

# **Nylon Stockings and Samizdat. The “White Ship” between Helsinki and Tallinn in the Light of Its Unintended Economic and Political Consequences**

by  
Lars Fredrik Stöcker\*

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1

The topos of the “White Ship” has entered the Estonian language and literature as an often evoked metaphor for a mostly futile wait for salvation; it acquired a specifically political dimension in the course of Estonia’s chequered and, to a large extent, tragic twentieth-century history. The powerful image of a saviour-like appearance on the horizon in the form of a white ship, its symbolism clearly reflecting its roots in religious and folk traditions, can be traced back to the years of the Estonian War of Independence.<sup>1</sup> In mid-December 1918, the British Navy sent a naval squadron to Tallinn in support of the republican forces that defended the nascent nation state against revolutionary Russia’s Red Army. The British naval warfare support and regular armament supplies considerably contributed to securing the coastline and sustaining the fighting morale of the Estonian forces.<sup>2</sup> After merely two decades of peace and national sovereignty, which ended with the forced annexation of the Republic of Estonia into Stalin’s Soviet Union in June 1940, the reappearance of the myth of the “White Ship” gave expression to the widespread hope for a similar miracle. However, the three consecutive occupa-

---

\* An earlier version of this paper was presented and discussed at the international workshop “Loopholes in the Iron Curtain: Economic Contacts between Eastern and Western Europe since the 1970s”, held at the University of Vienna, 18.-19.04.2013. The research was supported by the European Union through the European Social Fund (Mobilitas grant No. MJD347).

<sup>1</sup> MEIKE WULF: Locating Estonia. Perceptions from Exile and the Homeland, in: PETER GATRELL, NICK BARON (eds.): *Warlands. Population Resettlements and State Reconstruction in the Soviet-East European Borderlands, 1945-50*, New York 2009, pp. 231-254, here pp. 236-237. Originally, the myth of the “White Ship” goes back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and the religious sect of the Maltsvetians, as the followers of Prophet Maltsvet, the Estonian peasant Juhan Leinberg, called themselves. In early summer 1861, a few hundred Maltsvetians spent several weeks on the limestone plateau of Lasnamäe near Tallinn, searching the horizon for a mystical white ship that was supposed to take them to Crimea, where Leinberg had promised them a future as free peasants; SULEV VAHTRE (ed.): *Eesti ajalugu elulugudes. 101 tähtsat eestlast [Estonian History in Life Stories. 101 Important Estonians]*, Tallinn 1997, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> SULEV VAHTRE (ed.): *Eesti ajalugu VI [Estonian History VI]*, Tartu 2005, p. 33.

tions of the Baltic states by the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany during the Second World War proceeded without any military interventions or other forms of support on the part of the Western Allies. Nevertheless, rumours about a "White Ship" as an allegory of an anticipated military liberation from Soviet rule persisted up to the end of the 1950s<sup>3</sup>, when it finally became clear that the West would not interfere in support of the Baltic peoples and the armed resistance struggle in the woods and swamps of Estonia practically came to an end. Consequently, due to its strongly anti-communist connotation, the topos became subject to yet another reinterpretation, this time on the part of the Soviet regime. In the classic Soviet Estonian Cold War movie *Valge laev* commissioned by the KGB and shot in 1970, the "White Ship", which gave the movie its title, stood for "ideological diversion" and the shattered dreams and illusions of a young Estonian couple. After their escape to Sweden over a stormy Baltic Sea, they surrender to "Western propaganda" and become corrupted by anti-communist forces, embodied by the Estonian political exile in Stockholm.<sup>4</sup>

After the re-establishment of a direct ferry connection between Soviet Estonia and neighbouring neutral Finland in early summer 1965, the image of the "White Ship" reappeared in a different context. For more than two decades, the inhabitants of Soviet Estonia had been completely isolated from their opposite coast as a result of the Stalinist doctrine of quite literally raising an Iron Curtain around the newly annexed western territories of the Soviet Union. In view of the fact that almost the entire coastline and the islands of the Estonian SSR had been transformed into a military exclusion zone immediately after the re-occupation of Estonian territory by the Red Army in 1944, the significance of a regularly functioning tourist traffic between Tallinn and Helsinki can hardly be overestimated; not least the ferries themselves, which in the eyes of many Estonians already had a kind of extraterritorial status, promising a whiff of Western lifestyle and an abundance of consumer goods.

---

<sup>3</sup> VIKTOR NIITSOO: Eesti rahvuslik vastupanuliikumine aastail 1968-1975 I [Estonian National Resistance in the Years 1968-1975 I], in: *Akadeemia* 5 (1993), 9, pp. 1819-1833, here p. 1821. A comparably powerful image can be found in the People's Republic of Poland. The myth of the triumphal entry of General Władysław Anders – the former leader of the Polish forces that fought alongside the Western Allies and a key figure of the political exile in London – on a "white horse" into communist-ruled Poland survived long into the post-war era; ANDRZEJ FRISZKE, RAFAŁ HABIELSKI, PAWEŁ MACHCEWICZ: Zakończenie – Próba bilansu [Conclusion – Attempt of a Balance], in: RAFAŁ HABIELSKI: *Życie społeczne i kulturalne emigracji* [The Social and Cultural Life of Emigration], Warszawa 1999, pp. 307-318, here p. 308.

<sup>4</sup> In one scene of the movie, the young Estonian Enn, playing the role of an antagonist to the characters of Juhan and Linda who have decided to escape the Soviet Union, emphatically rejects the temptations embodied in the myth of the "White Ship": "Listen, Juhan, don't you think that the captain of this ship is an American? I definitely don't want to be member of this crew." *Valge laev* [The White Ship], Estonia 1970, 80 min., 55:25.

The prestigious Soviet Estonian flagship *Georg Ots*, which shipped across the Gulf of Finland as the successor of the smaller ferries *Vanemuine* and *Tallinn*, was in particular much more than a simple means of transport. It has entered Estonia's collective memory as a somewhat nostalgic symbol of the promises of freedom and lush consumerism that this breach in the Iron Curtain embodied. Constructed in a Polish shipyard, the highly modern ship was named after the honoured Estonian singer and People's Artist of the USSR Georg Ots, who was equally popular in Tallinn, Moscow and Helsinki. It started cruising between Finland and the Estonian SSR in 1980 on the occasion of the Olympic Games held in both Moscow and Tallinn. With its movie theatre and the huge variety of boutiques and shops filling the decks that had originally been designed for cars<sup>5</sup>, *Georg Ots* became a kind of "modern embodiment" of the "White Ship".<sup>6</sup>

## 1.2

The focus on the ferry connection as a breach in the Iron Curtain reveals, as will be shown, an insight into a quarter-century of largely uncontrolled micro-level interaction between Finnish and Soviet citizens. Going beyond the symbolic connotations of the "White Ship" and its place in contemporary Estonia's collective memory, this unique opening of the Soviet orbit to the non-communist world in the context of the Cold War era can thus be used as a key to lift the history of the Estonian SSR out of the narrow frame of Soviet history. Investigating the "White Ships" that, regardless of the ruptures, crises and changes in the political history of the region, cruised the Baltic waterways between Finland and Soviet Estonia throughout the latter half of the Cold War, the present study highlights the impact of small-scale, cross-border interaction in a broader political and economic context. The various entanglements that developed across one of Cold War Europe's most heavily guarded borders illustrate the nature and repercussions of micro-level interaction between East and West, which could evolve in the course of *détente* and whose full dimension still remains to be investigated.

Cold War historiography has in recent years increasingly turned towards the economic and social aspects of the superpower conflict in divided Europe, leaving behind the exclusive focus on high politics and state actors that has long dominated and, in fact, constituted the research field. With the turn from "political and diplomatic to social, cultural, and media history, the history of ideas, utopias and mentalities"<sup>7</sup>, a new generation of Cold War historians has

<sup>5</sup> MARINA KAAS, KERSTI KRAAS: *Eesti ettevõtluse taassünd, 1987-1991* [The Rebirth of Estonian Entrepreneurship, 1987-1991], Tallinn 2009, p. 136.

<sup>6</sup> ENNO TAMMER (ed.): *Nõukogude piir ja lukus elu* [The Soviet Border and the Enclosed Life], Tallinn 2008, p. 319.

<sup>7</sup> ANNETTE VOWINCKEL, MARCUS M. PAYK, THOMAS LINDENBERGER: *European Cold War Culture(s)? An Introduction*, in: IDEM (eds.): *Cold War Cultures. Perspectives on Eastern and Western European Societies*, New York – Oxford 2012, pp. 1-15, here p. 2.

not only introduced the cultural turn into a field long dominated and influenced by Cold War policy makers themselves. Due to the focus on interaction and exchange across what has long been perceived as an "Iron Curtain", the "shallow surface of bipolar juxtaposition" is confronted with an increasingly more complex approach to life in Cold War Europe, which highlights the "wide space of vivid interaction" on the micro-level.<sup>8</sup> Among the channels that triggered uncountable direct encounters between the inhabitants of capitalist and communist Europe, trade and tourism in particular have gained considerable attention among researchers interested in the Cold War and the history of Soviet-type socialism, not least with regard to the repercussions on black-market trading in the socialist countries.<sup>9</sup> The impact of the gradual liberalization of the border regimes of socialist Europe on politically motivated contacts, by contrast, i.e. communication and cooperation that in a broader sense could be labelled as "oppositional", still figure among the rather opaque aspects of Europe's Cold War history, although some researchers have already approached this challenge.<sup>10</sup> A more comprehensive understanding of the overall repercussions of the various forms of uncontrolled and, in

---

<sup>8</sup> SARI AUTIO-SARASMO, KATALIN MIKLÓSSY: Introduction. The Cold War from a New Perspective, in: IDEM (eds.): *Reassessing Cold War Europe*, London – New York 2011, pp. 1-15, here p. 4. See also: OLAF MERTELSMANN, KAAREL PIIRIMÄE: Preface, in: IDEM (eds.): *The Baltic Sea Region and the Cold War*, Frankfurt a.M. 2012, pp. 7-11, here p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> The increasing scholarly interest in technology transfers and micro-level cooperation between East and West in the fields of export and trade is well represented by the various contributions in AUTIO-SARASMO/MIKLÓSSY (as in footnote 8). For a rich collection of case studies from Central and Eastern Europe that illustrate the broad variety of micro-level contacts triggered by the evolution of tourism into a mass phenomenon within the communist orbit and beyond, see: WŁODZIMIERZ BORODZIEJ, JERZY KOCHANOWSKI et al. (eds.): "Schleichwege". Inoffizielle Begegnungen sozialistischer Staatsbürger zwischen 1956 und 1989, Köln 2010. In his monograph on the history of black-market activities in the People's Republic of Poland, Kochanowski provides a deeper insight into the mechanisms that connected tourism to the chronic economic scarcity and the undergrowth of illegal and semi-legal distribution of goods: JERZY KOCHANOWSKI: *Jenseits der Planwirtschaft. Der "Schwarzmarkt" in Polen 1944-1989*, Göttingen 2013. For further analyses on the entangled evolution of consumption patterns in East and West and the impact of the increasing exposure to Western lifestyles and taste on socialist societies, see NATALYA CHERNYSHOVA: *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*, London – New York 2013; DAVID CROWLEY, SUSAN E. REID (eds.): *Pleasures in Socialism. Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc*, Evanston 2010; CATHLEEN M. GIUSTINO, CATHERINE J. PLUM et al. (eds.): *Socialist Escapes. Breaking Away from Ideology and Everyday Routine in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*, New York – Oxford 2013.

<sup>10</sup> For some examples of the few relevant publications, which almost exclusively focus on East-West interaction triggered by the human rights discourse in post-Helsinki Europe, see FRIEDERIKE KIND-KÓVACS, JESSIE LABOV (eds.): *Samizdat, Tamizdat & Beyond. Transnational Media during and after Socialism*, New York 2013; SARAH B. SNYDER: *Human Rights Activism and the End of the Cold War. A Transnational History of the Helsinki Network*, Cambridge 2011.

fact, uncontrollable interaction across the bloc border, however, still requires a lot of thorough investigation. Further research on individual case studies and comparative analyses are indispensable for the evolution of an “alternative” history of Cold War Europe.

Taking the recent methodological discourses in the field into account, the present essay addresses tourism across the Iron Curtain in the light of its economic and political repercussions especially for the communist orbit. The significance of the Finnish-Estonian ferry connection for the economy of the Estonian SSR, notably its rather shady side, are commonly known, although they so far have not been subject to much historical research.<sup>11</sup> Still today, the legendary *Viru* hotel in Tallinn, built by Finnish workers in the early 1970s in order to accommodate an increasing number of foreign tourists, is famed not only for its at that time luxurious restaurants, bars and cabaret, but also for having been a major hub for black-market transactions, illegal currency exchange, prostitution and crime.<sup>12</sup> The political side effects of the mass tourism developing across the Gulf of Finland, by contrast, are much less known.<sup>13</sup> For that reason, the essay will dedicate special attention to this aspect, drawing on a variety of sources. Among them are edited volumes of primary sources from Soviet archives, memoirs, newspapers and interviews conducted with former dissidents, but primarily, the essay is based on findings from the archives of Estonian exile organizations in Stockholm, which for half a century thoroughly collected all accessible information on developments in Soviet Estonia. The idea is to present an overall picture of the unintended conse-

<sup>11</sup> One of the reasons might be that the archives of the Estonian KGB, which could reveal very interesting insight especially in fields such as smuggling and the black market in Tallinn, are lost with the exception of some reports dating from the mid-1950s. However, hardly any study on Estonian post-war history and especially on the development of Soviet Tallinn as a tourist destination omits the topic of the local black market and the role played by foreign visitors as reliable suppliers. One example is ANNE GORSUCH: *All This is Your World. Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin*, Oxford 2011, which dedicates a whole chapter to the topic of Estonia as a Soviet “abroad”.

<sup>12</sup> For an informative review of facts and anecdotes surrounding the *Viru* hotel, supplemented with numerous illustrations, see: SAKARI NUPPONEN: *Viru hotell ja tema aeg* [The Viru Hotel and Its Time], Tallinn 2007.

<sup>13</sup> During the last two decades, Estonian journals such as *Akadeemia* and *Tuna* have sporadically published articles that touch upon the topic of contacts between Estonian dissidents and the West, not least via the ferry connection to Helsinki. However, these texts were either written by former dissident activists themselves or are popular history writings, such as the article series by JAAK PIHLAU: *Eesti demokraatlik põrandaalune ja kontaktid Läänega 1970-1985 I-III* [The Estonian Democratic Underground and Its Contacts to the West, 1970-1985, I-III], in: *Tuna* 7 (2004), 2, pp. 70-79; 3, pp. 88-98; 4, pp. 87-94. For a deeper and more comprehensive analysis, embedded in the context of the political consequences of increasing East-West interaction and micro-level contacts in the Baltic Sea Region as a whole with the onset of *détente*, see: LARS FREDRIK STÖCKER: *Bridging the Baltic Sea. Networks of Resistance and Opposition during the Cold War Era*, PhD thesis, European University Institute, Florence 2012.

quences of the ferry traffic between Tallinn and Helsinki that the Soviet authorities had to cope with. As a whole, they illustrate the paradox of *détente*, which, while it temporarily led to a certain stabilization in the field of international relations, contributed in the long run to undermining authoritarian rule and the control apparatus in socialist Europe.<sup>14</sup>

## 2 Finnish-Soviet *détente* – Estonia's Window to the West

The reactivation of passenger traffic between the capitals of Finland and the Estonian SSR at a time when East-West *détente* in Europe was only developing marked an unprecedented phenomenon, as all forms of interaction between the Soviet Union and the West so far had been highly centralized and channelled via Moscow or Leningrad. Moreover, as a part of the occupied Baltic territories, Estonia was considered a vulnerable transitional zone that had, unlike other parts of the Soviet Union, not been opened to foreign tourists in the first wave of de-Stalinization.<sup>15</sup> The shift in the Kremlin's Baltic policy thus marks a clear break with the Soviet leadership's earlier concerns regarding the western borderlands in the Cold War set-up of divided Europe. However, already from the late 1950s, after the collapse of organized partisan resistance to the occupying forces, Moscow's attitude towards the Soviet republic with the highest GDP per capita had been gradually changing. At an early stage, the Estonian SSR turned into a kind of Soviet "testing ground for new initiatives in economics and culture"<sup>16</sup>, which can be seen as being one of the reasons why the Soviet leadership authorized the opening up of Estonia's medieval capital Tallinn to the (after all, politically quite reliable) northern neighbour.

According to Anne Gorsuch, there was an additional layer of propagandistic motifs behind this ground-breaking decision. It was, Gorsuch claims, the comparably high living standards in the Estonian SSR and the distinctly Western features of Tallinn's Hanseatic Old Town that were supposed to sell the Soviet Union as a modern, prosperous and "European" society to a broad-

---

<sup>14</sup> This became especially obvious in the aftermath of the negotiations held in the framework of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, which triggered considerable oppositional and dissident activity throughout the communist orbit. In signing the Helsinki Final Act in August 1975, which endorsed fundamental human rights such as freedom of thought, the communist states made "a public commitment to respect precisely the processes that were eroding their own authority"; JOHN LEWIS GADDIS: *Grand Strategies in the Cold War*, in: MELVYN P. LEFFLER, ODD ARNE WESTAD (eds.): *The Cambridge History of the Cold War. Volume II: Conflicts and Crises*, Cambridge 2010, pp. 1-21, here pp. 18-19.

<sup>15</sup> GORSUCH (as in footnote 11), p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> DAVID J. SMITH: *Estonia. Independence and European Integration*, in: THOMAS LANE, ARTIS PABRIKS et al. (eds.): *The Baltic States. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania*, London – New York 2002, p. xxv.

er Western public. The display of a successful Sovietisation of the Baltic republic was thus at the same time part of a strategy that was supposed to foster the “ideological and economic appropriation and integration of recently acquired territories”.<sup>17</sup> However, it should not be forgotten that the gradual liberalization of travel between the blocs was a phenomenon that by the mid-1960s could be observed in many parts of socialist Europe. A steadily growing number of holiday resorts and historical cities behind the ‘Iron Curtain’ prepared for a rising influx of Western visitors, who, the socialist regimes hoped, would generate a considerable revenue for the national economies, especially as Western hard currencies tied to the international gold standard were in high demand. Launching Tallinn as a new tourist destination for predominantly Nordic visitors, even the Soviet leadership displayed a rather pragmatic approach to the co-existence of East and West, driven by the need to generate financial means for the domestic production of consumer goods, “propping up communist-party rule” by “raising living standards”.<sup>18</sup>

The Finnish-Soviet rapprochement in matters concerning the relations between Finland and the Estonian SSR, which reached a peak with the re-opening of the regular ferry traffic across the Gulf, would, of course, not have taken place without the repeated attempts of the Finnish President Urho Kekkonen to put pressure on Moscow regarding this question. Although the war and its aftermath had established a seemingly insurmountable frontier between Finland and Estonia, the Finns’ interest in maintaining relations with their neighbours, with whom they shared cultural and linguistic traits and a national anthem, had not diminished. During the interwar period, cultural and artistic contacts between Finland and Estonia had flourished and the transformation of the venerable University of Tartu into the first institution of higher education with Estonian as a language of instruction would have been unthinkable without the active commitment of Finnish scholars.<sup>19</sup> These bonds persisted up to the forced annexation of Estonia into the Soviet Union in June 1940 and found a continuation in the intense post-war dialogue between Finnish Estophiles, and Estonian intellectuals and politicians in Stockholm, the political and cultural centre of the Estonian exile community. Yet President Kekkonen was not alone with his conviction that the future of this Finnish-Estonian dialogue lay in the establishment of firm relations with the Estonian SSR and its political and cultural representatives.

A decisive step towards this goal was reached during Kekkonen’s first informal visit to Soviet Estonia in May 1964, when he delivered a much-noticed speech at the University of Tartu in his hosts’ native language. How-

<sup>17</sup> GORSUCH (as in footnote 11), pp. 13, 61.

<sup>18</sup> CATHLEEN M. GIUSTINO: Conclusion. Escapes and Other Border Crossings in Socialist Eastern Europe, in: GIUSTINO/PLUM (as in footnote 9), pp. 252-266, here p. 257.

<sup>19</sup> KRISTIAN GERNER, KLAS-GÖRAN KARLSSON: Nordens Medelhav. Östersjöområdet som historia, myt och projekt [The Mediterranean of the North. The Baltic Sea Region as History, Myth and Project], Stockholm 2002, p. 220.

ever, the Finnish side had to make certain concessions. One of the major concerns of the Soviet leadership was that the large and well-organized Estonian exile community in nearby Sweden would consider expanding its anti-communist activities to Finland in view of a gradual opening of Soviet Estonia towards its northern neighbour.<sup>20</sup> Thus, in line with a kind of informal agreement between Helsinki and Moscow, the official Finnish relations with Estonian exile politicians, scholars and writers, whose literary output so far had been published by Finnish publishing houses and in the national press<sup>21</sup>, cooled down remarkably. Kekkonen himself urged his country's political and intellectual elites to refrain from contacts with the anti-Soviet exile community, and also the press soon adopted a harsher tone in statements concerning Estonian émigrés.<sup>22</sup>

It was due to this specific mini-détente between Finland and the Estonian SSR that the Estonian ship *Vanemuine* could finally leave the harbour of Tallinn on a northbound trip on 8 July 1965, with a number of carefully selected cultural representatives of Soviet Estonia on-board, accompanied by an adequate number of KGB agents.<sup>23</sup> Already one day later *Wellamo*, sailing under the Finnish flag, started its trip in the opposite direction with two hundred Finnish tourists aboard ship.<sup>24</sup> By the end of the summer season, 19 000 passengers had crossed the Gulf of Finland as travellers on the two ferries.<sup>25</sup> Of course, the tourist exchange between the small Soviet republic and its Nordic neighbour was highly unbalanced. The Soviet border regime was strict and only a small number of citizens were allowed to visit Finland for a week-

---

<sup>20</sup> NUPPONEN (as in footnote 12), p. 14.

<sup>21</sup> SIRJE OLESK: Pagulased ja kodumaa. Kirjad Soomest [Émigrés and Homeland. Letters from Finland], in: *Tuna* 14 (2011), 2, pp. 129-140, here p. 131.

<sup>22</sup> Letter from Esmo Ridala to Arvo Horm, 31.03.1966, in: *Rahvusraamatukogu isikuarhiivid (RR)* [Personal Archives of the Estonian National Library], Tallinn, 37 f[ond] 3, u[nit] 37, not pag. (The cataloguing of the exile community's archival collections at the Estonian National Library in Tallinn is still in a provisional state and may thus be subject to future changes.)

<sup>23</sup> From the very beginning onwards, the passenger traffic between Helsinki and Tallinn was subject to strict surveillance on the part of the Estonian KGB; IMBI PAJU: Valel on pikad jäljed [Lies Have Long Legs], in: SOFI OKSANEN, IMBI PAJU (eds.): *Kõige taga oli hirm. Kuidas Eesti oma ajaloost ilma jäi* [Fear Was Behind Everything. How Estonia Lost Its History], Tallinn 2010, pp. 176-196, here p. 192. Chaperoning KGB agents were an integral element of Soviet tourism to the capitalist West, used as a safeguard against the dangers of defection, illegal small-scale trade and other forms of misbehaviour among the tour group members. Thus, they were commonly referred to as "nannies"; GORSUCH (as in footnote 11), p. 24.

<sup>24</sup> Up to 1967, the ferry service across the Gulf of Finland was handled by both Soviet and Finnish ships. However, as the business turned out to be unprofitable for the Finnish companies, passengers between Helsinki and Tallinn soon travelled on-board ferries sailing under the Soviet flag only; NUPPONEN (as in footnote 12), p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> TAMMER (as in footnote 6), pp. 99-100.

end or to travel further west in order to meet up with relatives in Sweden.<sup>26</sup> Initially, short trips to Helsinki were mainly organized by the state, for example by trade unions, whose leadership carefully selected the appropriate candidates for the tour group.<sup>27</sup> An additional obstacle for Estonians to visit the non-communist neighbour country was the financial cost. In the late 1960s, the fee for applying for a foreign-travel passport alone amounted up to forty roubles, which equalled half a month's salary of a young scholar or a whole month's old-age pension in Soviet Estonia.<sup>28</sup> In 1970, the fee increased ten-fold up to four hundred roubles<sup>29</sup>, and even after the signing of the Helsinki Final Act in 1975, Estonian exile activists reported a large variety of deliberate bureaucratic attempts to sabotage visa applications of Soviet Estonian citizens and arbitrary denials to board the ferry in Tallinn.<sup>30</sup>

However, although only a tiny minority among the inhabitants of Soviet Estonia could directly profit from the opening up to the non-communist world, the effect of the restoration of the traffic connection across the Gulf of Finland on perceptions of the West in the north of the Estonian SSR was tremendous. The quickly rising number of Western, mostly Finnish, visitors to

<sup>26</sup> In the second half of the 1960s, the total number of Estonians and Latvians with permission to visit relatives in Sweden did not exceed the number of 500 persons per year; ANDRES KÜNG: *Estland – en studie i imperialism* [Estonia – A Study in Imperialism], Stockholm 1971, p. 12. The number of Soviet Estonians that could travel to Helsinki was larger – in 1970 the number amounted to 1700; ROMUALD J. MISIUNAS, REIN TAA-GEPERA: *Balti sõlteaastad, 1940-1990* [The Baltic Years of Dependence, 1940-1990], Tallinn 1997, p. 224.

<sup>27</sup> *Nachrichten aus dem Baltikum* (1967), 38, p. 35 (*Nachrichten aus dem Baltikum*, first published in 1957, was a German-language news bulletin edited and disseminated by the Stockholm-based Estonian Information Centre together with the Estonian National Council and the Latvian Information Centre in Scandinavia. The driving force behind a number of similar newsletters published in various Western European languages throughout the Cold War was the Estonian Information Centre, founded in 1946 as an exile initiative whose major task it was to fight Soviet propaganda about life in the occupied Baltic states and to collect uncensored information about the development behind the Iron Curtain). In Khrushchev's Soviet Union, travelling to the West was a privilege mainly reserved for "specialized tourist groups", i.e. the elites of the worlds of science and culture and the representatives of elite professions that underlined the technical progress achieved since the early post-war period. Besides their potential to represent an advantageous image of life in the Soviet Union, the tour members' political past was a crucial criterion that decided the approval of the planned trip abroad; GORSUCH (as in footnote 11), pp. 109-111.

<sup>28</sup> Speech entitled "Märkmeid tänapäeva Eesti elust-olust" [Comments on Life and Conditions in Estonia Today], given by Adelaide Lemberg at the annual assembly of the Estonian National Council in Stockholm, 2.12.1967, in: *Eesti Riigiarhiiv (ERA)* [State Archives of Estonia], Tallinn, f. 5008, r[egister] 1, u. 11, p. 143.

<sup>29</sup> Information sheet of the Estonian National Council's steering committee, 20.10.1970, in: RR, f. 3, u. 83.

<sup>30</sup> Press information of the Estonian National Council, 4.07.1977, in: ERA, f. 1608, r. 2, u. 935, p. 66.

the Estonian capital, together with the possibility of receiving Finnish television via special equipment, which astonishingly enough could be legally purchased and installed on the roofs<sup>31</sup>, almost literally brought the capitalist world to the western outpost of the Soviet Empire. This doubtlessly added to the peculiarity of the Estonian SSR in the Soviet context, manifested in the catchwords of the "Soviet abroad" or "our West", with which inhabitants of other Soviet republics expressed the unique and "un-Soviet" character of the tiny republic.<sup>32</sup>

### 3 The Flipside of Mass Tourism: Finnish Consumer Goods on Tallinn's Black Market

Leisure trips from Finland to Estonia, by contrast, quickly reached a mass scale and Finns soon became a common sight on the streets of Tallinn, as the Soviet Estonian radio was already reporting in 1969.<sup>33</sup> Among the masses of Finnish visitors were also skilled workers and professionals involved in Finnish-Soviet joint projects, such as the construction of the *Viru* hotel vis-à-vis the ancient entrance gate to the Old Town. During the construction process of Tallinn's new status symbol as a cosmopolitan city, which started in 1969 and lasted until 1972, the Soviet Estonian capital hosted up to four hundred Finnish construction workers and office employees at a time. As their daily allowances were paid in roubles, which could only be spent there, they became frequent visitors of the fanciest restaurants and bars in town, which certainly explains the large number of marriages with local Estonian and Russian women that resulted from the Finnish-Soviet cooperation.<sup>34</sup>

The majority of Finns travelling to Estonia, however, were short-term visitors who stayed a day or two, spending the night either on the ferry or in the

---

<sup>31</sup> In the second half of the 1950s, the Soviet authorities agreed on limiting the costly jamming procedures for foreign radio transmissions broadcasted in one of the Soviet Union's official languages. With the exclusion of Finnish broadcasts from the jamming targets, the Soviet regime had opened a gateway for the developing Finnish television broadcasts into the Soviet orbit. According to Finnish sources, Finnish television was received along the northern coast of the Estonian SSR as early as in 1957; SIMO MIKKONEN: Moskaus Medienpolitik im sowjetischen Baltikum, in: *Forschungen zur baltischen Geschichte* 5 (2010), pp. 184-204, here pp. 191, 199.

<sup>32</sup> DAVID KIRBY: *The Baltic World 1772-1993. Europe's Northern Periphery in an Age of Change*, London 1995, p. 415; GORSUCH (as in footnote 11), pp. 50, 62. Even in the Soviet context, Tallinn thus maintained the exceptional status it had already attained in the days of the Tsarist Empire, when it was labelled the "real Europe on Russian soil" or "Russian Germany" by visitors from the Russian heartland; KARSTEN BRÜGGEMANN: *Einleitende Überlegungen zu einer Geschichte des Tourismus im Ostseeraum am Beispiel der russischen Revalreise in der ersten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, in: *Nordost-Archiv N.F.* 20 (2011), pp. 9-33, here p. 10.

<sup>33</sup> Transcript of a Soviet Estonian radio emission, issued by the Estonian Information Centre in Stockholm, 19.04.1969, in: RR, f. 3, u. 92, not pag.

<sup>34</sup> NUPPONEN (as in footnote 12), pp. 24, 26.

hotels assigned to foreign visitors: the relatively small Hotel *Tallinn* at the foot of Cathedral Hill and, later, as the number of visitors rose, the above-mentioned *Viru* hotel. As Hanna Kuusi points out, a major incentive for Finns to visit Tallinn was the “unique Soviet tourism experience” that a trip to the nearby Soviet Estonian capital offered. It featured “cultural highlights such as ballet and art, fancy three-course dinners and impulsive purchases of consumer durables”, which for most Finnish tourists from the lower classes were unaffordable in their home country.<sup>35</sup> However, there is little doubt that a considerable percentage of the Finnish passengers who boarded the “White Ship” mainly intended to profit from the lower alcohol prices, a factor which still today regularly fills the southbound ferries in the harbours of Helsinki with thousands of visitors. Thus, evoking the Swedish and Finnish image of Estonia as a source for cheap liquor in the 1920s and 1930s, the ferry between Helsinki and Tallinn soon earned the name “vodka express”.<sup>36</sup> But the continuously rising number of Western visitors, and, thus, of “vodka tourists”, in the capital of the Estonian SSR did not only generate a reliable source of hard currency. For a government that based domestic stability on the highest possible degree of state control and surveillance, even a controlled opening of the country to foreigners on a mass scale soon challenged the capacities of the secret police<sup>37</sup>, as the following newspaper article from the year 1980 illustrates:

“A regular ferry brings hundreds of Finnish tourists over every weekend. Most come on vodka binges and spend two days in perpetual intoxication in the elegant Viru hotel. They sell their jeans, shirts and anything else they bring to finance their drinking, which goes on until they are rounded up by the police on Sunday evening and dumped back on the boat home.”<sup>38</sup>

Accordingly, internal reports of the KGB frequently complained about cases of “hooliganism”, the repeated violation of visa restrictions, illegal trips outside the security zone of seventeen kilometres around the city centre of Tallinn, overnight stays at places other than the officially designated hotels and the deliberate absence from the activities offered by Inturist, the official Soviet travel agency.<sup>39</sup> The most lasting impact on life in the Estonian capital, however, was not the lack of discipline among some segments of the numer-

<sup>35</sup> HANNA KUUSI: Accidental Traders – Finnish Tourists in the Soviet Union in the 1950s-1970s, in: VISA HEINONEN, MATTI PELTONEN (eds.): Finnish Consumption. An Emerging Consumer Society between East and West, Helsinki 2013, pp. 206-227, here p. 225.

<sup>36</sup> KÜNG, Estland (as in footnote 26), p. 13.

<sup>37</sup> INDREK JÜRJO: Pagulus ja Nõukogude Eesti. Vaateid KGB, EKP ja VEKSA arhiividokumentide põhjal [The Exile and Soviet Estonia. Hypotheses on the Basis of Archival Documents of the KGB, EKP and VEKSA], Tallinn 1996, p. 191.

<sup>38</sup> Estonian diary, in: The Times from 30.05.1980.

<sup>39</sup> INDREK JÜRJO: Soome turistid Tallinnas Gorbatšovi kuiva seaduse aastail [Finnish Tourists in Tallinn during the Years of the Gorbachev Prohibition], in: Tuna 5 (2002), 4, pp. 81-85, here p. 82.

ous groups of visiting Finns. It was the development of random illegal small-scale trading between tourists and locals into a substantial branch of Tallinn's chronic economy of scarcity that turned the "White Ship" into a distinctive element of Estonia's post-war history.

By the mid-1960s, when foreign tourism to Soviet Estonia began to develop into a mass phenomenon, life in the occupied Baltic republics had undergone a profound transformation. After the gloomy years of post-war Stalinism and forced Sovietization, which many Balts would remember as an era of terror and fear of imminent deportation or arrest, a certain degree of careful optimism could be observed in the course of the de-Stalinization process. The changes introduced by Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev went hand in hand with a considerable improvement in living standards. The satisfaction of the growing consumer needs among the population thus turned into increasingly urgent demand, even in Soviet Estonia. The gradual adoption of Western capitalist mass culture and consumption patterns which leaked through the "Iron Curtain" via Western television, newspapers and magazines and, finally, even the development of tourism across the blocs, was largely tolerated by the Communist Party leaders, both in the Soviet Union and in the satellite belt.<sup>40</sup> After all, the poor living standards and the economy of scarcity, under which large segments of the population in socialist Europe had suffered during the immediate post-war years, had been held responsible by the Kremlin for the 1956 uprisings in both Poland and Hungary.<sup>41</sup> The re-opening of the ferry connection between capitalist Finland and the Estonian SSR thus coincided with the onset of the era of a Soviet "consumer boom"<sup>42</sup>, which was most certainly additionally fuelled by the Estonians' "increasing exposure to Westerners and their tastes, ideas, and habits".<sup>43</sup> Yet there was a huge gap between the consumer needs of the population and the ability of the planned economic system to satisfy the increasingly sophisticated demands. Thus, the black market soon flourished and the Western tourist became a key agent in the intricate networks that regulated the illegal flow and distribution of goods across the "Iron Curtain".

In the Soviet Union, it was mainly the development of the touristic infrastructure connecting the vast country with the non-communist world that determined the major hubs of black-market activities. Thus, not only Moscow and Leningrad, the entrance gates for the majority of international visitors to the Soviet Union, became known as places where coveted Western products could be obtained; also seemingly peripheral places such as the Ukrainian city Lviv developed a similar reputation, as its railway station was a major stop for all traffic connecting the satellite states to the Balkans, Turkey and the

---

<sup>40</sup> GIUSTINO (as in footnote 18), p. 257.

<sup>41</sup> DAVID CROWLEY, SUSAN E. REID: Introduction: Pleasures in Socialism?, in: IDEM (as in footnote 9), pp. 3-51, here p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> CHERNYSHOVA (as in footnote 9), p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> GIUSTINO (as in footnote 18), p. 257.

Near East.<sup>44</sup> With the opening of the Estonian SSR to its capitalist Nordic neighbour state, even the harbour of Tallinn turned into a major gateway for the influx of Western consumer goods. As early as in 1967, a major news bulletin by the Estonian exile community in Stockholm reported on visitors from Finland and Sweden who brought with them basic, but barely accessible commodities such as shoes, woollen cloth and tools to Soviet Estonia.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, from the early days of Western mass tourism to Estonia, high-quality nylon stockings were in great demand among the women of Tallinn. They soon turned into a standard gift for chambermaids or, as can be discerned from the reports of homecoming Finnish tourists that Kuusi analysed, as an icebreaker for those who were interested in more intimate contacts with local girls.<sup>46</sup>

In the course of the 1970s, in line with the constantly rising number of Western visitors in Tallinn, the smuggling and trading of Western consumer goods developed into an increasingly well-organized business and became a characteristic element of life in the Estonian capital. The semi-legal and illegal activities centred around the newly opened *Viru* hotel, which, as the only hotel for foreign visitors and a major place of leisure and nightlife entertainment, was prominently located at the interface of the Old Town, the harbour and the modern city centre.<sup>47</sup> The authorities were of course aware of these undesirable side effects. Soon, the newspapers started to report on the hotel and its surroundings as “dangerous places of bourgeois decadence” that attracted “speculators and ‘parasites’”.<sup>48</sup> In order to curb the undergrowth of black-market structures that had developed in the wake of the mass influx of Western tourists, the Kremlin launched official campaigns against the speculation in goods in the late 1970s.<sup>49</sup> Yet legal sanctions and the public condemnation of illegal economic interaction with foreigners were not sufficient to

<sup>44</sup> KOCHANOWSKI (as in footnote 9), p. 412.

<sup>45</sup> Nachrichten aus dem Baltikum (1967), 38, p. 34.

<sup>46</sup> Accordingly, the Soviet customs officers were, as Finnish tourists recalled, especially eager to count the pairs of nylon stockings in the luggage of incoming visitors; KUUSI (as in footnote 35), pp. 206, 213.

<sup>47</sup> The *Viru* hotel and the unofficial and illegal transactions carried out in its bars and restaurants entered the local folklore at a time when Estonia still formed part of the Soviet Union. In one of its most famous songs, dating from the second half of the 1980s, the Estonian band *Kuldne Trio* openly mocked the obsession with Western brands and consumer goods that held the inhabitants of Tallinn in a firm grip and the black-market trading that had developed in the surroundings of the *Viru* hotel, supplying the population with Coca Cola flavoured chewing gum, Seiko watches and Western winter boots: “The businessman’s paradise is behind the corner of the Viru hotel, there you get striped socks, the code word is ‘carramba’, there you get chequered trousers, the drink you get is *tarhun* [a carbonated Georgian soft drink]”; lyrics of the song *Viru nurga taga* (Behind the Corner of the Viru Hotel).

<sup>48</sup> GORSUCH (as in footnote 11), p. 69.

<sup>49</sup> CHERNYSHOVA (as in footnote 9), p. 54.

halt the constantly growing desire for consumerism that developed among the Soviet population.

In spite of the risks that black-market trading and illegal currency exchange implied for both the tourists and the local inhabitants involved, the phenomenon became “very common on a small scale”.<sup>50</sup> Selling a pair of jeans for black-market prices was a convenient way for a tourist to make some *pimeät ruplat* [dark roubles], as they were called by the Finnish visitors, which could be spent on liquor, dinners or souvenirs in Tallinn.<sup>51</sup> The range of items in favour was broad and the Finns quickly became an important factor for the compensation of the chronic shortages that characterized life in the Soviet Union. Popular gifts from Finland always included, of course, non-communist newspapers<sup>52</sup>, but articles for daily use, clothes and luxury goods topped the list. As time went by, the market became considerably diversified. By the 1980s, among the most popular illegally and semi-legally imported goods from Finland counted not only blue jeans, nylon shirts and stockings, but also items as diverse as

“ball point pens, bubble gum, western cigarettes, western alcohol, coffee, Adidas gear, caps with any logo, fashionable clothes, plastic bags featuring advertisements, condoms, e-cassettes, Lada spark plugs, windscreen wipers, videocassettes, pornography, medical syringes, vegetable seeds and electronics”.<sup>53</sup>

Taking into account that the number of Western tourists visiting Tallinn amounted to 100 000 per year in the mid-1980s<sup>54</sup>, it becomes clear that the influx of Western consumer goods on a larger scale to a still relatively provincial city did not leave the local population unaffected. However, it is not an easy task to assess the role played by tourism and the individual visitors. By the early 1980s, black-market trading was an integral part of life in the Soviet Union as a whole and it is estimated that one third of all consumer goods purchased were bought via semi-legal and illegal channels.<sup>55</sup> This also included, of course, a whole range of coveted Western products and imported luxury goods. It is, however, as Jerzy Kochanowski points out, hard to estimate to what degree Western consumer goods were smuggled by Soviet citizens or even legally imported by sailors, sportsmen and artists – the privileged cast of Soviet travellers – and how much was illegally distributed by tourists.<sup>56</sup>

Nevertheless, it is indisputable that the opening up of Tallinn to capitalist Finland had a discernable and long-lasting impact on local consumption patterns. As Kari Alenius points out, the development of a burgeoning black

<sup>50</sup> KUUSI (as in footnote 35), p. 207.

<sup>51</sup> JÜRJO, Soome turistid (as in footnote 39), p. 83.

<sup>52</sup> TAUNO TIUSANEN: Külm sõda, Soome ja Eesti [The Cold War, Finland and Estonia], in: OKSANEN/PAJU (as in footnote 23), pp. 232-242, here p. 235.

<sup>53</sup> KUUSI (as in footnote 35), p. 218.

<sup>54</sup> JÜRJO, Soome turistid (as in footnote 39), p. 83.

<sup>55</sup> CHERNYSHOVA (as in footnote 9), p. 94.

<sup>56</sup> KOCHANOWSKI (as in footnote 9), pp. 15-16.

market with its access to the goods brought in on the “White Ships” was unmistakably reflected by the clothing and taste of Tallinn’s inhabitants.<sup>57</sup> The Estonian journalist Enno Tammer goes even further in reassessing the repercussions of the unintended economic side effects of the Finnish connection for Soviet Estonia. It was on the black market, he claims, that “our first capitalists” were raised.<sup>58</sup> This assessment is in line with the claim postulated by Marina Kaas and Kersti Kraas, who point out that it was at the *Viru* hotel, the meeting place of Western tourists, that members of the local party *nomenklatura*, common workers as well as the more dubious elements among Tallinn’s population, learned the basic rules of buying and selling to become independent Estonia’s future entrepreneurs.<sup>59</sup> This is certainly a reference to those who became commonly known as the *Viru ärikad* (Viru businessmen), at the time known to be well-dressed traders who mainly dealt in imported goods. Some of them came to play an important role in the development of private business structures as soon as the Soviet leadership under Mikhail Gorbachev allowed for the creation of de facto private small-scale enterprises in the late *perestroika* period.<sup>60</sup>

#### 4 Spies, Couriers and the KGB: A Political History of the “White Ship”

The black market and illegal small-scale trading was an experience shared by many Finns who visited Tallinn during the Soviet era and locals living in the Soviet Estonian capital at the time. However, there was also a less-known, hidden aspect to the “White Ship”: an Estonian newspaper recalled it as having been the vessel of KGB revelries, spies and couriers.<sup>61</sup> Without doubt, a regularly running ferry between the Soviet Union and a non-communist

<sup>57</sup> KARI ALENUS: The Cultural Relations between The Baltic Countries and Finland, in: KALERVO HOVI (ed.): Relations between the Nordic Countries and the Baltic Nations in the XX Century, Turku 1998, pp. 128-187, here p. 178.

<sup>58</sup> TAMMER (as in footnote 6), p. 100. The opportunities the relatively few Estonians who could go on leisure trips to Finland had of gaining similar experiences as “accidental traders”, as Kuusi refers to the Finnish tourists involved in black-market activities in Tallinn, were of course much more limited, not least due to the incomparably lower interest in Soviet goods in Finland. One of the few items that could always be easily sold was Estonian liquor. Among the collection of interviews in Tammer’s book on travelling during the Soviet era, a recurring issue is the so-called *viinaraha* [vodka money] earned in Helsinki on smuggled vodka, which allowed Estonian visitors to buy consumer goods on the spot; *ibidem*, p. 378. These, in turn, could be profitably resold back home in Estonia. As GORSUCH (as in footnote 11), p. 188, points out, a “few hundred well-spent rubles in Finland could be worth a few thousand rubles in resale at home”.

<sup>59</sup> KAAS/KRAAS (as in footnote 5), p. 16.

<sup>60</sup> NUPPONEN (as in footnote 12), pp. 116-119.

<sup>61</sup> Valge laevaga vabasse maailma [On the White Ship towards the Free World], in: SL Õhtuleht from 27.12.2000.

neighbour state was under close surveillance of the KGB, not only for the purpose of monitoring its passengers, but also due to the possibility of using the anonymous tourism traffic as a smokescreen for more clandestine operations of the Soviet intelligence service.<sup>62</sup> It is known, for example, that the Swedish and Finnish secret services kept a close eye on the Soviet ferries and that passengers staying overnight on-board the ships in the port of Helsinki repeatedly reported on peculiar behaviour among some of their fellow passengers. In 1987, a Finnish newspaper revealed that several persons had witnessed groups of male passengers who had left *Georg Ots* for a morning run and re-entered the ship in a different constellation: at times the returning groups were smaller than those that had earlier crossed the gangway, while others had obviously been joined by additional runners.<sup>63</sup> Yet the extent to which the route across the Gulf of Finland was used for secret KGB operations leaves plenty of room for speculation. Apart from a handful of reports dating from the mid-1950s there are almost no KGB documents to be found in the Estonian archives, which makes any well-founded research on the topic virtually impossible. Similarly clandestine operations conducted by the KGB's adversaries in the Cold War game, by contrast, are a little easier to reconstruct, at least those in which anti-Soviet Estonian exile activists were involved. The rich archival documentation left behind by émigré organizations in Sweden allows for a first assessment of the aims, strategies and outcome of their attempts to instrumentalize the "White Ship" and mass tourism to Soviet Estonia for their own purposes.

Already from the second half of the 1950s, when the communist orbit was gradually lessening the restrictions of the border regime under the impact of de-Stalinization, Western intelligence services and Baltic émigrés alike were closely scrutinizing the evolution of legal channels between the blocs, first and foremost tourism.<sup>64</sup> For the Estonian exile community, which consisted of the more than 50 000 war refugees scattered mainly in North America and Sweden, the Soviet Union's gradual opening to the West marked the end of more than a decade of almost complete isolation from the old home country. From early on, there were attempts to make use of the loopholes that appeared in the "Iron Curtain". In 1959, the Estonian KGB reported on a group of émigrés in Stockholm who apparently had tried to establish contact with members of visiting Soviet Estonian delegations and Finns about to travel to the Estonian SSR. Their aim had obviously been to circumvent the strict Soviet postal censorship by finding couriers willing to pass messages to friends

---

<sup>62</sup> JÜRJO, Pagulus ja Nõukogude Eesti (as in footnote 37), p. 192.

<sup>63</sup> Valge laevaga vabasse maailma (as in footnote 61).

<sup>64</sup> INDREK JÜRJO: Operations of Western Intelligence Services and Estonian Refugees in Post-War Estonia and the Tactics of KGB Counterintelligence, in: ARVYDAS ANUŠAUSKAS (ed.): *The Anti-Soviet Resistance in the Baltic States*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., Vilnius 2006, pp. 242-271, here p. 265.

and relatives in Estonia.<sup>65</sup> However, it was first with the re-establishment of the ferry connection between Helsinki and Tallinn as well as the development of mass tourism to the Estonian SSR that the opportunities of uncontrolled interaction between exile and homeland could develop on a larger scale. The exile circles in Stockholm soon recognized the potential of the changed circumstances. The ferries, as Arvo Horm, one of the leading representatives of the Estonian political exile in Sweden, stated as early as August 1965, “made it practically possible to send materials, informations [sic!], tourists, observers, etc., via this route”.<sup>66</sup> Aksel Mark, another prominent exile politician from Stockholm, confirmed the significance of the ferry connection, as it enabled “politically interested and engaged people” to melt into the masses of visitors and, thus, to surmount the obstacles imposed by the secret police”.<sup>67</sup>

In the mid-1960s, the Estonian exile community was undergoing a generational shift that went hand in hand with a major turn in exile politics. The majority of émigrés, especially in North America, preferred to maintain a highly isolationist stance, which was rooted in a prevalent fear of KGB infiltration and the refusal to implicitly recognize the Soviet occupation by applying for a visa at a Soviet embassy. In nearby Sweden, however, the understanding for the need to re-establish communication with the home country was more wide-spread, especially among the younger generation. Many second generation exiles even accepted the cooperation with the Society for the Development of Cultural Ties with Estonians Abroad (*Väliseestlastega Kultuurisidemete Arendamise Ühing*, VEKSA). The KGB-controlled institution had been founded by the Soviet Estonian authorities in order to develop cultural relations especially with the younger, less fervently anti-Soviet cohorts among the exile community.<sup>68</sup> A growing number of younger exile activists without personal memories from the years of the first Soviet occupation considered VEKSA as a necessary evil and, at the same time, the “weak point of the Soviet system”<sup>69</sup>, which could be used in order to re-establish informal ties between exile and homeland. Moreover, it was due to the growing tourism sector of Soviet Estonia that exile activists, travelling individually or as members of Finnish tour groups, could gain access to uncensored information about the political, economic and social development in Estonia to a much

<sup>65</sup> Report of Major Vertman, First Department of the Soviet Estonian KGB, 14.03.1959, reproduced in: JÜRJO, *Pagulus ja Nõukogude Eesti* (as in footnote 37), p. 312.

<sup>66</sup> Report by Arvo Horm entitled “World Congress for Peace, National Independence and General Disarmament, Helsinki, July 10-15, 1965”, August 1965, in: ERA, f. 5010, r. 1, u. 93, not pag.

<sup>67</sup> Press information of the Estonian National Council, 6.11.1975, in: ERA, f. 5008, r. 1, u. 16, p. 61.

<sup>68</sup> VEKSA was founded in 1960 as the Commission and later renamed as the Society for the Development of Cultural Ties with Estonians Abroad; JÜRJO, *Pagulus ja Nõukogude Eesti* (as in footnote 37), pp. 230, 237.

<sup>69</sup> HELLAR GRABBI: *Seitse retke Isamaale* [Seven Trips to the Fatherland], Tartu 2010, p. 25.

larger degree than before. The journalist Andres Küng, for example, a second generation émigré from Sweden, travelled twice to the Estonian SSR in 1970 in order to collect as much uncensored source material and conduct as many interviews as possible. Back in Sweden, he wrote down his observations and experiences in a number of anti-Soviet publications that became popular both in Sweden and abroad, in which he sharply attacked the Soviet "colonial" regime in the Baltic republics.<sup>70</sup>

As a direct result of the growing number of exile Estonians travelling on the "White Ship" from Helsinki to Tallinn, the influx of illegally imported literature considerably increased. According to the Soviet reason of state, the range of banned printings considered harmful to the Soviet order both politically and economically ranged from bibles and religious writings to non-communist newspapers and magazines.<sup>71</sup> In the early days of mass tourism across the Gulf of Finland, it was especially bibles published in exile in a new Estonian translation that were smuggled into the Soviet Union both by visiting exile Estonians and elderly Soviet citizens on their way back from family visits to Sweden.<sup>72</sup> Even Finnish and, to a lesser extent, Swedish religious organizations, first and foremost Baptists, frequently used the ferries and the Soviet Estonian loophole for the illegal dissemination of religious publications destined for the Soviet Union. In 1982 alone, the customs officers in the harbour of Tallinn confiscated more than 10 000 Christian writings from the luggage of incoming tourists.<sup>73</sup> Yet, the smuggling of printed material on the passenger ferries was not limited to religious books alone. As a KGB official reported to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Estonian SSR in 1984, both Estonian exiles and Western secret service agents based in Finland actively recruited couriers among the numerous Finnish visitors in order to smuggle both religious and decidedly anti-communist literature into the country.<sup>74</sup> At that point, Estonian exile activists from Stockholm had already established a deposit in Helsinki, filled with forbidden literature designated for Soviet Estonia, which was regularly transferred across the border by reliable "Finnish friends".<sup>75</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> ANDRES KÜNG: Saatusi ja saavutusi. *Baltikum tänapäeval* [Fate and Achievements. The Baltics Today], Lund 1973, p. 5.

<sup>71</sup> KUUSI (as in footnote 35), p. 212.

<sup>72</sup> KÜNG, Saatusi ja saavutusi (as in footnote 70), p. 120.

<sup>73</sup> RIHO SAARD: "Rõõmustame selle üle ...". Usulise ja teoloogilise kirjanduse saatmine Soomest Eestisse 1950.-1980. aastatel ["Let's Rejoice About This ...". Sending Religious and Theological Literature from Finland to Estonia Between the 1950s and the 1980s], in: *Akadeemia* 16 (2004), 4, pp. 844-869, here p. 851.

<sup>74</sup> JÜRJO, Soome turistid (as in footnote 39), p. 81.

<sup>75</sup> Circular letter from the Relief Centre for Estonian Prisoners of Conscience, based in Stockholm, to the support groups and godfathers of Estonian political prisoners, 16.12.1986, in: *Eesti Riigiarhiivi Filiaal (ERAF)* [State Archives of Estonia], Tallinn, f. 9608, r. 1, u. 21, p. 112.

The most politically subversive episode in the history of Cold War tourism between Finland and the Estonian SSR, however, was the developing courier traffic that ensured a reliable communication between émigrés in Stockholm and the Soviet Estonian dissident movement. These clandestine forms of communication across the Gulf of Finland originally grew out of the earlier networks that Finnish Baptists had established with their fellow brethren in the Soviet Union. Already by the early 1970s Tallinn had developed into an important hub for their Soviet courier traffic and an attractive alternative to the route via the Finnish-Soviet land border for the illegal import of religious writings. Most probably, it was one of the Baptists' Estonian liaisons who first came up with the idea of using these smuggling channels even for political purposes.<sup>76</sup> As any verifiable information about the local dissident underground in the Soviet Baltic republics was still lacking in the West in the early 1970s, it was the dissidents themselves who took the initiative to use the "White Ship" for subversive activities.

When a small group of Estonian dissidents decided to turn to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kurt Waldheim, together with an open appeal for the "de-colonization" of Estonia and the full restoration of independence in autumn 1972, one of the memorandum's initiators turned to the Finnish Baptists' contact in Tallinn. The channel via Russian dissidents, who closely cooperated with Moscow-based Western journalists and diplomats that assisted in smuggling samizdat writings and open appeals addressed to Western governments and international organizations out of the country, had failed. The reason behind that was, as a former Estonian dissident claimed, the outspokenly separatist and anti-Russian demands of the document.<sup>77</sup> Although any airtight chain of evidence is lacking, it seems as if the open appeal and the attached letter drafted by the Estonian dissidents reached the exile circles in Stockholm via the ferry to Helsinki, most probably smuggled on microfilm by a Finnish tourist.<sup>78</sup> The publication of the memorandum in the West by exile activists and the broadcasting of its content back to the Soviet Union via Western radio convinced the dissidents of the potential of smuggling oppositional writings out of the country via the Finnish connection.<sup>79</sup> In spite of the

<sup>76</sup> PIHLAU (as in footnote 13), p. 76.

<sup>77</sup> MAIT RAUN: Eesti Demokraatlik Liikumine ja Eesti Rahvusrinne. Dokumenteeritud tagasisaade I [The Estonian Democratic Movement and the Estonian National Front. A Documented Review I], in: *Akadeemia* 14 (2002), 6, pp. 1131-1155, here p. 1155.

<sup>78</sup> Kiri Kurt Waldheimile [A Letter to Kurt Waldheim], in: *Eesti Päevaleht* from 19.12.2012; RAUN (as in footnote 77), p. 1155.

<sup>79</sup> A follow-up letter dated 23.12.1974 and addressed to Waldheim reached Stockholm via equally clandestine channels in early 1975; in it, the dissidents stated: "As we have heard by radio, our appeal, dated 24<sup>th</sup> October 1972, has finally reached the United Nations Organization, in spite of considerable delay"; *Newsletter from behind the Iron Curtain* (1975), 473, p. 8. The *Newsletter from behind the Iron Curtain* was one of the first news bulletins on the development in Central and Eastern Europe that the Estonian

fact that the Baptists were often reluctant to risk their own channels for an involvement in dissident politics<sup>80</sup>, and although only a very small percentage of Finnish tourists dared to participate in the subversive activities<sup>81</sup>, both groups came to play a key role in the illegal transfer of Estonian samizdat to the West in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The foundation of the Relief Centre for Estonian Prisoners of Conscience in Stockholm in 1978, initiated by the retired businessman and first generation émigré Ants Kippar, paved the way for the development of a similar courier traffic in the opposite direction, directly linking Sweden to Soviet Estonia via the waterways across the Gulf of Finland. Initially, the main idea behind the Relief Centre had been the supply of material and financial support for the Estonian dissident activists who had been imprisoned and convicted for their involvement in the drafting of the memorandum to the United Nations, as well as for their wives and children. However, with Kippar's decision to send couriers, whose task it was to establish contacts with the families of imprisoned dissidents and, via them, the still active members of the underground opposition movement<sup>82</sup>, to Estonia, the scheduled tasks of the Relief Centre radically changed. Initially established as a coordination centre of humanitarian aid, the exile initiative soon developed into the major Western cooperation partner of the dissident movement in Soviet Estonia. Although it soon became possible to make direct phone calls from Stockholm to Tallinn, which Kippar and his dissident contacts, in spite of the obvious risks, at times used for the coordination of basic issues<sup>83</sup>, a reliable communication channel still required couriers, who in general formed the "essential link" bridging the gap between Soviet dissidents and the outside world.<sup>84</sup>

According to the preserved documentation on the dissident trials of the early 1980s<sup>85</sup> and the statements of several former Estonian dissidents, Kippar maintained regular contact with two Finnish couriers in Turku who frequently

---

Information Centre in Stockholm published in order to reach out to a Western public; the first edition appeared as early as in 1947.

<sup>80</sup> Interview conducted by the author with former dissident Heiki Ahonen, Tallinn, 21.09.2011.

<sup>81</sup> SIRJE ENDRE, MART LAAR, URMAS OTT: *Teine Eesti: Eesti iseseisvuse taassünd 1986-1991* [The Second Estonia: The Rebirth of Estonia's Independence, 1986-1991], 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Tallinn 2000, p. 92.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with Heiki Ahonen (as in footnote 80).

<sup>83</sup> Esten des "Gesprächs mit dem Westen" angeklagt, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* from 7.01.1981.

<sup>84</sup> ROBERT VAN VOREN: *On Dissidents and Madness. From the Soviet Union of Leonid Brezhnev to the "Soviet Union" of Vladimir Putin*, Amsterdam – New York 2009, p. 23.

<sup>85</sup> For a comprehensive documentation of the interrogations, indictments and verdicts, see the source edition ARVO PESTI (ed.): *Dissidentlik liikumine Eestis aastatel 1972-1987. Dokumentide kogumik* [The Dissident Movement in Estonia from 1972 to 1987. A Collection of Documents], Tallinn 2009.

travelled to Estonia. As Eve Pärnaste, who was involved in dissident activities from the mid-1970s, recalls, messages were usually typed on interlining cloth which then was sewn into the couriers' coats. This made it relatively easy for the couriers to get through the strict immigration and emigration controls at the port of Tallinn.<sup>86</sup> Moreover, Kippar and his confidants had apparently succeeded in bribing crew members of *Georg Ots*<sup>87</sup>, forming an additional channel that secured a quite efficient flow of information between Sweden and Estonia via Helsinki. However, in view of the intense surveillance of all movements across the sea, it did not take long for the KGB to discover the conspiratorial cooperation between the dissident activists and their supporters in the West. According to several of the former dissidents, the KGB resorted to a strategy that combined monitoring and infiltration. The dissidents had to be pragmatic in their choice of couriers and often chose coincidental opportunities to forward material and messages to the exile activists in Stockholm via the ferries cruising between Tallinn and Helsinki. Thus, the KGB succeeded in luring them into a trap in the early 1980s. An Estonian sailor offered his services to a contact to smuggle samizdat printings directly to Sweden. As it soon turned out, the connection worked.<sup>88</sup> But after a wave of arrests had struck, eventually crushing the Estonian dissident movement in 1983, it was revealed that the channel had been created on the behalf of the KGB which had systematically copied every document that was smuggled across the Baltic Sea.<sup>89</sup> Via the KGB infiltration, the Soviet authorities had the opportunity of getting valuable insight into the inner circles of domestic opposition. Apparently, the KGB considered that the benefits of this infiltration outweighed the disadvantages, which explains why subversive missions were still carried out.

In spite of all the successful and unsuccessful attempts to infiltrate the dissident circles, and the final paralysation of Soviet Estonian dissident activity in 1983<sup>90</sup>, the clandestine courier traffic on the "White Ship" constituted the backbone of uncensored communication between oppositional groups in Soviet Estonia and their Western supporters. Together with the connection via

---

<sup>86</sup> Interview conducted by the author with former dissident Eve Pärnaste, Tallinn (20.09.2011).

<sup>87</sup> Internal report of the Estonian KGB, 11.01.1985, reproduced in PESTI (as in footnote 85), p. 541.

<sup>88</sup> According to the former dissident Lagle Parek, the proposal was forwarded in 1981, while the channel itself was activated sometime during the following year; interviews conducted by the author with Lagle Parek, Tallinn, 19.09.2011, and with her nephew Heiki Ahonen (as in footnote 80).

<sup>89</sup> Interview with Eve Pärnaste (as in footnote 86).

<sup>90</sup> In spring 1983, the KGB finally decided to crack down on the Soviet Estonian dissidents, arresting and convicting the leading figures of the anti-Soviet underground movement for their "criminal contacts with a criminal organization called Estonian Relief Centre for Political Prisoners in Sweden"; verdict of the Supreme Court of the Estonian SSR, 16.12.1983, reproduced in PESTI (as in footnote 85), p. 464.

Moscow-based Swedish and American media correspondents, who provided valuable support in mediating messages and information across the "Iron Curtain"<sup>91</sup>, the Baltic waterways thus formed a major lifeline between anti-Soviet forces in the East and West. Kippar's name was omnipresent in Western media reports on Baltic issues of the time which reflected the success of his strategy to use acquired inside information about the situation in Soviet Estonia for anti-Soviet lobbying campaigns. Not least, the communication via the illegal courier traffic cemented long-lasting bonds between anti-communist activists in exile and the homeland. As the possibilities to communicate across the bloc border improved again after the lessening of the tensions of the so-called "second Cold War" in the mid-1980s and with the onset of the liberalizing spirit of Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika*, the contacts between oppositional circles, which now formed the core of the nationalist movement, and exile supporters in Stockholm could be reactivated.<sup>92</sup> This cooperation paved the way for new alliances that came to play an important role in the secession process, which once more underlines the long-term political significance of the new forms of communication that could develop due to Soviet Estonia's opening to Western tourism.

## 5 Conclusion

The increasing attention for the so-called "soft issues" in the history of exchange and interaction between East and West during the Cold War challenges the traditional narrative of conflict and confrontation. Case studies carried out on so far under-researched phenomena on the micro-level help to reveal the intricate pattern of multi-levelled communication and, to a certain degree, cooperation that characterized the relations between the halves of the divided continent even in times of political disintegration. As regards a future research agenda on trade, technical cooperation and leisure travel between the blocs, the satellite states of Central and Eastern Europe in particular offer a wide range of topics to be investigated, first and foremost with the onset of *détente*. However, as the present overview of the development of mass tourism in Tallinn and its socio-economic and political consequences has shown, even the Soviet Union's Cold War history can be approached from a transnational angle, at least to a limited degree. In this context, the Estonian SSR certainly held an exceptional status. The inhabitants of the smallest Soviet republic, which functioned as an outpost to the capitalist West, could profit from their proximity to the Finns, whose language shares many common traits with Estonian. Thus, already from the late 1950s onwards, the inhabi-

---

<sup>91</sup> Interview with Lagle Parek (as in footnote 88); Information note of the Estonian KGB, 12.09.1983, reproduced in PESTI (as in footnote 85), p. 437.

<sup>92</sup> The reconfiguration of the relations between exile and homeland in the case of the Estonian SSR between 1987 and 1991 and its impact on the secession process from the Soviet Union was the topic of a postdoctoral research project that has been conducted by the author at the Institute of History of the University of Tallinn from 2012 to 2014.

tants of northern Estonia were able to receive and understand the television programmes of a capitalist state. This constant exposure to television broadcasts from the neighbouring country certainly helped to break down the language barrier as Finnish tourists started to visit Soviet Estonia on a mass scale and obviously encouraged the development of bonds between visitors and locals that were closer than the Soviet authorities had intended.

According to the expert on Soviet history Sheila Fitzpatrick, it is impossible to write a history of Soviet society, or *Alltagsgeschichte*, from below in view of the omnipresence of ideology and the state in both the public and the private spheres.<sup>93</sup> Likewise, it is impossible to write a Cold War history of private, unofficial interaction between non-state actors across the Iron Curtain without taking its political, and, in a system with a state-ruled, planned economy, also economic repercussions into account. In every state that attempts to maintain virtually totalitarian control over all aspects of life, even a small breach in the “safety cordon” around its borders leads to a variety of undesirable side effects, as seen from the perspective of the government, as the present overview over Western tourism to Soviet Estonia has illustrated. Hence, the Kremlin’s decision to open up the Soviet Estonian capital to a larger number of tourists did not only bring Western hard currency into the country – an important profit for the state. With the establishment of a regularly functioning, de facto in its totality, uncontrollable channel between the West and one of the Soviet Union’s “frontier republics”, the equally growing material and informational exchange had almost inevitable repercussions for spheres beyond the tourism sector of Soviet Estonia. The influx of Western consumer goods into a society marked by chronic scarcity of economic production and supply fostered both the expansion of the black market and the development of smuggling into an everyday phenomenon on a small scale. At the same time, the increasingly uncontrollable encounters between Western visitors and the inhabitants of Tallinn threatened the Soviet regime’s attempts to control the minds of its citizens. The jamming of Western radio broadcasts and the strict border controls proved not to be enough for successfully keeping Western political thought from streaming through the Soviet Union’s “window to the West”, as Tallinn was known at the time. The undermining effect of the subversive flow of political writings and information was additionally increased due to the geographical proximity of a well-organized and outspokenly anti-communist exile community in Estonia’s immediate neighbourhood. Thus, the “White Ships” between Tallinn and Helsinki considerably contributed to turning the Estonian connection into a major hub of subversive cooperation between Soviet dissidents and their Western supporters.

In view of the Estonian post-war experiences of occupation and isolation from the outside world, it is maybe no surprise that the image of the “White Ship” and, first and foremost, its most commonly known incarnation, the lux-

---

<sup>93</sup> Quoted in GERNER/KARLSSON (as in footnote 19), p. 227.

urious *Georg Ots*, still constitute a central topos in Estonia's collective memory. At the same time, it stands as a symbol for an at first glance invisible level of Finland's and Estonia's shared and interwoven Cold War history of black-market trading, smuggling and ideological warfare. Thus, it can be seen as a *lieu de mémoire* of Cold War history in a so far relatively under-researched, peripheral corner of divided Europe. However, the "White Ship" itself, which in October 1986 served as Gorbachev's accommodation in the port of Reykjavik during his summit meeting with U.S. President Ronald Reagan and continued to cruise the route between Helsinki and Tallinn up to the year 2000<sup>94</sup>, does not figure among the many tourist attractions that Tallinn offers its visitors. After having shipped between the ports of Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg for many years, *Georg Ots* was transferred to the eastern outpost of the Russian federation. Yet, as an Estonian newspaper reported in early 2013, the vessel has apparently left the harbour of Vladivostok for good. Word has it that Estonia's Cold War icon will be dismantled and destroyed in one of the Republic of China's shipyards along the western coastline of the Pacific Ocean.<sup>95</sup>

### Zusammenfassung

*Nylonstrümpfe und Samizdat. Wirtschaftliche und politische Begleiterscheinungen des „Weißen Schiffes“ zwischen Helsinki und Tallinn*

Die Wiederaufnahme des Fährverkehrs zwischen Helsinki und Tallinn im Jahre 1965 markiert einen Meilenstein in der jüngeren Geschichte der finnisch-estnischen Beziehungen. Nachdem die Bewohner der baltischen Sowjetrepublik zwei Jahrzehnte lang fast völlig isoliert von ihren nordischen Nachbarn gelebt hatten, öffnete sich die estnische Hauptstadt Tallinn nun einem stetig anwachsenden Strom hauptsächlich finnischer Touristen. Im Verlauf des folgenden Vierteljahrhunderts entwickelte sich ein lebhafter Verkehr über den Finnischen Meerbusen hinweg, der Tallinn unabhängig von der politischen Wetterlage des Kalten Krieges mit dem Westen verband und die Stadt zu einer der touristischen Vorzeigestädte der Sowjetunion werden ließ. Die vorliegende Analyse der aus Sicht des Sowjetregimes unwillkommenen Nebeneffekte der Öffnung nach Westen thematisiert einen Aspekt, der in der historischen Forschung zum Kalten Krieg immer stärker Beachtung findet: die Vielfalt von inoffiziellen Kontakten und Einflüssen über den Eisernen Vorhang hinweg, die sich insbesondere im Kielwasser der europäischen Entspannungspolitik der 1960er Jahre entwickeln konnten.

Einer der nachhaltigsten Einschnitte in das Leben der Einwohner Tallinns war die deutlich sichtbare Präsenz von Besuchern aus dem kapitalistischen Westen. Schon seit den späten 1950er Jahren hatten die Bewohner der estnischen Nordküste von der Möglichkeit profitiert, finnische Fernsehprogramme empfangen zu können, doch die persönliche Konfrontation mit westlichen Touristen potenzierte den Einfluss fremder Konsummuster und -güter. Besonders im Umfeld des mondänen *Viru* Hotels, des einzigen Hotels für ausländi-

<sup>94</sup> Valge laevaga vabasse maailma (as in footnote 61).

<sup>95</sup> Kas legendaarne Georg Ots lõigatakse ribadeks? [Is the Legendary Georg Ots Going to Be Dismantled?], in: *Õhtuleht* from 30.01.2013, URL: <http://www.oh tuleht.ee/508216> (29.08.2013).

sche Besucher am Ort, entwickelte sich in den 1970er Jahren ein boomender Schwarzmarkt. In den Bars und Restaurants des Hotels, die von Touristen, Mitgliedern der Parteilite und des KGB, Prostituierten und Schwarzmarkthändlern aller Schattierungen frequentiert wurden, blühte der Handel mit westlichen Konsumgütern, deren Fluss dank der regelmäßig einlaufenden Fähren aus Helsinki nicht versiegte. Das Hotel *Viru* und der Typus des privatwirtschaftlichen Kleinunternehmers, den die illegale wirtschaftliche Tätigkeit im Laufe der Zeit hervorbrachte, sind längst Teil des kollektiven Gedächtnisses in Estland geworden.

Ein weniger bekannter Aspekt des Fährverkehrs ist seine Bedeutung als Kommunikationskanal zwischen Dissidenten und ihren Unterstützern im Westen. Die Netzwerke zwischen Menschenrechtsaktivisten in Ost und West, die sich vor allem nach der Unterzeichnung der Schlussakte von Helsinki im Sommer 1975 entwickelten, sind generell nur wenig erforscht. Doch ergibt sich aus KGB-Prozessakten, Erinnerungen ehemaliger estnischer Dissidenten und den umfangreichen Archivsammlungen des estnischen Exils eine Topografie oppositioneller Kontakte, für die die Fähren eine Schlüsselrolle einnahmen. Über Kuriere aus den Reihen finnischer Besucher oder der Schiffsbesatzung entwickelte sich ein funktionierender Schmuggelkanal für unzensurierte Informationen und Samizdat-Schriften. Die Kommunikation zwischen Vertretern des Exils in Schweden und der nationalistischen Dissidentenbewegung legte den Grundstein für die enge Zusammenarbeit zwischen Emigration und Heimatland, die den späteren Sezessionsprozess begleiten und formen sollte.

Indem die vielfältigen Formen inoffizieller Kontakte, die sich aus der Öffnung Tallinns nach Westen ergaben, umrissen werden, wird auch der Mangel an relevanter Forschung in diesem Feld deutlich. Man erhält so aber doch ersten Aufschluss über die politischen und wirtschaftlichen Nebeneffekte, die sich im Zuge des erwünschten Zuflusses westlicher Devisen in die UdSSR einstellten.