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OUTLINING THE SOVIET GENERATIONS IN LATVIAN POST-COMMUNIST AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

Key words: Latvian post-communist autobiographies, generations, birth cohorts.

“Generation” has become a buzzword for many sociologists and political scientists who have explored the changes in post-communist societies. With the generational issue some explain the presence of the communist *habitus*; others, in turn, talk about generational changes as a panacea for coping with the legacy of the past in post-communist societies. Rarely, however, do scholars consider the role of generational identity; namely, what is (if there is) the self-image of a particular generation, and how does this imagined group represent the communist era today.

Karl Mannheim, one of the first scholars who dealt with generations sociologically, has argued that neither a biological factor nor a common experience is the decisive variable in forming a generation. Yet, the fundamental integrative attitudes and formative principles of generations are very important conditions, which “alone are really capable of becoming the basis of continuing practices”.¹ These attitudes are articulated, for example, by poets and thinkers as well as those who influence public discourse and whose social network inspires them to express the spirit of their age, thus turning a generation from potentiality to actuality. Korsten has suggested that generations as collectives identify and locate themselves in the historical process by self-thematization, by identifying their patterns of interpretation and by validation of collective experience in discourses.² Thereby, generations may be defined as *cultural circles* formed in the period of adolescence and early

adulthood and which “maintain comparable standpoints and perspectives in the discursive practices in which they are involved”.³

Coming back to the post-communist societies, the previously described perspective on generations means to inquire how the communist-time generations are incessantly being constructed in public discourse rather than to accept “generation” as taken-for-granted. Thus, the aim of this article is to explore merely a single but crucial domain of where the *formative forces* dwell – that is to say, the autobiographies of the Soviet period published in Latvia since 1991.

THE PRINCIPLES OF ANALYSIS

Formally, Latvian autobiographers have been grouped into four particular birth cohorts in order to understand inner relations of possible generations. Such a grouping is employed as a purely analytical tool to elucidate a potentiality of generational identity. The two prevailing cohorts are those born in the 1920s and 1930s. Autobiographers born in the 1940s and 1950s make up the other two smaller cohorts. The 1920 and 1930 autobiographers have dominated the field of memoirs throughout the 1990s, whereas the *autobiographical boom* of those born in the 1940s and 1950s began fairly recently and perhaps will prevail in subsequent decades. Although the age when the autobiographers wrote their individual histories is lacking on an aggregate

level, we may assume most of them did so in their late 50s or 60s. A closer look at post-communist autobiographies also shows the majority of them were written by males who represent the former Soviet *intelligentsia*: highly qualified, usually well-educated people whose social mission was to promote the ideas of communism through art, science and culture. Besides the intelligentsia, one may delineate two more groups: former Soviet public officials, and deportees (those who were exiled to Siberia). Although deportees have been publishing their life stories during the last twenty years, both as individual autobiographers and as contributors to voluminous public collections of memories, the former public officials have only become active relatively recently, in the last decade. The rest of the autobiographers may be read as individual cases (priests, teachers, sportsmen and the like) rather than as a social group.

In line with the concept of a formative period, the autobiographers from dominant cohorts might be associated with different generational identities. In the following analysis I shall, however, examine whether such speculation is justified and what kind of common/divergent discursive repertoires are employed across the cohorts of autobiographers. None of the birth cohorts, thereby, are presumed equal to a generation. For the sake of clarity, “birth cohort” will be used as the marker, for example, the autobiographers of the 1920s or 1930s; likewise, for analytical reasons the autobiographers’ cohorts will be divided into older (the 1920s and 1930s) and younger (the 1940s and 1950s).

Forty five Latvian autobiographies have been analysed as representative of the whole body of texts which have qualified as post-communist autobiographies publicly issued in the period from 1991 to 2008 (roughly 200 autobiographies).⁴ The autobiographers of the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s have the largest representation in this sample (14, 12, and 10 autobiographies, respectively), and the rest of the cohorts have a remarkably smaller representation. To capture the explicit and implicit attributes of generational identity, analysis has been carried out on two levels. Firstly, by examining the autobiographers’ explicit characterizations of his/her

generation, the self-thematization of a particular *cultural circle* shall be explored. Secondly, the links are estimated between the autobiographers and the vivid public events they recall from Soviet times.

SELF-THEMATIZATION

Overall, the autobiographers, who have written explicitly either about their own or another generation, represent the former Soviet intelligentsia. In some respect, that goes in line with the Mannheimian thesis that representatives of this group have a significant role in the creation of generational identity. Therefore, the intelligentsia’s explicit self-thematization, which revolves around the construction of a positive, negative or victimized generational identity, is of prime concern here.

Admittedly, aspiring to achieve a positive identity is the most salient theme. Usually it appears in admiring assessments of the generation: the autobiographers accentuate certain pleasant characteristics that they think are common to their generation. Among such common attributes are idealism and romanticism, which are assumed to be major reasons why older autobiographers or their contemporaries have succeeded in accomplishing socially significant and historical goals. Reflecting upon generational belonging, many of these autobiographers also emphasize the extremely intellectual and dynamic daily life they led during their formative period. Moreover, this portrayal is linked to a strong feeling of the truth and to the ability to bear difficulties in order to reach ambitious goals for the public good. Thus the autobiographers of the 1920s and 1930s highlight self-denial and their constant coping with Soviet restrictions as emblematic practices of their generation.⁵ Frequently they attribute their impassioned lifestyle to the feeling of awakening after World War II, especially after Stalin’s death. The poet Imants Auziņš goes even further, linking the positive features of his generation with the pre-communist experience:

“Romanticism in life and a vigorous expression of romanticism in poetry at the beginning might be called almost the “specific indication” of the first post-Stalinist generation...

It is not hard to understand why it was like that. We, nonetheless, managed to inhale the first swigs of freedom in our youth”⁶

The autobiographers of two prevailing cohorts thus highlight self-denying work and constant coping with poverty as the emblematic practices of their generation. Unlike these generational manifestations, the younger autobiographers of the 1940s and 1950s more often stress their fearless resistance to communist ideology and avoidance of illusions about the communist regime. For example, this theme quite constantly emerges in the memoirs of Dainis Īvāns, who was the leader of the National Awakening in the 1980s.⁷

Although the various descriptions of positive identity have a common discursive origin, there are, however, certain tensions in terms of different cohorts, and these tensions are double-sided. On the one hand, one may talk about the criticism of succeeding generations, which is a characteristic feature of the autobiographers who are born in the 1920s or earlier. Namely, they are inclined to admit that younger generations are willing to undermine the accomplishments of the autobiographer’s generation, calling them a *lost generation*. Such an inclination may be observed in the autobiographies of the Soviet-period actors Harijs Liepiņš, Vija Artmane or Ērika Ferda, who in different ways argue that the younger generation cannot understand their genuine contribution to Latvia’s cultural legacy.⁸ Implicitly though, the *younger generation* is mainly associated with so called *last Soviet generation*⁹, which is sometimes also labeled the generation of *perestroika* or of National Awakening and whose members were born in the end of the 1950s and in the 1960s (Dainis Īvāns, mentioned earlier in this article, is an evident representative of this generation).

On the other hand, we may notice an opposite view as well, when some of the preceding generations are criticized by the younger autobiographers. For instance, convincing evidence exists that the autobiographers of the 1940s believed their generation was less tolerant of the malfunctioning communist regime. They put extra effort into differentiating

themselves from the previous generation, once again stressing their rebellious nature. Such an attitude emerges from the memories of everyday contexts as well as from non-biographical commentaries. The famous Soviet-era singer Larisa Mondrusa points out that she always complained when she was given a dirty fork at a Soviet restaurant, comparing herself with her parents, who would remain silent in such situations. Mondrusa considers that the behavioral differences were primarily caused by dissimilar generational backgrounds.¹⁰ On a more generalized level, the violinist Gidons Kremers voices the same idea: “Unlike our fathers, who were aware of the meaninglessness and dangerousness of resistance, my generation repeatedly questioned cooperation with the regime. They [our fathers] had been instructed to obey them”.¹¹ The *generation of fathers* here and elsewhere, is principally associated with those born in the 1920s or a bit earlier.¹²

On the whole, the abovementioned practices of social comparison reveal certain strategies of how a positive generational identity is constructed. The autobiographers of the 1920s tend to protect their identity from present accusations, whereas the younger autobiographers outline their positive identity through criticism of preceding generations.

The *victimization theme* is another thematic line that interweaves the discourse on generational identity. It often appears through the attempts to frame a generation as the victim of the Soviet repressive system, and it is basically carried out by means of the autobiographers’ memories of suffering (deprivation of human rights, lack of choice, prohibitions on travel, etc.). The poet Olafs Gūtmanis, for instance, claims that, “The destiny of my generation, who lived in the friendship of nations, was subjected to a violent power and a lack of any human rights. That was also my destiny”.¹³ Here, nevertheless, one should take into account that the majority of autobiographers, whose utterances were qualified as containing the victimization theme, represent the birth cohort of the 1920s, i.e. people who in their formative period witnessed the Stalinist repression. In addition, continuous humiliation in the post-Soviet era also becomes

the context of victimization for these autobiographers. An example is Uldis Lasmanis, who worked in the Soviet trade system:

“Alongside the positive and flourishing things, today’s reality causes many unexpected injustices and poverty, which enables us, especially the older generation, to remember not merely the disadvantages but also advantages of the Soviet years. No one today talks about the advantages, but if someone does, it is as if unwillingly”.¹⁴

The social comparison with regard to the victimization (say, *we* were more victimized than *you*) is not as widespread of a practice in generational discourse, and usually it is undertaken to conclude resignedly that there are many embarrassing experiential episodes from the Soviet period which today’s youngsters are simply not able to understand.

Finally, the construction of the *negative identity* is a third thematic line that emerges in the post-communist autobiographies. The negative identity of the generation is being invoked when naïveté, hypocrisy, and double standards appear in the foreground of the generational self-representation. For example, the journalist Rihards Kalvāns estimates that,

“My generation... They consisted of people who had two or even three natures. We thought about one, but talked about another “truth”, and we were happy if succeeded in enacting our third option, which was in the middle of what we wanted and what was allowed. And now, waking up in the night, we remember how it was THEN and what we would do and say now. These memories of conscience are the time bombs. Life would be much easier if such memories didn’t appear before the alarm clock wakens us”.¹⁵

The negative identity is also outlined by the strategy of social comparison, which is largely used by the autobiographers of the 1940s. They either criticize the older generations as Gidons Kremers does or,

in comparison to other generations (especially, to pre-occupation generations) they stress the negative qualities inherent in his/her generation.

RECALLING VIVID PUBLIC EVENTS

Another direction of my analysis leads to the exploration of how public events are remembered by the autobiographers. Normally we can talk about direct and indirect, or mediated, experience. It has been argued that a direct experience is usually very individual, whereas the carriers of an indirect experience emphasize the political and social implications of the recalled event. Furthermore, a direct experience is characteristic to the *formative period*, but an indirect one is related to objectified knowledge.¹⁶ I believe that the analyses of the public events of the Soviet period that appear in the autobiographical accounts constitute a publicly accessible cognitive realm, which facilitates the complex process of delineating a particular generation. That is to say, by mapping the shared events on a timeline, it is possible to determine the most crucial events for every birth cohort.

When reading the Latvian autobiographies, there is a high probability that you will face the deportation experience. In total, around sixty thousand Latvians were exiled to Siberia during the two biggest Stalinist deportations, which occurred in 1941 and 1949. Hence, the exile as a traumatic episode appears practically in all autobiographical narratives. However, the real *owners* of this tragic experience seem to be the autobiographers of the 1920s. Of course, the deportation episodes emerge in the stories of the younger autobiographers as well; however, this experience is not as widespread and vivid. Furthermore, unlike the younger autobiographers, the older ones have either been exiled to Siberia or have experienced the deportation of his/her friends and relatives and, therefore, they have such striking recollections. Alongside the deportations, the wartime experience is part and parcel of the memories of this cohort. Of course, World War II is a less salient episode for those who were deported to Siberia and actually did not experience the war. Stalin’s death is another important event for this cohort, and that to

some extent correlates with the deportation experience, i.e. Stalin's death is a decisive element in the stories of suffering.

Stalin's death is an equally significant episode for the autobiographers of the 1930s. They, nevertheless, mostly have *appropriated* the events from the post-Stalinist period in the 1950s, e.g. the Hungarian revolution in 1956 or the 20th congress of Communist Party, wherein the general secretary Nikita Khrushchov condemned Stalin's reign; consequently, this generation is sometimes called the generation of the 20th congress or the generation of the *thaw*. One may notice that this cohort also more often remembers the Prague Spring in 1968, which is declared an important turning point for a number of autobiographers. Along with Stalin's death and the *thaw*, the autobiographers of the 1940s remember many important events from the period of the revival in the end of the 1980s, inter alia, the Baltic Way, the attack of Soviet soldiers on unarmed civilians in 1991 in Vilnius, etc. The autobiographers of the 1950s, who are but a few, hitherto, in their turn, express a strong generational attachment to the period of National Awakening.

One must acknowledge that there are many public events which are mainly recalled by a particular social group rather than by the whole birth cohort; for that reason it is not appropriate to estimate them as the relevant collective attributes in terms of generational identity. Recognizing such kind of limitations, I, however, believe that the depiction of vivid public events in the autobiographies strongly corresponds to the hypothesis of a *formative period*, i.e. the autobiographers most often remember the public events which occurred in their 20s. Interesting, though, is the linking event – Stalin's death, which is common to the autobiographers of different cohorts. Perhaps it illustrates the strength of so-called flashbulb memory, the concept which accounts for a vivid mediated experience which structures the autobiographical memory.¹⁷

DISCUSSION

In this article I have attempted to illustrate the complexity of the Soviet generations. The main

challenge, as was shown, is to identify the cultural circle in rapidly changing conditions. The social changes in the 1940s (World War II, deportations), 1950s (Stalin's death, the *thaw*), and 1960s (dismissal of Krushchov, the Prague Spring) are, indeed, very striking variables that makes generational identity an ambiguous topic. Therefore, more questions than answers are provided by the previous exploration.

The findings of self-thematization suggest that the majority of Latvian autobiographers who reflect on the Soviet period might discursively form a common generational identity. There are, nevertheless, some crucial limitations which have to be taken into consideration. First of all, the strongest generational identity can apparently be assigned to the autobiographers of the 1930s. They have a coherent self-representation and clear demarcation lines. As this cohort formed the core of the generation of the Sixties, it goes in line with what has been said by Russian sociologist Victor Voronkov, i.e. the Soviet generation of the Sixties had an unprecedented generational self-consciousness.¹⁸

The group of the 1920s has experienced extremely rapid social changes in their formative period, and, for the autobiographers of this cohort, the turning point was Stalin's death, hence it, perhaps, explains why the defining moments of the generation of the Sixties do not appear in their life stories so constantly. Borrowing the label provided by the Latvian actress Vija Artmane, we may call this group "a threshold generation"; that is to say they were situated on the threshold of epoch, as Artmane describes in her autobiography.¹⁹

Another "threshold generation" is represented by the autobiographers of the 1940s. They are inclined, however, to differentiate themselves from the birth cohort of the 1920s. But they presumably share the ground with the generation of the Sixties. Yet evaluating remembered public events, they are emotionally closer to the revival in the late 1980s; thus they approach the late Soviet generation, never reaching them. Up to now, there are some indications from the autobiographies of the last Soviet generation which suggest they might have

a strong basis for the generation as actuality. This basis is made up of the positive (victors') experience of National Awakening. The *autobiographical boom* though, has evidently not started yet for this group; hence, the current assumption is highly speculative.

With this analysis I do not advocate any strict delineation of generations: it is empirically impossible to have clear borderlines when one describes generations. Unlike a *definitive concept*, a generation first and foremost is a *sensitized concept*, which, as the sociologist Herbert Blumer has argued, merely suggests directions along which to look.²⁰ Nonetheless, my contention is that the effects of the "threshold generations" I have described here should be taken into account very seriously when considering the social representation of the Soviet period in post-Soviet Latvia and elsewhere.

Notes

- ¹ Karl Mannheim, 'The Problem of Generations' in: Robert Miller (ed.), *Biographical Research Methods*, London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE Publications, Vol. 1, 2005, p. 175.
- ² Michael Corsten, 'The Time of Generations' in: *Time & Society*, Vol. 8, 1999, p. 261.
- ³ Ibid., p. 262.
- ⁴ The following criteria in the selection of the autobiographies were taken into account: 1) they were issued in 1991 onwards; 2) no intratextual or para-textual information indicates that the autobiography was written before 1991; 3) the Soviet period dominates the narrative's timeframe; 4) the autobiographer is not someone who emigrated to the West during World War II and stayed there; 5) the autobiography might have been written with someone else's assistance (int. al. ghost writings), 6) the bulk of the narrative is not in diary form, the autobiography was written in the third person, or it is autobiographical fiction, 7) the autobiographer was alive at least three years before the autobiography was published.
- ⁵ Cf. Imants Auziņš, *Piecdesmit gadi bez televizora* (Fifty

Years Without Telly), Rīga: Sol Vita, Vol. 2, 2003, p. 146; Vija Artmane, *Ziemieši. Mirkļi no manas dzīves* (Perennial Plants. The Moments from My Life), Rīga: Pētergailis, 2004, p. 16; Viktors Līvzemnieks, *Ceļāgājumi* (Road-Walks), Rīga: Sol Vita, 2005, p. 164.

⁶ Imants Auziņš, 2003, p. 62. [Hereinafter all excerpts from the Latvian autobiographies are translated by me.]

⁷ Cf. Dainis Īvāns, *Gadījuma karakalps* (An Incidental Warrior), Rīga: Vieda, 1995, pp. 19, 23, 36, 289.

⁸ Cf. Ērika Ferda, *Kā sendienās...* (Like in the Bygone Days...), Rīga: Liktenstāsti, 1995, pp. 199-200; Harijs Liepiņš, *Pēr, tu melo!* (Peer, You're Lying!), Rīga: Preses nams, 1997, pp. 67, 144; Vija Artmane, 2004, p. 12.

⁹ See Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, Princeton, Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006.

¹⁰ Iveta Meimane, *No manis neaizej... Larisa Mondrusa* (Don't Leave Me... Larisa Mondrusa), Rīga: Atēna, 2004, pp. 122-123.

¹¹ Gidons Krēmers, *Ceļā* (On the Road), Rīga: Neputns, 2007, p. 207.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Olafs Gūtmanis, *No klaidoņa par svētceļnieku* (From the Hobo to the Pilgrim), Liepāja: LPA LiePA, 2005, p. 158.

¹⁴ Uldis Lasmanis, *Dēla gadsimts* (The Century of Son), Rīga: published by the author, 2006, p. 468.

¹⁵ Rihards Kalvāns, *Atklusējumi* (The Unconcealings), Rīga: Nordik, 2006, p. 43.

¹⁶ See Howard Schuman, Amy D. Corning, 'Collective Knowledge of Public Events: The Soviet Era from the Great Purge to Glastnost' in: *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 105, No. 4, 2000, p. 951; Howard Schuman, Jacqueline Scott, 'Generation and Collective Memory' in: *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 54, No. 3, 1989, pp. 359-381.

¹⁷ See Catrin Finkenauer, Lydia Gisle, Olivier Luminet, 'When Individual Memories Are Socially Shaped: Flashbulb Memories of Sociopolitical Events' in: James W. Pennebaker, Dario Paez, Beranrd Rimé (eds.), *Collective Memory of Political Events*, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1997, pp. 191-207.

¹⁸ Виктор М. Воронков, 'Проект "шестидесятников": движение протеста в СССР' ('A Study of the "1960th Generations" as Protest Movement Within USSR') in: Теодор Шанин, Юрий Левада (eds.), *Поколенческий анализ современной России* (A Generational Analysis of Contemporary Russia), Москва: Новое литературное обозрение, 2005, p. 180.

¹⁹ Vija Artmane, 2004, p. 11.

²⁰ Herbert Blumer, 'What Is Wrong with Social Theory' in: Norman K. Denzin (ed.), *Sociological Methods: A Sourcebook*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2006, p. 91.

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Sovietmečio generacijų bruožai pokomunistinio laikotarpio Latvijos autobiografijose

• **Reikšminiai žodžiai:** Latvijos pokomunistinės autobiografijos, generacijos, gimimo kohortos.

Santrauka

Straipsnyje analizuojami Latvijos pokomunistinio laikotarpio autobiografijose matomi sovietmečio kartų ženklai, atspindintys šio istorinio laikotarpio patirtį. Autobiografiniai tekstai tyrinėjami siekiant suprasti, ar jų autorius sieja generacinę savivoka. Ypatingas dėmesys skiriamas savęs įvardijimui ir ryškiausiems viešiemis įvykiams, kurie, mano įsitikinimu, yra itin svarbūs kartos identitetui. Analizė atskleidė, kad autobiografijų autoriai, atstovaujantys skirtingoms gimimo kohortoms (pvz. kartos, gimusios per XX a. trečiąjį arba ketvirtąjį dešimtmetį) turi bendras diskursyvines ištakas, susijusias su aistringumu ir altruistišku gyvenimo būdu. Kita vertus, sprendžiant iš autobiografijų, kiekviena kohorta turėjo ypatingą savo laikotarpio sampratą, laikotarpio, kurį lėmė staigūs socialiniai pokyčiai (pvz. Antrasis Pasaulinis karas, trėmimai, Stalino mirtis, Atlydis) ir kuris savo ruožtu nulėmė tam tikrą generacinės savivokos nenuoseklumą. Straipsnio dalyje, skirtoje diskusijai, siūloma *slenksčio kartos* sąvoka, leidžianti tiksliau charakterizuoti XX a. septintojo dešimtmečio generaciją tiek sovietinėje Latvijoje, tiek, tikriausiai, ir kitur.

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