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Past, Present and Future: Youth Protest in the Soviet Union's Baltic Republics after Stalin

Robert Hornsby 

School of History, University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom
r.hornsby@leeds.ac.uk

Drawing on declassified reports from the KGB and Komsomol, this paper offers a new picture of dissenting activity among young people in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia between Stalin's death in 1953 and the end of the 1960s. In contrast to existing depictions of this period as a time of relative quiescence across the region, the article highlights key themes and forms of protest behaviour, ranging from political graffiti and vandalism through to mass public disorders and participation in clandestine underground groups. Further, while such actions remained well outside of the norm, we also see evidence of a wider social milieu in which ordinary citizens time and again declined to confront or report on those instances of dissenting activity that they encountered.

At the end of February 1953, only a couple of days before Stalin suffered the stroke from which he would die soon afterwards, the head of the Latvian branch of the Komsomol (the youth wing of the ruling Communist Party) wrote to superiors in Moscow about the state of work with young people in his republic. He started by bullishly insisting that the Komsomol in Latvia was growing ever stronger and its political work was constantly improving. The usual practice in such reports was then to outline a handful of the 'individual cases' where challenges or shortcomings had been identified, and to show that these apparent anomalies had been decisively dealt with. What Beman described next, though, were clearly not isolated problems that had been overcome. He wrote in particular of continuing 'occurrences of bourgeois nationalism and other anti-Soviet acts' among youth in Latvia, describing how 'enemies of the Soviet system' had catalysed underground activity among young people there, and continued working 'to tear students away from the Party and Komsomol'.¹

The outline of recent dissenting activity that Beman sent to Moscow from Riga would have looked pretty familiar to his fellow Komsomol bosses in Tallinn and Vilnius. Monitoring of the Lithuanian population around this time, for example, noted repeated cases of graffiti calling on people to resist Soviet occupation, along with slogans like 'Lithuania for the Lithuanians', 'throw the Russians out of our homeland', and 'death to the occupiers'.² Although rather short on concrete detail, a classified report from the Estonian Komsomol in March 1953 also noted that a number of schools in that republic had witnessed cases of hostile activity among young people in recent times. The seriousness of these instances can be inferred from the fact that Komsomol officials in Tallinn were requesting additional resources from the Estonian Communist Party leadership to bolster their ongoing struggle with what they termed 'anti-Soviet behaviour' among young people.³

In the first instance, the timing of these reports was noteworthy because they stood right at the edge of a critical juncture in the history of the Soviet Union. Stalin's death in spring 1953, along with the

¹ LVA (Latvian State Archives, Riga), f. 201, op. 1, d. 1052, l. 43.

² LYA (Lithuanian Special Archives, Vilnius), f. 1-k, op. 10, d. 154, ll. 3–20.

³ ERAF (National Archives of Estonia, Tallinn/Tartu), f. 1, op. 126, d. 13, l. 1.

plethora of reforms that followed soon after, was to change the country in some crucial ways, including moves to rein in mass repression and to soften some of the most egregious Russian dominance in the non-Russian republics. The timing was also significant in the sense that it roughly coincided with another important moment that was more specific to the history of the Baltics. From the point at which the three republics were forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union during the course of the Second World War, tens of thousands of Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians had taken to the countryside to wage a guerrilla struggle against control from Moscow.⁴ The Soviet regime's fight against what would become known as 'the forest brothers' was to be prolonged and ruthless. Mass deportations of the civilian population – which saw several hundred thousand people despatched from across the region to the Soviet East – ate away at vital local support for the partisans.⁵ On top of this, later KGB documents gave figures of about 20,000 fighters killed and another 20,000 captured alive from Lithuania alone.⁶ Running consecutive to that struggle, a determined 'Sovietisation' campaign sought to transform the region culturally, socially and politically, targeting for destruction or erasure people, institutions and symbols of the years in which Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia had been independent countries.⁷ Hopelessly outgunned, organised resistance was eventually finished off with a last major offensive by the Soviet armed forces in early 1953.⁸ This final defeat of the 'forest brothers' brought to a close what we might consider the first distinct phase of oppositional activity in the Baltics under Soviet rule.

The extant literature on resistance to Soviet rule across the region typically picks up again around the end of the following decade.⁹ From the late 1960s onwards, the Baltic republics were, according to one contemporary commentator, 'at the forefront of a growing discontent with the quality of Soviet political life', registering acts of protest on a scale some way above and beyond their share of the Soviet population.¹⁰ This next phase of dissenting activity – which could hardly have been more different from the post-war partisan struggle – mostly constituted a Baltic facet of a wider shift toward open and legalistic rights-based dissidence in the Soviet Union, primarily rooted among the liberal intelligentsia, and first gaining real traction in the wake of the 1966 Moscow trial of the Russian writers Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel.¹¹ The likes of Tomas Venclova – a poet and founding member of the Lithuanian Helsinki Group in 1975 – would be among the most notable participants in this wider Soviet trend. Another, final, phase of dissenting activity in the Baltics then got underway in the second half of the 1980s, as Mikhail Gorbachev battled to re-make the Soviet system while dissidents in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia strived to leave it entirely. Perhaps most famously, around two million people linked hands in August 1989 to form a human chain stretching over 600 km from Tallinn to Vilnius, as Popular Fronts (which included among their number plenty of dissenters from earlier years) mobilised huge public support for independence, helping finally to free all three Baltic republics from Moscow's grasp.¹²

⁴ On partisans in the Baltics, see, for example, S. Vardys, 'The Partisan Movement in Post-War Lithuania,' *Slavic Review* 22, no. 3 (1963): 499–522; M. Kukkk, 'Political Opposition in Soviet Estonia, 1940–1987,' *Journal of Baltic Studies* 24, no. 4 (1993): 369–84.

⁵ On this topic, see in particular A. Statiev, *The Soviet Counterinsurgency in the Western Borderlands* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); E. Zubkova, *Pribaltika i kreml', 1940–1953* (Moskva: Rossphen, 2008).

⁶ LYA, f. k-41, op. 1, d. 639, ll. 169–85.

⁷ On this topic see, for example, M. Saueauk and T. Hiio, eds., *Sovietization and Violence: The Case of Estonia* (Tartu: University of Tartu Press, 2018).

⁸ T. Tannberg, ed., *Politika Moskvyy v respublikakh Baltii v poslevoennyye gody (1944–56)* (Moskva: Rossphen, 2010).

⁹ See, for example, T. Remeikis, *Opposition to Soviet Rule in Lithuania, 1945–1980* (Chicago: Institute of Lithuanian Studies Press, 1980). Remeikis presents the year 1970 as the start of a new phase of dissenting activity in Lithuania. Kukkk offers 1969 as the start of this next phase of dissent in Estonia. Kukkk, 'Political Opposition in Soviet Estonia, 1940–1987.'

¹⁰ D. Kowalewski, 'Dissent in the Baltic Republics: Characteristics and Consequences,' *Journal of Baltic Studies* 10, no. 4 (1979): 309–19. Kowalewski's data on public protest during the period 1966–77 showed that a fraction under 19% of all recorded protest acts took place in the Baltics, despite the region accounting for only around 3% of the Soviet population.

¹¹ On the trial in question, see L. Labeledz and M. Hayward, eds., *On Trial: The Case of Sinyavsky (Tertz) and Daniel (Arzhak)* (London: Collins and Harvill, 1967); L. Alexeyeva, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993).

¹² On this theme, see A. Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); K. Gerner and S. Hedlund, *The Baltic States and the End of the Soviet Empire* (London: Routledge, 2018).

One of the purposes of the present article, then, is to show what was going on across the region in regard to dissenting behaviour between the end of the partisan struggle and the emergence of a cohesive dissident movement. While this is a topic that has already attracted some scholarly and public interest inside Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, work in the English language has thus far proved much more limited in scope.¹³ While not suggesting anything like universal passivity at the ground level, much of the most important scholarship on this period has tended to foreground the extent to which Soviet power was becoming increasingly stabilised and ‘normal’ in the region after Stalin’s death.¹⁴ Violeta Davoliute, for example, describes the emergence among young people of a Lithuanian identity with a distinct Soviet inflection, and notes former partisans returning from incarceration in the Gulag only to find people back home had politically ‘moved on’ in their absence.¹⁵ Things clearly had changed. By the mid-1950s, young people in the Baltics were increasingly entering higher education institutes, building careers, joining the Komsomol and more, rather than refusing all engagement with the Soviet regime. Nonetheless, plenty of them were at the same time engaging in an array of behaviours that political authorities considered ‘anti-Soviet’.

On the question of how one defines ‘dissenting activity’ in this context, it is worthwhile to begin with Roy Medvedev’s assertion that, in the Soviet context, a dissenter was someone who ‘does more than simply disagree and think differently, he openly proclaims his dissent and demonstrates it in one way or another to his compatriots and the state’.¹⁶ As I show, some did this via clandestine methods; others by much more public manifestations of discontent. Some aimed to stir their peers to action, or else to offend the sensibilities of officialdom, while others sought to resist specific regime policies and actions. While the kinds of youth dissenting activity presented below generally did not pose any immediate threat to regime stability and public order, they did represent a clear indication of long-term challenges for Soviet power in the Baltics, indicating that post-Stalin ‘normalisation’ was in some important respects a process of papering over cracks rather than fundamentally solving volatility and resentment as a more Sovietised youth cohort emerged across the region.

Focusing on the deeply unsettled spell around 1956, a 2006 article by Amir Weiner framed unrest across the Soviet Union’s Western borderlands (including not just the Baltics but also Ukraine, Belorussia and Moldavia) primarily as a product of the confluence of several broad socio-political developments that followed Stalin’s death, including the return home of former Gulag inmates (some of them unreformed nationalists), regime attempts to pursue a new and less overtly repressive approach to policing, and the cross-border influence of the tremendous public volatility in Hungary and Poland during the second half of 1956.¹⁷ As the present paper shows, however, while there surely was an intensified sense of ferment in the Baltics at that point, an expanded chronological framework reveals many of the same behaviours and attitudes displayed both before and after that particularly tumultuous year (albeit seemingly at a declining rate from the late 1950s). While very much stable and conforming in the main, sufficient resentments and animosities persisted, including among the young generation, that there was always at least some scope for real social turbulence to emerge. As such, the long-term prospects for Soviet power in the region remained decidedly mixed.

¹³ Among the most prominent museums to have featured materials on this topic are the Estonian History Museum (Tallinn), the National History Museum of Latvia (Riga) and the Museum of Occupations and Freedom Fights (Vilnius, attached to the Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania).

¹⁴ See, for example, V. Davoliute, *The Making and Breaking of Soviet Lithuania: Memory and Modernity in the Wake of War* (London: Routledge, 2014); V. Davoliute, ‘The Sovietization of Lithuania after WWII: Modernization, Transculturation and the Lettered City,’ *Journal of Baltic Studies* 47, no. 1 (2016): 49–63; Kuk, ‘Political Opposition in Soviet Estonia,’ 370. See also T. Remeikis, *Opposition to Soviet Rule in Lithuania*; E. Annus, ‘The Problem of Soviet Colonialism in the Baltics,’ *Journal of Baltic Studies* 43, no. 1 (2012): 21–45.

¹⁵ See Davoliute, *The Making and Breaking of Soviet Lithuania*; Davoliute, ‘The Sovietization of Lithuania after WWII,’ 49–63.

¹⁶ R. Medvedev, *On Soviet Dissent: Interviews with Piero Ostellino* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 1.

¹⁷ A. Weiner, ‘The Empires Pay a Visit: Gulag Returnees, East European Rebellions and Soviet Frontier Politics,’ *Journal of Modern History* 78, no. 2 (2006): 333–76.

Edward Cohn has also noted some of the behaviours described below in his important work on the KGB's emerging use of *profilaktika* (prophylaxis) in Lithuania during the Khrushchev period.¹⁸ Most significantly in the current context, Cohn suggests that much of the dissenting activity on show there in the 1950s and 1960s was broadly consistent with that already noted in other parts of the Soviet Union.¹⁹ The present paper seeks to add a little more nuance to this picture. There undoubtedly were commonalities between developments in the Baltics and other parts of the country, but also some important points of distinction. Broadly put, we mostly encounter forms of protest activity similar to those existing elsewhere, but often manifesting quite different themes of discontent. Further, we also see that the normalisation of Soviet power in the region during the post-Stalin years was not necessarily always accompanied by successful mass socialisation of young people. Lastly, I sketch out a number of themes and events which offer valuable glimpses of transition in regard to patterns of dissenting activity, providing a sense of how the armed struggle of the post-war nationalists came to be supplanted by the more open and legalistic dissent that prevailed by the end of the 1960s.

Going Underground

An April 1952 note from Moscow Komsomol boss Nikolai Mikhailov to the head of the Estonian Communist Party told of an underground youth group that was discovered in his republic – consisting of fifteen young men and women – whose adherents apparently maintained contacts with ‘politically dubious people’ and led a ‘dissolute way of life’ (which included producing falsified pornographic postcards of young women) that they supposedly aimed to spread throughout society.²⁰ Of course, the notorious unreliability of documentation on such matters from the late Stalin era in particular – when the security organs routinely invented all manner of crimes and far-reaching conspiracies, as political leaders demanded enemies be uncovered – makes such information deeply problematic for historians (though scholars have managed to excavate at least a few genuine underground youth organisations during the post-war period).²¹ While the terminology and political judgements contained in post-Stalin materials on dissenting activity continued to reflect the prejudices and prerogatives of the Communist Party and KGB, after 1953 such documents were nonetheless overwhelmingly anchored in events that had actually happened, rather than outright invention.

Declassified KGB figures show that a total of twenty underground youth groups were found in Lithuania alone in 1954, including a combined figure of more than 200 members.²² Data for 1957 then showed twenty-four groups uncovered that year, including a total of 136 participants.²³ In fact, the available statistical evidence – unfortunately, limited to Lithuania for the most part – makes clear that such groups were an enduring phenomenon of the age. Across the period 1961 to 1965, the Lithuanian KGB reported finding fifty-eight different groups.²⁴ On discovering four more in 1968, it lamented that such clandestine organisations were still appearing nearly every year, and uprooting the

¹⁸ See, for example, E. Cohn, ‘A Soviet Theory of Broken Windows: Prophylactic Policing and the KGB's Struggle with Potential Unrest in the Baltic Republics,’ *Kritika* 19, no. 4 (2018): 769–92.

¹⁹ E. Cohn, ‘Coercion, Reeducation and the Prophylactic Chat: “Profilaktika” and the KGB's Struggle with Political Unrest in Lithuania, 1953–64,’ *Russian Review* 76, no. 2 (2017): 275. Existing works cited by Cohn in this respect include V. Kozlov, ed., *Kramola: inakomyslie v SSSR pri Khrushcheve i Brezhneve, 1953–1982* (Moskva: Materik, 2005).

²⁰ ERAF, f. 1, op. 114, d. 10, l. 1.

²¹ See, for example, J. Fürst, ‘Prisoners of the Soviet Self? Political Youth Opposition in Late Stalinism,’ *Europe-Asia Studies* 54, no. 3 (2002): 353–75; V. Ioffe, *Granitsy smysla: stat'i, vystupleniya, esse* (Sankt Peterburg: ‘Memorial,’ 2002); G. Swain, ‘Before National Communism: Joining the Latvian Komsomol under Stalin,’ *Europe-Asia Studies* 64, no. 7 (2012): 1239–70.

²² LYA, f. 1-k, op. 3, d. 619, l. 114.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ LYA, f. k-41, op. 1, d. 639, ll. 169–185. The figure above combines the number of groups labelled as ‘anti-Soviet’ (17 groups with 98 members) and those termed ‘ideologically harmful’ (41 groups with 238 members). Official documents offer no clear distinction between the two categories (and this separate categorisation was anyway not consistently employed).

problem decisively was proving impossible.²⁵ Nonetheless, the available data does clearly indicate a steady decline in this form of activity there from the late 1950s onwards. Latvian documentation on the matter is rather less plentiful, but a 1967 Komsomol report, which insisted that recent efforts had successfully reduced youth attempts to form underground groups in the republic, does at least show that the phenomenon existed there, too, into the late 1960s.²⁶ Indeed, we might also add that what can never be known for sure is just how many of these clandestine groups' existence went undetected, and thus unrecorded, by the KGB. Therefore, the above data should be understood as representing only minimum figures on such activity.

Some groups saw members talking of inciting revolution and planning for violence, but others were much less strident. A secret circle that was uncovered in Vilnius during October 1962, consisting of eleven members, apparently existed under the pretence of being a jazz lovers' club but mostly their meetings (which took place in cafes and private apartments) were occupied with nationalist conversations, swapping anti-Soviet jokes and engaging in 'amoral behaviour', with one member apparently hosting orgies at his home (a claim which feels somewhat implausible, and may perhaps have been a KGB attempt to provoke moral indignation from prudish Party bosses). According to the ensuing investigation, the ringleader also wrote to foreigners seeking jazz records, and in return sent his addressees slanders about the Soviet system.²⁷ In the case of another loosely organised group that met secretly at the Institute of Art in Vilnius in the mid-1960s, participants (whose number varied between fifteen and twenty-five people) held private lectures and seminars about all manner of cultural topics, criticising the literature, theatre and architecture of the Soviet Union while praising that of the West, or else discussing the merits of artists and writers proscribed inside the Soviet Union, such as James Joyce and Franz Kafka.²⁸ Some other groups turned out to be not at all what they first appeared. As they looked into one underground youth organisation in Tallinn during the mid-1960s, for example, the Estonian KGB uncovered another group, by the name of 'Army of Free Estonia'. Further examination, however, revealed that the army in question consisted of only a single student.²⁹ It is worth highlighting in this context an additional challenge facing the scholar of Soviet dissent: groups (and, in some cases, individuals) were at times inclined to overstate both the scope and intensity of their activity in order to attract sympathisers and unsettle political authorities.

In plenty of other cases, groups actively took on the accoutrements of revolutionary organisations. KGB reports from Estonia in 1965 spoke of one group there which had begun producing its own underground newspaper – consisting primarily of transcriptions of Voice of America radio broadcasts. Others established systems of paying membership dues, dress codes, initiation ceremonies (including putting a cigarette out a new member's hand to test their toughness), along with bylaws and oaths that promised death for any member who betrayed the group.³⁰ Quite how far participants in even such subversive-sounding groups were essentially full of youthful exuberance and 'playing' at revolution is, of course, all but impossible to tell for sure. It is worth noting, however, that the KGB frequently came to this conclusion, judging most of the participants they caught to be politically 'immature' or else 'misled' rather than genuinely hostile to Soviet power (duly responding with prophylaxis, rather than penal sentencing). Certainly, the Soviet Union had a rich and inspiring storehouse of propaganda materials for young people that celebrated underground revolutionaries (namely, the Bolsheviks) and partisans (such as the legendary 'Young Guard' of the Second World War, immortalised in literature, plays and movies). While this kind of material clearly influenced youthful dissenters in some parts of the country, there is little concrete indication that groups in the Baltics explicitly drew much sustenance from such regime-generated propaganda.³¹ Indeed, though there is scant hard evidence on the

²⁵ LYA, f. k-41, op. 1, d. 671, ll. 86–90.

²⁶ LVA, f. 201, op. 3, d. 28, l. 257.

²⁷ LYA, f. k-1, op. 3, d. 627, l. 97–9.

²⁸ LYA, f. k-41, op. 1, d. 637, ll. 14–16.

²⁹ ERAF, f. 1, op. 302, d. 40, l. 15.

³⁰ ERAF, f. 1, op. 302, d. 40, ll. 1–40.

³¹ On regime propaganda and underground activity among young people in Russia during the late Stalin period, see in particular Fürst, 'Prisoners of the Soviet Self.'

matter, it seems much more likely that stories (confined to re-telling in the private sphere) of anti-communist partisan deeds would have been much more inspiring for many young Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians.

The period around the mid-to-late 1950s in particular often saw clandestine groups in other parts of the Soviet Union espousing a kind of radical neo-Leninist ideological position which reflected the fact that many dissenters of that time still believed passionately in the original virtues of a revolution that they understood to have since been corrupted under Stalin.³² There was little sign of such romanticised ideological faith among young dissenters in the Baltics, however. One unemployed war invalid in the Lithuanian city of Kaunas sought to create an underground group called 'the New Party' during 1963, with distinctly socialist leanings, albeit elements of its would-be programme were wholly out of kilter with Soviet political thinking, such as calling for workers to elect factory bosses, but found few others willing to sign up before he was eventually arrested.³³ Similarly, of the rather paltry number of unambiguously leftist groups found in Estonia was one that declared an intention to struggle for social democracy, explicitly rejecting both Western capitalism and Soviet communism, in the process making plain that prevailing Cold War political binaries were not always entirely rigid even here.³⁴ As and when Baltic dissenters' rhetoric did embrace or accept socialism, it could come with telling caveats which hinted at other priorities. KGB monitoring of private conversations at Vilnius Conservatory during 1960, for example, noted nationalist discussions as well as cases of students declaring themselves 'for socialism but without Russians'.³⁵

Also in clear contrast to other parts of the Soviet Union around the same time, a small handful of groups even took names with a distinctly far-right tinge, such as Lithuania's 'Iron Wolf' (surely named in reference to the inter-war youth movement 'Iron Wolf', which had harassed and occasionally attacked both communists and Jews) and Estonia's 'Kondor' (apparently named after the Nazis' notorious 'Condor Legion' that aided Franco during the Spanish Civil War), which had twenty-one members, all between sixteen and eighteen years of age.³⁶ KGB reports from 1961 also spoke of a group of Vilnius students making badges with swastikas on, and producing leaflets that read 'we are for fascism' and leaving them in city letterboxes.³⁷ In 1969, KGB reports claimed that Lithuanian youth in Kaunas were praising Hitler and greeting each other with 'Seig' and 'Heil' when they got together in cafes.³⁸ Some scholars have shown that such rhetoric could be intended above all else to offend Soviet officialdom, in whose discourse there was no clearer embodiment of antithesis to communism than Nazism, rather than to express any genuine political affinity.³⁹ Furthermore, fascism was a reference point that Soviet political authorities were especially liable to fall back on where Baltic nationalism was concerned. Nikita Khrushchev, for one, grumbled in 1959 that the troublesome Latvian Communist Party leadership – as it sought to build a more distinctly Latvian character in order to enhance its appeal to locals – was enacting policies like those of the authoritarian-nationalist regime of Kārlis Ulmanis during the inter-war years. Similarly, Soviet television shows and movies about the war in particular showed a long tendency of casting Latvians, Lithuanians and Estonians to play the roles of Nazis. Nonetheless, possibly as a legacy of inter-war regimes in the region, anti-communist rhetoric did incorporate unambiguous anti-Semitism at times. One anonymous leaflet found in 1956, for example, called on Lithuanians not to join the communist youth movement, falsely claiming that Komsomol members were 'mostly Jews' (playing to a particularly notorious fascist trope about Jews and communism).⁴⁰ Similarly, a

³² On this theme, see in particular Kozlov, ed., *Kramola: inakomyslie v SSSR*.

³³ LYA, f. k-41, op. 1, d. 627, ll. 260–63.

³⁴ ERAF, f. 1, op. 302, d. 40, l. 7.

³⁵ LYA, f. 1-k, op. 3, d. 619, l. 77.

³⁶ LYA, f. 1, op. 18, d. 115, ll. 36; ERAF, f. 1, op. 302, d. 40, l. 12.

³⁷ LYA, f. 18-k, op. 1, d. 9, ll. 1–3.

³⁸ LYA, f. k-1, op. 14, d. 144, l. 9.

³⁹ See, for example, V. Kozlov, *Neizvestnyi SSSR: protivostoyanie naroda i vlasti, 1953–1985* (Moskva: Olma-Press, 2006).

⁴⁰ LYA, f. 1-k, op. 10, d. 154, l. 20.

school group that was found in Vilnius (calling itself 'Free Lithuania') during autumn 1967 complained that Jews 'feel too free in Lithuania' and asserted that Lithuania would be a lot better without Jews and Russians.⁴¹

Another striking distinction from dissenting activity in other parts of the country – where underground groups sometimes spoke of revolution but hardly ever proceeded beyond mere words – lies in the fact that KGB materials show some in the Baltics at least took initial steps toward such acts. In 1957, for example, reports more than once mentioned youth groups being uncovered in Lithuania with secreted caches of firearms.⁴² A group consisting of twenty-seven members (all aged between sixteen and twenty-one) in Estonia at the end of the 1950s was found to have hidden a number of guns in a local forest 'for the coming war'.⁴³ Another school-age group apprehended in Tallinn during 1965 (whose members had apparently spoken of making a terrorist attack at a public event) was caught trying to construct a tear-gas grenade.⁴⁴ Other KGB documents from Estonia that year detailed a group whose manifesto stated that independence would have to be won through armed struggle, with members directed to acquire weapons and to learn how to use them.⁴⁵ We can probably consider this propensity to arms as a key legacy from the still-recent years of partisan struggle in the region, and the weapons acquired presumably were left over from earlier fighting. Furthermore, its declining prevalence, as the number of underground groups reduced from the late 1950s, helps us to perceive what we might consider a 'missing link' in the evolution of dissenting activity across the region, from organised and large scale armed struggle after the war to the peaceful and legalistic approach of later years.

In reality, of course, such mooted armed resistance posed only a very a limited threat to state security. Much more worrisome for the political authorities were Estonian KGB reports from 1965 which highlighted an underground group whose members had sought to compile confidential information on Soviet military facilities, equipment and troop displacements inside the republic, apparently with two possible intentions for the data they gathered: either to trade it to Western intelligence in exchange for material support, or else to use the information themselves to disable Soviet military capacity in Estonia, should a situation of war arise at some point.⁴⁶ Subsequent investigations confirmed that group members had indeed managed to acquire some sensitive information, and had also been to Moscow to figure out how to access foreign embassies there, but they were arrested before being able to transmit anything. Always especially concerned about Western subversive activity in the region, after the likes of the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany and France had all established some intelligence presence there before, during and after the war, the KGB had long overstated and oversimplified the impact of foreign intelligence efforts on unrest among young people.⁴⁷ Even in this overtly subversive case, though, the evidence suggests that the impetus for action came from inside the Soviet Union, rather than any kind of outside prompting.

Breaching the Public Sphere

From its very earliest days, the Soviet regime had placed great value on its control over public information and discourse, and this very much remained the case as the Sovietisation of the Baltics continued to progress. Probably the most common attempt to pierce this tightly-controlled public sphere, undertaken not only by groups but also by individuals, was the production and distribution of what authorities referred to as 'anti-Soviet leaflets'. Whether handwritten or typed, these were intermittently

⁴¹ LYA, f. k-41, op. 1, d. 651, ll. 39–45.

⁴² LYA, f. 1-k, op. 3, d. 619, ll. 1–71.

⁴³ RGANI (Russian State Archive of Modern History, Moscow), f. 5, op. 31, d. 133, l. 46. Notions of an impending war in which the West would defeat the Soviet Union were a recurring theme around this time, both in the Baltics and beyond.

⁴⁴ ERAF, f. 1, op. 302, d. 40, l. 12.

⁴⁵ ERAF, f. 1, op. 302, d. 40, ll. 8–10.

⁴⁶ ERAF, f. 1, op. 302, d. 40, l. 8.

⁴⁷ On KGB concerns about the involvement of Western intelligence agencies in the Baltics, see F. Kovacevic, 'An Inside Look at Soviet Counterintelligence in the mid-1950s,' *CWIHP Working Paper* 96, 2023.

found scattered in the streets, affixed to walls, left in mailboxes and more. KGB analyses made clear that such leaflets proliferated around major holidays, public events and historic anniversaries in particular. In that sense, they represented a deliberate challenge to the notion that Soviet power, with its accompanying cultural and political codes, was becoming 'normal'. The existing data also point to this being an overwhelmingly urban phenomenon, though that may not necessarily be a decisive indication of rural passivity – understandable itself, following earlier deportations especially – so much as a reflection of the fact that policing resources were spread much thinner in rural areas, and that this was also a means of protest explicitly aimed at communicating with unknown strangers, who were far fewer in villages. The efforts that the authorities went to in order to track down the authors of these leaflets – including fingerprinting, scientific analyses of handwriting and typeface, organising scratch search parties and more – serve as testament to how concerned the KGB were by such attempts to subvert the carefully curated Soviet public sphere.⁴⁸

As elsewhere in the Soviet Union, the most strident leaflets sought to expose regime lies about domestic and foreign affairs, and to mobilise compatriots. An anonymous leaflet discovered in a Riga middle school in early 1956, for example, called on students not to believe Soviet media coverage about the war in Korea.⁴⁹ Leaflets found that same year in Lithuania exhorted local youth not to join the Komsomol, and falsely insisted that 92 per cent of Komsomol girls carried venereal disease.⁵⁰ On 5 November 1960, twenty-one anti-Soviet leaflets (measuring 14 × 10 cm) were found scattered on the streets in the town of Alytus, calling on Lithuanians to 'not be bootlickers of the Russian blood-drinkers!' and announcing 'They, like ticks, drink our blood'. The trio subsequently apprehended were sixteen, fifteen and thirteen years of age.⁵¹ No less bluntly, leaflets found in Kalvarija in 1963 read 'Russians get out of Lithuania' and 'long live independent Lithuania', signed by 'the people' in fifty copies. Clearly, anti-communism and anti-Russian sentiment were to a considerable extent fused together.

A little while later in the same town, the KGB found sixty copies of a new batch of leaflets, calling on Lithuanians to 'raise yourselves for the struggle against the enslavers, break the chains of colonialism' and urging 'do not sell your conscience for a warm place and a soft life' as well as threatening that 'sooner or later every traitor will be rewarded for their "services"'.⁵² This final remark feels distinctly reminiscent of the violent struggles of earlier years, when those co-operating with Soviet authorities sometimes faced very significant danger for doing so. Nonetheless, the use of the term 'colonialism', rather than the more common 'occupation', to describe the nature of Soviet power in the region feels rather notable, and perhaps reflects a point raised recently in regard to Ukrainian nationalism around this same time. As Thom Loyd recently showed, by the 1960s some nationalists in Ukraine were becoming increasingly adept at using the Soviet authorities' own internationalist rhetoric – in this case, drawn from regime support for independence struggles against colonial powers in Africa, Asia and Latin America – to frame their own grievances against Moscow.⁵³

These leaflets were by no means the only written manifestations of protest activity. Some people eschewed the public aspect entirely and instead wrote anonymous letters (sometimes criticising, sometimes threatening) to high-profile individuals and to Party and state bodies or else to newspapers and radio stations. Across the early part of the 1960s, Lithuanian KGB records showed 283 investigations into people sending such anonymous letters.⁵⁴ Some composed and circulated poetry, like the Lithuanian who wrote verses such as 'Lithuania rising again' and 'Golgotha of Lithuania'.⁵⁵ Others

⁴⁸ LYA, f. k-1, op. 8, d. 207, ll. 5–12.

⁴⁹ LVA, f. 201, op. 1, d. 1052, ll. 46–7.

⁵⁰ LYA, f. 1-k, op. 10, d. 154, l. 20.

⁵¹ LYA, f. k-1, op. 10, d. 198, ll. 85–7.

⁵² LYA, f. k-11, op. 1, d. 1731, ll. 38–40.

⁵³ T. Loyd, 'Congo on the Dniro: Third Worldism and the Nationalization of Soviet Internationalism in Ukraine,' *Kritika* 22, no. 4 (2021): 787–811.

⁵⁴ LYA, f. k-1, op. 3, d. 639, l. 2.

⁵⁵ LYA, f. k-41, op. 1, d. 627, ll. 185–90. KGB reports noted the author of the poems in question also refused to go to university because she so hated the prospect of having to study Marxism-Leninism (an obligatory class for Soviet students).

dispensed with paper entirely, sharing their message in the form of graffiti in public spaces. In early November 1956, for example, walls at a Vilnius State University dorm were adorned with the words 'Long live the revolution in Hungary, we will follow its example!'⁵⁶ Similarly, KGB reports described Estonian nationalist slogans appearing on the walls of auditoria at Tallinn Polytechnic in 1965.⁵⁷ In Lithuania alone, the KGB conducted forty-two investigations into such activity during the early 1960s.⁵⁸ Again, such incidences did not pose any immediate threat to stability, but they did reflect the limits of normalisation, offering a visible rebuff to the regime's oft-repeated claims about the 'monolithic unity' of the Soviet people.

Attacking items and symbols that the Soviet authorities held as sacred was another important – and crucially, easily achievable – form of protest activity that violated the established public sphere. There were, for example, instances reported in Latvia during 1953 in which copies of Lenin's and Stalin's collected works were found defaced in school libraries.⁵⁹ In 1965 there were more than twenty separate cases in which unknown individuals ripped down Soviet flags in Tallinn.⁶⁰ KGB materials show that classrooms and student dormitories in particular were sites where politically problematic discussions and statements were aired by young people. There were also cases of school pupils in Kaunas working in concert to ask teachers deliberately provocative questions, and then making what authorities considered to be 'ideologically incorrect generalisations'.⁶¹ Pupils in Riga were reported to the KGB after declaring, in a class on the Soviet constitution, that life had been better in bourgeois Latvia.⁶² Undercover sources at Vilnius Polytechnic reported in 1956 on fellow students giving readings of anti-Soviet poetry, singing anti-Soviet songs and listening to foreign radio broadcasts.⁶³ In 1967, eight students gathered in a dorm at Vilnius Artistic Institute on 16 February, making what were branded as 'politically harmful remarks' (another widely-used term by Soviet officialdom that could be decidedly elastic in its meaning), complaining about the Komsomol and then defacing a placard intended for the upcoming May Day celebrations.⁶⁴ More than likely, countless such conversations took place without ever coming to the authorities' attention. Again, while they did not pose any immediate and tangible challenge to the Soviet order in the region, these types of behaviour did indicate that enduring frustrations and resentments continued to exist alongside the wider picture of normalisation, even among a youth cohort that was seemingly becoming more fully socialised into the Soviet system.

History was clearly an important factor informing both the themes and forms of protest activity. Schoolchildren in Vilnius made and wore badges with depictions of the 'Columns of Gediminas' (a Lithuanian heraldic symbol dating to the fourteenth century), insisting that classmates who did not wear such badges were not 'true Lithuanians', and called for the birthday of Antanas Smetona (the first president of independent Lithuania) to be publicly celebrated.⁶⁵ People also scaled churches and other prominent buildings to hoist national flags, which authorities then pulled down as quickly as they could. In September 1955, for example, four middle school pupils were apprehended as they attempted to hang Lithuania's independence-era flag from a telephone pole in the town of Kedainiai.⁶⁶ A KGB review listed 160 separate cases in the early 1960s of people illicitly flying the flag of bourgeois-era Lithuania (like today's flag, a yellow, green and red tricolour, as opposed to the official Soviet-Lithuanian flag of red, white and green with hammer and sickle).⁶⁷ For all that

⁵⁶ LYA, f. k-41, op. 1, d. 509, l. 315.

⁵⁷ ERAF, f. 1, op. 302, d. 40, l. 18.

⁵⁸ LYA, f. k-1, op. 3, d. 639, l. 2.

⁵⁹ LVA, f. 201, op. 1, d. 1052, ll. 46–7.

⁶⁰ ERAF, f. 1, op. 302, d. 40, l. 17.

⁶¹ LYA, f. k-41, op. 1, d. 650, l. 14.

⁶² LVA, f. 201, op. 1, d. 1052, l. 86.

⁶³ LYA, f. 1, op. 18, d. 115, l. 277; f. 1-k, op. 18, d. 92, ll. 20–21.

⁶⁴ LYA, f. k-41, op. 1, d. 651, l. 35.

⁶⁵ LYA, f. k-41, op. 1, d. 651, ll. 39–43.

⁶⁶ LYA, f. k-1, op. 10, d. 198, ll. 37–9.

⁶⁷ LYA, f. k-1, op. 3, d. 639, l. 2.

some recent scholarship has suggested that many of those who came of age in the region after Stalin regarded the Soviet system as ‘their own’ and ‘legitimate’, and saw the inter-war period of independence as ‘mysterious’ and ‘exotic’, there were clearly also others who felt a much deeper connection to their country’s past.⁶⁸

Marking ‘national days’ that had been made defunct under Soviet conditions was another part of the same picture. Multiple KGB documents show 16 February (the date on which an independent Lithuania had been formally established in 1918) as a day when young people persistently attempted to organise public actions, sent each other congratulatory postcards, sang patriotic and anti-communist songs, and when incidents of flying independence-era flags and circulating illicit leaflets spiked.⁶⁹ Conversely, there were also repeated instances of young people calling on their peers not to participate in Soviet public holidays, such as May Day and the 7 November anniversary of the revolution. An anonymous leaflet discovered in Riga during March 1953, of which 250 copies had been scattered, called on Latvians not to attend the upcoming May Day festivities – one of the key regime holidays in the Soviet Union – that year.⁷⁰ One youth under KGB observation was found admonishing his cousin for celebrating Soviet holidays, urging him to propagandise Lithuanian holidays and events like Easter instead, and calling on him to ‘act to keep your land Lithuanian’.⁷¹ Similarly, in what was presumably a concerted move, more than thirty Estonian youths refused to vote in elections during 1965, with others writing remarks described as ‘politically harmful’ on their voting slips.⁷² As Mark B. Smith has shown, such elections (like the festivities associated with major public holidays) were important for the regime primarily because participation signalled a willingness to recognise and conform to the rules and codes of the Soviet system.⁷³ Re-purposing these moments as a stage for protest activity, then, represented another knowing rejection of post-Stalin normality.

What Soviet authorities were generally most wary of was the prospect of large-scale public disorder. This clearly did have the potential to destabilise things, and quickly. As mass disturbances in the likes of Tbilisi (1956), Temirtau (1959), Murom (1961) and Novocherkassk (1962) made clear, the situation in the Soviet Union could be febrile at times during the first decade after Stalin, while the structures and mechanisms in place for managing Soviet society on a day-to-day basis could prove brittle when tested by large numbers of people in the streets. Two events in the Baltics have already drawn scholarly attention in this regard. First, in Kaunas at the start of November 1956, thousands of (mostly) young people, inspired by contemporaneous events in Hungary, congregated in a city cemetery to mark All Souls Day before taking to the streets flying the old Lithuanian tricolour, singing the country’s independence-era anthem, calling for the end of compulsory study of Russian language in schools and universities, and attacking shops and Party buildings.⁷⁴ The other major public disorder described in recent literature also took place in the same city, following the self-immolation (in protest against Soviet rule) of nineteen-year-old Romas Kalanta in May 1972. Around 2,000 young people gathered to demonstrate their fury, chanting ‘freedom for Lithuania’, with hundreds involved in running clashes with police across the city centre on the day of the funeral in particular.⁷⁵

Less widely known is the fact that the stage had seemed set for a re-run of the November 1956 Kaunas riot the following year, before rumours of imminent disturbances prompted pre-emptive action by the KGB. Party and Komsomol representatives held propaganda talks in schools, and

⁶⁸ On Lithuanian youth seeing the system as ‘their own,’ see Baločkaitė, ‘Pleasures of Late Socialism in Lithuania,’ 413.

⁶⁹ LYA, f. k-1, op. 8, d. 207, ll. 5–12.

⁷⁰ LVA, f. 201, op. 1, d. 1052, ll. 46–7.

⁷¹ LYA, f. k-1, op. 14, d. 144, l. 8.

⁷² ERAF, f. 1, op. 302, d. 40, l. 18.

⁷³ See M. Smith, ‘Popular Sovereignty and Constitutional Rights in the USSR’s Supreme Soviet Elections of Feb. 1946,’ in *Voting for Stalin and Hitler: Elections under Twentieth Century Dictatorships*, eds. R. Jessen and H. Richter (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2011), 59–80.

⁷⁴ Weiner, ‘The Empires Pay a Visit.’

⁷⁵ A. Swain, ‘From the Big Screen to the Streets of Kaunas: Youth Cultural Practices and Communist Party Discourse in Soviet Lithuania,’ *Cahiers du monde russe* 54, nos. 3–4 (2013): 467–90.

employees of both the KGB and militia (the regular police) were stationed at the cemetery in question ahead of time. Nonetheless, by evening about 1,500 to 2,000 citizens had gathered (with lit candles in hand) at the tomb of the unknown soldier of the independence-era Lithuanian army. Some of those present sang, some apparently abused Party and KGB people verbally, and some threw stones, refusing to disperse when ordered to do so. By about 21:00, attendees were successfully moved on and the cemetery closed, though this then threatened disorder on nearby Prospekt Lenina where crowds gathered instead, ending with a total of 105 people detained.⁷⁶

To the above instance, we can also add events at the end of October 1962, when a number of students from the Juridical Faculty of Tartu University held what started as a send-off for a colleague who had been drafted for military service. As the night wore on, the party grew increasingly animated, drunken and politicised, according to investigating officials. Komsomol reports noted youths later taking to the city's streets shouting slogans such as 'long live the Bundeswehr', 'Cuba no, Yankees yes' (a sure reference to the ongoing missile crisis) and singing what subsequent reports called 'fascist' songs (no precise detail was offered on the content of these songs, leaving open the possibility that they may have essentially been anti-communist rather than fascist per se, since Soviet authorities frequently elided the two). Culminating late at night with around 200 participants, there were drunken scuffles with police, graves broken at a nearby cemetery, and apparently even an abortive attempt to seize control of a radio station.⁷⁷

An unknowable number of other disorders were mooted or even planned but stymied by security forces, like an attempt during October 1965 by a group calling itself Free Estonian Youth to arrange a workers' demonstration in Tallinn.⁷⁸ There were also flashpoints that could easily have turned into serious conflagrations. In September 1960, for example, things grew heated in Tallinn after a group of Russian youths apparently beat up two young Estonians. The next day, a gang of twenty Estonians were out on the street looking for Russians to fight. The night after that, they found some, and a mass brawl ensued with thirty to forty Estonians attacking ten to fifteen Russians. Next, a much larger group of Russian youths gathered in response, and the cycle seemed to be accelerating dangerously, but the city militia managed to disperse the crowds and then took steps – such as organising talks in schools and at sports societies – to calm tensions, while the KGB began to monitor the situation on the street much more closely.⁷⁹ The available details are rather sparser, but it seems that something similar may have taken place in Riga during 1967, with the local Komsomol subsequently reporting on its attempts to bridge divides between Latvian and Russian youths there, by holding shared cultural evenings and marking holiday celebrations together, after a large fight between the two groups had taken place at one of the city's higher education institutes.⁸⁰ For all that Soviet power in the Baltics was steadily becoming more 'normal', there was still plenty of scope for public volatility to arise.

As one of the themes which came up again and again, it is entirely clear that the large and growing presence of Russians in the region (and in its biggest cities especially) was far from a niche issue in terms of the resentment it prompted. By the mid-1960s there were already around one million Russians resident in the Baltic republics – ostensibly there to fill a need for skilled workers, though in practice also serving regime efforts to 'Sovietise' the region by their presence.⁸¹ A decade later, Latvians made up only about half of their republic's population (ethnic Estonians stood at about 70 percent in Estonia and Lithuanians about 80 per cent in Lithuania). Everywhere, this aroused concern about the future survival of native language (newcomers were notoriously reticent to learn the local tongue, and Russian grew more and more pervasive in public life) and culture as well as resentment

⁷⁶ LYA, f. k-1, op. 10, d. 198, ll. 88–91.

⁷⁷ RGANI, f. 5, op. 31, d. 197, ll. 157–61.

⁷⁸ ERAF, f. 1, op. 302, d. 40, l. 9.

⁷⁹ ERAF, f. 5, op. 50, d. 8, ll. 58–61.

⁸⁰ LVA, f. 201, op. 3, d. 28, l. 257.

⁸¹ On this topic, see, for example, O. Mertelsmann, 'How to Define Sovietization,' in Saueauk and Hiio (eds.), *Sovietization and Violence*.

at apparent preferential treatment for incoming Russians in regard to allocation of housing, jobs and more. Noteworthy in this context was the fact that even the Latvian Communist Party under Edvards Berkļavs played to this popular resentment about Russian dominance for a time in the late 1950s as it sought to shore up its Latvian support base, before Moscow decided it had transgressed the boundaries of acceptable national sentiment, and extensively purged from office Latvia's so-called 'national communists'.⁸²

Social Environment

Among the most fascinating social trends to be noted in regime documents around dissenting activity is just how many of those involved were actually Komsomol members. As the youth wing of the Communist Party, the Komsomol very much constituted a facet of the Soviet party-state structure, and its members were supposed to be the communists of the future, providing an example of moral and political propriety to other youth. Komsomol boss Sergei Pavlov, for example, declared in summer 1963 that 'it is the duty of Komsomol members ... to lead a merciless struggle against those who impede the construction of communism', adding that they were duty-bound to 'correct the lives of people who break our laws and morals'.⁸³ Put briefly, Komsomol members were not only being socialised into the Soviet system, they were also expected to play an active role in upholding that system. In fact, it was not at all unheard of for Komsomol members to step out of line politically elsewhere around the Soviet Union, but the evidence suggests that this phenomenon was both more common and more enduring in the Baltics.

When the underground group 'Young Partisans of Lithuania' was jailed for anti-Soviet activity in April 1954 (they had distributed political leaflets, repeatedly flown the flag of independent Lithuania and had apparently gathered weapons and planned attacks on Komsomol and Party activists), there were several Komsomol members among their number.⁸⁴ When the KGB investigated an underground group of twenty-seven schoolchildren that was uncovered in Estonia during 1959, they found that ten of the school's fifty Komsomol members were participants.⁸⁵ One Komsomol member in Lithuania at the end of 1960 was found to have amassed an illegal library of over 400 books of nationalist and anti-Soviet content that he shared with others in his social circle.⁸⁶ After a group of students at Kaunas Polytechnic Institute were reported for singing 'ideologically harmful' songs in dorms and public spaces, it turned out that four of the five ringleaders were also Komsomol members.⁸⁷ In fact, when the Kaunas branch of the KGB produced a confidential memo outlining the city's ten 'most hostile' students in 1969, eight of them proved to be Komsomol members.⁸⁸

The problem for the political authorities was not simply that some Komsomol members were engaging in dissenting activity. Others were also turning a blind eye to such behaviour, regardless of the fact that this was in itself a crime according to Soviet law. A 1953 report from Latvia, which outlined multiple cases of leaflets being discovered in schools, complained that whole classes showed negative attitudes but the school Komsomol organisation did nothing about it.⁸⁹ Evidence found after the above group of twenty-seven Estonian schoolchildren was uncovered in 1959 showed that the head of the school's Komsomol cell had for some time known about its existence but had failed to report it

⁸² See W. Prigge, 'Power, Popular Opinion, and the Latvian National Communists,' *Journal of Baltic Studies* 45, no. 3 (2014): 305–19; M. Loader, 'Restricting Russians: Language and Immigration Laws in Soviet Latvia, 1956–1959,' *Nationalities Papers* 45, no. 6 (2017); M. Loader, 'A Stalinist Purge in the Khrushchev Era?: The Latvian Communist Party Purge, 1959–1963,' *Slavonic and East European Review* 96, no. 2 (2018): 1082–99.

⁸³ RGANI, f. 5, op. 31, d. 229, l. 15.

⁸⁴ V. Kozlov et al., eds., 58–10: *nadzornye proizvodstva prokuratury SSSR po delam antisovetskoi agitatsii i propagande* (Moskva: Mezhdunarodnyi fond 'Demokratiya,' 1999), 226–27.

⁸⁵ RGANI, f. 5, op. 31, d. 133, l. 46.

⁸⁶ LYA, f. k-41, op. 1, d. 623, ll. 14–18.

⁸⁷ LYA, f. k-18, op. 1, d. 145, l. 3.

⁸⁸ LYA, f. 1-k, op. 18, d. 92, l. 21.

⁸⁹ LVA, f. 201, op. 1, d. 1052, l. 47.

(and seemingly shared some of its members' critical views).⁹⁰ As young people first began to gather at the Kaunas cemetery in November 1956, one of the city's Komsomol activists was dispatched to try to calm the developing situation – but on arrival he decided instead to join in with the protesters.⁹¹ After school officials found graffiti on walls that read 'freedom for Lithuania', they removed the offending words but failed to report it to higher authorities: making it all but impossible to track down the culprits.⁹² Even an official volume on the history of the Latvian Komsomol that was published in 1985 noted the organisation's struggle in the late 1950s with 'instances of members' indifference to harmful phenomena in their midst'.⁹³

What this situation surely reflected, in part at least, was the impact of the increasing prioritisation of quantity over ideological quality when it came to admitting new Komsomol members. This was a theme that played out right across the Soviet Union during the post-Stalin years, but one that was particularly pronounced in the territories annexed during and after the war, since the issue of socialising young people into the Soviet order of things – after previous generations had come to maturity in a very different social, cultural and political environment – was especially pressing there.⁹⁴ As Geoff Swain has shown of late Stalin-era Latvia, failure to grow the size of the Komsomol membership roll – increasingly understood as the key metric of 'success' in work with youth – was sharply criticised by bosses in Moscow, and that prompted local Komsomol officials to soften previously exacting entry criteria in order to meet ambitious recruitment targets.⁹⁵ In fact, this was a process only just getting underway in the late Stalin era, and it would continue gathering pace for many years to come. Nonetheless, its long-term ramifications could hardly have been more apparent than when Komsomol members and officials at the grassroots level failed to fulfil one of the most fundamental expectations on them: to struggle against those apparently impeding the march to communism.

Importantly, this process of massification of Komsomol ranks not only weakened the ideological 'quality' of the membership roll. It also failed to produce the kind of all-encompassing organisational reach that would be needed for the Komsomol's emerging purpose: to exert ideological influence upon as many young people as possible (rather than to serve as a vanguard of the most revolutionary youth). One rural Komsomol organisation with thirty members in Latvia, for example, was assessed following a complaint about its lack of activity, and higher officials found that it 'does nothing, not even collect membership dues or hold meetings'.⁹⁶ Similarly, after the October 1962 public disorder in Tartu, investigations revealed that some Komsomol cells within the university there did practically no political work at all.⁹⁷

Sometimes, lack of political progress on the ground also reflected systemic problems rather than strictly local failings. Insisting that better propaganda materials were 'badly needed', an October 1956 letter from the Estonian Komsomol Central Committee to officials at the Komsomol's *Molodaya gvardiya* (Young Guard) publishing house in Moscow asked that the posters and signs that they despatch for use in Estonia in future include some blank space so that Estonian translations could be added in. As it was, these materials were coming only in Russian, meaning that a sizeable

⁹⁰ RGANI, f. 5, op. 31, d. 133, l. 46. The individual in question was promptly sacked from his role as secretary of the school's Komsomol cell.

⁹¹ LYA, f. 1, op. 18, d. 115, l. 181.

⁹² LYA, f. 1-k, op. 14, d. 478, l. 5.

⁹³ Yu. Bondarev, ed., *Ocherki istorii leninskogo kommunisticheskogo soyuza molodezhi latvii* (Riga: Avots, 1985), 272.

⁹⁴ On the expansion of the Komsomol, see G. Tsipursky, *Socialist Fun: Youth, Consumption, and State-Sponsored Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1945–1970* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016).

⁹⁵ Swain, 'Before National Communism.'

⁹⁶ LVA, f. 201, op. 1, d. 1044, ll. 7–8. Adding further insult to injury, the farm's Komsomol secretary was reported to be improperly appropriating farm goods for himself and his family, and was subsequently branded a criminal, a drunk and an idiot.

⁹⁷ RGANI, f. 5, op. 31, d. 197, ll. 162–165. The university Komsomol branch and the city-level organisation it belonged to were subjected to severe criticism for having allowed a negative political mood to grow among the student body. Numerous secretaries were sacked, while their corresponding Party organisations were similarly reprimanded for failure of oversight over their Komsomol charges.

proportion of Estonian members could not engage with them.⁹⁸ Similarly, a 1958 letter from Latvian Komsomol bosses to their superiors in Moscow illuminated the shortcomings they had to work with when it complained about there being too few copies of central Komsomol publications (presented as a vital tool for ‘upbringing work’ with young people) reaching Latvia – in some cases only a couple of hundred examples for the whole of the republic.⁹⁹ Already facing an uphill task in terms of winning the affinity of Latvian, Lithuanian and Estonian youth, bearing in mind both the history and social currents of the region, instances like these show that there were also plenty of holes in the web of measures designed by the regime to socialise young people in the Baltics.

It was not only the structures and methods of the Komsomol that could prove insufficient for the highly ambitious task of ‘moulding’ a pro-Soviet youth cohort across the region. As elsewhere, the key role of the cultural intelligentsia was to help political authorities shape the new Soviet man and woman, meaning that any ideologically ‘alien phenomena’ in their midst had potentially serious consequences.¹⁰⁰ With Soviet power so recently established in the Baltics, and with little option but to rely on those capable of communicating in the local language, ‘weak links’ in the chain were arguably more common here than in most other parts of the country. In December 1957, for example, Lithuanian authorities arrested an editor from radio broadcasting for anti-Soviet agitation and circulating harmful literature, warning that other ‘problematic people’ also worked in radio and television.¹⁰¹ In 1958, KGB agents reported the presence of secret nationalists at the Lithuanian Institute of Language and Literature: some of them sharing anti-Soviet views, forging connections with (and financially supporting) nationalist returnees from the camps, as well as acquiring and then circulating anti-Soviet works that were produced in the Gulag.¹⁰²

A 1963 KGB review made clear that most of the Kaunas cultural intelligentsia were regarded as politically upstanding, but some were apparently trying to influence less steadfast youth by playing on ‘patriotic’ (Lithuanian, rather than Soviet) sentiments, encouraging them to celebrate local jubilees, read literature about the bourgeois past and about the camps and more.¹⁰³ Similarly, in February of that year, KGB reporting spoke of young writers refuting the need for party-mindedness in the arts (essentially meaning the rejection of Party ideological control over literature, music and more), with the security organs then calling for more undercover agents to be deployed in film studios, publishing houses and more in order to root out such harmful elements. Staff at the Kaunas Historical Museum were also accused of wilfully overstating the achievements of Lithuania’s bourgeois past, and of seeking to downplay the ‘exploitation’ of the masses by old elites, while the city’s drama theatre was excoriated for staging performances (most notably a play entitled ‘Hunting for Mammoths’), which subtly parodied the Soviet way of life.¹⁰⁴ By 1969, authorities were complaining that visits to historic sites organised by local history groups in Lithuania – of much the same kind that were tolerated and even officially embraced within Russia – were also exerting a negative influence on attitudes among young participants.¹⁰⁵

Numerous reports pointed to university academics and schoolteachers – whom political authorities expected to play a crucial role in ideological upbringing work with youth – as wellsprings of undesirable behaviour among their charges. Following the public disorder at Tartu in 1962, it was noted pointedly that students there were still being taught by bourgeois-era professors – already a vanishing phenomenon in much of the rest of the country by that time – some of whom were apparently

⁹⁸ ERAF, f. 31, op. 63, d. 33, l. 21.

⁹⁹ LVA, f. 201, op. 1, d. 117, l. 22.

¹⁰⁰ LYA, f. k-41, op. 1, d. 671, l. 33.

¹⁰¹ LYA, f. k-41, op. 1, d. 545, ll. 39–40.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ LYA, f. k-1, op. 3, d. 634, l. 168.

¹⁰⁴ LYA, f. k-18, op. 1, d. 144, ll. 53–8.

¹⁰⁵ LYA, f. k-1, op. 14, d. 144, l. 9. On the official embrace of pre-revolutionary heritage in Russia around this time, see V. Donovan, *Chronicles in Stone: Preservation, Patriotism and Identity in Northwest Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2019); S. Pattle, ‘Forging the Golden Ring: Tourist Development and Heritage Preservation in the Late Soviet Union,’ *Slavonic and East European Review* 96, no. 2 (2018): 283–309.

unambiguously critical of Soviet policies. One was even reported as having openly announced the need to drive the Russians out of the city.¹⁰⁶ At the Lithuanian Institute of Economics and History, one faculty member was said by an informant to be keeping anti-Soviet material in his office safe.¹⁰⁷ In Kaunas, a KGB review of dissenting behaviour among young people pointed some of the blame at teachers for transmitting unhealthy moods to their pupils, citing the case of one who had, according to an undercover informer, been instigating students to ask politically provocative questions in social science disciplines and Marxism-Leninism classes (the report gave no details on what these questions consisted of, but this most often included asking about contradictions between the theory and discourse of Marxism-Leninism on the one hand, and the realities of Soviet domestic and foreign policy on the other).¹⁰⁸ Other cases cited school teachers praising the West, deliberately ignoring the 'unhealthy remarks' that some students made, and idealising 'feudal' Lithuania.¹⁰⁹

Conclusions

Without doubt, the picture of dissenting activity in the three Baltic republics will develop further as the declassification of KGB materials proceeds (especially in regard to Latvia and Estonia, where this process has so far moved slowest). From forming underground groups to scrawling hostile graffiti on walls, flying independence-era flags, singing anti-communist songs and more, a plethora of dissenting behaviour existed alongside the 'normalisation' for which the era is more widely known. Nonetheless, this was not a region perpetually bubbling with revolution, and scholars' findings about the emergence of a more distinctly Soviet-inflected youth cohort during the 1950s and 1960s can still sit comfortably alongside this new evidence about dissenting activity.¹¹⁰

It was, however, telling that when political leaders across the Baltics drew up contingency plans for public disorders in 1968 – as the Prague Spring in Czechoslovakia seemingly threatened to generate disruption inside the Soviet Union comparable to that following the Hungarian revolution twelve years previously – the potential scenarios envisioned were all but apocalyptic politically. In Estonia, for example, these included plans to secure telephone exchanges, railways and television centres against mass unrest, and to provide armed protection for key officials, buildings and factories.¹¹¹ In short, the authorities were well aware that even after more than two decades of Soviet power there, the atmosphere might change quickly, in the right circumstances. Indeed, the myriad cases in which Komsomol members either participated or else failed to take even very basic action against dissenting activity suggest that it would be deeply naïve for authorities to rely on support for the regime at the grassroots level (and, as Amir Weiner has rightly stated, the Soviet regime was many things, but it was not naïve).

As noted at the outset, many of the behaviours described above feel quite distinct from both the armed partisan struggle of the post-war years and the primarily rights-based dissidence that came to prominence around the end of the 1960s. Nonetheless, we can also see indications of both continuity and change that help us to understand the evolution of protest activity between the former and latter points. Similarly, the evidence shows plenty of parallels with dissenting activity in other parts of the Soviet Union, but there were nonetheless also important markers, especially in the themes of protest activity, that made the region distinct.

¹⁰⁶ RGANI, f. 5, op. 31, d. 197, l. 163.

¹⁰⁷ LYA, f. k-41, op. 1, d. 545, ll. 39–40.

¹⁰⁸ LYA, f. k-1, op. 3, d. 634, l. 168.

¹⁰⁹ LYA, f. k-1, op. 3, d. 639, l. 13.

¹¹⁰ On the emergence of distinctly Soviet influenced attitudes and values among young people in the Baltics after Stalin, see, for example, Davoliute, *The Making and Breaking of Soviet Lithuania*.

¹¹¹ See ERAF, f. 1, op. 5, d. 108, ll. 1–4.