

# ICOA945: DEMOCRACY: WASHING THE SOCIALIST STAINS FROM OUR HERITAGE

## Subtheme 02: The Role of Cultural Heritage in Building Peace and Reconciliation

**Session 2:** Heritage as Victim

**Location:** Silver Oak Hall 1, India Habitat Centre

**Time:** December 13, 2017, 17:15 – 17:30

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**Abstract:** After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the birth of the democratic Republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania the countries have consciously and subconsciously been eradicating the built reminders of their Soviet history. This has occasionally led to the mindless destruction of functional monumental edifices associated with Soviet legacy and resulted in the worship of everything new and innovative, such as glass and steel shopping malls and high rise office blocks symbolic of the consumerist nature of modern western democracies.

The making of the cultural heritage for these newly independent countries is tightly tied to the largely failing integration policies in whereby young second generation Russians, even after 26 years of independence, still don't identify themselves as citizens of the Republics and resulting problems and conflicts are common.

In this paper we examine the correlation between democracies' want and need to exemplify themselves as a beacon of free thought, speech and will with the requirement of heritage institutions operating within these democracies to preserve not just those sites deemed worthy according to current social thinking but also their moral duty to preserve sites created by all socio-economic models.

We will compare and contrast the on-going discourse about achieving perceived democratic ideals within these countries through the production of new heritage with relevant data, information and case studies from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

**Key words:** *identity, reconciliation, conflict, cultural heritage*

## Recent history of the Baltic States

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are small countries in the north-eastern part of Europe with the Russian Federation, Belarus and Poland as their closest neighbours. Historically the ambitions and expansive tendencies of great powers tend to intertwine in the area resulting in the countries having been occupied by a foreign power for most of their histories.

After having been a part of the Russian Empire since the beginning of 18<sup>th</sup> century the Baltic States seized the opportunity in 1918 and after the Wars of Independence signed peace treaties with Soviet Russia in 1920. The countries enjoyed a period of independence that lasted for 20 years cut short by WWII after which the Baltic States were annexed by the USSR. The Soviet occupation lasted from 1944 to 1991. After the failed pro-communist putsch in Moscow all three countries gained independence.

Despite the inefficiency of the central planning system the Soviet period saw a lot of economic activity and construction projects. As in every sphere of human activity, there were both positive and negative developments in architecture.

Today, well over half of Estonian capital Tallinn's architecture is from the Soviet era. Most of it is located in the microrayons of prefabricated concrete panel apartment blocks, with the population residing in these residences of predominantly Russian heritage. Buildings from the Soviet era dominate the Estonians' everyday life and therefore, as architect Triin Ojaripoints out «we should relate to [Soviet architecture] constructively and with acceptance, not disregarding or embellishing the problem» (Ojari 2012: 154).

With regaining independence, the Baltic Republics started a transition from a totalitarian regime with centrally planned economy into democratic capitalist states. One of the major steps towards the western ideal was the privatisation of businesses and the recovery of formerly nationalised private property. Due to this denationalisation the need for an economic and legislative reorientation from the east to the west was paramount.

In 1992 Russia accounted for 92% of Estonian exports the loss of which allowed an idealistic young government to create reformist legislation at an unprecedented rate allowing the economy to recover in an accelerated timeframe (Laar 2007). It was this rapid rise of living standards that solidified in the minds of the Estonians the superiority of the West and the deficiencies of the Soviet past. It was time to strive for the western ideals of free enterprise, minimum government intervention, and individual freedom. That sense of optimism for everything new is at odds with an immigrant population who were acutely feeling the loss of an empire, alongside of which came a rapid decline in their rights in the Estonian Republic – they were no longer citizens.

The antagonism caused by mutually exclusive historic narratives between the Baltic States and the Russian Federation is one of the essential drivers of the disenfranchisement of the people who migrated to the Baltic States during the Soviet era. This continues through politics and civic life today. Compounding this issue is the Russian appropriation of the cultural legacy of the USSR due to its belief in being its legal successor (Ehing, Berg 2009: 21). It should be of no surprise then that this original Soviet diaspora and their subsequent generations maintain a stronger connection to Soviet heritage within the Baltic States.

The drive toward westernisation is now causing clashes between heritage protection and the real estate market led by commercial developers (Hallas-Murula 2007: 4). But Soviet era buildings had not been considered a priority when it came to heritage protection - in 2009 out of 800 designated buildings in Tallinn only 32 originate from the Soviet era (Lankots 2009).

The loss of Sakala Cultural Centre in 2006 was a pivotal point in the discourse about Soviet architecture in Estonia.

This case highlighted a number of shortfalls in Estonian heritage conservation legislation.

- 1) More than 10,000 signatures were collected against the demolition of the structure, an unprecedented public reaction, asking for the building to be taken under heritage protection, at least temporarily for further analysis of the significance of the building to be conducted (Hallas-Murula 2007: 6). At the time there was no legal way for citizen initiatives to be taken into consideration by the Parliament. Having no legal ramifications the public outcry was ignored. There is still nothing in heritage conservation legislation that would allow a common citizen with no specialist knowledge even to make a proposal for listing consideration. The entire field of heritage conservation in Estonia is insular and does not encourage citizen participation and has no avenue for discourse with stateless persons in Estonia.
- 2) The area had a local plan aimed at arranging the future of the district and it seemed only logical for the city council to offer the developer a good deal for the building concession. The entire project should have been regulated by the local plan and the building concession contract (Paaver 2008: 37). The problems arose from the different aims of the developer and the city planning department and the possibility to follow the letter and not the spirit of the law. Instead of the desired cultural and social centre we now have another shopping mall with added parking facilities.

The loss of Sakala Cultural Centre had at least one positive outcome - a program of mapping and analyses of 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture was launched. Between 2007 and 2012 over 2,000 objects were assessed with the most valuable being picked out for further research and statutory protection (Estonian Academy of Arts 2012).

Out of the Estonian population of 1.3 million people approximately 330,000 are ethnic Russians. About 120,000 of them have Estonian citizenship, 100,000 are citizens of the Russian Federation and 100,000 are non-citizens. If all Russian-speaking population had equal citizens' rights, Estonia would have a different government. This would have allowed the Russian population to have a stronger voice in the defence of the built heritage that is essential for their historical narrative.

However, as this is not the case, a very similar situation repeated itself in the case of the "Super Ministry" in Tallinn, completed in 2017.

The building that originally housed the ESSR planning committee calculation centre and later became the Ministry of Finance was completed in 1977. Despite the increasing deficit the construction materials were of good quality having been purchased for foreign currency (Eilat 2012). It was a prominent office building with significant architectural features, like the mural by a classic modernist sculptor Edgar Viies. The building was not listed as a cultural monument, the developer claimed that it would be too costly to renew the existing building to meet the health and safety and energy efficiency requirements and the demolition permission was granted. Once again the public outcry was ignored.

The building was demolished – but what was the idea of erecting two plain characterless glass towers in the same place. The aim of the project was to save money, increase work space efficiency and enhance inter-ministerial cooperation. Money was saved on interior design (Paulus 2017); the expected increase in the working synergy between ministries has not materialised (Lige 2017).

Both of the above cases fall into the category of conscious destruction of the Soviet built heritage. By wiping the physical reminders of the uncomfortable past off the streets of Tallinn and replacing them with westernised glass and steel shopping centres and office blocks we are trying to disregard the Soviet past and with it causing the disenfranchisement of the people who relate to that historical narrative.

A conscious eradication of public Soviet symbols took place in Lithuania in preparation for celebrating the 25th anniversary of Lithuanian independence declaration. The removal of hammer-and-sickle symbols was not a straightforward process and in the case of the listed Aleksotas Bridge even required a minister's decree banning the protection of Soviet and Nazi German symbols (Žemaitis, 2015). This was a public wide-ranging project providing the Lithuanian population with an opportunity to speak up for or against the decision. Whereas in Estonia the loss of Soviet heritage is more of a creeping process and not as obvious to the public, resulting in a weaker discussion on the subject.

A different approach with the same result is the subconscious eradication of Soviet heritage like in the case of Tallinn's Central Post Office that was built as part of the construction boom before the 1980 Moscow Olympics. It was one of the most prominent modernist buildings of the time. However, having been built on the scale of the USSR the building did not meet the needs of the small state of Estonia and was struggling for a sustainable use already in the early 1990s.

The Post Office was in a structurally sound condition and the local plan of 2005 did not allow it to be demolished, rather just extensively rebuilt and redeveloped (Jagodin 2011). Eventually the structure was sold to Swedish developers. The building now looks like just another 21<sup>st</sup> century glass box, covered in the branding of the different outlets, with a shopping mall, cafes, restaurants and a my fitness wellness centre, adding to the already supersaturated commercial spaces, following in the footsteps of the ever increasing western consumerism.

A third dimension is added by the Soviet structures that are designated as cultural monuments, have lost their use and are inhibitive expensive to maintain, thus starting to fall derelict, being a constant crumbling reminder of the Soviet past.

Linnahall, originally known as the V. I. Lenin Culture and Sport Palace, was designed by architect Raine Karp for the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games. It was a successful entertainment centre in the 1980s-90s (Estonian World 2016). Apart from a functional helipad and a site for police dog training the building is now abandoned.

Despite its numerous excellent qualities – favourable city centre location, public ownership, landmark status, flexible spatial planning – the building is on the brink of collapse (Ojari 2012: 152). But there is hope. On 4 October 2017 the new local plan for the area was adopted and it states that Linnahall will be preserved, with some reconstruction and expansion, all following the current special requirements of heritage conservation. Projects have existed in the past, it remains to be seen whether and how these plans will be realised.

## Conclusion

There are inherent difficulties in the curation and conservation of 20<sup>th</sup> century built heritage. It looks much too contemporary and pervasive in our everyday surroundings. The 20<sup>th</sup> century in post WWII Europe is characterised by rapid technological and economic development that can result in the heritage of failed ideologies being undervalued and destroyed. Although the buildings used in examples were built by Estonians they still represent an opposing historical narrative. As there is a bias in the Baltic States towards the western historical narrative it has become easier to wash the socialist stain from the everyday environment. The very act of this increases the psychological gap between the Soviet-era migrant population and the indigenous people of the Baltic States. This leads to the ethnic minorities being even less engaged in the discourse and could expedite further destruction of Soviet architecture.

Consciously or unconsciously, Soviet architecture is being lost at a faster rate than that of any other era in the Baltic States. We know why this is happening – the question now is if and how it can be stemmed.

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# ICOA945: DÉMOCRATIE: LAVER LES TACHES SOCIALISTES DE NOTRE PATRIMOINE

## Sous-thème 02: Le rôle du patrimoine culturel dans la construction de la paix et de la réconciliation

**Session 2:** Patrimoine en tant que victime

**Lieu:** Silver Oak Hall 1, India Habitat Centre

**Date et heure:** 13 Décembre, 2017, 17:15 – 17:30

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*Jeune chercheur avec une formation en histoire de l'art et en conservation de bâtiments historiques de l'Université de York, portant un intérêt particulier pour la conservation constructive et la réutilisation du patrimoine bâti ayant une histoire controversée ou sensible. Sa thèse de maîtrise portait sur les possibilités de réutilisation des édifices religieux. Travaille actuellement à National Trust, UK.*

**Résumé:** Après l'effondrement de l'Union Soviétique et la naissance des républiques démocratiques d'Estonie, de Lettonie et de Lituanie, ces pays ont consciemment et inconsciemment éradiqué des constructions rappelant leur histoire soviétique. Cela a parfois conduit à la destruction aveugle d'édifices monumentaux fonctionnels liés à l'héritage soviétique et a abouti à la vénération de tout ce qui est nouveau et innovant, comme les centres commerciaux de verre et d'acier ou les immeubles de bureaux symbolisant le consumérisme des démocraties occidentales modernes.

La création d'un patrimoine culturel pour ces pays nouvellement indépendants est étroitement liée aux politiques d'intégration, largement défailtantes, auxquelles les jeunes Russes de la deuxième génération, même après 26 ans d'indépendance, ne s'identifient toujours en tant que citoyens de ces républiques : les problèmes et les conflits qui en résultent sont courants.

Dans cet article, nous examinerons la corrélation entre le besoin et la nécessité pour ces démocraties d'être des parangons de la liberté de pensée, de parole et de volonté tout en répondant en même temps aux exigences des institutions patrimoniales de préservation des sites et à l'obligation morale de préserver ceux créés dans des cadres socio-économiques différents.

Nous allons analyser et comparer les différents discours sur la réalisation des idéaux démocratiques tenus dans ces pays au travers de la conception d'un nouveau patrimoine s'appuyant sur des données pertinentes, des informations et des études de cas, s'appliquant à l'Estonie, la Lettonie et à la Lituanie.

**Mots-clés:** identité, réconciliation, conflit, héritage culturel