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Everyday Life in Stalinist Estonia

What is Sovietization?

It is not easy to define the term "Sovietization," because the actual implementation of the process varied from country to country. In addition, over time the content of this term underwent slight changes. If we examine only one country, such as Latvia or Estonia, we risk overlooking the larger context.[1] Thus this discussion of "Sovietization" starts by looking at the history of the term.

The word "soviet" (совет) means "council" in Russian and was used in the Russian Empire as a politically neutral term, as in Council of Ministers (*sovet ministrov*). In the context of the February Revolution in 1917, across the empire workers' and soldiers' councils were established, often elected, and played a role in the revolution. They turned into a parallel power structure vis-à-vis the institutions of the provisional government, especially because the remnants of the old administration began to dissolve and lacked legitimacy in the eyes of the population. In most workers' and soldiers' councils, it was not the Bolsheviks who dominated but other socialist parties such as the Mensheviks and the Social Revolutionaries. The "trick" used by Lenin and the Bolsheviks during their coup d'état, also known as the October Revolution, was to seize power in the name of the workers' and soldiers' soviets under the slogan "all power to the soviets." The long-term goal of the coup d'état, the establishment of a one-party dictatorship headed by Lenin, was hidden. Workers' and soldiers' councils played a certain role locally in developments, especially in the unfolding civil war. But step by step, the Bolsheviks pushed aside all other political groups, including the left-wing Social Revolutionaries, which whom they had initially formed a coalition. Likewise, workers' control of factories survived only briefly after the putsch. Workers' control was never completed, meaning the workers' councils never really directed the enterprises, and they were pushed aside over time by appointed commissars, communist-dominated trade unions and state institutions such as agencies of planning and the war economy.

On closer examination, then, the terms "Soviet power," "Soviet Russia" and "the Soviet Union" were misnomers, because soviets were usually not elected democratically, and their influence and authority declined rapidly. The meetings of those soviets increasingly turned into a staged performance for the acclama-

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1   After the 1989–91 collapse of socialism, many studies based on extensive archival research were published concerning Sovietization in individual countries. By covering only one country, these studies neglected the broader perspective. In this context, broader cooperation across the borders of national historiography is necessary to enable comparisons and combat the assumption that developments in one's own country were unique.

tion of the regime, and they had nothing to do with democracy. Consequently, until the 1960s, a number of Western researchers spoke of "Bolshevik Russia" when referring to Soviet Russia or the Soviet Union.[2]

After the Bolshevik coup d'état and during the civil war, the term "Sovietization" (советизация) first appeared. It was used by the Bolsheviks to mean the application of the Bolshevik model of governance and organization in one region or country. Thus, for example, Lenin spoke in September 1920 about the Sovietization of Lithuania.[3] The first Sovietized areas were those conquered by the Bolsheviks during the civil war. Initially the term possessed mainly a political meaning. Over time the meaning grew broader. Turning a non-Soviet society into a Soviet one meant not only taking political power but restructuring the economy, everyday life, society and culture. In the end, virtually everything could be "Sovietized," including the music on a radio station, as one source states.[4] In the 1940s the term "Sovietization" was still used, but in the 1950s it disappeared from Soviet sources, as a result of the word's use in Western research and media since the early Cold War.

Before World War II, some Soviet publications even contained passages about the future Sovietization of neighboring countries. Soviet military theoretician Vladimir K. Triandafillov (1894–1931) published the classic textbook on the subject in 1929: *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies* (Характер операций современных армий). It is quoted below extensively, because the textbook was written for future officers, and it quite openly elaborates how Sovietization should unfold in the framework of a military conquest. The author used his background experience from the Russian Civil War, and there are striking similarities between the description in the book and the events in the territories occupied and annexed in 1939 and 1940. The smaller states mentioned were, of course, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania:

> Enormous work involving Sovietization of regions captured from the enemy will fall to the political apparatus. Major successive operations, given favorable conditions, may over a period of three-four weeks lead to liberation of territory with frontage and depth of 200–250 kilometers. If small states are involved, this signifies that one must cope in a short time (two-three weeks) with Sovietization of entire states. This could mean three-four weeks of Sovietization of extremely large areas if larger countries are involved. Of course, complete Sovietization of such territories is a long-term concern, but deployment of a Soviet apparatus must take place within the

2   For example, Georg von Rauch, *Geschichte des bolschewistischen Rußland* (Wiesbaden, 1955).

3   Lenin's speech from September 20, 1920, cited in Richard Pipes (ed.), *The Unknown Lenin* (New Haven-London, 1996), pp. 95–115.

4   Meeting of the Biuro of the CC of the Estonian CP(b), June 20, 1946, ERAF 1–4–360, l. 151–2.

aforementioned periods. Here, from the very outset, one must achieve a high-quality and reliable apparatus dedicated to the ideals of Soviet power, people capable in demonstrating to the population of newly captured areas the difference between the Soviet and the capitalist system must be put in place.

It will be very hard to count on local assets when organizing revolutionary committees because the enemy will undoubtedly destroy all local revolutionary organizations in the area of the front. Only part of the technical apparatus and the most responsible workers will be found locally. All responsible workers and even some of the technical personnel must be brought in. Of course, they will and, if the capability exists, must be taken from among the local workers, who fled from the Whites. The number of these workers required to carry out the Sovietization of newly captured areas will be enormous. [...] The Sovietization mission, of course, cannot be handled without wide use of local workers, local revolutionary organizations. Strengthening the Soviet system and the Soviet apparatus wholly depends on the rate of reestablishment of revolutionary social organizations such as labor unions, poor peasant committees in villages, and so forth. The Soviet system in captured areas will be finally strengthened only when their own peaceful Communist Party is created.[5]

After the October putsch, the Bolsheviks tried to ignite revolution in nearby states, most notably in Germany, Poland and Hungary, but also in other countries. Weapons, ammunition and money were brought in and used to start local insurrections. After the failure of the last uprising—the December 1924 attempt to seize power in Estonia—the Bolshevik leaders finally understood that revolutions in the West would not succeed without the direct support of the Red Army.[6] This meant a change in the Soviets' policy towards their neighbors. Tobias Privetelli has demonstrated convincingly in his thesis that Stalin became a cautious expansionist. When the time was ripe, after the August 1939 signing of the German-Soviet Treaty of Non-Aggression and its secret protocol, the Soviet Union invaded eastern Poland in September and Sovietized the region according to a rough plan drawn up mainly by Andrei Zhdanov, one of Stalin's lieutenants. The plan resembles Triandafillov's ideas. The Soviet army occupied eastern Poland, and special plenipotentiaries came in. Sham elections; incorporation into the USSR; and the restructuring of the administration, society, economy and culture started within weeks.[7] Eastern Poland later served as a rough model for the events in the Baltic states, following a similar time frame.

The Bolsheviks felt the Sovietization of other states was ideologically justified and did not consitute imperialist expansion. According to the doctrines of

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5   V.K. Triandafillov, *The Nature of the Operations of Modern Armies* (Ilford-Portland, 1994), pp. 164–5.

6   Tobias Privetelli, 'Irredentism, Expansion and the Liberation of the European Proletariat: Stalin's Considerations on How to Bring Communism to the Western Neighbors of the Soviet Union, 1920–1941' (PhD thesis, University of Berne, 2008), pp. 68–72.

7   Ibid., pp. 318–26.

Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism, socialism was superior to other political systems, and its victory in the long run was historically inevitable. The population of the Sovietized territories would be freed from the ills of capitalism and could look forward to a brighter future. This explains why Triandafillov and others could write so openly about the Sovietization of neighboring countries during a military occupation. Only after cooperating with the Western Allies during World War II and then in the Cold War did the Soviets conceal their plans for expanding their territory and sphere of influence and portray Sovietization as a result of genuine local processes and the wishes of the local populations. To this end the Soviets created the myth of a revolution, which many socialist historians later echoed in books and articles.

In international media and the language of some foreign diplomats, the term "Sovietization" appears as early as the interwar period, but it spread more widely after the war. By then, the Western media and historians used the term to describe the changes in the Soviet-controlled territories of Central and Eastern Europe. Often the word was used by refugees from those regions.[8] The restructuring of all aspects of everyday life, economy, politics, society and culture was called "Sovietization," and the term had a highly negative connotation. There were local varieties, such as the East German, Czechoslovak or Polish model. In the Federal Republic of Germany, the term was widely used to describe developments in the eastern part of the divided country. The West German federal government sponsored an entire series of publications.[9] Further works followed, often imbued with the spirit of the Cold War.[10] The late 1950s saw the publica-

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8   For example, Endel Kareda, *Technique of Economic Sovietisation: A Baltic Experience* (London, 1947).

9   The West German Ministry for All-German Questions published, for example, the following volumes: *Die Sowjetisierung der deutschen Länder Brandenburg, Mecklenburg, Sachsen, Sachsen-Anhalt, Thüringen* (Bonn, 1950); *Die Sowjetisierung der Landwirtschaft in der Sowjetzone* (Hamburg, 1951); *Bibliotheken als Opfer und Werkzeug der Sowjetisierung* (Bonn, 1952); *Das Erziehungswesen der Sowjetzone: Eine Sammlung von Zeugnissen der Sowjetisierung und Russifizierung des mitteldeutschen Schulwesens* (Bonn, 1952).

10 Marianne Müller and Egon Erwin Müller, "*... stürmt die Festung Wissenschaft!*" *Die Sowjetisierung der mitteldeutschen Universitäten seit 1945* (Berlin, 1953); Bartho Plönies and Otto Schönwalder, *Die Sowjetisierung des mitteldeutschen Handwerks* (Bonn, 1953); Robert von Benda, *Die betriebswirtschaftlichen Auswirkungen der Sowjetisierung auf die Landwirtschaft Nordosteuropas* (Hamburg, 1955); Helmut König, *Rote Sterne glühn: Lieder im Dienste der Sowjetisierung* (Bad Godesberg, 1955); Andrivs Namsons, *Die kulturgeographischen, wirtschaftlichen und soziologischen Auswirkungen der Sowjetisierung Lettlands* (Stuttgart, 1958); Anthony Adamovich, *Opposition to Sovietization in Belorussian Literature, 1917–1957* (Munich, 1958); Ādolfs Silde, *Die Sowjetisierung Lettlands* (Bonn, 1967).

tion of a groundbreaking overview, cited to this day, on developments in East-Central Europe.[11] Outside the Federal Republic of Germany, the term was not as popular.[12] With new developments in Soviet studies, especially in the English-speaking world—such as revisionism—the use of the term "Sovietization" declined. It conjured up the rhetoric of Cold War hawks. In addition, some Western experts were themselves Marxists and did not reject socialism. Only the collapse of socialism led to a revival of the term, and today it is used in a more neutral way.[13]

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11 Ernst Birke and Rudolf Neumann (eds.), *Die Sowjetisierung Ost-Mitteleuropas* (Frankfurt, 1959).

12 The number of books using the term in the title was definitely smaller: Mid-European Research and Planning Centre (ed.), *The Sovietization of Culture in Poland* (Paris, 1953); Jurij Borys, *The Sovietization of Ukraine 1917–1923* (Edmonton, 1980); Janis Labvirs, *The Sovietization of the Baltic States: Collectivization of Latvian Agriculture, 1944–1956* (Gladstone, 1989).

13 Wladimir Berelowitch, *La soviétisation de l'école russe 1917–1931* (Lausanne, 1990); Hans Lemberg (ed.), *Sowjetisches Modell und nationale Prägung: Kontinuität und Wandel in Ostmitteleuropa nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Marburg, 1991); Konrad Jarausch and Hannes Siegrist (eds.), *Amerikanisierung und Sowjetisierung in Deutschland 1945–1970* (Berlin, 1995); Rüdiger Kühr, *Die Reparationspolitik der UdSSR und die Sowjetisierung des Verkehrswesens der SBZ* (Bochum, 1996); Donal O'Sullivan, 'Die Sowjetisierung Osteuropas', *Forum für osteuropäische Ideen- und Zeitgeschichte* 2 (1998), pp. 109–60; Michael Lemke (ed.), *Sowjetisierung und Eigenständigkeit in der SBZ/DDR (1945–1953)* (Cologne, 1999); John Connelly, *Captive University: The Sovietization of East German, Czech, and Polish Higher Education, 1945–1956* (Chapel Hill, 2000); Ruth Büttner, *Sowjetisierung oder Selbständigkeit? Die sowjetische Finnlandpolitik 1943–1948* (Hamburg, 2001); Elena Zubkova, 'Fenomen 'mestnogo natsionalizma': 'estonskoe delo' 1949–1952 godov v kontekste sovetizatsii Baltii', *Otechestvennaia istoriia* 10 (2001), no. 3, pp. 89–102; Erwin Oberländer, 'Instruments of Sovietization in 1939/40 and after 1944/45', *The Soviet Occupation Regime in the Baltic States 1944–1959* (Riga, 2003), pp. 50–58; Olaf Mertelsmann (ed.), *The Sovietization of the Baltic States, 1940–1956* (Tartu, 2003); F. Solomon and A. Zub (eds.), *Sovietization in Romania and Czechoslovakia: History, Analogies, Consequences* (Bucharest, 2003); Andreas Hilger (ed.), *Sowjetisierung oder Neutralität? Optionen sowjetischer Besatzungspolitik in Deutschland und Österreich 1945–1955* (Göttingen, 2006); Katrin Boeckh, *Stalinismus in der Ukraine: Die Rekonstruktion des sowjetischen Systems nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Wiesbaden, 2007); David Feest, *Zwangskollektivierung im Baltikum: Die Sowjetisierung des estnischen Dorfes 1944–1953* (Cologne, 2007); Tõnu Tannberg (ed.), *Eesti NSV aastatel 1940–1953. Sovetiseerimise mehhanismid ja tagajärjed Nõukogude Liidu ja Ida-Euroopa arengute kontekstis* (Tartu, 2007); Juliette Denis, 'Identifies les 'elements ennemis' en Lettonie: Une prioriteé dans le processus de resoviétisation', *Cahiers du Monde russe* 49 (2008), pp. 297–318; Elena Zubkova, *Pribaltika i Kreml' 1940–1953* (Moscow, 2008); Balázs Apor, Péter Apor and E. A. Rees