Introduction

Estonia. A small country situated on the shores of the Baltic Sea, with over 2,200 islands and islets (see Figure 1). Over half its territory is covered by forests. Population about 1.4 million. Member state of the European Union and NATO since 2004. Highly advanced in digital technologies, well-secured e-voting in use since 2005. A democratic state. Among the least corrupt countries in the world.

Independent republic 1918–1940; then forcibly annexed into the Soviet Union. After three years of German occupation during World War II, it was, in 1944, re-annexed by the USSR. Independent statehood was regained in 1991.

Population changes in the Soviet era: in 1935, ethnic Estonians composed 88.1 percent of the total population; in 1945, after Hitler's Umsiedlung*, the proportion was 97.3 percent; by 1989, ethnic Estonians composed 61.5 percent of the total.*

First nature reserve: 1910, a bird sanctuary on the Vaikla islets. First nature conservation law: 1935. First national park: 1971.

Estonian language: a Finnic language of the Uralic language family; closest to Finnish, but also related to Livonian, Votic, and Ingrian languages.

Soon, four decades will have passed since 1986, when processes of decolonization started within the Soviet Union. On the Baltic shores, full Soviet/Russian colonial-style control lasted, similarly, about forty years. In Estonia, Soviet rule was fully established only by 1949, when the deportations of about 200,000 people from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania destroyed the support base for organized resistance. Thirty-nine years later, in 1988, the Estonian Sovereignty Declaration asserted the supremacy of Estonian laws over those of Moscow's central rule.

This Element focuses on society and the environment in Soviet Estonia within a limited frame of thirty years, 1960–1990 – but it also tells a story of continuities across times and places. It follows the flow of ideas across continents, as well as the continuing life of earlier histories within the ever-unfolding course of social time.

In its investigations of spatial and temporal continuities, one central claim of this Element is that the Soviet Union was not always, in all its localities, and in all its aspects, so thoroughly Soviet. Sovietness – that is, value-systems, beliefs, and practices imposed by Soviet/Russian rule upon both ordinary people and cultural elites – was not necessarily the defining category in everyday life or in the circulation of ideas. While authoritarian colonial control delimited the boundaries of the possible for Estonians and others, within these boundaries there was nevertheless room for a range of thought and action – moreover, through the years, the limits of the possible were constantly contested and sometimes extended.[1]

[1] Epp Annus, *Soviet Postcolonial Studies: A View from the Western Borderlands* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

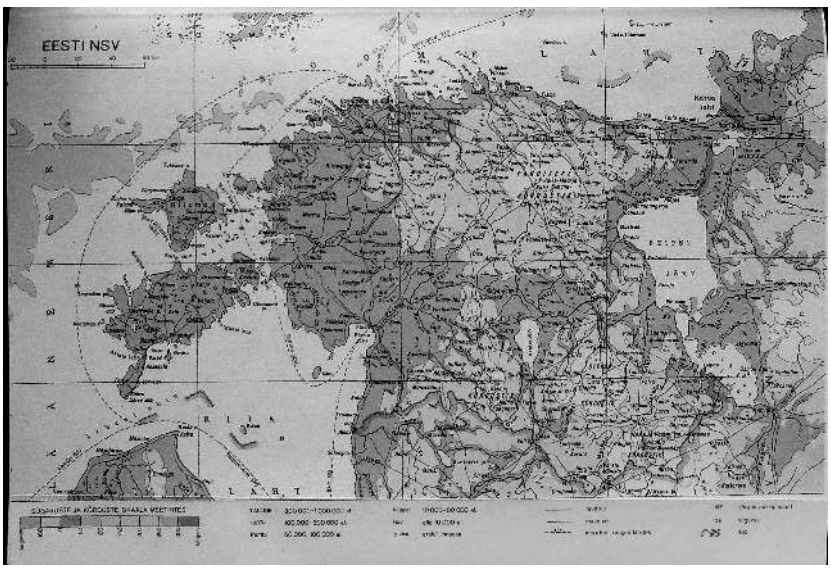

Figure 1 A geographic map of the Estonian SSR. 1978.

Source: Nõukogude Eesti. Tallinn: Valgus.

In the Baltics regions, people's thoughts, values, and everyday practices continued to include ideas, values, and beliefs inherited from their pre-Soviet past. These became jumbled together with the newly imposed official ideology and a large variety of ideas and imaginaries from cultural zones beyond the Soviet Union. And living memory of the pre-Soviet past very much persisted through the Soviet decades: Lennart Meri, for example, was born in independent Estonia in 1929, went to school in Germany and France, was deported to Siberia in 1941, became a well-known author and filmmaker in the 1970s and the president of the Estonian Republic from 1992 to 2001. My great-aunt Ella was born in 1903 and died in 1990 – and, for the whole of my childhood, her years of retirement, she showed little restraint in expressing her hatred for Russian rule. Russian rule – this was how the new rule, imposed through strategies of systemic violence by a Russia-dominated colonial matrix of power, was commonly referred to in everyday parlance.

Even as annexed into the Soviet Union, Estonians – like other nations within the USSR – were not altogether cut off from ideas circulating in the rest of the world. This Element traces Estonian responses to Albert Schweitzer's ethics of a *Reverence for life*, to Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring*, to the Club of Rome report *Limits to Growth*, and it follows how Estonian discussions about nature and the environment often presented these themes as simultaneously local, regional, and global. One way to understand this era, I propose, is through a

multiscalar approach, which does not privilege Soviet ideology as the single most determinative constituent of the era, but which follows how personal, regional, national, global, and planetary concerns all played their role.[2]

Indeed especially from the mid-1960s onward, the connections and intertwinings of personal experiences with local and global concerns emerge clearly in Estonian society. A truly ethical worldview, Estonian intellectuals would repeatedly stress after Schweitzer, can only be based on an "ethical sense for one's unity with all of nature."[3] This ethical stance was figured as proceeding from an intimate connection with one's immediate surroundings, from sensations of awe and wonder while walking in the woods, swimming in the sea, or sitting on the doorstep of an old farmhouse – and, from that primary connection, coming to acknowledge a shared global responsibility for shared global challenges (see Section 1).

Pre-Soviet conceptions of nature, legacies of environmental advocacy, and an array of cultural traditions continued to play a role in Soviet-era Estonia. Although almost anything related to independent statehood during the interwar period was censored with the utmost rigor, the nineteenth-century Baltic-German era, a common past for both Estonia and Latvia under the Russian Empire, was given significant attention in the 1970s and 1980s. The Baltic governorates, an era of a double Baltic-German and Russian colonial rule, had been instrumental in the development of Estonian and Latvian national cultures: tellingly, before the Russification wave of the 1880s, the Germanization of the educated classes was seen as a fundamental threat to Estonians' and Latvians' nascent efforts in nation-building. Moreover, Baltic German culture and Baltic German intellectuals – Johann Gottfried Herder in Riga, Karl Ernst von Baer, Gustav Helmersen, Jakob von Uexküll and others in Estonia – all made lasting contributions both to local cultural developments and to the figuration of local natural environments (see Sections 1 and 3).

The central focus of this Element is naturecultural coexistence, that is, how nature and culture, plants and rocks and seas, and all living species, are involved in shaping human histories, and how human thought and action has engaged with all living things. Since the early 2000s, the term "natureculture" has been widely used to denote the thoroughgoing connectedness of "nature" and "culture,"[4] to highlight the artificiality of the nature-culture opposition, and to overcome the prevailing neglect of anything nonhuman in thinking about

[2] Epp Annus, "Multiscalar Decolonization: Estonia's Transition from the Early 1980s to the 1990s," in *Aesthetic Democracy and the Collapse of Soviet Rule: Transformations in Estonian Culture in the 1980s and 1990s*, eds. Virve Sarapik, Epp Annus, Neeme Lopp (under review).
[3] Ain Raitviir, "Aukartus elu ees," *Looming*, no. 12 (1970): 1867.
[4] Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003).

society and history. In the Estonian context, instead of positing an ideal of virgin "wilderness" untouched by human activity, the environment figured by cultural narratives between the 1960s and the 1980s appeared specifically as created and sustained within a co-existence of human, animal, plant, and soil. The wooded meadow (*puisniit*), for example, of "sparse natural stands with an annually mown herb layer," something still found in parts of Estonia, has supported a biodiversity superior to both forests and natural meadowlands.[5] When Lahemaa National Park, the first national park in the USSR, was created in 1971 to include forests and swamps, farm lands and Baltic German manor houses, it was this mixed landscape with the strong presence of cultural history that was considered valuable and in need of preservation.

This Element can thus be read as a short history of nature-related ideas, values, and images of cultural significance in one small corner of the USSR. The term "cultural imaginaries," one of the central concepts organizing the following pages, conveys this cluster most precisely. The sea, erratic boulders, pre-industrial landscapes with small farms set amid hill and forestland, the forests themselves, the towers of medieval Tallinn, the pillars of the University of Tartu – culture tells its evolving story through a combination of ideas, values, and images. Sounds, too, are part of this history: choral song, the rustling of wind, the rumble of waves. Tradition, cultural memory, and the personal, affective relationship one sustains to concrete surroundings – all play a role here.[6]

This Element, then, is interested in the plurality of a living culture. It traces coexisting strands in the Estonian conception of nature: one oriented toward environmentalist advocacy, urging people to defend their local environments (Section 1), another turning to intimate nature-experiences to seek one's "true self" (Section 2), a third critiquing virgin-lands campaigns and destructive Soviet-era agricultural technologies (Section 1), a fourth connecting to global environmental movements (Sections 1, 4), a fifth building national identity through songs about the land and sea (Section 3), a sixth standing against colonial extractivism and restrictions on personal movement (Sections 2–3), a seventh expressing fears for the extinction of the human species (Section 4), an eighth seeking authenticity in Finno-Ugric traditions (Section 3), a ninth exploring alienation, global processes of urbanization, and displaying ambivalent attitudes toward natural environments (Section 4). The aim is to reveal

[5] Kalevi Kull, Toomas Kukk, and Aleksei Lotman, "When Culture Supports Biodiversity: The Case of the Wooded Meadow," in *Imagining Nature: Practices of Cosmology and Identity*, ed. Andreas Roepstorff, Nils Bubandt, and Kalevi Kul (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2003), 78.

[6] Epp Annus, "Estonians' European Imaginaries: The Soviet and Pre-Soviet Legacy," in *European Constitutionalism the Other Way Round: From the Periphery to the Centre*, ed. Jan Komárek, Birgit Aasa, Marina Bán and Michał Krajewski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

multiple views and voices, dig out their convergences, and attend to their differences. To further extend the theme of continuities, each section ends with a brief essayistic excursion into the present era.

1 *Reverence for Life*: Bridging Local and Global Environmental Perspectives. 1965

On September 19, 1965, the daily newspaper *Edasi* published an essay titled *Albert Schweitzer*, written by Ain Kaalep, an Estonian poet and freelance translator, a man familiar with the art of good storytelling. Kaalep begins his piece in a novelistic mode:

> On a spring morning sixty-nine years ago, a young theology student in Alsace, which at that time belonged to the German Empire, came to the thought that his life so far had been very fortunate. So fortunate indeed that he felt compelled to repay his debt. So he decided to dedicate his mature years to active human love.[7]

Kaalep then writes of Schweitzer's extraordinary decision to leave behind a highly successful career as a scholar and musician and instead study medicine with the aim of becoming a doctor.

Thus Albert Schweitzer came to finance and establish a hospital in Lambaréné, French Equatorial Africa, where he worked until his death in September 1965.[8] His commitment to "active human love" involved him in the international peace movement – which earned him a Nobel Peace Prize in 1953 – and in the development of an ethical vision of the interconnectedness of all living beings, an articulation that inspired millions around the globe. Schweitzer's death two weeks earlier is a fact that Kaalep's essay mentions only in passing.

Kaalep's essay instead offers a series of quotes by Schweitzer, including what were perhaps Schweitzer's most cited lines:

> At sunset on the third day, at the very moment when we were making our way through a herd of hippopotamuses, there flashed upon my mind, unforeseen and unsought, the phrase *Reverence for Life*. The iron door had at last given way: a pathway through the thicket had become visible. I had found my way to the principle in which affirmation of the world and ethics are joined together.[9]

[7] Ain Kaalep, "Albert Schweitzer," *Edasi*, September 19, 1965. TASS had already released a brief notice of Schweitzer's death, e.g. "Suri Albert Schweitzer," *Edasi*, September 7, 1965. TASS (Telegrafnoye agentstvo Sovetskogo Soyuza) was the official news agency of the Soviet Union.

[8] Schweitzer first gained international renown as one of the most celebrated organists and Bach-interpreters of his day. Schweitzer's vision was constrained by the horizons of his era, the mid-twentieth century: he was fiercely anticolonial, yet he could be paternalistic toward the natives at his hospital in Lambaréné; he was deeply influenced by Indian religions, yet his readings will strike contemporary eyes as Orientalist.

[9] Kaalep, "Albert Schweitzer."

Environmental thought between the 1960s and the 1980s took inspiration from a diverse body of thinkers, but the work of Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965) made an especially distinguished contribution to the Estonian scene. Following Schweitzer's death in 1965, discussions of Schweitzer's ethical thinking began to appear in the Estonian media: in January 1966, in the daily *Noorte Hääl*, Eerik Kumari, chairman of the Nature Protection Committee of the Academy of Sciences of the ESSR, explained how technical progress brings about the deterioration of living environments for humans, animals, and plants. His article, titled *To Defend Life*, foregrounded Schweitzer's "reverence for life" as one of the keywords for the modern conservation of life.[10] Two years later, in May 1968, on the front page of the daily newspaper *Edasi*, Kumari's article *Aukartus elu ees* [*Reverence for Life*] proposes "ten commandments for the protection of nature": Kumari starts the list with clean air and clean water, and concludes it with reverence for life.[11] In 1969, in the journal *Nõukogude Kool* [*Soviet School*], Jaan Eilart, a prominent environmental activist, suggested supplementing school curricula with concrete pedagogical steps based on Schweitzer's ideas: these steps would include promoting the general aim of "sustaining and developing maximum ecological diversity" as the main task "everywhere on Earth, on all continents, in all locations."[12] In 1970, in a lengthy essay about Schweitzer's life and thoughts, entitled – again – *Aukartus elu ees* [*Reverence for life*], Ain Raitviir explains: "According to Schweitzer, an ethical system concerned only with human beings and society cannot provide a harmonious worldview." Raitviir goes on to elaborate how "an ethical worldview is actually an ethical sense for one's unity with all of nature."[13] In 1985, Kalevi Kull's and Rein Kuresoo's detailed review article gives an overview of Estonian Schweitzeriana, asserting Schweitzer's role in establishing "a potential foundation to modern ecological ethics."[14] By that time, two book-length translations of Schweitzer's writings had been issued,[15] a biography had been published,[16] and, in Vanemuine theatre, a play by Osvald Tooming on the life of Schweitzer was staged to great success.[17]

[10] Eerik Kumari, "Kaitsta elu," Noorte Hääl, January 29, 1966.
[11] Eerik Kumari, "Aukartus elu ees," Edasi, May 12, 1968.
[12] Jaan Eilart, "Teoreetilisi lähtekohti looduskaitse käsitlemiseks koolis," *Nõukogude Kool*, no. 7 (1969): 538, 541.
[13] Ain Raitviir, "Aukartus elu ees," *Looming*, no. 12 (1970): 1867.
[14] Kalevi Kull and Rein Kuresoo, "Albert Schweitzer Eestis," *Looming*, no. 7 (1985): 989.
[15] An Estonian collection of Schweitzer's essays *Aukartus elu ees* [Reverence for Life] was published in 1972, and *Kultuur ja eetika* followed in 1984. In Latvian, *Vēstules no Lambarenes* (Letters from Lambaréné) was published in 1982, in Lithuanian, *Tarp vandenų ir džiunglių* (Between Water and Jungle) in 1979; *Kultūra ir etika* in 1989.
[16] A lengthy and detailed biography *Schweitzer*, written by Boris Nosik (1971), was translated from Russian into Estonian (1976) and Latvian (1980).
[17] Peeter Tulviste, "Albert Schweitzer 'Vanemuise' laval," *Sirp ja Vasar*, March 20, 1981.

What in particular was so extraordinary about the life and thoughts of this man, such that his impact spread so readily across languages and cultures? Why would the biologist Maie Valt make reference to Schweitzer in her monograph about Karl Ernst von Baer, who lived a century earlier?[18] Why would the newspaper *Noorte Hääl* publish a tale on New Year's Day, 1977, in which two friends explain Albert Schweitzer to *näärivana* (a Sovietised Santa Claus)?[19] Like Gandhi, Schweitzer lived what he wrote; his plain commitment to serving others gave his written word a special force and authority. From his deeply sensed connection with the world around him, there developed, as if quite naturally, an active position of ecological ethics. His accessible style made it easy for readers to understand his call for a "boundlessly expanded responsibility for all living beings," a responsibility shared by all individuals in a very concrete and direct way.[20]

Schweitzer's aforementioned quote, appearing in Kaalep's essay, offers a beautiful image of how his thought developed out of his encounters with the living world: at sunset, in the midst of a herd of hippopotamuses, an understanding arrives that becomes central to his writing: reverence for life. Such a simple idea was easy to embrace. As the Estonian poet Jaan Kaplinski has suggested, Schweitzer articulated what many had already felt and sensed: the enchantment and the beauty of the living world and the need to protect and preserve it.[21] With the support of Schweitzer's cultural prestige, such position could be declared as a foundation for an ethical life. Thus, Schweitzer's ideas helped readers take feelings of concern about local and global environmental devastations and transform them into an ecological worldview with an ethical stance.

Growing Environmental Awareness in 1960s Estonia

And the time was ripe: Schweitzer's death came at a moment in which environmental awareness was on the rise in Estonia, as in many other parts of the world. Even as the Estonian social order had undergone a near total restructuring after the Soviet annexation, a significant cultural continuity was nonetheless sustained: of prewar environmental initiatives, the Estonian Society for Nature Research, founded in 1853, had continued its activities, albeit now as a division of the Academy of Sciences of the Estonian SSR. Jaan Eilart (born 1933), one of the major figures of the Estonian environmental movement between the 1960s

[18] Maie Valt, K. E. v. Baer ja darvinism: Etüüd arenguideede draamast bioloogias (Tallinn: Valgus, 1977), 11–12.
[19] Juhan Aare, "Elagu elu! Näärimuinasjutt," *Noorte Hääl*, January 1, 1977.
[20] Albert Schweitzer, *Kultuur ja eetika*, trans. Mati Sirkel (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1984), 267.
[21] Jaan Kaplinski, "Ökoloogia ja ökonoomika," in See ja teine (Tallinn: Eesti Digiraamatute Keskus, 2013), 53–54.

and the 1980s, had joined as an affiliated member in 1950 and as a full member in 1953. Eilart's activities there included already much of what he undertook later: fieldwork, organizing youth, and writing popular articles.[22]

After the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, the 1950s saw a notable increase in officially sanctioned environmental activities. In 1955, the Commission on the Protection of Nature started its work within the all-Union Academy of Sciences; following this, the same year, the Nature Conservation Commission of the Academy of Sciences of the Estonian SSR was established, with the young Jaan Eilart as its secretary and Eerik Kumari as its long-serving head. In 1957, a law of pivotal importance was adopted to promote the conservation of nature – the first republic-level conservation law in the Soviet Union, and the first Soviet-era nature reserves in Estonia were created in Vaika, Viidumäe, Matsalu, and Nigula. In Douglas Weiner's summation, "Estonian law led the way for the entire USSR."[23]

In 1958, Jaan Eilart began teaching nature conservation at the University of Tartu, and that same year he founded the Tartu Students' Nature Conservation Circle, the first student society for nature conservation in the USSR and perhaps the first in the world. The same year, the journal "Eesti Loodus" (*Estonian Nature*) was re-launched and became a highly popular publication – notwithstanding its steadily growing print runs, new issues disappeared from kiosks within hours and the fixed number of issues available for pre-order was insufficient to meet popular demand.[24]

In 1966, the Nature Conservation Society of the Estonian SSR was established and swiftly became a truly mass organization; by the mid-1980s, it had approximately 22,000 members. By the 1960s, graduates of the Tartu Nature Conservation Circle were dispersed all over Estonia, and could contribute locally to the launch of activities by the Nature Conservation Society.[25] One of the many achievements of the society was the establishment of Lahemaa National Park in 1971, the first national park in the Soviet Union.[26]

[22] National Archives of Estonia, EAA.5311.22/57.41.

[23] Douglas R. Weiner, *A Little Corner of Freedom: Russian Nature Protection from Stalin to Gorbachev* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 258.

[24] Growing print runs and high demand were routinely discussed at the board meetings of *Eesti Loodus*. It was greatly irritating for the editors that the journal produced good profits, but was not allowed to use these to raise the rather meagre honoraria of its authors. *Toimetuse koosolekute protokollid*, EAA.5306.1.45; EAA.5306.1.31; EAA.5306.1.17.

[25] "Pool sajandit looduskaitserajal. Eesti Looduskaitse Seltsi asutajaliiget, geograaf Jaan Remmelit küsitlenud Ann Marvet," *Eesti Loodus*, no. 10 (2006): 34.

[26] Robert W. Smurr, "Lahemaa: The Paradox of the USSR's First National Park," *Nationalities Papers* 36, no. 3 (2008): 399–423. Latvians soon followed suit and Gauja National Park was established in 1973.

If the late 1960s were marked by history as the era of the Prague Spring and the end of relative openness, in Estonia they were also marked by the start of the "war of the wetlands," a campaign against massive drainage projects, the success of which led to the establishment of thirty mire reserves.[27] Even as social activism in the USSR was largely suppressed, collective action found an outlet in ostensibly apolitical movements promoting nature conservation. The scale of related mass-events is impressive and included large multi-day gatherings and bus-tours, but also smaller seminars and afternoon meetings, all undertaken in different locations (Figure 2 gives a sense of the high-spirited atmosphere of these gatherings).

The nature conservation movement was thoroughly intertwined with another mass activity: *kodu-uurimus*, the study of one's home region, an amateur-level investigation into regional history, language, and nature – in official publications,

Figure 2 Meeting of the Nature Conservation Society of the ESSR at Kirbla Bank, with Jaan Eilart in the foreground. 1975. National Archives of Estonia, EFA.331.0.162131. Unknown photographer.

[27] "Soodesõda ei lõpe kunagi. Botaanik Ann Marvetit küsitlenud Toomas Kukk," *Eesti Loodus*, no. 9 (2010): 38. H. Kink, A. Raukas, and T. Kaasik, eds., *Eesti kaitsealad – Geoloogia ja vesi. Estonian Nature Protection Areas: Geology and Water* (Tallinn: Teaduste Akadeemia Kirjastus, 1996). The "war of the wetlands" also involved an "aesthetic education," that is, cultivating an appreciation for the beauty of swamps and marshes that a foreign observer might easily dismiss as landscapes lacking "charismatic fauna" – as in Alan Roe's brief remarks about Lahemaa, in Alan D. Roe, *Into Russian Nature: Tourism, Environmental Protection, and National Parks in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 84.