

Post-Colonialism, Cultural Transfer, and the Soviet Experience in Estonian History

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Post-Colonialism:

- sometimes Soviet rule in the Baltic is presented as a kind of colonialism
- post-colonialism developed in the context of the colonial experience of non-European cultures governed by European colonialists
- colonial experience included usual a lower legal status of natives, some kind of racial segregation, the “superiority” of European culture and technology, and the feeling of inferiority; in fact, the actual setting differed from colony to colony; often indirect rule with the help of traditional elites was used and part of the existing patterns of life could persist while the local elites were “Europeanized”, but not considered to be equal; centre-periphery phenomenon
- in Estonia like elsewhere in annexed territory we saw the feeling of foreign rule, the remodeling of culture, society, political life and economics according to the Soviet model, but the population became equal citizens of the USSR (equal in the lack of freedom) and should participate in the utopian experiment of building socialism; best characterization of the process: Sovietization (which included in my opinion cultural transfer)
- in the opinion of the author “post-colonialism” does not fit to the Soviet context because of several reasons:
 - 1. periphery (Estonia) more developed than the centre (Russia/Moscow) according to all kind of different data
 - 2. lack of indirect rule, local political elites new and not traditional
 - 3. Soviet culture was presented as superior, but not perceived as such by many; Soviet culture had a universalistic and European approach, it was not totally different from Estonian culture
 - 4. lack of segregation, whether Russians were, in fact, preferred by the state debatable; Soviet experience similar for all citizens of the USSR
 - 5. culture and other spheres of life Sovietized, not colonized

Cultural Transfer:

- approach originated in a French context, more widespread in the German than in the English speaking world
- cultural transfer is a two-sided affair; exchange between cultures
- in the context of Sovietization we might speak of an enforced transfer from the Soviet Union to Estonia
- nevertheless, the USSR learned a bit from the annexed territories, too, and made a small part of Estonian culture through translations available to the entire Union (which happened seldom in the colonial context)
- Soviet nationalities' policy was at least for the nations with an own republic a way for cultural transfer opposed to Russification or colonialization, which was the experience of small, often indigenous peoples and less developed regions especially in Central Asia

I personally would prefer the approach of “cultural transfer” and “Sovietization” to “post-colonialism”, which makes more sense in a post-colonial setting. In addition, “cultural transfer” has a neutral connotation, while “post-colonialism” sounds clearly negative. Of course, the Soviet experience was mainly negative and often brutal, but this does not justify the inadequate use of terminology (like Soviet genocide or cultural genocide in Estonia etc). Estonia was a Soviet republic going through Sovietization and terror, but not a colony even when the ethnic composition of the population changed and the tendency of Russification existed. Usually “colonialism” is not used in Soviet studies concerning the European part of the USSR.