

# Becoming a Folklorist in Early Soviet Estonia: Learning the Rhetoric of the Socialist Research

**Kaisa Langer**  
*University of Tartu*  
*Estonia*

## **Abstract**

*In early Soviet Estonia, the goal of university education was to shape Soviet-minded cadres. Folkloristics was one of the many fields that were supposed to help rebuild a new society. However, the system was not effective: although the students learned about Marxist-Leninist theory and Soviet folkloristics, their choices in the fieldwork and research interests show that they mainly learned to use the Soviet rhetoric when needed, but mostly searched for ways to study folklore with approaches that were common before the Soviet period. The disciplinary identity mostly changed only in rhetoric aspects.*

**Keywords:** folkloristics; Soviet Estonia; Stalinism; higher education; fieldwork; disciplinary history

**D**uring World War II, Estonia, a small country with a strong history of folklore studies, was occupied by the Soviet Union, and the new political situation altered research and teaching of folklore, and the public understanding of it. The First Secretary of the Communist Party of Estonia, Nikolai Karotamm, held a speech in 1945 where he stated: “We need to start studying folklore seriously and systematically. There we will find the answers to many important questions about our people’s past in the areas of political, economic and cultural development” (Karotamm 1945, 23). The Commissar of Education of the Council of Peoples Commissars Nigol Andresen had also written about folklore studies, emphasizing the importance of working with both older folklore collections and contemporary folklore: “We need to study the rich garners of our folklore. At the same time, the events of the Great Patriotic War, cultural history and the new folklore need to be carefully collected and studied” (Andresen 1944, 1). These high-level officials<sup>1</sup> were interested in the role of folklore in Estonia that the Soviet Union had occupied. Folklorists and folklore students in the early Soviet Estonia quoted these and similar statements to show the relevance of the field. I start the text about folkloristics in Soviet Estonia with these statements uttered by people who were not interested in folklore as such, but in its possible value in political and ideological perspectives. Folklore was a source of information about the past, valid for a new understanding of the people’s history. Simultaneously, politicians expected the folklore to reflect the progress of the Soviet state and to inspire creative professionals. Folklorists needed to reevaluate their previous work, use collective methods for documenting folklore and analyze folk culture, using Marxist-Leninist theories and the works of Soviet folklorists.

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The article tracks the changes in studying and teaching folkloristics in the early Soviet or Stalinist period in Soviet Estonia. Estonia was a part of the Russian Empire until 1918. In the interwar period, the country was independent, and the Soviets occupied it in 1940 for a year. After three years of Nazi occupation 1941–1944, the Soviets returned. While the Stalinist period strictly lasted in 1944–1953, the cultural influence continued for several years after that, so the article will cover the developments until the mid-1950s (see also Raudsepp 2000, 137). Some of the processes characterize the whole Soviet period that lasted until 1991. I am charting the theories and methods the students got acquainted with in the Soviet university and looking at how they applied their knowledge in the student research papers and practical work. Becoming a folklorist in Stalinist Estonia was very different from studying folkloristics in independent Estonia. However, the field born out of national interest did not disappear in the socialist system; every year, there were some graduates of folkloristics. The number of students who graduated from the State University of Tartu in the field per year varied between one and seven during the Stalinist period.

The main sources of the article are the archival materials about the University of Tartu in the National Archives of Estonia: working plans and reports, protocols of faculty and department meetings, curricula, and lists of students. Naturally, one needs to be critical when dealing with documents of the Soviet period. The meetings' protocols might only reflect the part of discussions that were ideologically unproblematic, and the curricula might show the official content of the studies, but not what truly happened in the lectures. Unfortunately, there are no archived lecture notes or other unofficial sources that would show the studies from the students' perspective. Other important sources are the fieldwork diaries and the folklore materials collected by students that were stored in either the Folklore Department of the State Literary Museum, Folklore Sector of the Institute of Language and Literature, or in the Folklore collection of the Chair of Estonian Literature and Folklore, Tartu State University. In general, the diaries described the performers and performance situations. Authors presented some other topics in the fieldwork diaries according to their interests and experiences. The diaries' authors knew that others would read their texts, they often evaded topics that were hard to describe truthfully, and according to the Soviet ideology: they learned to write between the lines. Students were generally less careful in their writing than the professional folklorists. Some doubtful statements were common in their writings (Saarlo 2018a). Another valuable source to show the differences in rhetoric and practices are newspapers. I have used some larger dailies and the university's newspaper where the articles about fieldwork and folkloristics were published. All these sources show what the folklorists presented as folklore and how they communicated the folkloristics' goals; comparing the different sources presents a contrast between the texts and practices. I intend to follow the knowledge and the practices: what did the students learn at the university and how they applied what they had studied in their writings and in collecting folklore.

### **Folklore in the Soviet Union and Soviet Bloc**

In early Soviet Russia, folkloristics as a discipline flourished, and different trends coexisted. With the start of Stalinism in 1929, the government started to control folkloristics more strictly, as the politicians saw folklore as one of the tools for building a socialist society. In 1930s, all fields of research were controlled by the state more than in the previous decade and evaluated according to the use they brought to the socialist society. In 1934, Maxim Gorky gave a speech at the All-Union Congress of Socialist Writers, where he stressed the optimism in folklore and its value for studying social relations (Gorky 1977). Folklore collecting was encouraged, and new Soviet topics such as the party leaders, revolutions, workers, and class struggles appeared, much of it pseudo-folkloristic in nature (Oinas 1973, 45–49, see also Miller 1990). After World War Two, folklorists in Estonia and other countries in the Soviet sphere of influence needed to share the Soviet understanding of folklore and its goals.

Ethnological disciplines in the Soviet Union and East-Central Europe have been studied quite thoroughly. Several overviews about Soviet folkloristics and ethnology were published during the Soviet period (Oinas 1961, Oinas 1973) and during and after the collapse of the Soviet Union (Howell 1992, Miller 1990). Many analyses of the ethnological disciplines in the Soviet Bloc have been published in the smaller languages of East-Central Europe, but there are also several international collections of articles (Hann et al. 2005, Brunnbauer et al. 2011, Hann, Bošković 2013) that discuss and compare the developments in the area. However, these collections do not include the Baltics that were part of the Soviet Union.<sup>2</sup> Still, I would argue that the discussion of Baltic folkloristics and ethnology fits better in the context of the ethnological research in the Soviet Bloc than in the Soviet Union. Different languages and disciplinary traditions meant that the research, however, prescribed from the colleagues in Moscow and Leningrad and determined by the Marxist-Leninist understanding of culture, historical and dialectical materialism, had a specific path be seen separately from the folkloristics in the Soviet Union. Estonia (just like Latvia, see Kencis 2017, 2019; Treija 2017) was a borderland, where the researchers tried to imitate the research directions, but their imitation was never complete.

Most of the researchers in Eastern Europe were not aware of the work of their Soviet colleagues before the forced Sovietization of the countries after World War II (Hann et al 2005, 12). During the All-Soviet conferences, Baltic scholars presented their findings in a suitable way, but they were just picking out the texts and interpretations suited the Soviet research paradigm. Therefore, the ethnology and folkloristics in Soviet Estonia were an imitation game where all participants tried to follow the rules deducted from the suggestions and statements from the Soviet colleagues and goals in the research and culture politics the newly founded Soviet country. It was complicated because the rules changed in time, there was a lack of knowledge about the work conducted by the Soviet Russian colleagues or—of the Russian language. In Estonia, just like in several Central Eastern European countries, researchers paid lip service to the system and placed folklore in a new ideological context, while the actual research was not that different from the pre-Soviet work.

Folkloristics was Sovietized in Estonia gradually.<sup>3</sup> During the first years after World War II, folklorists and politicians presented the new position of folkloristics in the newspapers: folklorists were expected to collect folklore in the Soviet topics and reevaluate their previous work. What is more, the folklore collections were censored: texts and words that were unsuitable for the Soviet system were cut out or made unreadable (see Kulasalu 2013). The folklorists tried to adapt to the new requirements: searched for folklore about Soviet topics, learned about Marxist-Leninist theories, re-evaluated their previous work. The Soviet colleagues communicated the new research directions during research conferences. Folklorists praised the methodological and epistemological possibilities for folklore studies in the Soviet framework in the newspapers and in the prefaces of books. The peak of Soviet theories in folkloristics was in the early 1950s. The gradual Sovietization of the research field reflected the country's overall political situation: the first Soviet years were filled with attempts to use Soviet vocabulary and find ways of continuing things as they were before. The late 1940s and early 1950s came with severe repressions. Since the mid-1950s, there was less political pressure on the discipline, but many newly adopted Soviet practices remained in use until the 1990s: the collective ways of collecting folklore, the tendency to show the social relevance of folklore studies, quotations of the Marxist-Leninist authors. For the researchers, it was a time to ask how they can continue their work and at least some of the heritage of the previous scholars. They seemed to search for a new disciplinary identity but do so by preserving the old identity and showing it in a suitable light.

### **Folkloristics in the University of Tartu: Popular Internationally Linked Field**

Academia Gustaviana, the predecessor of the University of Tartu, was first opened in 1632. Due to the Great Northern War, the university was closed in 1710 but reopened in 1802. When Estonia gained its independence in 1918, a university reform took place and Estonian became the language of teaching in 1919. During the Republic of Estonia, students were relatively free in the decisions about their studies. The curriculum was flexible, especially in the faculty of philosophy, where students could combine almost twenty disciplines (Hiio & Piirimäe 2007, 318–319). As there was not enough academic literature in Estonian, the students read in various foreign languages (Mertelsmann 2004, 135). Attendance in classes was not compulsory. In order to pass a course, only exams were important. As the system was flexible and there were fees for studying, many students had jobs and needed more time than the standard period of study to graduate their studies. For example, in 1938, more than 40% of the students had exceeded the nominal period of study. Almost every second student did not graduate the university (Hiio & Piirimäe 2007, 336).

When the University of Tartu was reopened as an Estonian-language university in 1919, the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore was established. In Estonian Republic and during the following Soviet period, this was the only institution in Estonia where it was possible to study folkloristics as a discipline. When the department was founded, folkloristics and ethnology were seen as separate disciplines with

separate departments, one connected with philology, another with archaeology (Jaago 2003). The two disciplines remained separated during the Soviet period: folkloristics dealt with oral tradition, ethnology with the material culture. There were separate research institutions and study programs. Although often similar to those in the field of folkloristics, the developments in the field of ethnology are not in the direct scope of this article.<sup>4</sup>

The first holder of the Chair of Folklore at the University of Tartu was Walter Anderson, who previously had worked at the University of Kazan in Russia. In his first years in Tartu, Anderson, who had a Baltic German background, initially taught in German, but soon started to lecture in Estonian. Anderson was interested in comparative aspects of folkloristics. He participated in several research societies and was internationally active. In 1939, Anderson left the country (Seljamaa 2005). Another lecturer in folkloristics was Matthias Johann Eisen who died in 1934. In 1926, Oskar Loorits became a Ph.D. in folkloristics, and a year later, he started as a private docent at the Chair of Folklore. Folkloristics was one of the most popular disciplines among the students of the Faculty of Philosophy. According to Soviet rumors about the period, this was mainly because it was easy to pass the exams (Vaga 1950, 3). One student remembers that both of the professors were friendly, and during the oral exams, Eisen secretly helped the students to answer the questions asked by Professor Anderson (Ariste 1992, 299).

There were various folklore courses, the topics ranging from comparative methods in folkloristics, folk religion, epics, and other folklore genres to archival organization. Walter Anderson himself gave lectures about research methodology: in one year, the focus was on songs, in the next year, on tales. Every year, he gave a course about a different topic, e.g. cynocephaly or the New Testament in Estonian folklore. In every topic, international comparisons of the motifs were given. For the exams, students got acquainted to the relevant literature on the topic (Laugaste 1985, 608). They had some practical training in the Estonian Folklore Archives. The practical work in folklore collecting was not a specific part of the curricula, but it was encouraged, and students could get a scholarship and collect folklore during their spare time (cf. Ariste 1992, 298). The education in folkloristics gave the students a factual overview of various topics, skills to work with the literature, and to seek for international comparisons.

### **The Tartu State University: Learning to Follow the Rules**

The University of Tartu was renamed and reformed after Estonia was occupied by the Soviet Union. The Soviet universities were not autonomous but were connected to state apparatus: the state and the Communist Party could always interfere in the matters of the university. Many professors were dismissed, the Faculty of Theology was closed, academic organizations banned, and curricula were fixed. After the interlude of the Nazi German occupation that is not in this article's scope, the university was reopened as the Tartu State University on 15th November 1944. There were several ways of controlling the teaching and research at the university. Directives from the Ministry of Higher Education were applied, teachers were expected to visit each other's classes and write reports on the matter, the lecture notes made by students were controlled (Mertelsmann 2004, 138–140).





Illustration 1: The poster depicts the main building of the Tartu State University and states: "The citizens of the Estonian SSR have the right for education." Aleksander Pilar, 1946. EKM j 54339 GD 2840.

Instead of the previous Humboldtian model of higher education, research mainly was carried out in the institutes of the Academy of Sciences (where the political pressure was usually smaller as in the university), and the teaching staff at the universities was not expected to have a scientific degree, but just higher education (Mertelsmann 2004, 138). In Estonia, the number of people with university education had decreased drastically: in 1937, the number of people with higher education was over seven thousand. Ten years later, the number was around two thousand (Karjahärm & Sirk 2007, 31). The University of Tartu had lost around 75% of its teaching staff who had fled the country, were repressed, or started a career in the institutes of the Academy of Sciences (Mertelsmann 2004, 141). Therefore, it was hard to maintain the quality of teaching.

Unlike the pre-War university, in Soviet Estonia the attendance in classes was compulsory and the curriculum fixed. The methods of teaching were different: instead of seminars like in the pre-war university, lectures were the primary method of teaching. On the one hand, the curriculum was packed, and many lecturers were not qualified enough: it was easier for them to plan lectures and reuse the notes over the years instead of preparing seminars. On the other hand, the ideological situation itself led to more passive teaching methods—showing the politically correct interpretations to the students was safer than letting them discuss the materials themselves (Mertelsmann 2004, 138–139). The task of the students was to take detailed notes and learn everything by heart. Researchers needed to reevaluate their studies conducted before the Soviet occupation, as many books were banned or censored, there was not enough literature, and therefore, only a little independent work was expected from the students (Hiio & Piirimäe 2007, 471). Therefore, lack of suitable literature and experienced teaching staff on the one hand and the cautious attitude to the possible anti-Soviet discussions led to study programs where students learned facts and their ideologically suitable interpretations by heart rather than become skilled in the independent work.

Courses about Marxist-Leninist theory and History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union were included in every curriculum, state exams in these fields were necessary for graduating from the university. In addition to that, the students had physical education and military training. For more political education, students attended compulsory meetings or conferences for political information (Hiio & Piirimäe 2007, 469). There was a lot of work to do, and few choices students could make during their time at the university.

The admissions system changed. Estonia became a part of the Soviet Union later than most other countries in the union. Therefore, the people's political consciousness was more suspicious for the Soviet authorities, and the background of the students was controlled more (Hiio & Piirimäe 2007, 428). Prospective students were to fill out a form about their background and write a *curriculum vitae* (ibid, 460). The state decided how many students could be enrolled. The admissions policy favored sciences; fewer people were admitted in the field of humanities (ibid, 511). Many people decided to study something else than initially planned because of the ideological content of most of the university programs in the Soviet Union (Aarelaid 1998, 131–133). For instance, the Estonian folklorist Ülo Tedre had been interested in history since he was a child,

but because of the Soviet occupation, he gave up the idea to study the field where all statements had to fit Marxist-Leninism understanding of the past. He then chose to study folkloristics because it was similar to the history, but was less controlled politically (Rooleid & Niinemets 2008, 137).

So the students had a very different university experience than their predecessors before the war. Instead of academic freedom, strict rules, too many courses, and ideological subjects were part of their university experience. What is more, they needed to find their way how to deal with the ideological situation. Although the memories about the previous value-system were there, people needed to lead their lives in the new political situation and made compromises. For instance, the lecturers followed the official plans in teaching, but between quoting the Marxist-Leninist classics and reporting about the success of the Soviet Union, they also mentioned the contrary facts. This kind of behavior trained the youth in self-censorship (Aarelaid 1998, 125–130). The art of praising the new system even when the experiences did not support the positive depiction was learned by all students, also by the university-trained folklorists.

### **Folkloristics in the Tartu State University: Learning the Basics of Not Only Soviet Folklore**

When the Tartu State University was opened, there was a Chair of Folklore. In 1948 it was merged with the Chair of Literature and remained a part of the latter for the Soviet period. In a similar case, other departments and chairs in the university were also restructured. The Chair of Western European Languages was divided between two chairs in 1948: one for languages and others for literature. There were several reasons for restructuring the university chairs. Firstly, in order to the university structures to be similar all over Soviet Union. Secondly, there was not enough staff who would be both qualified and politically suitable. Moreover, thirdly, merging a chair was an ideological decision to diminish its role (Hiio & Piirimäe 2007, 500–501). Compared to the neighboring discipline of ethnography,<sup>5</sup> folkloristics was doing better: the Chair of Ethnography had been turned to an assistantship and later on, erased altogether (Rebas 1995, 272).

Folkloristics was a small and relatively unimportant discipline that received less political attention as the other fields in the faculty; notably the lectures were controlled less. What is more, it was relatively easy to use Soviet rhetoric in analyzing folklore: to emphasize that it was created by and disseminated by the “wide masses.” After such statements, the analysis of the folklore materials might have little to do with the Marxist-Leninist theory. When the discipline of folkloristics was mentioned in the university newspaper<sup>6</sup> or work in the field was discussed in the chair and faculty meetings, it was usually as an excellent example of a field that has adapted well with the Soviet system. The problems with similar disciplines like literature or linguistics were discussed more fiercely in the media. For example, in 1949, university newspaper TRÜ and the most prominent daily newspaper *Rahva Hääl* published critique towards the work in the Chair of Literature and Folklore, but folklore was not mentioned in the articles nor in the discussions that followed.<sup>7</sup>



After World War II, Eduard Laugaste was hired to teach folkloristics at the Chair of Folklore Tartu State University. Laugaste had obtained his master's degree<sup>8</sup> in 1937 in the University of Tartu, worked as a teacher in secondary education after that. In 1970, he defended the doctoral degree. In addition to teaching, Laugaste had many administrative tasks: he was a vice dean and the dean of Faculty of History and Languages in the early Soviet period and simultaneously the head of the Folklore Sector of the newly established Institute of Language and Literature (ILL) in 1947–1952. As Laugaste had so many other duties, other lecturers were needed.

Finding qualified teaching staff was difficult. Previous professors had left the country, but also political reasons complicated finding the lecturers: folklorist and literary scholar August Annist was about to teach a course about Estonian and Finnish national epics,<sup>9</sup> but he was imprisoned for political reasons in 1945. Some courses were taught by people from the Folklore Department of the State Literary Museum,<sup>10</sup> like Erna Normann, who taught Finno-Ugric folklore in the years 1950–1951.<sup>11</sup> Next to professional folklorists, graduate students like Veera Pino had teaching obligations. For example, she held a seminar on folk songs for second and fourth-year students in 1951–1952.<sup>12</sup>

The Soviet university programs needed new curricula that differed from the previous. Although there were standard plans for curricula in the Soviet universities, in the year 1944, no such plan was available for most of the disciplines,<sup>13</sup> but in some years, all curricula were standardized according to the Ministry of Education plans. There were some small differences between Soviet Russian and Estonian curricula, firstly because Estonian students needed to learn Russian. It was also possible to find suitable topics for seminars from the Estonian context.<sup>14</sup> In the curricula for non-stationary students, the plans of Moscow University were a model to follow.<sup>15</sup> Mostly, all the students in the Soviet Union learned the same or at least similar things.

Most of the literature about folklore and folkloristics in the early Soviet Estonia was outdated as it did not include the Soviet understanding of folklore; some of the books were censored. Eduard Laugaste searched for the possibility for at least some reading materials. So he wrote the first volume of the history of Estonian literature that focused on folklore (Laugaste 1946). The tone of the writing was rather neutral, and Soviet folklore<sup>16</sup> was not explicitly mentioned. Only some statements of the folklorist Yuri Sokolov and writer Maxim Gorki were used. As the book's tone was not radically different from the pre-war folkloristics, new course book was compiled that described literature and folklore through the Soviet perspective. Again, folklore was part of the first volume of the textbook for literature (Sõgel 1953). The scholarly community criticized this book was heavily after Stalin's death for its simplifying tone. In addition to these writings, a translation of a coursebook by Soviet Russian folklorist Yuri Sokolov was used (Sokolov 1947), and some lectures were printed offset (Laugaste 1983, 106). Soon after Stalin's death, it was possible to use a wider variety of literature. Already in 1953, Eduard Laugaste said in one meeting that the graduate students are not aware of the literature that was published in the Republic of Estonia and planned to introduce these texts from thereon.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the lecturers introduced the newest

developments in Soviet research. They incorporated the topics from journals *Znamya*, *Zvezda*, *Izvestija Akademii Nauk SSSR*, *Oktober*, *Eesti Bolševik*, and *Looming* in the teaching materials.<sup>18</sup>

To study folklore during the Stalinist period, one had to be one of the 25 students admitted to Estonian philology. These students could choose between four majors; folkloristics was one of the possible main subjects. In the Soviet Union, folklore was seen as the pre-form of literature, and therefore, there were strong connections in the university programs. After learning the basics of linguistics, Estonian language, and literature at the beginning of their studies, more specialized courses on folklore started for folkloristics majors from their third year on. It was not possible to make individual choices in the curriculum. All of the folklore students went through the courses “Introduction to folklore,” “Folklore theory,” and “Folklore of the neighboring people.” On the third, fourth, and fifth year, there were seminars with changing topics. In the years 1949–1950, these seminars introduced Finnish folklore, Estonian work songs, and mythology.<sup>19</sup> The topics of seminars varied according to the availability of lecturers and current trends in research. For example there was a course on epics to celebrate that hundred years from the first edition of the Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg* (Lau-gaste 1983, 108).

In the three compulsory courses, the approach to folklore and folkloristics was clearly determined by Soviet ideology. Firstly, the introduction to Estonian folklore for the second-year students discussed folklore as the artistic creation of the people and as a research field that reflects the class struggles and the folklife in the past. Students learned about the ideas of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Gorky. A part of the introductory class about the Estonian folklore was the history of folkloristics. A part of this was titled “main characteristics of folkloristics in Soviet Estonia”: just two years after the beginning of Soviet occupation, the new characteristics of folklore studies part of the university program. The course gave an overview of the main characteristics and genres of folklore.<sup>20</sup> Secondly, the course on folklore theory presented and criticized various schools. Romantic-mythological school, loan theory, historic-geographic school, Edward Burnett Tylor’s anthropological school, Hans Naumann’s theory of *gesunkenes Kulturgut*, and Freudian theories were showed critically, but nevertheless introduced to students as a part of the program. Chiefly the course on folklore theory introduced the Marxist-Leninist grounds of folklore.<sup>21</sup> The third course was about the folklore of the neighboring countries; the content of the course varied over the years. In 1946–1947 only Russian folklore and folkloristics were introduced, but a year later, not only Russian, but also German, Latvian, and Scandinavian folklore was discussed. In comparison to the previous year, the discussions of Russian folklore were more focused on Soviet folklore.<sup>22</sup> So it seems that the compulsory courses presented the main ideas of Soviet folkloristics, but at the same time, the courses introduced the basic terminology of folkloristics, history of the field, and several international theories.

Seminars that changed the topic every year had less to do with Soviet folkloristics or folklore. There was no special course on Soviet folklore. Seminars usually dealt with one particular genre. For example, the course on folk belief and customs intro-

duced topics like elves, death, sickness, sorcery, issues related to soul and body, and Christian influences on folk belief. These topics had little to do with Marxism-Leninism. Some other classes could more incorporate the ideology like the course on folk songs that gave a thorough overview about work and serfdom in the songs as these presented critiques to the class society. Moreover, the course described folk songs of other nations in the Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup> In another course, “folk tales, legends and short forms,” folk tales were described as “projections of the social longings of the people and critique against the injustice of great, rich and mighty.” Anecdotes and jokes were an important topic in this course because of the satire they showed against the weaknesses of the people in power. Interestingly, Aarne-Thompson’s classification system of fairy tales was introduced for the students, although using it in the Soviet Union was a controversial issue.<sup>24</sup>

The variety of courses ensured that the students would be acquainted to the main genres of Estonian folklore. International examples used in lectures were either from the Soviet Union or Finland, where the language and folklore are similar to Estonian. Although the Soviet definition of folklore was one of the foundations of the courses, the examples that the students discussed were based on folklore texts. So the students received a good overview of folklore in Estonian folklore collections.



Illustration 2: Students of the Tartu State University in the lecture for Marxism-Leninism. Semjon Školnikov, 1946. EFA.269.0.43988.



### **Folklore Collections of Students—Longing for the “Real” Folklore**

An essential part of the studies of future folklorists was practical work in folklore collecting. Documenting folklore mainly was seen as training for the students. Using the materials for research later was rather a side effect.<sup>25</sup> The lecturers and the graduate students collected folklore together with students. The first compulsory fieldwork practice for the folklore students in the Tartu State University took place in the spring of 1945 in Setomaa (Laugaste 1983, 115). In years 1947–1948, a program of practical work on the field of folkloristics was developed. After the third year of studies, a student had a year to go through a four-week internship that would introduce the discipline and Soviet working methods. The students spent two weeks collecting folklore and another two weeks at the Folklore Department of the State Literary Museum, with a possible alternative of making this at the Folklore Sector of the Institute of Languages and Literature or the Tallinn State Conservatory in the field of musical folklore.<sup>26</sup>

During the expeditions, students interviewed local people, wrote down the answers, and later rewrote the texts for archiving. During the Stalinist period, the possibilities for sound recording were rare; if folklorists decided to use sound recording, they mostly preferred musical performances. The students mainly used the typical model in the numerous folklore collections in Estonia since the late nineteenth century: handwritten texts were numbered and sorted by performers. The fieldwork notes that were handed to archives with the folklore texts included information about the performer (name, age, place of residence, sometimes also profession, and social class), the diaries of the fieldworkers presented information about the performance and social context.

The possibility of conducting fieldwork might have been one of the aspects that motivated prospective students to choose to study folkloristics. The newspaper articles that introduced the disciplines of the Faculty of History and Languages were introduced to youth in newspapers, always mentioned fieldwork. The fieldwork might have had touristic value for the students. For example, after an expedition to the island Hiiumaa one of the students wrote in her diary: “Our first expedition ended well. We collected relatively little due to our lack of experience and we didn’t meet great sources of folklore. From Hiiumaa, we brought unforgettable memories with us, because it was our first time there.”<sup>27</sup> The Estonian islands were a restricted border zone, where a special permit from police with a stamp from border guards was needed.<sup>28</sup> In order to go to a border zone, one needed an invitation. That explained why visiting an island was so exciting for the students. In several fieldwork notes, students mentioned the fun they had during the collecting trip: they went swimming or visited historical sights of interest. Some students got the opportunity to visit other countries in the Soviet Union. For instance, in 1951, students who specialized in Finno-Ugric philology or folkloristics did fieldwork among Karelians in Novgorod oblast.

In the first Soviet years, students mostly made their field trips in the company of some more experienced folklorists from other institutions. Later, students visited one particular area in small groups, or more extensive expeditions for the whole course took place. Working in bigger groups was a challenge. Often, many students inter-



viewed one person and wrote down the same texts.<sup>29</sup> As every student needed to present the results of the collecting trip, they used the possibility to add all the texts they heard in their notes. Therefore, the archived manuscripts about the student fieldwork might include even five or more descriptions of the same interview situation and the same folklore texts performed there.

It is interesting to note that although students had learned about the importance of social factors in folklore, the contextual information was still scarcely documented. Theoretically, the ways of documenting folklore changed a lot. In 1948, a conference about collecting research material took place in Tartu, the importance of social context was stressed, and expeditions were introduced there as the preferred method of folklore collecting. Expeditions were a way of documenting folklore in a larger group where professionals from different institutions or disciplines took part and interviewed people according to their specific interests, stayed in one place, and visited different areas around it.<sup>30</sup> The form of collecting did change: expeditions became a typical method of documenting folklore. In the early Soviet period, they were interdisciplinary, but later this was less common. Moreover, the changes in the content of documented folklore were not that distinct: it was still typical to interview older adults and contextual information was noted scarcely. As performer studies were a popular research area in the Soviet Union, in the 1950s the life stories of singers and storytellers were also in the focus of many Estonian folklorists and were documented better, but mostly only from outstanding performers. The difficulties in collecting folklore in the Soviet way were discussed in several meetings and analyzed in a diploma thesis by Veera Pino in 1950. Pino had joined an expedition in the summer after the conference that announced changes in documenting folklore, and in her thesis, she reflected the changes. Pino concluded that the bourgeois way of collecting still prevailed, and the expedition "brought more quantity as quality." The social context was hardly noted and mostly older adults were interviewed. Although Pino suggested better preparations before the expeditions and discussion meetings during the fieldwork, similar problems occurred to many expeditions to follow (Pino 1950, 198).

The preparations for the fieldwork were often inadequate. Notably, in the expedition with the goal of visiting and photographing places related to legends about the mythological figure of Kalevipoeg,<sup>31</sup> students who were sent out to record place-related legends had no map, measuring tape, compass, nor suitable films for the cameras.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the Soviet regulations hampered fieldwork; for instance in 1955, the students who worked on the northern coast could not see some stones related to Kalevipoeg on the beach, as they had no permit to enter the border zone.<sup>33</sup> The students usually were not acquainted with the archival materials on the same topic or from the same area. The lack of preparations made some students feel uncertain about their tasks. One student noted in her diary: "I feel really bad, because I only have a vague notion of what we are going to work on."<sup>34</sup> Usually, before the fieldwork, meetings were organized where the students learned about the work and the organizational details. Nevertheless, it was not always the case as the student Veera Pino only found out a couple of days before her first fieldwork that she would participate in it.<sup>35</sup> The

fieldwork of different institutions was not coordinated well: in 1950, in island Kihnu, folklore students discovered that ethnography students were conducting fieldwork on the same island, using a very similar questionnaire, therefore documenting very similar materials.<sup>36</sup>

Although (or rather because) there were several uncertainties in the preparations, students themselves often had a somewhat romantic idea of where and what they would collect. For example, in 1950, Loreida Raudsep wrote in her diary: "My first trip for folklore collecting begins. I hoped to be in the countryside, but as it seems, we ended up in a "town." Märjamaa borough is a big settlement."<sup>37</sup> The students preferred smaller settlements, but their expectations to find fascinating folklore in a small village were not fulfilled: "In general we were really disappointed in Umbusi because we found no superstition or other things we hoped for."<sup>38</sup> When collecting kolkhoz folklore Ellen Niit was certain that kolkhoz Tõusev Täht is not interesting because it is too close to the nearby borough Tõstamaa.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, the interviewees themselves had ideas of what folklore is and where to find it. Notably, the interviewees of the students who were documenting contemporary folklore about collective farms in 1950 in Tõstamaa suggested them to visit a near-by island Kihnu with rich traditional culture instead of asking them about the contemporary issues.<sup>40</sup> The notion of folklore as something archaic was shared by the rural people and folklore students alike, although the latter had learned about folklore as reflecting the current society.

The students preferred older people as informants and were eager to claim that they were interested in "all kinds of old songs and tales."<sup>41</sup> At the same time, some possible interviewees who could know more about Soviet topics were left aside; for example, Herta Ploompuu had stayed overnight in the home of a front-rank kolkhoz member but left the next morning without considering to interview her hosts.<sup>42</sup> Students seemed to be very sure what was and what was not folklore. It is interesting to see how Ants Järv and his informant were in a different opinion about the status of jokes that the older man told the student. In his diary, Järv reflected on the meeting and he was amused that the man "held them to be real folklore," whereas he did not note down the texts he certainly found insignificant.<sup>43</sup> Fieldwork was full of situations where the young folklorists worked with an idea of folklore as an archaic relic that is about to disappear soon. Instead of following the Soviet ideas of contemporary folklore, the students were conservative in choosing their informants and topics.

Political pressure on Estonian humanities grew in 1950 when the replacement of the Estonian SSR leadership began, and at the same time, Estonian folklorists visited conferences in Moscow and Leningrad where their Soviet colleagues expected them to present contemporary Estonian Soviet folklore. In the summer of 1950, the students collected kolkhoz folklore with the purpose of "getting to know the kolkhoz folklore after the turn into collective agriculture, to see how human consciousness changes when the social conditions do."<sup>44</sup> Most of the kolkhozes were founded in 1949; therefore the students were expected to find folklore about a very new phenomena.<sup>45</sup> The students started with big expectations and the results of the interviews were rather disappointing. For example, after her very first day on the field, Loreida Raudsep,

who was collecting with a more experienced student, wrote: "I think the results are meager, but my companion Ülo Tedre finds them quite good for the first day."<sup>46</sup> Another student, Maret Jäger, wrote in her diary in the same year: "In conclusion one can say that my hopes to gather good kolkhoz folklore had been greater, but as it seems, there is not much of it. On the basis of my collection, one could say that the seeds of this folklore are already there. But there are still some rudiments of old customs (mainly among older members of the collective farm). The younger generation is creating a new, socialistic culture."<sup>47</sup> Often students wrote that they searched for informants, but nobody gave them suggestions or agreed to be interviewed. When they did manage to have a more extended conversation with someone, it might have been that the more trusting person said something anti-Soviet or contradicted the statements of other, more careful informants. To sum up, the fieldwork on contemporary Soviet folklore was not easy for the students: it was hard to find materials that would fit in the picture of positive socialist folklore.

Although it was difficult to fulfill the tasks of the fieldwork for the students, the professors were satisfied with their work. According to the report of the docent of folkloristics Eduard Laugaste the results of the fieldwork were good, and "information about contemporary folkloristic topics" was collected from 21 kolkhozes.<sup>48</sup> The members of the Chair of Literature and Folklore analyzed the work of the students in the meeting where the Professor of literature Juhan Käosaar, who had the task of reviewing the fieldwork according to the field diaries, collected materials, and reports, was generally satisfied and criticized only the lack of material that would show the social consciousness of the people in kolkhozes.<sup>49</sup> In comparison, another practical fieldwork took place on the island Hiiumaa in July 1954. The students had a task to collect Soviet folklore, and according to the report of Laugaste, all of them were successful.<sup>50</sup> It seems that it was not expected that the students would find much folklore that would praise the new situation, yet it was necessary to show the positive value of the work in reports that would be more likely to be read and analyzed by Soviet officials than the actual fieldwork materials.

When the fieldwork had no specific topic like kolkhoz folklore or the legends about Kalevipoeg, students conducted interviews on miscellaneous topics. There was a considerable interest in songs, especially the older oral song tradition *regilaul*: the genre that was the cornerstone of the Estonian folklore collections (e.g., Saarlo 2017). This Kalevala-metric song was no longer part of the living singing tradition in most parts of Estonia in the mid-twentieth century. So the students documented newer end-rhymed folk songs (but often omitted sentimental songs that were not considered folkloric enough), descriptions of weddings and calendar customs, proverbs, riddles, and other genres. An interesting trend was to interview people about the Russian Revolution of 1905. Memories of this event reflected the history of class struggles in Estonia as many people who lived during the Revolution were alive and not too old to remember the events clearly; at the same time, the revolution had taken place so long ago that the different points of view were not politically relevant. Asking similar questions about World War Two would have a more significant potential to show possibly anti-Soviet tendencies.

During the Stalinist period, the students were careful to write down nothing that could be interpreted as counterrevolutionary or anti-Soviet. After Stalin's death, the students were more open to different topics and the problems of finding contact with informants were mentioned less often than in the years before. As a case in point, relation to religious practices can be followed. In the Soviet Union, religion was officially seen as an unnecessary relic of the past, and when the students collected kolkhoz folklore, they noted down that people rarely go to church and Christian traditions were fading. However, in 1954 students started their fieldwork in Muhumaa with a visit to the local church where a confirmation took place and noted that many people participated in the event.<sup>51</sup> In the same year, two students placed a wooden cross to a hill in Hiiumaa, where the locals traditionally had gathered crosses made from natural materials to commemorate relocated Swedes from Hiiumaa or to mark the place where bride and groom from rival wedding parties were killed.<sup>52</sup> Some weeks later, an expedition of the Institute of Language and Literature took place in Hiiumaa. Richard Viidalepp, who coordinated the expedition was surprised to see the cross: "Is it suitable for students to support the remnant customs that the folk has almost forgotten?"<sup>53</sup> So the students seemed to have a more liberal approach to religious practices than the professional folklorists who had learned to be careful with sensitive topics in their fieldwork diaries.

Nevertheless, the students had learned the phrases that depicted their work in Soviet fashion. They ended their field notes with a positive note even when the results were not good enough: "We left the practical work with more experience, and we can hopefully avoid mistakes and master different situations in our future work."<sup>54</sup> Students framed their diaries with Soviet rhetoric that was similar to the tone in the newspapers. For example, they could write in their diaries how some songs reflect the prosperity of the Soviet life and thankfulness of the people for the great leaders.<sup>55</sup> The descriptions of fieldwork were available for the wider public: it was typical that an article about the student fieldwork was published, at least in the university newspaper. Even when the expedition did not fill the goals, it was still presented positively in the print media. When Anita Rõõm had a goal to document legends about the mythological hero Kalevipoeg within her field trip in the summer of 1955, she had difficulties finding informants competent in the topic, and only four of her 189 folklore texts written down during the fieldwork were related to the goal of her fieldwork—legends about Kalevipoeg.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, she wrote an article about her "throughout successful" expedition in a country-wide daily newspaper (Rõõm 1955). Therefore, it seems that the students had mastered the art to present their work to fit with the Soviet optimistic rhetoric.

### **Becoming a Professional Researcher as a Matter of Finding Suitable Rhetoric**

There are several sources that reflect how students understood folklore and what did they value. Not only the fieldwork diaries of the students, described in the previous section, but also the research topics they chose in the course of their studies show



what their interests were. The students were encouraged to participate in thematic working groups of the Students' Research Society, where they learned research methods and gave presentations. The working groups gave possibilities to find research interests and train various skills, but at the same time were a way of political control on the students. A working group for folklore was founded in 1948. The first presentation was about manors in Estonian folklore.<sup>57</sup> As the group was not as active as planned, it was merged with the working group for literature. Although it had a separate subdivision, the group's main work was done in the literature studies, e.g. organizing writing contests for aspiring authors. Working group for literature and folklore was one of the most popular in the faculty.

The members gave presentations in schools and factories, and the group had contact with universities in Latvia and in Leningrad.

A more demanding possibility for trying out the research was to compete in a contest for research papers. Contests for student research were organized in the pre-World War 2 University of Tartu and this tradition was continued in Tartu State University during the Soviet period. Students were presented a list of topics in the spring semester, and they had almost a year to finish the paper. For example, in the year 1946, the topic for a paper in the field of folkloristics was "The reflection of social relations in proverbs,"<sup>58</sup> in 1948 "Harvesting songs in folklore."<sup>59</sup> The beginning of the 1950s was ideologically stricter, and the research topics reflected it: in 1952, students could choose between the topics "Estonian Soviet folklore" and "Social satire in Estonian folklore."<sup>60</sup>

The research papers were reviewed, and it seems that other qualities were valued higher than the presentation of Soviet ideology. In 1946 the paper "Working relations in the manor according to Estonian folk songs" received the first prize in the competition for the folkloristic paper. Still, in the Chair of Literature and Folklore meeting, it was decided not to publish the paper because there were "several mistakes" and the historical background was not depicted enough: euphemisms for ideologically unsuitable text.<sup>61</sup> In 1948, the first prize was awarded to Grigori Kaljuvee for the paper "Sun in the Estonian folk tradition." His work cited no classics of Marxism-Leninism,



Illustration 3: Students Ülo Tedre and Virve Murumaa visiting an observation platform on Emumägi. Ülo Tedre, 1950. KKI, Foto 1064.

but one book by Oskar Loorits.<sup>62</sup> Kaljuvee presented an analysis of comparative mythology based on a large number of archive texts. He claimed that he considered the social background of the phenomena in his research and concluded that the agricultural means of production shaped the religious ideas (Kaljuvee 1948). Although the connections to the Marxist theory were weak, the paper won the prize.

The students added the Marxist theory usually formally in their diploma thesis, although they discussed the social context of folklore in most of works, even if the topics had little to do with the Soviet ideology (Laugaste 1983, 113). The most crucial paper for students to write was their diploma thesis at the end of their studies. In the years 1945–1955, 25 diploma theses were defended in the field of folklore. The students could choose their topic from a list where various genres and approaches were usually offered. In the year 1951, the topics suggested for the diploma thesis are as follows:

- “Depiction of revolutionary actions of peasants in 19th century Estonian folklore,”
- “Social relations in the village according to older folk song,”
- “The unity of form and content in Estonian older folk songs,”
- “Plague in Estonian folklore,”
- “Legends about Suur Tõll,”
- “Riddles about tools,”
- “The history of Jakob Hurt’s manuscript collections.”<sup>63</sup>

In the Stalinist period, the most popular topics for the thesis were folk songs, beliefs, and customs. Archived folklore was the source of most diploma theses. The number of archive texts from nineteenth and early twentieth century that reflected social injustice could have been used for far many research topics that would fit the understanding of class struggles, but surprisingly, the students were offered relatively neutral research topics. Over the years, they could write about Sun or Moon in the folklore, about healing wounds, or other topics where the connection with class struggles was not apparent. Of course, the lists with suggested topics always had some related to serfdom, depiction of manors, or other issues that were more clearly related to Marxism-Leninism.

No student wrote their diploma thesis on the topic of Soviet folklore. In the last year of his studies, Heldur Niit had written a course paper about kolkhoz folklore and gave a presentation on the topic at the conference of the Students’ Research Society. His course paper was praised in the university newspaper, and Niit wrote an article about folklore in the collective farms in the nation-wide cultural weekly *Sirp ja Vasar* (Niit 1950). But for his diploma thesis, Niit focused on folk tales, and later as a graduate student, he also did not choose Soviet folklore as his research area, although he was an expert on the topic. In 1954, Niit participated in a meeting of the Chair of Literature and Folklore where he gave an overview of the folklore texts that were archived as Soviet folklore. Niit concluded that they were either aesthetically of low value or not folkloristic.<sup>64</sup> Although it was officially declared at the meeting that Soviet folklore

should be studied more, it did not happen, and the report of Niit might have been one of the motivations for abandoning the topic. Therefore it seems that the students—just as professional folklorists—avoided researching Soviet folklore in Estonia because not enough Soviet folklore had been documented and what was available in the archives, was not sufficient for a thorough analysis. The interests of students were instead in the classical genres of folklore. Over the years, the Faculty of History and Languages was criticized that the content of seminar writings and diploma theses is not topical enough or Marxist-Leninist theory was used superficially. However, no more significant change occurred.

For example, according to the regulation for evaluating course papers and diploma theses, the central task of the opponents of the student writings during the defense procedure was to evaluate how well the author of a thesis has solved the research problem according to the Marxist-Leninist methodology.<sup>65</sup> The duties of opponents were reviewed, and in 1950 they were said to be shallow in their tasks: “It is only said that the thesis is generally written correctly and based on Marxist writings, but it is not specified what is Marxist about the text. In searching for mistakes mostly facts or form of the diploma thesis are reviewed, but the analysis of the ideological disposition of the work is more superficial.”<sup>66</sup> Still, the habit to just superficially quote some works by Marxist-Leninist authors and then continue the writing without further incorporation of the ideological statements characterize the whole Soviet period. However, this did not mean that the students were able to get a diploma without a thorough knowledge of the Soviet ideology. To graduate, all students needed to take exams in their discipline and Marxist-Leninist theory. The state exam program on folklore was prepared in the years 1947–1948. This document listed what the graduate should know, e.g. see folklore as an artistic creation of the folk, know the statements of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Gorky.<sup>67</sup>

There were several strategies of finding a research topic that corresponded to the trends in Soviet folkloristics, but at the same time, revealed new aspects in Estonian folklore. There were topics that Estonian folklorists avoided in their work when possible, Soviet folklore being the most prominent example. The ethnologists also tried to avoid some research topics that had been state-supported, like the developments in contemporary culture that could be used to justify Russification (Johansen 1995, 196). Nevertheless, there were topics where several young researchers dealt with issues that were the core of Soviet folkloristics. For instance, performer studies—a field that originated from Soviet research—was a theoretical frame that many folklore students used in analyzing the singers of Estonian older folk song *regilaul* in the postwar years. (Oras 2008, 50–51) Another topic where national ideas and interests of Soviet folkloristics collided was research in folk epics. Collectively created epics suited with the Soviet idea of the creativity of the folk. Besides, in 1957 the hundred-year anniversary of the Estonian national epic Kalevipoeg was celebrated. Therefore, the epic Kalevipoeg and folklore materials it was based on were one of the central interests of folklorists in the 1950s. Student fieldwork was carried out, and several students wrote their diploma theses on the topic (Saarlo 2019, 23–25). One strategy to study a topic that was not di-

rectly related to trends in Soviet folkloristics was to state that the previous work on the topic and the source materials needed to be reevaluated from the Soviet perspective. The reevaluation meant including a bit more social context and some citations.

In 1947, postgraduate study period called *aspirantuur* (Russian: *аспирантура*) was founded by the Department of Folklore, making it possible to get a scientific degree in the field of folkloristics. The Tartu State University and the Institute of Language and Literature had graduate students. Officially, the university preferred specialists who had worked at least three years after graduating, but with a recommendation from the chair or from the research council, also fresh graduates could start in *aspirantuur*. In the first years after the graduate program was established, there were several difficulties, as the students had too many tasks and failed to graduate on time. Graduate students had three years to write and defend a dissertation. In addition, they had to take five exams: dialectical and historical materialism, major and minor specialization, Russian, and another foreign language.

Not all students could continue their graduate studies in the Soviet Estonia. Ülo Tedre had graduated from folkloristics at the Tartu State University in 1951 and wished to continue his graduate studies at the university, but was invited to be a scientific secretary at the State Literary Museum. There, officials of NKVD<sup>68</sup> pressured him to get a degree at the Graduate School of the NKVD, but Tedre, who did not want to be politically involved, could start graduate studies at the Institute of Language and Literature. As there was no suitable supervisor for Ülo Tedre at the Sector of Folklore, a supervisor from the central institutes of the Soviet Academy of Sciences was searched. Ülo Tedre spent part of his graduate studies in Moscow at the N. N. Miklukho-Maklai Institute of Ethnography after he had passed the exams and started collecting materials for his dissertation about class struggles in the nineteenth century rhymed folk songs in Estonia in 1955. His poor Russian skills hindered Tedre in exams, but he could defend the dissertation in Tallinn and in Estonian (Rooleid & Niinemets 2008, 140–141). In the Stalinist period, it was expected that the graduate students worked on socially relevant topics. Another graduate student Veera Pino defended her dissertation “Social conflicts in Estonian villages according to *regilaul* (Estonian older folk song)” in 1954. So both graduate students had found a topic that could be approached from the Soviet angle: archival materials reflected the social and class conflicts in the nineteenth century, and it was possible to give a new perspective of life in Estonian villages. Simultaneously, the dissertations were about a topic that had less relevance in the contemporary life in the 1950s.

When the thesis was successfully defended, the graduate student obtained the degree of the Candidate of Sciences. Another dissertation was needed to get a doctoral degree. During the Soviet period, only Eduard Laugaste became the doctor of folkloristics. After his pre-war master’s degree was acknowledged as the degree of Candidate of Sciences in 1946, he continued to write his doctoral dissertation and obtained the degree of doctor of folkloristics in 1970. As he was active in many positions and institutions, he was not able to graduate earlier, and in the many years of writing, the focus of the dissertation changed: in the beginning, he planned to show how the types



of folk songs developed parallel to social changes,<sup>69</sup> but finally he graduated with the thesis on alliteration in folk songs. The shifting focus from the social background to the form of songs shows a general pattern: questions of the form in folklore were abandoned as formalist and bourgeois in the Stalinist period but later became one of the central research topics. As Liina Saarlo stated, Sovietization conserved Estonian folkloristics: because of the political pressure on the field, studying contemporary folklore or social issues was abandoned as research topics as soon as there was another alternative for research (Saarlo 2018b, 147–148).

The graduates of Soviet universities were not free to choose their jobs, and instead were given a job placement that they had to accept. Academically better or just active students often found their future employer during the studies (Hiio & Piirimäe 2007, 461–462). In the 1940s, when the career possibilities were introduced to the prospective students it was said that the graduates of the Estonian Literature and Folklore Department of the Tartu State University would find jobs as teachers, translators, editors, librarians, and journalists. Some young people who had written their thesis about folkloristics got a job in one of the mentioned areas and did not continue to work in the field of folklore. Three institutions were offering academic jobs for folklorists: Tartu State University, Folklore Department of the State Literary Museum, and Folklore Sector of the Institute of Language and Literature. During the Stalinist period, most of the young folklorists started their careers in the latter because it was founded as late as 1947 and needed qualified staff. The first candidates of sciences Veera Pino and Ülo Tedre were employed there. However, although fresh university graduates were hired, the research was not radically Sovietized. The young folklorists were not so successful in using the Soviet research practices as expected. In 1947, a commission evaluated the work in ILL and in the State Literary Museum and concluded that ILL is politically stagnated whereas a much older institution, the Literary Museum, is ideologically much stronger (Ahven 2007, 37). Although ILL hired young researchers who were educated in the Soviet Union, they still made mistakes that were seen as a result of their “old bourgeois views and methods” (ibid, 55). In the Literary Museum, mostly older folklorists worked, several of them had not been able to finish their studies in the Republic of Estonia, but they had the practical skills in fieldwork and archival organization. Since the mid-1950s, some graduates also started to work in the Folklore Department of the State Literary Museum. The least jobs were available at the Tartu State University. In Soviet Estonia, there were more jobs for folklorists than during the earlier period of the Republic of Estonia (Olesk 1990, 521). To become a folklorist meant getting a job in one of the three folkloristic institutions and finding a way to master the ideological statements but still find his or her way of doing research.

### **Discussion: Doing Folkloristics as a Balancing Act**

When land is occupied, all social and intellectual structures change. In the Soviet Union and its satellite countries, institutions were reorganized, and the goals of social and intellectual life were defined through the Soviet ideals of building socialism. The folkloristic research in Soviet Estonia is an example of one of the many “small eth-

nologies" in Eastern Europe: small in the number of researchers included in the field, but also small in scope, primarily focusing on one national group, the territory of one country. Officially it was claimed that the Soviet perspective opened up new research possibilities. Yet, folklorists declared the search for new disciplinary identity in their writings, actually rather searched for suitable phrases that would frame the research done about local and mainly historical topics. The new research areas were discussed and presented in writings and speeches as progressive but were less prevalent in actual research. There were several reasons for this carefulness in choosing research topics. On the one hand, there was so little contemporary folklore that would show the Soviet system in a positive light; on the other hand, I would argue that Soviet understanding of folklore was not acceptable as a research foundation for the folklorists.

The Soviet Union presented itself as a country that brings prosperity and education to broad masses. Nevertheless, the students were quite restricted in their studies, and the teaching at the university was strictly controlled because it was expected that only Soviet-minded specialists would graduate from the university. As in many fields of humanities and social sciences, there was not enough teaching staff or reading materials in folkloristics. The curriculum was unified according to Soviet central plans in the Tartu State University and included Marxist theory, military education, and sports. The folklore students had to be socially active like all the students of the time. The practical work was a possibility to find out who had the abilities and interest to work as a folklorist. The students' preferred informants and the research topics show that although in newspapers, reports, and books, the Soviet approaches to folklore and folkloristics were successful, the students had a rather conservative understanding of folklore studies. No thesis was written about Soviet topics, and the students saw the older adults in remote villages as the potentially best performers of most valuable folklore texts. The awards for the best research papers in folkloristics were given to writings that only superficially dealt with Marxist-Leninist theory. So the university did not shape a new generation who would have been convinced in Soviet ideas, but rather conservative folklorists, who knew how and when to use suitable rhetoric and quotations. The tendency to only learn the suitable rhetoric at the university instead of becoming a convinced socialist was common to most of the Eastern Bloc countries, as was the lack of foreign contacts and, in many cases, longing for the pre-war ways of doing research.

Sovietization of folkloristics in Estonia was not successful. The rhetoric of new perspectives and innovative methods was a cover for the research done as it was already before the war—even if the new generations of scholars conducted the studies. Managing this balancing act between claiming to do Soviet research and continuing appreciating folklore in the pre-war sense meant that the epistemology of the research hardly changed. Folklorists chose the research so, that it was possible to claim the importance of such topics in the Soviet system, but the actual research content had little to do with Marxist-Leninist ideology. Nevertheless, the safe choices in research topics meant that the contemporary culture was hardly documented or studied. The Soviet period brought a series of social changes that reshaped the folk culture. However, the

researchers neglected the contemporary culture as an ideologically loaded research topic. The Soviet period mostly conserved folkloristic studies: young and old researchers searched politically neutral research topics.

The students who wanted to continue their career as researchers had to make more compromises as their research needed to convey more Soviet ideas than the undergraduate students' work. In their scholarly activities, they needed to condemn the previous methods and prove the social importance of folkloristics in the new Soviet society. Still, the graduate students in the Stalinist period did not choose contemporary Soviet folklore as their topic but discussed the social struggles reflected in folklore texts collected mainly in the second half of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth century. Contemporary issues mainly were left aside because of their complexity: the source materials would not support the Marxist theories or the optimistic style expected from this kind of research. After Stalin's death, these scholars could research the classical genres of folklore. The researchers continued to quote the Marxist-Leninist works throughout the Soviet period, but this did not affect the actual analysis of the materials.

The new Tartu State University was expected to shape young people into Soviet-minded specialists. Instead, the youth learned the formulaic language of the new system and the ways to show the social significance of working with archive texts from the previous century. In the newspapers and various meetings, the docent Eduard Laugaste depicted the folkloristic work at the university as successfully adapted to the new society, while the neighboring disciplines were criticized for their bourgeois work. The discipline seemed to be on new tracks, while the knowledge produced and values that were shared were similar to the ways folkloristics was done before the Soviet occupation.

### Notes

- 1 The First Secretary was the highest political position in a Soviet country, Commissar of Education administrated public education and culture.
- 2 The developments in the Baltic countries are discussed in a recent collection (Bula, Laime 2017).
- 3 This is a very condensed overview of the general developments in folkloristics in Estonia the Stalinist period. There are several recent overviews about the topic, in English see Kalkun, Oras 2018, Kulasalu 2017, Naithani 2019, Saarlo 2017 and Saarlo 2018a.
- 4 For an overview of Estonian ethnology before and during Soviet period see Jääts 2019.
- 5 In the Soviet Estonia, the discipline of ethnology was named ethnography and mainly dealt with analysing material culture.
- 6 For example: TRÜ 1949, no. 14, p. 1.
- 7 RA, EAA.5311.63.3.
- 8 1946 it was recognized as the degree of Candidate of Sciences.
- 9 RA, EAA.5311.63.3, p. 42.
- 10 The name of Estonian Folklore Archives during the Soviet period.
- 11 RA, EAA.5311.63.16, p. 60.
- 12 RA, EAA.5311.63.16, p. 75.

- 13 RA, EAA.5311.5.1, p. 4.
- 14 RA, EAA.5311.5.86, p. 63.
- 15 RA, EAA.5311.5.8, p. 8.
- 16 Meaning contemporary folklore that depicted Soviet system and its leaders in a positive way.
- 17 RA, EAA.5311.63.23, p. 108a.
- 18 RA, EAA.5311.63.16, p. 23.
- 19 RA, EAA.5311.63.19a.
- 20 RA, EAA.5311.63.9a.
- 21 RA, EAA.5311.63.9a.
- 22 RA, EAA.5311.63.12a.
- 23 RA, EAA.5311.63.9a.
- 24 RA, EAA.5311.63.9a.
- 25 RA, EAA.5311.5.80, p. 31.
- 26 RA, EAA.5311.63.12a.
- 27 EKRK I 5, 240 < Hiiumaa – Elly Küla (1954).
- 28 The border zone was established to prevent illegal entry or exit and contrabandism.
- 29 EKRK I 1, 129/30 < Tõstamaa – Heldur Niit (1950).
- 30 EKM, n 1, s 112.
- 31 The mythical Kalev's son was the central character in the Estonian national epic and a character of various legends (about the epic see for example Hasselblatt 2016).
- 32 EKRK I 2, 349/50 < Väike Maarja, Rakvere – Anita Riis (1951).
- 33 EKRK I 11, 59/60 < Jõhvi – Anita Rõõm (1955).
- 34 EKRK I 2, 349 < Väike Maarja, Rakvere – Anita Riis (1951).
- 35 KKI 5, 473/5 < Setumaa – Veera Pino (1948).
- 36 EKRK I 1, 124 < Tõstamaa – Heldur Niit (1950).
- 37 EKRK I 1, 405 < Märjamaa – Loreida Rausep (1950).
- 38 KKI 13, 269 < Põltsamaa – Maret Jäger (1950).
- 39 KKI 12, 345 < Pärnumaa – Ellen Niit (1950).
- 40 KKI 12, 339/40 < Pärnumaa – Ellen Niit (1950).
- 41 EKRK I 5, 31/2 < Hiiumaa – H. Kala, E. Priidel (1954).
- 42 EKRK I 2, 38 < Rapla – Herta Ploompuu (1951).
- 43 EKRK I 11, 28/9 < Paide, Rapla – Ants Järv (1953).
- 44 RA, EAA.5311.63.16, p. 85.
- 45 The newly founded kolkhozes were also the research topic of other disciplines. For example, Ea Jansen who started working in the Institute of History in 1950s, was supposed to write about the history of collectivization of agriculture – something that had only taken place some years ago. (Aarelaid 1998: 116).
- 46 EKRK I 1, 415 < Märjamaa – Loreida Rausep (1950).
- 47 KKI 13, 269 < Põltsamaa – Maret Jäger (1950).
- 48 RA, EAA.5311.5.80, p. 31.
- 49 RA, EAA.5311.63.19a.
- 50 RA, EAA.5311.63.16, p. 112.
- 51 EKRK I 6, 27 < Muhu – E. Veskisaar, I. Sarv (1954).
- 52 EKRK I 5, 38 < Hiiumaa – H. Kala, E. Priidel (1954).
- 53 KKI 27, 128 < Hiiumaa – Richard Viidalepp (1954).
- 54 EKRK I 5, 350 < Hiiumaa – Jenny Langinen (1954)
- 55 E.g. KKI 5, 510 < Setumaa – Veera Pino (1948).



- 56 EKRK I 11, 78 < Jõhvi – Anita Rõõm (1955).  
57 TRÜ 1948, lk 2, nr 3.  
58 RA, EAA.5311.63.3, p. 3.  
59 RA, EAA.5311.63.3, p. 55.  
60 RA, EAA.5311.63.23, p. 92.  
61 RA, EAA.5311.63.3, p. 7.  
62 Oskar Loorits was an Estonian folklorist, head of the Estonian Folklore Archives and lecturer at the University of Tartu. He fled the Soviet occupation in 1944. In early Soviet Estonia, the name of Oskar Loorits was censored from the folklore manuscripts and his works that contained ideas that were often considered nationalist at the time were banned.  
63 RA, EAA.5311.63.16, p. 54.  
64 RA, EAA.5311.63.33, p. 1–17.  
65 RA, EAA.5311.5.86, p. 13.  
66 RA, EAA.5311.5.86, p. 41.  
67 RA, EAA.5311.63.13.  
68 NKVD (Russian: *Народный комиссариат внутренних дел*) was the Russian People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, carried out purges as Soviet secret police agency.  
69 RA, EAA.5311.63.16, p. 93–94.  
70 I have used the traditional citing system of Estonian Folklore Archives. The citation is structured in a following way: archival collection, subseries in the collection, the volume, the pages in the volume (the number of the text) < the place where the text has been recorded—name of the collector (year of collection).

### *Archival Records*

#### Estonian Folklore Archives<sup>70</sup>

KKI – folklore collection of the Institute of Language and Literature.

EK RK – folklore collection of Estonian Literature and Folklore Department of the University of Tartu.

#### Estonian Literary Museum

EKM – the archive of the Estonian Literary Museum as an institution.

#### National Archives of Estonia

RA, EAA.5311.5 – Dean's Office of the Faculty of History and Languages, Tartu State University.

RA, EAA.5311.63 – Chair of Estonian Literature and Folklore, Tartu State University.

EFA.269 – Školnikov, Semjon. The Film Archive.

#### Art Museum of Estonia

EKM GD – Graphic Art Collection.

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