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Mārtiņš Kaprāns

# NORMALIZING THE COLD WAR HABITUS: HOW LATVIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHERS COPE WITH THEIR SOVIET-TIME EXPERIENCE



VALSTS  
PĒTĪJUMU PROGRAMMA  
NACIONĀLĀ  
IDENTITĀTE

**Mārtiņš Kaprāns**

**Normalizing the Cold War *Habitus*:  
How Latvian Autobiographers Cope with their  
Soviet-time Experience**

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The paper deals with post-Soviet Latvian autobiographies as a site wherein the social representations of Soviet period have been constructed. That is, I am concerned with the discursive repertoire undertaken by the autobiographers to normalize the Soviet experience. The normalization discourse is analyzed on three different levels: relations with Soviet institutions, the practices of everyday life, and comparisons between Soviet and post-Soviet experiences. I contend that, along with criticism of the Soviet period, these Latvian autobiographers shift across these levels to reinforce a positive post-Soviet identity. Accordingly the negative representation is complemented by a pragmatic social representation (as I shall call it), and that, perhaps, is characteristic of many other post-communist societies.

**Keywords:** social representations of Soviet period, biographical discourse, Latvian autobiographies, cognitive poliphasia

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## **Content**

Post-Soviet autobiographies in Latvia: an outline	5
Heuristic and methodological tenets	8
Adapting to Soviet power	9
Controlling the attributes of everyday life: a few examples	13
Coda	15
Concluding thoughts	18
Bibliography	21

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, post-communist societies were forced to define their memory politics towards the communist era. That went hand in hand with intensive biographical work, undertaken both on the institutional and individual levels. As the sociologist Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal has noted, biographical work appears as the communication and shared interpretation of what has happened in one's life and what can be expected to happen in the future.<sup>1</sup> As a result of biographical work, a wide range of communist-era experience became the object of mockery. That was particularly characteristic of the Baltic States where memory politics was dominated by an extremely negative attitude towards the indigenous communist regimes; it was featured by two major motifs: the suffering and heroism of suppressed people.<sup>2</sup> A prevailing public discourse in these societies encouraged individuals to rid their biographies of a positive communist-era experience. As Klumbytė asserts, politicians, journalists, and intellectuals still "stigmatize and mock people who remember Soviet times positively, and thus exclude them from the community of good citizens".<sup>3</sup>

Collaboration with Soviet ideological and repressive institutions (the KGB, Communist Party, Komsomol) has been a prototype of a negative experience in the Baltic States. However, a new modernization discourse that came from the Cold War adversary – the *Western world* – intended to stigmatize a much wider field of the daily Soviet experience, e.g. clientelism, double standards, and a peculiar lifestyle, to name but a few. Many people thereby were exposed to a negative identity, unless they decided to normalize this experience or forget it. The normalization meant to adjust the Soviet experience to post-communist normality, which in Latvia was characterized by orientation to the West and with an adoration of the interwar period.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the Soviet experience is not just the focus of interest of historians: it is also an essential part of a post-Cold War ethnography, which has recently been defined as an interdisciplinary field of studying the (post)Soviet and (post)colonial practices as different manifestations of the same cultural and ideological system.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wolfram Fischer-Rosenthal, 'The problem with identity: biography as solution to some (post)-modernist dilemmas', *Comenius* 15 (1995), p. 261.

<sup>2</sup> See Eva-Clarita Onken, 'The Baltic States and Moscow's 9 May Commemoration: Analysing Memory Politics in Europe' *Europe-Asia Studies* 59 (2007), p. 31; Dovyte Budryte, "'We Call It Genocide': Soviet Deportations and Repression in the Memory of Lithuanians', *Bridges* 9 (2002), pp. 223–253;

<sup>3</sup> Neringa Klumbytė, 'Memory, identity, and citizenship in Lithuania', *Journal of Baltic Studies* 41 (2010), p. 296.

<sup>4</sup> Daina Stukuls Eglitis, *Imagining the Nation: History, Modernity and Revolution in Latvia* (University Park, PA, 2002), pp. 16–17.

<sup>5</sup> Sharad Chari, Katherine Verdery, 'Thinking Between the Posts: Postcolonialism, Postsocialism, and Ethnography After the Cold War', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51(2009), pp. 6–34.

Arguably, the post-Soviet biographical discourse rather than the official memory politics of the Baltic States has turned the hegemonic and politicized representation of the communist period into a more flexible and democratic understanding of the recent past. Numerous memoirs written by the Lithuanian representatives of the former Soviet *nomenklatura* have lately challenged the traditionally negative estimation of *nomenklatura* by claiming that they worked for the benefit of the nation.<sup>6</sup> Consecutively, Estonian scholars suggest that repressions and resistance as the major themes of Estonian life stories in the 1990s have been replaced by memories of daily Soviet life.<sup>7</sup> In line with these observations, my article deals with post-Soviet Latvian autobiographies as a site wherein the shared representation of Soviet period has been constructed. That is, I am concerned with the discursive repertoire undertaken by the autobiographers to normalize the Soviet experience. The normalization discourse is analyzed on three different levels: relations with Soviet institutions, the practices of everyday life, and comparisons between Soviet and post-Soviet experiences. I contend that, along with criticism of the Soviet period, these Latvian autobiographers shift across these levels to reinforce a positive post-Soviet identity. Accordingly the negative representation is complemented by a pragmatic social representation (as I shall call it), and that, perhaps, is characteristic of many other post-communist societies.

### **Post-Soviet autobiographies in Latvia: an outline**

The emergence of post-Soviet life writing in Latvia has been similar to that in other post-communist societies. That is to say, the most significant endeavours were devoted to oral history projects or to other types of biographical material initiated by scholars.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the 1990s, for instance, social scientists organized expeditions to the Latvian countryside where they collected the life stories of common people, attempting to understand how they survived under the Soviets. More than 3000 recorded life stories were collected just by the National Oral History Project. Along with

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<sup>6</sup> Vilius Ivanauskas, *Lithuanian nomenclature in the bureaucratic system: between stagnation and dynamics (1970–1988)*, Doctoral diss., Abstract, Lithuanian Institute of History (Vilnius, 2008), pp. 5–6.

<sup>7</sup> Kirsti Jõesalu, 'The Right to Happiness' – Echoes of Soviet Ideology in Biographical Narratives', *Berliner Osteuropa-Info* 23 (2005), pp. 91–99; see also Kirsti Jõesalu, Enne Kõresaar, 'Working through Mature Socialism: private and public in the story of an Estonian industry manager', Aili Aarelaid, Li Bennich-Björkman (eds.), *Baltic Biographies*, in press.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Vieda Skultans, *The Testimony of Lives: Narrative and Memory in Post-Soviet Latvia* (London, 1998); Baiba Bela-Krūmina, 'Relationships between personal and social: strategies of everyday life in the process of radical social changes', *Pro Ethnologia* 16 (2003), Web. 22 Jan. 2010; Irena Saleniece, 'Latvian 20th century history from the perspective of oral history sources. The views of Russians from Eastern Latvia', *Pro Ethnologia* 19 (2005), Web. 22 Jan. 2010.

this institutional biographical work, the field of post-Soviet auto/biographical literature concerned with Soviet-era experience has been developing apace.

In general, Latvian auto/biographical literature has experienced fluctuant growth.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the number of autobiographies which reflect the Soviet period has grown consistently: 195 autobiographies were published between 1991 and 2008 (see chart 1). These works may be defined as a significant part of Latvian post-Soviet life writing.<sup>10</sup>

A closer look at these autobiographies shows that the majority were written by males who represent the former Soviet *intelligentsia* – highly qualified, usually well-educated people whose social mission was to promote the ideals of communism through art, science, and culture. Besides the *intelligentsia*, one may delineate two more groups of publicly active *biographical workers*: former Soviet public officials, and deportees (those who were exiled to Siberia).<sup>11</sup> If deportees have been publishing their life stories throughout the last twenty years, both as individual autobiographers and as contributors to voluminous public collections of memories, then the former public officials (some of whom may also be seen as representatives of the *nomenklatura*) have become active relatively recently, in the last decade. These categories, however, should not be perceived as mutually exclusive, because there may be representatives of the Soviet *intelligentsia* who had been deported, and former deportees who had been employed in Soviet institutions. The rest of the autobiographers may be read as individual cases (priests, teachers, athletes and the like) rather than as representing any social groups.

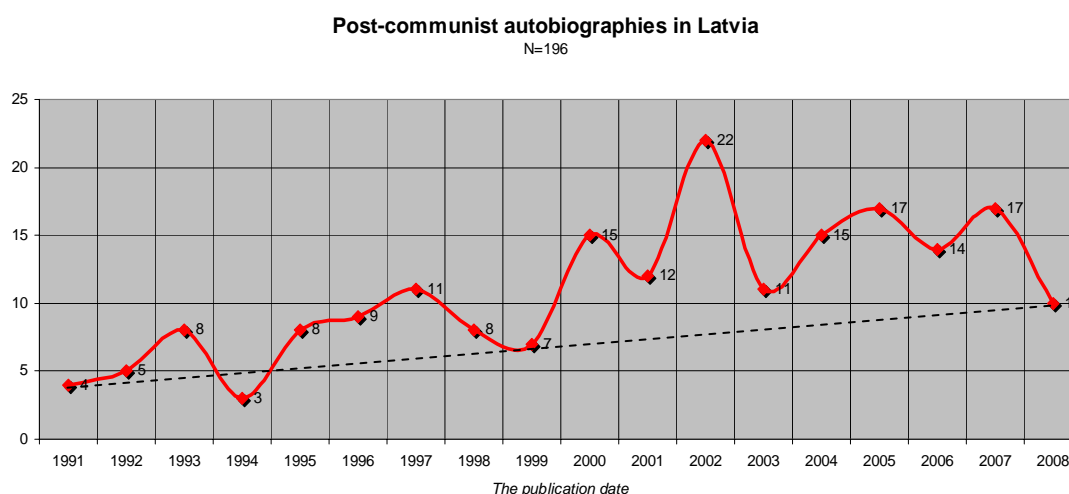
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<sup>9</sup> As the number of the autobiographies written by local Russian-speaking minority is too small, I have excluded them from the exploration. Why this ethnic group is so inactive in terms of public biographical work is a question for future research.

<sup>10</sup> The following criteria in the selection of these autobiographies were taken into account: 1) they first appeared in 1991 onwards; 2) no intratextual or para-textual information indicates that any of the autobiographies were written before 1991; 3) the Soviet period dominates the narrative's time-frame; 4) the autobiographer is not someone who emigrated to the West during World War II and stayed there, 5) the autobiography might have been written with someone else's assistance (int. al. ghost writings), 6) the bulk of the narrative is not in diary form, the autobiography was written in the third person, or it is autobiographical fiction, 7) the autobiographer was alive at least three years before the autobiography was published.

<sup>11</sup> Around 60 thousand Latvians in total were exiled to Siberia during the two biggest Stalinist deportations which occurred in 1941 and 1949. Exile as a traumatic episode appears in practically all the autobiographical narratives as a direct or mediated experience.

Chart 1



The autobiographers under discussion mainly represent two age cohorts: those born in the 1920s and in the 1930s. They may be associated either with two successive generations or with two units of the same generation: the former group who consciously experienced World War II and Stalinist deportations and whose formative period was largely the 1950s; the latter group formed the generational core of the 1960s and more actively experienced the liberalization of the Soviet regime.<sup>12</sup> Although on an aggregate level there is a lack of evidence to judge the age at which autobiographers wrote their individual histories, we may assume most of them did so in their late 50s or 60s.

These autobiographical narratives vary stylistically: they range from purely intimate self-reflections to recollections of public processes and events. Quite often a mixture of genres appears: a retrospective narration is supplemented by fragments of diaries, letters, short biographies of other people, and fictional texts. Some of the autobiographers also imitate the rhetorical style of texts written by historians, characterized by references to private and public documents, quotations from other autobiographies, bibliographies, appendices and so on. On the whole, however, memories of Soviet public life and “power motives” are dominant.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, many autobiographies reflect upon particular vivid periods such as life as Siberian exiles, or the Sixties, or the revival of Latvian self-determination in the late 1980s.

<sup>12</sup> See Martins Kaprans, ‘Constructing generational identity’, in press.

<sup>13</sup> On power motives in life stories consult Dan P. McAdams, *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story: Personological Inquiries into Identity* (New York, 1988), pp. 69–104.



## Heuristic and methodological tenets

I define autobiographies as a particular discursive field that plays a role in the creation of social representations of the past as a shared object, and that is influenced by already existing social representations of this object. Thus, the communist period, which still triggers a collective elaboration within post-communist societies, can also be perceived as such an object.

Social representations theory (SRT) insists that our social behaviour is largely influenced by social representations: the system of values, ideas and practices inscribed within the framework of pre-existing thought and always playing “a triple role of illumination (giving a sense of reality), integration (incorporating new ideas or facts into familiar frameworks) and partition (ensuring the common sense through which a given collectivity is recognized).<sup>14</sup> Appearing in the consensual universe, social representations are created through interpersonal and inter-group communication, and they are subjected to the dynamics of ongoing changes within social groups. Social representations emerge from conceptual themata (source ideas, image concepts), which are accepted by particular collectivity and “in the course of history, become problematized; for one reason or another they become the focus of attention, and a source of tension and conflict”.<sup>15</sup> Conceptual themata reveal themselves through various pragmatic manifestations or methodological themes. Endless communication on social objects within a group not merely creates, but also transforms social representations. The nature of social representations, thus, is dialogical, and dialogicity occurs within representations as well as among different representations of the same object. As Moscovici has argued, the relations between subject (group or individual) and social object in the formation of social representation are always complemented by *alter* that stands for social conditions, int. al. the presence of other subject.<sup>16</sup>

My analysis is based on fifty Latvian autobiographies, selected as representative of the whole body of post-Soviet autobiographies. The autobiographies were compelled to thematic analysis.<sup>17</sup> Initially, the salient basic themes were pinpointed in each excerpt of the normalization discourse, which served as units of coding; the basic themes were usually registered as *in vivo* codes. Further sorting and selection of basic themes followed until common patterns or organizing themes of each unit of coding were identified.

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<sup>14</sup> Serge Moscovici, *Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology* (Cambridge UK, 2000), p. 157.

<sup>15</sup> Ivana Marková, ‘Amédée or How to Get Rid of It: Social Representations from a Dialogical Perspective’, *Culture & Psychology* 6 (2000), p. 446.

<sup>16</sup> Moscovici, *Social Representations*, pp. 104–119.

<sup>17</sup> See Richar E. Boyatzis, *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development* (Thousand Oaks, 1998); Jennifer Attride-Stirling, ‘Thematic networks: an analytical tool for qualitative research’, *Qualitative Research* 3 (2001), pp. 385–405.

Insofar as it was reasonable, the organizing themes were divided into subthemes.

### **Adapting to Soviet power**

Reflection upon Soviet institutions and their ideological obtrusiveness is a common topic to many autobiographies. Along with suffering and heroism as possibly dominant motives therein, we may notice an inclination to normalize one's experience of these institutions.

The condemnation of the Communist Party has invariably been an integral part of the post-Soviet memory politics in Latvia. Consequently, joining the CP has been a stigmatized experience. Numerous autobiographers exemplify this prevailing attitude by regretting their party membership or by being proud of refusing to join. Nevertheless, the autobiographers do look for justifications to explain their collaboration. Usually, the advocates point out the inevitability of collaboration if one wanted to maintain or have a successful career; never, as they argue, was it motivated by some ideological beliefs.<sup>18</sup> Accordingly, living with double standards as a consciously cultivated state of mind is commonly used as a major justification for the Soviet-era conformity<sup>19</sup>; and sometimes, as in the case of Janis Liepins, it is even compared with "the underground activities of guerrillas."<sup>20</sup>

The same applies to joining the Komsomol, the youth wing of the CP, wherein future party leaders were tempered. Dainis Ivans, the icon of National Awakening, claims he joined the Komsomol merely because it could help with university admission, "A university then was almost the only way to avoid [conscription into] the legendary and heroic Red Army".<sup>21</sup> Moreover, several autobiographers contend that working in Komsomol should not be framed as a stigmatizing experience. They claim that many politicians and entrepreneurs of today's Latvia obtained leadership skills and had an opportunity to change the Soviet regime while working in the Komsomol.<sup>22</sup> Likewise, the autobiographers highlight various material and social advantages of participating in ideological organizations (such as travelling around the world or gaining their own flat).

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Jānis Āboltiņš, *Biju biedrs, tagad kungs* (Rīga, 1992), p. 7; Skaidrīte Kaldupe, *No jūras līdz "Ošu zemei"* (Rīga, 2001), p. 198.

<sup>19</sup> Similar phenomenon in terms of the second-generation Estonian communists has been observed by Aarelaid, see Aili Aarelaid, 'Estonian-inclined Communists as Marginals', Robin Humphrey, Robert Miller, Elena Zdravomyslova (eds), *Biographical Research in Eastern Europe: Altered Lives and Broken Biographies* (Hampshire, 2003), pp. 71–99.

<sup>20</sup> Jānis Arvīds Liepiņš, *Sarkano okupantu orģijas Latvijā* (Rīga, 2008), p. 100.

<sup>21</sup> Dainis Īvāns, *Gadījuma karakalps* (Rīga, 1995), p. 31.

<sup>22</sup> Āboltiņš, *Biju biedrs*, p. 13; Valērijs Kargins, *Nauda un cilvēki* (Rīga, 2005), p. 67.

Apart from somewhat pragmatic arguments one may also find more apathetic explanations of cooperation with the ideological institutions. That is characteristic of the autobiographers who worked in Soviet institutions and were party members. For instance, the former president of Latvia, Guntis Ulmanis, argues that his attitude towards the party and the Komsomol – both of which he joined – was similar: they were just structural units of the Soviet machinery.<sup>23</sup> The famous actress Vija Artmane, in turn, insists that she did not know about the riskiness of becoming a member, “Just one thing was clear: successful and loyal people, both old and young, were invited to join the party”.<sup>24</sup> By the same token, some of the oldest autobiographers, who had also experienced life in interwar Latvia, self-critically acknowledge their naivety and idealism as an impetus for joining the party or supporting the communist ideology.<sup>25</sup>

Although the autobiographers are partially reproducing the image of Stalin’s cruel KGB, their direct experience was connected with the post-Stalinist era. This experience was basically associated with the so-called “prophylactic practices”, which were the KGB’s main tool for controlling the Soviet intelligentsia after Stalin’s death.<sup>26</sup> Frequently the autobiographers note the systematic presence of the KGB in their daily lives. Either latent or manifest, it was everywhere: at their workplaces, in missions, infiltrating professional organizations, private flats, and cafeterias. Yet, the omnipresent and omnipotent image of the KGB might be exaggerated, as the memoirs of Edmunds Johansons, the last chairman of Latvian KGB, suggest:

Starting to work at the KGB, I was surprised by the prevailing public opinion about Cheka’s<sup>27</sup> eyes and ears as if they were everywhere. The society believed in the enormous size of the KGB’s staff. That, of course, was complimentary: it is pleasurable to work in an institution, which was assumed to be so mighty by society. In fact, the number of employees wasn’t more than a thousand.<sup>28</sup>

Overall, encounters with the KGB have been characterized as reserved, polite, and businesslike; the singer Larisa Mondrusa even estimates it as “a pathological politeness”.<sup>29</sup> This embarrasses many representatives of the

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<sup>23</sup> Guntis Ulmanis, *No tevis jau neprasa daudz...* (Rīga, 1995), p. 143.

<sup>24</sup> Vija Artmane, *Ziemcieši. Mirkļi no manas dzīves* (Rīga, 2004), p. 301.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Eduards Berklavs, *Zināt un neaizmirst*, vol. 1 (Rīga, 1998), p. 350; Jānis Liepiņš, *Es sadarbojos ar KGB un CIP dubultaģentu Imantu Lešinski* (Rīga, 2003), p. 85; Mavriks Vulfsons, *Kārtis uz galda!* (Rīga, 1997), p. 184.

<sup>26</sup> Aldis Bergmanis, Indulis Zālīte, ‘Most Important Directions of Activities of the KGB of Latvian SSR during 1960-1964’, In Andris Caune (ed.), *Totalitarian Occupation Regimes in Latvia in 1940-1964*, vol. 13 (Rīga, 2004), p. 552.

<sup>27</sup> Cheka (from Russian—*Chrezvychaynaya Komissiya* or Extraordinary Commission) was established after the October revolution 1917; historically it is perceived as the KGB’s predecessor.

<sup>28</sup> Edmunds Johansons, *Čekas ģenerāļa piezīmes: Atmoda un VDK* (Rīga, 2006), p. 26; for similar estimation see also Īvāns, *Gadījuma karakalps*, pp. 54–55.

<sup>29</sup> Iveta Meimane, *No manis neaizej... Larisa Mondrusa* (Rīga, 2004), p. 193

intelligentsia because they still have not understood what the KGB wanted and why it was interested in being so unobtrusive. Likewise, as I have noted elsewhere, the autobiographers challenge the conventional assessment of the KGB as having been a slim and cynic actor.<sup>30</sup> Instead, there are frequent comments about the KGB or its informers, showing their incompetence or naivety. In fact, those who became the objects of the KGB's surveillance present themselves as cautious and cunning individuals who kept an eye on the activities of the KGB. Additionally, the undermining of the KGB is reached rhetorically, using irony and trivialisation in its portrayals. For example, Purs' account describes how he was shadowed by KGB agents:

The tracking was clumsy already with the selection of an incompatible pair of informants [the first was tall and the second small]. Was it done on purpose, in order to check what I am able or unable to notice? But it's also possible that, being in a hurry, they simply chose those who were free at that moment.<sup>31</sup>

The differentiation between high-quality and awful functionaries is another organizing theme that facilitates the normalization of ideological and repressive institutions. Representatives of the former Soviet intelligentsia admit that not all members of the party or functionaries were crazy careerists and blind supporters of the regime and that among them were people who did understand the needs and frustrations of the intelligentsia. As a rule, good functionaries are still remembered positively today by the general public. By naming particular individuals, the autobiographers outline an ideal Soviet functionary: he/she was courageous, liberal, cultured, responsible, helpful, and with a comprehensive thinking manner.<sup>32</sup> Notably, even some KGB officials are presented as somewhat friendly, helpful and ordinary, and in a way that again challenges the cruel image of the KGB. The writer Viktors Livzemnieks has vividly illustrated that by recalling how he, after having publicly expressed anti-Soviet ideas, was warned by a friendly KGB officer about potential trouble:

I'm entering the anteroom of the editorial office of the magazine "Karogs", and there, as if waiting for me, sitting alone is pudgy Berhards Borgs, as far as I knew, an officer from the KGB. Since he is from my region [Latgale], he attacks me without any introduction: "What have you done now? You've openly talked about events in the Czech Republic [Prague Spring]. People are looking at you, they are listening to you." Then Borgs adds in a threatening tone, "If you are invited (you know where) and asked how it happened, tell them you were drunk, and don't

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<sup>30</sup> Martins Kaprans, 'Retrospective Anchoring of the Soviet Repressive System: the Autobiographies of the Latvian Intelligentsia', Kathleen Starck (ed.), *Between Fear and Freedom: Cultural Representations of the Cold War* (Newcastle, 2010), pp. 193–206.

<sup>31</sup> Laimonis Purs, *Aizejot atskaties*, vol. 1. (Rīga, 2006), p. 99.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Imants Auziņš, *Piecdesmit gadi bez televizora*, vol. 3 (Rīga, 2006), pp. 220–221; Māris Čaklais, *Laiks iegravē sejas* (Rīga, 2000), p. 45, 46; Gidons Krēmers, *Ceļā* (Rīga, 2007), p. 267.

gad about in cafeterias where the young are meeting!” Although I wasn’t very obedient, I was thankful to Bernhards Borgs for his advice.<sup>33</sup>

The Soviet army and military service is also a salient topic within the normalization discourse. Since military service or military training was mandatory for students, it was a crucial experience for the male autobiographers. Many of them recall vivid negative and fatalistic emotions of the moment when they found out they had been conscripted. Nevertheless, the whole military service experience was most likely a good lesson for life as the school for manliness and discipline.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, several autobiographers deny any of the bullying experience that the Soviet army is typically known for. Conversely, military officers are ridiculed by portraying them as hard drinkers and simpletons. Some autobiographers, however, point out particular officers who contrast with the common assumption of the Soviet professional soldiers as stupid dunces: actually, some of them are characterized as humane, simple-hearted and honest.<sup>35</sup>

On the whole, the analyzed autobiographies contain certain discursive practices that intertwine the normalization discourse in terms of Soviet institutions. For the autobiographers, who were employed by Soviet institutions, the normalization of the Communist Party/Komsomol and ideological activities means highlighting their utilitarian motives, which can also be converted into post-Soviet normality. Namely, professional and personal advancements as well as a realistic approach to the system one has to live in are virtues that might be accepted by post-Soviet society. Thus, utilitarianism – especially, if it was directed at increasing the well-being of society – manifests itself as an alternative to the collaboration perspective propagated by advocates of the negative social representation of the Soviet period. Ultimately, one may notice a generational division. Although self-critical, the older autobiographers, born in the 1920s, are more intent on demonstrating compliance to external processes that forced them to support the system, whereas the younger autobiographers emphasize the inner locus of control in relations with Soviet institutions.

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<sup>33</sup> Viktors Līvzemnieks, *Ceļagājumi* (Rīga, 2007), p. 171; see also Pūrs, *Aizejot atskaties*, p. 235; Sandra Landorfa, *Viktors Lapčenoks: par savu paša prieku* (Rīga, 2003), p. 93.

<sup>34</sup> Uldis Lasmanis, *Dēla gadsimts* (Rīga, 2006), p. 206; Ulmanis, *No tevis*, p. 138; Jānis Freimanis, *Visu vēju virpuļi* (Rīga, 2002), p. 23.

<sup>35</sup> Ulmanis, *No tevis*, p. 136; Jānis Arvīds Mednis, *Tēlojām – melojām – dzīvojām* (Rīga, 2008), p. 41; Andrejs Kavacis, *Cilvēks vēstures vējos* (Rīga, 2002) p. 62, 77.

## Controlling the attributes of everyday life: a few examples

Besides a rigid ideological system that complicated one's daily life, many informal and less ideologically inclined social practices were unique to Soviet society. Although the survival kit of *Homo Sovieticus* included various strategies, I shall touch on just a few of them, which are most likely to appear in the autobiographies and, thereby, in a way are most prototypical.

*Blat* became emblematic of the so-called Soviet public-private sphere, which appeared after Stalin's death and was a taboo subject in the official discourse.<sup>36</sup> *Blat* involved social networking: it was based on the idea of *scratch my back and I will scratch yours*. It was a method of dealing with the official sphere and a mode of transfer for the purpose of guaranteeing everyday survival that evolved in the context of the centrally planned communist economy; this social practice, as Ledneva reckons, was especially prominent in the 1970s, which is characterized as a period of raised needs but obvious shortages.<sup>37</sup> *Blat* as a theme emerges in many autobiographies, and, overall, it is a neutrally or even positively estimated phenomenon. In addition to being a survival skill, *blat* symbolizes the autobiographer's status in Soviet society. For example, Soviet-time artists remember situations when, due to their popularity, they could get exclusive products in shops or other services without standing in long cues. The singer Ojars Grinbergs, remembering heyday, notes: "I didn't know what it meant to stand in a cue for food or clothes. I was welcome to use the backdoor everywhere."<sup>38</sup>

Former Soviet functionaries add a pragmatic dimension to *blat* as a status indicator, i.e. it also helped to achieve many goals for public good. Particularly, that is exemplified by memories of how autobiographers attempted to get certain benefits from the Moscow functionaries by giving them well-known Latvian delicacies, such as Riga's Sprats, Black Balsam, and Laima chocolates. Janis Aboltins, who worked in the Riga Executive Committee, proudly admits,

Our republic also had other tools to obtain benevolence from [the resource] dealers: the pubs and sanatoriums of Jurmala<sup>39</sup>. At least during my career the vice-chairman of the city had a schedule consisting of when and with whom among Moscow superiors relaxing in Jurmala, he had to accompany to the pub. Due to such acquaintances and temptation system, we got almost everything that Moscow could offer us for the city's infrastructure.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See Ingrid Oswald, Viktor Voronkov, 'The public-private sphere in soviet and post-soviet society', *European Societies* 6 (2004), pp. 97–117.

<sup>37</sup> Alena V. Ledneva, *Russia's economy of favours: blat, networking, and informal exchange* (Cambridge, UK, 1998), p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Andris Jakubāns, *Dzīvs – tātad dziedu* (Rīga, 2005), p. 86; see also Iveta Meimane, *No manis neaizej... Larisa Mondrusa* (Rīga, 2004), p. 67; Landorfa, *Viktors Lapčēnoks*, p. 93.

<sup>39</sup> A popular seaside resort area in Latvia.

<sup>40</sup> Āboltiņš, *Biju biedrs*, p. 32.

On the one hand, the former functionaries, thus, stress their positive qualities such as strategic thinking and purposefulness (professionally guided qualities), while on the other, they show – at least implicitly – that regardless of the planned economy and peripheral status of Latvia, they were able to get resources for the development of cities or factories (socially guided qualities). Certainly, a pragmatic attitude towards *blat* was at times challenged by accusations of corruption. That is to say, the autobiographers criticize the nepotism and bribery of the Soviet *nomenklatura*. Janis Liepins, a top-level Soviet functionary, constantly invokes such a criticism: he expresses loathing towards the functionaries from Moscow whom he had to bribe regularly.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, some autobiographers interpret fraud and bribery as a form of protest against the Soviet regime. For instance, Janis Mednis, who worked for [the repair-construction section in Riga, remembers how he and his colleagues systematically falsified documents to show that they had completed work, which actually had not been completed, “This was also how the Soviet machinery crumbled little by little and how the end of an invincible and indestructible Soviet Union was brought about.”<sup>42</sup>

Extensive consumption of alcohol is another practice of the public-private sphere that is normalized. Most likely though, this practice is characterized via non-biographical commentaries and general observations of how it was then. Many autobiographers point to the everyday nature of drinking and widespread consumption of alcohol: on public transport, and in workplaces, demonstrations, and conferences. Occasionally, heavy drinking is justified as a way of surviving in the Soviet regime rather than being self-destructive. Simultaneously with certain remorse the autobiographers characterize drinking by phrases such as “it was inevitable then” or “what else could we do then”.<sup>43</sup> Besides such fatalistic feelings, there are also more balanced estimations. For example, the representatives of the intelligentsia perceive drinking as a bohemian way of living rather than as a survival strategy. In this context the consumption of alcohol reinforced mutual understanding and community<sup>44</sup>; it “was on a higher intellectual plane” than nowadays<sup>45</sup> and elicited noble thoughts<sup>46</sup>. Incidentally, numerous memoirs by members of the intelligentsia provide colourful descriptions of Soviet-era cafés and restaurants, i.e. the places where a bohemian lifestyle blossomed. The former functionaries, however, allude to more pragmatic drinking that helped to keep up informal relations and to be successful. As Aboltins considers, “To progress while working in Komsomol, it wasn’t enough to be

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<sup>41</sup> Liepiņš, *Sarkano okupantu*, p. 166.

<sup>42</sup> Mednis, *Tēlojām*, p. 127.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Māris Čaklais, *Im Ka* (Rīga, 1998), p. 123; Harijs Liepiņš, *Pēr, tu melo!* (Rīga, 1997), p. 153; Landorfa, *Viktors Lapčenoks*, p. 101.

<sup>44</sup> Biruta Baumanē, *Es dzīvoju* (Rīga, 1995), p. 158.

<sup>45</sup> Ivars Godmanis, *Cilvēks Godmanis* (Rīga, 1997), p. 59.

<sup>46</sup> Čaklais, *Im Ka*, p. 64.

able to persuade or impress someone. I had to be able to consume enormous quantities of alcohol with or without a reason.”<sup>47</sup> Mednis, in turn, claims that regular drinking with well-connected persons eased the maintenance of strategic friendships: one could count on an influential drinking buddy to help in troublesome situations.<sup>48</sup>

The students’ forced labor on collective farms (*kolhozs*) is also a vivid experience, which is normalized in terms of Soviet everyday life. In Soviet times, the majority of Latvian students had to spend a month in autumn on collective farms where they helped to harvest beets, potatoes, etc. Clearly, it was not a voluntary choice to work, however, all autobiographers, who remember this joint work on *kolhozs*, highlight the positive emotions attached to it. Namely, it facilitated socialization among freshmen, and there was much romanticism in the air.

Undoubtedly, a joint working in kolhozs at the beginning of each academic year was a part of the romanticism of studies. That has really remained as a vivid memory. [...] Of course, we had to work and we did it more or less honestly, although we didn’t earn a penny. Being economists, we knew that it’s a classical form of exploitation; nonetheless, we didn’t revolt. We were young, all together . . . Nothing to worry about, nothing to be responsible for.<sup>49</sup>

As can be seen from the above outline of how everyday Soviet life is normalized in Latvian autobiographies, there is an amalgamation of different social representations of the Soviet period. That is to say, there is a rather pragmatic approach taken when, regardless of the oddity of the Soviet regime, one stresses the ability to achieve certain goals. Surely, there is also a positive representation evoked when autobiographers possess a sort of nostalgic view of bygone times; it turns everyday experiences into innocent references within the autobiographical narrative. Finally, one may also notice a negative representation through which the acceptance of Soviet peculiarities is clarified as part of resistance and surviving practices.

## Coda

The thematic analysis shows that normalization of the Soviet period constantly appears at the level of coda.<sup>50</sup> The coda, as Labov and Waltetsky have defined it, is “a functional device within narrative for returning the

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<sup>47</sup> Āboltiņš, *Biju biedrs*, p. 25.

<sup>48</sup> Mednis, *Tēlojām*, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> Ulmanis, *No tevis*, p. 127, 128; see also Anrijs Kavalieris, *Pusgadsimts kriminālistikā* (Rīga, 2002), p. 163; Rihards Kalvāns, *Atklusējumi*, (Rīga, 2006), pp. 74–75; Freimanis, *Visu vēju*, pp. 19–20.

<sup>50</sup> See Martins Kaprans, ‘Social commentary as biographical work: post-communist autobiographies in Latvia’, *Auto/biography Studies*, in press.



verbal perspective to the present moment.”<sup>51</sup> In terms of Latvian autobiographies coda usually contains comparisons between Soviet and post-Soviet experiences.

The appraisal of current democracy in Latvia is an evident theme that emerges at the coda level. Here the most visible autobiographers become those who were employed by Soviet institutions. For instance, former policemen, who have been surprisingly active in publishing their memoirs, highlight various shortcomings which one can see in the work of current law enforcement institutions. They point out that then the state paid more attention to maintaining order in the streets and to the prevention of crimes, and the fight against corruption was more successful. In their opinion, too, the Soviet judicial system was more effective, and instead of merely making crime into cheap sensations, the press attempted to influence readers.<sup>52</sup> The autobiographers, even if they experienced Soviet oppression, also criticize the rule of law when it contradicts common sense or positive Soviet-era experience.<sup>53</sup> Thus, a sceptical attitude towards the current democratic state reveals some Soviet-era advantages. However, it also exposes disillusionment with how democracy has developed and its abandonment of democratic virtues and solidarity. As Klumbytē argues, “Memories of good Soviet times are primarily reflections of the present experience and concerns rather than accurate recollections of the Soviet past. They tell more about post-Soviet subjectivity rather than life under socialism.”<sup>54</sup>

Another recurrent theme is the autobiographers’ quarrel with present-day interpretations of the Soviet period. They point to the lack of understanding among *significant others* (historians, politicians, journalists and other commentators) on how complicated life was then. This criticism is principally aimed at preserving what was a positive social identity. For example, the autobiographers stress the vitality of creative life – so characteristic of the Soviet period and so anemic in post-Soviet Latvia. The poet Imants Auziņš suggests that people were more vibrant and unrestrained than they are now portrayed. Comparing writers’ creativity in the 1970s and 1980s with the situation today, one must acknowledge that creative work is stagnating right now.<sup>55</sup> The actor Harijs Liepiņš sarcastically mentions young “theatre scientists” who unfairly accuse the Soviet theatre of old-fashioned theatricality:

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<sup>51</sup> William Labov, Joshua Waletzky, ‘Narrative analysis: oral versions of personal experience’, Christina Bratt Paulston, Richard G. Tucker (eds.), *Sociolinguistics: the essential readings* (Malden, 2003), p. 100.

<sup>52</sup> Aloīzs Blonskis, *No ierindnieka līdz ģenerālim* (Rīga, 2000), pp. 100–103; Nikolajs Zlakomanovs, *Izmeklēšanas priekšnieka atmiņas* (Rīga, 2000), p. 148; Kavalieris, *Pusgadsimts*, p. 72.

<sup>53</sup> Lasmanis, *Dēla gadsimts*, p. 91; Mednis, *Tēlojām*, p. 67; Dainis Ivāns, *Eida pirtiņā* (Rīga, 1999), p. 135.

<sup>54</sup> Klumbytē, ‘Memory’, p. 306.

<sup>55</sup> Imants Auziņš, *Piecdesmit gadi bez televizora*, vol. 1 (Rīga, 2002), p. 86.

However, the previous generation, the parents [of 'theatre scientists'], watched us in their youth, and they experienced something so keenly that the contemporary theatre companies [*in Latvian the 'theatre' is written in the diminutive form to stress the author's sarcastic intentions – M.K.*] of 'independents', 'angry young men' or 'stubborn persons' will never be able to reach.<sup>56</sup>

Hence, the intelligentsia challenges the assumption that no real artistic freedom existed under the Soviets, and that the creative and technical intelligentsia performed only in the interests of the ruling elite. On the contrary, they claim there was a persistent spirit of community, resistance, and creativity that helped in accomplishing ambitious goals for public well-being. The repressive nature of the Soviet regime is thereby downplayed to a certain extent.

Likewise, the writers focus on what they see as false assumptions related to Soviet-era cultural production and social relations. According to the writers' comments, literary critics ignore the unique Soviet circumstances everyone had to cope with when writing. Commenting on criticism of the Soviet-era theatre, the actress Vija Artmane similarly contends that it is unjust to think that contemporary Latvian theatre has established absolutely new traditions and ignored the rich legacy created by generations of Soviet actors.<sup>57</sup>

The intelligentsia also highlights the high quality of their creative activities in the Soviet period. This theme becomes even more salient when post-Soviet culture is critically appraised, especially in terms of professionalism. The actress Ērika Ferda considers that in Soviet times, "We, the actors, criticized each other more often than nowadays when the stage directors are freely grazing in their own gardens according to their own rules which are, of course, mandatory to all actors."<sup>58</sup> Similarly, the violinist Gidons Kremers insists that, "Just a few young talented contemporary musicians have in their minds the same meaning of playing music as we had in the unhappy Soviet Union. It was then a sort of resistance and sacrifice and even a 'reverberant conscience'."<sup>59</sup> The same standard is used to criticize contemporary Latvian literature, art, and science.<sup>60</sup> Thus, the autobiographers refer to Soviet culture as better, because it was tempered by a repressive system.

Equally, social relations have been undermined when compared with Soviet standards. Basically such standards were derived from a positive working experience, whereas post-communist work ethics, which are rooted in a sense of impunity, are suspect. It sometimes discredits individuality and

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<sup>56</sup> Liepiņš, *Pēr, tu melo!* p. 55

<sup>57</sup> Artmane, *Ziemcieši*, p. 12.

<sup>58</sup> Ērika Ferda, *Kā sendienās* (Rīga, 1995), p. 168.

<sup>59</sup> Krēmers, *Ceļā*, p. 422.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Mārtiņš Dāboliņš, *Meža skandālista memuāri* (Rīga, 2005), p. 16; Freimanis, *Visu vēju*, p. 43; Auziņš, *Piecdesmit gadi*, vol. 3, p. 120.

the sense of duty, or it eradicates modesty and a mutual respect. According to several autobiographies of former Soviet public officials, Soviet society was more disciplined and law abiding as well; and even if there was anti-social behaviour like stealing or teenage fighting, it was usually based on sort of morality.<sup>61</sup> Other autobiographers, for their part, are particularly upset by the lifestyle of the present society which has lost its gravitas, the sense which triggered, “the crystallization of the moral core of personality.”<sup>62</sup>

Overall, the aforementioned criticism is more characteristic of the former intelligentsia, and it attempts to position the Soviet intelligentsia as agents rather than victims of the Soviet period. Regardless of Soviet-era restrictions, the autobiographers tend to emphasize the positive freedom of Soviet times as testimony to their positive social identity and unique experience. That is, beyond the political constraints and social conditions, there were many intellectual debates and a vigorous creative life – the processes which they find absent in current Latvian society.

### Concluding thoughts

The aim of this article was not to show the most typical segment of Latvian autobiographical discourse about Soviet times. Neither was it to reveal historically important details of *Homo Sovieticus*. Instead, I have sought to display the discursive tools and organizing themes that have been used to normalize Soviet-era experiences since the collapse of the USSR.

As I have demonstrated throughout the article, the organizing themes of normalization discourse largely evolve around the Soviet public and public-private spheres. Clearly, these were the domains wherein the Soviet man was socialized and wherein the peculiarity of the Soviet regime emerged. To apply Portelli’s conception, the normalization discourse may be dislocated either in the institutional or communal mode of the post-Soviet biographical narratives.<sup>63</sup> The different levels of these narratives reveal a variety of normalization strategies: manifest pragmatism towards ideological institutions, ignorance of conformity as a stigmatizing experience, differentiation of functionaries, undermining of the representatives of repressive and military structures, emphasis on the inner locus of control. No doubt, that does illustrate the complexity of survival during the Soviet period. However, for the social scientist it is even more appealing to interpret these strategies in the present context. Knowing the nature of normalization

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<sup>61</sup> Blonskis, *No ierindnieka*, pp. 32–33; Ulmanis, *No tevis*, pp. 81–82.

<sup>62</sup> Zlakomanovs, *Izmeklēšanas priekšnieka*, p. 136.

<sup>63</sup> Alessandro Portelli, *The battle of Valle Giulia: oral history and the art of dialogue* (Madison, 1997), p. 27.

discourse, what can we say about the post-Cold War autobiographical culture in Latvia – and perhaps elsewhere?

The necessity for a positive identity is a major and shortcut answer. For individuals who were heavily victimized by the Soviet regime (deportees, legionnaires, and dissidents) the recognition of their suffering helped to form a positive identity in post-Soviet Latvia. This negative social representation that stresses the people's suffering and heroism was institutionalized during the National Revival in the late 1980s and has been dominating ever since. However, the tremendous social changes in the 1940s (WWII, deportations), 1950s (Stalin's death, the *thaw*), 1960s (the end of Khrushchev's regime, Prague Spring), and 1980s (the national revival) are, indeed, consequential episodes that complicate the hegemony of a negative representation. Different generations and social groups had diverse relations with these changes and, thereby, also diverse representations of the Soviet period. The understanding of the Soviet experience may not be as rigid for the majority of people, who did not directly experience Stalinist repression and whose formative years fell in the post-Stalinism period.

The Latvian autobiographies to some extent challenge this dominant representation by offering a multidimensional view of the Soviet period. Many of the autobiographies I have analyzed here insist that victimization and resistance, although significant, are just one part of the *Soviet story*. A non-traumatic everyday experience and the advancement of social and professional status, nonetheless, are equally crucial themes, for they may provide the sense of a positive identity. Additionally, as Nagel has speculated, everyday experience might be more important than epoch-making events in forming generational identity of those born in the 1950s and 60s.<sup>64</sup> A public biographical work of the *last Soviet generation*, however, has evidently not begun, making current assumptions highly speculative. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that the autobiographers largely represent the former Soviet elite rather than the thinking of laymen. On the other hand, that gives us a sound reason to speak about the emancipated representation of the Soviet period. Unlike the hegemonic representations, which Moscovici has defined as uniform and coercive, the emancipated representations have "a certain degree of autonomy with respect to interacting segments of society. They have a complimentary function inasmuch as they result from exchanging and sharing a set of interpretations and symbols."<sup>65</sup> To highlight the core idea of emancipated representation concerning Soviet times in Latvia, I call it a pragmatic representation, which stands in opposition to the negative representation as well as the positive representation that is chiefly possessed

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<sup>64</sup> Ulrike Nigél, 'Maintaining a Sense of Individual Autonomy Under Conditions of Constraint: A Study of East German Managers', Prue Chamberlayne, Joanna Bornat, Ursula Apitzsch (eds), *Biographical methods and professional practice: an international practice* (Bristol, 2004), p. 144.

<sup>65</sup> Serge Moscovici, 'Notes Towards a description of Social Representations', *European Journal of Social Psychology* 18 (1988), p. 221.

by the Russian-speaking community in Latvia. In short, by providing an alternative understanding of a positive identity, the pragmatic representation is conceivably a way out of the deadlock created by the imperatives of negative and positive representation.

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