

Revista Română pentru Studii Baltice și Nordice, Vol. 2, Issue 2, 2010, pp. 225-248

L EISURE IN STALIN'S ESTONIA

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Abstract:

The period of Stalinism is usually overshadowed by accounts of terror and a topic like leisure seems not to be appropriate. Nevertheless, leisure was an important aspect of everyday life in Estonia under Stalin's reign. Some elements of continuity with the interwar period might be identified. The state struggled to control leisure activities and to re-educate the population but obviously failed. Listening to foreign radio stations or reading forbidden books might have been subversive but were not yet signs of resistance. Many leisure activities bore the character of escaping from a harsh reality and from poverty. The paper is based on archival documents, oral history and life stories.

Rezumat:

Perioada stalinismului este de obicei umbrită de dovezi ale terorii și prin urmare un subiect precum petrecerea timpului liber nu pare a fi adecvat. Totuși, petrecerea timpului liber a reprezentat un aspect important al vieții cotidiene în Estonia în timpul regimului lui Stalin. Câteva elemente de continuitate cu perioada interbelică ar putea fi identificate. Statul a luptat să controleze activitățile de timp liber și să reeduce populația, dar a eșuat în mod evident. Ascultarea posturilor de radio străine sau citirea cărților interzise putea fi subversiv, dar acestea nu erau încă semne de rezistență. Numeroase activități de petrecere a timpului liber au avut caracterul de evadare din realitatea dură și din sărăcie. Lucrarea de față se bazează pe documente de arhivă, istorie orală și povești de viață.

Keywords: Stalinism, leisure, Estonia, censorship, state policies, everyday life

*"It was the period of deepest and darkest Stalinism but the youth possessed the possibility for meeting and entertainment [...]. It was nice to sit together with other students. You visited somebody with more space and took some schnapps and food with you. We sat together, drank, sang and went home. When there was more liquor, we went to town and vandalized a bit [...]."*¹

Introduction

Usually, the history of Stalinism is overshadowed by accounts of terror and violence,² which was one essential feature of this regime, and of the horrors of World War II. Estonia, being annexed by the USSR in 1940 and occupied by the Germans from 1941 till 1944, faced enormous losses.³ When the Red Army re-occupied the country, more than a quarter of a million of its 1.1 million inhabitants had been arrested, deported, evacuated, mobilized or fled to the West, were killed in combat or by the Soviets or the Nazis. On January 1, 1945 only 854,000 civil inhabitants were registered.⁴ Dealing with leisure under those circumstances might bring an accusation of belittlement. Nevertheless, even in periods of oppression and misery people have leisure activities. Especially because of the troubled political, social and material situation leisure became important to escape

¹ Harri, born 1930, Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum – Eesti Kultuurilooline Arhiiv (Estonian Literary Museum – Cultural History Archives, KM-EKLA) 350-662, 42.

² For example Jörg Baberowski, *Der Rote Terror: Die Geschichte des Stalinismus* (Munich: DVA, 2003); on Estonia see: Aigi Rahi-Tamm, *Teise maailmasõja järgsed massirepressioonid Eestis: Allikad ja uurimisseis* (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2004); Vello Salo et al, ed., *The White Book: Losses inflicted on the Estonian Nation by Occupation Regimes 1940-1991* (Tallinn: Estonian Encyclopaedia Publishers, 2005); Toomas Hiio et. al., ed, *Estonia 1940-1945: Reports of the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity* (Tallinn: Inimsusevastaste Kuritegude Uurimise Eesti Sihtasutus, 2006); idem, eds., *Estonia since 1944: Reports of the Estonian International Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity* (Tallinn : Estonian Foundation for the Investigation of Crimes Against Humanity, 2009); Olaf Mertelsmann and Aigi Rahi-Tamm, 'Soviet mass violence in Estonia revisited', *Journal of Genocide Research* 11 (2009): 307-22 .

³ For an historic overview see: Romuald Misiunas and Rein Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence, 1940-1990* (London: Hurst, 1993); Anu Mai Kõll, ed., *The Baltic Countries under Occupation: Soviet and Nazi Rule 1939-1991* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2003); Olaf Mertelsmann, ed., *The Sovietization of the Baltic States, 1940-1956* (Tartu: Kleio, 2003); Olaf Mertelsmann, ed., *Vom Hitler-Stalin-Pakt bis zu Stalins Tod. Estland 1939-1953* (Hamburg: Bibliotheca Baltica, 2005); David Feest, *Zwangskollektivierung im Baltikum: Die Sowjetisierung des estnischen Dorfes 1944-1953* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2007); Tõnu Tannberg (ed.), *Eesti NSV aastatel 1940-1953: Sovetiseerimise mehhanismid ja tagajärjed Nõukogude Liidu ja Ida-Euroopa arengute kontekstis* (Tartu: Eesti Ajalooarhiiv, 2007); Elena Zubkova, *Pribaltika i Kreml' 1940-1953* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2008).

⁴ Statistical overview on the population, Eesti Riigiarhiiv (Estonian State Archives, ERA) R-10-43-155, 1.

from the harsh reality. Yet, I will not deal with religious activities in this paper; this has already been done by scholars like Riho Altnurme and Jaanus Plaat.⁵

The size of this paper is limited and literature⁶ and available sources do not allow dealing with everything. I used documents by the Estonian Communist Party (ECP), especially the Central Committee, in the former party archives (ERAF) and by the government of the Soviet republic in the state archives (ERA). They offer the perspective from above. A perspective from below is given by oral history interviews, a collection of life stories in the Estonian Literary Museum (KM-EKLA 350) and replies to questionnaires sent out to the correspondents of the Estonian National Museum (ERM-KV).⁷ The second group of sources is not always quoted but provided me with a lot of background information. Needless to say, both groups of sources – official documents and oral history – are not unproblematic and need extensive source criticism. Stalinist documents have the tendency to present overestimations and a success story. Oral history and life stories show what we remember, and human beings forget steadily, they transform their stories and do not memorize correctly.

When speaking about Stalin's Estonia, I'm referring to the period from 1940 until De-Stalinization in 1956 without covering the German occupation. This would be a different topic.

Standard of living and leisure

Leisure activities are related to the standard of living and the real income. Small incomes reduce our possibilities to determine leisure. Right from the beginning of Stalinist rule, the standard of living dropped and

⁵ Riho Altnurme, *Eesti Evangeeliumi Luteriusu Kirik ja Nõukogude riik 1944-1949* (Tartu: Tartu Ülikooli Kirjastus, 2001); Jaanus Plaat, *Usuliikumised, kirikud ja vabakogudused Lääne- ja Hiiumaal: Usuihenduste muutumisprotsessid 18. sajandi keskpaigast kuni 20. sajandi lõpuni* (Tartu: Eesti Rahva Muuseum, 2001).

⁶ On Soviet everyday life during Stalinism see: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Nataliia Lebina, *Povsednevnaia zhizn' sovetskogo goroda: normy i anomalii 1920-1930 gody* (St Petersburg, 1999); Elena Zubkova, *Poslevoennoe sovetskoe obshchestvo: politika i povsednevnost' 1945- 1953* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2000); idem, *Russia after the War: Hopes, Illusions and Disappointments, 1945-1957* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1998).

⁷ On oral history and life stories in Estonia see: Tiit Jaago et al, eds., *Lives, Histories and Identities*, 3 vols (Tartu: 2002); Riina Reinvelt, *Ingeri elu ja lood: Kultuurianalüütiline eluloouurimus* (Tartu: Tartu Ülikool, 2002); Tiina Kirss et al, eds., *She who remembers survives: Interpreting Estonian Women's Post Soviet Life Stories* (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2004); Ene Kõresaar, *Elu ideoloogiad: Kollektiivne mälu ja autobiograafilise minevikutõlgendus eestlaste elulugudes* (Tartu: Eesti Rahva Muuseum, 2005); Olaf Mertelsmann, 'Social and Oral History in Estonia', *East Central Europe* 34-35 (2007-2008): 63-80.

would not recover to the pre-Soviet levels in the period taken under consideration. The workday became longer. Living conditions were the worst during and after the war. Since the late 1940s, the situation in the towns improved, while it became worse for many families in the countryside after the forced collectivization in 1949. Only a new direction of agricultural policy improved the fate of the collectivized peasants after Stalin's death. Still, their free time remained restricted. They had to work between 150 and 200 norm days on the kolkhoz and care for their garden plot of 0.5 hectares so as to survive.⁸

Contemporaries describe the 1940s using the following words: "Maybe I survive – this was my philosophy."⁹ "During and after the war our main work was getting something to eat. Only later, life improved and one could think about something else than food." "From 1941 till 1950 private's life main motto was: I struggle for survival. [...] I did not hunger but I never felt saturated."¹⁰

Because of the problems with nutrition and poverty, there was not so much room for leisure in the 1940s. This should change in the following decade. Nevertheless, the situation was still better than in the "old" republics of the USSR. In several western regions, famine caused more than one million deaths in 1946-47.¹¹ A former Soviet soldier from Siberia remembered that during the postwar years people were well-dressed and food was rich in Estonia.¹² Yet contemporary Estonians thought about this in a different way.

Aims of the Stalinist regime

During Stalinism, an expansion of culture and education occurred in Estonia.¹³ The state invested enormous sums. Those measures should stabilize and legitimate the regime and followed the ideological goals of the Soviet Union seeing herself in the tradition of the enlightenment. The following arguments might be used as an explanation:

- The regime thought that the very small support given by the population was a sign of a lack of education and of a low cultural level. Improving this would lead to increasing backing.

⁸ On the economic development see Olaf Mertelsmann, *Der stalinistische Umbau in Estland: Von der Markt- zur Kommandowirtschaft* (Hamburg: Kovač, 2006).

⁹ 'Ea Jansen', Rutt Hinrikus, ed., *Eesti rahva elulood I* (Tallinn: Tänapäev, 2000), 230.

¹⁰ Aino, born 1921, Eesti Rahva Muuseum, Korrespondentide Vastused (Estonian National Museum – Replies by Correspondents, ERM-KV) 984, 333, 343.

¹¹ V. F. Zima, *Golod v SSSR 1946-1947 godov: proiskhodshchdenie i posledstviia* (Moscow, 1996).

¹² Interview with Mikhail, born 1928, on 30 May 2000 in Novosibirsk.

¹³ Olaf Mertelsmann, 'Die Expansion von Kultur und Bildung als Stütze des sowjetischen Systems in Estland', Mertelsmann 2005, 251-65.

- *Kul'turnost'* was one essential principle for the Soviets.¹⁴
- The officially advocated line of arts and literature, dubbed Socialist Realism, was also a means of propaganda. A similar aim served the “red subjects” in school and university promoting the “new Soviet man”.¹⁵
- Improvement of general education and cultural standards legitimized the regime. Even when the standard of living or economic performance was low, the number of university degrees, theatres and libraries indicated success.
- “Bourgeois” cadres should be replaced by reliable ones.
- The ECP saw herself in a pedagogical role attempting to “re-educate” the population. The Central Committee’s Bureau devoted thus a large amount of time for culture and education questions.
- Improving the skills of the population served the utilitarian aim of increasing economic growth due to more human capital and to the use of scientific knowledge.

All this had an impact on leisure, because even under harsh financial constraints the state supported many activities. Nevertheless, the state attempted to control and to “re-educate” according to Stalinist values.

Leisure before Sovietization

In comparison to Western or Northern Europe, Estonia was poorer and less developed in the 1930s and to some extent the country was also fairly provincial. Nevertheless, according to the contemporary newspapers, Estonia belonged to the European-Northern American sphere of leisure and entertainment. This is confirmed by memoirs and life stories. Cinemas presented Hollywood or UFA (Universum Film AG) films, Mickey Mouse or Popeye were known to the public. Apart from world literature, contemporary crime novels and bestsellers were translated into Estonian. In Tallinn plenty restaurants, a Central European café culture and a vivid night life attracted tourists especially from Finland.¹⁶

In a time before television appeared, leisure was used in a different way. Radio broadcasting and newspapers were the most important sources of information but they were also used to fill the spare time. In many cafés, the visitors could read foreign papers and journals, whereby the most

¹⁴ Catriona Kelly and Vadim Volkov, ‘Directed Desires: Kul'turnost' and Consumption’, Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd, eds., *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution: 1881-1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 291-313.

¹⁵ Lynne Attwood and Catriona Kelly, ‘Programmes for Identity: The ‘New Man’ and the ‘New Woman’’, *ibid.*, 256-90.

¹⁶ Kalervo Hovi, *Kuld Lõvi ja Kultase ajal: Tallinna restoranikultuuri ajalugu 1918-1940* (Tallinn: Varrak, 2003).

important European newspapers arrived with a delay of one or two days. Reading books was a central activity. On weekends, youth went out to the movies or dancing. There were few professional dance and jazz music orchestras¹⁷ and in the villages there were local musicians playing.

As a result of a long lasting German cultural influence there was a large variety of clubs and associations standing often in the center of social life. Sport and shooting clubs, voluntary fire brigades, the temperance movement, women's and education associations, choirs, orchestras, amateur theatres, scouts, the home guard, Esperantists and many others attracted members. Estonia was quite successful for a small country in the Olympic Games and it was one of the leading nations in shooting. Chess became popular due to the international successes of Paul Keres. One out of ten was a member of a voluntary fire brigade. For many amateur singers and musicians, smaller and larger song festivals were the highlight of the year. Student fraternities were not only a place of meeting but of extensive networking for future careers. The Estonian Student's Society was very influential. The teetotalism, cultural and educational clubs were children of the so-called national awakening in the late 19th century. Estonia was a multi-ethnic country with widespread knowledge of German and Russian languages and on the Western coast ethnic Swedes were living. Esperanto was popular, too. According to one author, 15 percent of the members of the first Soviet mock parliament were Esperantists.¹⁸ State sponsored institutions as the home guard should support patriotism and the ability for defense.

The state supported leisure activities through the establishment of people's houses (*rahvamaja*) and people's libraries (*rahvaraamatukogu*) in the countryside. Rural teachers should care for the people's houses and for single hobby circles or events. Rural life should become more attractive and the misuse of alcohol should be reduced. Many life stories speak about a blossoming of village life during the 1930s, but one has to consider that war and Stalinism led to an idealization of the independence period.

Especially in the countryside, economic and social activities were closely interconnected. Estonian peasants had organized themselves in cooperatives to market their products or to obtain machinery.¹⁹ Often, the

¹⁷ On Estonian popular music of the time see Valter Ojakäär, *Vaibunud viiside kaja* (Tallinn: Eesti Entsüklopeediakirjastus, 2000); idem, *Omad viisid vöõras väes: 1940-1945* (Tallinn: Ilo, 2003); idem, *Sirp ja saksofon* (Tallinn: Ilo, 2008).

¹⁸ Ulrich Lins, *Die gefährliche Sprache: Die Verfolgung der Esperantisten unter Hitler und Stalin* (Gerlingen: Bleicher, 1988), 222.

¹⁹ Anu Mai Köll, *Peasants on the World Market: Agricultural Experience of Independent Estonia 1919-1939* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1994).

same respected persons leading local cooperatives were also dominating other social activities and clubs. They were called social activists (*seltskonnategelased*) being usually better educated and well-off peasants.

Continuity under the Soviets

It would be wrong to believe that all those organizations and activities ended after the communist take-over in 1940. Sometimes we might detect continuity until the 1950s. Karl Säre boasted that in 1940 more than 2,100 “bourgeois” cultural organizations had been forbidden and people’s houses and libraries had been nationalized,²⁰ but this did not mean necessarily the end of those institutions. A “bourgeois” club might have turned into a Soviet circle or into a tolerated society with the same personnel. The Learned Estonian Society originally established by Baltic Germans was closed hardly in 1950. Three of the employees did their job during German occupation as well. Membership remained virtually the same, only the choice of topics of presentations indicated adaptation.²¹

Student fraternities, scouts, youth organizations of the church, teetotalers and women’s associations were dissolved in 1940 and replaced by Young Pioneers, Komsomol, women’s commission etc. Esperantism was forbidden in 1941.²²

Soviet oppression was not directed only against real or imagined enemies or “socially alien elements” but also against the social activists. Aigi Rahi-Tamm has found them in large numbers on the deportation lists and among the arrested.²³ The Bolsheviks intended to destroy not only the political but also the social order in Estonia. As a result, many contemporaries report that not only the low standard of living but also the lack of organizers was responsible for the low level of social activities in the 1940s.

Nevertheless, the voluntary fire brigades, for example, still had in 1947 86,000 members in the country²⁴ and was thus larger than any Soviet sponsored organization. The Red Cross, the second largest association, possessed 48,641 members in 1946.²⁵ Both were organized in a decentralized way and could not be completely controlled by the Soviets.

²⁰ Draft of Säre’s speech for the ECP’s IV plenum, February 1941, Eesti Riigiarhiivi Filiaal (Branch of the Estonian State Archives, ERAF) 1-4-49, 69.

²¹ Herbert Ligi, ‘Õpetatud Eesti Selts 1938-1950’, *Õpetatud Eesti Seltsi aastaraamat* (1988-1993): 247-61.

²² Lins 1988, 222.

²³ Personal conversation with Aigi Rahi-Tamm.

²⁴ Report on the work of the ECP’s CC in 1947, ERAF 1-5-2, 49.

²⁵ Report on the work of the ECP’s CC in 1946, ERAF 1-5-1, 42.

One teacher from the island of Saaremaa remembers: "The spirit of common social activities was preserved until the late 1940s." The house of culture offered a rich program and the village organized even the establishment of a small power station.²⁶ In the countryside, social activities were reduced by the hardships of collectivization.

Sports

As above mentioned, sport was an important activity in the 1930s. In the USSR it took the form of physical and pre-military education supported by the state.²⁷ Athletes paraded on public festivities.²⁸ After the war, the Soviet Union participated for the first time in Olympic Games and attempted during the Cold War to demonstrate the superiority of the system by successes in international competitions. Competitive sport was supported by the state including doping. The secretary for ideology of the Estonian CP, Leonid Lentsman, spoke about "sports and physical culture as an important element of communist education of the youth."²⁹

The three assignments of sports – strengthening the body, preparation for the military³⁰ and demonstration of superiority of socialism – were fulfilled in Estonia, too. The party could use the foundations already laid out in the interwar period as established sport clubs and qualified coaches. The country became important for Soviet sport. Already in 1946 the party reported 64,949 athletes in 1,325 collectives, 1,107 pupils in sport schools and the additional hiring of teachers for sport and paramilitary education.³¹ This was remarkable during the postwar crisis and maybe the figures were exaggerated. In the following year there were already 81,142 athletes.³²

Later, the party was more interested in competitive sports. More than 16,000 active athletes were registered in different categories and the report stressed that nearly eleven times more people participated in sports as a leisure activity than in "bourgeois" Estonia.³³ The direction was to

²⁶ Aasa, born 1927, KM-EKLA 350-638, 16.

²⁷ See James Riordan, *Sport in Soviet Society: Development of Sport and Physical Education in Russia and the USSR* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

²⁸ Malte Rolf, *Das sowjetische Massenfest* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2006).

²⁹ Meeting on ideological work among youth, 9 January 1952, ERAF 1-4-1452, 16.

³⁰ The newspaper *Rahva Hää* (People's Voice) contained on 12 August 1945 an article titled "The great importance of physical education for the strengthening of Soviet national defence".

³¹ Report on the work of ECP's CC in 1946, ERAF 1-5-1, 42.

³² Report on the work of ECP's CC in 1947, ERAF 1-5-2, 49.

³³ Meeting on improvement of educational work among the youth, 27 – 28 January 1956, ERAF 1-4-2031, 56.

establish records and to win championships. The party criticized in 1949 that 75 Estonian prewar records have not been improved yet.³⁴ In the same time, agriculture was collectivized, two percent of the population deported and an anti-Soviet partisan struggle continued.

Sport was a way to escape from every-day life or even to “rehabilitate” oneself. Viktor, born 1926, was the son of a policeman.³⁵ The family was deported in 1941 and his father sent to a camp. In 1947, Viktor returned to Estonia, gained weight after a long time of malnutrition and started with athletics. “Because of political reasons I needed a name,”³⁶ he writes, since his mother was arrested in 1949 after fleeing from Siberia. “My aim was to become a well-known athlete to escape Siberia.”³⁷ He lived half legally fearing arrest and turned into an Estonian champion in marathon. This obviously protected him. Later he became a coach but was not allowed to study at university.

In many life stories, sport played a central role and is presented in an apolitical way, even when the regime tried to politicize sport.

Radio

Listening to the radio during Stalinism served as a source for information and for entertainment. During the war, listening to stations abroad was strictly forbidden but this could not be controlled efficiently. After the war, officially it was not prohibited to listen to foreign stations but since 1949 the USSR started jamming.³⁸ Distributing news from abroad could lead to accusation of “counterrevolutionary activities”. Because of technical reasons, only few frequencies could be jammed the same time, mostly programs in Estonian. RIAS Berlin or Radio Luxemburg could be received without greater problems.

Listening to the radio was quite important and widespread. In January 1941, 104,000 and in October 1948 still 59,900 radio owners were registered.³⁹ The number declined because of theft and destruction during and after the war. In the countryside, the lack of electricity and batteries restricted radio use.⁴⁰ Approximately every third household in 1941 and every fifth in 1948 possessed a radio. Numbers were much smaller in the

³⁴ Protocoll of the ECP's CC Bureau meeting, 21 and 23 February 1949, ERAF 1-4-725, 25.

³⁵ See KM-EKLA 350-642.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 30-31.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 31.

³⁸ Walter L. Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture and the Cold War, 1945-1961* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), 33-34.

³⁹ Report by the radio committee, 11 October 1949, ERAF 1-47-35, 113.

⁴⁰ Aleksander Kaelas, *Das sowjetisch besetzte Estland* (Stockholm, 1958), 37.

“old” republics. In Estonia, foreign radio broadcasting became the most important source of information.

Buying a radio receiver turned out to be a big business. A radio without short wave unable to receive foreign stations cost one third of an average monthly wage, better models cost already two to three monthly wages.⁴¹ With the adequate model, the owner could decide what to listen to at home. Because of this, Stalinism propagated collective radio use in the public. A Finnish tourist expressed amazement about the loudspeakers everywhere: “Radio is very important for toady’s society, but I do not like to hear loudspeakers everywhere when walking in the street in the afternoon.”⁴²

Estonians preferred to listen to the radio in private and often to foreign stations in order to be better informed. Some people found hope like Jaan Roos did after a speech delivered by US-president Truman: “The spirit of freedom came from far away America. For a moment you feel as if freed from the red madness here and the existence of a slave in a prison.”⁴³ Estonians waited for a Western intervention, the arrival of the “white ship”, and the American radio propaganda supported such beliefs. Marta, born 1940, recalls: “There was only one radio in the village. Every evening at ten, people came to listen to *Voice of America*. It was jammed and hard to understand. Suddenly one heard that the USSR stood on ‘foot made of clay’. Everybody was happy and hope increased.”⁴⁴

Another reason to listen to foreign broadcasts was the poor quality of Soviet programs. Silvia, born 1932, writes about her moving to another place: “The first thing we bought in Kohtla-Järve was a RET-radio. It was very important to own a powerful receiver to listen to foreign stations. Nearly nobody listened to *Estonian Radio*. Some people did not use at all the Tallinn waves. Our radio was tuned towards Finland, from where good music came.”⁴⁵ Heino, born 1928, preferred German and British stations, because the music was better.⁴⁶ “In daytime one could listen to BBC on shortwave with new jazz, in the evening and at night to German medium wave stations (RIAS, NDR, and SWF). [...]I never listened to *Radio Tallinn*, there was the same banter as in newspapers or boring symphonies.”⁴⁷

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² ‘Soomlaste muljeid Eestist’, Sirp ja Vasar, 28. September 1956.

⁴³ Entry on 17 November 1947, Jaan Roos, *Läbi punase öö II* (Tartu: Eesti Kirjanduse Selts, 2000), 191. For nearly a decade, Roos hid himself from arrest. His diary is an important source.

⁴⁴ KM-EKLA 350-1073, 4.

⁴⁵ KM-EKLA 350-1368, 66-7.

⁴⁶ KM-EKLA 350-28, first part, 57.

⁴⁷ KM-EKLA 350-28, second part, 29.

Because the informants were young during Stalinism, they stressed popular music. Elderly people had different interests. Still, the radio was the most important connection to abroad and some people were well informed. Listening to foreign stations was not a sign of resistance. The party planned to develop Estonian music in three directions: "First, works dealing with the fight during the Great Patriotic War; second, the development of Estonian opera and symphonic music; third, the advancement of popular choir songs."⁴⁸ Under those circumstances, it is understandable, why even some communists tuned into foreign stations.

The Bureau of Estonia's Central Committee discussed the problem of entertainment music in June 1946:

Telmann: When listening to music you do not think it is Soviet. We do not have good Soviet music. We need the support of composers; they should offer us more of their output.

Kubin: One way out might be that the repertoire of our music broadcast is not thought through. One can draw such conclusions. The CC did not indicate that the [radio] committee plays too much Western music and does not take care enough to Sovietize the repertoire, to become more Soviet, to popularize Soviet music together with Estonian music. Under our conditions, it is necessary to work on the popularization of Soviet music. Here many people think that foreign music is the best.⁴⁹

Interestingly, the Russian Kubin thought the *Estonian Radio* to be too Western and the Estonian Telmann lamented about the absence of proper Soviet entertainment music. The state attempted to help and commissioned the writing of 131 choir or mass songs, 55 tunes of popular brass music and 39 jazz pieces by Estonian composers from 1944 till 1948,⁵⁰ even when jazz had fallen into disgrace. Frank J. Miller speaks about "folklore for Stalin".⁵¹ The state used resources to establish music in the mother tongue with popular melodies for titular nations of republics. In some places like Central Asia those "traditions" had to be even invented. Each Soviet republic should possess at least one national opera and an opera house.⁵²

Soviet radio was used for re-education. Because of this, the party leadership declared the *radiofikatsiia* of kolkhozes in 1952.⁵³ The Bolsheviks

⁴⁸ Report on the plan for the national economy, 16 May 1945, ERAF 1-3-429, 80.

⁴⁹ Meeting of the ECP's CC Bureau, 20 June 1946, ERAF 1-4-360, 151-2.

⁵⁰ Report by the cultural administration, 15 October 1948, ERAF 1-47-35, 184.

⁵¹ Frank J. Miller, *Folklore for Stalin: Russian Folklore and Pseudofolklore of the Stalin Era* (Armonk: Me. E. Sharpe, 1990).

⁵² Marina Frolova-Walker, "'National in Form, Socialist in Content': Musical Nation-Building in the Soviet Republics", *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 51 (1998): 331-71.

⁵³ Decisions of the ECP's VII party congress, 16 - 19 September 1952, ERAF 1-4-1282, 39.

understood the importance of the radio and the ECP's secretariat for propaganda started two surveys among secretaries of party organizations in 1947 to figure out how radio and other media of propaganda were absorbed and why foreign stations were so successful.⁵⁴

Cinema

Before television appeared, the cinema was the most important visual medium. After the war, there was a real hunger for movies. Because of backwardness and lack of funding of the Soviet film industry the demand could not be met. Only four to five Soviet movies appeared each year in comparison to 400 to 500 from Hollywood.⁵⁵ There were so few Soviet feature films that they could not fulfill their function as propaganda.⁵⁶

Stalin, a lover of movies, took care and the Soviets used trophy films from Central and Eastern Europe mostly of American and German origin from the 1930s and the early 1940s. Those films were copied, dubbed over or subtitled and shown to Soviet audiences. The party leadership complained sometimes, because trophy films were often more successful than Soviet productions. This was understandable, because Soviet movies were frequently more propagandistic, technically backward and there were not enough. One of the paradoxes of late Stalinism was the rising level of censorship and campaigns against Western cultural influences on one hand, the Zhdanovshchina named after Andrei Zhdanov, and the widespread distribution of trophy films on the other hand, which were often more subversive than a Soviet director would have dared to be.⁵⁷

A special success had one German movie in Technicolor, *The woman of my dreams* from 1944 with Marika Rökk. This was a light musical forgotten today. Still, the Soviet audience was impressed. The music became popular from Tallinn to Tbilisi, from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok. Goebbels' escapism and style impressed in Stalin's empire, too. In the early 1950s, trophy films disappeared from Soviet screens.⁵⁸

When Komsomol members of an Estonian paper mill decided to organize a festival of American films in 1952, the Estonian Ministry of Cinema Questions rejected the proposal and replied that a festival with

⁵⁴ Letters by propaganda secretary Algu Raadik, 15 and 16 May 1947, ERAF 1-5-73, 52-54.

⁵⁵ Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society, 1917-1953* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 210-1.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 215.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 213.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 214-5.

Soviet movies on youth topics would be adequate. Foreign films were still available in Estonia but advertisement for them was forbidden.⁵⁹

Trophy films reached high season in the 1940s. Government institutions in Estonia went even so far to show uncensored movies to increase revenues. Minister of the Interior, Boris Kumm, complained to first party secretary Nikolai Karotamm in 1949 that Tallinn cinemas *Partisan*, *Pioneer* and *Forum* showed in "closed" séances British and American films not belonging to the repertoire. Tickets were sold illegally in Tallinn enterprises and offices and could be bought at the cinema. Sometimes, foreign films were presented instead of Soviet ones. An official control established that "closed" séances were allowed by the responsible ministry to fulfill the financial plan. Minister Olga Lauristin replied two weeks later and defended the demonstration of foreign movies.⁶⁰

This was remarkable. The communists used the success of American and British films obviously without paying any royalties to improve state revenues. Lauristin's role is especially interesting as she was the former leading censor of the republic.⁶¹ Some years earlier, she destroyed "harmful" books and now she defended Western entertainment movies.

Tickets were usually cheap, between two and six rubles, "closed" films cost more. With an average income of approximately 600 rubles even in a period of hunger, going to the cinema was affordable. Some prominent Estonians remembered trophy films. Actor Mikk Mikiver, born 1939, watched *Bambi*. For conductor Eri Klas, born 1939, Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo were idols, and he adored Tarzan the most.⁶² Silvia, born 1932, writes about 1946: "The cinemas had still their old names: *Helios*, *Skandia*, *Diana*, *Forum*, *Victoria*. [...] American and German trophy films were shown and advertised as previously with huge posters at the entrance."⁶³ Concerning 1947 she recalls: "I watched some movies several times, among them *The Woman of My Dreams* starring Marika Rökk. It had were wonderful songs, music and revue scenes. And the movie was in color. I saw *Sun Valley Serenade* with the singing skater Sonja Hennie and music by Glenn Miller at least twice. I remember a film titled *Return to Soronto* starring the famous tenor Benjamino Gigli. Walt Disney's *Bambi* was screened. I watched this, too. Marika Rökk, Willie Forst, Nelson Eddie,

⁵⁹ Meeting on ideological work among the youth, 9 January 1951, ERAF 1-4-1452, 67-8.

⁶⁰ Kumm to Karotamm, 30 June 1949, reply by Lauristin, 18 July 1949, ERAF 1-14-31, 6, 8.

⁶¹ On censorship: Kaljo-Olev Veskimägi, *Nõukogude unelaadne elu: Tsensuur Eesti NSV-s ja tema peremehed* (Tallinn, 1996).

⁶² Reet Made, ed., *Lapsepõlvest tuleme kõik* (Tallinn: Sild, 2001), 162, 181.

⁶³ KM-EKLA 350-1368, 4.

Janette Mac Donald, Diana Durbin, Liubov Orlova and many other movie stars were dear to school girls in the 1940s. We collected pictures of the stars and exchanged them. Pictures of Soviet actors could be bought at the newsstands."⁶⁴ In 1949, her colleague was a huge fan of Zarah Leander singing her songs steadily.⁶⁵

Interesting in Silvia's description is the fact that Soviet, American and German stars stood side by side and that the Western ones were obviously the majority. Stalin could not defeat Hollywood and UFA but he supported the spread of cinemas in Estonia from 56 in 1940 to 207 ten years later.⁶⁶ In the postwar years, all screens were counted including those of the houses of culture even when they stopped operating. The figures for 1940 include only commercial cinemas. Nevertheless, the expansion of cinemas was remarkable and the party declared even that cinema was a Russian invention.⁶⁷

Dancing

Just like going to the movies, going out for dancing offered relief from every-day routine. As a rule, young people would dance on Saturdays often after visiting the sauna. The state organized dance evenings in clubs and houses of culture attempting to control the music. Commercial dance nights with ticket selling were organized, too. In restaurants and bars dancing on Saturdays was a common thing, and in the countryside it happened on weddings and holidays. In some villages, there was a dance every Saturday. Most of those events could not be controlled by the party, especially not in the countryside.

Lembit, born 1926, retells how he took dance lessons during German occupation while public dancing was forbidden. After his service in the German army, he returned to Tallinn to finish high school in 1945. The students earned the money for the prom by organizing dance nights with legendary orchestras as *Kuldne Seitse* (Golden Seven). The raised income was big enough for a prom in a restaurant like *Marseille*.⁶⁸ Heino remembers student parties in the early 1950s, where jazz music was not welcomed.⁶⁹ Arvo, born 1938, writes about popular dance nights in the

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 14-5.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 49.

⁶⁶ *Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR v 1956 godu* (Moscow, 1957), 265.

⁶⁷ 'Venemaa, kino sünnimaa', *Sirp ja Vasar*, 11 February 1950.

⁶⁸ KM-EKLA 350-715, 10.

⁶⁹ KM-EKLA 350-28, second part, 36-7.

house of culture.⁷⁰ Mikhail from Siberia being in Valga since 1948 recounts vividly how he danced with Estonian girls.⁷¹

Sometimes the parties were rather wild. Harri, born 1930, recalls: „Dean Anatoli M. was quite unpopular among students. Obviously he feared for his position and acted as an eager communist. [...] We knew he liked to drink. When we finished university [...] Mitt drank until he became nearly unconscious. Then the students raised him and cried ‘Hurrah’. One of the students of physics squeezed his genitals so strong that his shouts of pain were as loud as the ‘Hurrah’-cries. The chess player Ivar N. spat into his face, fondled his bold patch and said ‘You are really a great man!’”⁷²

On Saturdays, the youth was also interested in something else. Arnold, born 1929, writes: “During my time in a technical school, on internship, at dance nights and when working on the kolkhoz I had often possibilities for sexual contacts.”⁷³ Going out dancing was like elsewhere an important place to start relationships.

One problem for the ECP was the music and the dances, because western jazz and entertainment music was unwanted. Jaan Roos noted in his diary in 1949: “I have heard that modern dances will be forbidden soon. They are a sign of bowing towards the West.”⁷⁴ The party propagated Estonian folk dances and Russian ballroom dancing⁷⁵ without much success.

The Bureau of the ECP's Central Committee discussed a party of students of Tallinn's Polytechnic Institute in 1945. On March 24, the trade union organized a party with approximately 500 participants, among them deans and professors. A commission formed by eight students had previously collected 35 rubles from each participant for vodka and food. After the opening speech of the trade union chairman, *Gaudeamus igitur* and dozens of other undesirable songs were sung. The texts had been copied with the help of typewriters. Three artists performed, two students presented a solo program and awards for a sport competition were distributed. After this, a jazz orchestra played. The party leaders remarked: “All presentations were made during eating and boozing. The party organizers and employees of the Komsomol knew about the student night and kept themselves away. The uncontrolled masses of students turned the

⁷⁰ KM-EKLA 350-35, not paginated.

⁷¹ Interview with Mikhail.

⁷² KM-EKLA 350-662, 32.

⁷³ KM-EKLA 350-695, 34a.

⁷⁴ Entry on 19 December 1949, Jaan Roos, *Läbi punase öö* III (Tartu: Eesti Kirjanduse Selts, 2001), 319.

⁷⁵ June 1949 and February 1950 in the monthly *Pilt ja sõna* (Picture and Word).

evening into bourgeois binge drinking. This collective boozing at the Polytechnic Institute proves that political work among the student does not function."⁷⁶

Vodka cost between 110 and 120 rubles per liter, moonshine was one third cheaper, but food was also necessary and rather expensive in 1945. It seems not to be realistic that for 35 rubles per person students could be fed, got drunk and the orchestra paid. In addition, many Bureau members had a drinking problem themselves.⁷⁷ Topsy students dancing to jazz music and singing traditional student songs were disliked by the regime, which represented, in fact, petty bourgeois moral values.

Well-known singer and director of Tallinn conservatory, Georg Ots, lamented in 1952 about too few Soviet songs in Estonian. Because of this, on dance nights music of bourgeois Estonia was played. "This question needs more attention."⁷⁸ The party's opinion on dance music might be found in the weekly *Sirp ja Vasar* (Hammer and Sickle) under the headline "Invitation to Dance": "The tasks of contemporary bourgeois dance music are in a diametric opposition to the tasks of classical dance music. It does not awake strong positive feelings, it numbs and kills them. It does not move with catchy melodies but hypnotizes with dead mechanical rhythms, the one-sidedness and the weakness of the musical material. Even when it wants to inspire as a drug, it does it with hysterical cries and groans." The Soviet man possesses superior taste towards American jazz. "In all kind of dance courses, in the clubs and on dance nights, where our youth is getting fun, we can hear much of disgusting German and Anglo-American import music and music of unknown background poisoning the taste of our youth and dispersing the 'plastics' of bourgeois modern dances."⁷⁹

While David L. Hoffmann, in his analysis of Stalinist values, stresses the similarity to the aims of other European and North-American governments since the mid-1930s – orderliness, efficiency, soberness and the spread of education⁸⁰–, he understates in my opinion the prudence and petty bourgeois content of Stalinism. The regime cut kissing scenes out of movies, fought against dances, abandoned condoms and stopped any proper form of sexual education.

Estonia paid the Soviet Union back in musical terms. In Latvia and Lithuania many jazz musicians had been Jews and perished in the

⁷⁶ Protocol, 11 April 1945, ERAF 1-4-178, 51.

⁷⁷ Veskimägi 1996, 66

⁷⁸ Meeting on ideological work among the youth, 9 January 1952, ERAF 1-4-1452, 57-8.

⁷⁹ *Sirp ja Vasar*, 24 April 1948.

⁸⁰ David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity 1917-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

Holocaust but in Estonia they were mostly ethnic Estonians surviving the war. The ideological struggle against jazz and modern dances was not as vivid in the Baltic republics as in Russia. While Stalin attacked Leningrad, jazz and musicians disappeared in the Gulag, in Tallinn music written by Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller was played. The orchestras used own compositions and imitated pieces from trophy films. Frederick Starr called Estonians the most talented jazz musicians in the Soviet Union during the postwar years. He thinks in Scandinavia only the best Swedish bands reached their quality. On the 5th of May 1948, the "Tallinn Jazz Festival" started, a festival organized annually until today. For a long time, it was the only jazz festival in the entire USSR founded six years earlier than the legendary "Newport Festival". From Tallinn, jazz music returned to the Soviet Union. Because Estonian musicians listened so eagerly to foreign radio broadcast they knew more about the international development in the field of popular music than their colleagues in the Soviet hinterland.⁸¹

Dance nights did not always end peacefully. CC secretary for ideology, Leonid Lentsman, complained about Tallinn's railway workers' club. The club had no actual program for the youth, whenever an evening for them was organized, it started with the dance and ended usually in a brawl.⁸² Some clubs had the problem of regular brawls during the entire Soviet period.

Dance nights and jazz music played an important role among youth's leisure activities. Apart from all attempts, the party could never fully control this sphere.

Reading

Another very important leisure activity was reading. Because illiteracy was not a problem in Estonia in opposition to the "old" republics and libraries were easily accessible and free of charge, reading books was extremely popular. Many life stories stress the character-forming function of wide reading. All over the Soviet Union the number of regular readers increased due to urbanization and to the expansion of education. Books turned into valuable objects for many citizens.⁸³ The state supported reading by establishing a tight network of public libraries. For example, in 1950 there were 727 libraries in the Estonian countryside owning on the

⁸¹ S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: Jazz in Rußland 1917-1990* (Vienna: Hannibal, 1990) 189-92.

⁸² Meeting on ideological work among the youth, 9 January 1952, ERAF 1-4-1452, 13.

⁸³ Stephen Lovell, 'Publishing and the Book Trade in the Post-Stalin Era: A Case Study of the Commodification of Culture', *Europe-Asia Studies* 50 (1998): 682.

average 1,628 books.⁸⁴ This was one library per 800 inhabitants. In other words, the state subsidized libraries heavily.

As in the case of music, the state attempted to control reading with the help of censorship, by “cleansing” public libraries from unwanted titles to destroy them and by establishing “closed” holdings in special libraries. In single cases, people were even arrested for owning forbidden literature.⁸⁵ Millions of books were destroyed and Estonian censors added until 1948 5,251 titles to the already long list of books prohibited in the USSR. One report represents the attitude of the censors: “From November 1944 till October 1948 we withdrew 446,214 books from circulation, titles from the [German] occupation were not counted. According to an order by the central administration we sent them directly to the paper mills. [...] We have to acknowledge that nearly all literature produced before the establishment of the Soviet order has to be eliminated.”⁸⁶

First party secretary, Johannes Käbin, said on the ECP's VII party congress in 1952: “Our libraries have not been cleansed yet enough from ideological junk [...]. Our big mission in party-ideological work is the daily education of the laborers in the spirit of Soviet patriotism. They have to be mobilized for productive work in the name of building communism. Our youth has to be educated to become courageous, positively thinking and cultivated. They must believe in their strength [...], be ready to overcome any difficulties on the path to communism, open themselves towards the future of Soviet man and get rid of the remnants of the capitalist past.”⁸⁷

Soviet literature should play an important role in re-education since Stalin himself had called Soviet authors “engineers of the human soul”. As a reaction, Jaan Roos named Estonian authors fulfilling Soviet remittance works “literature prostitutes” willing to sell themselves and the Estonian literature. Even under the Germans some literature had been published, but in 1945 only crap appeared in print according to him.⁸⁸

As in case of listening to the radio, reading could not be controlled completely by the regime. Through teaching at school, the young generation should obtain a certain taste of literature, but there were too many forbidden titles in private property given from hand to hand or being sold on the black market. Even in public libraries, some prohibited titles

⁸⁴ Report on rural libraries 1950, ERAF 1-46-94, 79-82.

⁸⁵ Veskimägi 1996, 224.

⁸⁶ Report on censorship, 20 October 1948, ERAF 1-47-35, 237-8.

⁸⁷ ECP's VII party congress, 16 - 19 September 1952, ERAF 1-4-1452, 124-5.

⁸⁸ Entry on 24 November 1945, Jaan Roos, *Läbi punase öö* I (Tartu: Eesti Kirjanduse Selts, 1997), 287-8.

were available, because “cleansing” was not implemented efficiently enough.

Reading forbidden literature was not yet an indicator of resistance. The officially approved Soviet literature was often not very interesting and good fiction only published in small numbers. Because of this, a passionate reader had to turn to the prewar production. In addition, the entertainment value of Agatha Christie or Arthur C. Doyle was definitely higher than of Socialist Realism with often dull, instructional and predictable content.⁸⁹

For the period from the end of 1944 till the end of 1953 we know the circulation of all printed books in Estonia (see table 1). Approximately one million copies of fiction ended up in libraries and every inhabitant could buy two copies of fiction during nine years. There was a lack of books for children, too. Only textbooks for schools, the classics of Marxism-Leninism and special literature on agriculture were published in large numbers. The lifespan of propaganda publications was often short. Because of the chronic lack of paper, they were often used at the toilet rooms or to ignite a fire in the stove. The book title production of the Estonian exile during this period outnumbered the one of Soviet Estonia.

Table 1: Circulation of Literary Genres,
1944-53

Genre	In thousands
Russian classics	800
Soviet classics	1,500
Estonian classics	620
Western classics	305
Children's books	1,500
Textbooks	10,000
Classics of Marxism-Leninism	5,000
Agricultural publications	2,300

Source: VIII plenum of the ECP's CC, 24 November 1953, ERAF 1-4-1452, 49-50.

⁸⁹ See Cornelius Hasselblatt, 'The Fairy Tale of Socialism: How 'Socialist' was the 'New' Literature in Soviet Estonia', Mertelsmann 2003, 227-36.

Cultural events

There was a rich theatre life in Estonia in the interwar period being subsidized by the state. After the war, this practice continued and subsidies became much higher than revenues through the selling of tickets. The number of performances increased, but the audience for each performance decreased.⁹⁰ The ordinary Estonian visited a professional theatre once a year or every other year. More often, he attended amateur performances. Only a small minority went regularly to a theatre. More important than theatres or museums were the clubs and the houses of culture. A club was related to a place, an enterprise or a state institution. In 1947, there were 651 clubs organizing or staging 9,435 concerts and plays. Nearly 19,000 speeches were held in the public, there were 3,656 circles (for example choirs, amateur actors or political education groups).⁹¹ How many of those circles or concerts existed only on paper, we will never know, but those figures for one year were impressive, given the small number of inhabitants and over-all poverty. Many people spent their leisure time in those clubs and circles. De-centralized as they were, the state could not have a close look on them.

Social gathering and alcohol

In opposition to the "old" republics, in Estonia cafés, confectioneries and night life continued. Historian Ea Jansen recalls that in the corners of cafés an independent spirit still persisted.⁹² Well-known for open talks were *Café Werner* opposite to the main entrance of the University of Tartu and the university café. Jaan Roos' diary documents comprise quite open discussions on private parties and in saunas. In a sense, a kind of uncontrolled public sphere existed even during Stalinism.

One negative aspect of many social gatherings should not be ignored; some people drank too much alcohol. "Many searched for relief of problems in a bottle," writes Heino.⁹³ Stalinism led to widespread misuse of alcohol. For many males and some women, drinking became the favorite activity to fill leisure or even work time. In a comparison of liquor consumption per capita in 24 European states for the years 1928-32, Estonia ranked already second place.⁹⁴ Jaan Roos noted in October 1945: "Never before had the Estonian nation drunk and smoked so much. There is no

⁹⁰ Report by the art administration, 15 October 1948, ERAF 1-47-35, 178-9.

⁹¹ Report by the committee on culture and education, 12 October 1948, ERAF 1-47-35, 140-1.

⁹² 'Ea Jansen', 233.

⁹³ KM-EKLA 350-28, second part, 10.

⁹⁴ Timo Toivonen, 'Classes, Countries and Consumption Between the World Wars', *Acta Sociologica* 35 (1992): 223.

trace of teetotalism left. Everybody drinks and smokes searching for relief and oblivion in front of the difficulties of everyday life and despair. On nearly every farm moonshine is distilled and tobacco planted on large scale. Not only grown-up males but also women, boys and girls are drinking.”⁹⁵ Moonshining blossomed in the 1940s.⁹⁶ Consumption of vodka tripled from 1940 till 1956.⁹⁷ The state received approximately 10-12 percent of its revenues by selling liquor.⁹⁸ Topsy parties as in the Polytechnic Institute mentioned above were not the real problem but everyday alcoholism.

Conclusion

The impression of leisure activities in Estonia during Stalinism is contradictory. On one hand, traditions and forms of leisure from the independence period continued, on the other hand the state attempted to control and indoctrinate. Apart from censorship and political pressure, the state supported many leisure activities. Commercialized forms of leisure decreased but did not disappear. There was a certain competition between the state sponsored literature and music and those from the independence period or from abroad. The regime could not dictate the taste of the population and had to accept jazz music or “uncensored” dance nights unwillingly. One reason for this behavior was that the Soviet regime had not taken deep roots in the Baltic republics yet.

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⁹⁵ Entry on 9 October 1945, Roos 1997, 245-6.

⁹⁶ Olaf Mertelsmann, ‘Estonian Moonshine in the 1940s’, in: *Humanitāro Zinātņu Vēstnesis* 2004, No. 6: 86-95.

⁹⁷ Vodka output statistics, ERA R-4-1-280, 280; R-4-4-1213, 223.

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