

A PORTRAIT OF THE "HISTORICAL GAP" IN ESTONIAN LITERATURE*

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The notion of a "Historical Gap" in the development of Estonian culture, around 1950, has had wide currency among intellectuals in Soviet-held Estonia. The term used has been *ajalooline auk* which could also be translated literally as "Historical Hole," or maybe in a more meaningful way as "Historical Blank", or "Gap in History", or "History Gap." It suggests a postwar Stalinist period utterly devoid of any visible signs of creativity, as if someone in heaven or hell had taken scissors and cut those pages out of every book on Estonian cultural history. The Soviet Communist Party journal *Eesti Kommunist* addressed this issue in the following way (Utt 1968):

... One has to deal briefly with some disputable notions regarding the evaluation of the recent past of our literature and art. That is to say that oral discussions as well as printed word have, in the form of isolated hints or more developed systems of views, brought into circulation the so-called "historical gap theory." In essence it means that one crosses out the achievements of the first postwar decade, and shifts the beginnings of the history of truly creditable Soviet Estonian artistic creative work into the mid-Fifties. It must be said bluntly that this "theory" is not only harmful but also unfounded, and crumbles immediately when one turns to facts. It is true that the postwar development of our literature and arts was inhibited and complicated appreciably by the side effects of the personality cult, and not only by these: a part was played by the dispersal of the creative cadre in the whirlwind of war, by the unpolished talent of newcomers, and by other factors. Nonetheless, the first postwar decade bequeathed to us a number of valuable works which we can without hesitation include into the gold fund of socialist culture. After all, it is a fact that the first volumes of "Windy Coast" (by A. Hint, 1951 and 1954 — R. T.), "The Land and the People" (by R. Sirge, 1956), "Young Hearts" (by E. Krusten, 1954 and 1956), and many pearls of poetry by Smuul and Vaarandi were created precisely during those years. We are all glad about the strong progress of artistic creation during the period after the 20th Party Congress (in 1956 — R.T.). But let us ask: how many such works have our stages received which, in their ideological-artistic weight and social resonance, could be compared with Jakobson's "Life in a Citadel" (1946), and "Frontless Struggle" (1946), the plays by Hint, "Flames of Revenge" (1945) by Kapp and Rummo, or "Stormy Coast" (1949) by Ernesaks and Smuul?

That's how it is with facts, when one mentions only the major ones. In any case, we would act erroneously, if we were to slide in our criticism of past defects to the level of nihilism, and threw out the baby with the bathing water.

The period in question which was obviously still so painfully close in the 1960s has now receded into a more distant past. It might be time to take another, more dispassionate look at whether a gap existed and, if so, how long and deep it was. Both quantitative and qualitative aspects would have to be considered, i.e., the amount and the value of cultural production. Ideally, all aspects of creativity should be considered: literature, theater, music, figurative arts, and so on. The present study will focus on literature, because this field offers the most uniform and extensive data. If conclusions regarding literature should turn out to be fairly clear-cut, then they could reasonably be expected to apply to other cultural fields also, until someone brings evidence of comparable quality to show that some other field followed a different pattern.

Table 1

Number of Estonian Literary Works Mentioned by Title and Date in "Bibliographical Notes" (Nirk 1970: 380-405)

| <u>Date</u> | <u>Works per year</u> | <u>Works per year</u> | |
|-------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------|
| | | <u>Date</u> | <u>In Estonia</u> <u>Exile</u> |
| 1500-1839 | 0 | 1945 | 10 5 |

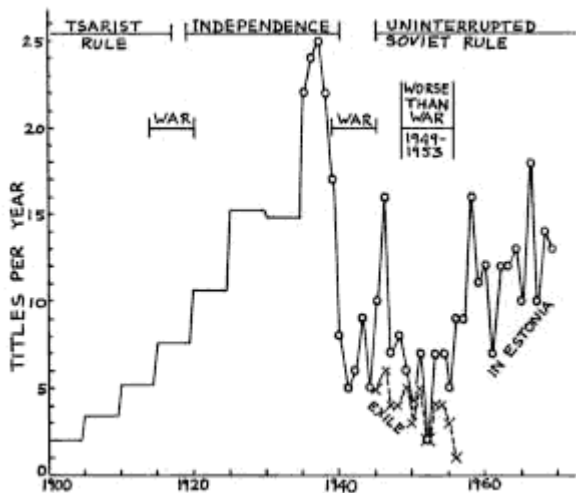
| | | | | |
|---------|------|----|----|---|
| 1840-49 | 0.4 | 46 | 16 | 6 |
| 50-59 | 0.8 | 47 | 7 | 3 |
| 60-69 | 0.8 | 48 | 8 | 3 |
| 70-79 | 0.5 | 49 | 6 | 5 |
| 80-89 | 1.3 | 50 | 4 | 3 |
| 90-99 | 3.1 | 51 | 7 | 5 |
| 1900-04 | 2.0 | 52 | 2 | 2 |
| 05-09 | 3.4 | 53 | 7 | 4 |
| 10-14 | 5.2 | 54 | 7 | 4 |
| 15-19 | 7.6 | 55 | 5 | 3 |
| 20-24 | 10.6 | 56 | 9 | 1 |
| 24-29 | 15.2 | 57 | 9 | 4 |
| 30-34 | 14.8 | 58 | 16 | 3 |
| 1935 | 22 | 59 | 11 | 2 |
| 36 | 24 | 60 | 12 | 1 |
| 37 | 25 | 61 | 7 | 4 |
| 38 | 22 | 62 | 12 | 3 |
| 39 | 17 | 63 | 12 | 4 |
| 40 | 8 | 64 | 13 | 2 |
| 41 | 5 | 65 | 10 | 3 |
| 42 | 6 | 66 | 18 | 2 |
| 43 | 9 | 67 | 10 | 2 |
| 44 | 4 | 68 | 14 | 2 |
| | | 69 | 13 | 1 |

Excluded:

works not written in Estonian (Kallas, Leberecht, and part of Wuolijoki) and posthumous collected works. For multivolume works only the dates of first and last volumes were used.

Table 1 shows how many literary works are mentioned by title and date, for every calendar year, in the "Bibliographical Notes" section of *Estonian Literature* by Endel Nirk (1970) which is the major Soviet publication on that topic in the English language. For the 20th century, these data are plotted in Figure 1. Up to 1935, five-year averages are given, while for the more interesting period since 1935 every year is shown separately. We see that the yearly number of mentionable works increases fairly steadily from 1900 to the late 1930s. Even World War I does not make a dent into this trend, and achievement of independence does not seem to affect it either, but the Great Depression has a visible inhibiting effect. In publishing work mentionable by this Soviet list of "principal authors" (Nirk 1970: 380), Estonian authors reach an all-time peak during the so-called "Silent Period" (1935-38) in Estonian politics. Publication decreased in 1939, possibly due to economic hardships caused by the start of World War II, and then plummeted to the pre-independence level in 1940 when the Soviet army carried out an internal revolution in Estonia. In contrast to World War I, World War II kept literary production severely depressed, presumably not only due to direct military action on Estonian soil but also the totalitarian nature of the foreign occupations. A new outburst of publication took place after war, in 1946, but by 1947 the output sank again. From 1949 to 1955 the average was 5.4 titles per year — lower than during the war years of 1941-44 (6.0) or of 1915-19 (7.6). Whether a period worse than war and 75% below the prewar level qualifies as a "gap" is of course a matter of taste. Please note that the few exile books mentioned by Nirk for the post-1944 period have not been included in Figure 1. After 1955 the number of titles increased again, but remained quite low compared to the independence period, surprisingly so in view of the generally pro-Soviet tendency of Nirk's book. However, a page count of his main text leads to the same outcome: he spends an average of 4.3 pages per year on the 1917-1940 period and only 3.6 (including 0.5 for exiles) on the 1945-70 period.

Figure 1. Estonian Literary works mentioned in Nirk (1970: 380-405). Data from Table 1.



The second data set is based on the major Soviet anthology of Estonian poetry. Titled *Eesti luule* (Estonian Poetry), it was edited by Paul Rummo in 1967. It includes about 1100 poems by 120 authors, ranging in time from 1637 to 1965. Selection was based on esthetic considerations, or on long-established popularity as texts for well-known songs, or on the "poem's ideological foundation" (Rummo 1970: 5). Indeed, a versifier like Vassili Mölder-Proletaar-lane seems to make it only because of his eminently proletarian pen name, and Estonian translations of the "International" and some other such songs find their place in what is otherwise an anthology of original poetry. In sum, the selection of poems is clearly not done from an "anti-Soviet" viewpoint. Exile poems are represented quite modestly. For our purpose, it is important that poems carry the date of their creation or, if this could not be determined, of first publication.

Table 2

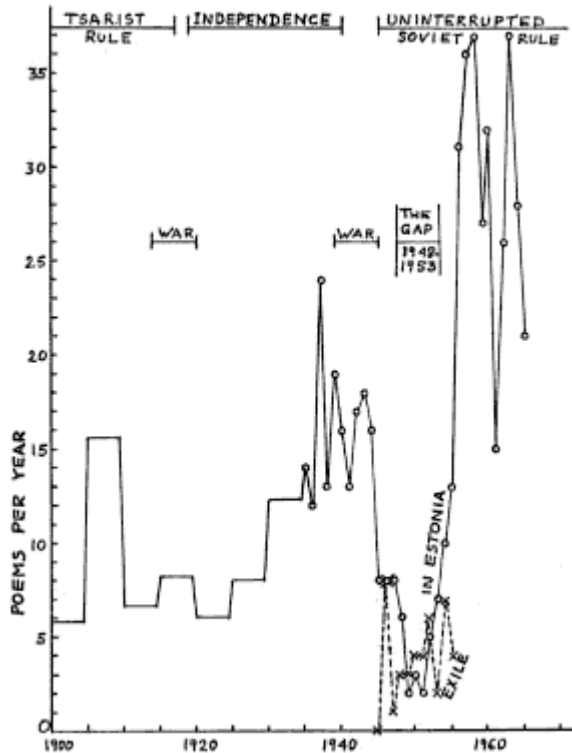
Number of Poems Included in Rummo's (1967) Anthology

| Works | | Works per year | | |
|---------|----------|----------------|------------|-------|
| Date | per year | Date | In Estonia | Exile |
| 1600-99 | .02 | 1945 | 8 | 0 |
| 1700-49 | .04 | 46 | 8 | 8 |
| 1750-99 | .12 | 47 | 8 | 1 |
| 1800-49 | .46 | 48 | 6 | 3 |
| 1850-59 | .6 | 49 | 2 | 3 |
| 1860-69 | 3.0 | 50 | 3 | 4 |
| 1870-79 | 3.2 | 51 | 2 | 4 |
| 1880-89 | 3.7 | 52 | 5 | 6 |
| 1890-99 | 4.2 | 53 | 7 | 2 |
| 1900-04 | 5.8 | 54 | 10 | 7 |
| 05-09 | 15.6 | 55 | 13 | 4 |
| 10-14 | 6.6 | 56 | 31 | 0 |
| 15-19 | 8.2 | 57 | 36 | 3 |
| 20-24 | 6.0 | 58 | 37 | 3 |
| 25-29 | 8.0 | 59 | 27 | 0 |
| 30-34 | 12.3 | 60 | 32 | 4 |
| 1935 | 14 | 61 | 15 | 2 |
| 36 | 12 | 62 | 26 | 1 |
| 37 | 24 | 63 | 37 | 5 |
| 38 | 13 | 64 | 28 | 2 |
| 39 | 19 | 65 | 21 | 2 |
| 1940 | 16 | | | 2 |
| 41 | 13 | | | |
| 42 | 17 | | | |
| 43 | 18 | | | |
| 44 | 16 | | | |

Table 2 shows how many poems were chosen by Rummo's anthology (1967) from every calendar year. Figure 2 shows the results graphically from 1900 on, following the same format as used in the previous Figure. The general pattern is much the same, with some differences. There is a peak in 1905-09, partly reflecting the poetic reaction to the 1905 revolution. The general rise, from 1900 to the late 1930s, is less rapid and regular. World War II does not result in a decrease: publication difficulties could not deter poets from writing and, also, many "ideologically correct" war songs have been

included. However, already by 1945 a decline sets in, and in 1948-53 the lack of entries becomes so blatant that it becomes very hard, indeed, to brush away the notion of a "gap." The low points with only two poems selected per year, as they occur in 1949 and 1951, have no precedents since 1922. A three-year period with only seven poems selected, as is the case from 1949 to 1951, is unprecedented since the 1800s. If being put back into the past century does not represent a gap in history, what would? Figure 2 also shows, as a dashed curve, the number of exile poems included, from 1945 to 1955. Despite ideological bias against selecting them, the exile poems are actually more numerous than poems from Soviet-held Estonia, during every year from 1949 to 1952.

Figure 2. Estonian poems selected by Rummo (1967). Data from Table 2.



Let us look at some samples of the seven items dating from the deepest gap period (1949-51) which are selected for the anthology. Three of them (Rummo 1967: 663, 664 and 766) could be classified as "romance of Stalinist duty." A characteristic example would be the following strophe from a song by Debora Vaarandi:

But I rarely get to see my sunshine maid,
for she's busy leading our cattle brigade.

Two other items deal with capitalism (Rummo 1967: 380 and 405). August Alle is typical:

No, buster, no,
gold-fanged Wall Street boss,
the Earth is not a pancake,
it cannot be gobbled up!

The remaining two items of the cream of the Gap consist of a nice ballad in the tradition of Marie Under and Betti Alver, by Ain Kaalep ("The Monk's Kiss," in Rummo 1967: 861), and a rather simplistic but ideologically daring fable by Hugo Angervaks (Eduard Päll) in which a Frog is advising his son (Rummo 1967: 487):

When you criticize the Stork,
do not call him by the name . . .

Both are likely to have been written "for the drawer," to be published only much later, after the Stork's death. Since even the drawers were not stork-proof, one can understand that little was written in that category. But one may be left wondering why much more was not piled up during the gap years in terms of Wall-Street and cattle-brigade poetry, if what is presented is considered fit for anthology. However, the purpose of this study is not to explain the reasons for the existence of the History Gap. Suffice to have sketched two graphical portraits which together strongly suggest that a gap did occur. Regarding creativeness, the bottom was reached in 1948-53. Regarding publication, there was, not surprisingly, a time lag of one to two years, placing the nadir at 1949-55.

It is important to notice that the bottom was not reached immediately at the end of the war but several years later. Thus one cannot accept war losses as a partial cause for the gap, as suggested by Utt (1968), unless one assumes that some sort of a war against Estonian writers continued until about 1953.

Some notes about methodology are in order. Why use anthologies and biographical notes rather than data on total book output on one hand, and extent of coverage in literature history books on the other?

Regarding total book output, uniform data are hard to find, to distinguish between books and slim brochures, and between original literature, translations, and non-literary books. For the first 400 years of Estonian printed word, precise year-by-year figures for book and brochure publication separately are given in *Eesti raamat 1535-1935* (Antik 1936) where some breakdown by topics also is given. For the later period, one would approach with great hopes a presumably similar and more voluminous *Eesti raamat 1525-1975* (Miller 1978), but one faces disappointment. Even Antik's data are reproduced only partially, and without proper credit given (cf. Miller 1978: 106 and 108, and Antik 1936: 26-29, 38 and 63). For 1532-1917 Miller has tables, but for 1918-1939 he has only a graph of total output in Estonia and a table for Estonian books published in Russia (pp. 106-108, 201, 229). For 1940-1945, only books published under Soviet control are tabulated, thus omitting any data on German occupation period (Miller 1978: 263). For the post-1945 period all Estonian-language books published outside Estonia are passed under silence, although the same policy is not applied to previous periods (pp. 107, 229). Soviet Estonian production 1946-1974 is given by five-year brackets, and data mislabeling comes close to falsification: while previously "Printed Matter" was presented as the sum of "Books" and "Brochures" categories (p. 106), now the table on production of "Books" actually also includes brochures, a fact mentioned only casually within the text (pp. 262-263). One is left with the impression of deliberate presentation of non-comparable data in an attempt to show the 1945-74 period as more productive. The wild criss-crossing of categories (by language, translation status, topic area, and age group addressed) in more detailed tables for 1940-74 (Miller 1978: 263-308) reinforces this impression of lack of professionalism in an otherwise valuable book. Little useful data emerge. A listing of yearly number of original literary works published in Estonia from 1945 to 1960, as given by Magi (1972: 89), confirms the existence of the Gap, but the incomplete description of criteria and sources limits the value of this exile analysis.

Regarding overview books of history of literature, the extent of year-to-year variations in coverage is impossible to measure objectively, since such texts perforce cover longer periods without chronological order within the period. Thus Nirk (1970) covers the postwar period in general, and then also author by author. There is also the possibility that the reviewer might feel obliged to pad up a period which seems to come out as overly short from any a priori viewpoint. In an alphabetical list of authors (such as the appendix of Nirk 1970) this factor is minimized, since a general lean period does not stand out. The Rummo (1967) anthology occupies middle grounds, in this respect, because authors are not ranged alphabetically but by approximate chronological order of first publication date. The 460-page *Eesti kirjanduse biograafilise leksikon* (Biographical Lexicon of Estonian Literature — EKBL 1975) would, of course, be eminently suitable raw material, but I would rather leave such a massive compilation of dates to those who might think that the outcome would be any different from the one presented here.

Similar criteria for selection of raw materials should be followed, if one wanted to extend the study to other aspects of culture. A brief example for figurative arts is presented in Table 3, based on art reproductions in the Estonian Soviet Encyclopedia (ENE 1970). Here the gap would seem to have lasted a full 15 years, starting in 1940. It may have started with wartime shortage of paints and other materials, and continued due to whatever caused the gap in literature. A most prominent year was 1939 (with 6 reproductions). One may wonder whether a whole generation of emerging artists, producing every year better work than before, were suddenly deprived of opportunity to create, for the rest of their lives, so that in retrospect 1939 represents a cumulation of individual peak achievements. Actually fate was not that drastic. Several of these artists went on to surpass their prewar quality later on in exile, a creativity ignored by the Soviet encyclopedia.

Table 3

Number of Estonian Figurative Art Reproductions in Estonian Soviet Encyclopedia (ENE 2, 1970), by Five-Year Periods*

| Date | Number | Date | Number |
|---------|--------|---------|--------|
| 1900-04 | 0 | 1935-39 | 152 |
| 05-09 | 2 | 40-44 | 2 |
| 10-14 | 1 | 45-49 | 2 |
| 15-19 | 2 | 50-54 | 3 |
| 20-24 | 5 | 55-59 | 21 |
| 25-29 | 4 | 60-64 | 21 |
| 30-34 | 6 | 65-69 | 19 |

* Reproductions of paintings, etchings, sculptures and applied art in Plates X to XXI, between pp. 120 and 145 in ENE 2 (1970). Reproductions on text pages were not counted.

It would be interesting to know whether a comparable gap occurred in Latvian and Lithuanian literatures. Estonia underwent in 1950-51 a thoroughgoing purge of native communist administrators which had no parallel in Latvia and Lithuania. The utter lack even of sycophantic literature during the same period may have some connection with the purge.

The present Soviet evaluation of the Historical Gap has remained ambiguous. They could persevere with the thesis presented by Utt (1968): the Gap notion looks "harmful" from a simpleminded pro-regime viewpoint, therefore it better be "unfounded." Pick a few isolated facts, mostly from the pre-gap year of 1946 and the post-gap year of 1956, and pretend that the whole notion of a gap crumbles "when one turns to facts" (see the long quote in the early part of this article). This is the approach which, in addition to innumerable westerners, has been criticized by the highest authority in the Soviet Union (if one is to believe Nurmoja 1980: 11):

. . . There is no trick more widespread and groundless than picking out isolated little facts — the game of examples. One must try to lay a foundation such that one could stand on it, based on precise and irrefutable facts. To have such a foundation, one must take not some facts but all facts relevant to the issue under discussion, without a single exception.

Besides vulnerability to such rational criticism, Utt's approach also has a practical disadvantage for the current regime: pretending that the early 1950s were basically all right makes a regime spokesman about as believable and respectable to the Estonian population as would be a Christian clergyman who would try to maintain that the German forced christianization of Estonia in the thirteenth century was basically all right.

This parallel also suggests another approach the present regime could take. They could acknowledge the hard facts about the Gap, fully condemn the practices of those times, and point out the obvious major changes since then. If the notion of a Gap has remained "harmful" to the present regime, it has been so mostly because they have chosen to solidarize with the perpetrators of the Gap. They do not have to do so. This more truthful and, in the long run, socially more stabilizing approach is exemplified in the following poem published in Estonia, and dealing with another aspect of postwar history which was common to all three Baltic countries. Hando Runnel is only one among the numerous poets whose work could be presented as evidence of the very marked change in literary life in Estonia since the Historical Gap (1972: 111).

WOODS ARE WIDE

Woods are wicked, woods are wide,
many men in woods have died,
during war, and after war,
rarely mentioned any more.

Many men starvation-bent,
many bloodhounds tracked the scent
in the woods with danger fraught,
every single man was sought.

Many men were found,
deported, many men to arms resorted.
Bunkers in the woods were built.
Many mouths were filled with silt.

Many wolves howled at the graves,
many days to calm the waves,
till the memory was shed
of the woods of grief and dread.

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