

LECTIO PRÆCURSORIA

From Paradise to the Town of no Hope: Home-making among the Soviet-era Russian-speakers in Narva, Estonia

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A lectio præcursoria is a short presentation read out loud by a doctoral candidate at the start of a public thesis examination in Finland. It introduces the key points or central argument of the thesis in a way that should make the ensuing discussion between the examinee and the examiner apprehensible to the audience, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the candidate's research or even anthropological research in general.

Honoured Custos, honoured Opponent, dear audience members

I am delighted that you have gathered here, both physically and virtually, for the defence of my doctoral dissertation 'From Paradise to the Town of no Hope: Home-making among the Soviet-era Russian-speakers in Narva, Estonia'.

My first contact with the protagonists of this thesis—Estonian Russian-speakers and Narva—occurred before I could even remember, during one of my parents' visits to my maternal grandparents' home soon after I was born. During my childhood, I regularly visited these grandparents in the North-East Estonian industrial town of Narva. My relatives belonged to the Estonian minority, the four per cent of the town's population who were living in a tiny Estonian-speaking oasis surrounded by a large Russian-speaking majority.

In 1991, when I was 11 years old, the Soviet Union collapsed and Estonia became independent. I continued visiting my grandparents and noticed how the materiality of the town gradually changed: the Soviet

street names were replaced by Estonian ones and street signs appeared in Estonian with the Russian printed below in smaller letters; checkpoints were erected along the banks of the Narva River, as the river became the international border with Russia; small basement shops were opened in every second apartment block and filled with Western products; and *euroremont* (refurbishment with Western materials) became the new standard of renovation.

Although not so easy to observe visually, emotionality, and relationships between people also changed. Suddenly, Estonians, although still the clear minority in the town, took up city governance jobs and other public positions. In Narva, local Estonians rarely directly provoked or challenged Russian-speakers, but the atmosphere between native Estonians and Russian-speakers was becoming hostile in the whole of Estonia and this carried over into Narva too. The public discussion in the media and among ethnic Estonians often presented the opinion that the Soviet migrants, not knowing the Estonian language, having a foreign culture and with no roots in Estonia, had better leave

the country and head to where their real homes were. This rhetoric did not feel right to me, but I did not yet have the means with which to make sense of and counteract the arguments. Questions such as *who gets to decide where their home is?* and *what is home in such a definition?* took shape in my head much later.

In 2004, I moved to Tampere as an exchange student, and after becoming a migrant myself I attained a new, migrant subjectivity. My fellow international students in Finland constantly asked me about the Estonian Russians' problematic situation as it appeared in the international media and I realised that I lacked the means to explain the situation in a broader context. I also felt that at that time Estonian social scientists had not given sufficient voice to the Russian-speaking people in Estonia and so I eventually ventured out to conduct ethnographic research on Russian-speakers' home and belonging in Narva. The topic was highly sensitive and controversial and, although familiar with Narva, I was doubtful as to whether Russian-speakers would open up to me as a native Estonian who by definition did not stand on their side.

I have worked with the notion of home for a great many years now in an attempt to understand what home is made up of for Soviet-era Russian-speakers in the Estonian-Russian cross-border town of Narva. My thesis builds on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in Narva, both in 2010–2011 and during a short follow-up period in 2018 when I investigated the home-making practices of Russian-speaking Narvans who were born elsewhere and had moved to the town between 1944 and 1991. During my fieldwork I worked with 42 people between the ages of 35 and 80, the majority of them women. I interviewed them, visited their homes, and spent time with them in order to understand

their life-worlds through observation and conversation. Most of my interlocutors were ethnically Russian, but Ukrainian, Belorussian, Polish, Ingrian, German, Kazakh, and several other ethnicities were also represented in my informants' backgrounds, and many of them were of mixed ethnic origin. My informants had resettled in Narva from places all over the former Soviet Union. In Narva, they shared the subjectivity of being or becoming Russian-speakers and of having the history of a Soviet resettler.

My informants, who can also theoretically be conceptualised as migrants but strongly reject such subjectivity themselves, ended up resettling in the Soviet Estonian industrial town of Narva in search of a better life. They moved to Narva during different Soviet periods. Those who arrived there straight after the end of World War II were among the first inhabitants of the war-demolished town, and they started to work in the Kreenholm textile industry and participated personally in the rebuilding of the town. They suffered from a severe housing shortage and challenges of many kinds as they tried to make a living and improve their lives. Others arrived in Narva after being mass recruited as technical specialists for large new industries such as the electric power stations, and they received apartments in newly built Soviet blocks with all the modern conveniences. And yet others arrived in the town just before the Soviet collapse, unable to foresee how this demise would soon lead to the erection of international borders between the former Soviet Estonia and Russia, and the establishment of visa regimes between Estonia and all former Soviet republics. During the Soviet period, which lasted a little less than 50 years, tens of thousands of Soviet people resettled in Narva, giving birth to several Narva-born generations. Today, 96 per cent of

Narva's population are Russian-speakers, and half of them do not have Estonian citizenship.

I have inquired into the Russian-speaking Narvans' mobile life-trajectories, their processes of homing in Narva upon arrival, and their ongoing practices of dwelling in and relating to the place, the people and the ruling state. I have delved deeply into specific features of Soviet migration and have investigated how they play out in the individual narratives of how my informants made Narva their home. I have placed my research within the wider framework of Soviet and post-Soviet mobilities and dedicated a significant amount of thesis space to opening up the context of Soviet mobilities. Only by taking a historical look can we comprehend how the Soviet-era Russian-speakers' migratory trajectories unfolded, and how home-making at that time was differently conditioned compared to how people move and make their homes now in the EU, or elsewhere in the democratic world. In my interpretation, living through such structural conditions has formed Soviet and, later, post-Soviet subjectivities, which, although not necessarily representing universal experiences, enable people to share each other's cultural, social and moral worlds.

Of course, there is no such thing as a universal Soviet experience, as Alexei Yurchak's (2005) famous study *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* has demonstrated. The late Soviet generation did not directly experience war, was not living under the Stalinist regime with all its atrocities, and was not involved in rebuilding war-destroyed towns or facing the need to relocate for sheer survival. However, all Soviet generations grew up and lived in a society where freedom of speech was severely suppressed and 'wrong' words could easily lead to imprisonment by the authorities. Similarly, it

was repeated to them day after day that their lives were endangered by the world beyond the borders of the Soviet Union, and later the Iron Curtain. All Soviet generations are also connected by memories of the war that are shared by older family members who had direct World War II experience, and generations are united in the firm belief that fascism must be regarded as the most evil experience in world history. For some, there is only a short distance from nationalism to fascist politics.

In Narva, I worked with people from different Soviet generations. I take the factor of generation into account in my analyses; however, it is not only this that is decisive in making sense of how Soviet experience unfolds for people of different ages. Ethnic background, family history, and even personal tragedy produce shades of colour in Russian-speaking Narvans' specific applications of Soviet and post-Soviet subjectivity.

Resettling, dwelling, and creating a meaningful forward-looking relationship with a place encompasses various activities and ways of relating that together can be called home-making. I build my central argumentation on the idea of practising home. To me, Soviet resettlers' relationships with Narva have formed in the course of long-term practice. This practice has involved physical dwelling in the town, working in the factories, digging the land around summer cottages—*dachas* in vernacular language—foraging in the forests for berries and mushrooms, using waterways that surround the town, crossing the bridges, becoming familiar with every corner of the town, and observing how the urban infrastructure and landscapes change over time. Russian-speaking Narvans have invested a lot of time, work and energy in making Narva a familiar and comfortable place in which to live. Through such long-term

practice, home becomes saturated with emotions, memories, and symbols of many kinds.

Home-making involves seeing one's children raised in a particular environment and forming their own connections to the place. Relationships to a place are interwoven with the evolution of social ties, in one's life in general and on various scales: locally, translocally and, later, transnationally.

We tend to think that home is a personal matter and yet, when interrogated, home appears increasingly as a highly politicised and publicly debatable subject. States use political tools such as state language and citizenship to establish the conditions on which people are allowed to belong in a nation state. I have approached the relationship between the state and the people in Narva through the vocabulary of politics of belonging proposed by Nira Yuval-Davis (2006). In this way, I have been able to tap into the political aspects of home-making and put forward my interlocutors' perspectives on their grappling with the Estonian state's nationalist politics, including the discourses of loyalty, citizenship, and language politics that have produced a great deal of resentment and also experiences of exclusion and discrimination.

Alina Jašina-Schäfer (2021) has recently stated that the independent Estonian state empowered its core ethnonational group—Estonians—by reviving their national identities, cultural symbols, and language, and by giving them political hegemony over their new successfully independent state. But for Russian-speakers, it was the beginning of political and sociocultural struggles that they have experienced as significantly worsening their legal, political, and socioeconomic situation in the country.

As a consequence, Russian-speakers have felt their home in post-Soviet Estonia to be under threat. They have also experienced the

dramatic transformation of economic and social relations that came with the fall of socialism, including the integration of Estonia into the structures of neoliberal capitalism and its distancing from the socioeconomic structures of the former Soviet space. These changes have been accompanied by many uncertainties and challenges, and a great deal of emotional suffering, especially for the older generations. The continuous efforts of the Russian state to interrupt into the lives of Russian-speakers abroad have not made things easier for them.

In the final chapters of my thesis, I propose the intersectional approach of studying home, state, and hope together to shed light on the process by which Narva as a place of hope and development became a place of uncertainty and injustice in the experiences of the Soviet generations. When recalling their personal stories of migration to Narva, my informants frequently expressed that, upon arrival, the town resembled a paradise to them. And yet, the Narva that I encountered during my fieldwork was described as a place of degradation and hopelessness. What made Russian-speakers see their hometown in such contrastive terms? I figured that I should scrutinise home as a space of possibilities, as Ghassan Hage (1997) had done earlier, if I wanted to be able to disentangle the overwhelming emotional tone in Narva. Through detailed accounts, I argue that Narva as a place was saturated with hope for a better future in Soviet times. In contrast, in independent Estonia the majority of my interlocutors—the elderly—developed a sense that hope was being removed from Narva by forces independent of Narvans themselves, and consequently, that their own and their descendants' lives were running out of hope, too. I capture this striking change with the metaphor of transformation from a 'Paradise' to the town of no hope.

I want to finish on a positive note. Since my longer period of fieldwork 11 years ago, much has changed and much has remained the same in Narva—depending on where you stand and how you look. The Estonian state has paid more attention to Narva by directing more financial resources into developing the town in all spheres of life. The Estonian cultural elite, together with the local Narvans, have made efforts to normalise and cherish Narva's complex history and to strengthen the town's identity as part of the Western cultural space. Political power in the town has changed as well. The state and civil society together have come closer to considering Estonian Russian-speakers as equal to the rest of the population. I am convinced that this would not have happened as fast and decisively as it has if the international media had not challenged Estonia to demonstrate through concrete acts that Narva was not another Crimea, which is what the rest of the world suspected after the Crimean conflict broke out in 2014.

While I believe that for the Russian-speaking younger generations in Narva, similarly to in the rest of Estonia, experiences at the crossroads of home, state, and hope have become generally less tense, there is a continuous need to recognise the existence of diverse experiences, some of which are primarily of marginalisation and discrimination. My research honours the experience of Soviet generations, experiences

that would be easily disregarded and forgotten once the people involved had passed away. My work makes it possible for the joy and pain, hope and suffering of Soviet-era Russian-speaking Narvans to be taken into consideration when we write the history of Estonian homes.

I now call upon you, Professor Jansen, as the opponent appointed by the Faculty of Social Sciences, to present your critical comments on my dissertation.

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