went missing. In 1949 the number of people from Säreve Parish on the list of those to be deported was 239, the number taken was 161 and all of them were sent to the Krasnoyarsk region (Kibe 2005: 82–83).

In an interlocking theme with deportation, but mainly independently discussed, one of the commentators seeks to find the secret to the Estonia kolkhoz's success. They admit that the collective farm was successful, but sincerely doubt the truthfulness of some of the economic data submitted or analyses of how much (useless) work or equipment was needed to achieve such results (cf. Kohalik [Local], February 9th, 2005, 18:14:55 and comments addressed to him). They seek connections to the rules applicable to Soviet agriculture, and in many of the cases they find what they sought. The main prerequisite was said to be limits:

The Estonia kolkhoz was allocated everything at the expense of others. . . . But they only needed a couple of such kolkhozes and there couldn't have been or shouldn't have been more because ideologically it was necessary to prove that the kolkhoz regime was possible and this was as much as the limits allowed for. (Mart Arold, February 9th, 2005, 15:37:26)

. . . wealth did not come only from skillful management, but also from the fertilizers and technical equipment wrangled from Moscow and Käbin. (Lugemine [Reading], February 9th, 2005, 01:49:06)

Signs of the omnipresent pointless wastefulness can also be found around Oisu; there is talk about the times of higher wages of those working at the Estonia kolkhoz and the equipment sent off as scrap iron when brand new and senseless expenditures were made on transport, for example.

Every day a journey form was written out for a hundred cars. The present association hardly writes out ten and the work gets done all the same. (Jaak, February 9th, 2005, 10:22:28)

The theme is elaborated to the point of discussing the Potemkin-style life; the Estonia kolkhoz seems to be the Estonian Potemkin village. The claim "It is also a type of Potemkinism if in the background of overall ruin a couple of model example kolkhozes are applauded. The general level of management was devastating both to the state as well as its citizens, both materially as well as mentally" (to Juhan 15.28, February 9th, 2005, 23:37:35) is fiercely objected to:

Potemkinism is a thing where there is nothing behind it. But in Estonia there was! There was the work of Estonian farmers. Respect for the land and the things on it. These are the places where people are successful today, as well. And these people who were able to operate, having the basics of economics in mind, were also successful in the new Estonia. (juhan, February 9th, 2005, 15:28:16)

Those that worked at the Estonia kolkhoz think that the secret to its success was farmer's sense, honesty, and hard work; although people went to work at the kolkhoz reluctantly, they did try to consider which way it would be better to manage: "Ours did not destroy theirs, but people at Kärevere, they had done away with many of the animals. You went to the kolkhoz, but you have no animals, there's no possibility for you to earn an income" (Kibe 2005: 212). The sense of pride—both in the things done, and also in the profit—can be felt both in newspaper commentaries as well as in the interviews conducted during the fieldwork. Self-consciousness is enhanced by the fact that the collective farm is

not in demise, but continues to operate as a private limited company. Despite the fact that the present company is managed by a man of a different character and, possibly, management style compared to that of Marrandi, the company is considered to “be founded on old Marrandi’s groundwork” (cf. *olid ajad* [those were the days], February 9th, 2005, 01:22:47, Teet, February 9th, 2005, 15:32:59).

The commentators seem to agree that a great deal depended on the chairman; only Sisuliselt confirms:

Life in the countryside has never depended on some kind of owner, but on the farmer in question. If the farmer goes, grass, bushes, and forests start to grow on the land. Nature shows who the true owner of the land is. (Sisuliselt [Basically], February 10th, 2005, 00:08:10)

The job of chairman is considered the most nerve-wracking because the district committee demanded compliance in everything, even in if it was contrary to the farmer’s sense. The successful chairman, often chosen from among the men in his own village, is often opposed to the one sent from the town (ideologically solid and faithful to the party) “who did not know the difference between rye and barley” (Kuldilõikaja [Boar cutter], February 9th, 2005, 01:04:16).

In the case of former chairmen, the commentators are made watchful by the fact that starting with the 1960s all kolkhoz chairmen had to be members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

The First Secretary of the District Committee had complete authority to replace any kolkhoz chairman, except for some of the so-called heroes that were under the personal protection of Kâbin, Vaino, or, for instance, Brezhnev. The chairman of the Estonia kolkhoz, Marrandi, was a completely exceptional case. (Mulk [Peasant from Mulgimaa], February 9th, 2005, 10:17:41)

However, there are those chairmen that held opposing views:

I worked on a kolkhoz in the 1950s and 1960s and on a state farm in the 1970s, and in all of these the party secretary was more of an organizer of festivities. There were only a few party members at kolkhozes that did not even bother to come to the meetings. I myself became a chairman as late as the 1980s, despite the fact that I have never been a party member. The economist of the company was the party secretary. I myself became aware of only two meetings and did not take part in any. All in all I made three visits to the party headquarters: the first time when I was appointed and twice to take birthday flowers to the First Secretary. I was not even summoned when out of fifty-six Russian employees



there were only seventeen left a year later and then again eleven left a year later. (Kolhoosnik, February 9th, 2005, 08:36:07)

During my fieldwork I had little contact with former senior members of staff, but those few told me many stories of their defiance to the central authorities. A wise chairman knew very well how many of the orders had to be followed so that the authorities would be more or less satisfied, and how to ignore unreasonable orders. Commentators point out that successful chairmen were held in high esteem and such leaders are missed even in today's economic life. The work of the present directors is considered trivial: the commentators say outright that "The young directors today cannot even imagine what it actually means to lead a company" (Julius, February 9th, 2005, 08:54:30).

In addition to chairmen, specialists and other people (e.g., party organizers) are mentioned as officials that had an influence on the life of the collective farm (cf. Loogik [Logician], February 9th, 2005, 01:20:56); they had the authority to take notes on the meetings as necessary. People are quite uniformly convinced that the protocols were not honest (i.e., real life was different). There is, however, no absolute accord as regards the share of the party organizer, but there are more of those that remember the official in question as a secondary character that looked after the party display, landscaping, and handing out travel vouchers and other areas that had little effect on life at the collective farm. At the same time, people admit that a great deal depended on the person; if the party organizer was able to act as a filter between the district committee and the collective farm, the party organizer did in fact have real power. It is indeed the ability to be a buffer that is also stressed by Jääts in his study when talking about successful and clever chairmen.

Almost equal to, or worse than, a party organizer were "all kinds of party committee commissioners that came to inspect and instruct" (Kuldilõikaja [Boar cutter], February 9th, 2005, 01:09:38). The essence of these people is quite uniformly understood: "these were no friends of the rural people; they bullied people into doing things and were secret informers, servants to their masters either willingly or unwillingly" (To Pärnakas [Pärnuer], February 9th, 2005, 13:10:19). At this point commentators gladly mention those now well-known politicians that held the role of commissioner, worked for the Youth Communist Party, or had been a pioneer or a member of the student construction brigade; at the same time, people are bold enough to discuss their own party organizer experiences.

Jääts summarizes the topic of management both at the level of an individual as well as more broadly, discussing the general meeting at the kolkhoz in his article as follows: the general meetings were held at kolkhozes more frequently during the years of the kolkhoz era. By the 1960s, such meetings had developed, at least at the Estonia kolkhoz, "into quite an immaculate voting machine"; elsewhere in Estonia there are cases in which the general meeting did not function as the verifier of management's decisions. The management could only operate in the framework established by the party and the regime, in which there was also some room for maneuvers and negotiations, especially from the Khrushchev era onward (Jääts 2004b: 394).

The progressive collective farms mentioned include, in addition to the Estonia kolkhoz, Oskar Kuul's Kirov kolkhoz.<sup>12</sup> Again, the man's charismatic personality is highlighted here. Whereas Marrandi was described as a serious and simple workman whose hobby was land improvement, the recollections related to Kuul have more of the sound of folk tales to them:

He offered the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Estonian Communist Party, Karl Vaino, the position of a kolkhoz party organizer with a monthly salary of 1,000 rubles, but the fool turned him down and became the people's enemy, earning 280 rubles a month. ("Kirovi" Kuulil, February 9th, 2005, 11:42:40).<sup>13</sup>

He was quite an old man: he applied for permission to asphalt the roads in Tallinn (he was not granted permission) and made a proposal to Karl Vaino to come and work at the kolkhoz as a party organizer with a proper salary (Vaino did not come) (Kuuli "Kirov," February 9th, 2005, 11:15:16).

I once accompanied a journalists' delegation from Moscow on behalf of the Journalists' Union when they visited Kirov. What a thrilling experience that was. The Russians shot all kinds of tricky questions at the vice chairman. The message they were getting at was: you live a bloody good life here, milking the Soviet regime. Whose pet are you? That was, indeed, partly true because the state did nothing to hold this kolkhoz back. The chief specialists parried the blows by stating the facts of their work: a fish-smoking machine from Denmark, their own cannery, a fleet on the Atlantic, and so on. The results were impressive, but the guests were still bombarding them with criticism: look at what Moscow has done for you. They later heard that they would be given two boxes full of smoked fish as a present to take home on the train; they had a taste of it at Kirov and calmed down. And bags full of smoked sprats, as well. I hope that the articles in the Russian newspapers were favorable . . . (Paljud siin [Many people here], February 9th, 2005, 11:26:03)

<sup>12</sup> The model collective fishery named for Sergei Mironovich Kirov was founded in 1950 after four small fishing kolkhozes joined and established their center in Haabneeme. The main activity of the collective farm was fishing. Its main ancillary branches were fish processing, fish and fur farming, timber processing, souvenir making, and horticulture. The collective farm had its own fish factory, refrigerating plant, shipyard, vehicle yard, engineering office, and other facilities. From 1955 to 1990 Oskar Kuul was the chairman of the kolkhoz.

<sup>13</sup> At the time a junior employee earned ninety rubles a month, a teacher's salary was, depending on the workload, around one hundred rubles, engineers at factories earned 180 rubles, an ordinary milkmaid working at a collective farm earned one hundred fifty to two hundred rubles, and laborers earned one hundred rubles. As a comparison, some prices of goods were as follows: a loaf of bread cost sixteen kopeks, a kilogram of packed pork chops 2.05 rubles, a kilogram of sausage 2.20 rubles, half a liter of vodka 4.12 rubles; a meter of cotton print eighty kopeks, a pair of good shoes twenty-five rubles, a jacket forty to sixty rubles, and a Zhiguli car four thousand rubles.

The good selection of personnel at the Kirov model collective fishery is also considered a secret to its success; the wages were remarkably higher than in Tallinn and this is why the kolkhoz located near Tallinn was able to select the best employees. Those that had been selected to work there had to make an effort not to lose their jobs: One could not be caught drunk in town or cross the street in the wrong place, or you immediately lost your bonus. You could not even steal from the kolkhoz; the discipline was very strict (Paljud siin [Many people here], February 9th, 2005, 11:26:03). The same, although to a smaller extent, is repeatedly said about the Estonia kolkhoz. In general, the kolhoz members' salaries were better than those of the townspeople from the 1960s onwards, but nevertheless there were personnel problems at ordinary collective farms.

### THE BOTTLENECKS OF THE (SOCIALIST) RURAL ECONOMY

The commentators that take an analytical look at the last century explain that the small farms established as a result of the application of the land reform passed on November 10th, 1919 in the Constituent Assembly of the Republic of Estonia were not functional. These could, at best, create sources of livelihood, but not make a profit; hence, the transition to major production would have been inevitable. Agricultural scientists are of the same opinion (cf., e.g., Kaubi 1999: 800–801; Lillak 2003: 216–217). Although both historians as well as a small share of commentators see the need for the reorganization of the agrarian structure that had emerged by the First World War, they deny the need for the establishment of kolkhozes. Collectivization was carried out violently and did not take into account the local situation and the natural course of the development of agriculture; the technical and technological level at the time did not require a higher concentration of production. The commentators are also of the opinion that the privatization process that was launched with the Farm Act of 1989 was corrupt and ideological, and did not take reality into account; they also admit that three agricultural reforms in one century is far too much (cf. Harald, February 9th, 2005, 12:01:43; to ..., February 9th, 2005, 12:26:15).

The following mistakes were reportedly made in the first decade of collectivization: incompetent management, especially on the part of the central authority and party functionaries, and the application of the achievements of “progressive” agricultural sciences, such as Lysenkoism and Michurinism. Curious examples are generally not discussed from the point of view of the economy, but these provide good material for making fun of the Soviet regime. The discussions of the events of this period mostly concentrate on repressions. The rapid decline in the second half of the 1950s of the one-village kolkhozes making slow progress is explained by the joining of small kolkhozes; from that point onwards a rise in thefts was also recorded.

Another comment reported that the reason for the decline was the low remuneration of work during the first years of the kolkhozes and the resulting low motivation.<sup>14</sup>

. . . we were, indeed, entitled to two hundred grams of crops for our normal days, but the crops were left on the field and we received no payment for the year's work. Indeed, no payment at all! The cow kept the rural people from starving. Cows should have a monument erected to them (mäletan [I remember], February 9th, 2005, 07:41:06).

The things done and left undone in the countryside during the final decades of the Soviet era are diversely analyzed and compared with the present day; people try to find explanations for the collapse of the seemingly functional system that gave people a good standard of living.

The cautious attitude towards Soviet-era statistics is quite stereotypical; at the same time people use quite a lot of reference materials in the forum both from other republics and from abroad, not to mention the comparison of the indicators of the collective farms inside Estonia and the drawing of parallels with prewar Estonia. Everything is compared: production results, productivity, organization of work, working culture, the use of resources, and the standard of living. Although this is mostly done to highlight the advantages and disadvantages of major production, especially in the Estonian context, people predominantly remain emotionless and do not formulate their judgements directly; interpretation is left to the readers. When presenting data, memory is mostly relied on; there are only a few commentators that mention specific indicators; however, people are quite accurate when stating quantities. Compared to other Soviet socialist republics, Estonia is seen in a better light; when drawing parallels with foreign countries, the capability or backlog of agriculture—depending on how the commentator desires to present the arguments—is proven in the case of both Estonia and the Soviet Union.

Estonia is considered exceptional in the context of the Soviet Union; to some extent people are willing to share this special status with the other Baltic states. Estonia is said to be a model republic “first to show the West how good life is under communist rule, and second because there were educated people here who were able to do something with money” (Imf, February 9th, 2005, 07:52:20).

Statistical data speaks the same language as the “voice of the people”; in the 1970s the productivity of an Estonian farmer was more than twice as high as the Soviet average in the case of cattle breeding, and one and a half times higher for effectiveness of fodder use (Lillak 2003: 227–229).

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<sup>14</sup> Until 1956, kolkhoz members were only paid in kind for normal days worked; afterwards monetary wages were slowly implemented. Starting in 1964, all collective farms started paying monetary wages (Cf. Lillak 2003: 223)

The understanding that the environment was more polluted during the Soviet time than now is widespread. The main dangers to nature reported are excessive fertilization, weed control, and manure storage. To counterbalance these hazards, the problems of modern ecology are presented: first and foremost, senseless logging and self-created garbage dumps.

One gets an inkling of the true scope of environmental problems arising from agriculture when one takes a look at the register of herbicides and pesticides from the Plant Protection Inspectorate, although it does give information about only one area in which chemicals were used. It turns out that the peak in the use of these chemicals in Estonian agriculture was from 1981 to 1989, when chemicals was applied to almost every field. In 1990 the use of pesticides and herbicides decreased sharply in connection with the recession in agriculture, but the trend is increasing again. Taking into account that today a new generation of such products is in use—with smaller hectare norms—it may be concluded that their use is much more intensive compared to the 1990s (cf. <http://www.plant.agri.ee/?op=body&id=123>).

The issues related to Soviet-era construction in rural areas evoked lively discussions. Evaluations vary from one extreme to another. The opinions regarding residential construction tend to be either favorable or neutral: “Without the kolkhoz regime, this settlement [located near the town] where I live today would not exist because it is a kolkhoz center built from scratch during Soviet times” (Rahva Võit [People’s Victory], February 9th, 2005, 09:19:21). In connection with the emergence of centers, people also recall former farm buildings that are now left in ruins. However, they admit:

Nobody forced people to go and live in the settlements. It did, indeed, happen that the younger generation went to live in new buildings: warm water, toilets, bathrooms, and so on. (Vot [Well!], February 9th, 2005, 10:56:07)

The deployment of production buildings, especially cow stables, is associated with environmental pollution; the problem is more acute when taking into account that most of the production went to the dinner tables of fellow republics, leaving the producers themselves emptyhanded. And now people become really angry, calling Estonia the pigsty of the Soviet Union (Uuriija [Investigator], February 9th, 2005, 15:48:48).<sup>15</sup> Harsh criticism is directed at the pointless “architectural miracles” such as unexciting culture centers and sports halls, and so on; people are not satisfied with the quality of construction.

Among all of the peculiarities of Soviet-era rural economy, the commentators are searching for reasons why the kolkhoz regime, as well as the major power itself, did in

<sup>15</sup> A folk riddle: What is the longest animal in the world? A pig: the carcass is in Moscow on a shop counter, and the head in Tallinn under the counter. Compare, for example, RKM II 420, 440 < Tallinn or Tartu – J. Viikberg (1976/77); RKM II 428, 155 (2) < Tartu – M. Kõiva (1988). Nevertheless, there is no recollection that people called the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic the pigsty of the USSR; in the 1980s people talked about Estonia as a potato republic and later on as a banana republic.

fact dissolve.<sup>16</sup> The most frequently mentioned negative aspect of kolkhozes is the senseless waste, the excessive subsidizing of agriculture, and the allocation of resources based on limits and low productivity. The forces that tied the Soviet state together are thought to be fear and a strict passport regime: in the internal republics the citizens did not have passports until 1980, and so they were basically attached to the land; in Estonia (a border republic) citizens were never without a passport. The main reasons for the collapse of the socialist system are considered to be the following: the arms race, the decline of oil prices on the world market, and the founding of an economy on cheap fuel and iron “that was paid for by the blood of the northern peoples and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of nature (to be read as oil dollars)” (to sisuliselt [basically], February 9th, 2005, 11:00:26). The following analytical comment appropriately summarizes the theme:

The system possibly also functioned due to the fact that the Soviet Union was, indeed, bloody big. It takes years to steal everything from such a big chunk of land. Look at Russia today: there is still something there. Where else would these millionaires come from?

But the good life had to end because, paradoxically, life was too good. As we know, there is no such thing as a free lunch. If a patient does not pay for medical care, then the state has to pay for it. But if the state only hands out money and nothing comes in, the money will eventually disappear. There is no helping it. (fredrikson, February 9th, 2005, 13:15:55)

## LIFE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE IN POST-SOCIALIST ESTONIA

Almost one-third of the comments discuss life in the countryside after the restoration of Estonia's independence; one-fourth of these concentrate on privatization. The commentators admit unanimously that life in the countryside has gone downhill. The benefits outweigh the shortcomings highlighted when talking about the final decades of the Soviet era; these are amplified with the disappointment in Estonia, especially in agricultural policy. The following stereotype is prevalent: the value created during the Soviet era is beginning to disappear (the ditches are full, weeds grow on the improved lands, production buildings are falling apart, etc.) and no new value is created. There is also no comfort in knowing that some of the collective farms that were successful in Soviet times continue to operate, including the Estonia kolkhoz. Whereas people in Oisu praised their former collective farm and protected the honor of their kolkhoz and its chairman, they now are critical where the functioning and management of the present private limited company is concerned.

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<sup>16</sup> This theme has been touched upon in forty-three comments. It is noteworthy that all of the social and political groups, as well as age groups, took part in the conversation here.

Johannes Kaubi analyzes the agrarian reforms that affected Estonia in the journal *Akadeemia* and explains that at the beginning of 1990s reform of the agrarian structure was necessary because the entire system of major production was not flexible, it did not function effectively, and it needed re-arrangement. It was not reasonable to destroy the system of major enterprises right away and return to the farm system because the production basis of one system is not applicable to the other and building a new basis is costly and time-consuming. An agrarian structure of many different forms was applied, also taking into account, in addition to economic considerations, ideological, emotional, and other pursuits (the author does not specify which ones). Kaubi admits that the property of major collective farms was created with people's hard work and that it should not have been written off so easily. The reform laws did not directly require the dissolution of major collective farms, but public opinion and most of the reform committees were attuned to their dissolution. The property of collective farms was privatized in the form of individual structures, not as a technological whole. This is how 1,013 fragmented production units with vague land use were formed; of these, only 803 were still functioning in 1999; in addition to these, there were 35,000 farms in 1999 (cf. Kaubi 1999: 808–817).

None of the commentators seem to be against the idea of privatization, but they are not satisfied with how it was carried out: “Privatization was carried out without having in mind the actual rural development” (Kaval-antsule [To Cunning Ants] 18.00, February 10th, 2005, 00:49:35). People feel betrayed because production resources were divided among a small circle. The employees feel that they have been unfairly deprived of their share and the damage is even greater considering that “the same bunch changed chairs at the end of the kolkhoz era and is now nicely settled in rural municipalities and working either there or in local councils even today” (Näiteks [For example], February 9th, 2005, 12:43:14). This attitude is prevalent and cannot be changed with a few counterarguments, either. In general, people hold the view that the dissolution of joint collective farms was as senseless and ideological as the establishment of kolkhozes so that “the two crimes are no different from one another” (Harald, February 9th, 2005, 12:01:43).

With hindsight, people propose various solutions that were not used in the past and cannot be applied in the present:

The whole mistake lies in the fact that during the land reform the land and technology should have been returned and, based on these, companies with full liability should have been formed for land owners. These should not have been separated and distributed. This way agriculture would today be functional and profitable because it would have been represented by earning landowners. (to to, February 9th, 2005, 17:32:58)

Many—and if not the commentators themselves, then their acquaintances living in the countryside—would have gladly continued working on the collective farms as paid

laborers. According to them, kolkhozes and state farms could have been given a different name; for example, they could have been renamed public or private limited companies; people see no fundamental differences between the former and the present production units. This became especially clear in 2005 during fieldwork in Oisu, where people even used Soviet terminology when talking about the current Estonia farm.

Mart Arold criticizes the compensation calculation method based on which the profits unearned by the landowner during the Soviet period are not taken into account. The so-called land holding compensation should have been made on a share principle, based on the total amount of production during the entire period (cf. Mart Arold, February 9th, 2005, 17:16:52). This idea receives an active response, although mainly negative, because people think that the shares would have been paid out by the kolkhoz members themselves that worked at the collective farm and the entire painful process seemed even more unjust.

Likewise, the possibility for the locals to do anything about the founding of kolkhozes was minimal, and so the decline of collective farms and that of the standard of living is blamed only on the distant government. The political parties the people are disappointed in can be seen very clearly: on the negative side, the leader's position is held by the party Pro Patria Union with Mart Laar being its leading figure, followed by the Res Publica Party, and Edgar Savisaar from the Estonian Center Party as an individual. The Res Publica Party—which did not even exist as a political party at the time of the dissolution of kolkhozes—is treated slightly less severely.<sup>17</sup> Life in Estonia today is considered very much ideology-based. People state with sadness that:

Estonia has developed and Estonia has been developed with eyes filled with money. It means that other things necessary in society are not noticed or not noticed enough. (!!!!Müüt edukast Eestist [A myth of successful Estonia], February 9th, 2005, 14:38, signed with the name Andres Tarand)

People feel that at the government level the rural population is not cared about; the politicians only show a hypocritical interest prior to the elections.

The future of life in the countryside is seen in quite black shades when taking into account the overall moral and economic degradation. People see a solution in the development of family farms and the implementation of major production. Based on Jääts' study results, people are not always eager to adopt new things (cf. Jääts 2000: 119), but the data

<sup>17</sup> The Res Publica Party, founded on December 8th, 2001 in Tallinn, evolved from the Association Res Publica. The association was registered as a political party on January 8th, 2002. In the parliamentary elections of 2003 they received 24.61% of the votes, falling only behind the Estonian Center Party (<http://www.zone.ee/erakonnad/erakonnad/registreeritud/vanad/rp.html>). Its popularity declined quickly after the election win; they received no seats in the elections to the European Parliament a year later. They were represented in the government for two years (from April 10th, 2003 to April 13th, 2005). As a reminder, the comments analyzed in this study were written on February 9th and 10th, 2005; that is, at the time when the Res Publica Party's coalition was still in power



that underlie this analysis do not show any opposition towards it either; people rather tend to admit with a sad smile that it is a good thing if someone does come to the countryside and finds some use there:

The people that today come to the country, owning a horse, are, however, positive characters, although they do not meet our perception of natural rural life. There are no conditions in the countryside for the emergence of capital. The capital that emerges will indeed pour from the town to the country. So—welcome, enthusiasts! There's plenty of room and enough time in the country. (To *Pärnakas* [Pärnuer], February 9th, 2005, 13:10:19)

The value of rural areas as a living environment has increased; a fifty-kilometer drive to town is considered completely normal, the only obstacle, perhaps, being the high price of gasoline (cf., e.g., enrik, February 9th, 2005, 09:14:20); poor public transport between rural areas and the town are not listed as a problem.

## CONCLUSION

Many of the phenomena and values prevalent during the socialist period have not been studied in Estonia. This especially applies to life in the countryside and the change in forms of ownership as imposed by the political regime, which strongly affected people. Alongside documented historical records and interviews, online comments form an important source of information. Based on the analysis of the comments, it is possible to synthesize the stereotype of rural life created during the Social era, according to which there was a lot of everything: a lot of work, laziness, sloppiness, machines, laborers, production, money, and so on. At the same time, there was distrust towards this perceived excess: Soviet statistics were not considered trustworthy as indicators and, according to the commentators, were artificially out of proportion: they were either far-fetched or something was hushed up. The general opinion was that the chairmen and chief specialists had to be members of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and only a very few select chairmen could remain apolitical.<sup>18</sup> People are also convinced that all precepts were drafted in Moscow and approved in Tallinn, then sent from district committees to collective farms for the locals to obey unconditionally; the locals themselves could do nothing to change the situation. Both the establishment of kolkhozes as well as their dissolution was arranged “from afar.” The

<sup>18</sup> Vednost in praksa, da je nujno biti (postati) član komunistične partije, sta bili za vodilne delavce (managerje idr.) značilni za vse države s komunistično partijo kot vodilnim političnim telesom in ideološko. Izjeme so bile redke, v Sloveniji so npr. veljale le za nekatere posameznike, ki so se udeležili narodnoosvobodilne borbe. Članstvo je pomenilo predpogoj za vstop v mrežo managerjev (cf. Fikfak 2008; Bajuk Senčar 2008) (op. J. Fikfak).

commentators very much agreed with the statement that “the Soviet era began with lying and stealing and it ended exactly the same way,” whereas people agree that the people that lived and worked at the time (in the countryside) cannot reorient to the changed environment and cannot therefore be considered a considerable labor force.

On the more positive side, the following generalizations are made: life in Estonia was better than elsewhere in the Soviet Union, the production here was comparable to that of the rest of the world, and the chairmen that were successful during the Soviet era were better managers and more selfless than the entrepreneurs today. In people’s collective memory, two periods are remembered more frequently: the difficult first years with many repressions and the final lavish years, the likes of which the rural population will allegedly never see again. The present opportunities for the rural economy are considered poor.

The stereotypes and assessments that emerge do not differ greatly from the historians’ description and the analysis given in the development plan for 2007–2010 in the area of governance by the Ministry of Agriculture. At the same time, it is worth noting that the commentators do not think very highly of the written descriptions of history; the facts included are considered faulty and the authors inept. Their criticism was targeted at both Indrek Jääts, who published the newspaper article, as well as the politician Mart Laar, and to some extent the treatment given by Edgar Savisaar. History is considered a discipline with an ideological effect; the commentators think that the truthful study of recent history is only in the power of its contemporaries.

Conventionally, there is opposition between the commentators that only see the negatives of kolkhoz life and those that include a positive side in their assessments. The emic and etic division mostly works at the political level, whereas the group of negativists is more aggressive and denies its political starting point. Those commentators that find something to value in the Soviet rural economy are more tolerant; they do not impose their views on others and they present their arguments unemotionally. Talking about the present, one can feel disappointment in their answers. The stereotype of an Estonian of the commentators’ generation comes forth clearly: “I was not a pioneer or a member of the youth communist party. Moreover, I have not journeyed somewhere in search of a better life, nor do I bother my fellow countrymen with stupid teachings; instead, I live and fight here in Estonia, trying to make Estonia better and more humane. With actions, not with claptrap” (tohoh [what the hell], February 9th, 2005, 20:28:18).

The stereotypes presented mainly represent the views of the over-thirty generation and are based on their personal experience; the various age groups and social groups do not come forth. Because this summary was made based only on 333 online comments describing rural life in Soviet times, the result cannot be considered final and encompassing all stereotypes, but it does give quite a truthful overview of the moods prevalent at the beginning of 2005. These attitudes are worthy of the attention of sociologists and economic analysts, and are also a good starting point for a deeper discussion of people’s understanding of history.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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SPLETNA USTNA ZGODOVINA  
POGLEDI NA SOVJETSKO REPUBLIKO ESTONIJO

*V zadnjem času so si ustna zgodovina, tj. spomini navadnih ljudi, njihove življenjske zgodbe, življenjske strategije, usakdanje življenje ipd. pridobili status zgodovinskih poročil. V tem okviru je mogoče spletne komentarje pri medijskih novicah obravnavati kot posebno obliko literature posvečene spominu; pripombe predstavljajo izrazito trenutna mnenja na določeno temo.*

*Autorica v članku analizira podobo zgodovine in zgodovinskega znanja, ki ju kažejo komentarji novice, objavljene v časopisu Eesti P.evaleht (9. februar 2005), o nagradi družbenih znanosti, ki jo je prejel Indrek Jääts za raziskave o začetku kolektivnih kmetij v pokrajini Oisu.*

*V času Sovjetske zveze je bil uspešen "milijonarski KOLHOZ" v pokrajini Oisu; raziskava je odprla razpravo o tem ali so (mlajši) raziskovalci sposobni ustrezno analizirati to zapleteno zgodovinsko obdobje in predstaviti svoje znanje o življenju v kolhozu. Spletni komentarji se nanašajo predvsem na zgodnje obdobje, na čas okrog 1950, ko bili kolhozi ustanovljeni. V primerjavi z desetletji potem so komentarji o tem obdobju najbolj čustveni in negativni. Nasprotno pa se zdi, da so leta med 1970 in 1980 čas gospodarske blaginje. Vsekakor je zanimivo da se stereotipi in splošno zgodovinsko znanje v bistvu ne razlikuje od akademskih zgodovinskih poročil ali npr. analize Ministrstva za kmetijstvo, zapisane v razvojnem načrtu 2007-2010.*

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