

SUMMARY

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*Free Spaces in an Authoritarian System: The Students' Building Brigades of the Estonian SSR*

Most Estonians perceive the period of Soviet Estonia, the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR), merely as a time of occupation by the Soviet Union. Hence, today hardly anything is celebrated that was linked to Estonia's Soviet past. However, an exception to that are the Estonian Students' Building Brigade, the so-called *Eesti Üliõpilaste Ehitusmalev* (EÜE). This is surprising as it was an inherent part of the Soviet youth organization *Komsomol*. With its clear ideological-educational function these brigades were an essential part of the political-authoritarian system. However, many former students recall those summers spent in the EÜE-brigades as the best and most liberal experiences that they could remember during the Soviet time. Not only could they dress and behave like they wanted to, but also speak in an open and free manner. The EÜE as a phenomenon can be described as a free space (*gesellschaftlicher Freiraum*), where specific forms of dialogue and activism were encouraged and protected from harassment. In other words, in the EÜE, students did not have to comply with the social-political everyday expectations of Soviet society.

To sum up, the EÜE was, on the one hand, part of the political-authoritarian system but, on the other hand, provided a free space that ran contrary to its political purpose. This paradox triggered the study which provided the material for this article. The aim of the study was to explore the existence of such a free space as well as how the students made use of it and to shed light on its underlying mechanisms, particularly, its historical foundations. In that regard, this study contributes to the rather young historical literature dealing with former socialist systems, which analyze repression and power relations in the everyday life of individuals.

By analyzing the free space that EÜE provided for the students, we can gain a more differentiated understanding of how everyday life was in the authoritarian system of the Soviet Union, especially, in the Estonian SSR. Oral history forms an important element for the analysis, more precisely, the memoirs of those who participated in the EÜE. Besides other historical sources, the study used twenty-one interviews and other written memoirs of the former EÜE-members. To shed light on the discrepancies between the political-ideological expectations and the lived-reality, those oral history documents were compared to Soviet newspaper articles, books and the official EÜE-guidelines.

The historical-institutional development of the EÜE in Estonia and the secretly conducted student traditions, dating back to the First Estonian

Republic, have fostered the rise and the existence of that particular free space. The latter was used by the EÜE-members, not only for criticizing the political system of the Estonian SSR and the Soviet Union, but also to simply express creativity, to have fun and play student pranks. Estonias' geographical location at the periphery of the Soviet Union, as well as its small and tightly connected population, contributed to the development of such a free space. Those conditions laid the fertile ground for a free space to evolve and safeguarded it based on control mechanisms within the EÜE and the Estonian academies. This behavior dates back to the so-called Kom-somol-opposition of the 1960s, which was active in the Estonian SSR. Its goal was not to abolish the communist system, but to gradually reform it. It ceased to exist after the Soviet military invasion in Prague in 1968, as it witnessed increased political oppression. Those critically minded young people found their way into the only recently established EÜE. They used the organization ingeniously in order to continue expressing their thoughts and feelings about the social and political environment they were living in. However, while such behavior surely did not fit the social and political attitudes that would have been attributed to a young Soviet intellectual of that time, it may not be qualified as an opposition or resistance against the Soviet regime as such. This complexity makes the analysis of the EÜE and of the free space it provided for Soviet Estonia a challenging and fascinating phenomenon.