

ARTISTS AND CULTURAL WORKERS AND THE LEGACY OF KGB IN THE ACTUAL PUBLIC DISCUSSION LANDSCAPE IN LATVIA

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine how myths, narratives and biases referring to the recent history are born and developed in nowadays Latvia, supported by the analysis of the case study of the legacy of KGB and its actualization in the public discussion landscape focusing on the relationship of KGB and artists and cultural workers.

One of the main criteria for narrowing the research subject to regarding only the relationship between representatives of the fields of arts and culture and KGB is that those particular relationship cases have caused the most heated discussions in mass media and general public, mostly due to the undeniable public 'visibility' of the aforementioned professionals as well as due to personal in-depth connection of society members with art products, artists and cultural workers via artistic preferences, engagement with cultural processes, individual contribution to professional and amateur arts, emotional links, memories etc. Another important aspect to be considered is the strong connectedness of arts and culture with the state apparatus, as throughout history arts and cultural production has served as a propaganda tool, putting forward regime ideology and granting a certain kind of 'power legitimization' as supported by entertainment industry.

In order to get a deeper insight into the formation of the myths, narratives and biases referring to the relationship between artists and cultural workers in nowadays Latvia, the authors of the study have combined empiric data analysis based on the research project by the Government Commission for KGB Research at the University of Latvia, the purpose of which was to prepare KGB card files for public access on the website of the National Archives of Latvia, and qualitative media and public discussion narrative analysis, focusing on how certain aspects referring to

Soviet legacy in general and specifically to cooperation between artists and cultural sector workers and KGB have been framed and portrayed in actual social memory representations.

Keywords: *cultural workers, KGB, collaboration, agents.*

Discussion

Undoubtedly, an in-depth assessment of the impact of Soviet state security services to the general society of the occupied Latvia can be fraudulent due to the current research progress that has been insofar focused on data collection and resolving the issues circulating around the pros and cons of the necessity of making KGB agent files accessible for public. However, even the empiric statistics allows to obtain quantitative data characterizing the number of cultural sector workers cooperating with KGB.

Currently there is available information on several thousand former KGB agents recruited during the Soviet occupation. The data are accessible for public as KGB agent files published on the website of the National Archives of Latvia: 7998 files have been published in the agency's alphabetical index, 4441 – in the agency's statistical file index, and 75 in the KGB's unofficial employees index, as well as 447 cards in the Agency's supplementary accounting file, 688 cards in the collection of cards excluded from the statistical file, 558 entries in the journal of the agency excluded from the KGB, 22,935 entries in 53 register journals of the agency and in other materials. Certainly, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the available archives are incomplete – they lack the agents' personal files and assignment lists, which would allow to specify the tasks and responsibilities of each agent. Therefore, it is necessary to refer to other sources (mainly eyewitnesses' memories). Nevertheless, the above-mentioned KGB document archive is the largest in the Baltic States and one of the largest in Eastern Europe, therefore it can be regarded as a vital reference [kgb.arhivi.lv].

According to the data provided by the Government Commission for KGB Research, about 600 recruitment cases involve artists and cultural workers [Review of The Government Commission for KGB Research]. The authors of the article have also examined 1500 cards in the alphabetical index of the KGB Agency. As a result, 148 cultural workers have been identified, or 9.87% of the total number of the recruited agents.

In the course of the study it has been established that the KGB agency in the occupied Latvia covered all layers of society [Review of The Government Commission for KGB Research]. Thus, it can be concluded that although the number of cultural workers and artists recruited by KGB is rather significant, there is no reason to believe that it is higher than the number of other professional and social groups. However,

it must also be taken into account that different social and professional strata have different 'visibility' in the public sphere, such as media representations, appearance in public discussions, strong associative link between author and production, ability and accessibility to shaping and developing public opinion and other factors contributing in particular when we consider cultural sector representatives. These aspects undergo more detailed analysis in the further course of the discussion.

Thematization of the Soviet past in nowadays Latvia: KGB heritage and cultural sector

Thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union historical developments of the Soviet occupation period are still an acute topic in the public discussion space of Latvia. The process of preparing the former Latvian SSR archives for publication and publishing the information in 2014–2018 exacerbated the discussion. The same topicality has not been lost referring to the issue of the impact of the KGB legacy on the Latvian cultural sector.

Some of the main undercurrents in the ongoing discussion are prompted by comments from well-known personalities in the public space of Latvia, referring to the issue of making KGB agents' filing systems accessible for general public in December 2018. For instance, the poet and public figure Māra Zālīte (1952) commented on this question as quoted: "We may not avoid publishing, opening and examination. It had to be done a long time ago. But despite the delay it has to be done. We may not avoid it. It [the issue] will rot and decay and poison the blood of the people all along" [LSM.lv]. The composer Mārtiņš Brauns (1951) has commented: "I think that the special services of Russia would have gained a big victory with such a public exposure, as the people still serving those services would definitely be missing in these lists. The officials following the orders could falsify the lists according to any requirements" [LA.lv]. In turn, the President of the Republic of Latvia (2015–2019) Raimonds Vējonis (1966) stated the following: "Before making hasty conclusions, it is essential to wait for and to gather additional information. If we come to early conclusions, we run the risk of creating a false understanding of history instead of a better understanding of the totalitarian regime, its mechanisms of action, and total control of society during the occupation of Latvia" [LETA].

The aforementioned views prevailed in surveys questioning the opinion of the residents of Latvia whether KGB archives should be published or not. For example, a population survey organized by the KSC Scientific Research Commission in 2016 identified the following predominant opinions: "Documents should be disclosed to the public immediately" (28.4%), "Documents should be disclosed to the public with scientific explanations" (33.7%). In 2018, the respective indicators were 34.3% and 27.1% [Materials of The Government Commission for KGB Research].

These replies allow us to raise a question regarding the peculiarities of the perception of the recent past events in Latvia. There is a certain degree of radicalization and mutual incompatibility. This is particularly the case regarding the heritage of KGB in the cultural sector and the views expressed by cultural workers. Furthermore, some of the possible mechanisms for the formation of such a situation have been outlined.

Background of the myth speculating about the impact of the KGB on the cultural sector

The history of the development of various myths speculating about the impact of the activities of the KGB in the occupied Latvia, including speculations about the cooperation of the KGB with the cultural sector, has been lasting several decades already. To a large extent the formation of various prejudices and misconceptions has been promoted by the Latvian state policy – as a result of refusing to start a comprehensive lustration policy immediately after the restoration of independence in 1991. On the contrary, the documentary heritage of KGB until the end of 2018 had been largely secreted and inadmissible. This condition served as a ground for a plethora of rumours and misinformation to be developed.

As one of the most influential sources that has largely contributed to myth development must be mentioned mass media that often have served the information about the activities of KGB by linking it to well-known people – especially those representing cultural sphere. The earliest example of such miscommunication is an article by Elita Veidemane (1955) and Ilmārs Latkovskis (1958), “KGB senior officer in an interview to *Atmoda*: “Publishing of the Lists would be destructive”” released in 1991. The article particularly focused on the cooperation between well-known cultural workers and KGB. It also enlisted nicknames of the supposed KGB agents composed by a KGB employee. However, the published data provided only affiliation and nicknames of the prospective agents, but not their first and last names: for example, “Džeina” (nickname), name, surname (cached), film director, Riga Film Studio [Veidemane; Latkovskis]. The article allowed a spectrum of speculations and myths to emerge, many of which referred to assumed cooperation between KGB and cultural sector workers. The misleading practice of this article was often repeated in the coming years after the re-establishment of the independence of Latvia. Media, political discussions and educational institutions as well as other actors contributed to the formation of myths; meanwhile on the basis of the already existent myths new developments arose while the myths rooted in the 1991 article that supposedly revealed the names of the cultural workers collaborating with KGB were additionally strengthened and broadcast. The authors of the article have enlisted some of the most widespread myths as emerging by analysis of qualitative interviews conducted from 2016–2018 (at the period of submitting the article the research analysing the

contents of the interviews in detail is still in progress therefore we provide only a preliminary insight in the opinions circulating in the general public and occasionally in mass media or political discussion arena): “there are many cultural workers in the ‘KGB sacks’”, “all the artists who travelled abroad collaborated with KGB”, “all the big names have already been removed, there are only writers and artists left” – and certainly, the most popular belief and public claim: “I know the names of the people who collaborated”, not to forget that often these names would be of popular artists and cultural workers.

The generation of these beliefs and myths is also strongly influenced by the perception of the Soviet occupation period in the contemporary society of Latvia. It must be noted that on the contrary to occasionally supported belief that the Soviet past is undoubtedly negatively viewed by the most part of the population, especially amongst Latvian native speakers, clearly there are more complicated and deeper processes affecting the perception of this period, which simultaneously also leave an impact on the ways how the issues linked with the KGB heritage are viewed in nowadays society. The discussion whether Soviet period has to be and is regarded as exclusively negative by nowadays society is beyond the thematic boundaries of this article. However, it can be observed that due to the policy suggesting to regard the Soviet occupation period as ‘dark ages’, a policy which was particularly supported between the period of re-establishing Latvia’s national independence and Latvia’s accession to the European Union, the Soviet past in the social memory the population of Latvia more and more begins to turn into a kind of ‘*historia obscura*’: a bizarre, chaotic, veiled and preferably avoided narrative. For younger generations this tendency results in a perception of blank or misinterpreted period in the history of Latvia. For example, as reflected in the recorded interviews after teenagers and young adults were asked about their general knowledge of the Soviet period, often only the benchmarks of the era are recognizable: for instance, R., a 14 year-old boy had his only reference about the Soviet occupation period related events got from a film about the re-establishment of the independence of Latvia: “Soviet time... erm... we were watching a film about it at school... there were barricades in the streets and that... how do they call it when all the people carry flags?”, while A., a 24 year-old woman with a master’s degree, working in an international company displayed only slightly broader knowledge: “First, there was the deportation to Siberia... (a long pause)... well... then... nothing happened till the independence” [Liena Galeja’s personal archive]. Hereafter fragments from interviews conducted for the purpose of collecting empiric data for Liena Galeja’s doctoral thesis “Analysis of the Representations of Soviet Nostalgia in the Context of the Current Cultural Landscape of Latvia” have been used. In general, 82 interviews have been conducted so far, the data analysis is currently in progress.

This forgetfulness can manifest itself not only as a lack of interest in the recent past and loss of identity, but also as a fertile soil for the development of distorted views, myths and preconceptions regarding the Soviet era and its heritage, part of which is the so-called KGB sacks. Or, as Jan Assmann has pointed out, by regards and interpretations of history not only present and future perceptions of actual generations are formed, but also hints and stimuli are given to encourage certain steps to be taken [Erl1 2008], – that makes us not only ask the question how the knowledge about the names on the file cards would resonate in the younger generation, but also to wonder whether forgetfulness might pave the road to the repetition of history.

Another aspect of the state policy advances towards discrediting the Soviet era manifests if we regard the older generation who have experienced this time personally. In this case we cannot talk about induced forgetting but rather about avoidance and regarding the Soviet past as an ‘uncomfortable history’ that is difficult to ignore but shall be treated with suspicion or rather swept under the rug by all means. The legacy of KGB is one of the buzzwords among the ‘Soviet taboo’ topics. For example, the political scientist Ilga Kreituse (1952) commented on the ‘opening’ of the KGB archives scheduled for 2018: “My dears, *cheka* sacks have been cleaned, emptied and cleared. [...] I know a person who was offered his card file for a certain amount of dollars. It was during the 5th Saeima” [Dienas personība ar Veltu Puriņu]. This also refers to the KGB legacy affecting the cultural sector. For example, the authors have sampled a significant number of comments online. Even taking into account the question of validity of these comments as a reference, it shall be noted that the opinion suggesting cautious approach towards the contents of the files is a frequent occurrence, more than in a few cases in the context of fear to find names of celebrities and cultural workers there. For example, a commentator with the nickname “huk” said on September 11, 2018 (delfi.lv): “Honestly I am even not interested in those lists, as it is absolutely no fun to read enlisted the names of famous artists and doctors that, from what I have heard, form the majority there” [Delfi 1].

It can be easily observed that both comments, despite the former one belongs to a professional political analyst while the latter comes from an anonymous Internet commentator, reflect upon the aforementioned myths connected to the legacy of KGB in post-Soviet Latvia. Ilga Kreituse’s comment follows the assumption that the contents of the files have been significantly changed and thus cannot be regarded as authentic, while the online comment directly forwards and multiplies the myth that the files mostly contain names of celebrities, including those of artists. Both comments also display fear of how the publishing of the files might affect the present.

Stigmatization and induced forgetting referring to the Soviet past in the post-Soviet Latvia is also strongly related to a tendency characteristic for communities in transition periods, when being on the lookout for a common enemy helps to

strengthen sense of belonging, very often expressed as national consciousness. This process may occur naturally as part of national awakening, like it happened in late 1980s and early 1990s, or can be reinforced and sustained by state policy in case there is a general feeling of crisis and loss of ideals caused by economic or social disruptions, that could be regarded as referring to the situation in Latvia following the global financial crisis of the previous decade. The mystery veiling the contents of KGB archives served particularly well this 'common enemy searching' purpose. That can be explained by two fundamental reasons. The first one is strongly influenced by historical events and reminiscences of the collective trauma connected to the massive deportations in the 1940s as well as to the so-called *Year of Terror*, continuously re-awakened in the social memory by public representations, among which those of KGB agents are one of the most powerful and often overlay with a diversity of other Soviet authority forces, both in the 1940s and later. This perceived connection is still alive in the social memory, at times leading to paradoxical conclusions, for instance, as one of the interviewees was asked if she had checked the KGB card files after their publication (the interview was recorded in April 2019), she replied: "No, I do not have a need to do it. My family stayed safe, no one was deported. Checking [the files] would not change anything for me" [Interview with A. (59 y/o), HR specialist; Liena Galeja's personal archive]. The interviewee's answer illustrates that the responsibility for the traumatic experiences of the collective past can be often addressed to the persons who have collaborated with KGB in later decades and thus have nothing to do with the aforementioned events.

Another reason why cultural workers collaborating with the KGB are treated as a collective enemy is related to splitting between "blue collar" and "white collar" social layers in the society of Latvia. It should not be overlooked that this splitting has been strongly enhanced by Soviet era type of "cultural revolution" that accentuated the power of the working class, and simultaneously, by certain privileges accessible only to the upper-class Soviet citizens loyal to the regime. For example, an opportunity to travel abroad, in particular beyond the socialist countries, was regarded as one of such privileges. The access to travelling was often exclusively linked with reporting to Soviet authorities, and this assumption now is frequently transferred to speculations about cultural workers' and artists' presumed collaboration with KGB – to quote one of the online commentators (Nickname "So it is", (September 11, 2018, delfi.lv): "Everybody who for some reason travelled outside the USSR had to go to the so-called Part 1 before and after". Since artists and cultural workers were among those who travelled most often, for general public the envy directed towards the differences regarding mobility became transformed into accusations for reporting to KGB: "They all went there [abroad] because they reported [to KGB]. All the actors, reported and travelled" [Interview with D. (70), former amateur

theatre actress; Liena Galeja's personal archive]. This opinion, often hand in hand with certain names of presumed cultural workers mentioned, was expressed in several of the recorded interviews, often traced in online commentaries and also broadcast in mass media, particularly in interviews with well-known public figures that played a significant role in the process of national awakening and restoring of Latvia's independence. As a typical example can be mentioned the statement by the popular journalist and political figure Dainis Īvāns (1955), one of the leaders of the movement of the restoration of the independence of Latvia between 1986 and 1991, also the leader of the Popular Front of Latvia from 1988 to 1990. Īvāns hinted that there had been a strong relationship between the composer Imants Kalniņš (1941) and KGB [Pietiek 2015]. Notable that neither Īvāns' statement nor several other similar accusations expressed by influential public actors referring to themselves as connoisseurs regarding the topic, would be confirmed after KGB agent files were made publicly available in December 2018. However, the publication of a series of the aforementioned interviews added to the rumours about the possibility that a certain person would have collaborated with the KGB and often reinforced the false beliefs circulating in society. It must be also mentioned that since revealing names was strictly banned during the research process, media interviews with the members of the Government Commission for KGB Research were also subjected to a number of speculations and interpretations.

Conclusions

The Soviet past is still a topical issue in the public debate in Latvia. Despite the fact that there have been strong state policy determined attempts to stigmatize the Soviet era and thus induce forgetting the past, the recent discussion about the necessity of revealing the names of the persons collaborating with KGB has actualized the topic both for the representatives of the older generation that have experienced the Soviet era in person and also for younger people who receive the information on the topic, often being unable to interpret it due to the lack of direct experience and historical knowledge. In both cases, memory politics as it has developed in the post-1989 Latvia has afflicted the possibility of impartial lustration policy, instead offering a fertile soil for a number of myths and false beliefs to be created, often on the basis of ignorance and search for a collective enemy. In numerous cases these myths have been linked to influential public personalities among which cultural workers and artists are of particular prominence due to their recognizability. Thus, following the rumours and personal beliefs about the KGB file contents, among presumable personas, who might have collaborated with KGB, names of actors, musicians, visual artists, filmmakers and other representatives of creative arts are often mentioned. The frequency and intensity of these beliefs is often directly linked to the person's public

influence, recognizability or privileges such as access to travelling abroad, personal possessions and others.

It can also be noted that, with regard to the perception of Soviet history in general and the perception of the KGB role in the history, some dominant tendencies can be observed in the contemporary public discussion room of Latvia. First of all, there are uneven, chronological and thematic contradictions referring to this stage of history. It is not perceived as a whole, but as a set of distinct significant events. The problem of KGB activity is one of the following points of gravity of perception. Secondly, Soviet history is often perceived as “uncomfortable history”, to a great extent due to the post-1989 memory and history policies in Latvia, but also because of the fact that as the past events are still very recent and eyewitnesses still form a significant part of the society, contrasting remembrances are possible when comparing facts and personal convictions, beliefs, views and strivings to preserve a positive persona in the eyes of society, often by modified interpretation of the past events.

Particularly due to the latter aspect cultural workers often find themselves in the centre of a heated public debate where they either are asked to defend themselves or to “reveal the truth”. However, it shall be noted that media publications have played a significant role in sustaining and reinforcing the myths already present in the general society, especially what refers to the cooperation between KGB institutions and cultural workers or other influential public figures.

It could be expected that since KGB files have been made publicly accessible as from December 2018, the myths and false beliefs should gradually fade to be replaced by factual data. However, at the moment this paper is being composed, this cannot be regarded as the case yet. Despite the fact that the names are available, the myth speculating that the “real, true” information is being hidden, is still present. Various assumptions about the published files being fake, archives being taken to Moscow or hidden by the state authorities of Latvia are still circulating alongside with ongoing speculations regarding certain well-known personalities being related to the KGB, just without documental evidence publicly available.

The purpose of this article is neither to offer solutions to the problem, nor to draw optional future scenarios. However, now when the first round of research and disclosing the data to the public has been completed, the claim for scholarly research practices to be applied when dealing with the subject has not lessened, and it must be recognized that political and media discussion cannot replace an analytical approach that should be optimally provided by interdisciplinary effort considering different angles, interpretations and reviews of the KGB legacy, both as factual file cards, historical and political significance of the topic, and also as myths, beliefs and narratives surrounding the subject.

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