

Facing the Otherness: Crossing the Finnish-Soviet Estonian Border as Narrated by Finnish Tourists

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Abstract

This study examines Finnish travellers' experiences of travelling across the sea frontier between Finland and Soviet Estonia during the period of 1965–1991. The article focuses on the narratives of Finnish tourists about border crossings and cultural encounters. The analysis concentrates on travellers' relations and conceptions of the former Soviet Estonia and their descriptions of facing cultural otherness during their travels. The concept of otherness is used as an analytical tool to interpret the narratives.

Keywords: Finnish-Soviet Estonian border, Soviet Estonia, Finnish tourism, narrative, otherness

Introduction

Having lived in Estonia for a while now, it is especially funny to think about my first trips when many things behind the Gulf seemed to be strange and unusual, even inconceivable. In the last twenty years Finland and Estonia have become closer to each other, and those travellers who cross the Gulf today probably do not undergo the same kind of culture shock.¹ (148–152)

The quotation above was written by a Finnish man who lives in Estonia. In the narrative, he reflects on his relationship with former Soviet Estonia and the present-day independent Estonia. According to his narrative Finland and Soviet Estonia differed significantly, whereas the present day Estonia and Finland are culturally close. Despite the fact that Finns and Estonians were actively interacting with each other prior to WWII, the war and closing of the border of the Soviet Union changed their relationship so that familiar neighbours became strangers to each other. Relations gradually became closer when cross-border travelling between Finland and Soviet Estonia opened again in 1965. When travel across the Gulf of Finland started, it played an important role in the convergence of the countries and cultural encounters (Salokannel 1998a: 108–109; Zetterberg 2007: 713).

Helsinki and Tallinn, the capital cities of Finland and Estonia, are located on opposite sides of the Gulf of Finland. The sea frontier and travelling across it thus forms a bridge between two state administrative and cultural centers. Regular passenger traffic through this water route has been active since the early 19th century (Graf & Roiko-Jokela 2004: 90). The seaway has been an important unifying bridge between the countries, enabling their interaction especially after WWII when Estonia was part of the Soviet Union and isolated from the western world. Regardless of the short geographical distance between Finland and Estonia (only 85 kilometres), the mutual knowledge of Finns and Estonians of each other has varied during different periods. For example political situations, changes in travelling circumstances, education and living standards have influenced the transfer of information between the two countries (Alenius 2002: 61–66, 73). Nowadays, the fastest sea lane takes less than two hours and it is the most widely used way to travel between Finland and Estonia.²

This research focuses on the narratives of Finnish tourists that tell about travelling from Helsinki to Tallinn and encountering cultures in the time of Soviet Estonia, starting from 1965 when a direct shipping lane was established, until the independence of Estonia in 1991. The research questions are: How are cultural encounters represented in Finnish travellers' narratives? What kind of conceptions and images did travellers have of Soviet-Estonia and its people? The research material consists of narratives that Finns have written and sent to a nationwide writing collection entitled: *There was a time in Georg Ots* (Silloin kerran Georg Otsilla, in Finnish)/*Across the Gulf of Finland* (Yli Suomenlahden, in Finnish), organized by the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society (SKS) and the

Tuglas Society in 2009–2010. In the writings, Finns remember their ferry trips to Soviet Estonia. Before 1965, Soviet Estonia was isolated over 20 years from western countries, and consequently the shipping lane was closed. Although Finns were able to travel by ferry to Soviet Estonia during the years 1965–1991, Soviet tourism to Finland was still strictly limited and difficult (Zetterberg 2007: 713). After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of Estonia in 1991, the land, sea and air routes really began to open up. Border crossing further developed after Estonia joined the European Union (EU) in 2004, and the Schengen area in 2007 (Finland joined the EU in 1995 and the Schengen area in 1996).

Border, Otherness, We and the Other

In this research, the conceptions of otherness are actualized in the narratives of Finnish tourist's border crossings from Finland to Soviet Estonia. National borders separate nations, countries and cultures from each other, so the role of the border is to make a difference between us and them. By crossing these borders, borders also become places of cultural encounters (Alvarez 1995: 462). When travelling to a foreign country, a typical way to conceptualize cultural encounters is to make comparisons and contrasts between the familiar and the unknown. This is because people understand themselves, their identity and nationality in relation to other people, groups, and societies. Establishing a difference between "we" and "the other" is mainly directed by culture. Different cultures make their own meaning systems which can be used to recognize members from the same culture and distinguish them from others. This meaning system also helps to act within a culture which makes it possible to manage and cope with it. Cultural meanings do not arise coincidentally, but are learned through social interactions and boundaries with other members and groups of a culture. Thus, we become aware of our own identity by clarifying *who I am* and *where I belong*. Cultures are seen as relatively permanent constructions of meanings and conventions which have their own temporal and spatial continuity (Barth 1969: 9; Bruner 1990: 33–34; Hall 2003: 85–86; Delanty 2011: 637). Consequently, cultures and traditions connect people to the previous generation's way of life. Because of this fact, the understanding of being for example a Finn or an Estonian includes the idea of a historical continuum which the individual or group can see themselves to be part of.

Cultural and subjective identities develop in a process where we are being socialized in our inner group and also in our connections with external groups. In this process, different groups and their members are assigned stereotypical conceptions. Stereotypes typically reduce, simplify and exaggerate human features, and by doing so, the characteristics of people are easily solidified and consequentially not given the opportunity to change. Stereotyping creates symbolic boundaries between *us* and *them*, which helps us to construct and systematize the world. At the same time, stereotypes also highlight the differences in connections alt-

though they are actually less than the similarities. The essence of difference, otherness, as well as stereotype, is ambivalent which means that their character could be both positive and negative. When creating cultural, social and subjective identities, it is necessary to recognize differences between people and cultures. However, the making of difference and the emphasis on otherness include intonations of threatening danger, negative feelings and antagonism towards “the other” (Bhabha 1994: 66; Hall 1997: 234–238, 257–259; Raittila 2004: 17–18). In addition, the way we represent our thinking about “them” and others has an effect on how we understand “we” and ourselves. Our ideas of the other, we and them, are not stable categories. Instead, they are constructed and changed in different places and at different times. The issue in these constructs is about power and rhetoric, rather than about the essence of otherness (Hallam & Street 2000: 5–6).

Beside the concepts of otherness and difference comes the concept of similarity; in order to distinguish between otherness and the familiar, we also have to recognize what is similar. To recognize similarities and familiarities relates to the knowledge and understanding of unfamiliarity and “the other” (Izotov & Laine 2013: 99). However, in cultural encounters, similarities are not given the same (or any) degree of attention, when compared to differences and originality (Löytty 2005: 162). This can be seen in the empirical research material analysis of this article.

Materials and Methods

My research material consists of selected texts that have been sent to the writing collection entitled *There was a time in Georg Ots* (Silloin kerran Georg Otsilla, in Finnish)/*Across the Gulf of Finland* (Yli Suomenlahden, in Finnish). The open writing collection campaign was organized in Finland by the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society and the Tuglas Society in 2009–2010. The texts have been written by Finns who travelled in Soviet Estonia and independent Estonia, and thus take the form of travel writing (see Duncan & Gregory 2002). However, these unpublished and archived texts do not belong to the institutionalized literature of travel books and cannot be categorized to a certain genre. Single texts do not necessarily compose a coherent story. Instead they can be made up of short and episodic memories, and so do not commonly follow the conventional forms of e.g. short story writing. The writers are not professional authors but rather people who found the theme of the writing collection interesting and were willing to share their travel experiences. Nevertheless, in their texts the writers compare their travel experiences, various countries and people with their own homeland and its people, so in that sense, the topic comes close to that of travel writing (Pelvo 2007: 13).

In the call for contributions, the organizers asked Finnish tourists to write stories about travelling to Estonia, and to tell what had happened during their trips,

what has changed and what has remained the same. In addition, the following prompts were given to help people recall their memories and to motivate them to write: my first trip to Estonia; my most memorable visit to the southern neighbour; the Estonian people; places and atmospheres; souvenirs from beyond the Gulf; mishaps and incidents; work and free time during the travels; are there differences between the former and the current Estonia?³ Altogether, 96 writers participated in the collection and sent 580 pages of text. All the texts are archived in the Finnish Literature Society's Folklore Archives in Helsinki and are available for research. In the archive, the text's pages are marked with numbers. In this article, the page numbers of the text references (archive sources) are given in parenthesis, e.g (508–510). Contributors names have been omitted to protect the anonymity of the writers.

The remarkable social changes that happened in both Soviet Estonia and in Estonia after its independence in 1991 have also been reflected in the travelling experiences of Finnish tourists. A comparison between the previous and current Estonia is part of the narratives' construction. However, travelling to today's Estonia is given much less coverage than past memories of travelling to Soviet Estonia – a time when travelling across the Gulf of Finland was full of excitement and surprises. As such, the Soviet period in Estonia takes a central position in the research. Thus, when I chose my research material from the writing collection corpus, a criterion was that the text should include narratives about travelling to Soviet Estonia. Guided by this, I chose 11 texts from the writing collection corpus, four of them written by women and seven by men. The writers did not give their ages, but on the basis of the texts I estimate them to be about 45–65 years of age, so they still remember the period of Soviet Estonia. The female contributors occupations are a farmer, a librarian and a teacher (one of the women didn't reveal her occupation). The men's occupations are a teacher (2), a headmaster, an engineer, a nurse and an information technology specialist (one of the men didn't reveal his occupation). Many of the writers were in the field of teaching which reinforces the fact that teachers have played a central role in building the cultural bridge between Finland and Estonia.

Judging from the texts of the research material, it seems that among the writers are people who have been active in the Estonian language and culture, and have increased their knowledge of Estonia by travelling and meeting friends and relatives there. The writer's texts reflect warm and close relations towards a southern neighbouring country which is repeatedly called a *kindred* or *brother* nation. According to the texts, among the writers are also those who have had a relationship with relatives in Estonia prior to WWII, so their picture of Estonia has been constructed over a long period of time. It is necessary to take into account that the writers are by definition, a selected group of people. Many of them have long-term relations with Estonia and Estonians and could therefore be characterized as

“Estonian friends” – those who have been interested in Estonia and its culture for a long time.

By reminiscing on travel from Finland to Soviet Estonia, Finnish travellers reflect on experiences such as what happened before and during their travels, and what kind of people and surroundings they met, both on-board and on-shore. The narrators examine their experiences and memories from the perspective of a Finnish cultural background. The emphasis on the narratives is on drawing a comparison between the Finnish, Soviet Estonian and Estonian people; how they look and act, and their way of life. Typically, the narratives concentrate more on differences and seldom on similarities and familiarities. The writers highlight this in their narratives and so it also becomes an analytical focus of this article. The temporal context of this research spans about 25 years, 1965–1991, including the time before Estonian independence. However, it is important to take into account that the memories have been written today. In this article, the concept of otherness (presented earlier) is used as a tool for textual analysis. In the analysis, I give sensitive consideration to the words and emotional expressions that the writers use in their narration. I also take into account the kind of interpretations the writers give to their experiences and emotions (Latvala & Laurén 2013).

To understand the narratives of Finnish travellers that are the focus of this research, I will next give a historical overview of the relationship between Finland and Estonia in the context of neighbourhood and travel.

Relations Between Finland and Estonia and the Revival of Cross-border Travelling

Finland and Estonia are kindred nations, both of whose languages, Finnish and Estonian, belong to the Finno-Ugric language group. Both countries are democratic republics and are part of the European Union (EU). Finland has about 5.5 million inhabitants and the amount of those whose native language is Estonian is about 40 000. The population of Estonia is about 1.3 million and the amount of Finnish citizens in the country numbers around 6000 (Embassy of Finland, Tallinn 2014; Estonian Embassy in Helsinki 2014; Statistics Finland 2013). The countries’ histories are connected to each other in many respects and they have various contacts, for example in the fields of culture, economics, tourism and education. In addition, Finns and Estonians have close family and kinship relations (Zetterberg 2007: 18–19, 582–583, 713).

Past and present Finland and Estonia are in many ways connected to their eastern neighbour Russia, by which they have both been ruled during periods of their history. The Autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland was part of the Russian Empire from 1809–1917, as was Estonia from 1721–1918 (Zetterberg 1995: 62).⁴ A national awakening strengthened in Finland at the beginning of the 19th century when Finns became aware of the fact that their language and cultural traditions

differ from other Europeans. In consequence, they started to actively create a nation of their own (Anttonen & Kuusi 1999: 307–319).⁵ Mainly inspired by the example of Finland, the awakening of Estonian nationalism also started and they began to create and form their own national culture and nation (Alenius 2002: 62–63). Strong feelings of brotherhood (*heimoaate*, in Finnish) between Finns and Estonians prevailed, and this encouraged Finns to assist the Estonians in the Estonian War of Independence in 1918–1920. In that war, Estonians fought for their sovereignty against the Russian Empire and Finnish soldiers fought side by side with their Estonian brothers. As a consequence of the Russian Revolution in February 1917, Finland managed to disengage itself from Soviet Russia and declare its independence. Soon after in 1918, Estonia managed to do the same (Lukkari 1996: 24–25; Zetterberg 2007: 504–508).

After they gained their independence, the interaction between Estonia and Finland became increasingly busy and diverse. Lots of contacts were created, especially between various occupational groups and in the fields of culture and sport. Finland also played an important role when Estonian universities began to develop and achieve western standards (Rui 1998). Especially, teachers were among the first who made contact with their colleagues across the sea and meetings and reciprocal visits between Finnish and Estonian teachers was common practice. Because of the co-operation of teachers, interaction between students was also vivid, especially among students of the Finnish-Estonian students' unions which were established in Tartu and Helsinki. The brotherhood perceived between the nations was highly appreciated and permeated the whole political field, as well as worker's associations and civil guards. Tourism also increased quickly and up to six ferries per day could cross the Gulf of Finland in summer, during the period following Estonian independence from 1918–1940 (Lukkari 1996: 38–39; Rausmaa 2007:16–17).⁶

WWII 1939–1945 caused many changes and strangled the free interaction between Finland and Estonia. Finland went to war with the Soviet Union but managed to preserve its independence when the war ended. Estonia however, was occupied by the Soviet Red Army in 1940 and became part of Soviet Union, along with Latvia and Lithuania. This led to them becoming isolated from the western world, whereas the independent Finland continued its active cooperation with the west and other countries. The previously close connections between Finland and Estonia broke down but for Estonia, Finland still provided a potential link to the west. However, as a western country, Finland posed a threat to the Socialist Soviet Union and therefore relations between Finland and Soviet Estonia were kept as distant as possible. Even though the official relations of the Soviet Union with Finland were good, in the secret reports of their authorities, Finland represented a western enemy (Roiko-Jokela 1997; Made 2002:113–114; Graf & Roiko-Jokela 2004: 33–36; Zetterberg 2007: 713). From the perspective of the Soviet regime,

travel between Finland and Estonia was also seen as a threat and was therefore closed immediately after their occupation of Estonia.

After a long-term period of closure and the death of Stalin in 1953,⁷ the Soviet Union began to gradually open up to the outside world and foreigners were allowed to visit Moscow and Leningrad. Most of the travellers came from socialist countries, but the number of tourists coming from the West was relatively low. Soviets made their tourist trips mostly to other socialist countries, partly because in the eyes of the Soviet leadership, their citizens' trips to western countries were seen as problematic; travel to the western capitalist world was thought to increase critical attitudes against the socialist and communist system. Therefore the travel of Soviets citizens to western countries was kept strictly controlled, difficult to arrange and subject to license (Syrjämäki 1986: 56–68; Lukkari 1996: 72; Graf & Roiko-Jokela 2004: 39–40, 91). When the travelling between Finland and Soviet Estonia was suspended, a traveller who wanted to make the trip from Finland to Tallinn had to have a good reason for their journey. Firstly, the traveller had to get a visa which required complicated arrangements. The journey had to be made via Leningrad, and finally, the traveller had to face the distressing border crossing formalities (Nupponen 2007: 16).

Travelling between Helsinki and Tallinn was suspended since 1939, but was revived again in July 1965. The open sea route was important for the interaction between countries, but for Estonians it had a more important meaning: it opened and fortified a way to the West, and consequently helped Estonians to release themselves from the rule of Soviet Union (Savisaar 2005: 16–17; Graf & Roiko-Jokela 2004: 87). The *Vanemuine* ferry service started from Tallinn to Helsinki on 7th July 1965 carrying influential Soviet Estonian politicians. The following day it came back bringing Finnish politicians to Tallinn. After a couple of days, the Finnish *s/s Wellamo* started from Helsinki, bringing tourists to Tallinn (Graf & Roiko-Jokela 2004: 87). Also, the Finnish passenger ships *s/s Ariadne* and *s/s Silja II* began operating on the route. However, the route was unprofitable and the Finnish parties stopped their ship traffic after only a few years. The Estonian *Vanemuine* continued its traffic, and was later supplemented by the *m/s Tallinn* and *m/s Georg Ots*. The Finnish Finnlines company later arranged cruises to Tallinn in the 1970's with their *m/s Ilmatar* and *m/s Finnhansa* vessels (Nupponen 2007: 16; Yle, Elävä arkisto 2011).

After WWII, Finland and other western countries had to accept the fact that Estonia as a nation was gone and had become a part of the Soviet Union (Made 2002: 122–123; Rausmaa 2013: 20). When the border between Finland and Soviet Estonia was closed, Finns got their information about Estonians mostly from the West, from old “Estonian friends” (*estofilit*, in Finnish), Estonian refugees and expatriates. The countries maintained their relations but their interactions were conducted from above, and when the shipping lane was opened the meetings between Finns and Estonians were organized in the terms of goodwill visits (Salo-

kannel 1998b: 15). The former president of the Republic of Estonia (from 1992 to 2001), Lennart Meri, has stated that the reopening of travel between Tallinn and Helsinki was a social phenomenon beyond comparison in European history, although the travel was parallel (Salokannel 1998a: 108–109).⁸ Finns were able to visit Soviet Estonia even though they were under the restrictions and control of the Soviet administration, but Estonians who wanted to visit Finland were still strictly controlled and only the chosen few were granted a license to travel (Graf & Roiko-Jokela 2004: 91). Even though Estonians were not able to visit Finland as much as Finns were able to visit Soviet Estonia, the cultural bridge between the countries strengthened because of the opened sea lane. The sea lane gave an opportunity to maintain personal relations between Finns and Estonians that had been created before it was opened. Gradually, along with the relations between private citizens, various organizations also began to create forms of cooperation. People who were active in cultural life on both sides of the Gulf of Finland played an important role, for example, by establishing various friendship organizations such as the *Tuglas Society*⁹ which was found in Helsinki 1982 (Ylönen 1998: 352–357; Rauhala 2002: 432; Rausmaa 2007: 40–55).

Cultural Encounters on a Ship

In the research material of this study, it is typical that the narratives of Finnish travellers start with the episodes of writers' first trips to Soviet Estonia and their reflections about encounters between western and eastern cultures on board. During the Soviet period, the number of the passengers was limited and under the predetermined travel programs of the time, travel should happen in groups (Graf & Roiko-Jokela 2004: 91). The control of the Soviet authorities is reflected in memories where Finnish tourists remember their travels at the end of 1960's when the shipping lane had just opened after a closure of 20 years. This control of travelling continued until the beginning 1990's. Estonia was inaccessible and closed for a long time, and right after the shipping lane was opened, Finnish tourists found it as providing an exciting opportunity. According to the narratives, the Finnish passengers departed on the ship with a sense of excitement, but at the same time they were nervous about the Soviet authorities' strict control. Already in Helsinki harbour, before going aboard, their attention was drawn to the symbols of the Soviet Union on the ship. For example, one writer states that "it was very strange to get on board when the chimney was bedecked with the hammer and sickle" (139–137).



A Finnish family crossing the Gulf of Finland by *Georg Ots* to Tallinn.
Foto: Jukka Ristolainen.

Only a few decades earlier Finland had been at war with Soviet Union, and thus stepping aboard aroused mixed feelings: the journey was to Soviet Estonia which, however, was part of the Soviet Union – the former enemy of Finland. After WWII, the Soviet Union was closed and ordinary Finns knew hardly anything about it. Most Finnish tourists did not know much about travelling to the Soviet Union and had little idea of what to expect. As travel became more frequent, stories about circumstances in Soviet Estonia spread quickly, so travellers were then able to construct preconceptions about their travels. This made the travel preparation easier and lessened the surprise of cross-cultural encounters on both the border and in Soviet Estonia. However, these first trips were in most cases full of new and astonishing experiences, aroused by different cultural encounters. Before travel and on the ship, Finnish passengers had to adjust to Soviet conventions that they felt to be strange. They strived to follow the official rules related to travelling because if they didn't, it was known to cause trouble. According to the narratives,

there were many strange rules. For example, at the time, travelling with the whole family was forbidden. It was rare to defy this rule and if someone did so, it attracted attention. This kind of bravado could have been questioned by others, as seen in the following text:

When the shipping lane then opened in 1965 we immediately ordered a trip to Tallinn. The Furniture Retailers organization of Kymenlaakso started an unforgettable journey in midsummer. There were my parents-in-law, me and my husband. That attracted the attention. We were cautiously asked, how it was possible that so many family members had got permission to travel – so typical of the Soviet time.

Everything was new and strange, already on the ship. The customs officers on the ship started checking immediately when the ship departed, then a four hour customs inspection in the harbour. I had *Kotiliesi* [a women's magazine, KL] to read during the trip, and it was scrutinised for over an hour in the backroom; perhaps they were afraid porn and politics would be imported into the country.¹⁰ (508–510)

The authorities' control on board is depicted and criticized in the narratives of Finnish tourists, and by these descriptions the narrators are drawing a difference between Finns and Soviets. In the text example above, the "Soviet time" represents the stereotypical impressions of both the Soviet and the Soviet Union, where people were controlled from above. The writer describes the customs officers' long-lasting checks on board and in the harbour as "new" and "strange". The narrative reflects the censorship enforced in Soviet Estonia which fed on communist ideology where exposure to western, political, religious and pornographic influences across the border was controlled (Ermolaev 1997: 181–257; Graf & Roiko-Jokela 2004: 40–47). The effects of censorship were realized in border practices where, for instance, passengers' western magazines and books were confiscated. For the Finnish travellers, the prohibition to bring products and things that were considered ordinary in Finland was so incomprehensible that they could not necessarily take it seriously during their first trips. As such, they may have had newspapers and magazines with them which then became a problem on the border and further delayed the border crossing (136–137, 508–510, 549–551, 167–170).

In the texts of the research material, the authors tell of the checking on the ship and on the Soviet Estonian border. The descriptions of these actions mostly express surprise and are negative in tone. The authorities' behaviour during customs inspections has also been unforeseeable for the Finnish travellers, because almost everything could be seen as suspicious, from a jumper to a rubber boot. The authors describe the customs inspections as irritating, oppressive and frightening. One passenger who was travelling to Tallinn in 1986 narrates his experiences like this:

At last, we came into the harbour. We went to the immigration control and customs. It took time. Passengers stood in a row like soldiers, waiting for their turn. When it was my turn to hand over my passport, the man in a glass cubicle stared chillingly at me and the passport, then again at the passport and me. In the end, however, he slapped a stamp in my blue covered passport. It seemed that the luggage of all travellers was rummaged through by the men and women customs officers. "Why do

you have two pairs of socks with you? For what reason do you need two sweaters?" Stupid questions for which you need to either fabricate as wise an answer as possible, or fell silent submissively. Those authorities really knew how to humiliate passengers. The air in the harbour hall was heavy. I felt dizzy. The reception in our sister nation was not very warm.¹¹ (143–146)

The text example above tells of the narrator's indignation and reluctant resignation to the authorities' behaviour and "stupid questions", which she felt to be humiliating. In general, for most of the authors who tell about their border crossings, the Soviet authorities' behaviour left negative first impressions of Soviet Estonia. They remember how the border crossing evoked unpleasant emotions, as well as physical sickness.

Wondering and Comparing

Finnish travellers describe their arrival in Soviet Estonia, the harbour, and the urban environment in their narratives. The descriptions also tell how they value the environment, thus the aspects of beauty and ugliness form central roles in the narratives. For most of the travellers, Tallinn was a new and unknown place, and they tried to conceive it by comparing it with the Finnish urban environment, which was familiar to them. So they made their observations about the city through cultural lenses. Observations like these are selective and the aesthetic interpretations that are based on these observations are also culturally bounded; we have learned and got used to our experience and thus value some things as beautiful and pleasant, and others as ugly and unpleasant (see Rolston 2007: 81–82; Downton 2009: 176–177).

The narratives of Finnish tourists concentrate mainly on the strangeness of Tallinn and its people. The harbour area of Tallinn is typically described by using negative characterizations, like "a terrible sight", "a dump of various junk and stuff", "gloomy" (167–170). When arriving at the port, various symbols of the Soviet Union drew the attention of travellers, like "the red and white stripes on the chimneys, on which had been painted the occupiers' visible signs of the sickle-hammer" (167–170), "there was a smell of Mahorkan (Russian tobacco with a distinctive smell) and some odd smell in the terminal" (136–137), "when we walked out of the terminal, a huge picture of Lenin was greeting us on the wall of the opposite building" (148–152), and "Volgas and Moskovits (types of Russian car) were revolving around us" (188–191). The observations that the travellers made describe Tallinn in a negative light and represent the dilapidation of the city: "after arriving in Tallinn we were struck by inconceivable raggedness and rusty cars" (1–2), "you heard mainly the Russian language on the streets of occupied capital" (549–551) and "the houses were badly painted and the air wafted the smell of brown coal, cabbage and Mahorkan" (136–137).



Soviet signs on the streets of Tallinn in 1981. Photo: Jukka Ristolainen.

According to the narratives, the Soviet occupation was thought to worsen Estonia, but to the Finnish tourists, the Estonians were seen to be reluctant in addressing this situation. The inhabitants' disinterest in taking care of their environment is seen in the narratives as implicitly attributed to the influence of the Soviet Union. This also comes out in the following narrative in which the author tells about her trip to Tallinn to visit her sister's family. The writer describes the building where her sister's family lived and compares it with Finnish houses and building techniques:

It was a new block of flats built by Russians, and Finnish builders [they were building a hotel in Tallinn, KL] lived there. – –The staircase was poorly finished, not even warehouses are in such a condition in Finland! There could be many different types of wallpaper in the rooms and on the ceilings as well. Moreover, it was so cold that electric heaters were needed, in spite of the fact that there was normal central heating.¹² (125).

The narrative underlines that the Soviet represents undesirable otherness. The author criticizes the Russian/Soviet ability to construct proper buildings. Their buildings are in the authors eyes totally different than Finnish ones; Finnish buildings are much better, because they are properly build and warm, whereas Soviet

buildings are of poor quality (“poorly finished”), tasteless (“different types of wallpaper”) and cold.

During their visits in Soviet Estonia, Finnish travellers watched and compared people on the streets of Tallinn. According to their narratives, it was possible to distinguish local people from Finns because of their shabby and modest clothes (136–137, 549–551). However, Estonians stand out from the Russians with their quiet, humble and kind behaviour (549–551). One writer tells, that “when wandering the streets you learned quickly to distinguish between the Estonian and Russian. The Estonian walked expressionlessly, looking down, while the Russian was walking briskly, speaking loudly, and relaxed and enjoying their existence.” (167–170). The Russians that the travellers met on the streets and shops are depicted negatively in the narratives; they were rude and arrogant: “Buxom Russian matrons who were standing behind their tables treated both foreigners and Estonian-speakers rudely” (508–510). In these narratives, the writers are contrasting Finns, other foreigners and Estonians (*we*), to Russians (*them, the other*).

Finnish travellers who visited Tallinn during the Soviet period have many memories of its hotel accommodation. Especially, the *Viru* hotel is remembered in many narratives. Built by Finns in 1972, the *Viru* was one of the *Intourist* hotels included in the State’s Tourist Office, and was numbered among the top five hotels in the Soviet Union.¹³ The USSR State Security Committee of the KGB recruited spies and informers to monitor different sectors of society, for instance administration, schools, and hotels. Their task was to control people (especially foreigners) who brought western influence to the Soviet Union. Since foreigners stayed in the *Viru* hotel, it also came under KGB control (Nupponen 2007: 9, 31, 50).

In the memories of the *Viru*, Finnish travellers tell of their suspicions about KGB’s infiltration among the foreign travellers, and how they feared to come under its observation. A writer who stayed in *Viru* in 1975 describes his suspicions:

Regardless of the things that we heard about microphones in the hotel rooms and that through them our conversations were recorded, we were not able to hide our impressions. Big Brother’s control, indeed, annoyed us in many ways. The microphones manifested themselves in other ways as well. [...] One day a man slipped in to my room behind the cleaner, and he did not say a word, but presented matters like currency change etc. by using written notes.¹⁴ (549–551).



Viru hotel in 1981.
Photo: Jukka Ristolainen.

From the perspective of the KGB, it was not appropriate that the Finns and Estonians met each other, because Finnish tourists were known to bring forbidden western products into the country and deal them to local people. Therefore Finnish ship travellers were controlled almost everywhere – in their hotels as well as on the streets (Graf & Roiko-Jokela 2004: 167–169). Regardless of the embargo on foreign products by the Soviet Union, some Finnish travellers brought for example coffee, groceries and western clothes, which they gave to their Estonian friends or relatives, or sold to other people in Soviet Estonia. According to the narratives, they found it both necessary and kind to bring different products to Estonians, especially when it emerged that the selection of food and other goods available in the shops of Tallinn was minimal. However, it was always a risk to bring forbidden goods across the border, and even if the products were successfully brought across, it was another matter to deal them without being caught. If the KGB got to know of these countertrades and western souvenirs, it would mean not only trouble to the dealer, but to the receiver as well. Thus, items were given to Estonian friends secretly and discreetly (e.g. 549–551).

Conclusion

Travelling motives undoubtedly influence how cultural encounters, other countries and their people are experienced and understood. As mentioned earlier, the writers and their narratives in this research are constructed for the most part from an exceptional group of people. They have long-term relations to Estonia, its culture and language, and some have relatives and friends there. For such travellers Estonia is not just a country through which to pass; instead, since their first visits to Soviet Estonia, it has since become an annual place to travel. The authors still remember the Soviet period when Estonia belonged to a country that represented otherness in a variety of ways. Their narratives show the remarkable role our memories and past experiences play in the process of making conceptions of different cultures and people.

The narratives of Finnish tourists about travelling from Finland across the Gulf of Finland to Soviet Estonia expose their experiences, but above all, their conceptions of Soviet Estonia and the Soviet Union, which they had adopted in both Finnish and western culture. The border between Finland and Soviet Estonia comes up very clearly in the narratives: it separates the eastern and western nations, which are seen as different in many ways. During the 50 years of the Soviet period, in Finland it was thought that Estonia was lost and it would be forever a part of the Soviet Union (Salokannel 1998b: 15). The generation that was born after WWII did not know Estonia as anything other than a part of the Soviet Union (see Onnela 1998: 69), and this can be seen in their narratives. According to these narratives, Soviet Estonia was almost unknown for those who travelled there

for the first time. For them, it represented *otherness* and “eastern”, something that differed from Finnish and western.

In the narratives of Finnish tourists, the descriptions of border crossings and travelling to Soviet Estonia are ambivalent. Travellers knew that on the other side of the border the Soviet regime prevailed, but the populous were also Estonians, seen as a sister nation. Some of the passengers already had contacts in Estonia before the shipping lane was opened, but most of them knew very little about the Soviet regime’s concrete influence on Estonian society and culture. So, the first trips were anticipated with excitement and curiosity. The strictness of the border authorities’ checks on board and again on shore were a nasty surprise, especially for those Finns who had not travelled to the Soviet Union before. Unpleasant and humiliating checks were remembered well after decades had passed, and these memories describe the cultural encounters with an emphasis placed on the differences between us and them. Consequently, the narratives of border crossing during the Soviet period are mostly told in a negative tone, and the writers interpreted them to represent a typical “Soviet time” and “Soviet spirit”. The descriptions about border crossings and writers’ interpretations of their cultural encounters are quite similar in the various texts covered in this study – on the whole, they repeat mostly negative characterisations of the Soviet period and Soviet Estonia.

The research material texts concentrate mainly on the period of Soviet Estonia and the focus is for the most part on the speculation about otherness and the establishment or creation of difference. According to the narratives, Finnish travellers looked at Soviet Estonia through their own cultural lenses, and thus the Soviet way of life and people were interpreted as being culturally different (the *other*) than that of Finns (*we*): they looked different, they acted differently and they spoke a different language (Russian). In relation to Russians and the Soviet Union however, Estonians are identified with Finns (*we*). Additionally, the narrators make a difference between Estonians and Russians because of differences in their language, behaviour and external appearance. Estonians are seen as resigned victims who were forced to give up their western culture under the pressure of Soviet power.

The Soviet Union and all things “Soviet” represents otherness in the narratives of Finnish travellers, and invariably it means something negative: the disrepair of buildings and the whole cityscape of Tallinn, the lack of food supplies and commodities, the control of Big Brother, and the dominance of the Russian language and other cultural signs appear everywhere. Estonian culture and Estonians are represented as something that is hiding in silence and remains in the background. For example, elements of Estonian history such as their old buildings, songs and other oral history – actually, all considered as good and beautiful – are thought to be preserved from the corruption of the Soviet Union, and to represent the past Estonian (western) culture.

Tallinn is still in the midst of changes today, although the last of the signs and scars that the Soviet regime left behind have been repaired and removed from the urban landscape. Its new architecture represents completely different values: glassed-in office-blocks, shopping centers, hotels and stores (Virtasalo 2008: 38). Modern-day Tallinn is a western city, and Finnish travellers visiting there today mostly shop, enjoy the various cultural and health attractions, or simply relax in the urban atmosphere.

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Notes

- ¹ ”Jo jonkin aikaa Virossa asuneena on erityisen hauska muistella ensimmäisiä matkojani, jolloin lahden takana tuntui olevan paljon outoa ja erikoista, käsittämätöntäkin. Parinkymmenen vuoden takaa ovat Suomi ja Viro tulleet paljon lähemmäs toisiaan, eikä ensi kertaa lahden yli matkustava varmaankaan koe samanlaista kulttuurišokkia.”(148–152).
- ² Finns make about two million leisure trips to Estonia every year and along with Sweden, it is the most favorite destination. Many ferries operate daily between Helsinki and Tallinn (Statistic Finland 2014; Tourism Tallinn; Viro.fi).
- ³ Cruises and book prizes were raffled for those who participated in the collection. See more about the collection at: <http://www.finlit.fi/kra/keruut/vironmatkat.pdf>. See more about the call for contributions and its results at: <http://www.finlit.fi/kra/keruut/vironmatkattulos.htm>
- ⁴ Finland was part of the Kingdom of Sweden until the end of Finnish War in 1808–1809, when Finland was ceded to the Russian Empire as the autonomous Grand Duchy of Finland (Zetterberg 1995: 62).
- ⁵ Finland’s educated classes began to make determined efforts to promote Finnish national unity and the emergence of nationalism at the beginning of the 19th century. The Finnish national epic *Kalevala*, compiled by Elias Lönnrot, came out in 1835 and it has an important meaning for the creation of the Finnish nation (Anttonen & Kuusi 1999: 307–319).
- ⁶ Regular travelling between Helsinki and Tallinn began already in 1837 (Lukkari 1995: 39).
- ⁷ Joseph Stalin was a general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the leader of the country from 1922–1953. Stalin ruled Soviet-Estonia during the period of 1944–1953 (Lukkari 1995: 68–71).
- ⁸ From the time of opening up until August 1967, 15 000 Finns had already visited Tallinn which was a remarkable amount in those days (Nupponen 2007: 17). Travel across the Gulf

of Finland was however asymmetric: 200 000 Finns visited Tallinn whilst only 20 000–30 000 Estonians visited Finland (Graf & Roiko-Jokela 2004: 91).

- ⁹ *Tuglas Society* (Tuglas-seura, in Finnish) is a friendship society that connects Finns and Estonians. Its main purposes are to support the interaction between Finland and Estonia, and to increase the mutual knowledge of each (Tuglas Society: 2014).
- ¹⁰ ”Kun sitten vesitie vuonna 1965 avautui, tilasimme heti matkan Tallinnaan. Kymenlaakson Huonekalukauppiasyhdistys lähti keskikesällä unohtumattomalle matkalle. Meidänkin perheestä appivanhempani ja minä mieheni kanssa. Sepä herätti huomiota. Meiltä kysyttiin varovasti, miten on mahdollista, että samasta perheestä on päässyt matkustamaan niin monta henkeä – neukkuajalle tyypillistä. Kaikki oli uutta ja outoa jo laivalla. Tullimiesten tulo laivaan jo kaukana ulapalla tarkastukseen, neljä tuntia kestänyt tullitarkastus satamassa. Matkalukemiseksi ottamaani Kotiliettä tutkittiin takahuoneessa toista tuntia kai peläten maahan tuotavaa pornoa tai politiikkaa.” (508–510).
- ¹¹ ”Vihdoin tultiin satamaan. Purkauduttiin passintarkastukseen ja tulliin. Siinä kuluiakin aikaa. Matkustajat seisoivat tiukoissa riveissä kuin sotilaat, odottaen vuoroaan. Kun oma vuoroni tuli ojentaa passini, mies lasikopissaan tuijotti hyytävästi vuoroin passia, vuoroin minua, sitten taas passia ja minua. Löi sentään lopulta leiman sinikantiseeni. Tullimiehet ja -naiset tuntuivat penkovan jokaisen maahan tulevan matkalaukut. ”Miksi teillä on kahdet sukat mukanaan? Mihin tarvitsette villapuseroa?” Tyhmiä kysymyksiä, joihin oli syytä keksiä joko mahdollisimman viisas vastaus, tai vaieta nöyrästi. Ne virkamiehet osasivat todella nöyryyttää matkustajia. Ilma satamahallissa oli raskasta. Pyörrytti. Vastaanotto veljesmaassa ei ollut kovin lämmin.” (143–146)
- ¹² ”Se oli uusi venäläisten rakentama kerrostalo, jossa suomalaiset rakentajat asuivat. – – Rappukäytävä oli surkeasti viimeistely, ei Suomessa ole edes säilytystilat siinä kunnossa! Huoneissa saattoi olla montaa eri tapettia ja katossa myös. Lisäksi siellä oli niin kylmä, että piti olla sähköpatterit, vaikka oli normaali sähkölämmitys” (125).
- ¹³ The *Viru* hotel still operates in Tallinn but has become a part of the chain of Finnish *Sokos* hotels (Nupponen 2007: 9, 31).
- ¹⁴ ”Vaikka olimme kuulleet huhuina, että Viru-hotellin huoneissa oli mikrofoneja, joilla äänitettiin huonekeskusteluja, emme käsityksiämme osanneet salailla. Isoveljen valvonta tosin kiussasi monella tavalla. Mikrofonit kävivät muullakin tavalla ilmi. – – huoneeseeni livahti kerran siivoojan mukana mies, joka ei puhunut sanaakaan, mutta esitti rahanvaihto ynnä muita asioita kirjoittamallaan lapuilla.” (549–551).

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